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HI FI NEWS / JULY 06 / KEN KESSLER / DUETTE

**"THEIR PERFORMANCE IS REMARKABLE, OPTIMIZED AND IDEALLY SITED  
IT REALLY IS SPECTACULAR"**

HI FI PLUS / ISSUE 47 / ROY GREGORY / DUETTE

# PROVO-NANCE

Provo, Utah's hi-fi artisans, the speaker builders of Wilson Audio, have now been at the top of the high-end tree for three decades. Recent recognition of their achievements tells us that complacency has yet to affect David A. Wilson's enthusiasm, as is evident in the rave reviews afforded the stunning new small speaker, the **Duette** – a Wilson first designed to perform as well against walls or on shelves as it does in free space. The award-winning **Alexandria** has been acknowledged globally as the greatest cost-no-object speaker available today. As the **Alexandria** paves the way for new and exciting advances in music reproduction, so, too, does the deliciously exciting **Wilson WATT Puppy System 8**, which remains the benchmark for consumers who desire compact speakers that demonstrate zero compromise. For this season, we're pleased to note that its single-chassis sister, the sublime **Sophia** has been revised to earn the **Sophia 2** name. And for the comprehensive embrace of authentic surround-sound, only the wall-mountable effects speakers and centre channel model in the **WATCH** range achieve the ultimate in home theatre sound playback. Now that's what we call "Provonance".



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# EDITORIAL

## Editor

Alan Sircom  
editor@hifiplus.com

## Contributors

Anke K. Bronner  
Chris Birns  
Mark Childs  
Richard Clews  
Anthony H. Cordesman  
Dave Davies  
Dennis D. Davis  
Steve Dickinson  
Peter Downard  
Richard S Foster  
Roy Gregory  
Ian Harris  
Jason Hector  
Andrew Hobbs  
Jimmy Hughes  
Jason Kennedy  
Paul Messenger  
Reuben Parry  
Harry Pearson  
David Stirling  
Chris Thomas

## Photography

Simon Marsh

## Cartoonists

Dave Davies  
Dave Ayres

## The Editorial Office can be contacted at:

Hi-Fi+ Editorial  
Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd  
Cornerways House  
School Lane  
Ringwood, Hampshire  
BH24 1LG  
United Kingdom  
Tel. +44 (0)1425 461155  
Net. www.hifiplus.com

## Advertising

Pete Trewin  
Tel. +44 (0)1425 461113  
Fax. +44 (0)1425 461139  
Email. sales@hifiplus.com

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## Design

Creative Byte  
Poole, Dorset  
Tel. 01202 690990  
E-mail. info@creativebyte.co.uk

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Welcome to issue 64 of *Hi-Fi Plus* magazine, and my first in the Editor's chair. In what proved to be one of the worst kept secrets in the hi-fi industry, Roy Gregory has decided to stand down from the role of Editor of the magazine to concentrate on reviewing. Just one issue at the helm of an internationally-renown magazine has proved exhausting enough, and Roy has been doing it for a decade. Little wonder he felt it was time for a change.

Roy has also recently developed a listening room with the breadth needed to handle high-end products with true gravitas, which is why one of his first jobs as reviewer is to explore the truly remarkable Focal Grande Utopia EM and the stunning Audio Research Reference CD8 and more this issue. Lucky man!

Of course, I also get to play with all the best toys, too. This time, products like the exciting Neodio NR One CD player from France, the sublime mix of Pure Sound A30 amp with Border Patrol power supply and the exciting new (if poorly named) HRT Streamer and Streamer+, that deliver audiophile sound to a whole new audience. Hopefully. And then there's aural wonderment from AudioSmile, Cairn, Guru, Renaissance and more, all of which have blown away our reviewing team.

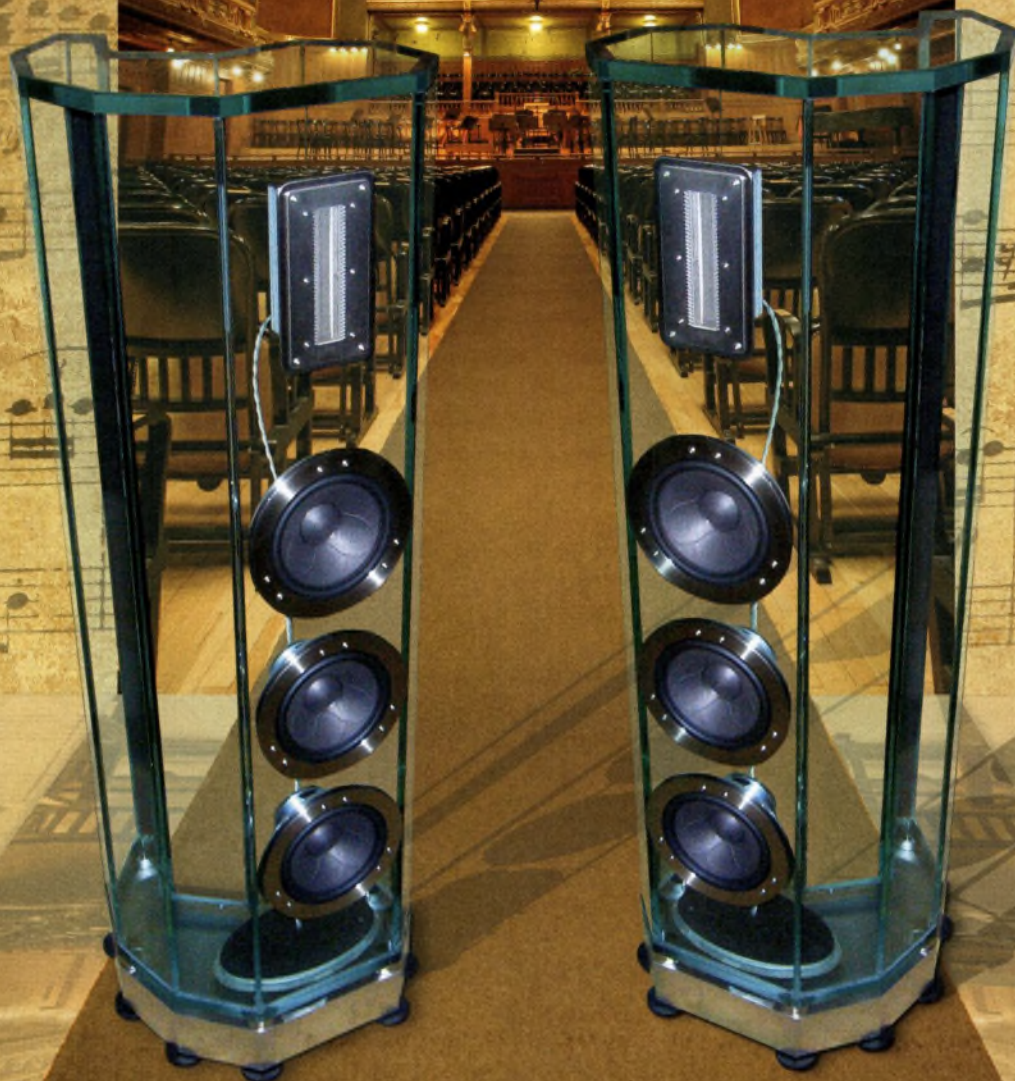
A change in editor will naturally entail changes to the magazine, but I'm keen not to shake the tree just for the sake of making my presence felt. I have intimated my feelings on *Hi-Fi Plus* and its future direction on pages four and six of this issue, but this is just a jumping-off point. I welcome your comments and opinions about *Hi-Fi Plus* – good and bad. It's not possible to please everyone, and if your dearest wish is that *Hi-Fi Plus* campaigns to bring back 8Track, I'm sorry but your dreams are likely to remain unfulfilled. But maybe, just maybe, together we can build a better magazine. Or at least one with less cliché.

editor@hifiplus.com



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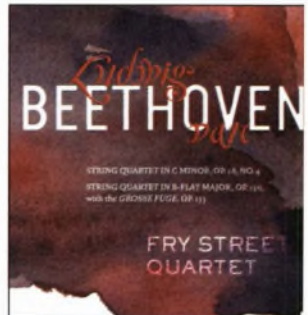
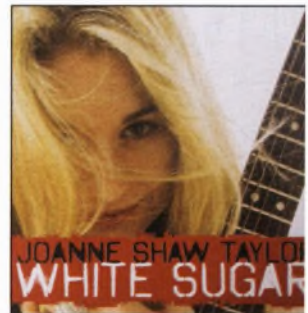
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# MUSIC MATTERS

by Alan Sircom

Any new editor has big shoes to fill. And Roy Gregory has left some of the biggest paw prints around. It's a daunting task, taking over a magazine from someone who was both launch editor and the person who steered it so remarkably well through its first decade. But it's not as if he's gone away; Roy really is 'spending more time with his speaker cables', and that's not a euphemism. By returning to his first love – reviewing – he can enjoy the products without the politics.

That being said, taking on the editorship of a high-end hi-fi magazine at a time when 'luxury' became a dirty word might at first seem like an odd career move. In fact, it's perhaps the prime time to do so.

**"...we are putting down roots and making our homes a nicer place to live. And that means better listening facilities."**

Having a first public outing as Editor at the Bristol Sound & Vision Show in late February showed why. Despite endless wailing from the mass media about terminal decline in retail and similar woeful fears from manufacturers, the show performed far better than anyone expected. There were more people than last year walking the halls on at least one of the three days, and even when visitor numbers were down, they weren't as bad as some expected. In total, sales were down by about eight per cent on last year. The only thing that was clearly absent was manufacturers; although there were key names in the business in attendance, many others were MIA.

So why are people still buying hi-fi in a recession? Several things spring to mind. One of the first things to happen in a recession is that public displays of wealth become vulgar; wearing an expensive suit, driving a top-of-the-range car, and having a five-figure watch hanging off

your wrist all begin to look offensive when the news is full of lay-offs and hardship. So, you internalise your luxury purchases and an expensive audio system might be seen as less vulgar than a big chunk o' bling.

Also, until about a year ago, what money we had was spent on doing up today's house for tomorrow's purchase. That all ended when easy mortgages went away. So now, we've gone all 'nesty' – instead of spending time and energy to move every two or three years, we are putting down roots and making our homes a nicer place to live. And that means better listening facilities.

In recessions, people tend to need cheering up. This is why, in the worst years of the 1930s, sales of radio sets and record players and cinema attendance were all almost 'Depression Proof'. If you aren't as likely to go out so much of an evening (because it's a cost that soon mounts up, with nothing to show for it) then you are likely to spend a bit more on your home entertainment complex.

We also have savings that are doing nothing (those of us who have savings, at least). We will all cling to our nest-eggs in tough times, but to find that nest-egg barely growing over the next year or two is going to be very, very frustrating. Better to put it to good use than watch it stagnate. Once again, high quality hi-fi, with its long lifespan, reputation for build and reliability and high entertainment value, wins out.

It's worth remembering that some of the most important changes to hi-fi occurred during economic downturns, and some of our biggest and best products and brands popped up when stock market was on its knees. CD was launched at a time when the worldwide economy was at one of its lowest points of the tail end of the last century. Mark Levinson's No 30 CD transport and No 31 DAC (perhaps the first grand CD statement from the high-end community) arrived during the worst downturn of the 1990s and the 'Black Monday' stock market crash of 1987 ultimately did little to stem the tide of Linn and Naim systems sold during this time. Brands like Krell, Wilson Audio and even Monster Cable were founded at times when the words 'economy' and 'boom' were never spoken of together.

Despite better than expected results at the Bristol Show, 2009 is going to be a tough year all round. Those that survive tough times do so not simply by belt-tightening. ►



full product range not shown

## McIntosh - for those who want the best seat in the house...

In the world of specialist Hi-Fi, no finer example exists than a **McIntosh**. They design precision musical instruments of beauty that accurately reproduce your music day after day for a lifetime. That's why every model spanning the company's 60 years can be serviced and restored to the same standard as the day it left the **McIntosh** factory.

Not surprisingly it explains why a **McIntosh** never loses its resale value and why owners are so loyal to a brand they dearly love.

60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary



▶ but through enterprise, innovation, products that deserve to survive and good ol' fashioned hard work – this applies as much to countries as it does to individuals. Unfortunately, there will be those who do all that and still fail, but such failures will be less common than those who spend the next year or so clinging to last year's strategy. The single worst thing anyone can do right now is to do nothing.

heard of; this will continue, but we must provide reviews of products that are at least available on Earth. There's no sense in parading a series of products that are only sold on the other side of the world, or where the waiting list stretches into the 23rd Century. Sometimes, the best products are the hidden gems, but there comes a point where they are so unrealistically hidden as to render the

product, the review and even the magazine itself almost impossibly elitist.

Closely connected to this is a degree of relevance. We believe the average *Hi-Fi Plus* reader (if there is such a thing) buys products on a bell-curve, centred around the £5,000 mark. While we all love to ogle over products costing as much as a private jet, the magazine recognises that not many people buy products in the £10,000+ band. If we were to concentrate too heavily on £50,000 loudspeakers or £80,000 amplifiers, we would be doing our readers



Above: The Bristol Sound & Vision Show. Recession-proof?

It's that ethos that meant jumping at the chance when the post of editor came up. And it's that ethos that means *Hi-Fi Plus* will change, in part to reflect the changes that are taking place in the hi-fi industry. So, as the audiophile landscape moves beyond the physical disc as music carrier, we will be there finding the best ways to download, the best places to find high-quality music and the best ways to replay that music.

We should first try and separate the changes to the way we will be listening to music over the coming years from the key changes in world economies (if such a thing is possible). Irrespective of the actual value of the system, tomorrow's hi-fi will feature – with increasing importance – music found from sources other than traditional CD and LP. In fact, tomorrow's systems will make little or no distinction how the music got to them; CD, downloads from the internet, streamed data... they are all files to be handled and turned into music. We won't abandon CD (we won't abandon LP either), but we will find a way to welcome new music sources to our systems without compromise.

I believe *Hi-Fi Plus* needs to stick to the three 'R's; realism, relevance and responsibility. The magazine has a commanding reputation for finding the fascinating new and exciting products that few people have ever

a disservice. Similarly, if we were to focus on products costing less than £1,000, we would be understating what most of us actually buy, own, use and love. This is not to say we will not be ignoring these ends of the audiophile spectrum, but simply that the magazine's central focus is returning to the sort of hi-fi that's relevant for most readers.

Similarly, we shall be considering the relevance of the products under test, not simply for their price tags. This relevance is dynamic – a year or two ago, downloaded music files would have been entirely irrelevant to a high-end hi-fi magazine; a year from now, failing to include such music would make the magazine just as irrelevant.

That leads to responsibility, and this cuts all ways. A magazine needs to be responsible in terms of product selection, choosing the right reviewer for the task, ensuring the reviewer is not too strongly biased in favour of (or against) the product under test and produce reviews that adhere to that well-known Fox News trademark – Fair and Balanced. Only we mean it. In fairness, in common with the broad spectrum of UK hi-fi magazines, *Hi-Fi Plus* has a team of reviewers who already fit those profiles.

This is a fascinating and exciting time to make a magazine about hi-fi. It's like one big leap into the unknown; we don't know how the hi-fi industry will look in a year's time. But, between us, we'll find out. ▶+



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# Good practice makes perfect...



## Because the how and the why are just as important as the what when it comes to cables

While the design of audio and video cables is considered by many as something of a 'black art', there is one company that employs proprietary design and manufacturing technologies developed for critical applications such as the space program and the field of medical science. That company is Nordost, makers of the original Flatline® Cable. Today, Nordost's renowned Valhalla and state-of-the-art Odin cables are acclaimed by audio manufacturers – and audio critics - the world over as simply the most accurate and musically transparent cables that money can buy.

In striving to preserve the tiniest nuances of musical information and picture detail during power and signal transmission between various AV components, Nordost rigorously selects its materials. Then it employs unique production processes, executed to exact tolerances in its Massachusetts-based factory in order to produce

what can rightly be claimed 'the best cables in the world'. Needless to say Nordost's extensive R&D has resulted in countless awards and accolades during the company's ten year history of precision cable design and manufacturing.

Nevertheless it's Nordost's Balanced Design Concept that truly sets the company's products apart. By employing consistent materials throughout the range, and thanks to a deep understanding of the issues and problems surrounding signal transfer, Nordost designs functionally specific cables that enable audiophiles and home theatre enthusiasts to create a 'coherent cable loom' throughout their systems. The results are astonishing, delivering a level of overall musical balance and coherence that places you closer to the original performers than ever before - even when using modestly-priced separate components and loudspeakers.

## MAKING TRICKLE-DOWN A TORRENT

Applying lessons learnt during the development of its flagship designs, Nordost has created a complete new range of cables called Wyrewizard. And the great news for enthusiasts not fortunate enough to be able to afford the very best cables in the world is that many of Nordost's carefully selected materials and unique manufacturing processes have trickled down to the company's most affordable range yet. Better still, the Wyrewizard range employs the same Balanced Design Concept that is core to Nordost's design philosophy in order that your system will perform to the very best of its ability and deliver a directness of communication and musical expression that simply has to be experienced to be believed.

## REAL FAMILY VALUES

So today even Nordost's most affordable cables – the Wyrewizard range – share common design DNA with its flagship cables such as the legendary Odin and Valhalla products. A few of the key features found in the Wyrewizard range include:

- The use of aerospace grade dielectric materials – and even patented Micro Mono-filament construction in key applications
- Consistency of design together with common choice of materials and construction - such as silver-plated solid core conductors and proprietary FEP insulation
- Low mass – utilising very high quality, lightweight cable terminations and minimalist construction for superior sound
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## Nordost – because you need good science to get great sound





# PEEL APPEAL

by Jimmy Hughes

The late John Peel was a remarkable man. It seems he retained a youthful enthusiasm for new music throughout his life. Okay, it was his job to discover new bands. But my guess is he would probably have gone on listening to new stuff even if it hadn't been his livelihood.

I don't think there are many listeners like John Peel. With many of us, our musical tastes are formed in our late teens and early twenties, and after that follows a period of consolidation rather than exploration. In other words, our interest in music no longer expands and broadens as much as it did.

There's nothing particularly wrong in this. Few of us have John Peel's crusading spirit. Speaking personally, I view the pieces of music I love as 'friends'. Rather than have a huge circle of friends I know superficially, I'd rather have a just a few that I really know well.

But, there's always a danger your relationships become stale through **excessive** familiarity. In my earlier years, I really loved the music of Bach. But, I played certain pieces so much, I almost wore them out. I still enjoy listening to Bach, but I can't respond to his music with the same enthusiasm I had (say) 20 or 30 years back.

Apparently, John Peel played a certain amount of music he did not necessarily like himself. He played it because he felt it was representative of what those at the cutting edge of new music were doing. That being the case, it deserved to be heard – whether or not he liked it himself.

That's a laudable policy. But, when you're listening purely to please yourself, you have no such obligation. Why should you listen to music you don't like and fail to understand, just because it's new? A lot of classical music written in the 20th century was decidedly unpleasant and very 'difficult'. Why waste time on it?

Yet it's often the case that really worthwhile pieces of music do take time to assimilate. Some of the music I love most needed a surprising amount of time before its secrets were revealed. I had to keep listening to the piece before – suddenly – everything fell into place.

There's a story about the German Wagner specialist Karl Muck being engaged to conduct the New York Philharmonic. Apparently, one of the orchestra's directors had a quiet word in his ear, letting him know that many New Yorkers did not like the music of Wagner. "Zen ve vill play him till zey do" was the testy response.

Now, put like that, Herr Muck's response could be construed as arrogant teutonic obstinacy. Just because

Wagner was one of his passions, he was going to inflict the music on audiences whether they liked it or not. Or maybe he had a point; with increased familiarity audiences would grow to love Wagner.

Repeatedly listening to a piece of music until it finally sinks in is sometimes the only way. Some music you 'get' the first time you hear it; other pieces have to be played three, four, or five or six times. And, it's often the way that, the pieces that do take time to assimilate, are the ones that end up meaning the most to you.

**"John Peel played a certain amount of music he did not necessarily like himself. He played it because he felt it was representative of what those at the cutting edge of new music were doing."**

If the music in question is fairly short (say, a three minute pop song), then playing it a few times doesn't take long. And if, at the end of half a dozen attempts, you still don't like it – well, you haven't wasted much time. But, what about repeat listenings to a Wagner opera lasting three or four hours? Now that's a completely different thing.

My attention span is not particularly short, but nonetheless I do find it difficult to maintain concentration with long pieces of music. I find my mind starts to wander after about an hour. For this reason, I often know the first part of long works better than the later parts.

On a personal level, someone like John Peel would not necessarily need to fully assimilate every piece of music he listened to. All he'd need to do is make a judgement about whether or not it was worth including on his radio show. But that's not the same for those of us who primarily listen for pleasure.

We need pieces that speak to us – pieces that can join the inner circle of 'friends' – pieces we can return to again and again. Knowing which pieces of music are worth giving time to is ultimately something of a lottery. You may get lucky, you might not. Sadly, there's no shortcut. As Karl Muck realised – you have to keep listening.



# Flow

by ARGENTO AUDIO



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# DIGITAL DREAMS

by Jason Kennedy

Alongside the paucity of visitor numbers in the corridors of the recent CES expo in Las Vegas, one thing that struck me was the quantity of rooms demonstrating high-end systems that had PCs as the front end. Often these rooms also had the latest transports in them as well, but these were lying idle while a computer fed a suitably expensive and USB-inputted converter. These PCs were not being used because you can cram thousands of songs onto a normal hard disk; they were being used to play material recorded at such a high resolution that it doesn't fit on regular PCM formats.

**"These PCs were not being used because you can cram thousands of songs onto a normal hard disk; they were being used to play material recorded at such a high resolution that it doesn't fit on regular PCM formats."**

One of the first labels to issue such files was Reference Recordings which launched its HRx 'format' at CES last year. HRx is the name RR has used to describe WAV files of its 24-bit/176.4kHz recordings, files that are effectively the same thing as the original master in a way that a disc that you can spin in a player rarely if ever seems to be. Ray Kimber assured me that his Isomike recordings sound the same whether you play the SACD or the DSD file of the same thing, but for his four-channel dem, he too was using a PC, to stream DSD using Sonoma pro audio software.

You can only buy his recordings on SACD but Reference sells its HRx material on DVD-R discs that you have to load

onto a computer prior to playback with a suitable media player and thence out to an amplifier or convertor. An approach which will be familiar to the MP3 generation but one which until now has been the antithesis of high fidelity. Now that RR, and now Naim Audio for that matter, have taken to putting the highest resolution music that they have onto DVD-R, we could see a sea change in the way that computers are seen by audio enthusiasts. Perhaps that change is already here.

Of course it's also a whole new area to grapple with in hi-fi terms, your average PC is not going to be anything like a decent CD transport when it comes to noise and jitter suppression. But when you hear the results it is clear that effort put into making it better will be worth it. Even in a less than perfect set up this is the best thing I've heard in reproduced audio. Yes really, the HRx recordings are stunning in their realism, scale, dynamics and sheer ability to bring the recording to life in the listening room. I am not the only one to notice this; Robert Harley said the same thing in *The Absolute Sound* recently. He managed to organise a rather less compromised source/computer for the purpose: A PC with no moving parts, solid state drive, radial cooling and a high quality sound card with digital output via AES/EBU (as recommended by Reference) and the much vaunted Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC to go with it. So he should have got a result... but even using the optical output of my Mac feeding a Russ Andrews DA-1, it is apparent that this is something out of the ordinary.

One reason for this of course is that the quality of the recording is extremely high. Reference's Professor Keith O Johnson knows a thing or two about capturing sound and the HDCD discs that these recordings are normally released on sound pretty impressive themselves. But they are compromised by the limitations of the format for sure and quite possibly the limitations of optical disc playback systems as a whole. Interestingly, Boulder's 1021 CD player does not play as it spins rather it rips the music off each CD and stores it on hard disk prior to playback.

It's the combination of Reference's high quality recordings and the fact that it puts a copy of the 24-bit/176.4 kHz master onto HRx discs that makes it so powerful. We've had this bit level available in the past (on DVD-Audio) but very few audiophile labels offered recordings of this quality on it and even fewer

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▶ manufacturers made serious DVD-A players. The best example I have come across is Townshend's heavily reworked Pioneer 565 universal player. That made a very strong case for DVD-A but the format never really got off the ground and has effectively ceased to be.

SACD is the highest resolution digital format we have and while new releases are not an everyday occurrence, there still plenty coming through, particularly in the classical field. It produces pretty stunning results too if you have a serious player. However, maybe it's that



Above: The Hot Club of San Francisco. Django's spirit lives on in high-res!

I've not played the right recordings when I've had such a player in the system but the format has not produced the quality of result that I've found with HRx. It makes one wonder whether a suitably audiophile PC equipped with appropriate playback software and soundcard might be able to deliver a better result from DSD files too. But its hard enough putting together a good PCM playing computer so I'll leave that to the pros for now.

What got me started on this road was the RR HRx disc *Yerba Buena Bounce* by the Hot Club of San Francisco (pictured), the only non classical HRx so far released. It's a recording with plenty of 'air' made by a band that models itself on the Django Reinhardt/Stephane Grappelli ensemble of very similar name (substitute Paris for San Francisco). This means lots of plucked acoustic strings, strings which in this form have a texture and vibration that's unusually natural and relaxed. I admit that I've not heard the CD of this recording but am nonetheless

convinced that it would not be in the same league, CD can be pretty good but not this good. In fact it makes the six hundred pound Russ Andrews DAC sound like a six grand one. And while it's a good DAC it's not that good.

The key to optimising results with these formats is to build a PC that delivers the full resolution of the signal without adding noise of its own. Robert Harley had a PC built by Goodwin's High End, a dealer based in Boston, it used 'heat pipe' cooling to instead of a fan and a solid state drive with no moving parts. Its output was produced by a Lynx AES 16 soundcard with an AES/EBU digital output. If you were to buy this PC from Goodwin's it would set you back \$3,600, which is a lot for a computer but not bad for a state of the art transport that will play all PCM formats at least. The Reference Records site has useful information on what you need to get optimum results from both Macs and PCs. An easy option for those wishing to dip a toe in the water is to get a DAC that will accept a USB input, of which there are plenty, and hook up your PC that way. It limits you to 24/96 but that's all I have been able to achieve so far and it's pretty impressive.

What those at the leading edge of high fidelity would prefer of course is an audio-oriented version of this approach, a bit like a multiroom server (such as those made by Imerge, Living Control, etc) that is built for sound rather than flexibility. It won't be long before it happens; Meridian/Sooloos looks promising, as does the Qsonix Q110... and there's always the Naim HDX. This last limits oversampling to 96kHz, though; possibly because streaming higher rates requires an interface like AES/EBU which is still quite rare in domestic audio. Naim's thinking is that 88.2kHz is extremely good and keeps file sizes down, which is useful if you want to obtain this material via download.

The most exciting thing right now is that we can buy a replica of the master that was created in the studio and play it back on a source that we have at home already. Naim has two titles out that were created by Tony Faulkner and Reference Records has just released its fifth title, and the emphasis is on classical material. As a generally non-classical listener, I didn't think I'd appreciate this music. But when its presented with this degree of realism, it's impossible to ignore.

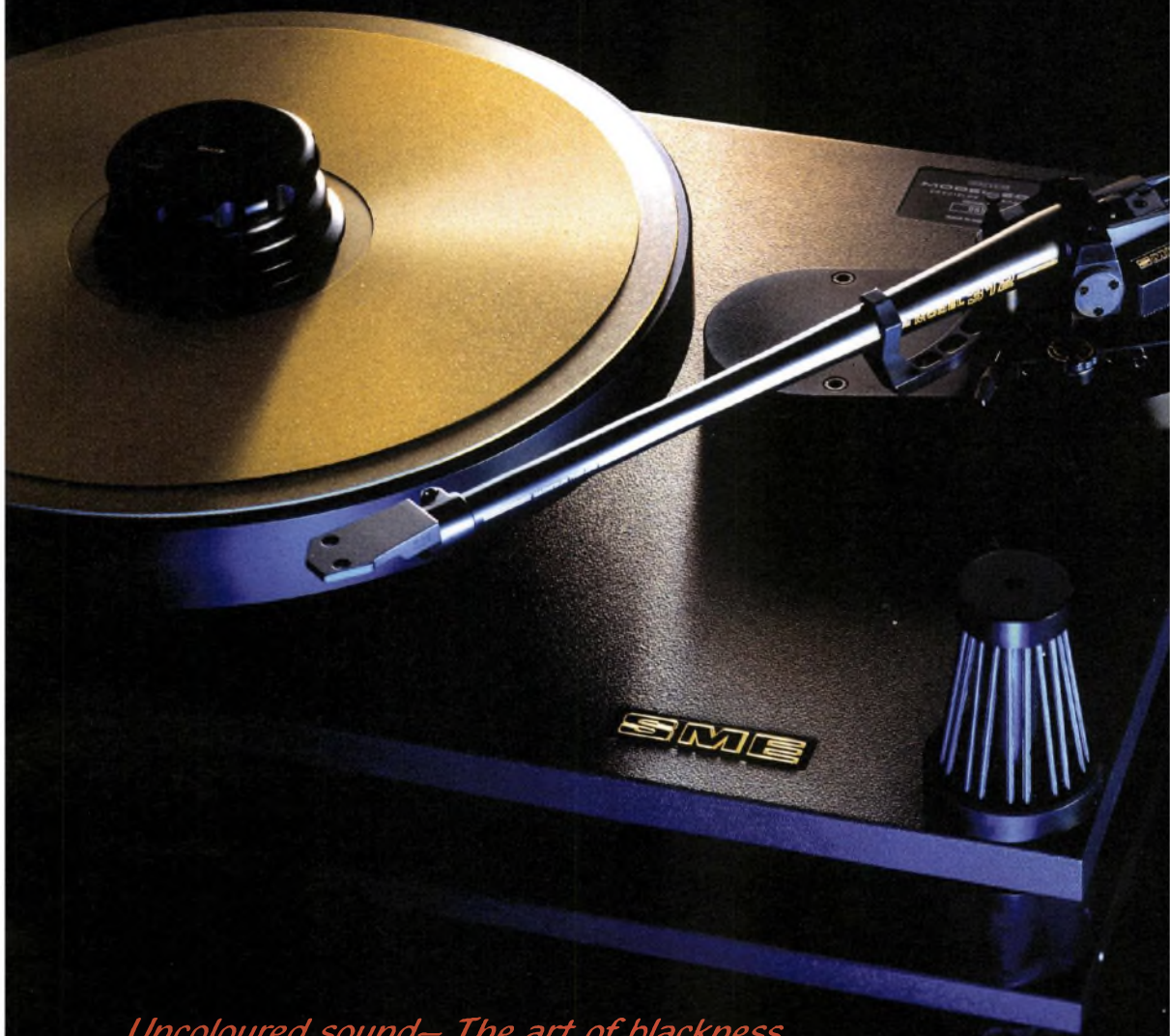




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Ken Kessler Review - Hi-Fi News, Volume 51 No. 5.

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**FOCAL**

# Standing tall...

## The Focal Grande Utopia EM Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

The third family of products to carry Focal's flagship Utopia designation, this latest iteration represents not just an evolution of the technology and thinking behind these speakers, but a ground-up reassessment of its implementation. So, while there are clear common factors that bind these new Utopia models to their predecessors (driver technology, complement and materials), there isn't a single element that hasn't been modified or changed, wholly or in part. In fact, the developments are so comprehensive and their implications so far reaching that they are beyond the scope of a single review. Which is why we started by looking at the simplest speaker in the range, the two-way stand-mounted Diablo, a model that incorporates the advances made to the established Beryllium tweeter and W Cone driver technologies, as well as touching on the sophisticated cabinet mapping technique that has been applied to the design and construction of the enclosure.

The Grande Utopia EM embodies all those advances and adds a few twists to the mix that only become possible when development budgets and product pricing become truly elastic.

As such, this review constitutes Part II, a second instalment of the story that started with CT's Diablo review in Issue 63, in which he notes the significant advances made by Focal in the areas of driver performance and cabinet design. Refinements in the diameter of the Beryllium tweeter and

the development of a new spaced motor assembly, shaped to maximize venting and minimize reflections have resulted in a lower resonant frequency, a 1.5 dB increase in efficiency and a 40 per cent reduction in distortion, increased thermal efficiency, greater dynamics and reduced compression. Laser cutting of the W sandwich cones used in the mid and bass drivers has improved sonic consistency and pair matching, while the sophisticated new cabinet mapping technology has allowed the creation of more efficient and rigid cabinet structures, shorn of the excess weight that stores mechanical energy, smearing musical information and anchoring the sound to the speakers, identifying them as its source.

The Grande Utopia EM matches those advances in midrange and high-frequency driver performance and enclosure design, with equivalent advances at low frequencies, in extending the Focus Time concept that governs the larger Utopia's curved baffle arrangement and in crossover developments to actually deliver the increased musical potential. Confronted with a structure as strikingly different as the latest Grande, it's easy to assume that it's an exercise in ostentatious aesthetics (at the possible expense of

performance) – especially when it's this big and this red! Well, the speaker comes in black and a subtle pale grey too – while anything, as they say, is possible. What's more, by presenting such a striking and well rounded form, the speakers make a statement,

rather than trying to hide or slip into the background – never a possibility with something this large!

Besides the superb standard of finish, the key factor in this success is the Bauhaus discipline to the design, its form absolutely dictated by function. But its revolutionary appearance pales into insignificance against the mechanical and technological developments that lurk beneath its skin, so let's examine each developmental aspect in turn.

### Adjustable cabinet geometry...

Separate, stacked enclosure modules are nothing new in loudspeaker design, with many companies relying on the approach to fine tune arrival times and driver placement relative to the listening position – often in conjunction with a complex set of tables or formulae to calculate proper placement. Indeed, the first and second series Utopias used both separate cabinets and a curved displacement of the drivers to arrange them relative to the listening position.

However, despite a fair degree of cleverness in the actual placement and alignment of the drivers there was no escaping the inherent compromise ▶



► of a one size fits all approach. With the latest Grande, the speaker with the longest baffle and most drivers, Focal was determined to overcome that limitation. The problem, clearly, was how to make the individual modules movable relative to the listening position; the solution is both mechanically impressive and wonderfully elegant.

The Grande Utopia EM actually consists of a plinth and five cabinets, but is physically divided into three separate elements: the tweeter enclosure, the two boxes above it and the two boxes below that sit on the plinth. The top and bottom pairs are actually fixed assemblies, their boxes physically fixed together.

The clever bit is that the tweeter cabinet moves relative to the bass and midrange below it, as does the midrange and mid-bass unit pairing above it, thus allowing the listener to tighten or loosen the baffle curve depending on listening distance. But with a speaker system that weighs around 260kg, the notion of adjusting these elements and then holding them stable whilst fixing them was clearly out of the question. Instead, Focal have implemented a mechanical arrangement of moving wedges that is simple, precise and repeatable. A drop down flap on the rear of the lower midrange cabinet contains (amongst other things) a beautifully machined crank handle. Fit it into the socket in the back of the tweeter cabinet and each turn raises or lowers the upper elements, the top two cabinets by exactly twice as much as the tweeter enclosure, thus preserving the correct arc. A mechanical/numerical counter

allows you to set the angles precisely and the whole exercise will take one person a matter of moments.

The end result contributes not only to the striking appearance of the Grande EM, but also to the easy optimization of its sound, with quite small adjustments in tilt having a profound effect on the presentation and balance of the sound.

