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HI FI PLUS / ISSUE 47 / ROY GREGORY / DUETTE

# PROVONANCE

**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 delightfully 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

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Two things loom large on the horizon of this issue: one is, inevitably, the economic downturn; the other is the Bristol Show. Fitting then, that in one sense at least, these two influences should actually dovetail so neatly, for Bristol has always been a value orientated event and with everybody's money getting tighter at home and worth a lot less abroad, the price/performance equation is set to dominate buying decisions for some considerable time.

It hasn't always been so, with styling, facilities and fashion all dictating commercial success at one time or another, but there's nothing like a tightening of the purse strings to focus the buyer's attention on what really matters. So, in assembling the running order for this particular issue, a pair of connected themes quickly emerged. We wanted as many of the products reviewed as possible to be those that will be seen and heard in Bristol, allowing readers to absorb the reviews and then compare notes with the show experience – an experience which should inform you about the product, the review(er) and the event in equal measure. But also, and almost inevitably, the result is a line-up of products, many of which represent the most music you can get for your money in any given category. So Focal's stunning new Diablo Utopia rubs shoulders with other speakers, all of which offer a musical coherence and level of communication that not so long ago you couldn't buy at any price. Then there's Electrocompaniet's Prelude electronics, along with phono-stages from Audiolab and PS Audio – and perhaps most remarkably of all, the X-Can V8 from Musical Fidelity. The contents page might not read like your average copy of *Plus*, but rest assured, the thinking behind it hasn't changed one iota. It's all about getting the most from your music – and getting the most from your magazine. Enjoy... then go to the Bristol Show and enjoy it all over again!





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Roy Gregory / Hifi + 2008



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## Music+

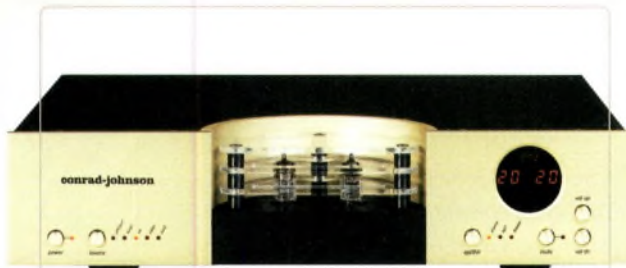
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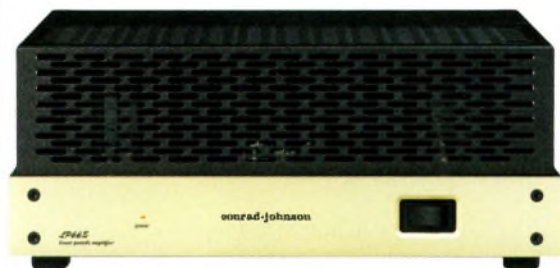


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# MUSIC MATTERS

by Alan Sircom

Measurement is an odd thing in hi-fi. It's an absolutely vital part of the manufacturing process and possibly as useful as a chocolate fireguard in reviewing. And yet, it often seems we get things back to front, with some manufacturers spending next to no time measuring their products and some reviews (and reviewers) getting obsessed by measurement.

It's sometimes hard not to appear biased. Hi-fi+ is not a measurement-based magazine, so it could be seen that the magazine is pushing an anti-measurement agenda. I've worked on measurement-led magazines however, and have no problems with the idea of running a set of meters over a product. But what is the point of measurement?

From a manufacturer's perspective, measuring the parameters of a product is vital. It can show you where the product needs to improve, where a design's limitations might exist and how to correct these issues. It can help create a more saleable and reliable product. It also gives a manufacturer a set of specifications that can be used both to sell the product, ensure consistency and help its compatibility with other products.

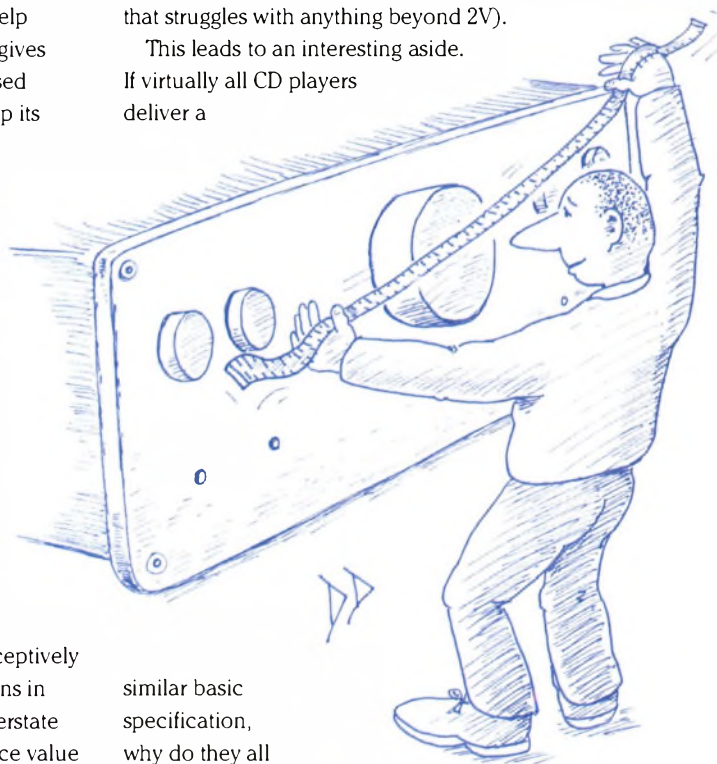
For a reviewer, some of the same things apply. Measurement is a useful tool to determine the parameters of a product, whether the statistics cited by a manufacturer are representative of the product itself and how that product will behave in combination with other components. Except that they often don't. Measurement of a product often simply establishes the performance of that sample of the product, not the product line.

Here's what can happen. A manufacturer might rate an amplifier at 50 Watts per channel, but a test run by a reviewer might turn in a rating closer to 45 Watts while another might show a 55 Watt rating. Both would be in spec, but where one could get criticised for being 'under-powered', the other would be praised for being 'deceptively powerful'. Really, both are discussing batch variations in a product. Worse, even if the magazine does not overstate the impact of its findings, these are often taken at face value by a readership that doesn't completely 'get' the nature of audio measurement. So, if a magazine prints that a loudspeaker is 3dB down at 28kHz instead of 29kHz as cited in the brochure, you can bet that someone on some forum somewhere will end up calling that speaker 'dull' and the company 'deceitful' for printing 'fake results'.

Right now, virtually all the CD players on the market will measure ruler flat from 20Hz-20kHz, give or take the odd (and inaudible) one-tenth of a decibel and will have negligible harmonic distortion: Those that don't, sport a series of valves in the output stage, are broken or have broken valves in the output stage. There are aspects of a player that are worthy of testing; jitter, maximum output level and output impedance for example. But these are never the ones commented on by most people because most people don't understand them (I'd like to add 'and don't need to understand them', but this is patently not true – a CD player with a low output impedance coupled with a pre-amp with low input impedance will end up sounding light in the bass. Similarly a high maximum output voltage can make a player sound enjoyably upfront in a demonstration, but could wreak havoc with an amp that struggles with anything beyond 2V).

This leads to an interesting aside.

If virtually all CD players deliver a



similar basic specification, why do they all sound so different?

Yes, there are parameters (some of which are cited above) that do differ with each product, but many of these behave in predictable ways. We can also find two products that turn in almost identical measurements on paper that still sound different. There are two obvious conclusions; either we are ▶

▶ hearing things that aren't there, or we are measuring the wrong parameters. The absolute objectivists would proclaim the former, and suggest that unless a product passes a test closer to a controlled drug trial than a listening session, any observations are mere speculation. So the question at the beginning of this paragraph is flawed; we should be asking 'do they sound different?' before asking why. Claiming that we are not running the right tests is not much better; it is the 'get-out' clause deployed by anyone wanting to cling to his or her beliefs in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary. Probably, the reality lies somewhere between the outright objectivist and subjective viewpoints.