### Electromagnetic Bass Driver...

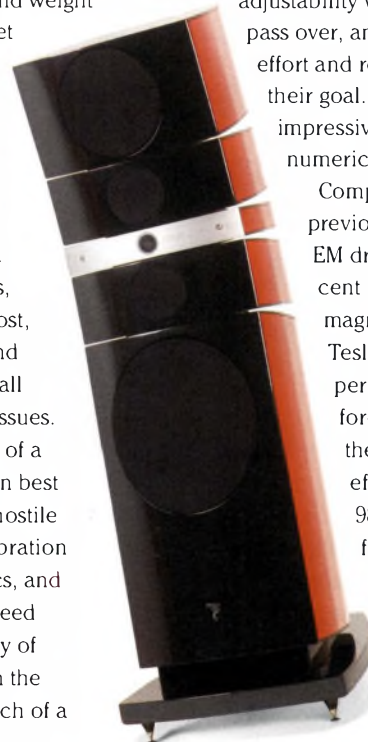
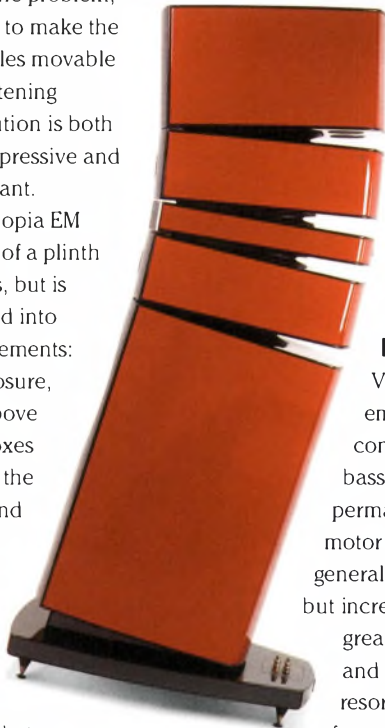
Virtually all loudspeakers employ what are now considered conventional bass units, employing permanent magnets in their motor systems. These are generally driven passively, but increasingly, in search of greater level, extension and control, designers are resorting to active drive at low-frequencies. It's an undeniably attractive option, offering far greater extension and weight from smaller cabinet volumes, as well as a degree of tuning adjustment to match room conditions.

However, it is not without its own set of compromises, with complexity, cost, amplifier quality and system integration all posing significant issues. After all, the inside of a speaker cabinet can best be described as a hostile environment for vibration sensitive electronics, and active crossovers need to match the quality of the preamp used in the system, not too much of a

challenge in an AV set up, but really hard to achieve in a high-end rig. And that's before we even get to the question of amplifier quality and top to bottom continuity.

For a speaker like the Grande, where size and cost were largely irrelevant and quality of performance is everything, another solution needed to be found. Perhaps typically, it came from combining forward thinking and new technology with a concept that, in hi-fi terms at least, could be described as positively ancient; the electromagnetic drive-unit. In the days before powerful amps and high-quality, high power permanent magnets, speaker manufacturers resorted to electromagnets to energize their drivers. You want more bass, more efficiency? Just turn up the power fed to the coil. Of course, it's not quite that simple, especially when applied to a driver and system with the power demands and bandwidth of the big Utopia, as RH explains in his sidebar. But the attraction of a driver with not just significantly greater power, but also an inbuilt level of adjustability was just too attractive to pass over, and Focal poured massive effort and resources into achieving their goal. The results are impressive, even from a purely numerical standpoint.

Compared to the driver in the previous Grande, the 400mm EM driver offers an 80 per cent increase in available magnetic field (from 0.93 Tesla to 1.75 Tesla), an 88 per cent increase in the force applied to accelerate the cone, increased efficiency (92.7dB to 98.6dB), a lower resonant frequency and an overall reduction in distortion by a factor of almost four; and all down to the nearly 7kg of copper wire ►



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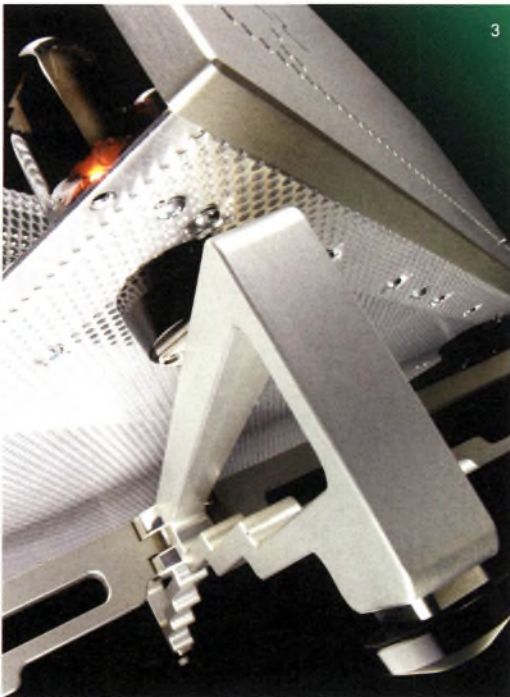
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1. Karan Acoustics KA I 180 integrated amplifier
2. Avalon Acoustics Indra
3. David Berning Quadrature Z & Stillpoints Components
4. dCS Paganini CD/SACD system



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► used in place of the magnets. Add in an adjustable output power supply, housed in a small separate enclosure and with six discrete steps from 1W to 75W, and you have the equivalent of 6dB in level adjustment, as well as an 'overdrive' setting!

The other big change in bass implementation is the move to a flow port arrangement, which feeds the output of the downward facing port through a wide, forward facing slot between the bottom of the cabinet and the plinth. This improves the port's interface with the room and also keeps it more consistent when it comes to boundary conditions.

### Adjustable Crossover...

Like everything else in loudspeaker design, making the most of the advances made with the bass unit was a question of balance, weighing up how much of the benefit to spend on overall system efficiency, how much on adjustability. Setting the range of adjustment at  $\pm 3$ dB allows an overall system efficiency of 94dB. As well as significant level compensation at low frequencies, this allows the elimination of subtractive components in the mid and treble crossovers, components that limit transparency and dynamic response.

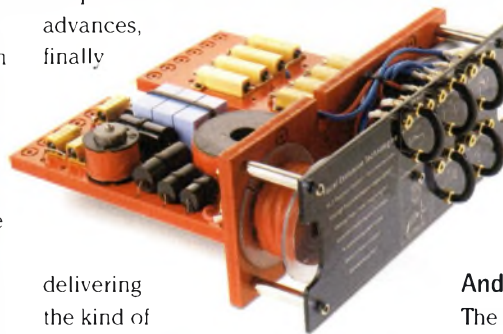
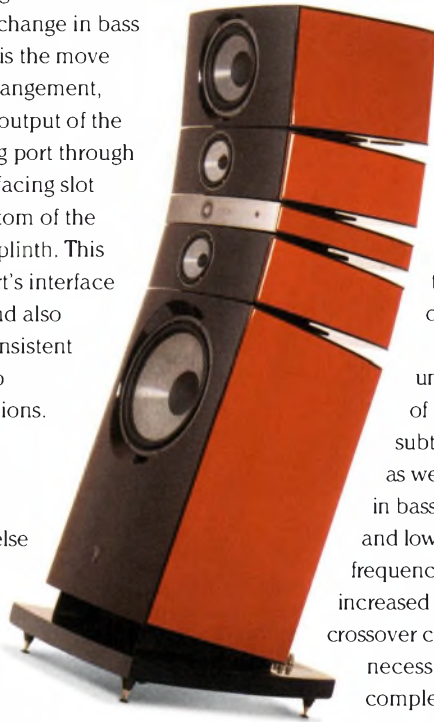
But Focal wanted to further increase user optimization, and settled on a set of high-quality jumpers to give three-step settings that enable users to tweak crossover slopes between mid and treble, as well as tweeter and mid-bass levels and sub-bass Q. Add in the level control on the bass PSU and that's 1458 permutations. Thankfully, the discrete and repeatable nature of

each step makes the process simple to execute and easy to navigate. The upper range adjustments give a tilt and 'smoothness' function to compensate for the live-ness or balance of the room, but it's the ability to balance mid-bass

and sub-bass levels against low-bass Q that is critical to achieving the scale, presence and coherent dynamic range of which the Grande is capable, and which represents one of the key breakthrough developments.

However, one unforeseen effect of the elimination of subtractive elements as well as the increase in bass transparency and lower levels of low-frequency distortion was increased audibility of crossover component quality, necessitating in turn, a complete overhaul of crossover components (including the development of dedicated designs) and the selection (by blind listening) of new internal wiring. Only with these developments in place was it possible to fully realize the potential of all the other advances, finally

delivering the kind of step-change in low-frequency performance that characterized the impact of the Beryllium tweeter on the upper reaches of the second generation Utopia Bes.



### Feeding The Beast

Installing any speaker that weighs 260kg is always going to be an issue, but the Grandes proved easier than most. The fact that the top cabinet element is removable helps reduce the weight a little and the height to manageable proportions, while the integral casters allow you to roll the speaker straight out of its crate and into place – as well as helping with fine tuning once they're up and running and before installation of the (necessarily) substantial spikes. Once the speakers are in situ, the top box needs to be lifted into place (a two person job) and the power supplies connected. Then, you can finally start thinking about all those adjustments. I opted to position the speakers for optimum performance with the controls set flat before any further refinement, finally settling on a combination of 1.5dB mid and sub-bass cut with a notch increase in Q.

Two other points need to be made about the feeding of the Grandes: despite a 94dB sensitivity, small amps are out; and it matters how you feed the power supplies. On the latter point, don't skimp on the mains leads – you will hear the difference. And on the former, even the impressively linear, tactile and well-controlled 20 Watt output of the Vacuum State monoblocs didn't do justice to this speaker's frequency extremes. Around ten times that is a more sensible target, with the Levinson 383 and both the Ayre and Berning monoblocks all putting in sterling service. Power and load tolerance is definitely the order of the day.

### And, finally... the sound!

The latest generation of speaker designs, notably the Avalons and Spondors among others, exhibit a level of sonic invisibility, an ability to stand aside from the music without leaving their mark on it that is quite unprecedented. But nor is it a

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► coincidence. Advances in driver design have in turn placed considerably greater demands on crossover configuration and component quality, revealing previously unsuspected levels of damage to the overall performance (and the root of the somewhat simplistic notion that the simpler a crossover the better – well yes, but not quite for the reasons we thought).

It's a development that Focal has matched with the Diablo, and even more impressively, with the Grande EM. To make a speaker that is this large, this complex and this adjustable – but is also the nearest thing to sonically invisible, is impressive indeed. That the Grande can do the small things so brilliantly and intimately, do poise and delicacy with a natural independence to the sound that mini monitors can only dream about is even more so. And while it's difficult to ignore anything this large and visually striking, shut your eyes or better still, turn out the lights, and the music will hang in its own acoustic, free of the speakers and their location, the scale matched to the venue and musical forces involved – small when it should be, effortlessly huge when it's called for.

Even early stereo mixes with their hard left/right placement don't betray the position of the Grandes, the instruments placed separate from and just behind the speakers themselves. Soundstages grow and shrink or simply evaporate according to the recordings themselves, but the signal and the picture it paints is always separate from the speakers holding the brush.

This ability to allow the music to exist independently of the system producing it speaks volumes about the quality of the speakers involved. It's a feat impossible to achieve without exceptional linearity from lowest bass to highest treble, without dynamic coherence that projects energy equally across that entire spectrum. Finally, you need tonal consistency too, a quality made easier to achieve with consistent driver materials across the range. Ironic

## Electromagnetic Drive Units

The "EM" in the Grande Utopia EM's name stands for "electromagnetic," the drive principle employed in the woofer.

In a conventional drive unit, the power amplifier drives alternating current (the audio signal) through the voice coil, generating a varying magnetic field around the coil that is an analog of the audio signal. The varying magnetic field changes its orientation at the audio signal frequency because the audio signal is alternating current – the current flow reverses direction at the frequency of the audio signal. Send 1000Hz to the driver and the current flow through the voice coil reverses direction 1000 times per second. The voice coil then alternately pushes and pulls against the fixed magnetic field generated by the driver's permanent magnet, causing the voice coil to be pulled back and forth, and with it, the cone.

This approach, used in virtually all moving-coil loudspeaker drivers, runs up against the laws of physics. The magnetic field strength generated by fixed magnets is limited, which in turn places restrictions on the cone weight, how low in frequency the driver will play, and how sensitive the driver is. A heavy cone goes lower in frequency (all other factors being equal), but requires greater magnetic field strength surrounding the voice coil to drive it.



Focal's solution to this physics problem is to replace the driver's fixed magnets with a large coil that functions as an electromagnet. The coil is driven with direct current from an outboard power supply that plugs into an AC outlet. The current flow through the coil creates the magnetic field, against which the voice-coil-generated magnetic field pushes and pulls. The electromagnet produces a magnetic field strength in the gap (the area in which the voice coil sits) double that of a conventionally driven woofer. Consequently, the EM's woofer can be heavier (giving it a lower resonant frequency) yet simultaneously more efficient. Moreover, the woofer's bass output can be adjusted by varying the current through the electromagnetic coil. This is accomplished in the

EM via a rotary switch on the outboard supply that drives current through the electromagnetic coil. One can thus adjust the EM's bass output to better integrate the system into a variety of listening rooms.

The result of electromagnetic drive is a woofer with very high sensitivity (97dB for 1W) but very low resonance (24Hz). So, the woofer delivers lots of very low bass with very little input power. The price of this performance is the need for the outboard supply that has to be plugged into an AC outlet, along with the sheer weight of the woofer. The EM's 400mm woofer weighs 63 pounds, 48 of which is the electromagnetic coil.

Robert Harley

then, that so much of the performance achievable from this boldly charismatic design is delivered by its least visible element, the crossover that hones and actually delivers the potential benefits of all those technological advances in driver and cabinet design.

It's hard to overstate just how crucial the configurable nature of both the cabinet and crossover are to the final results achieved. Sit and listen as a knowledgeable practitioner goes about the fine-tuning and you'll be astounded at the degree of difference even tiny changes make to the presentation and arrival of the music. This isn't a case of bending it into the shape you want; more a case of arriving at the shape it needs, because what happens is that the music becomes more and more integrated, moves further and further

from the plane and influence of the speakers, deeper and deeper into the realm of the natural and believable. It's almost trite to suggest that you'll know when it's right, but use acoustic music, especially with players or voices that you know and it really is that simple.

Time then, for an example of the Grande speaking in anger. Having composers conduct their own works is seldom a recipe for success, but Polski Radio's live concert SACD of Gorecki leading the National Polish Radio S.O. in his own *Third Symphony* is a stunning exception to that rule. It's a vast and stentorian work of three slow movements that might easily become sprawling and ponderous. Indeed, on many a system and despite the perfectly poised performance with its incredibly control of tension ►



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through tempo, the sheer weight of low frequency information simply overloads the speakers' ability to resolve and differentiate pitch, pace and texture. Never on the Grandes! Even the slow and low bowed entry is picked out perfectly, the individual bars and phrases distinct, the measured increase in intensity and tension, the resulting anticipation of the Cello entry, the inevitable arrival of the rest of the orchestra, building and building to the shattering climax built around the solo soprano part: it lives, it pulses, it breathes, drawing you into, immersing you in the sheer majesty of the music and he playing. But a 33-minute slow movement, even if you can't tear yourself away, is a long way round when it comes to making the point. That's made before a single note is played. Just listen to the opening, the eruption of applause, first from the choir stalls and then spreading around and across the auditorium as the conductor comes into view. Feel its warmth, its length, the explosive enthusiasm of a home crowd greeting a home-town hero, the way it reaches out and includes you. And as it settles, hear the sounds of the orchestra taking their seats, the shuffling of feet and setting of instruments and music stands. No random events these; instead you can hear the height and breadth of the stage, the gently terraced risers on which the orchestra is arranged, each incidental noise a part of a single organic whole. And as the hush descends with those deep, opening notes, the sense of presence, of human activity and attention is heightened by a sudden, stifled cough, just in front and to the left of you. Never



have I had such a sense of palpable presence, of attendance at a musical event. The Isis set new standards in this regard, but the Grande EM matches it and adds an effortless scale and genuinely unfettered dynamics to proceedings.


It's also a chameleon, the same ease with which it reveals changes in its own state of tune effortlessly exposing shortcomings in system set up and partnering equipment. The contrasting virtues of different front-ends, their

behaviour under warm up and the importance of carefully considered support have all rarely been clearer. A speaker like this attracts audiophiles like bees round a honey pot. I've been beating them off with a stick, but none of those who have slipped under the guard have gone away anything other than bowled over: Something else this Grande shares with the Isis – the ability to readjust a listener's notions of what is possible. Seldom has a speaker looked so striking and sounded so unlike it looks.

For many (most?), the cost of the Grandes and the space required to accommodate them will mean they remain a pipe-dream, but their tonal, spatial and temporal coherence, their extended bandwidth and truly astonishing dynamic capabilities (at both ends of the spectrum) puts them in a very select category indeed. They rub shoulders with the Isis – and probably Wilson's X2, although that's one speaker that I haven't had at home. This select group really are do it all speakers, whose weaknesses and shortcomings are more to do with practicality and matching than gross failings in performance. Indeed, they do less damage to the signal than a lot of matching electronics, which is food for thought...

From a company's point of view there are many different reasons to build a flagship speaker, from attention seeking to trickle down. But confronted by a £110,000 product, reviewers and potential purchasers need ask only one question: does this speaker go straight to the top of my "if I won the lottery" list? Well, as far as I'm concerned the Grand Utopia EM is firmly ensconced atop that pile, waiting to be shot at. Bring on the competition.

With the Grande Utopia EM, Focal has made a serious statement of intent, one that challenges the boundaries of speaker performance. That makes it worthy of more attention than we can give it here, and attention from more than one reviewer too.

This is one that will run and run, in the sense of other views and also other products, as much for what they say about the Grande as *vice versa*... 

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	4-way floorstanding reflex loaded loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	1x IAL2 25mm inverted beryllium dome 2x 165mm W cone midrange 1x 270mm W cone mid-bass 1x 400mm W cone electro magnetic sub-bass
Bandwidth:	18Hz – 40kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	94dB
Nominal Impedance:	8 Ohms (3 Ohms minimum)
Crossover Frequencies:	80 / 220 / 2200Hz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	654 x 2012 x 880mm
Weight:	260kg ca.
Finishes:	Black, red, grey; Others to order.
Price:	£110,000

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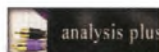
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## The Audio Research Reference CD8 CD

by Roy Gregory

It was a long time coming, but eventually, inevitably, a CD player turned up in my system that not only challenged the performance of the resident Wadia 861SE but actually beat it on price. That player was the Audio Research Reference CD7, a one-box unit built into the distinctly retro casework favoured by the company, and employing a valve regulated power supply and the same tube output stage you'll find in its Reference 3 line-stage. Not the kind of features you might associate with a benchmark performer in the high tech arena of digital replay systems. But, it seems advances in CD player performance have always owed as much to the past as they have to developments in digital technology itself.

The CD7 quickly became an indispensable presence in the audio landscape around these parts, its consistently musical delivery a boon in dealing with so many different products. But the pace of digital development is unrelenting, and ARC's

### CD7 Upgrades...

While it's not possible to retrofit the DAC used in the CD8 into a CD7, one thing that can be done is to modify the power supply to accept the 6550 in place of the existing 6H30s, which in itself should deliver a substantial lift in performance. What's even better is that ARC is carrying out the work free of charge for original owners – all you will have to pay is the cost of shipping the unit. It's an arrangement that is being honoured by Absolute Sounds in the UK, and I assume other distributors around the world. So, owners of CD7s should get in touch with their local distributor to check this out and make the necessary arrangements.

own CD5 and DAC7, more recent and more affordable digital devices than the Reference CD7 have already outstripped that player in terms of their digital technology, necessitating an update to the Reference player.

Enter then, the Reference CD8, which features the same Burr-Brown 24bit/192kHz chip-set as the CD5 and DAC7, in place of the CD7's Crystal CS4396 (another 24/192 chipset, but one that ARC decided to use with its upsampling set at a lower rate).

However, there's more (much more) to the CD8 than a higher resolution digital implementation. Intent on further improving the performance of the Reference player, ARC's engineers managed to shoehorn the Ref 3's valve regulation topology into the CD chassis. Not easy, given that the Ref 3 employs a single (but physically bulky) 6550 in place of the CD7's two nine-pin 6H30s, but the bigger valve delivers superior performance and longer tube life, making the effort well worthwhile. The rest of the circuitry and components have also been given a makeover, the most notable changes being an upgrade to the output coupling caps and the liberal application of damping material to just about everything in sight.

Outwardly (and operationally) the CD8 is virtually indistinguishable from the 7, employing the same Philips CDM PRO2 top-loading transport, complete with a magnetic puck to restrain the disc beneath its sliding lid – which is still manually operated. It also still offers the same balanced and single-ended

analogue outputs, together with AES/EBU and BNC digital output options. The display is now dimmable in five discrete steps, or can be switched off altogether, which is definitely a welcome improvement: otherwise, on the outside at least, *plus ça change...*



With a sample of the Ref CD7 still in residence, direct comparisons were possible, although that meant running the CD8 on repeat for a good month, just to get it burnt in. But with that chore out of the way and both players supported on identical finite element shelves, listening could finally begin. It was well worth the wait...

I'm not going to dwell for too long on the differences between the CD7 and its successor, simply because they are both clear and significant. Back to back listening to familiar material demonstrates the CD8's clear advantage in terms of focus, separation and transparency, the establishment of an overarching acoustic and the layering of images within that acoustic. Nor are these benefits purely hi-fi cosmetic. Growing as they do from clearer, more resolute and more transparent low frequencies, they have an immediate and pretty dramatic effect on the

▶ clarity of tempo and purpose in music, the solidity and presence of the performers. Playing the Chandos recording of the Taneyev *Fourth Symphony* (Polyansky and The RSSO) the stentorian opening bars have greater impact, texture and poise on the CD8, the brass punctuation is more definite, the orchestral spread as the first movement opens more dramatic and full of light and shade. The string contrasts are more vivid and there's a far greater sense of bowing and energy from the double basses. This life and the precise placement of the notes and phrases

bass notes that underpin the opening, locating each in space and giving the same sense of shape and impulse to the low frequencies that it does to the highs. And as the track develops, there's a poise and calm to the layers as they build, a stability that both echoes the lyric and provides the foundation for the cannonade and dynamic shift that signals the musical change of gear half way through.

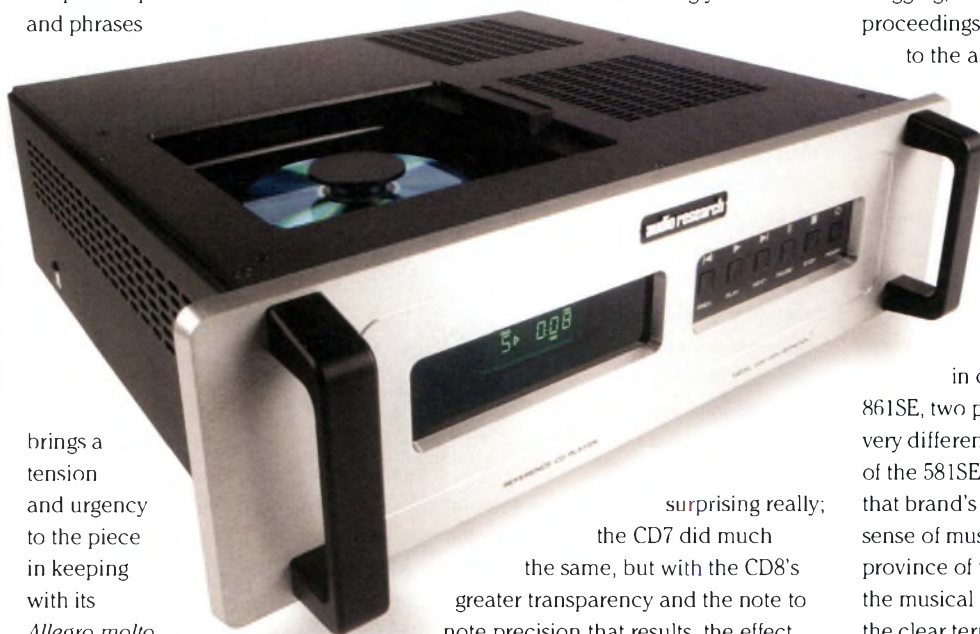
It's almost as if the CD8 latches on to the music's internal clock, matching step and arranging everything accordingly. Not

drum beat a metronomic steadiness, others give it an urgency and drive that pushes things along in a headlong tumble. In fact, it moves and evolves, starting out steady before picking up its tempo as the track develops scope and density. Few players let you hear this, none in my experience make it as apparent or natural as the CD8. Even the full-on, RnB power ballad excess of 'Better In Time' (great song, truly dreadful recording) is kept in check, the heavily compressed bass allowed to add to the drama without clogging, slowing or muddling proceedings. Listen to the vocal, listen to the arrangement and it's a

classic case of making the most of the song's considerable strengths while minimizing the horror wrought at the mixing desk.

In a wider context, this evolution is fascinating.

The CD7 stood its watch in company with my Wadia 861SE, two players of equal charm but very different attributes. If the arrival of the 581SE added considerably to that brand's textural qualities and sense of musical flow – the erstwhile province of the ARC – the CD8 invades the musical low-countries, previously the clear territory of the Wadia. This convergence is something of a current phenomenon; it seems to be occurring more and more, with traditional sparring partners leaving their deeply entrenched positions and getting almost cuddly on the middle ground. The gap betwixt and between the 581SE and CD8 is now close enough to see them singing from the same song-sheet. So, playing Jackson Browne's *Solo Acoustic Volume 1*, the Wadia gives you slightly more explosive applause, with more detail and definition of the individual claps and voices, but the ARC delivers a shade more weight, body and spreads the crowd more convincingly



brings a tension and urgency to the piece in keeping with its *Allegro molto* signature, while

the soundstage sits slightly higher, much deeper and divorced entirely from the plane of the speakers. Shut your eyes and you hear the hall, the stage and the orchestra; picking the speakers is almost impossible.

Nor is this new facility with timing and tempo a case of never spare the horses. The newly released Deluxe Edition of *Tea For The Tillerman* narrows the gap between vinyl and CD versions of this classic. But listening to 'Hard Headed Woman' it's the CD8 that reveals the depth of reverb on the opening vocal, that separates the cymbal shimmers and single plucked

surprising really; the CD7 did much the same, but with the CD8's greater transparency and the note to note precision that results, the effect is that much more obvious. Where its predecessor succeeded despite its more rounded, warmer bass by dint of centring the energy at low frequencies properly and coupling it to a natural sense of flow, the added shape and shading that comes with the CD8 allows it to dig even deeper into the temporal plane. If you thought the CD7's *pièce de résistance* was its ability to make the most of less than wonderful recordings, just wait until you hear the CD8 doing its thing. The almost imperceptible increase in pace that marks Eliza Gilkyson's 'Engineer Bill' is a case in point. Few players get it right; some fall on the side of caution, lending that

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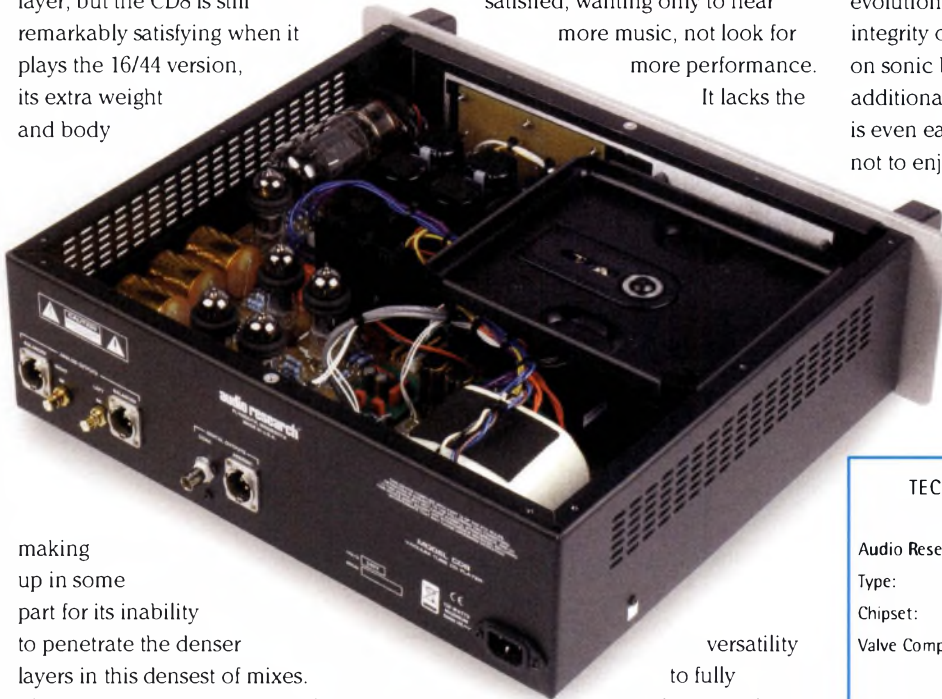
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Move on to the recently re-mastered *Fox Trot* and there's no missing the extra space, air, detail and definition that the Wadia lifts from the SACD layer, but the CD8 is still remarkably satisfying when it plays the 16/44 version, its extra weight and body



making up in some part for its inability to penetrate the denser layers in this densest of mixes. Close enough in fact that I could see some listeners preferring it, and those for whom the appeal of SACD remains illusory or irrelevant needn't feel short changed. High-res die-hards on the other hand, will point to a warmth in the sound that leans to the forgiving side of natural – with a consequent impact on low-level detail and absolute resolution. Indeed, while the CD8 is not as rounded as the CD7, its spectral balance is very similar, adding a sense of chest to voices and body to strings – hints revealed most obviously when running comparisons with hybrid discs against front-rank SACD players.

And therein lies the tale. These two players might no-longer represent the opposite extremes of CD's sonic spectrum, but conceptually they are a century apart. The Wadia offers the option of multiple digital inputs,

switching and volume control as well as SACD replay: the ARC is a one-box CD spinner. But then it's quite possible the best all round single-box CD player I've heard and certainly a match for anything at its price. It brings an organic and inherently musical quality to proceedings that leaves the listener satisfied, wanting only to hear more music, not look for more performance. It lacks the

versatility to fully embrace and integrate into today's digital convergence revolution. It also lacks the rosy glow that many a two-channel Luddite swears by and can only find in filterless designs. But weight, body and a sense of musical purpose? That's just for starters. Follow it up with a healthy serving of rhythmic sophistication and musical communication. Colour, texture, immediacy and presence? They're all on the menu too. Musical drama and an involving performance – in fact, a sense of performance full-stop? That'll be under house specials...

Audio Research's Reference CD7 was a slightly surprising success in that it came out and challenged the digital big boys head on, despite all their years of experience and the advantages they should have enjoyed

as a result. It did so by getting the musical fundamentals right; arguably by treating the transport's output like any other signal rather than fixating on digital technology for the sake of it. In doing so, it played to the Company's established strengths. The CD8 is a thoughtful and thoroughly effective evolution, retaining all the musical integrity of the CD7, while grafting on sonic benefits to considerable additional musical effect. The result is even easier to listen to and hard not to enjoy. It offers greater range and even more musical communication. ARC's Reference CD8 may only be a CD player, but for many a listener that will be more than enough. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

<b>Audio Research Reference CD8</b>	
Type:	Top loading tube CD player
Chipset:	Burr-Brown 24/192bit
Valve Complement:	5x 6H30 1x 6550C
Outputs (Digital):	1x 75 Ohm Co-axial (BNC) 1x 110 Ohm AES/EBU (XLR)
Outputs (Analogue):	1pr single-ended RCA/ 1pr balanced XLR
Output Levels:	1.8V single-ended 3.6V balanced
Output Impedance:	330 Ohms single-ended 660 Ohms balanced
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480 x 134 x 390mm
Weight:	14.8kg
Finishes:	Silver or black
Price:	£9,498

#### UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds  
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909  
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#### Manufacturer:

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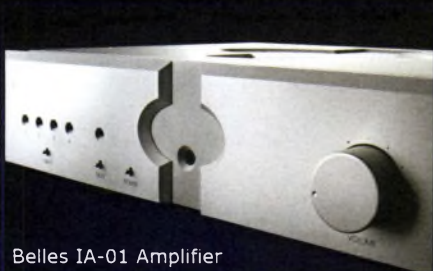
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# Back in Black...

## Renaissance RAP-03 preamp and RA-03 power amps

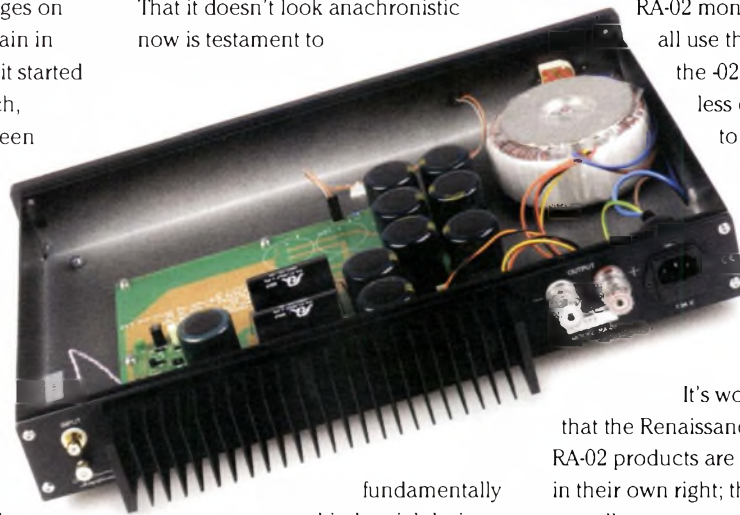
by Steve Dickinson

Shortly before Christmas, I got myself a new mobile phone because the battery in my old one had died and, I'm ashamed to admit, getting a new phone was the easier option. Thanks to a funky touchscreen this one promised email, web browsing, more megapixels and lots of other life-enhancing stuff. Two months on it sits in a drawer and I've gone back to my old phone (plus new battery) because, despite several hours with the manual, simply making calls and sending text messages on the new one is a complete pain in the wotsit. Particularly once it started doing predictive text in Czech, something the manual has been disappointingly silent about. Probably out of embarrassment.

There's a lot to be said for good old-fashioned simplicity and honest purpose, so when three boxes from Renaissance arrived, I put down my phone manual and set to with rather more enthusiasm for this particular new arrival. Three boxes? Simplicity? Well, yes, relatively speaking.

This lot takes me back. A simple metal box with a plain, nicely finished, aluminium front plate. An rotary on/off switch on the power amps, similarly the preamp which also sports a volume control and a four-position source selector, all using knobs from some off-the-shelf parts supplier. And not much else. Under the bonnet is a good Class AB MOSFET design (both in preamp and power amps); the preamp with four line-level single-ended inputs, the power amp punting out 50 watts a side.

The obligatory blue LED power light places these amps in the noughties, not the eighties (though Renaissance will happily fit a red LED, or even a green one, should you prefer), but there is little else which would have looked out of place in my system twenty years ago. Even the remote control, or rather the lack of it, harks back to earlier, more enlightened times when men were men and didn't mind walking across to the room to raise a well-turned volume dial. That it doesn't look anachronistic now is testament to



fundamentally sound industrial design. Good, honest fare for decent, uncomplicated folk. Like me.

In truth, if you like your kit to draw attention to itself, either visually or sonically, there is probably little here to tempt you. The word is 'understatement' and if you have to look it up, then this mightn't be quite your cup of air-dried, macrobiotic herbal infusion. Or something.

The RA-03 combination is something of a departure from the company's better-known offering: the RA-01, a 300B-driven monoblock valve power amp of somewhat traditional

appearance. If you thought the Renaissance name meant valves, wooden panels and wire cages, think again. The solid-state electronics range now encompasses a CD transport and DAC, standalone phono stage and two pre/power amplifier combinations. This new RAP-03 preamp represents an upgrade from the cheaper RAP-02 but sports the same number of line-level inputs; the RA-03 power amplifiers share the 50 Watt output of the cheaper RA-02 monoblocks and they all use the same chassis, but the -02 units are built with less costly components to compete at a lower, sub-£2,500, price than the -03 series whose combined cost for a preamp and a pair of power amps is almost £3,800.

It's worth bearing in mind that the Renaissance RAP-02 and RA-02 products are impressive enough in their own right; the combination actually won an award in *Hi-Fi Plus* back in 2005. So, upgrading these successful designs without doubling the price – or demanding expensive power-supply upgrades and their like – makes the RAP-03 and RA-03 an exciting proposition even before they are powered up. Of course, with Renaissance's ultra-minimalist approach, the only exterior differences between old and new are hard to spot without Sherlock Holmes' spyglass.

The Renaissance equipment is also one of those few product lines that's both designed and built in the same country. So often these days, the



► 'Designed in the West, built in China' badge has become almost a mantra. So, perhaps it comes as a pleasant change to find something wholly designed and built in the UK. Renaissance is built by a company called Integrated Engineering Solutions Ltd here in Blighty. This has a very 2009 advantage for Renaissance; although the costs of buying in raw materials has increased in recent months due to fluctuations in the currency, the products are less likely to suffer sudden 30per cent price rises because of the state of

the Pound against the Euro or the Dollar. It also makes the products very attractive as an export proposition. Which is perhaps why there are new models to be found in the range. And the range is growing at speed, at least for a company the size of Renaissance. Having started with a distinctly 'hollow state' brand, the newer solid-state products – both analogue and digital – are proving to be a resounding success; powering the Rowntree Acoustics OmniMon loudspeakers at this year's Bristol Show, the Splash Audio stand was considered by many to be the star of the show.

Perhaps the strangest part of the Renaissance story is that the company's products are not better known, at home or abroad. The products are well made, elegant whether valve or transistor and minimalist enough to catch the attention of many audiophiles. Hopefully, with both a digital front end in the RT-01 CD transport and RD-01 converter – as well as phono stage and an increasingly thorough range of amplifiers – it's hoped that

Renaissance stops hiding its light under a bushel soon.

Despite all this self-effacement, the RAP-03 and RA-03 pairing does impress, and quickly, but much more for what it doesn't do than for what it does. In a simple A/B dem in a shop it would, alas, be easy to miss the point. The Renaissance combo imposes very little of itself on the music, allowing the signal to pass comparatively unmolested from source to speaker. This means that when I wish to play



something possessed of subtlety and grace I get precisely that, with no added sweetness or inappropriate drama. But if drama is called for, it doesn't come with a dollop of extra bass just because it can. It doesn't make music, it just lets the music happen. This is immensely reassuring and confidence-inspiring. I found myself testing out ever more varied material, some from the more foetid backwaters of my CD collection, just to see what these amps would make of it. That's usually an encouraging sign and, in a nutshell, if there was music to be had, then that's what I got.

Perhaps this is why the Renaissance range isn't up there with the big

names in British hi-fi. Taking a more honest approach to music-making, avoiding all the *sturm und drang* of some of the more easy to find brands, will never win out in quick-fire A/B demonstrations. Renaissance plays the longer game instead, teasing out the sound intrinsic to the recording and never imposing its own character.

I have a Yo-Yo Ma compilation, *Classic Yo-Yo* (Sony Classical, SK89667) and one track features Alison Krauss in a wonderfully understated duet, performing 'Simple

Gifts' from Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*. The delicate breathiness of her voice brings out an extremely touching and nuanced performance,

totally charming. Far grander amps than the Renaissance would not have bettered that result.

At the other extreme, I wound it up to somewhere closer to Spinal Tap's 'eleven' and put on The Mission's *Tower of Strength*. I had to double-check that these amps are really only fifty Watts per channel because the sheer volume levels I achieved, clean and quite spectacularly devoid of stress and harshness, really shouldn't have come across the way they did on that track. Absolutely no shortage of excitement here. Afterwards I turned it back down, more out of consideration for local property values than concern for my system. Being critical, the modest output betrays itself at higher volume levels by some loss of grip and control in the bass, particularly on large-scale orchestral or choral music with sustained levels of bass energy. This is characterised by a slight disjointedness, a mild disconnect ►

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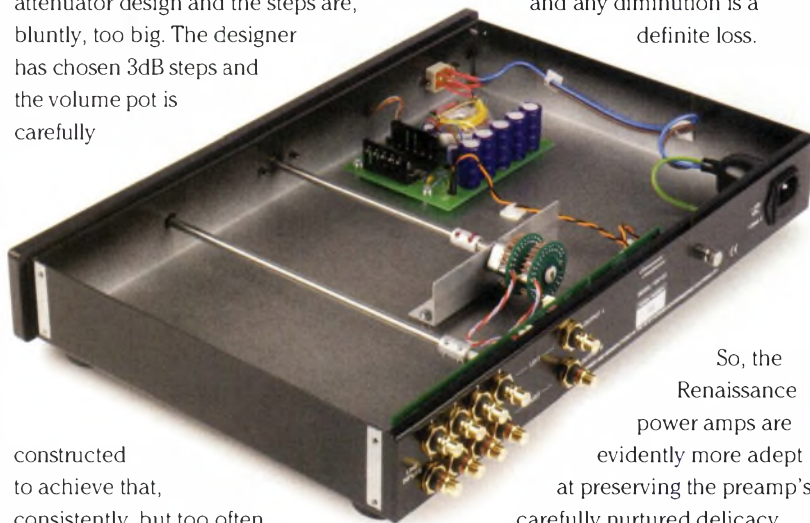
▶ between the lowest frequencies and the upper bass and midrange, the more noticeable because the amps are otherwise so even-handed. At more normal listening levels, this is seldom something which is drawn to your attention.

While we're on the subject of volume, I can't ignore the one big flaw (well, the other big flaw after the lack of remote control, of course!). The preamp's volume control is a stepped-attenuator design and the steps are, bluntly, too big. The designer has chosen 3dB steps and the volume pot is carefully

constructed to achieve that, consistently, but too often I found the jump from one step to the next took me from 'just a touch too quiet' to 'just a bit too loud'. This was particularly the case during later evening listening at lower levels. To his credit, the designer is responding positively to criticism and can offer the option of a volume control with 1.5dB steps in the part of its range associated with most normal listening levels, indeed this may yet become the standard fit. If you're thinking of shortlisting the Renaissance amps then this option is one worth very serious consideration.

The lightness of touch extends to phrasing, which is effortlessly natural, and timbral resolution, which is as understatedly correct as a Savile Row suit. Sting's 'If you love somebody (set them free)' from the live album *All This Time* has a great and infectious sense of rhythm and timing. Both parts

of the amplifier are playing their part in the greater whole but, the better to consider the preamp and power amp sections in isolation, I connected the preamp up to the power amp section of my regular Accuphase e213. This time around, Sting has more foot-tapping pace and drive, but the Yo-Yo Ma/Alison Krauss 'Simple Gifts' sacrifices a little of its essential fragility. I use the word deliberately, that fragility is very much the essence of the piece and any diminution is a definite loss.



So, the Renaissance power amps are evidently more adept at preserving the preamp's carefully nurtured delicacy than the power section of my Accuphase. An interesting and telling result. Repeatedly, the Renaissance proved better at preserving timbre and the finer detail of music, the sense of atmosphere, ambience and texture, whereas the Accuphase, particularly when used as an integrated amp (i.e. with its own preamp section) was invariably ahead on pace and timing, not to mention drive, rhythm and flow. Which you prefer is as much a matter of the musical material being played as it is of personal taste, which is another way of saying: these differences are very far from black and white.

The \$34k price range is an interesting place. Amplifiers range from good integrations like my Accuphase (recent price rises and exchange-rate slumps have pushed the entry-level Accuphase above \$3k), through two- and three-box pre-power combinations,

for which you also need to factor in the cost of an additional pair of interconnects. The musical argument (there is a parallel economic one, particularly at upgrade time) for separating the roles is that you get the benefit of dedicated power supplies for the delicate preamp section and the grunter power sections, and in the case of the Renaissance, a pair of mono power amps gives yet further dedication to the power supplies and much less risk of intermodulation. The argument is certainly well-made in the Renaissance setup, seldom is a musical signal better preserved at this price. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Renaissance RAP-03 preamplifier

Type:	Solid-state MOSFET, Class A, no overall feedback
Inputs:	4 line-level, unbalanced, (RCA phono)
Output:	1 pair, unbalanced, (RCA phono)
Input impedance:	50k Ohm
Sensitivity:	0.5V
Output impedance:	75 Ohm, 20Hz to 100kHz
Bandwidth:	20Hz to 100kHz, +/- 0.1dB
Gain:	14dB max
Remote control:	No
Dimensions (WxHxD):	455 x 75 x 336
Weight:	7.5Kg
Price:	£1,295

##### Renaissance RA-03 mono power amplifier

Type:	Solid-state MOSFET, Class AB, low overall feedback
Output power:	50W (8 Ohms), 85W (4 Ohms)
Distortion:	<0.1% at 10W output; 1% at full-output (50W)
Bandwidth:	20Hz to 20kHz +/- 0.2dB
Outputs:	1 pair, WBT loudspeaker terminals
Dimensions (WxHxD):	455 x 75 x 357
Weight:	9.0Kg
Price:	£2,495 per pair

##### Distributor:

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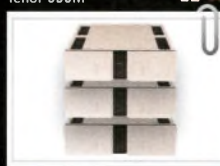
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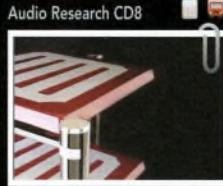
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DAC1  
PFE

1  
USB  
Analog  
2  
Source

ON/OFF

Benchmark



# Setting the Standard

## The Benchmark DAC 1 Pre digital converter/preamplifier

by Alan Sircom

One of the champions of the new movement in audio, Benchmark has gained lots of appeal as the DAC for computerate audiophiles. One of the first to include a USB port as more than just an afterthought, this pro-grade DAC has become almost ubiquitous in systems where hi-fi meets the PC. Now, having improved and grown a preamp section, the move to front-runner in the audiophile stakes becomes almost guaranteed.

As you can guess by the name, the DAC 1 Pre builds upon the existing DAC 1. It's essentially a distillation of the standard DAC 1 and DAC 1 USB, but adding a single analogue stereo phono input and an additional knurled knob to act as source selector alongside the volume control. Apparently, another big change to the DAC 1 Pre is the use of National Semiconductor LM4562 op amps in the analogue stage; given we did not have an original DAC to compare side-by-side, this change in op-amps was not directly verifiable. This is a significant upgrade (sadly not one offered to existing Benchmark DAC users) because the LM4562 op-amp is the current Chairman of the (printed circuit) Board, and a popular choice among the electronicati.

The rear panel sports a single Toslink, a USB, three coaxial digital

links and a pair of stereo analogue inputs. A single pair of phono and balanced XLR analogue outputs and a IEC mains socket complete the roll-call; so no digital pass-through or output to a digital recorder. There's a small toggle switch to adjust the analogue output level; full mute (why?), calibrated (see below) and variable output.

There are two full-size

inputs. As this 'all inputs' includes USB too, this is a major bonus. Benchmark claims the product demonstrates no jitter on the test bench, even with artefacts as low as -140dBFS, with jitter amplitudes as high as 12.75 unit intervals and over a 2Hz-200kHz frequency range. In other words, if the signal is despoiled by jitter with the Benchmark, it's probably a broken Benchmark. However, what's unclear is whether UltraLock is a

suite of treatments unique to

Benchmark or the ultimate expression of what that AD1896 chip can do. It's almost a moot point, though; whether it's good circuit design or good programming on Benchmark's side, it's still made a DAC that does the business, jitter-wise.

The inside of the Benchmark includes a series of jumper switches that

can tailor the attenuator pads on the XLR line outputs, change the range of the headphone gain or disable the headphone mute. There are also 10-turn calibration trim pots, which can be adjusted with a jeweller's screwdriver, but unless you can accurately measure your audio levels at input, leave well alone. The factory settings for this and all the other internal selectors



headphone jack sockets on the front panel.

Inside, the DAC 1 Pre sports what Benchmark calls a 'reference quality' 24-bit, 192kHz DAC; an Analog Devices AD1896. With a potential 140dB dynamic range, claimed 117dB THD+N (harmonic distortion and noise) and built-in jitter reduction, it's top of the Analog Devices tree and Benchmark might be right in calling this a reference point.

Benchmark also refers to 'UltraLock', a schema that cuts through jitter on all



▶ are all good enough for most audiophile uses. Wise cautions are printed in the manual about not opening the box without taking static-control measures.

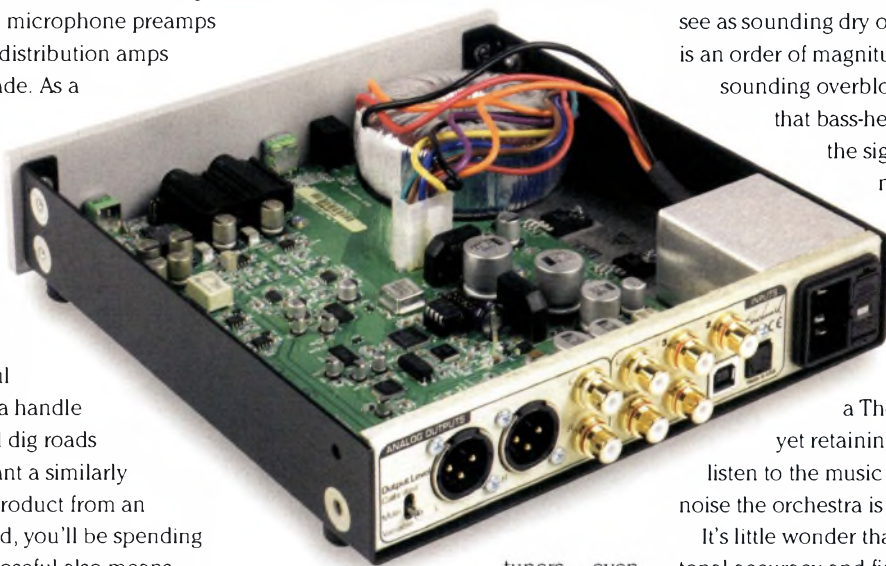
This is pro-side stuff, as is reflected by the level of control over the DAC 1 Pre and also by the extensive 55-page manual, which even includes a full run-up of test data (hi-fi manufacturers take note – download the PDF manual from Benchmark's site and learn how to do manuals properly). The company is best known in the trade for making digital products, microphone preamps and rackmount distribution amps for the studio trade. As a consequence,

the DAC 1 Pre is astonishingly well built. It's small and compact and yet is so damn purposeful you could stick a handle on the back and dig roads with it. If you want a similarly solid chunk of product from an audiophile brand, you'll be spending a lot more. Purposeful also means there's not a lot of excess features and if you want a remote volume control or thick gold panels, forget it. In many respects, the lack of remote highlights the DAC's heritage; this is the best in desktop audio, designed for near-field monitoring, transforming your iTunes and all the scrt of things you are supposed to do when you are within arm's reach of your electronics. The fact that this DAC is now becoming the control component of systems in living rooms reflects just how good this product really is.

The sound really lives up to the name Benchmark. It's perhaps one of the most neutral converters out there. Which, for those used to digital stages that have 'character' of their own, might come as a bit of a shock. To

those people, it might sound dry and slightly lean. In fact, what's happened is you have compensated for tonal tweaking in your existing converter or output stage of a CD (whether in the rest of your system or simply psychologically). Give the Benchmark time and it will win you over. For the rest of us, the job's already done.

Like many modern DACs, testing becomes protracted; not only should you check this through CD audio files, but through iTunes, internet radio sources, DAB



tuners... even satellite decoders.

And this one adds a line-level analogue component too. Fortunately, the Benchmark makes it easy, because it makes all of them behave brilliantly.

It's time to get all *Spanish Inquisition* sketch on this DAC/pre. The key to the Benchmark sound is accuracy. Accuracy and detail... the two main keys to the Benchmark sound are accuracy, detail and imagery, as good as the loudspeakers portray. Among the Benchmark's arsenal are accuracy, detail, first-rate imagery, excellent dynamic range and total liberation from the hegemony of the sound card.

Unpacking those aspects one by one, the Benchmark DAC 1 Pre is extraordinarily accurate, irrespective of price. Recordings are not tampered

with, replaying the sound with the sort of precision that studio engineers crave. That might make for a sound that's more stark than we might be used to, however; there's a price to pay for accuracy.

Detail and accuracy tend to go hand in hand, and that's certainly the case here. The Benchmark is all about detail. Not only do you get to hear precisely what's recorded accurately, but you get to hear pretty much all of it in fine order. The bass is taut and controlled, which some will see as sounding dry or light, but this is an order of magnitude better than sounding overblown and passing that bass-heaviness on down the signal chain. It

neatly passes the Mahler test; capable of delineating instruments in full 'Symphony of a Thousand' wig-out, yet retaining the ability to listen to the music as well as the noise the orchestra is making.

It's little wonder that with good tonal accuracy and first-rate detail, the imagery would be good, but it's here that perhaps the Benchmark shows its mettle. Not by imposing its own sense of what stereo should do, but by adhering to the limitations imposed upon it by the recording and the rest of the system. If a disc has a natural ambience, that's what you'll hear; if it paints big, broad brush-strokes like a Phil Spector wall-of-sound, so be it. Few DACs do as little to the sound and few make it mean as much.

It's also a keenly dynamic sound. Once again staying within the confines of the music source (it doesn't impose; the last thing you need is a really dynamic piccolo) it presents everything with an unsullied dynamic range. You'll hear similar subtle dynamic shading when you play ▶

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▶ through high-end CD players, but at anything approaching the price of the DAC 1 Pre, everything will sound flat by comparison.

And then there's the whole liberation from the sound card thing. This is more substantially important than might first be considered, because many on-board cards seem to struggle to sound consistent. A card might be great through one set-up, not so good through others and mediocre through yet another PCs. Here, the Benchmark just sounds like the Benchmark, whatever the source.

Running through the different formats and different inputs shows just how well engineered this DAC really is. If you can hear any change switching between coax and optical, then you have golden ears with magic powers. More significantly, you would need the same magic powers to differentiate a well-turned out USB port. And that means comparing like with like; uncompressed files ripped from a CD against the output of a CD proper. This makes for fascinating listening, a chance to compare the product of a good CD transport against a hard disk drive. In many respects, the hard disk wins, and wins on a pure musical standing, not simply on the convenience stakes. More research and structured listening tests are needed, but the Benchmark DAC 1 Pre shows just how much potential a post-CD future might hold.

Then there's the preamp; the analogue input is far from being an afterthought, but the line stage lacks transparency, especially in the upper registers. In many cases, this would be mild enough not to pass comment, but when stacked next to that remarkably honest performance from the digital section, the limitations of the line-level inputs – however mild – is thrown into sharp focus.


Converters like this one are often discussed without any perspective. This will stomp on any digital product

on the planet, apparently. It won't, but those not used to the really first water digital products might think so at first exposure. If you do a 10-second comparison between this and the top-table players and converters, you'll think there's no difference. More prolonged comparisons begin to show the justification for spending bigger sums. In particular, those who want a richer, warmer sound from their digital sources – but without sacrificing any of the detail and precision – will find the Benchmark is not what they are looking for. For many, the reverse is true.

There's another reason why the Benchmark gets 'bigged up'; it's perhaps the least fussy decoder out there. You want to compare fancy mains leads, exotic variations on the theme of a coaxial cable or wax lyrical about the changes brought about by going from one brand of XLR cable to another, pick another DAC. You want to determine differences between CD transports, look elsewhere. The DAC 1 Pre laughs in the face of running in and tweaks the nose of warming up. What the Benchmark does – and does brilliantly – is push past such ephemera. It does what a good product should do; make things sound better, nothing more.

For some strange reason, the headphone sockets get mentioned in passing in most reviews of the DAC 1 line. Which is a shame, because that's one of the true joys of the Benchmark. Yes, the outputs to a power amp are great, but sitting at the computer, writing up this test at half past stupid o'clock, listening to an AIFF version of the new Peter Green *Anthology* on a pair of Sony MDR-7506 headphones was a revelation. These professional closed-back headphones might not be the most audiophile models around, but – because they are used for recordings – the performance is a known, er, benchmark. Greeny's excellent *Anthology* should have been background listening, but it came alive.

The sound was just more accurate, more controlled, more 'there' than ever those MDR-7506s normally sound. Try it; you won't stop nodding along and will likely even let fly with some serious air guitar.

With the exception of the lack of a remote control, the Benchmark DAC 1 Pre serves up state-of-the-art components in an application that's as thorough as it is well executed. It's easy – and wrong – to dismiss this as the best in 'desktop audio'; it's a cogent DAC/preamp combination in its own right. It won't overturn the performance of three grand's worth of DAC with six grand's worth of preamp. But it comes surprisingly, disturbingly close. This really is the Benchmark for the audio revolution. 

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Benchmark DAC 1 Pre

Type:	Digital to analogue converter with preamplifier/headphone amp
D/A Converter:	24-bit, 192kHz Analog Devices AD1896
Analogue inputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/phono
Digital inputs:	USB, Optical, 3x Coaxial (switch selected)
Analogue outputs:	1pr balanced Neutrik XLR, 1pr single-ended RCA/phono, 2x HPA2™ ¼" jack headphone outputs
Audio output (single ended, factory preset):	2Vrms
Power consumption:	8W idle, 16W max
Dimensions (WxHxD):	249x44.5x216mm
Weight:	1.6kg
Price:	£1,633

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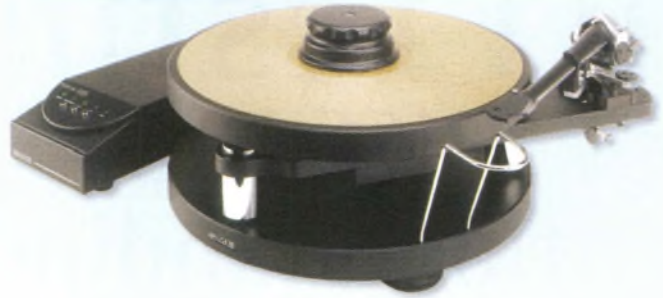
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# iQ testing

## KEF iQ50

### floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom



One of KEF's most popular ranges in recent years, the iQ series showed a true return to form for the Kentish KEF. The range utilised the latest version of its Uni-Q loudspeaker design to good effect and offered great value. The range was changed late last year and the new iQ50 is typical of the new breed.

It's smack bang in the middle of the new range (the range itself is smack bang in the middle of KEF's non-Reference series, with C-Series below and XQ models above), yet a pair will likely see you with change from £500. Below it are two stand-mounts; above it a bigger version of the same and a floorstander festooned with drive units. There's also a centre channel, and several subs that fit the bill too. In other words, KEF doesn't do half-measures.

It's an elegant design, too. An ever-tightening curve at the back and a second curve to the top plate, the lines of the iQ50 are svelte and slim, but absolutely no good for the plant-pot generation (a personal aside; I've never been able to fathom the logic of potentially spending thousands of pounds on a speaker, only to plonk £6.99 worth of Homebase's most rancid spider plant on the top). It benefits from a plinth to widen the footprint and lower the centre of gravity, but this plinth could do with a touch more mass behind it to better anchor the speaker to the floor. Spikes help, of course.

That cabinet is more advanced than it looks, and it looks advanced in its own right. The curved shape is not simply decorative, but there to knock out internal standing waves, and the laminated MDF build helps reduce cabinet colorations. Peel back a driver and the cabinet looks like the inside of one of KEF's Reference series, in microcosm. It sports a number of acoustically inert braces and a labyrinthine damping system. Having already lowered

▶ internal standing waves on the horizontal plane, this is claimed to do the same to the vertical.

The KEF signature piece of the two-and-a-half way, front ported design is the latest version of the Uni-Q speaker, which plants a 19mm tweeter in the acoustic centre of the 130mm mid/bass unit, with a secondary 130mm bass unit bringing up the rear. Both of these 130mm units share the same front port and KEF supplies some room tuning in the shape of foam bungs to stop up the ports should you end up finding them intrusive.

The big change to the Uni-Q concept is the new waveguide atop the aluminium dome tweeter. Called the 'tangerine' for obvious reasons (because it's segmented, not because of its colour or its ability to spit juice in your eye), the new waveguide is claimed to smooth out the high frequencies and improve dispersion. Fortunately, it's pretty resilient, useful because being the shiniest part of the speaker, it's a magnet to junior fingers and their ability to treat tweeters as pushbuttons.

The mid and bass drivers have undergone less profound changes, but KEF hasn't sat still here either. The new woofers feature KEF's new lightweight dual composite cones with tall profile rubber surrounds, designed specifically for longer cone throw. These sit in a rigid die-cast aluminium chassis with what are said to be ultra-low distortion motors,

with Faraday rings to help eliminate harmonic distortion.

Moving away from the high tech, the speaker's lines are uncluttered. The rear panel has nothing other than a pair of 4mm terminals in a panel, designed for bi-wiring. The terminals come with healthy-sized cable jumpers instead of the usual strip 'o gold, which should be a step in the right direction. In truth,

running these speakers

single-wired, bi-wired or shot-gunned (bi-wired sets of speaker cables connected as single-wired cables with both ends terminated together) made not a jot of difference to the performance of the KEF iQ50 sonically.

Positioning the KEF designs is an odd experience, but in a wholly good way. Plan A is to plant them down with the minimum care and attention, and in this context they return a perfectly good sound, as long as the Uni-Q centres are at the same height and the speakers are level. Plan B is to take micrometer-level precision in positioning the speakers to get the most benefit out of them. Interestingly, Plan A and Plan B sound remarkably similar until you begin to get the KEFs just right. Then, suddenly, the sound takes on a life of its own. Field notes suggest the

speakers should be more forward and slightly wider apart than is commonly considered a good plan and with no toe-in whatsoever. A good way to check is using a recording with a strong centre image; move the speakers apart until the centre image begins to break up, then move back a notch. In fairness, some of this might be cable-related; DNM cable seemed to make the most sense with the KEFs and traditionally DNM's distinctive performance makes you move speakers more into the room and farther apart. However, take the first part of this as significant; you don't need to be anally retentive in installing the speakers, unless you really, really want to be.

Running in seems not to be much of a problem here, either. The speakers were good from the get-go and remained pretty constant through their listening life. This might be a function of the Uni-Q (and similar designs), as there seems to be less need to run in Uni-Q and Tannoy Dual Concentrics, than usual at this price point.

KEF is also very amp-chummy, with a claimed 88dB efficiency and eight ohm impedance. Realistically, you could comfortably run the speaker off almost any amplifier currently made without complaint; the sound would get better as soon as you leave alone amps cheaper than the speakers, but there's no need for something powerful enough to jump-start a Boeing sitting at the speaker terminals.

Sonically, the changes to the Uni-Q design do appear to work as advertised; the speaker has a lithe, extended but not harsh treble and ▶



▶ excellent dispersion characteristics. As such, imagery does not deteriorate as you move from the optimum listening position. This gives forward-pitched singer-songwriters an in-the-room appeal to many listeners in the room, not just the person in the Chair of Ultimate Importance. Mid and especially high

for more information. Many could happily make that trade, because of that upper range sweetness though; you'll struggle to find anything that comes close for the money.

The bass is good, and well capable of delving into bass lines and happily decoding them.

has an ace up its elegant veneered sleeve. It's one of the most coherent performers £500 can buy. Music flows from the speakers with a grace and an ease that makes a seamless, sumptuous soundstage. Even the patchwork quilt that is *Chinese Democracy* seems to hang together here, despite the fact that some parts might have been recorded a decade

apart. This gives those classic Blue Note jazz recordings a real sense of musicians at the acme playing in smoke-filled clubs.

To many people, this one point – that the music simply hangs together better here – will outweigh everything else. If that's your bag, KEF's iQ50 floor-stander isn't the first choice for the money, it's the only choice. ▶+



The bass performance is more dry than full-bodied though and those after some good ol'

fashioned trouser flap will quickly pass the iQ50s by. The bass here is more analytical and cerebral than visceral; so you can hear the difference between floor toms and bass drums with ease, but the bass drum does not want to rearrange your more squidgy organs in the process. Normally, the 'but it works in a small room' rider gets washed ashore about now; however, because these speakers like some room to breathe, this is less of a recommendation. That said, bunging up the ports and placing the speakers up against the wall works well, and the bass reinforcement helps.

Lest you think this is building up to some awful *coup de grace*, the KEF

frequencies are particularly attractive here; the sound is spacious and open, with surprising transparency too. There's a trade off between sweetness and clarity here, which makes the iQ50 sing a siren's song but not make you want to follow the lyrics closely. This made the Hilliard Ensemble singing Thomas Tallis sound wonderfully full and harmonically rich. Replace this with the wry lyrics of Belle & Sebastian and you find a need

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Q Acoustics 1050i

Type:	Two and a half-way bass reflex floorstanding loudspeaker
Drive Units:	130mm LF, 130mm Uni-Q, 19mm aluminium dome HF
Frequency Range:	40Hz - 40KHz
Crossover Frequency:	2.5kHz
Sensitivity (2.83V/1m):	88dB
Maximum Output:	109dB
Input Impedance:	8 Ohms
Amplifier Requirements:	15-130W
Magnetic Shielding:	Yes
Dimensions (WxHxD):	175x815 x261mm
Plinth Dimensions (WxHxD):	250x28x295mm
Weight:	10.2kg
Finishes:	Black Ash, Dark Apple, American Walnut
Price:	£500

##### Manufacturer:

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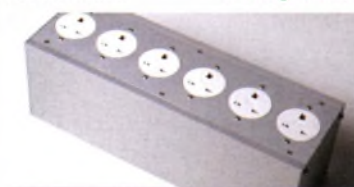
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# Stream On!

## HRT Streamer and Streamer+ USB digital to analogue converters

by Alan Sircom

It's not often you get to play the international espionage game. The HRT products gave us the chance to do just that. The first HRT Streamer converters were released as very much a hush-hush launch at this year's Consumer Electronics Show. Most of the review samples of this stealth-launch product were destined for US analysts and buyers. One or two were literally smuggled out of the country, including the one tested here. The bigger Streamer+ converter arrived through more normal lines.

Let's dispense with the obvious jokes first; HRT stands for High-Resolution Technologies, not the other thing. So, there's no point getting emotional about the name. But, what's the story and why all the cloak-and-dagger stuff? The line (currently just the Streamer and Streamer+, with more to follow) is the product of a meeting of minds; Kevin Halverson of Muse Electronics and Mike Hobson from Classic Records. Both having recognised that a significant proportion of music today is streamed and PC-based, Kevin Halverson started looking for a decent cheap USB-only DAC to investigate the potential of the format from a quality perspective. And kept looking, because the quality simply wasn't there. So, he designed (from first principles) a USB converter that delivered the goods. And then did it again. The potential was huge, so he and Mike Hobson joined

forces on the venture to realise on that great potential.

The basic Streamer is intended to sell by the lorry-load. It's a hi-fi product, yes, but one intended for multiple retail outlets, or perhaps bundled with music client software deals. There's talk of a warehouse full of Streamers ready to roll. By way of contrast, the Streamer+ is the distinctly audiophile product and will be sold



through more conventional hi-fi outlet lines. Not exactly hand-built, the Streamer+ is more expensive, with a better-measured performance and that takes a lot more components on the board.

This is a high volume project developed by people best known for low volume concepts. That invites an obvious question; whether the business model can 'scale' accordingly. It would be a crying shame for the HRT duo to end up as a warehouse full of unfulfilled promise. As we went to press, the Streamer was still awaiting lines of distribution in the UK and the Streamer+ is to be distributed by Audiofreaks.

Given the Streamer should be bundled with every MacBook and the Streamer+ should be in every hi-fi retailer in the land by now, the scale issue remains a potential concern.

There's a degree of secrecy to these products so far, with chip designations gently filed off all bar a Burr Brown PCM1794 in the Streamer+. Not that it really matters, because the many of the names used in USB converters have little resonance in hi-fi industry – we might as well be reciting a list of resistor values. The Streamer and Streamer+ share the same separate USB controller board, which both syncs and powers the DAC. After that, things are very different.

Both products make extensive use of surface mount devices.

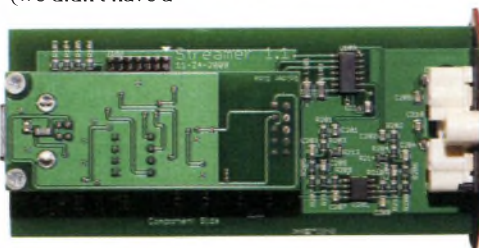
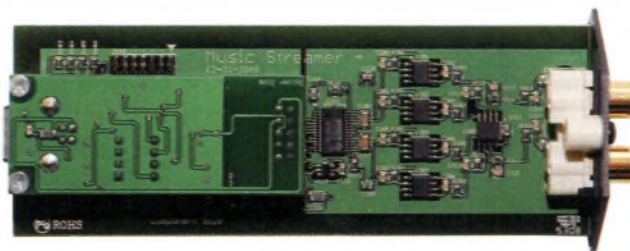
You won't find a soldered wire anywhere on the HRT products. Components are mounted to the boards, the USB controller and the pair of gold-plated phono sockets are then mounted to the same boards, and the two boards are plugged together and fixed in the case. This isn't 'untouched by human hands', but the process is not entirely labour-intensive either, which helps keep prices competitive. All the more remarkable then that in 2009 this product is built in the USA. Such is the sea-change in production that it was almost a shoe-in that a high-volume technology-driven product like this would be Chinese built these days.

At the time of writing, both fit on a simple trapezoid block; same extrusion, just longer in the Streamer+. Four

▶ grub screws clamp the end-plates to the extrusion, and the main PCB rests in a groove. This extruded case might change to a clamshell design, but this shouldn't change the performance on a fundamental level.

One thing that does need to change is the quality of the powder coating. The dull-red Streamer and the dark grey Streamer+ look classy in their matt coating, but the coating does rub off easily. Hopefully, this will improve.

They are both super-simple to use. All you need is a large USB connector to wire either to your PC or Mac (we didn't have a



Linux box to test, unfortunately) and a pair of phono plugs to hook whichever DAC to an amp. That's it, the computer's USB controller will auto-recognise the converter (assuming your operating system is new enough to speak USB; if you are running Windows 95, you need to upgrade). If you are using Mac OS, remember you need to select the external output device in System Preferences (as you do to any USB-based DAC solution). The choice of application (iTunes, Windows Media Player, Rhapsody, Napster or anything else) has absolutely no impact on the HRT.

If they look similar (from the outside at least) and behave similarly, the specification of the two Streamers is subtly different. Essentially, the Streamer+ has a lower noise floor, better signal-to-noise ratio, lower distortion and a more accurate frequency response at 20Hz than the basic model. These are not

small differences either; an 18dB improvement in S/N is significant and audible.

Both products are designed for CD-grade solutions, in that they deal with 20Hz-20kHz frequencies with a 16-bit resolution. This is fine for ripped CDs and most downloads, but won't do much to highlight the benefit of high-resolution 'master' tracks with 192kHz sampling and 24-bit precision. This is wholly forgivable in the Streamer,

but there are high-res ready DACs at the price of the Streamer+. But we think that most audiophiles will go for real-world performance over on-paper 'improvements'.

The natural place to start listening is with the base model Streamer. And it's worth placing it among its peers (other USB converters) and – perhaps even more significantly – against the headphone mini-jack output of a PC or Mac. In both cases, the Streamer makes an awful lot of sense. It's completely seamless, with a whisper-quiet background that will shock you, highlighting how noisy your on-board system really is. Sounds are easily delineated from one another and sit in an expansive plum-pudding of a soundstage, which – given the intended source material and prospective amplifiers and speakers the Streamer is likely to end up with – gives an impressive sense of stereo.

Then there's the tonal range of the Streamer, which is accurate, but not so extended into the higher frequencies, giving the files a slightly rich presentation. This is actually an advantage, because it is really made

for standard-quality MP3 files and streamed Internet radio sources of varying degrees of quality. Yes, a lossless or bit-for-bit file will benefit too, but the Streamer has a levelling effect that brings those less than impressive file formats up to snuff, at the expense perhaps of the best performance from top-class files. But the better files are where the Streamer+ comes on song.