Back to the measurements – or lack of them. We need measurement in home cinema magazines, because some of the measurements made by manufacturers in that setting are often taken under deceptive conditions. For example, there's a difference between 5x50 Watts and 50 Watts (x5); in mathematics there should be no difference, but the rating is more to do with sentential logic and suppressed premises

than arithmetic, more Wittgenstein than Euler. 5x50 Watts can be used to imply a 50 Watt rating (one channel driven) into five speakers, where 50 Watts (x5) denotes what it says and nothing else. That wouldn't amount to a big problem with two-channel audio, but if you have five or seven amp modules making demands on the one power supply, that can quickly sap the amount of utile power out of a home cinema system. Which is why many home cinema systems seem to be 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. The majority of hi-fi manufacturers don't adopt such duplicity and serve up more real-world measurements in their spec sheets. But, in the absence of tests, we have to take that at face value

There's a sting in the tail for measurement, though. We are moving into a post-CD replay world at a surprising pace (although the change is somewhat masked by the overarching downturn in the economy). If you think it's hard running a set of needles over a CD player, think what you have to do to a computer running a dozen different codecs. That way madness lies. ▶+



# SPEAKERS CORNER

by Paul Messenger

I like large stand-mount loudspeakers. Trouble is, this is a type of speaker that has virtually disappeared from the marketplace, for the simple reason that nobody seems interested in buying them anymore.

Like flared trousers, kaftans and beads, their time seems to have passed. Unlike flares and other hippy paraphernalia, they actually offered certain performance advantages. Furthermore, history is firmly on their side, which makes their disappearance is all the more puzzling.

Go back to the 1960s or even the 1970s and words like 'stand-mount' or 'floorstander' weren't even part of the hi-fi lexicon. Speakers were either 'bookshelf' or, er, sat on the floor. In the 1960s at least, the speaker stand simply didn't exist, and it wasn't until the latter half of the 1970s that specialist speaker stands (with spike and/or Blu-Tack coupling), support furniture, and even cables for that matter, started to become part of the hi-fi landscape.

In fact, the first speaker stands I can recall seeing were those supplied with Spendor's famous BC1 speakers, in the early 1970s. However, they had nothing to do with supporting the speaker rigidly. Their prime purpose was in fact to lift the bass units off the floor and the tweeters up to

ear level, and they even came with casters, so the speakers could be parked out of the way, and then brought forward away from boundaries when listening. Yes, it was a different world back then.

If the BC1 led the way, even very large speakers like the BC3 and Linn Isobarik were also technically stand-mounts, presumably using their low stands to get their bass drivers up off the floor, while the Isobarik was one of the earliest to stress rigidly mounting the speaker, with spikes coupling the stand to both speaker and floor.

Around the same time, companies like Heybrook and Linn were sourcing and selling rigid, open-frame and relatively high stands to support their 'bookshelf' speakers, simply because it made the speakers sound better, and so increased sales. It wasn't long before a number of specialist stand brands got in on the act, and debates began over the relative merits of Blu-Tack vs spike coupling, heavy vs light construction, open frame or filled column etc.

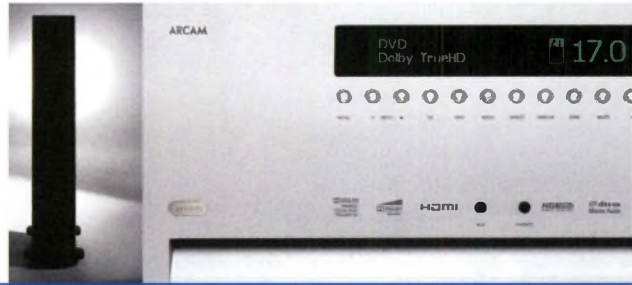
There were genuine floorstanders in those days of course – most leading brands had one or two in their range, and I could probably list around a dozen examples, after a bit of head-scratching. But they were very uncommon indeed in ▶



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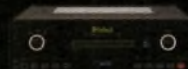
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► the 1970s, and far from widespread in the 1980s.

I don't know for sure when floorstanders started taking off, but their momentum certainly started building during the 1990s and today they dominate the scene. The reason why this has happened is probably essentially down to fashion, spurred by a general dislike of having ironmongery in the lounge. But it certainly isn't about obtaining a performance advantage.

Although it's certainly possible to make a floorstander that works well (and making generalisations is risky, as there are always exceptions to every rule) the stand-mount does have certain innate advantages. The ratio of bass driver area to box area is greater, for one, so the contribution of the box to the overall sound is likely to be less. The shape of the box should give a more even distribution of standing waves and avoid 'column honk'. The dedicated stand nearly always gives more stable and secure floor coupling (many cheaper floorstanders without plinths are horrors in this regard). And there also seems to be some advantage in leaving

a reasonable size gap underneath the speaker and/or bass driver, presumably avoiding midrange output rolling down the baffle and out forwards off the floor.

When I look back over literally hundreds of speakers I've tried out this past twenty years, it's the larger stand-mounts that often come to mind as the most interesting, and not just because now they're relatively uncommon and therefore a bit oddball. Besides their stand-mount enclosures, the other thing they have in common is main driver areas larger than that available from the narrow frontal dimensions of fashionably slim columns.

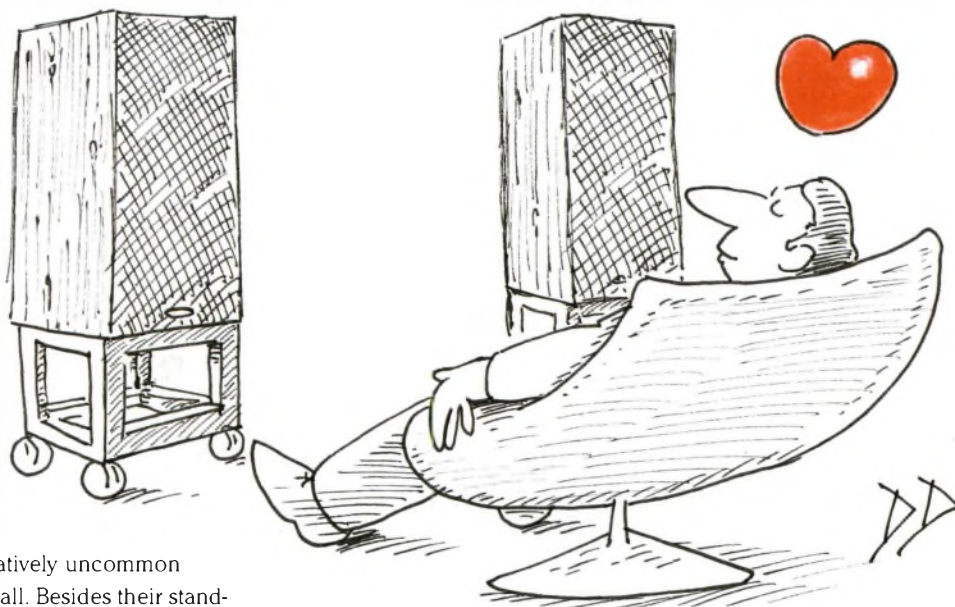
Let's highlight a few examples. Spendor's classic BC1 might be long gone, but it remains a remarkable speaker, which can still be serviced, and which has spawned a host of successors. Models like the SP2/3e that I reviewed in 2001 (and its current replacements) might not have that Alnico magnet and birch-ply enclosure, but their 200mm (8inch) drivers still show smaller competitors several musical tricks.

One of my favourite budget B&Ws was the LCR6 – an

AV-oriented speaker that I reviewed back in 1999. It was effectively a 'stretched' variation on the 602, with an extra 7-incher in a two-and-a-half-way configuration. Intended primarily as a dialogue speaker, it could be used horizontally or vertically, and although it did look a rather strange shape, it worked superbly well as a stereo pair, with real muscle and agility. The only difficulty was a \$700/pair pricetag - \$300 more than the two-way 602. Sadly, neither an LCR nor even a 602 successor are in the current catalogue, due to a regrettable lack of demand for these good size stand-mounts.

An altogether more dramatic beast came my way in 1995. With its 12inch bass driver, three-way line-up and horizontal disposition, JBL's L90 echoed the Century L100 from the 1960s, and delivered a sound that had fine dynamic expression and great authority. Sadly again, fashion seemed to be its enemy, and no equivalent seems to exist today.