The improved performance of the Streamer+ is a double-edged sword. It significantly upgrades high-quality downloads and ripped CDs in bit-for-bit or lossless compression. However, anything at 128kbps or lower (AAC or MP3) sounds pretty damn awful, especially when played through a decent system. If your collection comprises compressed modern pop taken straight off the standard iTunes server, stick with the standard Streamer and abandon any dreams of real hi-fi. Sorry about that. .. but on the other hand, this might be a significant benefit – we found a download of 'The Boy Does Nothing' by Alesha Dixon in an iTunes client (it's a wife thing... honest) and not surprisingly the 125kbps track sounded utterly unlistenable. Chalk that one up as a bonus.

Those bit-for-bit rips or high-quality downloads are wonderfully sonorous and – perhaps most importantly – entertaining to listen to. It's good enough to spot when you are dropping back to lossless and recognise the difference between iTunes and Foobar2000. No, it will not challenge a good dedicated four-figure audiophile DAC, and the Benchmark tested on page 38 of this issue quietly knocks the Streamer+ into a cocked hat when it comes to soundstage depth or width, or sheer detail, but the Streamer+ is the Benchmark's superior in dynamic range, at least in terms of subtle shading and microdynamics, drawing out the inner rise and fall of individual musicians within the recording.

Perhaps the big thing though is the 'cor' factor. Forget the individual ▶

# DEFINITIVE AUDIO



1. CEC TLOX Belt Drive CD Transport
2. Living Voice OBX-RW Loudspeaker in Ebony
3. KSL Kondo DAC
4. KSL Kondo Neuro Integrated Amplifier

5. SME 2012A Turntable with KSL Kondo iOJ Cartridge
6. New Audio Frontiers KT66 Legend Integrated Amplifier
7. Kore-Eda LLA-1 Control Amplifier & PLA-1 Power Amplifier



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► properties of the performance and think globally. You plug your laptop into the Streamer, plug the streamer into your system, play music and the your first comment uttered just a few bars into the recording is 'cor!' It's a very British outburst, and very nearly translates to 'wow!' outside of the boundaries imposed by the Shipping Forecast. It means the immediate reaction is an impressed one; not suprising really, because the Streamer makes a very clear across-the-board improvement.

Waxing philosophically about products is seldom constructive, but worth it in the case of the HRT devices. This is because – especially in the case of the base Streamer – their worth is only slightly connected to their sonic performance. Here are a pair of products, designed and built by those with very high-end credentials, that makes a play for a potentially mainstream audience and does so with little compromise. In this, it joins a very select list of products and manufacturers, such as Wadia with its 170i. This is a sign – and a very welcome sign at that – of the hi-fi industry slowly waking up and smelling the coffee. The Streamer demonstrates to those on the non-audiophile side of things that we haven't just been contemplating our collective navels for the last 25 years and that these things really do make a significant difference to sound quality. To the audiophile hold-out, the same product shows there the whole post-CD audio world is worth investigating and the Streamer (and a laptop or PC) is one of the best ways of surveying this new land without incurring punishing costs or equally punishing sonic degradations.



We suspect that most audiophiles will swiftly make the jump from Streamer to Streamer+ because the improvement in audio quality is so marked, but this gives the option to dip toes in the water.

There's a viral aspect to this, too. One that cuts both ways. We can envisage a couple of father-son scenarios; one where the father buys a Streamer, almost immediately upgrades to the Streamer + and hands the Streamer on to his offspring, the other where Junior receives a Streamer as part of a package and shows it off to his audiophile father, who ends up with a Streamer+ as part of the deal. The viral thing also works on a collage level – many students have a cheap audio system and all have a laptop. The connection is rarely made, and those students often end up listening to their music through laptop speakers or earbuds from their iPod. The Streamer makes the hook-up to an audio system a doddle; hanging the thing off the end of a USB port and every time your student plugs in their laptop, it's connected. And the Streamer is cheap enough to be used by students... just.

Once that happens, it's only a matter of time before every student in the halls wants one.

Don't underestimate the viral aspect of these Streamers. From personal experience, we found it difficult not to spread the word.

Look at it this way; many of us know people who use laptops to serve their music these days.

If you have one of these, you will put it in your pocket and take it over to them. They will, in turn, get one and do the same to their friends. And so on until you end up breaking Facebook. So you too can become the Avon Lady of hi-fi.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Both Products

Type: USB digital to analogue converter  
 Data Rate: 48 kS/s  
 Bit Depth: 16 bit  
 Digital Input: Type B USB socket (USB 1.1)  
 Analogue Output: 2prs single-ended RCA/ phono  
 Audio Output: 2.25Vrms  
 USB to Audio output isolation: > 20M Ohm  
 Power Requirements (USB buss): 250 mA

Streamer

Frequency Response (20Hz-20kHz): -0.3 dB / -1.8 dB  
 Noise Floor (DC to 30kHz): 174µV RMS  
 Noise Floor (A-weighted): 110µV RMS  
 S/N Ratio (to 30kHz): 82 dB  
 S/N Ratio (A-weighted): 86 dB  
 THD+N (1kHz FS): 0.06%  
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 53x30x104mm  
 Weight: 120g  
 Anticipated Price: \$89

Streamer+

Frequency Response (20Hz-20kHz): 0 dB / -1.7 dB  
 Noise Floor (DC to 30 kHz): 22µV RMS  
 Noise Floor (A-weighted): 10µV RMS  
 S/N Ratio (to 30kHz): 100 dB  
 S/N Ratio (A-weighted): 107 dB  
 THD+N (1kHz FS): 0.02%  
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 53x30x130mm  
 Weight: 150g  
 Price: £299

Manufacturer:

High Resolution Technologies  
 Tel: (001)323-967-7447  
 Net: www.highresolutiontechnologies.com  
 Streamer+ Distributed by Audiofreaks Ltd  
 Tel: (44)208 948 4153  
 Email: info1@audiofreaks.com

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Classic Cartridge (we have this exact  
combination on demonstration)

Geoff Husband. TNT Magazine 2007

*"Had the Classic Wood made it to our house a month earlier, it would have been part of my Favorite Discoveries of 2007. Since the 2008 wrap is still 11 months away, my suggestion is that you don't wait that long and give it a listen now. I turned 35 just a few days ago, rediscovered vinyl with a passion and a wonderful birthday present now sits on the top shelf of the equipment rack. I just have to write a cheque for it."*

**Classic Wood**  
(we also have this on demonstration  
along with the Solid Wood Black)

Frederick Beudot, 6 Moons 2007

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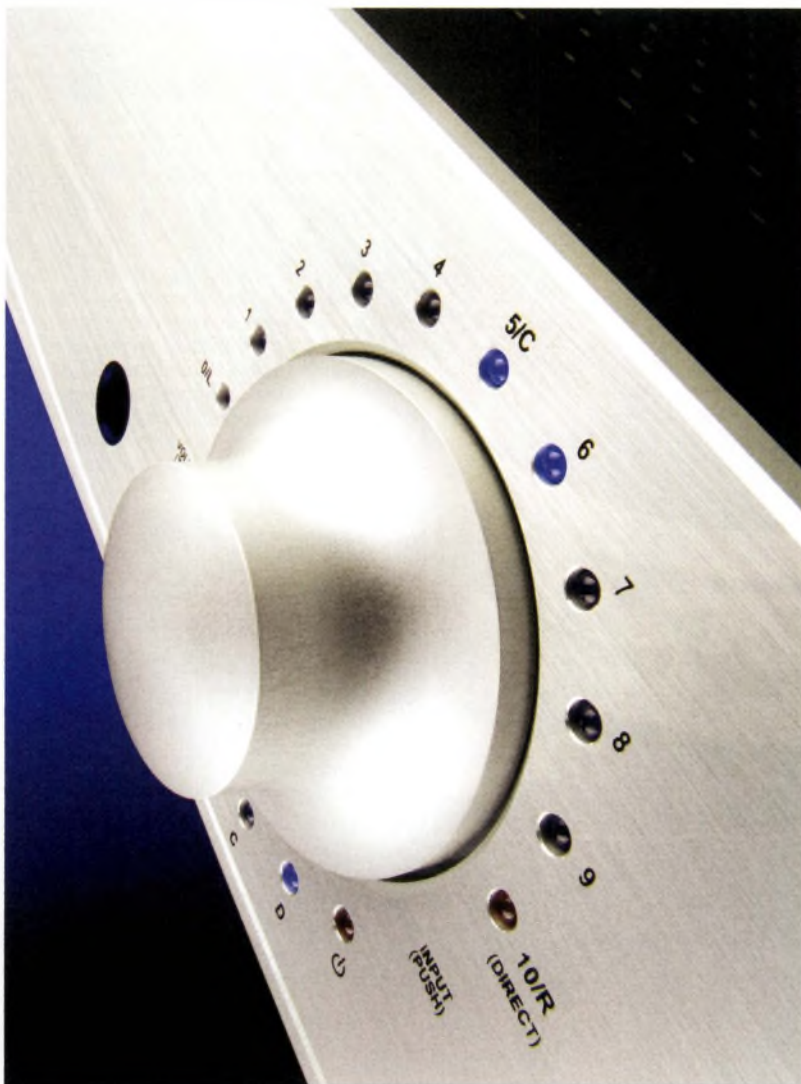
# Little Devil Cairn Diablo Integrated Amplifier

by Jimmy Hughes

As entrances go, the Cairn Diablo's arrival was fairly low-key. No fanfare; no advance warning; it was simply waiting for me one evening when I got home. To be honest, when I saw it, I wasn't expecting much. It's not a big amp, nor a heavy one. And that points to one of our great hi-fi prejudices; we can so easily review by weight. There's something about a big heavy piece of kit – you feel it might just do something...

The French-made Cairn Diablo did not tick that particular box, however; it weighs in at just 9kg – there are heavier loudspeaker cables out there. On the face of it, it just seemed like a nice ordinary integrated amplifier. There are four line inputs plus tape, and outputs for tape, a sub, and the preamp. There's just a single set of loudspeaker outputs, so – no unnecessary switches in the signal path. It sounds like that too; clean and free from the adverse effects of switches, which (paradoxically) roughen and soften the sound at the same time.

One side-effect of all this simplicity is a very smooth uncluttered fascia. The mains on/off switch is on the back, leaving just the volume control and an On/Standby button on the front. The amp looks elegant and attractive – simple and understated – without being bland or boring. It's one of the few designs that could make a Creek amp look festooned with buttons, but fortunately things aren't pared down so much that the amplifier becomes hard to drive. As long as you don't plan on doing anything overly complex (like adjust the balance) without the remote in your hand, you'll do fine. Of course, if one knob and one button seems dangerously filled with controls, there's an even shorter signal path in the direct mode. This is like hooking your CD player straight to the 300VA transformer, the bipolar input sections and those MOSFET output stages. ▶



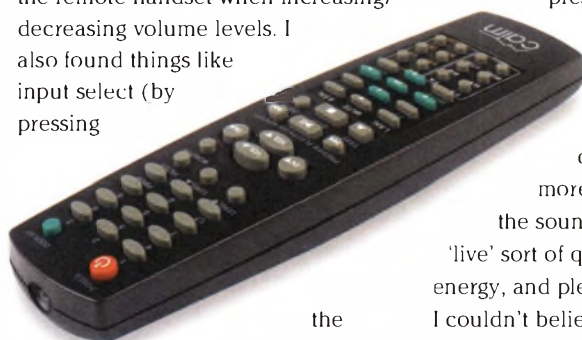


▶ The increments with the Diablo's electronic volume control are very subtle and fine. The volume knob itself turns continuously. There's no end stop – it's not a conventional potentiometer with a motor. There are light click-stops, and an illuminated display indicates the changes in volume level. Increase the volume by half a turn, and hardly anything happens. You have to turn the knob quite a bit to hear a noticeable change in level.

The control works well enough, but there's little or no 'feel' as you change levels. The changes are so subtle, you wonder if volume levels have altered at all.

After conventional volume controls, this takes some getting used to. But it's not a bad thing. It's better to have very subtle gradations, rather than coarse steps. With the Diablo, you should be able to set the volume control very accurately to give the precise level required.

For this reason I preferred to use the remote handset when increasing/decreasing volume levels. I also found things like input select (by pressing



the volume knob down) a bit counter-intuitive. Again, it's easier to select inputs by using the remote handset.

The remote offers the prospective

Cairn user a potential upgrade in the shape of the optional ROC3 remote control – a cool studded circular design (streets ahead of the standard plastic fantastic handset) that looks all the world like a powder compact for the BDSM enthusiast. Don't get too carried away by this though; principally, the



Diablo feels and behaves fundamentally like it's a perfectly serviceable, but perfectly 'blah' amplifier. But, when I actually got it working, a very different picture emerged. I was more than a bit shocked by how immediate it sounded; the music had real presence and impact.

It wasn't just the tonal balance. Agreed, this was on the bright side of neutral, but it was more than a tonal thing - the sound had an immediate 'live' sort of quality. It had pace and energy, and plenty of attack. I couldn't believe such a fast lively and powerful sound could come from such a small box.

Something I realised fairly quickly was that the Diablo's preamp has active circuitry before the

(electronic) volume control. My CD player has a much higher output than most designs, and I noticed the sound 'clipped' during climaxes. Initially I thought the amp might be running out of power, but soon realised the input was clipping.

Let's be practical about this, this is an abnormally high output and only happened in the context of my because I use transformers and tube line stages between CD player and preamp. I cured the problem by reversing one of the transformers, so that it stepped down the signal rather stepping it up. In 'normal' use with CD players having an output voltage of 3V or less, there should be no issues with input overload.

I mention this, not as a warning, but because I think it almost certainly explains why the Diablo sounds as lively and immediate as it does. The conventional 'passive' volume stage found on most amps and preamps tends to soften the sound slightly by introducing a fixed resistance in the signal path.

In this amplifier, the arrangement is different. Clearly there's an active stage and then the electronic volume control. Potentiometers used conventionally do 'colour' the

▶ sound, and create problems of their own which lead to lost immediacy and impact. I may be wrong, but I think this is the Diablo's secret weapon.

it would certainly have made me pause for thought. Of course the kW combination is much more capable. Like all small amplifiers, the Diablo flatters to deceive; it lacks the huge power reserves of the kW-750.

But, on quite a lot of music for much of the time, I found

So – a surprisingly good little amplifier – one that punches well above its weight. I have to say its combination of liveliness and detail suits my system almost ideally. And while I like the richness and weight of certain tube amps, something that sounds lean and immediate is great too – it makes the music sound exciting and real. ▶+



Despite having a fairly crisp forward sort of presentation, the Diablo sounds very clean and surprisingly refined. It's not exactly a warm or beguiling sound, yet neither is it brash or edgy. Nor does it sound as though it's adding something false that makes the music sound fast and lively. It's more like the brakes have been taken off.

The bass sounds clean and firm, if not especially fat or voluminous. Low frequencies have the same sense of clean tight integration and control as the top-end. Listening, you're not aware of the bass/treble extremes as such. The bass is there and has positive qualities, but does not draw your attention away from the music.

On a personal note, I recently bought a Musical Fidelity kW Preamp and kW-750 power amp – a hugely powerful behemoth that sounds very crisp and immediate. The kW Preamp on its own is at least two and a half times the size of the Diablo, yet the smaller amp was giving the bigger one a real run for its money.

Now, I'm not saying I wouldn't have bought the kW pre/power had the Diablo come along, but

myself very happy with the Diablo. If, however, you partnered the Diablo with less sensitive speakers, and played something very demanding (like heavy choral music), the extra power and refinement of a bigger amp (like the kW-750) would soon become very apparent.

The Diablo offers 70W per channel, while the kW-750 produces a massive 750W. When you push the kW-750, it doesn't flinch, and that's the difference. But hi-fi is all about perception rather than reality. Whatever the truth of the situation, the Diablo sounds like it's in control with power to spare. Subjectively that's what counts.

When used at 'normal' sorts of volume levels, the Diablo barely gets warm. There's a gentle transformer buzz that's just audible with your ear close to the casework, but nothing serious. It doesn't take much (if any) time to 'warm-up' or settle in. It sounds good the moment you switch it on; if there is an improvement later, it's quite subtle.

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Cairn Diablo

Type:	two-channel solid-state integrated amplifier
Inputs:	5x single-ended RCA/phono
Dynamic range:	120dB
Outputs:	4mm binding posts
Output power:	2x 70 Watts RMS into 8 Ohms 2x 110 Watts RMS into 4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	432x92x245mm
Weight:	9kg
Price:	£950

##### UK Distributor:

Hi-Fi Brokers  
Tel: (44)1422 372110  
Net: [www.hifibrokers.co.uk](http://www.hifibrokers.co.uk)

##### Manufacturer:

Cairn Audio  
Net: [www.icairn.fr](http://www.icairn.fr)



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# Following the true path?

## Guru QM10 stand-mount loudspeakers

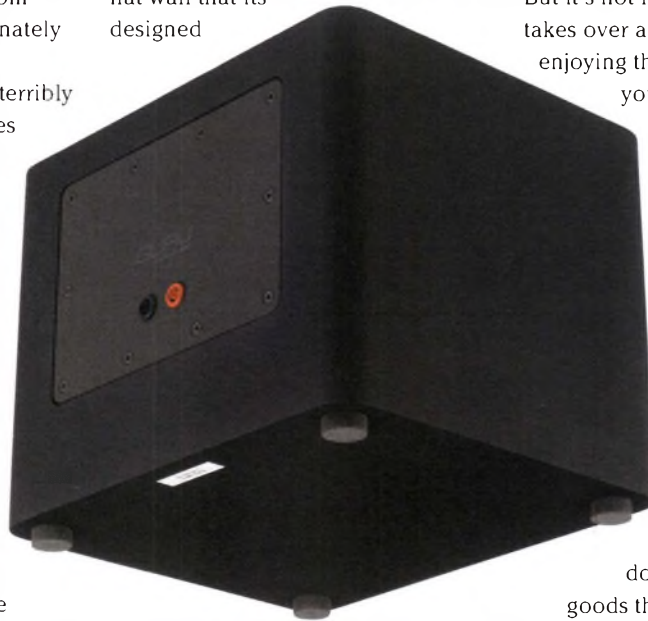
by Jason Kennedy

It's said (not by animal lovers, it must be said) that there's more than one way to skin a cat, and the Guru Quality Manager 10 is as good an example of this as I have come across. This is a radical rethink of loudspeaker technology from Sweden that on first impressions looks very stylish and could be part of the Sonos wireless multiroom system, if it were beige (fortunately it's not). From an audio nuts' perspective, however, it isn't terribly encouraging and one imagines that many would write it off as just another lifestyle product, with an iPod dock somewhere in the back.

The drive units are neither large nor particularly high tech looking and the box volume is pretty compact. But good things often come in small packages and this is certainly the case here, the fact that it looks good to these eyes at least is an added bonus in these interior conscious days. There is a white finish, too.

With its wide but short baffle and square section, the Guru cabinet goes against all current thinking in loudspeaker design. Maybe that is why it sounds so different and, it has to be said, so much more musically engaging than most loudspeakers.

Its size is an issue though if you have a larger room; basically it's best suited to normal UK living rooms in the vicinity of 4m by 5m, I tried it in a much longer room that is irregularly shaped and it struggled to deliver the goods. But moving the big ATCs in my living/listening room and giving the Guru the expanse of flat wall that its designed



to work with transformed the performance to something that I am tempted to buy. Which – for a penny pinching ReviewScrooge who has the luxury of being able to borrow all manner of top-notch speakers – is saying something.

The reason is that this speaker lets the music take centre stage. You can hear the recording quality of each album and for the first minute or so this can get in the way if you have gone from a great recording (Terje Rydal's *Vossabrygg* on ECM) to a less impressive one (Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited* in mono). But it's not long before the content takes over and you can get on with enjoying the music. And while you might point out that this is the point of the exercise, it's one that the reviewing process has a tendency to undermine.

Others in the reviewing fraternity (such as Paul Messenger) bang on about musicality and communication quite often. But it's only when you come across a product that does deliver the musical goods that you realise how fundamental this is.

The Guru is not the most neutral of loudspeakers; it's not distinctly coloured either, but it must be cheating to get the level of bass extension that it does. This is partly achieved by placing the speakers close to the wall and toed in so

▶ that their axis cross in front of the listener. The manual suggests that a seating position that is 20 per cent further away from the speakers than the distance between them will give the optimum results. My sofa is not so conveniently placed and is probably closer to twice the distance from

base as you were recommended in the good ol' Linn days) because it helps get rid of floor reflections in the bass and



the speakers but this doesn't seem to screw things up. Guru's

maker also suggests that you damp the wall between and either side of the speakers, it even goes so far as to suggest having carpeting in the room and adding extra curtains behind the speakers.

The manual lists several 'Options to enhance the listening experience' and these include placing pictures on parallel walls and letting them tip downwards so that the top of the picture is two inches from the wall. A low coffee table is also advised (please welcome the Ikea Lack table back to the audio industry after a long absence. Fortunately, you don't have to cut out the

it is also nice to put your legs on it when enjoying your favourite music!

This is hard to disagree with and I might just get that one sorted; I've tried it in the past and the table just gets covered in stuff, leaving little room for resting the legs.



I got great results when pairing the Guru with a Leema Tucana integrated amplifier, a notably well timed component itself and something that's clearly a factor. Nonetheless the CD source was an near vintage Sony XA-333ES multichannel SACD player, a machine that while entirely competent is not renowned for its musicality. So the fact that it sounds so good with the Guru is encouraging really and suggests that it is a more on the ball player than it had seemed. The source might be king but it needs the right conduit to prove as much.

Guru is an unusual company in many respects, for a start it wasn't started as a speaker company, its roots go back twenty years to the time that Ingvar Öhman wanted a loudspeaker to demonstrate how human hearing works for the purpose of lectures on the subject. The story goes that he could not find a ▶

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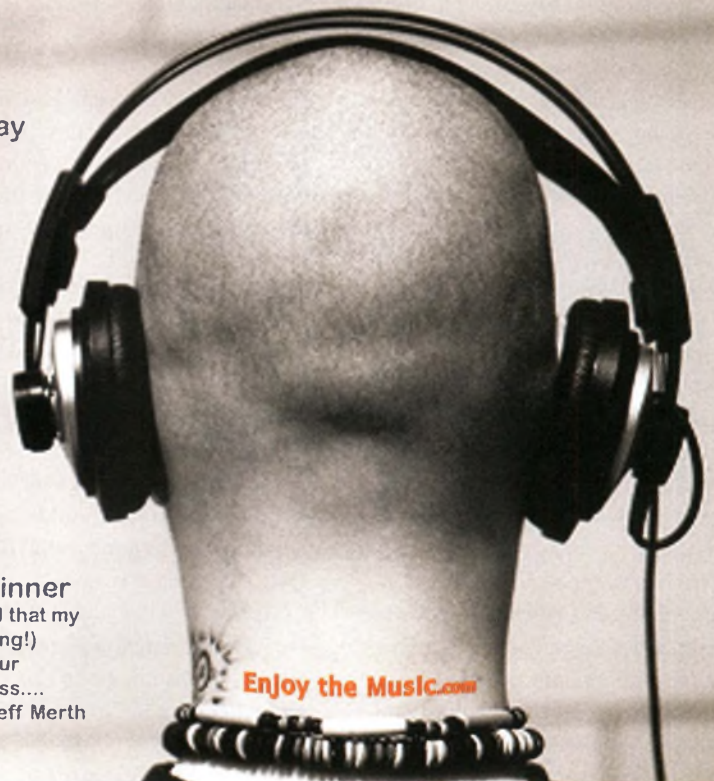
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— Craig Mattice

What a great review! — Paul Kittinger

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





► speaker that did the job sufficiently well so he made some himself, apparently his home is choc-a-bloc with prototypes that he built in the quest to make the perfect tool for the job. Inevitably his students did a little more than appreciate the functions of human flight responses and used them to play music with and people started wanting to buy them. For some time this was done in an ad-hoc fashion with long lead times and no notion of making it a commercial product. However, when viola player and owner of Guru Pro Audio Erik Ring got involved things changed and the QM10 was put into production.

It's interesting to note, however, that Ingvar is not keen on spiking loudspeakers as this is an approach I've avoided for some time, albeit primarily with the intention of stopping the speaker vibrating floor boards and the system that is sitting atop them. But Ingvar's reasons for rejecting speaker spikes could be more pertinent and go some way to explaining why the Townshend Seismic speaker bases improve matters even on a concrete floor.

By taking a completely different approach to speaker design Ingvar has succeeded in building a speaker that combines attributes that are usually considered exclusive. The QM10 has wide bandwidth, great sensitivity to dynamics and low level detail and remarkable imaging. All from a small two way box with essentially low tech drive units. Guru plans to release a passive subwoofer stand for the QM10 which should give it the ability to fill larger spaces. I just hope that it doesn't detract from the magic of the speaker alone, but I'm looking forward to finding out. In the meantime, the distributor should not expect much response from his requests to return the speaker; it's a totally addictive design.

A small speaker with ever so humble drive units shouldn't sound anything like as good as the Guru QM10. It's almost magic.

*We spoke at length with Ingvar Öhman on his intriguing Guru design and other factors. Turn to page 92 for more details of his unique take on how to make a loudspeaker.*



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

<b>Guru QM10</b>	
Type:	two-way, Helmholtz resonator, stand-mount loudspeakers
Drive Units:	16mm dome tweeter, 102mm plastic covered paper cone woofer
Bandwidth:	30Hz-20kHz (in room)
Sensitivity	86dB (2,83V, 1m)
Nominal Impedance:	5 Ohms
Mean value:	8 Ohms
Minimum Impedance:	4 Ohms
Recommended Amplifier Power:	20W-60W
Dimensions (WxDxH):	300x252x232mm
Net Weight:	6 kgs
Finishes:	matte black, black piano lacquer or white lacquer
Price:	£1,695

#### Distributor

Tom Tom Audio  
phone: +44 (0)1727 893 928  
[www.tomtomaudio.com](http://www.tomtomaudio.com)

#### Manufacturer

Guru Pro Audio  
<http://guruproaudio.com>



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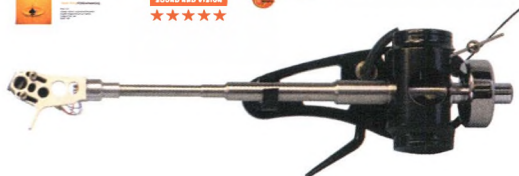
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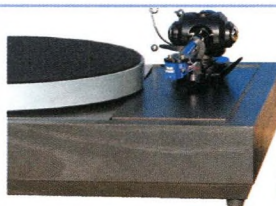
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# Break for the Border

## Pure Sound A30 with Border Patrol power supply

by Alan Sircom

Sometimes the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Occasionally, those parts are already good and the whole ends up being something truly wonderful. That's precisely what happened when the Pure Sound A30 met the Border Patrol power supply. Both products have been checked out in *Hi-Fi Plus* in the past (the power supply was reviewed way back in issue 15, while the A30 received a 'Discovery' award in issue 48), and both did very well. Even so, that doesn't prepare you for how the good the combination can sound.

Although producing a power supply for the A30 has made for slight redesigns in the circuit of the Border Patrol box, the two are essentially unchanged from our first encounters. The Pure Sound A30 is a Chinese-built integrated amplifier with a healthy dose of input from Pure Sound's own Guy Sargeant. It's a push-pull amplifier (with a triode-operation switch), featuring a pair of Electro-Harmonix 6550 power tubes per side. These are in an auto-biasing circuit, so no need to fiddle around with long-bladed screwdrivers and the rest. The input stages feature 6N8P and 6N9P triodes, somewhat different from the 12AX7's commonly found in today's preamps, but the two 6N tubes were once highly respected for their neutrality and good dynamic range. It's not exactly a feature-led product, with just a power knob, a central volume control and a three-source line-level selector and a choice of output impedances, but it invites the question; who needs much more? Yes, a remote might be nice and an extra input for a phono stage would be a bonus, but realistically, it ticks all the basic boxes.

The Border Patrol box is a separate power supply for valve amplifiers. It's a valve-rectified choke and input filter designed to replace your high voltage supply in an existing amplifier. This not a user upgrade; the Pure Sound needs surgery to receive its Border Patrol'd



▶ juice. The surgery is not irreversible (apart from a hole drilled in the back panel of the amp where the connector socket sits), but we doubt anyone would go back.

In essence, the use of the power supply strips out the need for the pair of 5Z3P/5U4G rectifier valves in the Pure Sound's circuit. This means the two valve seats bang in the centre of the A30's top panel are empty. This shouldn't pose any difficulties in the real world, although if you have a toddler with an interest in pushing pointy



metal things into curiously attractive little holes, you need to cover these things up (but, if you have toddlers with a penchant for exploration, a valve amp is not a good idea on any level).

Now this is where it gets odd, to the naked eye at least. You are essentially replacing a choke-regulated power supply (in the Pure Sound) with... a choke-regulated power supply (in the Border Patrol). Surely this would generate little or no fundamental changes to the sound? In fact, the reverse is true. If anything, products engineered well enough to utilise a choke-regulated supply are the ones most likely to benefit from the upgrade. And that's certainly the case here.

So, just how good is this amplifier combination? Disturbingly good. Good enough to make me think that as the new Editor of *Hi-Fi Plus*, I'd already

encountered the exit point – first day in, best product ever. The first few seconds make you think of only one thing – the Audio Note Ongaku. Specifically, the effect the Ongaku had on listeners when they first heard it in the UK nearly 20 years ago. Back then, no one had heard an amplifier as dynamic, as natural (or as expensive) as the Ongaku. And that's what the first moments of play with this amp remind you of. Only without the bank-balance crushing expense.

There are two key aspects to that massive upgrade in performance; the dynamic range and the open,

unforced high-frequency sound. That dynamic power comes across both as a macro and microdynamic boost. The sheer heft and solidity of Pablo Casals playing Bach's *Cello Suite No 1* comes across, but so does the deft fingerwork and energy of his playing. It's easy to get the broad strokes right and it's easy to get the details sorted, but it's very difficult to get both of them right in the same device, especially at anything like the money.

Then there's that high-frequency sound, or rather the absence of a sound. There's no hardness, harshness, grit or glare to the treble. It merely extends up into the higher registers with all the grace of a really, really good valve amp.

Something that's really hard to get across in print is the 'shape' of the music. This is a nebulous term at best, vaguely related to timbre and tonal accuracy. That isn't all, though; an amplifier can be tonally accurate, temporally correct and have spot-on timbre and still not raise a smile, while there can be products that do everything wrong but make a sound so right people will forgive almost anything. The Border Patrol'd Pure Sound manages to do both; combining tonal accuracy with a captivating musicality. Of course, the absence of grain and glare from the high frequencies help.

There's a gloaming to the sound, like an audiophile twilight, with notes rising out of a surprisingly quiet, peaceful background. Were it not for the slight



glow of the valves, you'd be forgiven for thinking this were a solid-state design, or switched off. It's extremely quiet.

It's almost perfectly designed to silence solid-state proselytisers who dismiss valve amps as sounding 'slow'. Bass here is wonderfully resolved, combining that dynamic punch with a speed of attack and note-release that makes the amp keep time admirably. Often, those amps praised for their keen timing are demonstrated with music with extremely simple time signatures, often just a simple backbeat with ▶

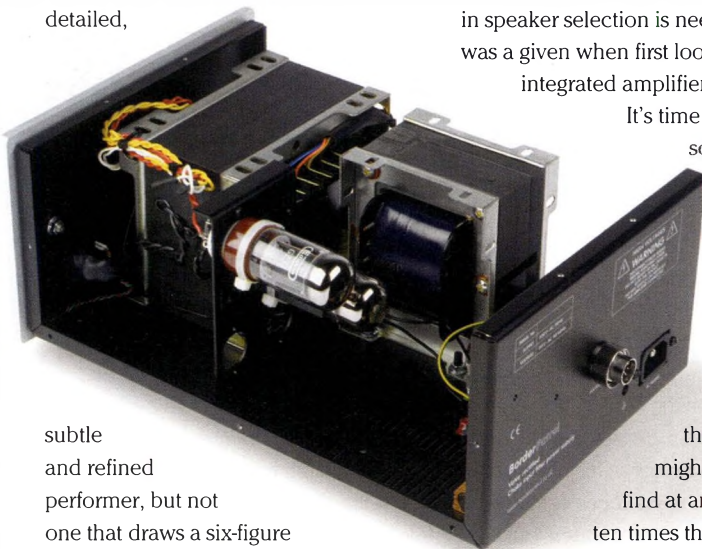
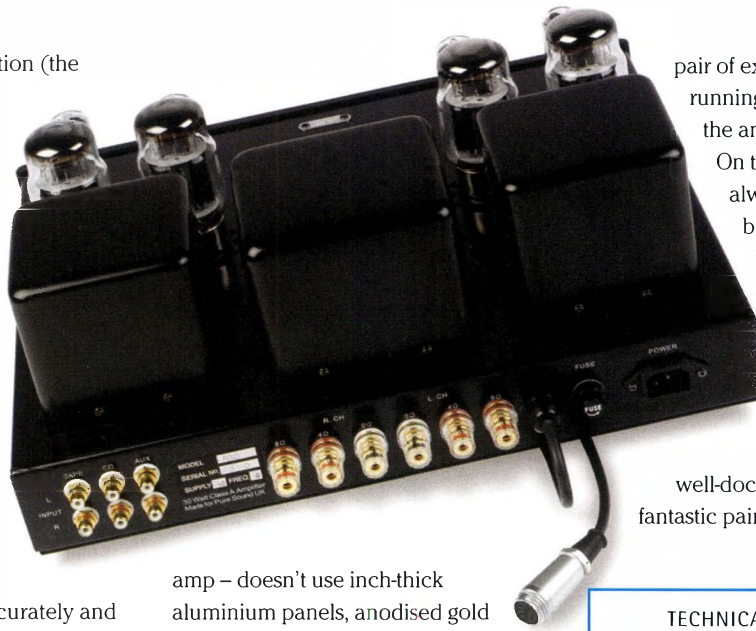
▶ surprisingly little syncopation (the exception being Pink Floyd's 'Money', which is mostly in 7/4 time). The Pure Sound/Border Patrol combination doesn't rely on 3/4 or 4/4 time; instead, it portrays the time signature of a piece of music accurately and precisely irrespective of what that signature actually is. If the music places accent on the beat, the backbeat, the offbeat or no beat at all, this combo portrays it accurately and makes sense of the music.

As you listen more and become acclimatised to the performance of the Pure Sound/Border Patrol combination so you realise where that Ongaku moment begins to pall. What's missing is the subtlety behind the dynamic range. It's still a very detailed,

amp – doesn't use inch-thick aluminium panels, anodised gold finishes or fancy LCD readouts. There's not even a remote control. Also, although the treble is sweet and extended and the midrange fluid and open, there is a limit to what essentially is a sub-£1,500 valve amp. It covers its tracks remarkably well. Then there's the power issue; 30 watts means some care in speaker selection is needed. But that was a given when first looking at the integrated amplifier on its own.

It's time to put this into some kind of perspective. This is an amplifier that costs slightly less than £2,500 in total – and yet does things that you might struggle to find at amps costing ten times that figure. But not everything – and that's a double-edged sword; where the standard Pure Sound is uniformly good in all aspects, lofting some musical elements into the top of the tree might tantalise those after across-the-board improvements. It's not for everyone; if you have inefficient loudspeakers and if you really can't stand the idea of a

pair of exposed valve seats running down the middle of the amp, look elsewhere. On the other hand, if you always lusted after the best in valve amps without the best in valve amp prices, the Border Patrol'd Pure Sound A30 is the first port of call. Neither product lose any of their well-documented magic in this fantastic pairing. ➤+



subtle and refined performer, but not one that draws a six-figure sum these days. So, where the Ongaku has the sheer grace and good sound to back up that powerful dynamic range, the Pure Sound/Border Patrol combo is a bit rough-edged.