Today's really big stand-mounts seem to be found exclusively amongst brands with strong studio monitoring connections. I've recently been having a great time using



PMC's revamped IB2i, which is dimensionally very similar to an Isobarik or BC3. It was originally developed for JVC Mastering in Japan, but is largely ignored by a hi-fi community which invariably opts for the ostensibly similar EB1i floorstander. However, when I compared IB2 and EB1i I found the IB2 significantly superior (largely, I must admit, because it has the Pro version of the 3-inch dome midrange driver – the one with the massive 7.5-inch magnet). The new 'i' version of IB2 is even better, and by ignoring it on fashion grounds, the hi-fi sector is unquestionably missing out. ►+



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

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# PLAYING THE SYSTEM

by Roy Gregory

Over the years, much has been made of the superior listening skills, sonic and technological omniscience of audio writers – normally by those writers themselves; nothing relies on the Cult Of Personality like the Communist Party and the hi-fi press. Taken to its logical extreme we end up with a herd of soundalike Jeremy Clarksons, where every review is about the reviewer rather than the product – a situation we approach with monotonous and alarming regularity. But why? When audio equipment embraces so many different technologies, approaches and perspectives, as a commentator why reduce everything to the lowest common denominator of personality and personal taste?

Actually, let's ask the same question but in a slightly different way. As a reviewer, how much can you really know about a product? More to the point, what are the things you'll never know? To what extent is the elevation of ego and the tyranny of taste a knee-jerk reaction to the dawning horror of our own ignorance and vulnerability? After all, putting words on paper is exactly the same as pinning your views (and credibility) to the centre of a target. No anonymity here, no hiding behind screen names, no ability to play the internet bully. This is you, up there to be shot at. Under the circumstances it's hardly surprising that a little bit of insecurity goes a long, long way.

Of course, it would help if we didn't believe our own BS. We project ourselves as all-seeing and all-knowing; pretty soon readers start to believe it and act accordingly (driven by their own insecurity – there's more than enough of that to go round) and before we know it, we're living their dream – and believing it. Climb too high up an imaginary tree and it still looks like an awfully long way down and the fall still hurts.

But there is another way and it starts with two simple phrases: "don't take yourself too seriously" and "first know what you don't know". They should be etched on the mirror in every reviewer's bathroom, with a movement sensor that illuminates the words sufficiently brightly to burn them onto the retinas!

In fact, present any half-competent reviewer (which eliminates quite a few of our brethren, but that's another story) with a product to listen to, and most of the time he (or occasionally, but not often enough) she, will have its basic sonic character nailed within a few tracks or a few minutes. Don't be too impressed; the same applies to most decent dealers and anybody else whose business it is to

listen to a seemingly endless conveyor belt of new designs. It's about currency (not money – how often you listen to different equipment!); it's about context; it's about a frame of reference. Put those things in place and it's a readily mastered skill. But that's not what reviewing is about. It's not about basics. It's about understanding a product and stretching the performance envelope. Working out how far you can take it and just how to get there; that's the difficult and time consuming bit, that and putting down in a way that readers can understand. But even if you get that right, there are whole areas of performance and other product attributes that you can only guess at. So, in perhaps the most direct example of caveat emptor, here are just a few things that reviews and reviewers don't and can't ever know about the products they are writing about:

**Reliability.** As a manufacturer, the last thing you should do is send an untested product for review. You should be making damned sure that the unit going to the egomaniac writer you are relying on to sell your products for you via the magical power of free marketing, is going to satisfy his every whim and desire. If you know what's good for you, you make sure that it works flawlessly, and you never, ever mention or admit to any problems or reliability issues with the product. And if it breaks? Well, it's the only time it's ever happened, and how unlucky is that...\*

**Longevity.** Actually, it's not just reviewers who are ignorant in this regard. Increasingly, even manufacturers can't guarantee the long-term availability of key parts and components, without which a product becomes unserviceable. As a purchaser this is one of the most important and yet least considered of any product's attributes. Think it through. If it breaks and it can't be fixed, you are in trouble. Even if it doesn't break but it can't be fixed, its second-hand value (the value of your investment) plummets. For most of us hi-fi is just like our houses; we work our way up the property ladder, we work our way up the upgrade ladder. Lose the value of the product you've already bought and suddenly, ►

\* Some manufacturers have become past masters at this, going way beyond simply selecting review samples. Products that have been specially tuned, massaged and even specially built are not as unusual as you might imagine. Dishonest? Absolutely. Fraudulent? Quite probably. There is a limit to the protection provided by the manufacturer's right to modify etc etc... The only protection that magazines (and their readers) have from this practise, is to catch the culprit in the act and then never review another of his products.



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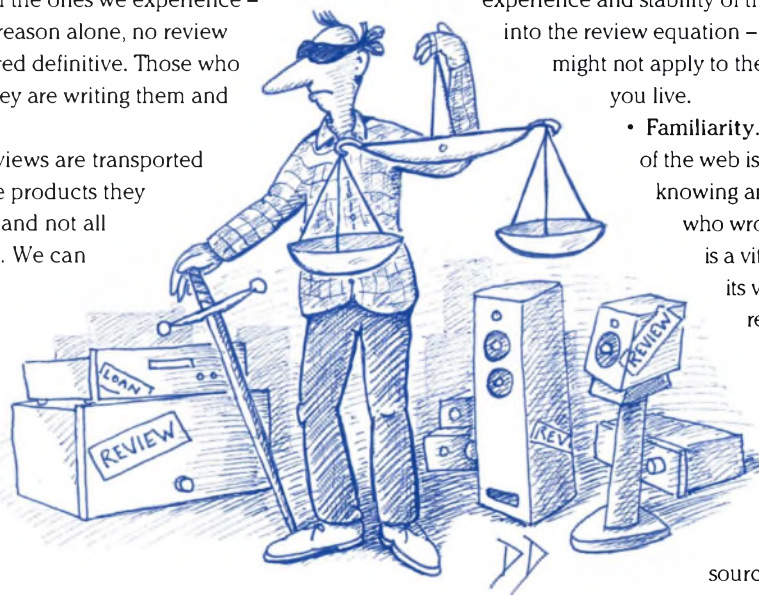
► the next rung up looks a long, long way away.

**Back-up.** This is similar to longevity, but more to do with the company itself rather than the product. Will they be around in four years time, if you have a problem? Ironically, the main reason that emergent manufacturers fail is that, in a misguided effort to be competitive, they charge too little for their products for the company to survive. Something to consider next time a new product from a new company delivers performance that's way beyond its price. Ask yourself why, and if no answer is forthcoming, approach with caution.

**Versatility.** Few reviewers have access to more than one listening room, or more than a handful of associated products that they know really well (products under review don't count!). We cannot even start to chip the surface of the sheer range of system situations in which the review product might find itself. Sure, we can extrapolate from our experiences, the specifications and what we actually hear, but in reality this is no more than (hopefully) well-informed guesswork. There will be many situations we cannot explore and it's quite possible that one of them will produce results that are entirely at odds with the ones we experience – for better or worse. For this reason alone, no review can (or should) be considered definitive. Those who think they are, are fools if they are writing them and fools if they believe them.

**Context.** Increasingly, reviews are transported around the world, as are the products they feature. But not all reviews, and not all products travel equally well. We can sub-divide the contextual implications of a review into a number of sub-sections:

- **Price.** Pricing structures vary considerably from one company to another and across markets and time. A product which starts life as a bargain in its domestic market, might be anything but, two years down the road and a couple of continents away. Or, perhaps the company has a less than enlightened export policy. Magneplan is the best example of this. There products are supplied to a European distributor at the same price as to US dealers. That distributor supplies the product to individual, national distributors within Europe. They then supply it to dealers. Add together all those cumulative margins, plus the tax and shipping costs – and it's no surprise that Magneplanars cost something like four times as much in the UK as they do in the US. Yet all the glowing US based reviews reflect their bargain price in their home



- market. Buy them in the UK and a bargain they ain't!
- **Environmental issues.** These include everything from the size of the room in which the product was reviewed (especially speakers) to the materials used in its construction. Listen to a big speaker in a big, stud-wall constructed room with a concrete floor and the results will be very different from the same speaker in a small, brick-built room with a suspended floor. That's one of the reasons that Wilson Audio make E, or European, versions of their speakers, with a totally different bass voicing. But they are the exception... Other environmental concerns include the quality of the AC supply, temperature and humidity, all of which can have profound effects on the performance of equipment. And if you lived in the tropics, would you really want a pair of 450 Watt, pure Class A mono-blocs, no matter how good they sounded!
- **Expectation.** Different markets have different sonic tastes or demands. A great product in one market might well have zero appeal in another.
- **Local Support.** The better reviewers will factor the experience and stability of the manufacturer into the review equation – but those qualities might not apply to the distributor where you live.