This rough edge is as much to do with the functionality of the product and its finish as it is sonically. The finish – more than good enough for a sub-£2,500

**TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS**

Type: Line-level integrated valve amplifier  
 Valve complement: 2x 6N8P, 2x 6N9P, 2x 5Z3P (not fitted), 4x 6550  
 Inputs: 3x single-ended RCA/phono  
 Outputs: 2x 4mm binding posts (four and eight ohm taps)  
 Output power: 2x 30 Watts RMS Class A per channel  
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 350x200x435mm  
 Weight: 25kg  
 Price: £1,370

**Manufacturer:**  
 Pure Sound  
 Tel: +44 (0) 1822 612449  
 Net: www.puresound.info

**Border Patrol PSU**  
 Choke-regulated power supply upgrade for valve-based products (see website for options)  
 Valve complement: 1x GZ34  
 Output Voltages: (selected internally, dependent on amplifier upgraded) approx 310V, 380V, 420V.  
 Max Current: 260mA  
 Dimensions: 345x145x220mm  
 Weight: 11kg  
 Price: £1,195

**Manufacturer:**  
 Border Patrol  
 Net: www.borderpatrol.net  
 Tel: +001 301 705 7460

**UK Distribution:**  
 Tom Tom Audio  
 Tel:+44 (0) 1727 893 928  
 Net: www.tomtomaudio.co

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ATC SIA2-150 (left) and Moon I-3.3 (right).



## WORKSHOP NOTES 6: THE BEST OF THE NEW

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# Q marks the spot...

## Q Acoustics 1050i floorstanding loudspeakers

by Paul Messenger



Q Acoustics might be a relatively new name on the hi-fi scene, but considering it's only been around for a couple of years, it's already made some surprisingly big commercial waves. Where did it come from, and why?

The new speaker brand is itself part of a relatively new company called Armour Home, which was only founded in 2003, after its parent company had enjoyed some success in the in-car sector with Armour Automotive. It moved quickly through acquisition, purchasing Veda, Goldring, QED, Myryad and more recently Alphason, so it rapidly became a major force at the budget end of the market.

In fact, Armour now owns and operates a dozen different brands in hi-fi, home cinema and custom install. It acts as UK distribution more than a dozen more, including some well known names like NAD, Grado and Tivoli Audio.

When Armour Home started out, it had a deal to distribute Mission's budget loudspeaker range across the UK. However, that arrangement lapsed when Mission was bought by IAG. Rather than looking around for an alternative, Armour decided to develop its own Q Acoustics range from scratch, combining the talents of a top European acoustic engineering consultancy with its own in-house 'golden ears', and using Chinese manufacture to keep the price down.

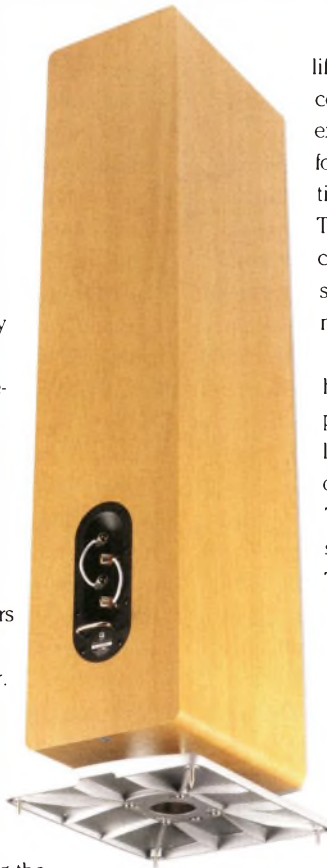
First examples appeared in 2006, and were clearly very good value for money, but further refinements have been added to a new i-suffixed series which consists of our stereo pairs plus a clutch of home cinema extras.

The floorstanding 1050i reviewed here is actually the largest and most costly in the portfolio, with an official retail price is £370/pair (though it's widely advertised for less than £300/pair). Can this be a genuine hi-fi speaker or is it just a 'mug's eyeful'? I reviewed the original 1050 ►

▶ back in 2006, and if it wasn't exactly the last word in smoothness and sophistication, it was certainly worth taking seriously. And since the new version looks identical to its predecessor, and is only distinguished from it through extra under-the-skin refinements, it's unlikely to wag a tail.

Although there are three drive units, this is a two-way design, based around twin 165mm bass/mid drivers mounted above and below a solitary tweeter. It's an arrangement that is usually referred to (not particularly accurately) as a 'd'Appolito' configuration. Managing the crossover transition from what is effectively a line-source midrange to a point source tweeter is not particularly easy, but it's an arrangement that usefully combines generous drive unit are with a fashionably slim front view and the simplicity of two-way operation. It takes its inspiration from a very successful 1990s design, the Dali 104, which has actually been a key influence behind a number of other designs such as those in the Living Voice range, some of which have very exotic ingredients and pricetags.

Inevitably, given the very sharp price, the finish here is mostly vinyl woodprint, with 'cherry', 'beech' and graphite black options. Ours came in 'beech', with a thick and sculpted silver painted front panel, and the whole thing feels very solid, as its 18kg weight confirms. A nice touch is that the horizontal edges are post-formed to soften the appearance. Perhaps the most impressive feature at the price is that the 1050i comes complete with an alloy plinth which



lifts the speaker a few centimetres off the floor, extends the stability footprint, and generally tidies up the appearance. This is used with convenient top-adjustable spikes, but lock-nuts are not provided.

The two main drivers have 115mm doped paper cones and are loaded by a large diameter front port. The tweeter has a 25mm soft dome diaphragm. Twin zig-zag terminal pairs are integrated with a cable-tidy, and the speakers are supplied with wire links – generally considered preferable to the usual brass strips. A black fabric-covered perforated metal

half-grille is supplied, but for those who choose to ignore it, the fixing lugs are very discreet.

What changes distinguish the 1050i from the original 1050? According to Q Acoustics, the tweeter has lower distortion, and the crossover has undergone a number of changes, including the use of polypropylene capacitors and higher purity copper wiring. The internal damping has also been modified, and now uses a cocktail of different materials to optimise performance

Whether these changes

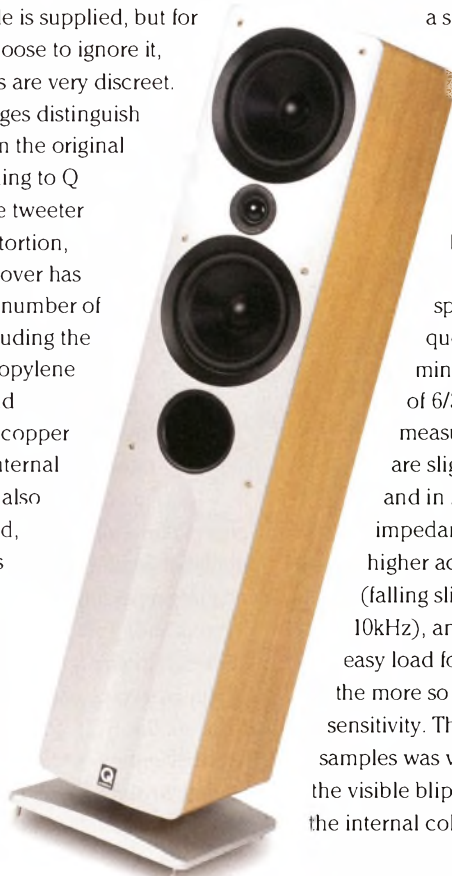
have substantially affected the sound could only be assessed by comparing old and new, which wasn't possible here. However, even my rather simplistic measurement regime shows that quite significant changes have been made, most (but not all) in favour of the new model.

The performance envelope slightly favours sensitivity over bass extension here, the former registering a high 91dB (close enough to the claimed 92dB), while the latter remains solid down to 40Hz (maximum port output is at 43Hz), and still maintains decent output down to 23Hz.

In overall frequency balance terms – the power response, measured in-room and under far-field averaged conditions – the 1050i looks very well judged. Although significantly smoother than its predecessor, it's still not particularly smooth, but does produce an impressively well balanced average through the bass and midrange, and again through the treble. However,

a slight dip is visible around 1.8kHz which wasn't as obvious with its predecessor, and the average treble level is around 3dB below the bass/mid average.

Although the specification quotes nominal/minimum impedances of 6/3.8 ohms, on our measurements these figures are slightly pessimistic, and in fact this speaker's impedance stays at 5 ohms or higher across most of the band (falling slightly below above 10kHz), and is therefore a quite easy load for an amplifier to drive, the more so because of its high sensitivity. The pair match of our samples was very good indeed, but the visible blip at 180Hz, reflecting the internal column resonance, is ▶



▶ much more obvious here than it was with the 1050. Is this batch difference or a design change?

So far the 1050i looks a very impressive prospect indeed, but the bottom line must be whether it sounds as good as the portents might suggest. There's certainly much that is good about this

speaker, but there are also reservations, and I somehow found I didn't quite warm to it in the way I recall reacting to its predecessor, probably because its overall character is a little dull.

One of the biggest problems in reviewing loudspeakers comes down to the unavoidable fact that the speaker is at the end of a chain of other components, and that chain will impose its own character on the signal the speaker reproduces.

My own approach is to use the best possible source components, amplification and ancillaries, as these are likely to provide the best quality signal and avoid compromising the

loudspeakers. But one can fairly point out that putting a pair of budget speakers on the end of a system costing a hundred times their price is unrealistic. There's

no easy answer, but it does mean the speaker designer and reviewer have next to impossible jobs!

My main criticism of the 1050i is that its presence and top end is a little too restrained, which in turn makes the broad bass and midband just a bit too dominant.

The left hand of the piano tends to take centre stage, and any vocal chestiness captured by the microphone comes through rather strongly.

Most of the speakers I try tend to be rather weak through the upper bass and lower midband, and there seems to be a modern trend towards strengthening the relative treble output (possibly reflecting improvements in tweeters and/crossover components). This tends to give a lean balance that emphasises voice band projection. However, the 1050i goes the other way, delivering warmth and harmonic richness in abundance, and doing so rather effectively with no obvious

coloration and a worthwhile degree of dynamic tension, but also some lack of openness. Voices sound just a little 'shut in', with slightly suppressed consonants and sibilants. This doesn't make emotional communication particularly easy, and somehow takes the edge off dynamic expression too.

But that's on the end of a top quality system. Where the context is more heavily compromised, as is bound to be the case in practice (especially in a budget home cinema system), this speaker's top end restraint could well be beneficial in preventing a system from sounding edgy or aggressive.

Smartly presented and cleverly engineered, the 1050i has several features that are particularly surprising at its exceptionally competitive price. Sound quality is solid but maybe a little too laid back and restrained for some tastes. ▶+



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Q Acoustics 1050i

Type:	two-way reflex-loaded floorstander
Bass/Mid Drivers:	2x 165mm, 115mm doped paper cone
Treble Driver:	25mm
Frequency Responses:	
Spec:	44Hz-20kHz +/-3dB
Measured (in-room)	25Hz-20kHz +/-5dB
Sensitivity:	
Spec:	92dB
Measured:	91dB
Impedance:	
Nominal:	6 ohms
Minimum:	3.8 ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	195x975x295mm
Weight:	17.8kg per speaker
Price (per pair):	£370

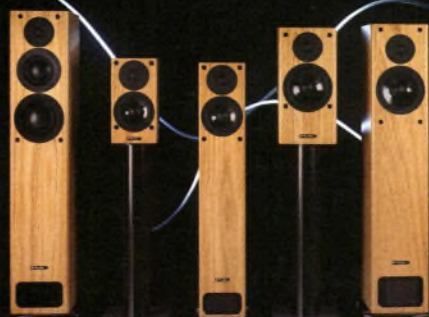
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# Boxing Clever...

## The Ensemble Fonobrio Phono-Stage

by Roy Gregory



With realization dawning on an increasing number of manufacturers that the internal microphony generated by the components within an electrical device is potentially far more damaging than external interference, it is perhaps surprising that more products don't take this issue more seriously. Indeed, once you start down this path you quickly realize that the traditional, battleship construction that graces so many high-end products can quite easily become seriously counter productive. 47 Labs have demonstrated just how far you can take the performance of even basic, monolithic circuits if you pay enough attention to the mechanical aspects of their implementation, while at the other end of the size spectrum, both Zanden and Hovland have applied the approach with notable success. But even these companies have not gone to the lengths seen in Ensemble's Fonobrio phono-stage...

The Fonobrio is a bulky yet rather stylish unit, built into a surprisingly substantial steel chassis that is folded, damped and braced by a full height fore and aft bulkhead that separates the power supply from the active circuitry. The power supply board itself is isolated on eight decoupling legs that separate it from the chassis floor, while the input IEC socket is mounted to a floating rear panel, to prevent 50Hz mechanical energy entering the unit. The transformer is encapsulated and there are damping pads on the reservoir caps.

Even these measures, along with the bulkhead, are considered insufficient to protect the fragile phono signal and the circuitry that handles it from the mechanical energy generated by the larger components of the power supply. So, the stacked, dual mono boards and all their sockets are mounted on another, separate floating chassis, decoupled from the main casework itself. And just to prove that

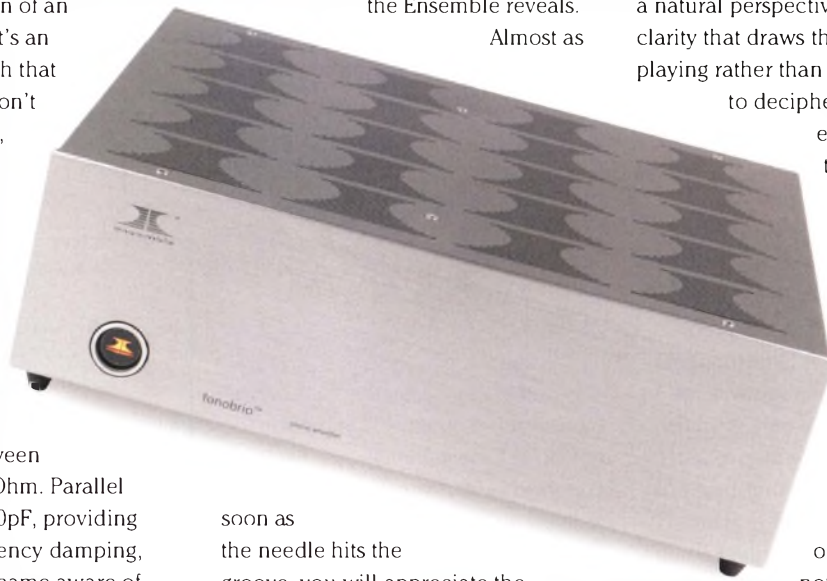
▶ structure-borne vibration hasn't been forgotten, the tall, soft, conical rubber feet constitute a suspension system in their own right.

The audio circuits are neatly laid out, using discrete components throughout, while rear panel DIP-switches allow user adjustment of gain and cartridge loading. There are a fair number of Ensemble proprietary components, including the RCA sockets. The MM inputs present a 47K load with 220pF in parallel, while the MC input offers two sensitivities, the higher gain setting achieved through the addition of an extra active stage. It's an interesting approach that means that if you don't need the extra gain, you can dispense with it and the noise problems associated with it too. The four dipswitches for each channel offer an array of 16 settings with a sensible range between 51.7 Ohms and 1k Ohm. Parallel capacitance is 2,300pF, providing a hint of high-frequency damping, something I first became aware of in the context of MC cartridges with the latest TEAD Groove. If an owner wants a specific impedance to match a given cartridge/system, internal sockets on the board allow the use of individual values, although this would require removal of the upper board and is best left to a qualified technician. Likewise, a small jumper located just behind the front edge of the board allows you to alter the maximum output level of the Fonobrio in three steps between 4.75V and 9.5V, but again this is best left to the qualified. Overall gain is 44dB for the moving-magnet stage, with the MC stages topping that up by 24dB and an additional 6dB on top, all of which

should enable the Ensemble to mate with just about any cartridge on the planet. For the review, I used a pair of Lyras (Scala and Titan) mounted in a Triplanar on the Grand Prix Audio Monaco turntable, as well as a vdH Condor mounted in a Kuzma Stogi Reference 313 on the XL4 turntable.

The first few tracks you play through the Fonobrio will leave you in no doubt as to its basic nature, a view of the product and a view of the music that's unlikely to change over time – but it will develop and evolve as you discover the layers of subtlety that the Ensemble reveals.

Almost as



soon as the needle hits the groove, you will appreciate the lucid clarity and enforced focus and transparency that this phono-stage brings to record replay – stunning testament to the effectiveness of its mechanical design and construction. There's a poise and delicacy to its presentation, an easy sense of separation that makes the structure and form of the music an open book.

So, whether it's the fragile, hesitant beauty of Janis Ian's 'Some People's Lives', the perfectly poised contrast of those halting yet strangely captivating piano notes with the sad, reflective vocal, or the scale and complexity of the Brahms *Violin Concerto* (Heifetz, Reiner and the CSO) the soloist's inimitable swagger and technique

perfectly balanced against the disciplined power and restraint, the explosive release of the orchestra, the Fonobrio encompasses the musical demands, large and small, and delivers them intact.

What you soon come to value is its tidiness – a back-handed compliment if ever there was one in a world awash with over used superlatives applied to underperforming products. But its unflustered, uncluttered, unobtrusive presence ensures not just that everything is in its place but that there is a place for everything, presenting a natural perspective, an unforced clarity that draws the listener into the playing rather than leaving you trying

to decipher or unravel the

event. It's a quality that's built on a ghostly quiet background and superb spatial order, stability and resolution.

That inky black silence allows instrument's their natural colour and while organisation might not seem like a glamorous thing,

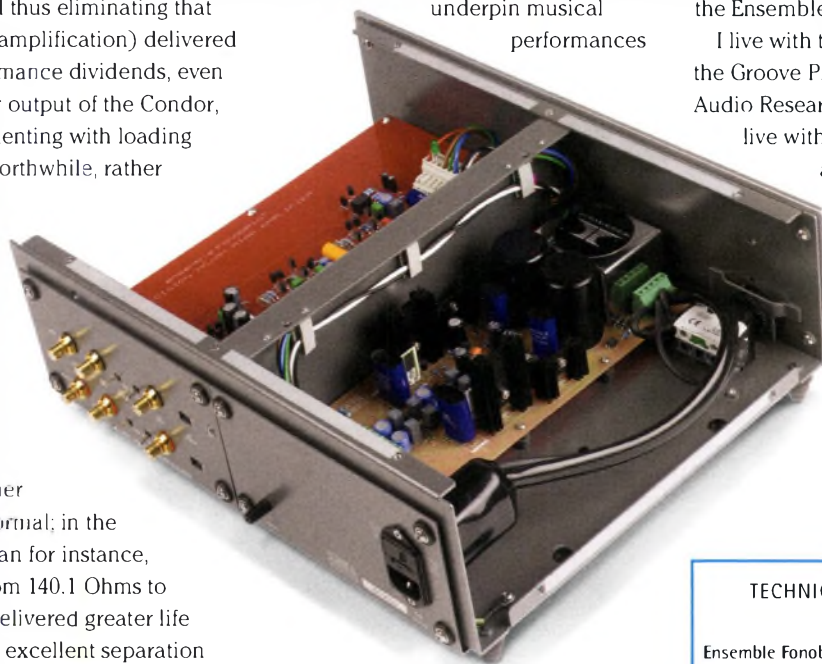
just remember, that's what actually separates music from noise, is what provides the framework for artistic expression. The Ensemble mirrors that arrangement, its ability to order things properly and easily, in turn making the listener's task so much easier, the music so much more accessible.

All that resolution does come at a price – or at least with demands attached. The sheer clarity of the Fonobrio means that even tiny changes in cartridge set-up and optimization are readily apparent, a fact reflected in the range of adjustments offered within the unit itself. Simply settle on a single VTA setting, or a quick guesstimate ▶

▶ as to cartridge gain and loading and you'll be selling your records – and the performances captured on them – well short of the mark. Reducing the overall gain at the phono-stage front-end (and thus eliminating that extra stage of amplification) delivered serious performance dividends, even with the lower output of the Condor, while experimenting with loading also proved worthwhile, rather than simply plumping for whatever's worked before. In fact, I ended up running all the cartridges at slightly higher values than normal; in the case of the Titan for instance, the step up from 140.1 Ohms to 195.5 Ohms, delivered greater life and presence, excellent separation between string and wind instruments in the bass and a compact sense of muscular power to the playing in the Brahms; moving up one step to 331.1 Ohms broadened the soundstage but the music lost its sense of presence and purpose. Fortunately, the in-built adaptability of the Ensemble means that such balancing acts are relatively easily achieved, both between cartridge and phono-stage and phono-stage and line-stage. Likewise, few phono-stages I've used demonstrate quite so obviously the benefits of precise VTA adjustment – to the extent that I'd consider an arm that offers the facility a prerequisite for Fonobrio ownership.

This insistence on getting everything just so is revealing of another aspect of the Ensemble's character. In part, it's deft, unflustered clarity is the result of a slightly lightened balance, the loss of a little weight and power in the lowest frequencies, a heightened definition and focus at higher ones. It

stops short of etched, and it's certainly seamless from top to bottom, with no disconcerting steps in its range, but careful set-up is required to deliver the presence and authority to really underpin musical performances



– as well as close attention to the level set for each recording. Comparison to the TEAD Groove Plus shows that the Fonobrio lacks the emphatic dynamic delivery and sheer substance of the Tom Evans design, but that it also has its own cards to play, especially when it comes to its air of calm confidence and grace under fire. Play Basie's *Farmer's Market Barbeque* and while the Ensemble might not match the sheer impact and energy of the Groove Plus, it offers its own insights in terms of the quality of the ensemble playing, the chemistry between band and soloists, the brilliance of the arrangements. Yes, it's a slightly more cerebral experience – but it's no less enjoyable for all that.

You will need to work on initial set-up; you'll need to pay attention to VTA and volume setting for each record if you want the full range of body and colour that the Fonobrio can deliver to complement its

effortless clarity and precision. But get those things right and you'll be listening to one of the best (and least intrusive) phono-stages available – which is quite an achievement given the Ensemble's price tag.

I live with the Connoisseur and the Groove Plus. I could live with the Audio Research PH7 and I'd love to live with the Zanden. I could also happily live with Ensemble's Fonobrio and that puts it in exalted company. Cool, calm and collected, it's well worth its place at the top table. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Ensemble Fonobrio

Type:	Standalone MM/MC phono-stage
MM Gain:	44dB
MM Loading:	47 kOhms, 220pF
MC Gain:	68 or 74dB
MC Loading:	User adjustable – 51.7 Ohms to 1 kOhm 16 steps plus sockets for discrete values 2300pF
Output Level:	9.5V max, user adjustable in three steps
Output Impedance:	<100 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	395 x 138 x 315mm
Weight:	8.5kg
Price:	£2,999

##### UK Distributor:

Signature Audio Systems  
Tel: 44(0)7738 007776  
Net: [www.signaturesystems.co.uk](http://www.signaturesystems.co.uk)

##### Manufacturer:

Ensemble Ltd. Inc.  
Net: [www.ensembleaudio.com](http://www.ensembleaudio.com)

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# Raising a Smile

## AudioSmile Kensai loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger



There's no getting away from it: the hi-fi industry is getting old. Most of Britain's leading hi-fi electronics brands (Arcam, Naim, Linn, Meridian, Rega etc) all started out in the 1970s, when hi-fi was still the height of consumer fashion, so most of its prime movers are now getting close to normal retirement age.

By the time the 1980s came along, the music had arguably become less interesting, and the personal computer had started peeping over the parapet, providing a different distraction for those coming of age. Hi-fi had rather lost its glamour, and bright young things were becoming thinner on the ground. Musical enthusiasms still lead a good number of younger people to explore the world of hi-fi, as Britain's most successful hi-fi retailer Julian Richer will confirm. But there aren't that many people under 35 trying to start up hi-fi companies today.

Which is why I was both surprised and delighted to find a decidedly youthful Simon Ashton occupying a room called AudioSmile at last Autumn's Heathrow hi-fi show, and making some very enjoyable sounds therein too.

AudioSmile currently operates on three fronts. It has add-on supertweeters; it modifies Behringer DACs and active crossovers to make them more audiophile-friendly; and it makes a complete miniature speaker system called the Kensai, which is the subject of this review.

Why review a tiny and obscure speaker from a relatively small start-up company? Because it's actually a very impressive tiny and obscure speaker. In the wake of the impressive Heathrow demonstration, I suggested Simon brought a pair down for me to try. I hate trying to make any sort of judgement under the unknown system and room conditions found at hi-fi shows, and wanted to check them with my own familiar sources, amplification and ancillaries. ▶

► By chance I happened to have the excellent Sendor SA1 (about which both Roy Gregory and Chris Binns got pretty excited in Issues 60 and 61) on hand when Simon arrived. While I agree with both fellow reviewers that the SA1 is an exceptional small speaker, the even smaller Kensai was every bit as good, albeit in its own rather different way. And any speaker that can hold its own with the SA1 definitely deserves to be given the full *Hi-Fi Plus* treatment.

The Kensai is both tiny and expensive, but there's long been a niche for speakers that are both very small and very good, irrespective of price. An interesting bonus is a matching flight case, available as a £150 optional extra, for those who want to travel around and still have access to a decent pair of speakers. The price of the speakers (*sans* case) is £1,499 per pair, which might seem a lot, but if you want something small, ultra-discreet, and potentially easily transportable, yet which is good enough to make your music (or radio, or whatever) totally engrossing and communicative, I can think of no better.

Naturally it's a two-way design, with a 120mm bass/mid driver and a relatively large isoplanar ribbon tweeter. Said tweeter has a 40x56mm visible area, albeit somewhat occluded by a cellular structure that presumably provides the magnetism, (and which looks very like the transducer used in Wharfedale's famous Isodynamic headphones some decades back). The bass/mid unit looks like a very classy SEAS affair with fixed copper phase plug, and has a 75mm diameter magnesium alloy cone, and is loaded

by a heavily damped (aperiodic) front slot port. Signal is applied to a single pair of terminals, each fitted directly through the woodwork.

Finish and presentation are top class. Solid wood side panels – beech on our samples, though alternatives are available – while the top, base, front and back are covered in white (or black) leatherette. There's no grille to mess up the sound.



According to AudioSmile, the tweeter incorporates an acoustic lens to widen dispersion, the main driver has a 9mm travel and its motor uses copper rings to reduce distortion. The crossover is hard-wired, phase-aligned, uses poly-film capacitors and is covered in

a butyl rubber compound to avoid vibration effects.

You might expect a speaker this small would work well with a little extra bass help by being sited just in front of a wall, and that is very much the case. Indeed, the Kensai coupled beautifully to the wall in our room, so that the far-field averaged 'power' response is smooth and even right across the audio band. It's flat too – it delivers a +/-3dB in-room response from below 40Hz up to 16kHz – though there is enough variation to add character. The bass is strong 45-75Hz, but output is then weak (about -4dB) through the upper bass and lower midband (80-600Hz), before a forward upper mid and presence (800Hz-5kHz). Happily, the the transitions are smooth. Not surprisingly, sensitivity is low, my measurements confirming the claimed 83dB/W, though it won't stress the amplifier too much as the load stays comfortably above 6 ohms throughout. Centred on 48Hz, the port output is well damped. ►

▶ Listening immediately confirmed the extraordinarily good close-to-wall integration, and the excellent bass alignment. The sound shows a fine freedom from boxiness with no obvious reflection effects to cause unpleasant midrange colorations.



Indeed, provided that the volume level is kept in sensible bounds, the little Kensai can do amazing things even with bass-rich material. Seeking to catch it out, I slipped Massive Attack's *Mezzanine* onto the turntable and deliberately selected 'Inertia Creeps', one of my favourite subwoofer test tracks. Much to my surprise, the Kensai wasn't in the least discommoded – in fact rather the reverse. What it might lack in terms of party-level power handling, it more than makes up for in taut timing, fine agility and an impressive ability to discriminate between different instruments and musicians and the way they are playing. So struck was I, when *Mezzanine* finished, I dug out *Blue Lines* as an encore. "Eat your heart out LS3/5a", I thought, as Grandmaster

Flash's 'The Message' came pounding out of the speakers.

Although the bass is thoroughly impressive, the best thing about this speaker has to be its total and seamless coherence. Just prior to trying the Kensai, I'd been listening to a pair of those lovely single-driver egg-shaped Eclipses, where a solitary voice-coil ensures total coherence. Not only does the Kensai supply a degree of coherence that's at least broadly comparable, it does so alongside the sort of flat and wide frequency balance that no single-driver system can yet approach.

Tonally, one is aware of the Kensai's slightly light, bright and forward overall character, at least when using the speakers in a fairly large room. (A smaller room could well help here.) The sound therefore has a certain coolness, while at the same

the voice band detail is very explicit – not unwelcome, since it's not at all peaky, especially with speech.

Stereo imaging is very effective, especially for a wall-mount, helped by the lack of boxiness, the small size of the sources, and the way these speakers seem able to ignore the wall immediately behind them, acoustically speaking. A degree of depth is apparent with appropriate recordings, and even some height is sometimes audible.

AudioSmile claims that the relatively large area of its ribbon tweeter contributes to the speaker's "impressive dynamics". It's not an argument I've heard before, but, I can't argue with the observation that the dynamic expression is impressively vigorous, especially so (again) from something so small. The top end is also attractively sweet and clean, although it should be added that there's not a lot of grip

or dynamic tension low down in the audio range.

Any small speaker is bound to have constraints as well as benefits, but I have to admit that the Kensai hides the former remarkably effectively, while displaying the latter in abundance. The more time I spend time listening to it, the more impressed I become by its extraordinary ability to sound as big as a full size speaker, while almost disappearing visually.

Simon tells me he's making progress on a new big loudspeaker design, so I'm going to start saving my pennies now. Meantime, anyone in the market for a tiny loudspeaker should at least try to hear the Kensai before making a decision.



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### AudioSmile Kensai

Type:	Two-way, stand-mount, reflex-loaded speaker
Drivers:	1x 40x56mm isoplanar ribbon tweeter 1x 120mm mid/bass unit with 75mm magnesium cone
Bandwidth:	48Hz-20kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	83dB
Nominal impedance:	8 ohms
Minimum impedance:	6 ohms
Crossover frequency:	2.2kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	150x250x200mm
Weight:	5kg each
Finish:	Beech or Walnut (with black or white leatherette)
Price (per pair):	£1,499

##### Manufacturer:

AudioSmile  
Tel: 07952 478193  
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# French fancy

## Neodio NR One CD player

by Alan Sircom

We complete the French triumvirate with Neodio. Add this to the Cairn Diablo and the Focal Grande Utopia EM, we have a complete CD-amp-speaker package from France, all reviewed in the same issue. Okay, so that particular system would be somewhat unbalanced in reality, but it shows just how significant French hi-fi has become in recent years.

Of this particular trio, Focal is the best known and the Bordeaux-based Neodio the least. In fact, outside of *la belle France*, Neodio is almost unknown. Which is a shame, because the product is very, very good. Take the Neodio NR One tested here; it's a solidly built CD player that follows in the exalted footsteps of the Lavardin amplifiers both in manufacture and performance. However, it's not that Neodio is disliked outside of France; it's that the company hasn't really needed to go international. This is a sign of how significant some European markets remain – companies in Germany and France can exist only for the home market. The UK was similarly inward focused for years, and it's likely that – as market forces change around the world – companies like Neodio will start investigating the world beyond their country borders.

Back to the NR One. The player is elegant, although it's hard not to think it a little dated looking; a bit like Spectral, or something like a scaled-down version of the WOPR from *War Games*, only without the flashing lights. With a centre-mounted CD tray in the centre black methacrylate groove running down the silvery aluminium front panel, and just five buttons on the front control surface, it's extremely minimalist, but also very functional. The big yellow LED readout adds to the dated, yet functional appeal; just a dimmable and defeatable four-digit display, it won't tell you much ▶



▶ more than track number and basic track handling, but for many that's all you need. The player sits on three adjustable feet of aluminium and the back panel is methacrylate. The remote control provides the functions missed by the front panel, and is an aluminium billet with buttons.

The CD drawer itself is part of a DVD-ROM mechanism. This helps the player be able to read a wealth of CD-like formats, including CD-R/RW and hybrid SACD, although not DVD, Blu-Ray or CD-V. The mech sits on a visco-elastic vibration damping mechanism and the data passes to an asynchronous upsampling 24bit, 192kHz processor and then out to a balanced and single-ended output stage that sports 100MHz op-amps. A 150VA toroidal transformer, positioned directly behind the IEC power socket, feeds all this. The digital mech and display are both fed by ribbon bus cables.

If you judge the value of a player simply by the size of its circuit boards, then the Neodio NR One will struggle to make the grade. There's a lot of air in the casework, but on the other hand, most of us are (or should be) more inspired by what those circuit boards do, instead of their physical dimensions.

It's not a player designed to be switched off. The rear panel switch is only there for power off for travelling or long periods of inactivity. Neodio runs a 72 hour burn-in in the factory and suggests giving the player an additional 30 to 40 hours of play-time before it comes

to life. We'd double that, and then some. If powered down after the burn in is complete, Neodio suggests the player will come to full form after an hour. There's a lot of aluminium to warm up on the front panel, and as a rule of thumb, when the front panel heats

on an old Sound Organisation table (that's spent the last decade holding up a printer) than it did on a Townshend VSSS or even a Torlyte table.

Cabling is an interesting exercise, too. The player seems very receptive to playing with mains phase. It uses an IEC cable, so live and neutral can be swapped over physically, but there's very much a right and a wrong way. You'd be wise to experiment



up to a notch below body heat, you know it's back to life. Fortunately, like most CD players, leaving it constantly powered does not fill the room with heat, despite a reasonable power consumption of 35 watts.

It's also designed to work on a rigid stand. A decoupled device can work against the vibration support systems built into the player.



This is a bit problematic, because many high-end stands have some form of decoupling built into them. So, if this player sounds so-so, look to your support. This is one of the few players that sounds better

with mains phase to find the right way to listen. The difference is subtle, but there nonetheless. Good, solid cables are more or less mandatory, for both interconnects and mains leads (we mildly prefer the single-ended connection). Fortunately, when all this is done, the product stays pretty much fit and forget.