- **Familiarity.** Pulling a review off of the web is all very well, but knowing and understanding who wrote it and who for is a vital part of assessing its value to you. Not all reviews are created equal – and not all are equally useful to every reader. The less you know about the reviewer and the source of the review, the less weight you should give it.

After which, you might wonder why you should bother with reviews at all... Well, actually, they have their uses as long as you employ them correctly.

As long as you understand their strengths (the rigor and experience on which they're based and the direct advice they can provide about a given product) and their weaknesses, they can be extremely useful tools. But just like a chisel, employ them for the keenness of their edge, not to try and beat down the awkward nail of universal truth and reassurance. That way you won't be disappointed by failure – and you won't risk hurting yourself!





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*FOCAL*





# Future Perfect...

## The Focal JMLabs Diablo Utopia

by Chris Thomas

I recently realised that I have reviewed no fewer than six Focal speakers for *Hi-Fi+* over the years, so I can't hide my general admiration for them. For me the most interesting have always been those designated Be, as that suffix denotes the speakers that use their famous Beryllium tweeter, first seen in the second generation Utopia collection more than six years ago. To my ears this inverse-domed unit not only instantly set a new standard but also made many other speakers sound dull and dated. Initially it was only seen in the flagship Utopia models, but variations were soon available in the more affordable Electra range. The unit's high frequency extension has never been in doubt, but in more recent versions, Focal has extended its working range downward, further into that territory usually covered in two-way stand mounts by the bass/mid driver. There was a lucidity and tonal illumination to the balance of those new speaker models; one that I felt sure would soon carry over into a new Utopia range, as and when it appeared.

The Micro-Utopia Be has been my personal loudspeaker choice for several years, employed in countless reviews. It is a testament to Focal that, until recently, I hadn't found any other stand-mount speaker that could match its unique balance of attributes. I have heard other

superb HF units of course. The ribbon in the Eben C1, the twin-ribbon in the JAS Orsa, Piega's extraordinary magnetostatic mid/hf driver in the TC 10X and the Scanspeak ring radiator in the Wilson Duette are all excellent in themselves, but it is their design implementation that really counts. Both the Wilson and the Eben are so successful because they are superbly integrated with their respective cabinets – and with the very different bass/mid drivers they sit above.

Fast-forward to summer 2008, thirteen years after the very first Utopia series appeared and the rumours that Focal have been working on the third generation range are confirmed as the

Grande EM, Scala and **Diablo** are announced. Focal's design team believe that they have

a tremendous advantage over

most of their competitors, in that they manufacturer just about the whole loudspeaker in-house. Apart from a driver's chassis and magnets they control every other facet of production, allowing them to start at the top by designing the flagship

model and then incorporate what they have learned through their extensive research into the models lower down the range. Having spent a couple of days recently being shown around both the driver manufacturing facility and the separate cabinet workshop, I must say that the whole set-up is enormously impressive.

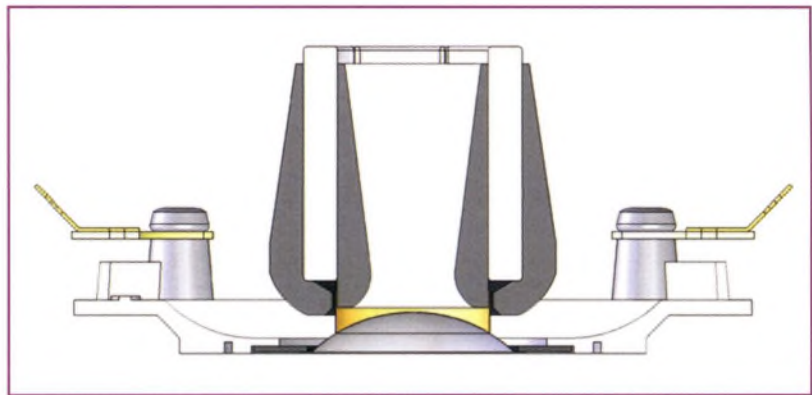
As well as retaining control over all aspects of production, a situation that frees them from reliance on sub-contractors, this level of integrated manufacturing also allows them to react quickly and decisively to changes in technology or the market. For example, few manufacturers these days actually build their own cabinets and many high-profile speaker brands out-source the work. Which approach is best depends on the individual business concerned – and the technology and materials involved. The investment in machinery required to create the boat-backed, multi-ply cabinets used by B&W (amongst others) would clearly be beyond a single speaker company, the manufacturer in this instance off-setting the cost across multiple markets, products and customers. But more traditional methods don't require such heavy investment, and there is also the cultural aspect to be considered, something that I believe is very important to Focal.

### The Cabinet

The cabinets are made in the Burgundy region of France, at Fourbon-Lancy in a factory that looks and smells like the studio of an instrument maker, though MDF and interesting veneers are



▶ their materials of choice, as opposed to exotic hardwoods. The whiff of wood, glue and lacquers permeates the various sections of this old artisan shop that started life building fine furniture in 1939. I watched the cabinets for the Diablo take shape and pass through complex cutting, gluing, sealing and sanding stations before finally being ready for painting and final finishing, prior to being shipped two hours south to St Etienne for driver installation. Focal's design goal is to ensure that all of the magnet's power should drive the cone rather than moving the cabinet. Where the first Utopia range featured lead-lined cabinets to add mass, the second series saw the lead removed in favour of what they call Gamma construction. This aimed at providing enough stiffness to resist internal vibration by using massive cabinet walls. The third generation though, takes these concepts much further. Now the whole structure has been re-thought with the aid of resonance analysis and vibration cartography that shows a three dimensional representation of the cabinet's movement under load. Take a closer look at that bass enclosure and you will see that the Diablo has a far more complex, tapering shape than the Micro. Sheer mass though is not the only answer, despite having a 50mm baffle. The cartography data analysis also allowed them to strategically locate internal bracing to keep the cabinet walls as inert as possible without having to resort to panels of absurd thicknesses. The result is a significantly more effective and an altogether more elegant solution. The reflex system survives but has moved and is now a laminar slot port on the front of the cabinet,



beneath the larger driver rather than between it and the tweeter.

### The Drivers

The W-sandwich driver was one of the key elements of the original Utopia line. This laminate cone is based around a foam core, of varying thickness according to application, and ultra-thin glass coats layered front and rear, from one to three deep. In this way Focal can shape the response curves of the drivers and choose the damping levels, whether it is to be used as a



midrange or bass driver.

The new Utopia range still employ this construction but, critically, the cone edge is now precision laser cut with the exact edge profile required, before being glued to the roll surround. This is a key factor in improving driver performance and consistency, as the accuracy of this join is absolutely crucial to the driver's behaviour and Focal are extremely keen to point

out the huge performance gains this expensive procedure has bought about. The arrangement of Power Flower magnets on the rear of the Diablo's 165mm woofer remain, but these have also been modified, along with the chassis, spider and voice-coil, aimed at reducing magnetic leakage and increasing driver efficiency.

The Electra Be range was the first time Focal introduced the IAL (Infinite Acoustic Loading) tweeter. The objective was to operate the driver loaded in a tuned cavity. For the IAL 2nd generation, installed throughout the new Utopia line, the concept has been further developed. This necessitated opening the rear of the tweeter by redesigning the whole magnetic assembly and shifting it from the back to the sides of the unit. The inverted Beryllium dome enabled them to maintain an extremely low moving mass (Beryllium is two and a half times



lighter and seven times more rigid than Titanium for the same mass) and push the response down to achieve both low frequency extension and reduce the resonant frequency. By operating the rear of the driver into free air Focal's approach seems to be conceptually similar ▶



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► to Eben, who went to enormous lengths to remove the magnet system and general superstructure from the rear of their bass/mid driver, to startling effect. The lack of reflected energy and thermal compression are just as obvious here. The Neodymium magnet arrangement is now a five-section encased design, looking rather like a jet engine, extending lengthways backward from the dome circumference. The dome size itself has increased slightly to 27mm and the new Poron surround is also considered by Focal to be vital to the unit's stellar performance. The range now covered by the tweeter is from 2.2kHz to 40 kHz and this means that the critical area between 2 and 5kHz is now handled by an ultra responsive light dome rather than a bigger, midrange driver and therein lies one of the key reasons why the Diablo does what it does to such startling effect. The tweeter sits in its own enclosure with the same profile as the bass cabinet, the cavity behind the unit tuned to act as a Helmholtz Resonator at the resonant frequency of the tweeter itself, thus damping the impedance peak. Damping this resonance with the Helmholtz reduces distortion considerably and its effect is felt throughout the bandwidth.