This is where things get really, really good. Sonically, the Neodio might not quite be up there with the very best CD players – it's no Wadia or Audio Research, nor is it a Metronome Technologies or a Zanden. But otherwise the player is of the absolute first water. The bass in particular is exciting, deep and potent, underpinning and reinforcing the performance brilliantly. This works ▶

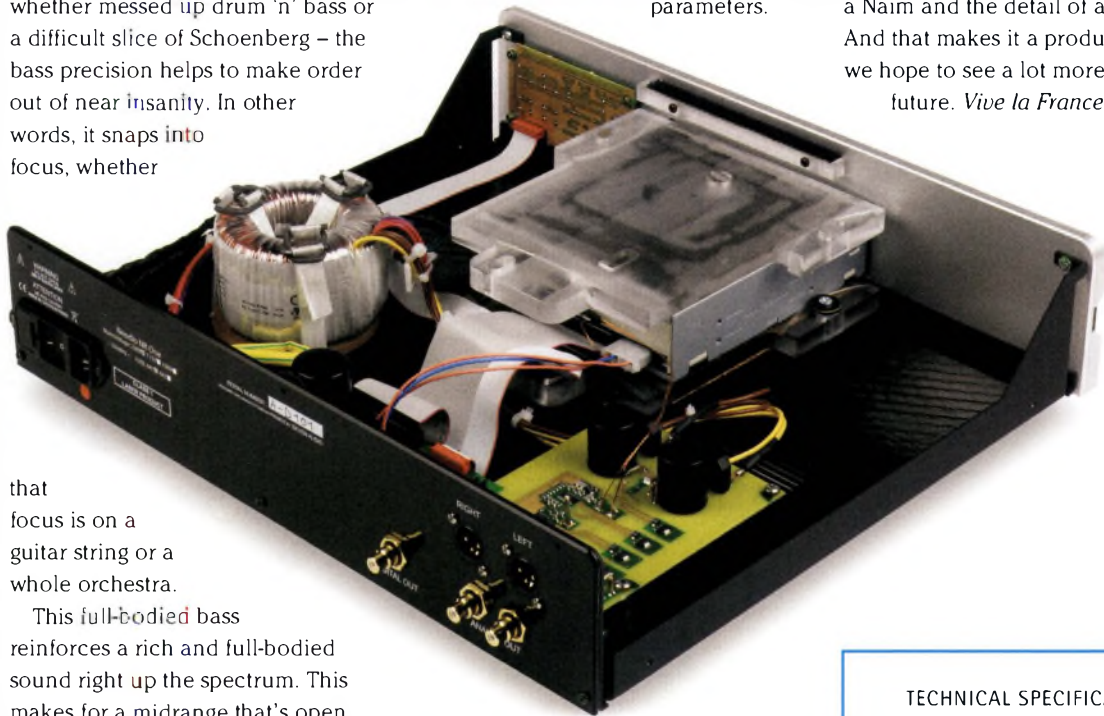
► for more than just big orchestral pieces, it also helps to reinforce the voices of singer-songwriters, because it adds solidity and roots the sound in a three-dimensional space. Of course, when you get a complex, multilayered bass performance – whether messed up drum 'n' bass or a difficult slice of Schoenberg – the bass precision helps to make order out of near insanity. In other words, it snaps into focus, whether

that focus is on a guitar string or a whole orchestra.

This full-bodied bass reinforces a rich and full-bodied sound right up the spectrum. This makes for a midrange that's open and expansive and a treble that's clean and detailed without tipping over into brightness. It's a big sound (saying 'full-bodied' twice in the same sentence seems to give a bit of a hint to this) but not a dull one. For all this deep bass and rich performance, the music is never lost within the sound. Once again, it's not as immediately rhythmically bouncy as a Naim player, but the sense of musical coherence and flow is little short of wonderful.

Part of this flow is thanks to a soundstaging and articulation that draws the listener into the music. The Neodio is perhaps better at deciphering the breathy tones of a chartreuse songstress than delving into the machine-gun rap of an Eminem; but either way it's a remarkably open sound. And part of

the sense of flow is down to a fluid and natural-sounding dynamic range. You'll probably never hear the term 'dynamic range', though; the 'natural-sounding' part gets in the way first. You'll find yourself listening to the music far more than to the musical parameters.



Sometimes it's hard to pin-down a very good CD player's performance. It's in part because most of them sound, well, digital. The alternative is a record player. Like the select handful of very, very good CD players, this one doesn't sound like either of these end stops – it's not bright, steely and digital (but it is extended well into the treble) and it's not vinyl-like in its approach. Instead it just sounds like a CD player, only one that's freed from all the things that make CD players sound wrong to many ears. And that means the player joins a very select list of players *sans pareil*.

Because it's not so well known round here, it's logical to describe the Neodio NR One in terms of players that are more commonplace in the UK. And strangely, that highlights one

of the true strengths of the design; it takes the middle path and that means it draws strengths from all these better known designs. So, the Neodio is ideal for those after a mix of the richness of Audio Research, the soundstaging of Wadia, the beat of a Naim and the detail of an Esoteric. And that makes it a product that we hope to see a lot more of in the future. *Vive la France!* ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Neodio NR One

Type:	Integrated CD player
D/A Converter:	24-bit/192kHz with asynchronous upsampling
Analogue Output:	1pr balanced XLR, 1pr single-ended RCA/phono
Digital Output:	Coaxial RCA (S/PDIF)
Audio output (fixed):	2.6Vrms
Power requirements:	35 watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	440x105x400 mm
Weight:	9 Kg
Price:	£4,795

##### Manufacturer

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# Solid Citizens...

## The Siltech Classic Anniversary Cables

by Roy Gregory



Siltech is one of the oldest and most respected cable brands in the audio industry. While it was far from the first manufacturer to offer specialist audio cables, Siltech was certainly the first to introduce exotic materials and high-end performance to the market. Those original Siltech interconnects seemed stratospherically expensive at the time, the 4-56 leads weighing in at around \$400 for a meter pair – this at a time when a top-flight pre-amp like the Audio Research SP11 would set you back around \$5.5K. Well, the current ARC Reference 3 line-stage might have roughly doubled in price, but cable costs have got crazy, with the likes of Transparent, Nordost, Siltech itself and a number of other companies all offering products that dwarf that original \$400 price tag. Get it right of course, and those prices can be justified, but the real relevance of top-end cables is in their trickle-down impact on more affordable product lines.

The Classic Anniversary line marks Siltech's 25 years in the audio business. It is also the most affordable range the company offers that still incorporates all of its latest thinking and metallurgy. And just as an added point of interest, Classic Anniversary also uses the same silver/gold alloy for its conductors that feature in the company's sister brand, the minimalist Crystal Cables that so impressed me when I used them. But instead of the almost string-like simplicity of the Crystals, these Siltechs are much more traditional in presentation and construction.

As per usual practice, I ordered up a complete cable loom for review, allowing me to run the same cable brand (and therefore the same thinking, materials and technology) from one end of the system to the other, from wall socket to speaker sockets if you like. The cables supplied consist of the Model SPX-300 power cord, Model 330i interconnect and 330L loudspeaker cable. I also received one of the



interconnects arriving with Siltech's own low-mass RCA plugs, incorporating a simple but extremely secure locking action. The single-wired speaker cables were terminated with heavy-duty spades. In addition, to the models mentioned, the Classic Anniversary series also offers various, more expensive models of interconnect and speaker cable, as well as a range of video leads and dedicated phono and digital designs.

► company's Signature Octopus 8 mains distribution blocks, equipped with the superior (to 13 Amp) continental Schuko sockets, the power cords being equipped accordingly.

The SPX-800 power cords are constructed from heavily stranded and shielded, silver-plated copper conductors, but they are the exception here. The signal leads all use Siltech's proprietary G7 silver/gold, high conductivity alloy arranged in a dual balanced co-axial arrangement,

The cables themselves are beautifully presented, firmly within what I'd term the "sensible school" of hi-fi aesthetics. Nothing here to offend the purchaser: reassuring girth combined with good flexibility, muted colours, neat termination and a metal sleeve that adds a touch of luxury. In keeping with the cables themselves, the connectors

are suitably solid, almost bulky against the current fashion for minimalist termination. Like I said, everything one would expect from a traditional audio cable from a traditional manufacturer, one that leans heavily on the excellence of its metallurgy and consistency of its manufacturing rather than gimmicks or unnecessary exotica.

In use, the Siltechs have an immediately comfortable and comforting sound. They lack the obvious speed and stark clarity of cables from the likes of Nordost, or the easy, expressive fluidity of their stable-

mate, the Crystals, but offer their own considerable virtues. Playing orchestral works the richness and stability of their bass performance is immediately apparent. The sparse and sporadic opening of the second movement Scherzo from Taneyev's *Third Symphony* is a perfect example. With notes and phrase plucked forth, seemingly from every section of the orchestra, that steady stability in the music's nether regions is all that ties it together, giving shape and substance, musically and physically. It also serves to demonstrate the sweetness they possess across the rest of the range, instruments instantly identifiable from their natural



tonality and texture. From the opening woodwind trills to the rumbling bass chords and burbling bassoon continuo, each extra instrument, across the strings and brass is brought to life, added to the expanding soundscape and tonal palette. It's a lively, affectionate piece and the Siltechs capture that warmth and humour perfectly.

This ability to bring shape to music, to maintain its structure, is key to the musical appeal of these cables. Comparisons to similarly priced competitors (and the experience of live music) betray a slight softness in their presentation, which accounts both for their sweetness and also their sense of subtle distance or lack of immediacy. Their presentation, built on that solid foundation is rhythmically sure-footed and coherent, but also contained; it is a distinct entity that you look in upon, complete and perfectly shaped. Therein lies both its appeal and the single biggest factor in the selection ►



giving four conductors per channel and allowing for balanced connection with the interconnects and also bi-wired termination on the speaker cable. I used single-ended connections, the

► process. There's many a system that is crying out for just such a humanizing touch; there's others, and other listeners for whom it will be anathema. Plus ça change! No cable offers a universal solution, so don't punish the Siltechs for exhibiting the same failing. Instead, appreciate their virtues and see consider whether they fit you and your system's needs. They might well be just what you are looking for.

Their lack of glare or hardness, their natural weight and presence is in stark contrast to the vast majority of audiophile offerings. If you've heard silver cables in the past and been worried by their thinness and shimmer,



it's time to listen again. An album like *Tea For The Tillerman* has exactly the kind of immediacy and

explosive dynamics that can have you reaching to reduce the level with starker sounding cables, pulling the music (and the system) back into its comfort zone. The Siltechs are utterly imperturbable, irrespective of level. Even with genuinely uncompressed

material they are never provoked to a rash overshoot or a hurried skid, remaining perfectly poised right up to the point where the electronics or speakers go weak at the knees. The price you are paying is that loss of immediacy and intimacy, the Classic Anniversaries trading edge of the seat, you are there excitement for a more balanced, all-embracing presentation, occasional flashes of near reality for a more general and universal excellence. There is no music that they will not play, nor any type they particularly favour.

Vocals are particularly well served, with none of the anemic tonality or lack of body, emphasized sibilance or threadbare emotional range that afflicts so many cables and the systems they serve in the name of resolution. Add that to the easy sense of solid substance and natural weight, and songs like Eleanor McEvoy's 'Old, New, Borrowed and Blue' roll along with a rollicking enthusiasm. There are those who might wish for more drive, more sheer authority from the cables' lower reaches, a quality which would also likely increase the immediacy of their performance, but there's no faulting the lack of grain or bleaching that would rob instruments and voices of their natural character. There again, Siltech offer their own, more expensive and more accomplished options that I suspect would allow you to have your tonal cake and lace it with all the immediacy you can handle – at a price. And therein lies the real beauty of the Classic Anniversary cables. Their path travels the right side of the music/resolution divide, ensuring that you can enjoy whatever you play, whilst offering a ready upgrade path if funds and opportunity allows.

The natural warmth and detail they offer is a winning combination, whilst the unpolluted background behind the instruments speaks clearly as to



the benefits of the silver/gold alloy and the exacting construction employed in these cables. More balanced and less obvious in their presentation than some – and possibly less purposeful – the Classic Anniversary cables are welcome and worthwhile antidotes to some of the more extreme cable options on offer.



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Siltech C330i (1m RCA) -	£610
Siltech C330L (3m single-wire) -	£1,385
Siltech SPX-300 (1m IEC) -	£450
Signature Octopus 8 (Cu) -	£1,805

#### UK Distributor:

J.E. Sugden Ltd.  
Tel: +44(0) 1924 404088  
Net: www.sugdenaudio.com

#### Manufacturer:

Siltech B.V.  
Net: www.siltechcables.com



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# Future Now...

## The finite elemente Modul LS Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory



One look at the finite elemente Modul LS should tell you that this speaker is far from run of the mill. Mind you, one look at the price-tag says that it had better be. Conclusion? There's a lot more here than meets the eye...

The Modul LS represents quite a departure for finite elemente, constituting both its first ever loudspeaker and first ever electronics project. It's a hybrid, active design, where on-board amplifiers are responsible for the low frequencies, while the rest of the range is driven in conventional fashion. More and more manufacturers are adopting this approach, drawn by the versatility it offers and the possibility of extended bandwidth from a compact enclosure. But few have taken the concept much further than that. What sets the Modul LS apart is the completeness of its vision; not only is it both a standalone product and a vital element in a wider system concept, it has also used innovative construction and implementation to maximize the potential of its hybrid format.

Of course, it's quite a jump from building furniture to creating a complex, genuinely full-range, part active loudspeaker system, so finite elemente has concentrated on what it does best, structure and cabinet work, then partnering with an established speaker designer with specific experience to help choose the drivers and their implementation, while Trigon was employed to develop the active crossover and amplification module.

The speaker system itself is a three-way design, featuring a 25mm aluminium dome tweeter, a 180mm paper-cone midrange and a pair of 250mm metal-coned bass units, all of Scanspeak design. These provide a usable bandwidth of 10Hz to 22kHz, the bass units being actively equalized and each driven by a 500 Watt IcePower module. So far so good and nothing terribly out of the ordinary. That's because the first and

▶ most obvious departure comes in the structure of the speaker cabinet. This is a three-part construction designed to control the passage of energy within the cabinet. The passive section, containing the mid and treble drivers along with a separate chamber for the passive crossover, takes the form of a flying baffle constructed from lightweight multi-ply board, 19mm thick and faced with MDF skins.

At the rear is an 8mm aluminium plate that is matched by an identical plate on the front face of the bass cabinet. The two plates are separated by a quartet of ceramic balls and clamped together by a pair of stainless steel 'bolts', passing through the plate on the front of the bass cabinet and spaced from its rear by roller bearings, maintaining point contact between the plates. The result is a structure with a resonant frequency lower than the operating range of the drivers and a ready exit path for that energy.

The compact bass cabinet is constructed from high-density beech multiply, 30mm thick. Its 20.5 litre volume stands on a plinth coupled to the floor by four of finite element's CeraBase feet. This extremely rigid arrangement has a higher resonant frequency than the operating range of the drivers it contains, and again provides an effective mechanical ground, with feet that are perfectly at home standing on beautifully polished wooden floors.

That is far from a coincidence, because the Modul LS is part of the new Modul furniture range, an elegant modular solution to the problem of accommodating today's multi-media systems in the increasingly Spartan and minimalist interiors that are currently

fashionable. The dimensions of the speaker, its plinth, appearance and many available finishes all integrate perfectly with the Modul storage units.

The concept goes further than that. Modul furniture elements incorporate the ability to route signal and power cables, fit power sockets and even cooling fans. The individual cabinets are decoupled from one another and there are even speakers that can be built into modules to provide a discrete centre channel or front three-channel array.

But the *pièce de résistance* is the set up



protocol. The active element of the Modul LS naturally includes a degree of room adjustment and compensation. But rather than the simple level control and phase switch found on most such speakers, the finite element solution is significantly more sophisticated and couched in different but highly intuitive terms. As well as level and phase control for the bass output, you also get eight step settings for room size and hardness, a subsonic filter (to protect the drivers and electronics if you really want to party)

and a factory default setting. But the best bit of all is that all these parameters are adjustable from the listening seat via an extremely solid, wired remote with its own menu driven display. Speaker set up is a doddle, just as soon as you work out the way the various performance factors interrelate.

The combination of the room size and hardness settings allow you to tweak the transparency of the soundstage and the body and presence of the images within it. With individual

settings for left and right speakers, I was able to compensate easily for the light, tight bass in my room – and its asymmetry.

With a 90dB sensitivity and four ohm rating for its passive section, the Modul LS still needs a little driving, but I found the 50 watts of valve power delivered by the VAS Citation Sound 2 monoblocks more than capable, while integrating their sound with the active bass was no problem at all. And don't go getting the idea that the Modul LS is an aesthetical hog-tied compromise. These speakers are more than capable of standing comparison with the competition, with a combination of coherent bandwidth and a tactile, immediate mid-band, underpinned by those tuneable low frequencies. Indeed, in many ways the most impressive thing about these speakers is the way in which the technology and effort that's gone into the bottom end has been made to serve the all-important midrange. It's easy to look at these speakers and assume that they're all about big bass from a compact box. Actually, they're about a solid, credible sound from those minimal dimensions, much more about quality than sheer, brute quantity. ▶

► Using a familiar voice to set the low-frequency parameters will ensure solid, dimensional presence across the broad mid-band, something that the Modul LS excels at. Switch to orchestral music and you'll be rewarded with a beautifully spread and voluminous soundstage, instruments boldly separate within it. Woodwinds in particular manage to retain their natural, piping tone without sounding thin or hollow. They stand testament to the way in which this speaker manages to sound both tonally rich and transparently lively. Indeed, the finite speakers offer a purposeful directness to performances that is engaging and exciting.



Can they do delicate and subtle? Richard Thompson's *1000 Years...* live discs contain myriad examples of the man's ability to conjure simultaneous bass lines from his acoustic guitar, lines of astonishing depth and power. The Modul LS captures that interweaving finger-work effortlessly. At the same time, his transition from 21st Century Britney back to the 14th Century in the middle of 'Oops I Did It Again' passes without hesitation or a missed

step. But the musical news from this disc isn't all good, and just like the live event, the version of 'Friday On My Mind' captured here clearly reveals the drumming and backing vocals reaching the ragged edge of control and acceptability. Enthusiasm is one thing, but even I have my limits and to their considerable credit

the Moduls conjured exactly the same slightly uncomfortable sensation from the disc that the band did live.

So much of the communicative clarity and sheer presence that makes music so vivid and enjoyable with these speakers is propelled by the quality and character of the bottom end. You can only bend the laws of physics so far, and with such large drivers and so much power coupled to such a small internal volume the bass will always lack a little of the sheer breath and generosity you get from a much larger cabinet that's driven passively. Indeed, the heavier the equalization the more pinched and punchy the bass tends to become. In a speaker like the Modul it is a mistake to fight it. Instead, enjoy the space, clarity and substance it injects into performances, the life and raw energy it can deliver. Compare it if you like, to a turbo-charged four cylinder. Undeniably exciting and poky, it will never quite have the sheer grunt of something larger and naturally aspirated. So play to its strengths – which is exactly what the finite elementes do.

This is a speaker that looks neater and far more polite than it sometimes chooses to sound. Don't get me wrong, its musical manners are impeccable

when they should be, but just give it a hint, even the merest sniff of music's wilder side and it will respond with gusto; that potential, just waiting to be let loose, makes for vivid and dramatic performances on demand, poise and restraint when required. It's a winning combination, especially if your tastes are catholic and your room modishly minimal or acoustically challenging. Music starts in the midrange and so does the thinking behind this product.

The Modul LS gets its design priorities in the right order and its musical ducks in a row, to deliver an awful lot of useable performance from an awfully attractive package. Add in the discrete multi-channel options and the integrated storage solution and you could just be looking at the shape of things to come; pricey but classy with it!



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Hybrid loudspeaker with active bass
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm aluminium dome tweeter 1x 165mm paper cone midrange 2x 250mm aluminium cone bass
Sensitivity:	90dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Bandwidth:	10Hz – 22kHz ±3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	200 x 1100 x 565mm 265mm inc. plinth
Weight:	58kg
Price (per pair):	£19,000-£22,000 (depending on finish)

#### UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks  
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153  
Net. [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)

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# The Guru

## Ingvar Öhman, chief designer of Guru Pro Audio

by Jason Kennedy

*Hi-Fi Plus spoke with Ingvar Öhman, the chief designer of Guru Pro Audio (through his UK distributor) and asked him about the QM10. His answers proved uncommonly original and his thinking clearly out of the box, which is quite refreshing and probably the reason his speaker is so distinctive.*

**JK:** What is the cabinet made from?

**IÖ:** MDF and aluminium.

**JK:** How is the cabinet constructed?

**IÖ:** It is constructed for the purpose of being 'effective' in many dimensions. It is effective in respect of giving a big internal volume, without having a huge external volume. It's effective in effectively deadening (killing) all 'old sounds' in the midrange. And effective making up an functional low loss Helmholtz-resonator (giving very high efficiency and bandwidth for its size).

Also, it is effective due to its baffle shape, which lowers reflections from the walls behind the speaker. All the parts of the cabinet are milled and then glued together, then the radius of the cabinet corners are milled, and so is the port and the recess on the

top for the top plate.

**JK:** What tweeter do you use?

**IÖ:** We use a German design that we first apply a lot of selection on (we



use only about 70 per cent of the drivers produced). We pair them, and modify them to fit our application (both regarding mechanical shape and acoustical behaviour).

**JK:** Why did you choose this tweeter?

**IÖ:** This tweeter was the only one on the market that had all the properties needed, and the possibilities to

modify what we needed to improve it for our application. It came very close to my target curve regarding dispersion, it offered a benign enough distortion character and enough efficiency to render both the amplitude and energy required. The tweeter has its pros and cons as all drivers do, but all in all, every alternative I looked at, was less attractive. Developing a brand new tweeter would have delayed the production start by at least two years.

I'd say that its dispersion behaviour 3-15kHz is one of the properties that the loudspeaker had to have, and therefore made a lot of tweeters into non-alternatives.

**JK:** What woofer do you use?

**IÖ:** We use a Guru/Inwoofer, a proprietary driver that is produced in Denmark. It has a 100mm pulp/polymeric-cone and a very strong motor. Actually, the pressure factor of this little driver exceeds that of close to every driver in existence on the market. Most drivers (including PA-drivers) have a pressure factor (pa/V) of less than 1/2 of that of the Guru-woofer. It is one of the reasons for its ability to produce deep bass in a very small cabinet. ▶

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► **JK:** What are the key features of this woofer?

**IO:** The woofer is designed to work together with the cabinet, the crossover and the tweeter. Going into all the things taken into consideration would render a very long answer. But some of the odder characteristics I've aimed at incorporating, include having it produce an EQ chosen for psycho acoustic reasons, at around 6 Hz, which obviously is above crossover. However, the job cannot be handled by the tweeter since it does not have a high enough directivity at the range. Another thing the woofer does that is a bit uncommon, is that its membrane behaves as a bending wave transducer at midrange frequencies and up, to ensure that the wave locus coincides with that from the tweeter.

**JK:** Why do the speakers need to be placed against a wall?

**IO:** Because they are one with their mirror images, especially at low frequencies. Making a loudspeaker design that takes into consideration all or most of their primary frontal mirror images - renders great advantages (regarding extension, sensitivity and transient time integrity). But at the same time puts demands on how these mirror images contribute. They have to be 'in order', i.e. working together as in the model from which the design is made. That means that not only should the speaker be put close to a wall (preferably acoustically treated), but it must also be put 60 cm above floor. All loudspeakers are a sole representation (one that they themselves dominate) of the recording only above 500Hz-2kHz. Actually, even over 2kHz the room is an important part of what is heard. But below 500Hz, the

room is always a more and more important part of what is heard, and it becomes a totally indistinguishable part of the sound at lower frequencies. So since that is something that we can do nothing about I'd rather use it.

**JK:** Why do you use compliant feet?

**IO:** Stiff feet (spikes) always add one or many (one is always dominant) resonances to the transfer function of the loudspeakers. That has nothing to do with aiming at fidelity to the music and ultimately (if the recording allows) to the original performance. In an optimal world loudspeakers would be free floating in the air with no contact at all with surrounding surfaces, for optimal performance. If they are heavy enough (more than 500 times heavier than the bass membrane is a good target point), the contribution from the cabinet will then be inaudible, if intrinsic resonance and 'breathing' of the cabinet is handled by other means. Putting the speakers on spikes does the opposite - introducing resonances and high levels of mechanical tension in the system causing distortion and waves in the floor. And that has nothing to do with being true to the recording.


But anyone liking spikes for subjective reasons should continue using spikes of course - we do not need any laws on what is allowed or not. Anyone driven by curiosity about the actual music however, rather than just wanting to be stimulated by sound, should consider using or at least trying super soft feet. The feet attached to the QM10 speakers is the next best thing to having the speakers actually hovering. The GAP feet make the speakers almost float wherever they are standing. Not resonating and not transferring energy from the speaker to the floor surface it is standing on, or vice versa.

**JK:** What is hi-fi your philosophy?

**IO:** I believe playing recorded music is about the excitement produced by a curiosity in recordings, rather than simple stimuli of senses. Thus I rather make a loudspeaker that tells the exciting truth (if exciting records are replayed), rather than a speaker telling exciting lies. Actually, I have no interest in doing the latter at all. It is done already by so many, I believe that market is satisfied and saturated already. I think it is better to let people see themselves as experts in 'beautiful sound' (and I am sure they are) handling that demand. I'm only interested in the music and being respectful to its true origin.

So: No bi-wiring, no spikes, no added depth via speaker wall reflections. It is not the Guru-way of doing things. (I respect anyone making such choices as long as they are deliberate. I'm just not offering that family of colour-choices.)

**JK:** What is the blue LED for?

**IO:** The blue LED originates from the normal application of the speakers - as monitors for recording studios. The purpose of the LEDs is to indicate when the speaker, fed by the worst possible music signal, has reached a level where the distortion is close to becoming audible. When it blinks, it does not necessarily mean that audible distortion is at hand, only that I can't guarantee that the speakers tell the truth. For listening at home, paying attention to the diode makes no sense - it is not a clipping indicator, and most times, the speakers have quite a bit of headroom left at the point where the LED starts blinking, so they are not at immediate risk of getting damaged. But in a studio where decisions depend on what artists, producers and recording engineers hear, I believe the 'potential lie-detector' is an important feature. 



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## Cliché begging

I look forward with pleasure to every issue of your splendidly produced magazine. But as a former English professor, I must question your use of the expression “beg the question”.

It means to assume a proposition without evidence, not just to demand that a question be answered. And since I'm into nit-picking, how about dating each issue? I have quite a pile of back issues of *Hi-Fi Plus*, and consult them often. Without dates, however, it becomes difficult to guess whether a given component is still available. One further nit that demands picking; in your review of the splendid Berning monoblocks you neglect to tell us whether tubed or solid-state, how many watts, and anything all about their innards. I am no techno nerd, and definitely in your camp concerning what is important to describe, but without the photograph I would not have known that they are tubed.

Keep them coming! I wish you were monthly.

**Anthony Henderson**

*I also find the misuse of the petitio principii logical fallacy vexatious; we should be ‘inviting’ – not ‘begging’ – the question. Unfortunately, ‘it begs the question’ (used incorrectly) is a journalistic cliché. In fact, it’s the poster child of cliché. We will go back to the drawing board, leaving no stone unturned until this pure and unadulterated codswallop has a brickbat lobbed at it.*

*Regardless, dating an issue of Hi-Fi Plus does have hidden difficulties. This is an international magazine, which means the same issue could be published at different months depending on the country.*

*The Berning Quadrature Z is indeed a valve-based design, and a zero-hysteresis output-transformerless one at that. It can deliver 200 watts per channel. Practically any other discussion about the Berning, however, quickly descends into madness, because it behaves and is designed like no other amplifier design. Ed.*

## Let's have a lexicon

I have been subscribing to *Hi-Fi Plus* since it was in single figures and thicker paper. As a consequence, I have a

wonderful potential source for reference or vicarious pleasure. Strange how, in middle age men move from the carnal to the electromechanical!

This collection would serve a much greater use if there was an index. May I plead that this onerous task would mightily enhance the experience and utility of your excellent publication?

Incidentally I occasionally rehearse the disaster scenario in which I have, for whatever reason to forgo some of my magazine subscriptions. Inevitably it appears that *Hi-Fi Plus* and *The Gramophone* remain when all else are abandoned (although I would miss Mr Kessler!).

**Christopher Wiltshire**

*We have traditionally shied away from publishing an index of products tested in the magazine because it takes up valuable space that could otherwise be spent bringing you more reviews of hi-fi and music. We can't even supply an edited index of the crème de la crème... because Hi-Fi Plus is all crème. In addition, because the best hi-fi is the sort that doesn't have to change every six months, there are still products in production from several years ago that remain current. We'd hate to lose an extra page or two every year just to support an index of products; at that rate, by 2035, the whole magazine would be one big index, (excluding the contents page, of course).*

*Never say never, though; the Hi-Fi Plus website is crying out for a redesign and this could be the perfect place to make a more thorough index of our back catalogue of reviews. Ed.*

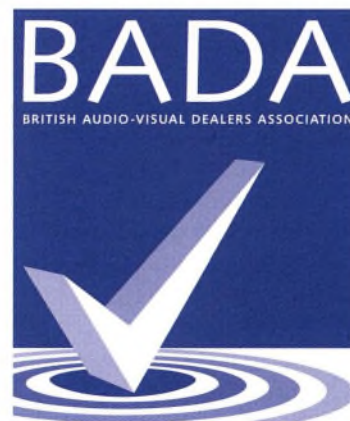
## Can-not


I bought issue 63 of your magazine, after reading that a review of the Musical Fidelity X-Cans v8 was included. On reading it, the ‘Headphone amplifier’ designation became superfluous, as indeed you indicated it was, to you, during your article. Clearly the preamp function is paramount in your publication, the headphone element being superfluous, as your publication itself is, with those of us who have been (wrongly) anticipating any continuation of the *Head first into headphones* ‘series’. This began several years ago, as did my interest in *Hi-Fi Plus*, an interest

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▷ now sadly concluded – how disappointing; the four or five loudspeaker reviews only further emphasize my point.

**‘John’**

*Well, sorry to lose you, especially as the next issue will hopefully feature an interview with none other than Dr Sennheiser and a review of the company's latest flagship headphone, the HD800. Headphones are sadly all too often a neglected aspect of hi-fi and one that we hope to cover in greater detail in coming issues. Ed.*

### The Mains Event

Which is better with regard to mains purification: cleansing or regeneration? I have recently purchased the phenomenal Bryston 28B SST 1,000W monoblocks and I am looking for the optimum mains purification system with which to feed them. The remainder of my system comprises: Alphason Sonata, Kuzma Stogi Reference plus Koetsu Black, Meridian spinner, Bryston preamp and Quad 2905s. I am delighted with the overall sound at present but I understand that cleaning the mains is the final link which should deliver tangible and very effective improvements to the sound quality overall. I have read about products from Isotek, PS Audio and Shunyata, although I am concerned about the low wattage output in the latter.

**Cliff Rapley**

*‘Better’ is a tough term to deal with here. It depends on myriad factors, many of which are out of your direct control. Mains conditioning works wonders on stripping away what happens when technologies new and old start muscling in on your mains, while regeneration works on the mains itself, by attempting to make the 240V, 50Hz supply more than just a standard occasionally attained. Some are lucky and need neither; a few need both – and you could have the (somewhat unlikely) scenario of next-door neighbours having precisely the same hi-fi system and both needing different solutions.*

*You can test the influence of other equipment very easily, by turning everything else off (including – briefly – refrigerators, freezers and even clock radios); if the sound of the system improves significantly with everything off, it's filter time. You can check your supply by calling in an electrician with a power meter to monitor your mains activity; if it wavers dramatically, regenerate. Or, you can just experiment, but with an amplifier the size of Bryston's Big Bertha to feed, make sure whatever mains conditioner or regenerator you decide on is up for the challenge – partner this with a product that cannot handle the power, and you just turned your mains-treating product into an expensive fuse. Ed.*

### Mode of transport

As an acoustics engineer, *Hi-Fi Plus* subscriber and hi-fi nut of many years standing I have tweaked my existing system as far as is financially worthwhile with one exception.

My Marantz CD player is becoming a little aged and needs replacing. I already have an external DAC and don't wish to pay for another, potentially inferior, internal DAC I don't need. That way I could buy a more expensive transport. Does anyone make a quality CD transport with only a digital output. i.e. no DAC/analogue output.

**Geoff Davison**

*You are about to take a step into the darker regions of hi-fi nuttery, Geoff. Dedicated CD transport mechanisms abound in hi-fi; they were all the rage in the early 1990s, faded from the picture somewhat for the last decade or so, but as the DAC rises again to cope with computer-driven audio sources, so CD transports are beginning to re-appear. The upside is you get a better class of CD transport for any given sum and you don't need to spend money on a DAC you don't need. The downside is it makes clichéd ‘A Transport of Delight’ headlines almost inevitable. We apologise in advance.*

*Dedicated transports are made by a number of companies at a huge range of prices; check out models from CEC, Chord, Cyrus, Esoteric, Metronome Technologies, North Star, Renaissance, Zanden and many more. Some of these cost about as much as a new set of tyres on a 4x4, others cost as much as the whole 4x4. Ed.*

### Of mice and men

I suspect this might be a first. Last Autumn, one of my wife's cats (I think it was the one I call Cookin' Fat) went through a phase of bringing in an assortment of little ‘gifts’. Everything from leaves to the occasional sausage appeared, but mostly small birds and rodents. These were all left on display in the living room, almost perfectly between the speakers.

I recently upgraded my loudspeakers and sold the old pair on on eBay. When boxing them up, I tilted one forward... and out dropped a slightly dessicated mouse. My new speakers are also ported and the cat spends a good hour a day staring at the port. I can only guess what's going to end up stuck in there.

**Roger Kent**

*Just so long as the cat doesn't try to climb into the port to retrieve a long-dead mouse, you should be OK. And you're not alone; I know of at least one set of speakers that have been ruined by a cat jumping on the top and taking a swipe at the tweeter with its claws. Ed.*



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# ANGER MANAGEMENT

No names, no pack-drill. Just a chance to leave no spleen unvented

You may know me. Perhaps I sold you your last amplifier, or maybe I repaired it, designed it, built it, reviewed it or was its public relations officer. I'm not telling.

I've got something to get off my chest. Everyone's all worked up about putting music on PC, but I think for no good reason apart from convenience. In truth, I just can't get on with what we are all being told is the next phase in hi-fi.

I'm not unbending, but I demand good performance from my hi-fi. I have a good turntable and CD player. Both get a lot of use and I get a lot from them. And, while I recognise that people are starting to retire their CD collections in order to burn them onto computers or music servers, it's not for me. And that's not because I don't understand the concept or even fear the rise of computers. It's just that I think hi-fi reproduction and computers don't mix.

**"Whenever I've put anything with a hard disk drive and a LCD screen in the system, the sound of everything in that system takes a nose-dive. Just the presence of a computer in the signal chain seems to do bad things to the sound."**

Oh, I've done the listening. As much as I could stomach. I've used PCs and Macs, both direct into amps and with a DAC in the chain. I've used them wired and wireless, on their own or with separate NAS boxes and terabytes of storage. And I've played with different software. Yes, Exact Audio Copy and Foobar2000 sound as good as everyone claim, but they are next to impossible to use in my opinion. Easier to use software like Apple's iTunes just doesn't sound as good to my ears. And then

there's the big downside to me – you need to have a screen and a keyboard in the system. They can't be doing good things to the mains. Whenever I've put anything with a hard disk drive and a LCD screen in the system, the sound of everything in that system takes a nose-dive. Just the presence of the computer in the signal chain seems to do bad things to the sound.

If that's the price of progress, it's too expensive for me.

There are some big benefits to these systems, I grant you. Having every single album you've ever owned in one machine is nice, but I have no problems with walking over to the CD collection, finding an album and then walking back to the CD player. It's like exercise for couch potatoes like me.

It's not just about ripping CDs, say the computer fanatics. It's about downloading high-res music files, they say. Problem is high-resolution music has limited appeal for most buyers and those who are high-res converts already have SACD players and collections. The same reservations about people ripping CD apply here, except that ripping a SACD is impossible, so you need to have a SACD player and a high-resolution media player.

We in the business know that CDs and CD players are not selling in the same numbers they were five or ten years ago. But this might be that the younger generation are simply moving away from CD to downloaded music. These people will grow into hi-fi in time (hopefully) and the servers and computer systems that will drive them to proper stereo systems have possibly not been invented yet. The people we are currently trying to sell music servers to are still happy with CD.

Maybe I am painting everyone in my own colours, but I find it hard to believe that people like me (who have spent the last few decades perfectly comfortable with CD) should suddenly make the switch to computer audio just because we can. Isn't more likely that people who want to upgrade their CD players will continue to want to upgrade their CD players instead of switching over to a computer?

The continued rise of the DAC and the increased interest in streamers and servers suggest I'm in the minority here. Or maybe I'm just the voice of the silent majority. I'd just hate to see all this development go to waste... just as I'd hate to see the end of the CD player for no good reason.