The build quality and finish is exemplary. The Diablo bolts directly onto the steel top-plate of what is unquestionably the best stand that Focal have ever supplied. It's solid 40mm MDF base mirrors the shape of the speaker cabinet as does the sand-filled aluminium pedestal and the angle of the speaker's time-aligned baffle is continued through the rake of the stand. If you have a wooden floor I would suggest that you use the heavy-duty spikes provided, with floor protectors, as the alternative of rubber inserts softens the speaker's remarkable leading edge clarity. When it comes to positioning,

room layout will obviously be a consideration, but generally the advice must be to operate them in as much free air as space affords to allow them room to breathe and certainly keep them as far from sidewalls as possible.

Like all high quality speakers, the Diablo puts a magnifying glass to the rest of the system that comes before it and believe me, this particular speaker throws things into pin sharp focus as it is as revealing as a stand mount gets. It can't really be looked upon as a Micro Utopia Be replacement as about the only thing they share is the single pair of WBT connectors. Cabinet, drivers, crossover, stand and price are all way too different to make any comparison meaningful. But the Micro can certainly serve as a point of reference. System requirements are simple because the Diablo has so much potential that it will respond to the very best your audio electronics have to offer. There is no performance wall to come up against. If you have a large room and want more bandwidth and scale, then look at the Scala. If you have a massive room with bottomless pockets to match, then the Grande has to be on your list, but for small to mid-sized rooms the Diablo is a perfect fit. The system requirements though are essentially the same. I have always been intrigued by ultra high quality electronics and cables driving the simple purity of the best two-way stand-mount speakers and the Diablo fits that particular bill perfectly. So, I



used two systems.

First I employed a Burmester CD 001 CD player and a Vitus SS-010 integrated 25 Watt, Class A amplifier with a full loom of Vitus cables. The second and more expensive was an Esoteric P-03/D-03 SACD player and DAC feeding either an Ayre KX-R or a Lyra Connoisseur 4.2L SE line stage, driving a pair of Ayre MX-R mono-bloc power amplifiers. All the electronics, for both systems, were sat on a Stillpoints ESS rack with Level-3 shelving, including both Thor and Quantum Qx4 power conditioners, while this time the cabling was Nordost Valhalla mains leads and Odin interconnects and speaker cables. The Vitus system is a beautifully integrated, free-flowing set-up that is subtle, sweet and open in nature.

It is a real music-lovers system (with less boxes). The second set up is certainly a no-compromise, musically powerful, super high-resolution package, but the Diablo has all the potential to make an entirely viable system. This Utopia is absolutely not one of those speakers where you should consider what is the least in accompanying

electronics that you can get away with. It's not that it is particularly difficult to drive. It just cries out for and deserves real quality. Get it wrong and it will sound tilted toward the treble because that tweeter installation will provide a forensic examination of everything that goes before it.

As a long term Micro UtopiaBe user, I was very aware of their particular qualities when I sat to listen to the ►



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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
- Coherent cable loom – functionally specific designs ensuring a lead for every need in all types of stereo audio and multi-channel AV systems
- All analogue and digital audio cables precision-manufactured and custom-terminated in Nordost's factory in the US



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Cable your complete system with Wyrewizard and you'll inject new life into your separate components, ensuring that they work as a whole and enabling them to deliver a spellbinding degree of emotional involvement.

## Nordost – because you need good science to get great sound



► Diablo for the first time. I know their strengths and weaknesses as well as any speaker, but it only took about 30 seconds for me to realise just how different the new baby Utopia is. Through the bass, the feeling of control and fluid movement combines with a speed and pitch clarity that is infectious. Where the Micro was growing vague and soft around the edges, the Diablo is sharply focussed with more efficient use of bass energy and that opens the ear to a world of expression and technique. There is no bunching or sense that articulation begins to suffer as the frequency drops. It has power and weight, but it is supremely agile and never holds the flow and musical progression back. Like all good speakers the Diablo only shows you its real bass extension when the music calls for it and it is often surprising just how low it can reach. Focal have been cute too, I think, by not trying to extract the last ounce of bass from that cabinet. It doesn't have that compressive punch that can fool you into overestimating a speaker's true ability, but it is still taut and at ease under rigorous pressure. With a solo upright acoustic bass or a couple of bowed cellos to deal with, it is clean, explicit and tonally superb. Whether the strings are being picked or bowed, the Diablo is comfortable. This is of course, in no small way, a reflection of the system electronics



but the message is that if you give it some serious low frequency work to do, it will show you just how much grip it really has. You can hear that the cabinet is not storing energy when you ask it to show you the transient power of a kick-drum or the intricacies of a slapped bass riff. Even so, I can still imagine some people complaining that there isn't enough bass, so I'll disagree before they even say it and suggest that they improve the signal quality and listen

again. I was struck by how beautifully balanced and poised the music remained up through the broad mid-band. But the thing that really grabs you (and never lets go) is just how bright the instruments are.

When I use the term bright, I don't mean it in any way detrimentally or as a comment on the speaker's overall balance. That new tweeter's influence is really being felt here and it increases driver coherence enormously. I spend a lot of my time around real instruments,

played by people who know their way around them and I understand just how much high frequency information they produce. Even an electric bass guitar has a brightness and energy about it that comes from the playing action and pickups. Most audio systems have a tendency to damp and mute everything that passes through and resolve them as loose representations of instruments that you could never really mistake for reality, if you know just how raw

### Running-in and a reader health warning...

The rather striking pair of red Diablos you see in the photographs were not the actual pair I reviewed. Due to schedules, logistics and RG's (thankful) insistence that I was supplied with a fully run-in speaker, I used a black pair for the listening. These, as I understand it, had been soundly and continuously thrashed for some considerable time, so they would be ready to go when I first plugged them in. As you see from the review, I loved them. But then I took delivery of the red ones and heard just how bad a pair of brand new Diablos can really sound. The difference between the two versions was simply staggering. So, on no account audition a pair of these speakers that have not already had extensive use, because if you do then you will certainly wonder what all the fuss is about and that would be a real shame.