*The author's opinions do not necessarily represent the opinions of the magazine, its editor or its publishers. But if you feel strongly about hi-fi, why not pen your own Anger Management column? Please send your 700 word rant to editor@hifiplus.com. Your identity will remain a closely guarded secret.*



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# Beth Hart

## disguises and happy endings

by Drew Hobbs

*When Beth Hart played her first show in this country late last year I was extremely fortunate to meet her afterwards. She was gracious and kind, and at the end of that brief encounter I asked if she'd grant me an interview when she returned to these shores. She promised she would, and remained true to her word. So, on the eve of her second live show at The Borderline, a friend and I raced across town and met up with her at the Holiday Inn, Camden Lock. She came out of the lift with a cigarette in her mouth, so before we sat down we went outside to share a smoke and we talked on a very deep level for half an hour. Beth Hart pulls no punches; she hides from nothing, is honest to the core, has a heart the size of the country she comes from and she's a survivor. But just as importantly, Beth Hart is the consummate performer and a woman of substance. The show was electric and the meeting a privilege and an honour. This is what she had to say...*

**Andrew Hobbs:** You are often likened to Janis Joplin, not just for your voice but the way your life has gone. Do you, through music or at any other time, feel her presence from beyond the grave?

**Beth Hart:** I never did. When I was growing up people would say her name, and when I was out on the circuit trying to get a grip on my career her name would come up then, but I didn't really know who she was. When I was 21, I went out and got a record of hers; I listened to the record and of course I loved her...she's amazing. I did an off-Broadway show when I was 27 called *Love, Janis* and I did a run in Cleveland,



and then had my terrible breakdown with drugs right after that. Then, when I came round from getting clean, the Director approached me again and asked me to do a run in San Diego and then New York, and it was there I felt a very strong presence from her. It was almost like she was saying, "Dude, you gotta stay clean or you're gonna die."

**AH:** Your voice has an almost unearthly power. Did that power come fully formed or did you discover it at a later date?

**BH:** I was pretty loud as a kid. In fact, I got in a lot of trouble for being not only loud but for being very much an extrovert. Having dinner with my mum or being at kindergarten in first grade, I'd be the one who'd jump on the table and start singing. It's gotten calmer now

'cause I'm on medication, but if I'm not on something to kinda balance me out, it's over-the-top loud...constant talking, talking, talking. I really wanted to be an Opera singer and I was working with an Opera coach when I was 13. I loved it so much 'cause I could sing loud, but she said to me one day, "You know, Beth, you're doing it your own way and the classics is all about doing it the way the composer wrote it. You can't really mess with that." It was the first time I realised I wanted to do it my own way, you know? So I got with another vocal coach who I'm still with to this day, and what he taught me to do was how to make something powerful out of being quiet. So a lot of time in the shows I can be really belting but in that same song it'll be very quiet...don't know if that's me trying to calm myself down! It feels good for me to scream and I really enjoy it, but I think it's tiring on the ears of others.

**AH:** Were you an angry child, or was there a defining moment that unleashed that inner fury?

**BH:** I think it was like I was a split child. My mother always says I was such a happy and loving child, but my brother and sister – and I, myself – remember having huge anger and huge insecurity... and sadness. It would come at different times, but what was strange about it was that it was always so intense; there wasn't a lot of being mellow and just going through the day, it was extremes of joy and elation, fear, anger and sadness.

**AH:** Was that the bi-polar problem, do you think? ▶



► **BH:** Yeah, definitely.

**AH:** Is songwriting the ultimate therapy for you, or do you have other ways of unlocking the demons?

**BH:** I used to think so, but not anymore. To me, songwriting today, at this time in my life, is more like when we were talking earlier and sharing deep thoughts, which means I get to reiterate that back into a song. So, there will be a song that will be coming soon and I will write about everything that you said, and that you feel. That, to me, is the greatest purpose I can have in terms of the gift of music, being able to reiterate peoples' wonderful stories – and they're all wonderful. I don't give a fuck what kind of bullshit we've done in our lives, everyone is at the core of the heart. It's just like Anne Frank said: "The core of the heart is beautiful." No matter what travesties we commit, there's still something special in all of us; to get to reiterate that through a song after meeting someone – that is very cool and exciting for me.

**AH:** Very powerful indeed.

**BH:** It's wonderful. I love it! Love it! Love it!

**AH:** For you, is songwriting very much a 'no pain, no gain' process?

**BH:** Uh, I used to think it was, but after a lot of years in therapy my therapist convinced me that was a load of shit. All of my heroes were pained: Beethoven – fuckin' tortured, Van Gogh – totally mentally disturbed... I could go on and on and on with the artists I really looked up to. So, at a young person's age, to be able to see all this pain and genius at work, I thought in order to be creative, I had to suffer. Then I realised I don't have to create suffering in order to work 'cause life will bring me suffering, no matter what. I don't think I have to write sad songs all the time; in fact, most of

the songs that come across as really sad are because the seed inside of the song is really saying, "Hey, if you're still here and we're talking about this... well, obviously it's not that bad." I don't know, ask me this question a week from now and I'm sure it'll be totally different.

**AH:** To witness you in a live setting is to witness a sea of swirling emotions and a willingness to let the audience in at an incredibly honest and soul-baring level. You do seem very comfortable up there; are you a mistress of disguise or is this the case?

**BH:** I've done the mistress of disguise thing plenty – especially growing up through school. I didn't think I'd survive any other way, but of course I didn't think I'd be able to keep those faces up, that's why I was always in the fuckin' principal's office! In terms of being in music, especially in the beginning when the Atlantic thing was happening and the *Starsearch* thing was going on... that was my first taste of people comin' up and wanting autographs, that kind of thing. I definitely didn't feel good enough being myself, so I put up arms that said I was big and tough and strong, and don't fuck with me blah, blah, blah, but it just got so exhausting.

I think I got to a place, not by courage or anything like that but just from being tired, where I decided to be myself. I'm going to be judged whether I'm being me or someone else, so it's easier to be judged being me than trying to be that 'someone else'. That's why I'm open about my drugs, my mental stuff... I figure, why not?

**AH:** Are you happy when you're in a happy place, or are you expecting it to go up in a puff of smoke, therefore making you unable to relax and embrace?

**BH:** What a wonderful question! Both. Sometimes, something good is happening and I'm really embracing it – like, yeah, this is really cool, this is

a gift for me right now and I'm gonna take it, and then other times I think uh-oh, things are going too good and it's all gonna blow up, so before it does, before this state abandons me, I'm gonna do something destructive so at least I can say I took it away from myself. I hate that shit!

**AH:** Do you have any unrealised ambitions?

**BH:** I try not to 'cause it just complicates things. I really try to live like this is my last fuckin' day – I just try and stay in today. I try and trust that whatever is going to be will be. If history is any sort of guide – my own personal history – then of course there's going to be some rough road ahead and there's going to be some wonderful road ahead. But then again, there might not be any road ahead. So today, I'm here and I have the power and choice to look at life however I wish. I could look at this now and go, "fuck, I've gotta do an interview and I've gotta pretend to be nice to this guy so he doesn't write about what an asshole I am", or I can say, "wow, I get an opportunity to talk with someone, another human being who's obviously a writer and an artist himself, and we're gonna talk about stuff that affects us and we're gonna go to a really cool place." I will be changed in some way from meeting you today... from working with you today.

**AH:** Tough question, skip it if you want. If you could be God for just one day, where would you lay your healing hands?

**BH:** ( Long pause ). It's a really fuckin' tough question, man! There's so many places that need hands laid, but I guess if you're God then you've got 500 billion hands, huh? Maybe first of all on those who think that they have the right answers, everyone who's doing 'better than'. Firstly, 'cause they're usually the ones causing the suffering for all those who are without. There's a wonderful song called 'God Bless The Child' that ►

▶ Billie Holiday wrote. She says: “Them that’s got shall get, them that’s not shall lose, so the bible says and it still is news...mama may have, papa may have, but God bless the child that’s got its own.” I love that.

**AH:** Is the struggle within any closer to being resolved?

**BH:** I think that every single day it finds itself resolved and every single day it flips around on its ass. If I’m lucky, then it’s only one or two flips, you know? But I guess it has to be that way, doesn’t it?

**AH:** I guess it’s undulating – up and down, up and down. It’s finding the middle ground, isn’t it?

**BH:** Yeah, but the middle ground is so fuckin’ boring, isn’t it? Give me a ride, man!

**AH:** A quick dip into politics. Has the recent change in leadership in the USA been met with your approval, and does it fill you with positivity for a more understanding and hope-filled world?

**BH:** With Obama becoming President, the number one thing, more than making the country better, more than changing the economy, more than our hopes for him in the U.N., more than that is the fact we have a black President. It’s so amazing, and the reason to me it’s so amazing is that almost every black person I’ve ever met still believes they’re treated like shit in the USA. They think it’s so unfair, and it is so unfair. It’s terrible to see how black people are treated in the United States, so to see a black man go to President...Can you imagine what that must mean to a black person, to see a black man as President? How wonderful that must seem to them and how that will affect that person? I think it’s the most wonderful thing to happen in our country since I don’t know when.

**AH:** Do you take an avid interest in the music scene, either current or bygone? Is there one artist or group you worship the most?

**BH:** There are so many. I mean, Etta James is my most favourite singer of all time. Then there’s also Billie Holiday; she had an amazing struggle through



life but she still held herself like a lady – I don’t know how she did it. I adore Edith Piaf. Adore! Adore! Can’t get over what a singer she was...sung like a fuckin’ bird. Amazing! There’s so many; I love James Taylor’s songwriting, and who doesn’t love Led Zeppelin? That’s just the shit. Black Sabbath – huge Black Sabbath fan. Oh, I could just go on forever and ever. Tom Waits, one of my favourite songwriters of all time. I would even choose him over Bob Dylan. Tom Waits is ridiculous!

**AH:** I have never in my lifetime witnessed a more passionate, more explosive or more heart-connected performer than you. Do you feel the ghosts of others in or around you when you are up on stage, or is that you and only you that you’re expressing?

**BH:** Absolutely! In fact, yeah, once I get up there I don’t feel like me at all. I feel like I get to feel the feelings of everyone

in the audience, the band, every person I’ve ever met – and myself. What makes that show in my mind happen are the people that are present. It’s nothing like recording an album where there are four people present who are all focussing on their job instead of the song. Playing those songs in front of all those people in a live setting completely changes the ghost of the song; it’s so different, so much more tangible, you know? You get to sink your teeth into it. If I’m not all freaked out and into myself, it’s a very freeing experience. If I’m thinking I’ve gotta do this or I’ve gotta do that, then it’s fucked, ‘cause I’m not gonna do it. If I move out of the way, then something cool happens.

**AH:** Have you ever lost that voice? Has it ever gone?

**BH:** When I had a breakdown last year, the whole year prior I had no voice because when you’re in a state of mania, you can’t stop talking. But it’s not just talking, it’s talking very loud; aggressive, a lot of screaming, a lot of anger. When you’re like that you get a bad stomach with a lot of acid, and when you go to sleep it all comes up on your throat. I cancelled so many fuckin’ shows, I made Amy Winehouse look like the most focussed dude!

**AH:** Finally, does Beth Hart believe in fairytales and happy endings?

**BH:** I absolutely do, but I don’t believe that something that is wonderful, powerful or a miracle has to last. For instance, if two people have a wonderful marriage for five years and the next two are hell and they decide to split, I don’t look at that as an unhappy ending. I think if you have a marriage for five years and it’s wonderful, that’s a great gift and a miracle. You have a couple of bad years and go your separate ways... well, it doesn’t make it unsuccessful, do you know what I mean? ▶✚

# Record Reviews

## How To Read Them

The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard, good quality pop recording as slightly below average.

This issue's featured reviewers are:

- RSF** – Richard S. Foster
- JK** – Jason Kennedy
- DH** – Drew Hobbs
- RP** – Reuben Pary
- AS** – Alan Sircom

### Key to Icons

	CD		120g LP
	Gold CD		150g LP
	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		10" LP
	Double Disc		Availability As S/H LP
	DVD		Vinyl Double Album
	SACD		
	Hybrid SACD		
	Multi-Channel		



Vashti Bunyan

### Lookaftering

Fat Cat Records FATCD38

Nostalgia is often severely overrated. The memory plays its damned tricks and in this particular case having had the best part of a quarter of a century to do its worst, you could not be blamed for coming to Vashti Bunyan's follow up to *Just Another Diamond Day* with no little trepidation. That evocative epoch-defining and quite rare hippie vinyl album captured a precise moment in time with its innocence, simplicity and hazy pastoral journey.

Vocally, Vashti's breathy, gently framed delivery is unmistakable. *Lookaftering* leads with her fragile, piquant and ever so carefully delivered lyricism. The production, while more sophisticated by far, retains that instrumental softness with its use of strings, oboe, harmonium, cor anglais, dulcimer and Joanna Newsom's harp. With these Bunyan creates extremely pretty soundscapes. 'Against The Sky' and 'Here Before' have those distinctly pictorial qualities. But it's her observations about our lives – be they hesitancy and reticence in 'Hidden'; the indifference of 'Turning Back', or that misinterpretation of and unrequited side to love that she expresses so knowingly in 'If I Were' – which underpins all this charming and delicately framed song craft.

RP



Mêlée

### Devils & Angels

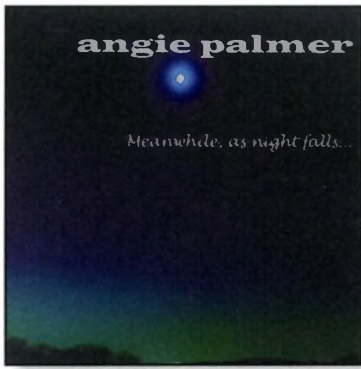
Warner Bros 093624985006

Mêlée hail from the West Coast and with their lead vocalist Chris Cron they have sometimes been favourably compared to the Ben Folds Five. *Devils & Angels* is their second release and if you were to place it alongside the BFF follow up album, *Whatever And Ever Amen* you'd certainly notice the similarities, but Cron is not yet such an accomplished pianist and nor does he at this moment possess that delicious Fold's timing in the delivery of a line. If you're familiar with the BFF track, *Smoke* then you'll understand exactly what I mean. However Chris's song writing (the credits here are shared with lead guitarist Ricky Sans) has distinct possibilities.

A catchy opener, 'Built To Last' – with its musings on love's consuming feelings of well being – is the obvious capably crafted single release. It's saccharine stuff, but I've heard it sung acoustic and unaccompanied and this is where you really hear the Cron management of a solid pop song at its best. Relationships feature in most of them. Wry twists like the psycho with the blue dress on 'OH! OH! NO!' is an amusing and salutary lesson in love. This band is an intriguing work in progress.

RP





Angie Palmer

Meanwhile, As Night Falls...

Akrasia Records: PMCD5

Angie Palmer is a great favourite of Bob Harris, a DJ who recognises a quality songstress when he hears one. I interviewed her and her partner Paul Mason for this magazine a few years back and came away hugely impressed by what they both had to say. Palmer's likened to Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan; the Joni references can be heard in her pure voice and the beauty and subtlety of her guitar playing, whilst I suspect the Dylan observations are aimed at the panoramic, deeply ethereal lyrics. That department is handled by Paul, and as on previous releases, he shows an amazing depth of knowledge and an ability to conjure up the richest imagery.

The Palmer/Mason partnership is balanced to perfection, and this album is probably their most fully realised work to date. The band Angie has around her are all first class musicians but they never crowd her out or smother the essence of the songs. When a real drive is needed, like on country rocker I Hear That Locomotive, they provide the necessary kick, but they drop back and caress on the more introspective numbers with equal aplomb.

Palmer and Mason wrote *Meanwhile...* deep in the heart of the French countryside surrounded by a dense forest, which may account for the mysterious and secluded feel of these beautifully written and performed songs.

DH



Leo Kottke

6 & 12 String Guitar

Takoma/Classic Records

Leo Kottke's debut album is one of those records which I was fortunate enough to grow up with, so my opinion of it is not strictly neutral. Having said that it's probably the best acoustic guitar record made by anyone who isn't John Fahey. But it's on Fahey's Takoma label and reproduced here in its original US black and white cover rather than the orange variation sold on these shores. Kottke was clearly influenced by Fahey, but you are unlikely to mix the two up because the exuberant youth has a clattering and sparkling style that is all his own. One of the few people to pick a 12 string guitar, the noise he makes with it is huge and bodacious; it zings under his bottle slide and makes more noise than a whole truckful of regular acoustic pickers.

Kottke has a dry sense of humour evinced by the sleeve notes which include a reference to his voice sounding "like geese farts on a foggy day", fortunately this didn't stop him writing equally ry songs for later albums but on here it's all wood and steel. Of the 14 tracks, only one is not an original and all of them are entrancing.

This Classic Records pressing is on its new Clarity vinyl, transparent vinyl without the usual black carbon element. Next to one of Classics' standard 200g Quix pressings it sounds calmer and with lower noise which is a bonus.

JK



Brandi Carlile

The Story

Columbia Records: 8697286782

Washington DC-based singer Brandi Carlile got her big break on the strength of a demo she sent to Columbia Records. That resulted in her self-titled debut album, a fine blend of country, country-folk and light rockers. There was enough about it to mark her out as one to watch and sure enough, this release confirms we're in the presence of something pretty special. The songwriting's sharpened up considerably, and that voice, always a remarkable tool, is now much more developed and capable of reaching right into the core of the heart.

With the backing of a fine cast of musicians, Carlile takes the listener on a mesmerising trip through the emotions. She has a lovely catch in her voice, a sensuous rasp that hypnotizes the senses, and a quite sensational range that when pushed to the outer edges threatens to crack, but never quite does. She's a little bit (authentic) country, but a long way from the processed, formulaic Nashville machine, and when she decides to rock, she couldn't be further away from it if she tried. That's what makes her special; her amazing ability to get inside the song and pull every last drop of passion and ache from it.

There are 13 mainly self-written numbers on *The Story* with not a single filler in sight. If she keeps this standard up, she's going to hit the perfect 10.


DH





Oumou Sangaré

## Seya

World Circuit: WCD081 

Mali seems to be the first port of call for world music fans these days. It's not surprising, really; artists like Oumou Sangaré (The Songbird of Wassoulou) are turning out remarkable works that draw on the traditional and the modern with equal measure. Sangaré, 40, has been a major force in bringing the traditional music of her native Wassoulou region to the fore, with 20 years' worth of recordings under her belt, but *Seya* – Sangaré's first album cut in six years – is her most accomplished work to date.

These are 11 powerful tracks from a powerful woman, singing about her country's woes. And when she sings, Mali listens. This makes some of the lyrics deeply uncomfortable – 'Wele Wele Wintou' for example is "a cry for help for the young girls married under age", while 'Sukunyalí' is a song about economic migration – but is clearly making important statements in musical form.

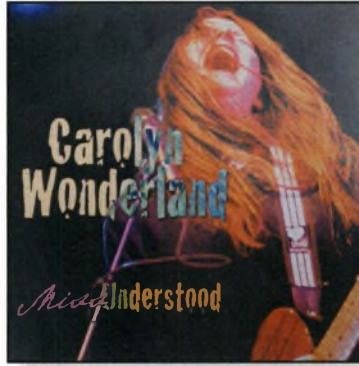
If this all sounds very agitprop, there are more up-beat tracks too; the title track is about her reunion with her Malian audience – "A girl is enjoying herself/ She's all dressed up/She arrives full of joy". And remember this is delivered with mesmeric, flowing rhythms and taut musicianship throughout

The recording quality is good too, although like many Malian recordings, it's a wall of sound. But it's deft enough to let the music win through.

AS


RECORDING 

MUSIC 



Carolyn Wonderland

## Miss Understood

RUF Records: RUF1143 

Carolyn Wonderland's one of those artists with real fire in her belly; a singer who digs deep to reach an inner power reserved for the very best. Listening to her is to listen to someone who's had to do it the hard way; on the road playing every dusty roadhouse and rundown old bar in town.

There's yearning in tunes like 'Bad Girl Blues', a reflective number softly sung without a hint of raucousness, but this is a hugely versatile singer who can just as easily slip into a horn-driven swing ('Walk On') or tackle a hard driving rocker like 'Still Alive And Well'. Authentic is the word.

She's one mean guitarist too; the solo on that last mentioned song is brief, but full of vitality and punch. Wonderland is just as comfortable when she switches to a jazzy number like 'I Don't Want To Fall For You', or when she decides to roam through a pumped-up version of JJ Cale's 'Trouble In The City', where she nails that lazy groove to near absolute perfection.

Grammy-nominated producer Ray Benson sat in the chair for *Miss Understood*. He was talking to Bob Dylan a fair while back and it was Bob who remarked, "Have you heard of this girl Carolyn Wonderland? She's something else." Now, there's an artist who knows a thing or two about quality.

DH

RECORDING 

MUSIC 



Dan Auerbach

## Keep It Hid

V2 Music: WR966253 

The Black Keys is one of the most influential Blues/Rock bands right now. So when the band's singer and guitarist Dan Auerbach trundled out a solo project, it was clearly worth a listen. Recorded at Auerbach's new Akron Analog studio, *Keep It Hid* is a more considered album than Keys albums like *Thickfreakness*, but retains the strong blues feel; without Pat Carney's insistent drumming adding a nervous edge, this is all about guitars thick with vibrato and small bands sounding big; think Tom Waits without the bark or Nick Cave without the obsession with murder.

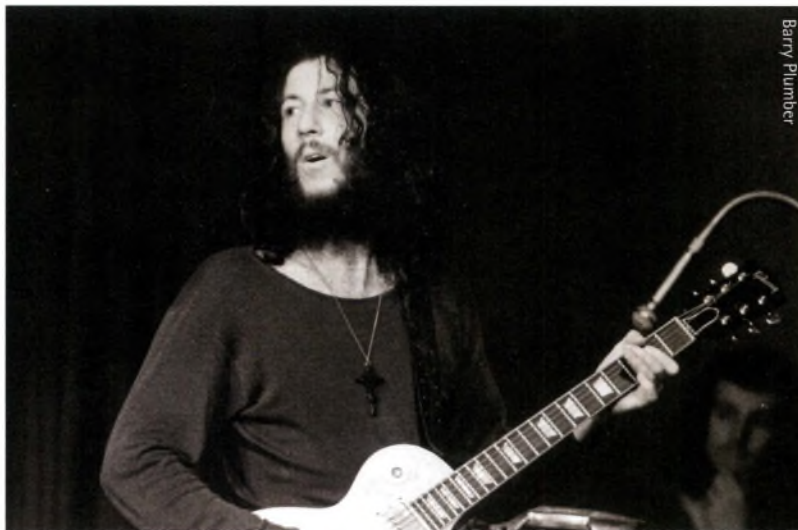
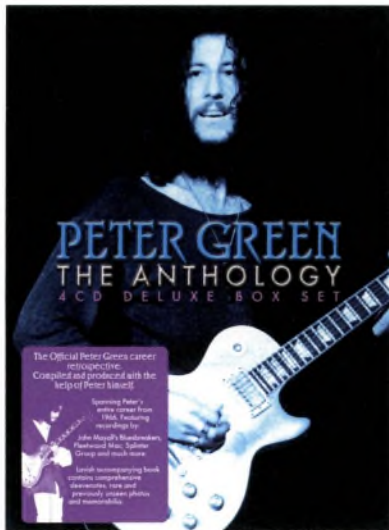
Not an easy album to categorise, then. Sinister Garage Blues Gospel Rock is possibly the nearest we get to pinning the album down, but it is very much an album, rather than a collection of tracks. It hangs together well, and pulling individual tracks out is difficult (although 'My Last Mistake' is a rare commercial find, 'Real Desire' is a true gem and 'The Prowl' can spook little animals at 30 paces).

The recordings are also noteworthy. Using a natural reverberation, every recording has a very live feel. Auerbach seems almost allergic to close mic technique on instruments (except vocals). As a consequence, the sound has a distinct late-50s/early-60s feel to it.

AS

RECORDING 

MUSIC 



## Peter Green

### The Anthology

Salvo: SALV0BX404



Some compilations and anthologies have a whiff of the great cash-in. A cynical record company hooks on to the back catalogue of an artist and milks it for all its worth. Nothing could be further from the truth when it comes to Salvo's excellent four-disc *Peter Green: The Anthology*. This is a labour of love, made with the assistance of Green himself.

Each of the four discs marks a key part of Green's career, spanning more than 40 years. The 64 tracks add up to more than four and a half hours of pure blues bliss. In addition, each disc represents a key time in Peter Green's development as guitarist, as well as his battles with mental illness. An excellent accompanying 72-page booklet combines photo library, discography and biography in one.

Disc One maps out Peter Green's early guitar work. This was the time when he was the blue-eyed boy (literally) from Bethnal Green, who famously took Eric Clapton's place in John Mayall's Bluesbreakers and then moved on to be one of the founding members of Fleetwood Mac. Perhaps less well-known, Green also teamed up with the likes of Eddie Boyd and Peter Bardens on 'Soul Dressing' (who later founded prog-rock group Camel). Unlike his peers, Green played a more traditional

blues guitar style with less distortion and a softer, sweeter sound; one that apparently gave blues royalty BB King "the cold sweats".

The second disc showcases Green's classic late-1960s/early-1970s period work with Fleetwood Mac, beginning with his two best-known compositions; 'Albatross' and 'Black Magic Woman' (famously covered by Santana in 1970). Slowly, steadily there's a move from straight blues (the wonderful 'Need Your Love So Bad') to a more mainstream sound ('Oh Well'). This is interspersed with more traditional blues offerings, in cahoots with the likes of Otis Spann, and psychedelic noodling with Peter Bardens. It is also around this time when Green's experimentation with LSD likely began to take its toll on his mental health.

Disc Three marks transitions all round and covers Green's work with the increasingly mainstream Fleetwood Mac and his solo projects. It also marks his descent into mental illness, as can be seen in hindsight with increasingly dark – yet still brilliant – tracks like 'The Green Manalishi'. The 1970s should not be dismissed as Peter Green's 'confused years' though; despite spending time in and out of psychiatric hospitals and having rounds of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), he also turned in remarkable performances on Mick Fleetwood's The Visitor, including 'Rattlesnake Shake'. This is perhaps the time where Green's playing sits least comfortably into the music of the time. A player of subtlety, finesse and economy, Green was not the sort of player who would spank out meaningless widdy-wee guitar solos just for the sake of it.

There's also a marked change in Green's singing voice across the 1970s that's a result of his first wilderness period. On later tracks like 'Carry me Love' and 'Corners of my Mind', the fragility of his voice is there, but it's tinged with a broken quality that suggests a life touched by events.

There would be a deeper, darker wilderness period in the 1980s, when Green lived the life of a recluse for almost six years until 'rescued' by his family. But the 1990s and first years of the 21st Century saw a renaissance for Peter Green. His comeback with Splinter Group forms the bulk of the fourth and final disc in this excellent *Anthology*. Although Green's life and medication have clearly taken their toll, this last disc also shows a considerable maturity in performance. It also marks a return to a more pure blues form, often featuring famous bluesmen like Buddy Guy ('Crossroads Blues'), Dr John ('From Four Until Late') and Hubert Sumlin ('Dead Shrimp Blues'). The *Anthology* ends with a 2002 Chris Coco chill-out remix of 'Albatross', introducing 'Green' to a new generation of listeners.

Peter Green has backed away from performing over the last five years, citing the blunting effect of his medication holding back his playing. However, as this excellent *Anthology* shows, his talent may be dimmed recently, but that just levels the playing field for other blues guitarists. We look forward to Peter Green's return to the music scene.

AS

RECORDING  
MUSIC





Joanne Shaw Taylor

White Sugar

Ruf Records: RUF 1147

Joanne Shaw Taylor was first discovered by the Eurythmics' Dave Stewart when he saw her play at the tender age of 16. He obviously has an eye for talent – and a pretty girl! – because this young lady is not only a very accomplished guitarist, but also in possession of a very tasty voice. Apparently, she didn't pick the guitar up until her early teens, yet she plays like a seasoned pro. Astonishingly, she wrote all 10 songs too, which pretty much makes her the complete package.

Maybe the best example of this girl's talents is 'Time Has Come', a burning slow blues with a husky vocal delivery and a fireball of a guitar solo. She so obviously plays and sings from the heart and her heart knows what it loves – a liberal soaking of blues. She likes to funk it up too; 'Kiss The Ground Goodbye' features lovely choppy guitar licks, and the way she moves that voice from a breathy stroke to a powerful slap around the face is nothing short of marvellous.

To slip so effortlessly between bluesy shuffles, soul-drenched numbers and amazingly mature heartbreakers like 'Blackest Day' requires a very special talent. Stewart spotted it and RUF Records trusted it enough to hire Jim Gaines to produce, so all she needs now are the right breaks and the world will embrace. That's a cast-iron guarantee.

DH



Friendly Fires

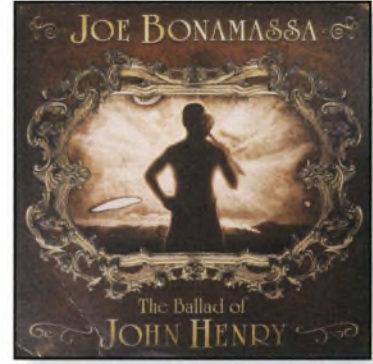
Friendly Fires

XL Recordings: XLCD383

I lived in St. Albans in the 1980s and went to a lot of shoegazy gigs there. That's important here because Friendly Fires come from St. Albans, they seem stuck in the 1980s and they have reinvented shoegazing. Well, in fact they have mixed dance-pop with shoegazing; bass-lines supported by hand-claps, cheesy synth lines, timbales and percussion aplenty. 'Paris' is a perfect example of this; breathy synths and backing vocals that could almost be from a Dollar record (how's that for back-handed praise?), coupled with singing voices that could be mistaken for Heaven 17, a quarter of a century ago – all mixed up with darker The Jesus and Mary Chain sentiments. Fluffy pop... oh yes, but perfect pop at the same time.

Following the trend set by New Young Pony Club last year, the 1980s revival is very 'in' at the moment, and Friendly Fires are close to the top of the tree. But despite that, this remains a classic debut album, albeit one that is firmly stuck in a floppy-fringe groove. It's the antithesis of the sort of stadium rock that many bands are punting out at the moment. It's not the best recorded album ever (sounds are exaggerated and 'plastic-coated', like many of the 1980s recordings it draws on) but has an infectious beat. One day, somewhere, you'll end up dancing to this at a wedding.

AS



Joe Bonamassa

The Ballad Of John Henry

Provogue Records: PRD7269

It's tempting to think of Joe Bonamassa's meteoric rise to the top as an overnight success story, but he's been plugging away on the circuit since he was 12 and this is his 11<sup>th</sup> album! There have also been a couple of live recordings, and this release follows hard on the heels of the brilliant *Live From Nowhere In Particular*.

Bonamassa says that this new record is a tale of two halves; he was in the happiest place of his life when he made the first half, and the worst when the second took shape. He feels it's his strongest to date – not a view I share. The title track is pretty standard blues-rock fare and rolls by without making a dent in the memory, while the cover of Sam Brown's 'Stop!' isn't a patch on the original. 'Last Kiss' is what he does best, working a ferocious riff around a really strong vocal. He repeats that feat on 'Story Of A Quarryman' and when he's attacking the guitar this way, it's easy to hear why he's made such massive strides.

It's a brave man who attempts a song like 'Feeling Good', especially when Nina Simone made it so spectacularly her own. Kudos for trying, Joe, but it doesn't work.

He has massive talent, but maybe Bonamassa needs to come off the 'one album a year' treadmill and take a rest.

DH





Guns N' Roses

Chinese Democracy

Geffen: 0602517906075

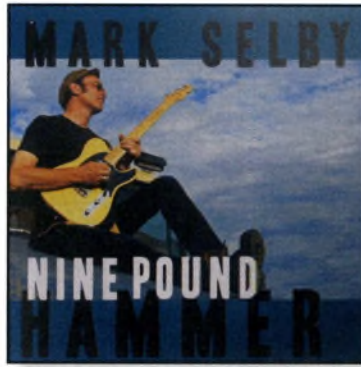
It's hard to separate the hype from the music at times. Take *Chinese Democracy*. How do you ignore the fact it cost grillions to make; can you by-pass that it took so long to make, the fans grew old; or skip over that mile-long list of musicians, producers, engineers and studios that makes Axl Rose look like the Cecil B DeMille of rock?

On the one hand, despite all the band changes, this is clearly a G N' R album; clever, powerful guitar riffs, power drumming and some of the most widdly-widdly guitar solos around. And then there's Rose's distinctive screech-vocals over the top. On the other hand, because of the band changes, it comes across as a bit of a mess. Why use one guitarist when 70 will do? In fact, why use one track when you can cut 20 together. 'Better' is a perfect example of this; There's maybe six or seven good tracks in there, four or five great solos, a dozen different leitmotifs... all in five minutes.

Worse, that Rose has been writing this stuff since the mid-1990s shows in some tracks; 'Street of Dreams' is close to being a power ballad fresh out of the romantic montage sequence from a mid-90s action film and sounds out of step, today.

The recording quality is just as variable; sometimes brilliant, sometimes overproduced and compressed. But mostly overproduced.

We waited nearly 20 years for *THIS?*  
AS



Mark Selby

Nine Pound Hammer

Peppercake Records: PEC2033-2

Mark Selby remains one of those largely undiscovered diamonds floating around in the music world. His debut album, *More Storms Comin'*, showcased an incredible songwriter with a strong, southern-tinged voice who can play the living shit out of a guitar. That was essentially a blues-rock album but the follow up, *The Dirt* trod a more introspective Americana/roots path and probably confused his fan base. It was another fine record and reflected his mood at the time, but with *Nine Pound Hammer*, he's come back to where it all began...and then some!

This one's the best of the lot; it was recorded in just one week with little interference from over-fussy producers. Because of that it has a very 'real' sound and captures a bunch of musicians having fun and free from normal studio constraints.

It's not for nothing Selby's a much sought-after songwriter; the man's a master craftsman and knows what's needed to give a song longevity. This album's a loving mix of reflective ballads, earthy blues and foot-to-the-floor rockers, the best being 'Sure Hope It Ain't A Train', a driving boogie number with a truly swinging guitar solo.

Word of mouth has to count for something, and someone as good as Mark Selby can't sit under the radar for too much longer.

DH



The Phantom Limb

Phantom Limb

Naim Edge: naimcd120/naimlp122

Naim Edge is the contemporary end of the Naim Label, the audiophile recording arm of Naim Audio. This Bristol-based quintet is one of its first signings, and a very cool one it is too.

I am normally entirely opposed to audiophile recordings on musical grounds, but this is that rare exception; an album that ticks all the hi-fi boxes, but with music you might actually want to listen to. The 10 cuts on the album are slick, country (not West Country) toned slices of bluesy, gospel-tinged soul. Lead singer Yolanda Quartey has got one hell of a voice on her – we're talking Aretha Franklin mixed with Mavis Staples and a touch of Janis Ian for good measure, backed by close harmony from the band. Good musicianship too; skilled without drifting into showing off those skills too boldly. Add songwriting that plays to the strengths of the band and this is a fine offering from a new name on the UK jazz scene.

The fact that Naim is involved only serves to guarantee the recording quality, which is of the first water. It manages to deal with the fragile beauty of Quartey's voice in 'My Love Has Gone', gently highlighting the interplay between her soulful singing and the pedal-steel country licks from the band. Highly Recommended, and a sign of promise from what could so easily become just another bland audiophile label.

AS







Navaro

Under Diamond Skies

Halo Records: HALOCD24 (CD)

Life has a way of taking us in different directions. Beth Navaro's debut album had its roots firmly in country territory. She sang like a bird on that record but on this one, after teaming up with Pete White and Steve Austin, she's moved into a much folkier sound. A great voice is a great voice, no matter where you take it, and Beth Navaro has a great voice. But Navaro's not just about her because all three of them sing on these 12 tunes.