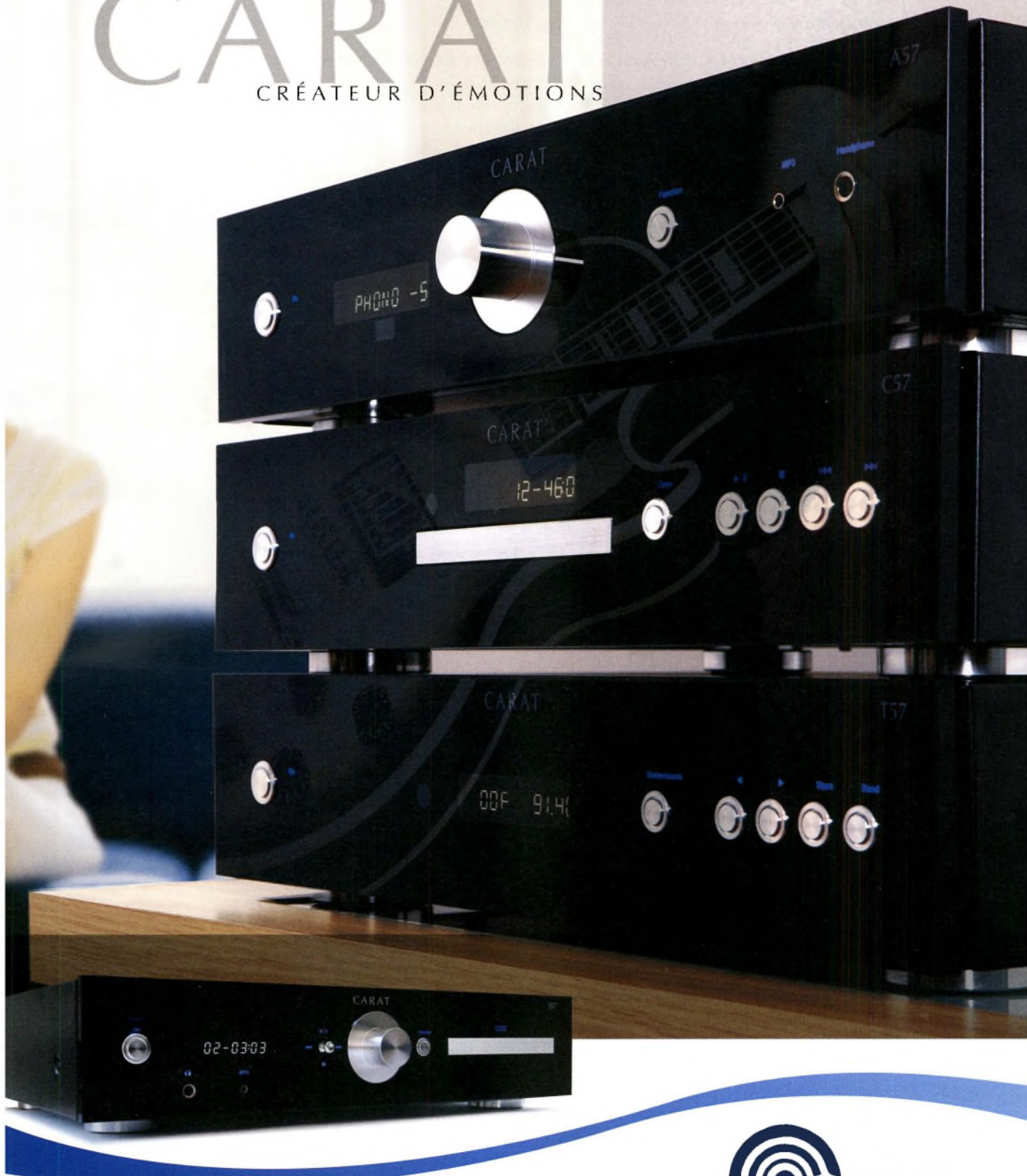
the real thing actually sounds. This is where the Diablo absolutely excels. That tweeter reaches down into areas where big, damped cones usually operate and shows how it should be done, simply by articulating the voices, speed, delicacy and tonal character of each instrument more accurately. Its life, subtlety and textural range are remarkable and makes the bitter, squeezed astringency of many other hf units sound like sucking a lemon through a tennis racket. So, everything sounds brighter and crisper and this has repercussions in terms of pure note control. Leading edge articulation is fantastic. From the high impact of the first energy input, there is no compression and no sense that the speaker is muting the development at that single point in time and it carries on right through the note and into the longest and purest decay that I have heard. But it is also a speaker with remarkable density and the glowing luminescence it throws onto the instruments is not



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►remotely thin or diluted as a result. The difference this makes to the stability of piano alone is enormous. It has a quite striking transparency in its presentation and a sense that you can reach out and touch the music and is equally at home on simple recordings as it is on the most complex of multi-track mixes. Closely miked vocals can sound spellbindingly real, as does the range of colourful harmonics that you hear in cymbals. It's as if you can see the whole thing from front to back shimmering with metallic energy, like the cymbal itself is operating in free air in front of you and this high frequency dynamic detailing is so clear and uncompressed that when a drummer is really working the top end of his kit you have complete focus on every explosive, resonating element with no smearing, or harshness. A drummer friend even told me he could identify different makes of cymbal through the Diablo. As I mentioned before, this speaker has a sense of reality that is extremely rare and it is also loose and supple when it comes to rhythm. Any time signature is opened up with superb control and this gives insights into phrasing and timing within that framework that is the equal of any speaker I have heard. The way they are totally responsive to rhythmic emphasis and ultra sensitive to "pushes" where the tempo gets an accentuation of the beat means that their portrayal of



the subtleties of movement within a piece is also totally addictive.

The Diablo creates a soundstage that is so broad and deep that you can practically walk in and look around, reflecting the their transparency and "see-through" character. This is not a conservatively voiced speaker. When you are listening in the near-field, as I do, the mid-band and high-end is a little forward, but I wouldn't change a decibel of it because it's intimacy, immediacy and stunning clarity draw you deeper and deeper, delivering a very close physical relationship to the musicians and their performance. With this tweeter installation in their armoury it would have been so easy for Focal to have come up with a speaker, full of resolution and micro detail, that was in some way clinical or even academic to listen to, but they haven't. What they have made is unquestionably one of the great high-end stand mount speakers available today. Some will think it is the best, but I have heard some of the competition and they too are very good, underlining just how meaningless the notion of "best" really is. There are always considerations of personal taste and system electronics, individual demands and circumstances. I love listening to music through the Diablo because its musical potential is virtually unlimited. It works equally well with

all musical styles and genres and I believe that, at its price, it is a bit of a steal. Achieving all of these things means that it is certainly demanding when it comes to matching electronics and it will absolutely reward the sort of care taken in system building and installation that RG and I have been writing about for a while now. But the payback is pure musical involvement and enjoyment and there is no substitute for that, regardless of cost. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way, stand-mount reflex-loaded speaker
Drivers:	1x 165mm"W" Cone Power Flower Woofer 1x 27mm IAL 2 inverted Beryllium dome Tweeter
Bandwidth:	44Hz-40kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	89dB
Nominal impedance:	8 Ohms
Minimal impedance:	4 Ohms
Crossover Frequency:	2.2kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	258 x 431 x 427mm
Weight:	20kg
Lacquered Finishes:	Warm Grey, Piano Black, Imperial Red
Price:	£7899 including stands
Distributor:	Focal UK
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# Looks That Can Deceive... The Quad II-eighty Mono-blocs

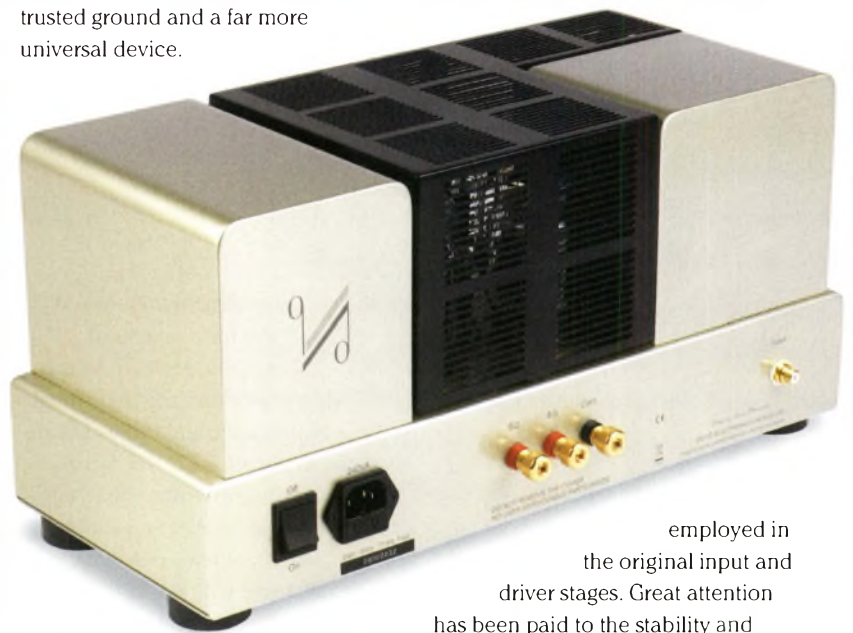
by Roy Gregory

It's far from an exaggeration to term the original Quad II power amps landmark products. For many a UK listener they represented the gateway to real high-fidelity sound, usually coupled with a 22 control unit and FM2 tuner, often with the revolutionary electrostatic loudspeakers to match. A whole generation grew up venerating the Quad name, while the impossibly long shelf-life of the Company's designs only added to that number. Then came their children, who also grew up around the distinctive electronics and speakers. Then came another generation, who rediscovered the joy of valves through second-hand Quad equipment – and so it goes. As a result, only the youngest of hi-fi listeners have remained untouched by the Quad experience, and even they will be aware of those early valve designs with their iconic looks – if only because the Company has revamped and re-released them in updated form.

The original IIs generated what was for the time, a fairly healthy 15 Watts from a pair of cathode coupled KT66s, a novel output topology which escaped widespread imitation in a world of ultra-linear designs. Those amps still exist in the shape of the II-classic, a faithful reproduction of the chassis and circuit of the original, with nothing more than updated socketry and components. But that's an amp for purists and the nostalgia market. Real systems these days need more power, and Quad also launched the II-forty. This 40 Watt mono-bloc was built into a larger chassis that retained the appearance of the original design, but employed a pair of KT88s to deliver

that extra power from a thoroughly revised circuit developed by Andy Grove. It's hard to decide quite what the reaction to the II-forty really was, but it's tempting to conclude that its sound wasn't Quad enough to appeal to the traditionalists, nor modern enough to appeal in its own right. Whether or not that's correct (and the forty remains available, so what do I know) the latest addition to the range marks both a return to tried and trusted ground and a far more universal device.

KT88 output tubes. The II-eighty is the work of Tim de Paravicini, of EAR fame. Unlike the II-forty, it sticks far closer to the conceptual roots of the original, retaining the cathode coupled output stage and instead working to improve the quality of the driver stage and output transformer. The amp now uses a pair of twin-triode 6SL7s in a cascode configuration to provide slightly more gain and better linearity than the pentodes



The II-eighty is a bigger, heavier and more powerful amp altogether. By now, you'll not be surprised to learn that each mono chassis is rated at 80 Watts output, and clearly, the basic layout remains true to the original. Except that the chassis mounted capacitors of the II have been relegated to the inside of the enlarged mains transformer housing, in order to make way for a second pair of

employed in the original input and driver stages. Great attention has been paid to the stability and reliability of the circuit, running the valves well within their rated voltages and cross-referencing the driver voltages to each half of the output stage. Overall feedback is kept low at 16dB. The output transformer has also been designed to maintain the balance between the two sides of the output stage, whilst extending both bandwidth and power delivery at frequency extremes. The end result

► is a thoughtful and carefully executed update on the classic circuit, retaining its virtues and transporting them, intact, into the 21st Century. Not bad for a chassis and circuit topology that started life in 1953!

As well as the increase in size, there have been a few other changes too – and here I must note some mild disapproval. Connections are provided for a single-ended input, four and eight Ohm loads and an IEC connector. But rather than being positioned on the end of the shoe-

adjustments for the likes of bias, and the neatly executed valve cage is securely fixed in place. Finish is any colour you like as long as it's (champagne gold and) black.

With no user adjustments and the most basic connections possible, set-up couldn't be simpler, apart from one thing. The II-eighty sits on four beautifully finished rubber feet that hide both the fixings for the base plate and the amplifier's

was with the Vacuum State, a unit whose uncluttered coherence and natural sense of presence and music flow played straight to the Quad's strengths. In contrast, the higher resolution, transparency and micro-dynamic niceties of the Herron and Connoisseur seemed hobbled by the amps, with the two halves of the electronic equation pulling in different directions. Music



box chassis as in the original, they've migrated to the side, meaning that the amps now sit side on to the listener. It's a small thing, but it makes them harder to accommodate and less attractive to look at – at least to my eyes. That aside, fit and finish are both excellent, well up to the expected standards at the £5K asking price for a pair of mono-blocs. Internal construction is similarly neat, the entire circuit built onto a single, nicely spaced and laid out PCB. The amp offers no user

true sonic potential. Anything between the base-plate and supporting surface, from simple wooden blocks through to a Stillpoints Component Stand, is going to constitute a significant sonic upgrade. Other than that, all you need to do is select a suitable system, which, at least in terms of speakers and with a healthy 80 Watts available, is pretty easy to do. Sadly, the matching (aesthetically at least) QC-twenty-four pre-amp isn't really up to the job of partnering the II-eighties. Expect a new unit from Quad before too long, but in the meantime I used pre-amps as varied as the Vacuum State SVP2, Herron and Connoisseur – and briefly, a Musical Fidelity X-Can V8, but that's another story. Of these, by far the most successful combination

seemed slightly forced, with an almost fixity of purpose about it. In contrast, hook up the SVP2 and performances sprang to life, easy and expressive rather than cramped and constipated. No contest then.

The way the Quads react to their partnering pre-amp tells you a lot about the amps themselves. Their sound is full and rich and solid, with a satisfying weight in the bass that gives them a real sense of substance and presence. At the same time (and rather like the original IIs) they are neither the most detailed or transparent performers, with bass that might be powerful and weighty, but is also a little soft around the edges. In short, you could sum them up (or dismiss them if that's your wont) as ultra traditional valve amps. Except that that would be to miss the point. The II-eighties go higher and lower, with considerably more overall ►



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► coherence than any vintage amp I've used. They also deliver much more power. Rather than writing them off as old fashioned, you should instead consider them a worthy and worthwhile update, amplifiers that retain tradition valve virtues – and significantly reduce the practical and sonic weaknesses that used to accompany them.


Playing Neil Young's thoughtful and beautifully reflective *Prairie Wind*, the Quads are in their element, one pair of old troupers supporting another. The easy, relaxed communication of the band, the perfect pacing and weighting of their contributions, the sort of intuitive intimacy and understanding that only comes from years of playing together, is the perfect foil for Young's voice and the insistent prods and jagged rhythms of his guitar lines. The deceptive simplicity of a song like 'This Old Guitar' is given an emotional centre and gravitas by the Quads' stability and substance, the unmistakable harmony vocals of Emmylou Harris perfectly pitched in their fragile purity. The loping rhythm and almost sentimental melody are filled out with subtle backing, while the immediacy of the close miked vocal gives the song a breathy, fluid line that radiates its own inner beauty, its measured pace adding to the feeling rather than lagging. It's this natural momentum that makes music from the Quads so engaging, a quality that's really exploited by the SVP2.

It's that ability to reveal the shape and weight of notes, their harmonic complexity and identity, the rich warmth of the sound that makes acoustic instruments and voices such a joy. The crisp, percussive backing of the Peter Nordahl Trio is solidly impressive and redolent with texture, but there's no missing the disturbingly knowing quality in Lisa Ekdaahl's almost childlike vocals

(and appearance). But the Quads are no one trick ponies. Sixties soul and jazz might be obvious fodder for their musical mores, folk-rock suitably delicate in its sensitivities, but how about a high-level outing with the synth slabs and flanged bass of Moby. The Il-eighties are right at home in this territory, their combination of sheer substance and smooth warmth allow you to drive suitable speakers (and your ears) within an inch of their lives, the sound's infectious, motive quality just egging you on, encouraging you to wind that volume control ever higher.

Quad and The Clash are hardly natural bedfellows – until now. The Il-eighties delivered the raw aggression of *London Calling* with pace, passion and enough atmosphere to conjure up the smell of sweat, spilt beer and fags that attended their gigs. Cheap Trick absolutely rocked The Budokan, Bun E. Carlos's drum beats arriving with the weight and impact of howitzer shells, this ultimate air-guitar extravaganza reaching new heights of physical excess. And The Cure? The Cure took on a rolling, irrepressible momentum all of their own, the pell-mell tumble through 'A Forest' taking me back to the joys of the Tannoy dual-concentrics I first played it on.

Quad has an undeniably "pipe and slippers" image which the Il-eighties do little to dispel – at least on the surface. But let them off the leash, take them for a walk on the wild side and they'll surprise you with a streak of the feline power and solidity that delivers real musical intent and authority. And the really great thing about them is that you realise, once you've discovered it, that that musical backbone and substance is exactly what makes smaller scale, acoustic music so satisfying and engaging. These amps

have surprisingly little to do with nostalgia and what there is, is all good. Partner them with a pre-amp and speakers that release their baser qualities alongside their obvious warmth and refinement and you might just hit the hi-fi jackpot – a system that can be both unobtrusive and seriously enjoyable. Sure, they look just like Quads – but there's definitely something a bit special going on under the hoods. Which raises the entertaining prospect of a few of Quad's more traditional customers getting rather more than they bargained for... 