It's not always easy to bring three solo artists together without ego getting in the way, but this is a team effort held together by first class musicianship, excellent songwriting, drop dead gorgeous harmonies and the lightest of touches. 'Moonrise' brings all of those qualities to the fore with a gentleness and a lovely understanding reserved for the very best. Writing duties are all handled by White and Austin apart from the delicate 'Blackbird', the only composition credited to Beth. She sings like a dream on this, and with the right kind of exposure from radio, 'Blackbird' could raise the band's profile enormously.

*Under Diamond Skies* is in many ways a throwback to the harmony groups of the 60's and 70's; it's a little bit Mamas and Papas infused with Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young and has a soft Celtic twist at its centre. Lovely.

DH



The Raconteurs

Consolers of the Lonely

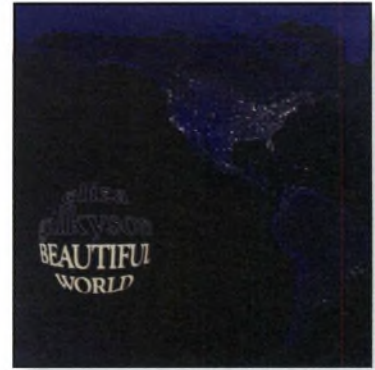
XL Recordings: XLCD359 (CD)

The second album from Jack White's 'other' band, *Consolers of the Lonely* is perhaps the least promoted album in history. It was only announced a week before it was launched and publicity was, er, minimal. That could spell bad things, but not here; the blend of White's crunked-up American Blues and Brendan Benson British Invasion obsession matures. It's Led Zep, sprinkled with healthy doses of Badfinger and graunch-period Who and a pinch of Barefoot Jerry.

*Consolers...* is not just a game of spot the influence. It's more like you set your watch back 37 years. 'Old Enough' is a perfect example; it's packed vocal harmonies, fiddle and guitar solos, Hammond organ backtracks and Moog bass lines. Or there's the final track 'Carolina Drama', complete with breathy female backing singers doing that glissando'd 'aaahs' thing that was all the rage when Plainsong went *In Search of Amelia Earhart*. For all this, it never sounds arch, it just sounds like it's 1972 all over again.

Played as an album, it's scatter-gun in approach; always in the right period costume, but unpredictable. It ultimately succeeds because the individual tracks are largely so strong and the sheer enthusiasm for the project (and the time) shines through. Plus, it's one of the best-recorded rock records made this year, again because it keeps perfectly in period.

AS



Eliza Gilkyson

Beautiful World

Red House Records: RHRCD212 (CD)

Regular readers of this magazine will be well aware of our affection for Eliza Gilkyson. It makes no difference whether one listens on record or experiences her in a live setting, her warmth and generosity of spirit always shine through with humility and grace.

Eliza's a great storyteller and has the gentlest of hearts. She's someone who walks this world with her eyes wide open and she's not afraid to express her views, but she always does it in a thoughtful and non-precious way.

It's a troubled world we're living in right now, an observation not lost on this most sensitive of artists. On 'The Great Correction' she sings, "Down here on the corner of Ruen and Grace, I'm growing tired of the human race" and from those lines one might form the opinion that Eliza see no hope for the future, but in that same song she offers this: "It's the bitter end we've come down to, the eye of the needle we've gotta get through, but the end could be the start of something new, when the great correction comes." It's one of her best ever songs, but by no means the only great one on *Beautiful World*.

I met Eliza after a gig once, and she was one of the most kind-hearted, genuine and honest people I've ever met. Just what the world needs more of.

DH



# The Top 10... 20th Century Musical Innovations

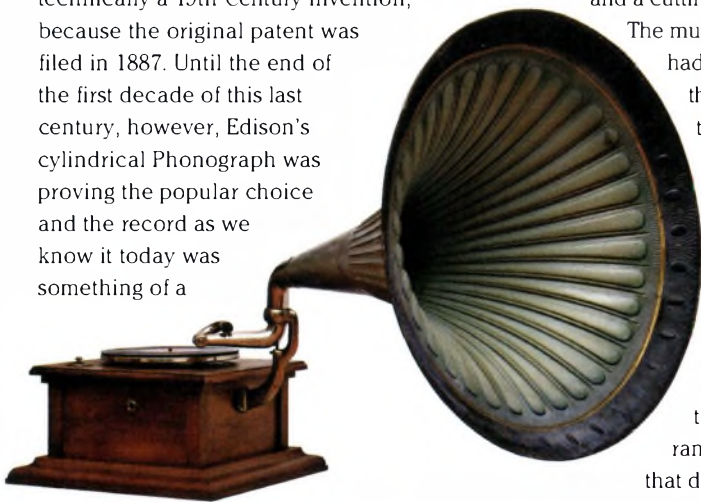
by Alan Sircom

*In the first of a regular series of features, we bring you the 10 most influential musical things. It could be the 10 most significant jazz recording ever made, the 10 most important classical composers, the 10 worst casualties of the 1960s.*

*By way of introduction, here are the 10 most important musical innovations of the last century. These changed the way we listened to music, and changed the way musicians play music. It's hard to imagine our modern musical landscape without one of these milestones. Each one had its vital part to play in our musical make-up.*

## The Gramophone disc

Okay, Gramophone records are technically a 19th Century invention, because the original patent was filed in 1887. Until the end of the first decade of this last century, however, Edison's cylindrical Phonograph was proving the popular choice and the record as we know it today was something of a



sideline. However, Emile Berliner's Gramophone discs ultimately proved inherently easier and cheaper to mass-produce and by 1910, the

Above: The birth of recorded music.  
Copyright: iStockphoto

original Phonograph was all played out. Discs were in for the century.

Originally hand-cranked and played at anything between 60 and 100rpm, the angular speed of a gramophone disc was eventually fixed at 78rpm in 1925. And there it stayed until the late 1940s, when 12-inch 'microgroove' vinyl LP albums (played at 33 1/3rpm) and later seven-inch 45rpm singles appeared. Recorded music and the pursuit of high fidelity started here.

## The 'Westrex' Western Electric recording system

Early recordings were entirely acoustic. Musicians played into a large horn, which fed directly to a diaphragm and a cutting needle.

The musicians had to stagger themselves to prevent the loudest instruments from drowning out the quietest and any instrument that had a range or timbre that didn't fit the profile of the recording process was either left out or had to change; one of the reasons why woodblocks and cowbells became popular with early jazz bands is these did better in acoustic recordings than cymbals and bass drums.

Developments in electrical circuitry (most notably the triode valve by Lee

DeForest) and in diaphragm design led to an all-electrical system, using a microphone and an electronic amplifier to drive the cutting lathe.

Later, engineers discovered methods of shaping tone to make instruments more recording-friendly and mixing the outputs of numerous instruments to balance the recording. And it didn't take long for people to realise that what was good for the recording could be just as good for the replay, too; amplifiers, tone shaping and electrically-powered loudspeaker designs in the home all followed suit.

## Magnetic tape recording

Regardless of whether the system was acoustic or electric, recordings were initially limited to direct-to-disc cuts. An alternative to mastering direct to disc was to record on a magnetic medium, originally a magnetised wire. As the technology developed, wire recorders improved significantly, eventually allowing hour-long recordings at 78rpm quality; however, recording at 24 inches per second meant for very, very long reels of very thin wire.

Steel tape was an early alternative, but the razor-like tape meant it was not practical for real-world use. Just prior to WWII, German scientists at BASF and AEG developed a tape recording system called the K1, using paper tape lacquered with oxide powder. After WWII, crooner Bing Crosby saw the potential for recording on tape and became the first star to pre-record (and edit) his radio programmes, and helped revolutionise the recording and radio industries. Eventually, tape would ►

▶ give way to hard disk recording in studios. But that would be almost half a century away.

### Stereophonic sound

Once again a concept that was first seen in the late 19th century, the first practical stereophonic systems were developed in the early 1930s, in the UK and US. In America, Harvey Fletcher of Bell Laboratories experimented with systems to record the full soundstage of an orchestra. The system involved as many as 80 microphones and involved two separate grooves for left and right channels, but created the oldest surviving stereo recording in the process; Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra's performance of Alexander Scriabin's *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*, which was recorded on March 12, 1932.

Meanwhile, at EMI in the UK, Alan Blumlein experimented with cinema sound to make actors voices follow their on-screen placement, using a coincident pair of microphones in a system that's still called a 'Blumlein Pair' today. Blumlein also developed a stereo system in 1933 that used the walls of the groove and designed a stereo cutting lathe for the purpose. His methods are still in use in every stereo record ever cut after that.

### The Fender Telecaster

Clarence 'Leo' Fender was not the first to make an electric guitar; he was arguably not even the first to make a prototype of an amplified solid-body electric guitar. What's indisputable is Fender's Telecaster (originally

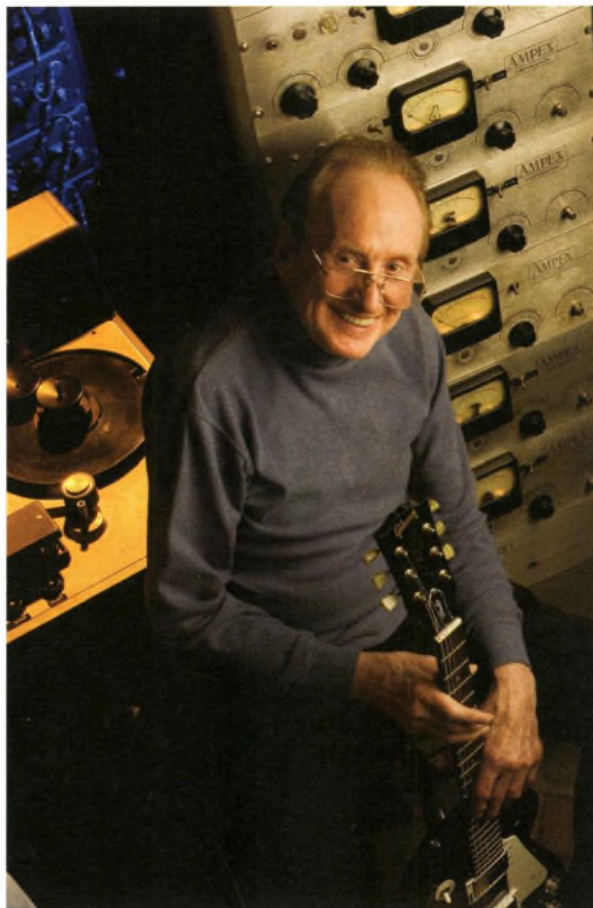
called the Broadcaster) was the first commercially available solid-body, first appearing back in 1950. Having made the transition from a relatively quiet rhythmic instrument to the

hands of Mike Bloomfield when Dylan went electric, Jimmy Page when spanking out that *Stairway to Heaven* solo and is still used today by all sorts of musicians, from jazz (Bill Frisell) to metal (Jim Root of Slipknot) and indie music (Jonny Greenwood of Radiohead). In other words, it helped define music as we hear it today... and still does.

### Multitrack Recording

We stay with guitars for the next big change in musical recording technology. Back in the late 1940s, long before stereo became the Next Big Thing in record sales, one Lester William Polsfuss – better known as Les Paul – made a recording in his garage that featured him simultaneously playing eight guitar parts at once. His scheme was remarkably simple, but brilliantly effective; record a guitar track on shellac disc, replay that track while playing the next guitar part and record the resulting mix on another shellac disc.

By 1954, Les Paul –

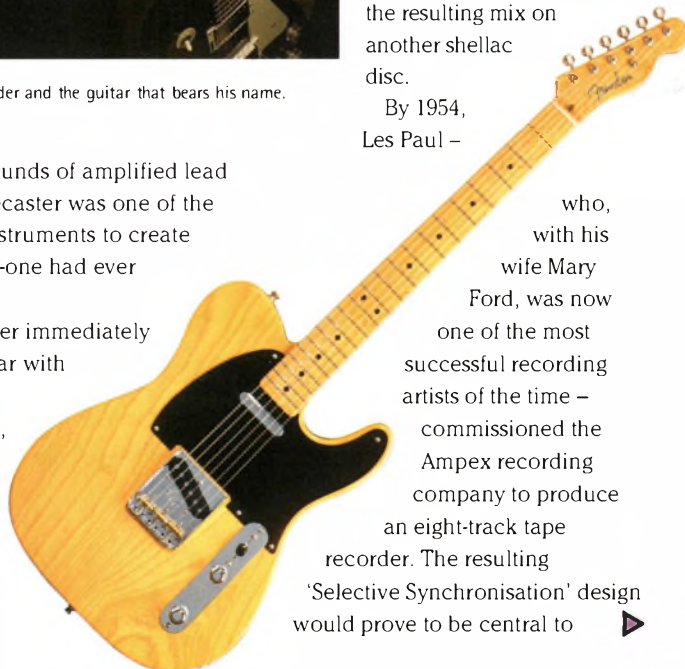


Les Paul with his multitrack recorder and the guitar that bears his name.  
Photographer: Gene Martin

wailing new sounds of amplified lead guitar, the Telecaster was one of the first musical instruments to create sounds that no-one had ever heard before.

The Telecaster immediately became popular with Country & Western bands, quickly made its mark on Rockabilly and Rock 'n' Roll acts, was in the

who, with his wife Mary Ford, was now one of the most successful recording artists of the time – commissioned the Ampex recording company to produce an eight-track tape recorder. The resulting 'Selective Synchronisation' design would prove to be central to ▶



**“ If a picture is worth 1000 words  
a video presentatiaon  
is worth a 1000 times more ... ”**

**( Bob )**

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► multi-track recording technology until the birth of digital and hard disk recording. And yes, he is also the same Les Paul who put his name to a well-known Gibson guitar and the 93 year old still plays two sets every Monday at the Iridium Jazz Club in New York City.

### The Moog Synthesizer

So far, most of the innovations listed have been designed to improve the way we hear recorded sound. Even the Fender Telecaster guitar built upon the sound of the acoustic and amplified hollow-bodied guitar. The Moog is different. It didn't take existing sounds and make them better, it didn't even alter the sounds of existing instruments; the synthesizer made wholly new sounds.

An all-analogue electronic sound generator developed out of the ideas that went into the Theremin, the Moog used voltage-controlled oscillators to create deliberately artificial tones, which were then put through voltage-controlled amplifiers, envelope-generators, filters and noise generators. The result was quickly adopted by musicians of all waters (Wendy Carlos' *Switched On Bach* and Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *Tarkus* spring to mind). More importantly, the Moog synthesizer (and the models that followed) completely redrew the way musicians approached their musical instruments, whatever the genre. It's a shot still reverberating round the musical world.

### Digital Recording

It's a fact perhaps best extolled by Al Murray's Pub Landlord character, but the backbone of the majority of today's recording technologies was a British invention. Way back in 1937, when most recordings were powered by tea, British telecommunications Alec Reeves patented Pulse-code

modulation, as a method to aid long-distance telephony. Of course, being thoroughly British about the whole thing, nothing else happened, and an American called Max Matthews of Bell Labs went ahead and invented a method to digitally record speech some 20 years later. By 1972, Denon had extended the concept to produce the first all-digital eight-track recorder. By the end of that decade, the first digitally-recorded album from a major label was released – Ry Cooder's



Seven years on and CD is still at the top of the audiophile tree

*Bop Till You Drop*, on Warner Bros. Records. Today, most recordings are produced in the digital domain, although there are exceptions; curiously including many made by one Ryland Cooder. Of course, these early digital recordings were all transferred onto analogue vinyl, but it wasn't long before the record companies had a fix for that...

### Compact Disc

A compromise between performance and practicality, the CD was an off-shoot of the large (and almost forgotten) Laserdisc format, with parallel development in optical disc technology from Philips and Sony in the mid-late 1970s. The two consumer electronics giants pooled

their boffins, taking Philips data encoding system and coupled it with Sony's CIRC error correction technology... and we are still listening to the end product to this day.


The first players appeared in Japan in October 1982 and around the world by Spring the following year. The first album on CD was Billy Joel's *52nd Street*, but we had to wait until 1985's *Brothers in Arms* by Dire Straits to find the first million-selling CD. The biggest selling CD of all time was *1* by The Beatles, released in 2000,

which has sold more than 30 million copies.

This feat is unlikely to be repeated, however; CD sales dipped by a whopping 20 per cent last year, thanks to the increased interest in downloaded music. For now though, CD remains the first choice for many audiophiles.

### Audio data compression

As the CDs began to get played in computers, so we began to think of music as a series of data files as well as tracks on an album. Technologists had come to the same conclusion; when the first paper cataloguing data compression techniques was published in 1988, most scientists had problems finding useful digital audio files. And yet just two years later the first commercially-available audio compression systems were available.

In many respects, the long-dead Digital Compact Cassette was the catalyst for modern 21st Century computer files. It was DCC's Precision Adaptive Sub-band Coding system (itself based upon MPEG-1 Audio Layer I) that set the scene for subsequent data compression systems, including MPEG-1 Audio Layer III, better known as MP3... 

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#### Examples from the setlist:

Brown-Eyed Girl - Van Morrison  
 Sweet Home Alabama - Lynyrd Skynyrd  
 Johnny B. Goode - Chuck Berry  
 Blue Suede Shoes - Elvis Presley  
 I'm a Believer - The Monkees  
 Stuck In The Middle - Stealer's Wheel  
 Little Green Bag - George Baker Selection  
 Alright Now - Free  
 Pretty Woman - Roy Orbison  
 Should I Stay Or Should I Go - The Clash  
 You Really Got Me - The Kinks  
 Back In The U.S.S.R. - The Beaties  
 Teenage Kicks - The Undertones  
 Roll over Beethoven - Chuck Berry  
 Message In A Bottle - The Police  
 Honky Tonk Women - Rolling Stones  
 I Saw Her Standing There - The Beatles  
 Jailhouse Rock - Elvis Presley  
 Baby Please Don't Go - Van Morrison  
 Mustang Sally - Wilson Pickett  
 Pulling Mussels From A Shell - Squeeze  
 Wonderful Tonight - Eric Clapton

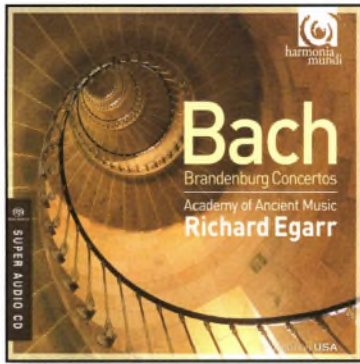
#### More modern songs from the setlist:

Summer Of 69 - Bryan Adams  
 Mr Brightside - The Killers  
 I Predict A Riot - Kaiser Chiefs  
 Chelsea Dagger - The Fratellis  
 Angels - Robbie Williams  
 Don't Look Back In Anger - Oasis  
 She Moves In Her Own Way - The Kooks  
 Dakota - Stereophonics  
 I Bet You Look Good - Arctic Monkeys  
 Always Where I Need To Be - The Kooks  
 All The Small Things - Blink 182  
 Last Nite - The Strokes  
 Bohemian Like You - Dandy Warhols  
 Molly's Chambers - The Kings of Leon  
 New Shoes - Paolo Nutini  
 Dreaming Of You - The Coral  
 Basket Case - Green Day  
 Oh Yeah - The Subways  
 Parklife - Blur  
 Ruby - Kaiser Chiefs  
 Alright - Supergrass  
 Weather With You - Crowded House

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**Johann Sebastian Bach: The Six Brandenburg Concertos. Richard Egarr conducting the Academy of Ancient Music.**

Harmonia Mundi HMU 807461 62

What a delightful pair of discs Harmonia Mundi has given us. Richard Egarr, a famous forte-piano and harpsichordist leads the Academy of Ancient Music in a rousing set of *Brandenburg Concertos*. Named after being 'found' neglected on a library shelf in Brandenburg Castle, these six concertos are among some of the best known works in Classical Music. They are known for their musical inventiveness and their games of mathematical symmetry. No two concertos are the same in style or instrumentation.

Listening to the complete set takes less than two hours and you easily are able to discern what Bach has wrought. Whether it's the horns in *No. 1*, the spectacular trumpet solo in *No. 2*, or the virtuosic harpsichord part in *No. 5*, you are transfixed in your listening venue. These are some of the most easily accessible works by Bach and I can't recommend them highly enough. I've listened to the Boston Baroque/Martin Pearlman collaboration as well as the famous Marriner/Academy recordings. They don't hold a candle to the finesse and flavour of the Egarr set. Egarr and the AAM deliver delicious performances of these works that I think you will come back to often. This set of concertos has moved to the head of the class and I wouldn't want to be without it. Extremely infectious music, most highly recommended.

RSF

Supplier: [www.harmoniamundi.com](http://www.harmoniamundi.com)

RECORDING   
MUSIC



**Terje Rypdal  
Vossabrygg**

ECM

ECM has a knack for bringing together musicians from different fields and getting them to make great music together. This is not one of those albums; guitar player Rypdal assembled the team for the Vossa jazz festival in Norway in 2003. Among his fellow countrymen he included keyboard player and groove meister Bugge Wesseltoft and it was his name that drew me to the record. The first and longest piece, *Ghostdancing*, contains a "quote" from Joe Zawinul's 'Pharaoh's Dance', a piece of music on Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew*. It was the latter album that inspired all the material on Vossabrygg. You can hear as much on some tracks but others have a significantly more contemporary feel. Look those tracks up on the liner notes and you'll see they were co-composed by Rypdal's son Marius which might explain matters.

The music that this eight piece ensemble (two drummers) creates is subtle and burbling one moment and dynamic and powerful the next. The material has a strong live feel but it is taken straight from the desk and the audience was clearly restraining itself from comment, this being a jazz festival, so it doesn't sound live in the usual sense. At times it strays close to noise, (*Incognito Traveller* for instance) and at others the guitar has something of the Fripp about it but as a whole this is great sounding disc that revels in the scale that a big system lets it loose in.

JK

RECORDING   
MUSIC



**Janos Starker Celebration  
Boccherini & Schubert**

**String Quintets in C Major**

Delos DE3344

These chamber works were recorded live at the end of February 2004 from the El Paso Pro Musica and they are undoubtedly an atmospheric and quite inspiring pair of heartfelt performances. Starker has for the Boccherini String Quintet, G.349 summoned up one of those typically beguiling and perfectly executed readings that combine intelligence and exuberance. In that masterful Schubert String Quintet, D.956 he strives and achieves that wonderful sense of balance between expressive vitality and the contemplative qualities that seem to be so rarely heard elsewhere. Of course peerless recitals like this one are dependant upon the generation of that marvellous sense of ensemble which can only be achieved when all the string players are in sync. Kirsten Johnson viola, fellow cellist Zuill Bailey and the violinists Kurt Niskanen and Soovin Kim do not disappoint. They are not overawed by the maestro. He inspires them and generously allows them ample opportunity for individual expression too, but it is their intuitive playing as a quintet that impresses most of all. It cements the performance as whole, making for a truly satisfying and highly desirable account.

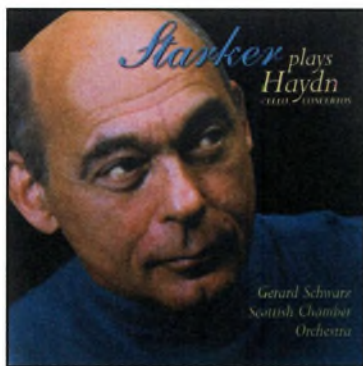
RP

RECORDING   
MUSIC



Mozart: Piano Concertos No. 20, K.466 & No. 27, K.595; Clifford Curzon, piano. Benjamin Britten conducting the English Chamber Orchestra.

Esoteric ESSD 90014 Stereo Hybrid Limited Edition (SACD)



Haydn Cello Concertos Gerard Schwarz conducting the Scottish Chamber orchestra Janos Starker, Cello

Delos DE3341 (CD)



Frédéric Chopin: The 2 Piano Concertos. Sa Chen, piano and Lawrence Foster conducting the Gulbenkian Orchestra.

PentaTone Classics PTC 5186 341 (SACD)

Here we have a very special disc indeed. Esoteric's President Motoaki Ohmachi is the producer of this disc with Kazuie Sugimoto of the JVC Mastering Center as mastering engineer. The SACD layer of this disc was created with state-of-the-art Esoteric equipment and the CD layer of this disc mirrors the quality of the best of the JVC XRCd recordings. These performances were recorded by the great Decca engineer, Kenneth Wilkinson at the Maltings in Aldeburg in 1970. Not released until after Sir Clifford Curzon's death in 1982, we have been given an absolute treasure by Esoteric.

The SACD recording quality is superb. The performances are of reference quality. What Curzon may not have liked about these performances is beyond me, but after all, he was a true perfectionist. First released by Decca in the mid 1980's, these performances garnered the elusive Rosette from the Penguin guide even though they had a quibble with the sound. There is nothing to quibble about here at all now. Britten was a masterful conductor of Mozart and Curzon is of course, legendary for his superlative performances of this composer. This is one of the best sounding discs I've ever heard and because it is a limited edition, it is going to sell out fast. While the CD layer is a gem, the beauty is in the DSD layer. Don't miss this release!

RSF

Supplier: [www.symmetry-systems.co.uk](http://www.symmetry-systems.co.uk)



Janos Starker's long association with Californian Delos record label brought him in 2005 to the Queen's Hall, Edinburgh for these distinctive and intensively expressive cello works. The *C Major Concerto* is an early bold and highly enjoyable serenade that Starker knows and understands very well. He after all gave the American Carnegie Hall premier in 1964. While for a mature composition like the Haydn *Second Concerto in D Major*, with its tremendous technical difficulties and tension between orchestra and soloist, we are treated to a beautifully subtle and sophisticated lyricism.

These are ambitious works which anticipate those great Concertos of the latter half of the Nineteenth Century. Starker, surely the greatest living cellist is a powerful and innovative communicator. His grasp and command of this repertoire is as perceptive as it is unrelenting. He breezes through the virtuoso moments, the variations, thematic inversions, trills and grace notes, but retains a thoughtful and deeply considered side demanded from these scores. Such is his mastery in this reading. This is an exceptional performance backed up by a classy recording that reproduces the rich and resonant cello part with warmth and clarity.

RP



Sa Chen debut concerto release with PentaTone marks the beginning of what I expect to be a quite fruitful collaboration. Certainly considered in the top 3 Chinese pianists on the circuit today (the others would be Yundi Li and Lang Lang), Chen displays her very close relationship with 'the Paganini of the Keyboard', Frédéric Chopin. Her playing is, simply put, quite elegant. The music dances through her fingers while she demonstrates how comfortable she is with this master composer.

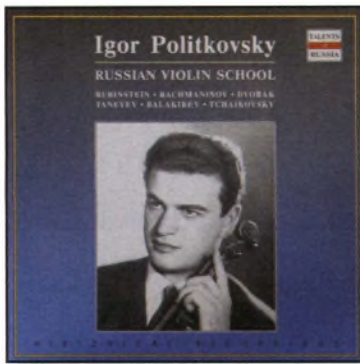
She is an exceptional talent and has a solid grasp of Chopin's melancholic lyricism. Foster and the Gulbenkian follow Chen attentively and never seem to get in the way of what she is exploring in this music. Rather than just accompany her, you get the feeling, and you would be right, the orchestra is following her lead. Chen has one numerous awards at international competitions and has played with many fine orchestras throughout the world. The recording quality is first rate and as would be expected, the SACD layer does better its CD counterpart. This is Chopin for everyone and I can't really find anything here I am not completely satisfied with. I am delighted to have heard her and look forward to more from this superb artist on this label in the future. There is also an excellent DVD interview included. Strongly recommended.

RSF

Supplier: [www.pentatonemusic.com](http://www.pentatonemusic.com)







Rubinstein, Balakirev, Tchaikovsky,  
Taneyev, Rachmaninov & Dvorak  
Russian Violin School, Igor Politkovsky  
(violin), E Epstein, I Kollegorskaya & T  
Merkoulova (piano)

Russian Compact Disc RCD 16279 

The recordings here span four decades from the late 1950s with the Balakirev Impromptu and Rachmaninov Romance to the uncommon Rubinstein's Sonata for violin and piano that was taped in 1981. It showcases Politkovsky's wide-ranging repertoire and the kind of technique one would expect in a pupil of David Oistrakh's school. His is a powerful and persuasive talent. The beautifully warm sound and sun ripened tonality combines with a heartfelt and deeply romantic style of playing that pervasively enriches every melodic moment of this eastern European kaleidoscope. The exquisite performances of that well known Dvorak *Slavonic Dance No.2* and *Gypsy Song* are quite inspired. While Taneyev's *Sonata for violin and piano in A minor* is an unusual and extremely welcome inclusion that gives us a real sense of this musician's creative sincerity and purposeful personality. His excellent pianists also subscribe to these lofty standards and their contributions cannot be over estimated as they cement these romantic interpretations.

Above all, when Igor Politkovsky died prematurely in 1984, the world lost an expressive, highly individual and authentic temperament – characteristics that are truly in evidence here.

RP

RECORDING   
MUSIC



Brahms, Falla & Paganini  
Russian Violin School  
Marina Yashvili (violin), Igor  
Chernyshov, Taisiya Schpiller &  
Naum Walter (piano)

Russian Compact Disc RCD 16252 

For all its political failings, the Soviet Union excelled in its identification; development and training of naturally gifted musicians. Get beyond the inherently prescriptive barriers and State social and cultural structuring and the rewards are almost immeasurable, which is why the 'Russian Violin School' series of recordings prove to be so fulfilling. Here, violinist Marina Yashvili reveals the nobility, romanticism and philosophical possibilities in this 1991 recording of the Brahms *Sonata No.2* through a dazzling technique, virtuosity and sublime moments of delicacy touched ever so slightly by idiomatic Russian pathos.

These convincing interpretative qualities and instrumental mastery extends to earlier 1975 sessions for both the *Contemplation in D* and four *Hungarian Dances* later on in this recital. There then follows a series of colourful miniatures in the shape of Falla's popular Spanish song cycle transposed for violin. But of course in that age old tradition the best is saved for last with a brace of Paganini vignettes which includes a piano accompanied rarity in the *Cantabile* where Marina gleefully plucks at the strings. She closes with his masterful *Moto Perpetuo* – four minutes of brilliance that should leave you breathlessly gasping in unadulterated admiration for its cunning dexterity.

RP

RECORDING   
MUSIC



Fry Street Quartet/Beethoven

String Quartet in C Minor op.18  
& B Flat Major op.130 inc Grosse  
Fuge op.133

Isomike



When Ray Kimber isn't winding cables, he gets out and about with his Isomike and records acoustic music. His Isomike is a device that looks like an air-raid blimp, but it's designed to isolate two relatively close microphones in order to "address the interference of intrachannel sounds". In essence, it's a baffle system that is claimed to increase fidelity and thus improve factors such as imaging and low level detail. Ray also goes to great lengths to ensure that the recording space is as quiet as is possible. The result is superb timbre and dynamics along with tremendous fine detail that do indeed build highly convincing three dimensional imaging.

The Fry Street Quartet is an award winning ensemble from Chicago which has been working together for the last decade. The *Quartet in C Minor op. 18, No.4* was influenced by Beethoven's mentor Haydn and has a hint of Mozart in its playfulness and optimism. However it's the rather more serious and later piece in *B Flat Major (op. 130)* that makes the emotional connection. Presumably because Beethoven had rather more to be miserable about at this juncture. The *Grosse Fuge* on the other hand was so far ahead of its time that it was only appreciated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This quartet plays it with a vivacious subtlety that brings out the tensions of the piece and makes it all the more real.

JK

RECORDING   
MUSIC



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## IN PRAISE OF THE UNDER-RATED, UNDER-APPRECIATED OR JUST PLAIN DISCARDED MUSICAL MASTERPIECE

by Alan Sircom



If anyone fits the bill for “under-rated, under-appreciated or just plain discarded”, it was John Martyn. It was only in the months leading up to and just following his death in late January this year that he began to receive once again the recognition he so richly deserved.

It might be difficult for anyone under the age of about 35 to appreciate the importance and impact of John Martyn. However, if you are aged between about 30 and 35 and your parents met at college in the early 1970s, there’s a pretty good chance you were conceived to a track on *Solid Air*. Released in 1973, the album went on to pretty much define the sound of British singer-songwriters of that generation, even if few could even match the album’s scope and breadth.

Martyn’s fifth and by far his most successful album is a thoughtful, sophisticated blend of folk and jazz; never once falling into folksy Aran sweater hell, bland jazz pap or twee noodling. Nevertheless, it owes much to these disparate roots, and can often sound surprisingly like free-form jazz in approach.

*Solid Air* was also a distillation of much of his previous work, as reflected in the title track. Famously at the time, the track ‘Solid Air’ was dedicated to Martyn’s close friend Nick Drake, who died 18 months before the release of the album. Martyn said of the track, “I really like the title track. It was done for a friend of mine (Nick Drake), and it was done right with very clear motives, and I’m very pleased with it, for varying reasons. It has got a very simple message, but you’ll have to work that one out for yourself.”

Martyn had been experimenting with the sound of his acoustic guitar, most notably playing it through fuzz and phase-shifting pedals and then to a unique device known as an Echoplex. In combination, this gave him a remarkable ability to mix his own guitar, effectively combining lead and rhythm sounds in one sweeping texture. This was first heard on the *Stombringer!* LP of 1970. Having perfected this unique and exciting guitar sound, it was only natural that John Martyn started to play with his other key instrument... his voice.

At the time of writing and recording *Solid Air*, Martyn experimented with a new slurred vocal style. Although no stranger to drink and drug problems throughout his life, this vocal style was not the result of excess; instead it was a deliberate attempt to use the voice as instrument, not merely a purveyor of lyrics. In many respects, the *legato* timbre is closer

to a tenor sax than a singing voice, which was precisely the effect the jazz-influenced singer-songwriter craved.

For the recording, Martyn was joined by some of the most important rock and folk musicians of the time, including Danny Thompson (bassist with Pentangle), John ‘Rabbit’ Bundrick (then keyboard player

with Free) and several members of Fairport

Convention; Richard Thompson (guitar), Simon Nicol (guitar, dulcimer and synthesizer) and Dave Pegg (bass) and Dave Mattacks (drums). In folk/rock terms, this is a line-up of dreams.

The nine songs on the album span everything from smoky jazz tone-poem (‘Go Down Easy’), to light acoustic folk (‘Over The Hill’, ‘May You Never’), balls-out blues rock (‘I’d Rather Be The Devil’), straight acoustic blues (‘The Easy Blues’), funk (‘Dreams by the Sea’) and jazz (‘Next Train Home’, ‘Don’t Want to Know’). But perhaps the key thing about *Solid Air* is that it stands alone. It’s influenced by jazz, blues and folk, but not beholden to any of these genre. It is an album that bespeaks John Martyn, could have only been written and performed by him. It is his DNA, his fingerprint expressed in musical form. Which is perhaps why there have been so few cover versions taken from *Solid Air* (Eric Clapton’s cover version of ‘May You Never’ being a rare exception).

Like every good album, *Solid Air* is essentially timeless. And it’s one of those albums that gets under your skin, an album you would run into a burning building to save. Despite this, to a whole generation this is essentially unknown territory. Maybe it will be John Martyn’s enduring legacy that this excellent slice of Britain c1973 will be returned to its status as a true classic.



### John Martyn

#### Solid Air

First released February 1973

(Island Records)

Recorded December 1972

(Sound Techniques studio, London)

Produced by John Martyn,  
John Wood

#### Track listing

Solid Air – 5:46

Over The Hill – 2:51

Don’t Want To Know – 3:01

I’d Rather Be The Devil (by Skip James) – 6:19

Go Down Easy – 3:36

Dreams By The Sea – 3:18

May You Never – 3:43

The Man In The Station – 2:54

The Easy Blues – 3:22

Currently available on the

Island Remasters series CD IMCD

274/548147-2 (features bonus live track of I’d Rather Be The Devil)



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Unilet Sound & Vision - Surrey - 020 89 429 567  
Home Media Limited - Kent - 016 22 676 703  
V Audio - Bristol - 011 79 686 005

Service Centre  
NSS Ltd, London - 020 88 93 58 35

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