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Push-pull valve mono-bloc
Valve Complement:	1x 6SN7
	2x 6SL7
	4x KT88
Inputs:	1x RCA/phono
Input Sensitivity:	1V
Output Power:	80 Watts into 8 Ohms
Damping Factor:	16 at 1kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	420 x 210 x 190mm
Weight:	20.4kg ea.
Price:	£5000pr

**Manufacturer:**  
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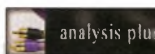
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**X-CAN V8**  
HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

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# Hidden Talents...

## Redeploying Musical Fidelity's X-Can V8 Headphone Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

The budget valve pre-amplifier has long been a staple of the entry-level high-end market. Countless Conrad-Johnsons, Counterpoints and Crofts established the tradition, with the likes of Rogue Audio and now Cayin taking on the mantle. But sadly, the biggest bargain of all, first step on so many roads to audio riches (or ruin), the Croft Micro is no longer. And, whilst there are plans to rejuvenate the brand, target price for the micro replacement will be upwards of £700. Which brings us to the nub of the problem. In these increasingly price-conscious days, customers consider nearly a grand for an entry-level unit anything but a bargain. So, as fine as the various Rogue Audio and imported designs from the likes of Cayin certainly are, they're way outside the budget esoteric bracket occupied so effortlessly by the original Croft Micro – a unit that started out at a mere £150.

Time then, to introduce you to the Musical Fidelity X-Can V8, a compact but solidly built little box that houses a standalone headphone amplifier, an add-on for amps or systems that lack a headphone socket of their own. So what? I hear you ask... Well, apart from the fact that the X-Can uses a dual-mono, hybrid circuit, with a pair of ECC88 twin-triodes used to drive a solid-state output stage (which is kind of neat...) offers outputs for two pairs of headphones and also features a USB input and

DAC – it only costs £350! Great... but so what?! Well, the really interesting thing is that, at the end of the day, an amplifier is just an amplifier – and anything capable of driving a pair of closed back, dynamic headphones, sure as shootin' should be able to laugh in the face of any self-respecting power amp. Now do you get it?

The X-Can is built into a nicely presented aluminium extrusion that supports the single, large internal PCB. The brushed aluminium front-panel sports two headphone sockets, a small dip switch to select between



line and  
USB inputs

and a volume control so flagrantly oversized that it's beyond embarrassing. Feels nice though... The back panel offers line in and out (fixed level) so that you can daisy chain the X-Can if necessary, along with the USB socket and a three-pin Din for connection to the wall-wart power supply (MF do offer a more sophisticated PSU built into the same casework as the X-Can, and capable of driving up to four X-Series components).

Used as a headphone amp the X-Can is an admirable performer, well

worth the asking price; but that's not what this is about. What I'm interested in is using it as a pre-amp. Okay, so it's only got one input (two if you count the USB) and you have to hook up your power amp to the headphone sockets on the front panel (which isn't particularly elegant), but where else are you going to get a tube pre-amp for considerably less than £500 – especially one this pretty? And isn't using a headphone amp as a pre-amp kind of weird? Hey, it takes a line input and provides a low-impedance variable output; which is pretty much what a pre-amp does. In fact, the X-Can's output impedance is just 2 Ohms, considerably lower than many high-end pre-amps. Gain is generous, so you need to be a shade careful with the volume control, but otherwise, this thing's a natural. The only proviso I'd make is that, whilst you can use the X-Can in plug and play mode, a little time spent playing with proper supports and the provision of properly terminated interconnects in place of the 1/4" jack adaptor (thoughtfully supplied) will reap disproportionate benefits. It's not that the X-Can is fussy, it's just that if you treat it like a high-end product it really starts to behave like one!

The best pre-amps offer an easy accessibility to the performance, a combination of tonal, spatial and temporal clarity. They sort out the musical strands, keeping them ▶

► independent but connected, allowing them to run, or walk, at their own pace. Above all they never, ever, impose their own sense of pace on the music; they never, ever act as a turbo charger – or a choke on its ebb and flow. Measured by these purely musical standards, the most important standards there are, the X-Can V8 is astonishingly, frighteningly successful in its unintended role. In some respects, what's even scarier (for the average audiophile at least) is just how good it is in hi-fi terms.

I used the MF with a whole array of different power amps, solid-state and valve, vintage and modern, in a vain attempt to catch it out. Everything from the Audionet AMP V to the Quad II-eighties, a vintage Leak Stereo 20 to the Hovland RADIA, all came, all were seen and all were conquered, swept along by the solid rhythmic foundation and natural momentum that the X-Can imparts to music. Bear in mind also, that the Leak aside, these amps range from ten to around 25 times the price of the X-Can, yet it never sounded anything other than right at home, even in this exalted company.

I don't know if it's down to that super low output impedance or the way-overbuilt output stage (for a pre-amp) but when it comes to deep, deep bass this thing is a monster. Fast, solid and sure-footed, there's an inevitability to the music's momentum when required, launched from the firmest of foundations. The throbbing, repetitive bass lines and solidly hit drum beats of The Cure's masterwork, *Seventeen Seconds*, hold no fears for the X-Can, whether it's

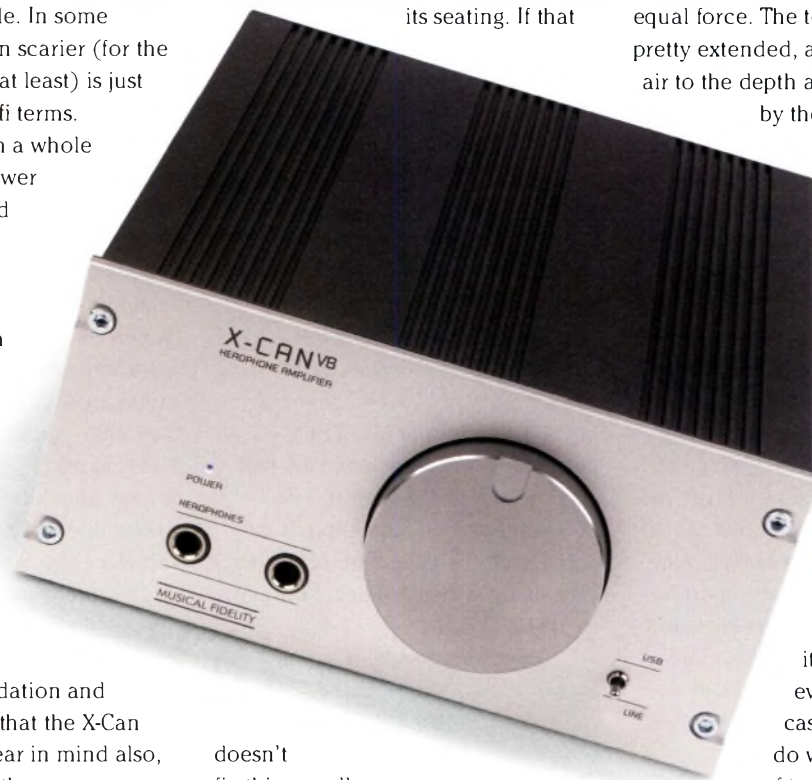
the drive and pace of 'Play For Today' or the more measured, reflective evolutions of 'At Night'. When it comes to low frequency substance, timing and transparency, this little box speaks in a far more authoritative and commanding voice, with more shape, presence and useable weight than it has any right to. If things seem a little slow or turgid, look to its seating. If that

voices have a solidity, presence and immediacy that gives musical performances a direct, communicative quality, a sense of purpose and intent that makes listening a primary activity; there's no using a system as aural wallpaper with the X-Can in circuit. This grabs the signal by the scruff of the neck, allowing the music to grab you with equal force. The top end is clean and pretty extended, adding just enough air to the depth and scale delivered

by the combination of solidity and transparency across the rest of the range. As a result, soundstaging is remarkably natural, impressive and uncluttered, adding still further to the musical appeal.

Of course, the X-can isn't perfect; far from it – but then isn't everything? In this case the flaws are to do with a diminution of textures and micro-dynamic detail (although this doesn't

affect the immediacy) and a lack of core warmth, that rob voices and instruments of some colour and musical shape. There's a big-boned, ruggedness to the sound that favours energy and presence over the finest subtleties of musical technique, the whole of the song as opposed to its elements. In part, that's down to the sheer integrity with which the musical picture hangs together, but it also reflects that ultra resolution isn't on the menu here – at least not as long as the X-Can relies on a plug-top supply. But the really ►



doesn't fix things pull your speakers forward by increments – because one thing's for sure, it's not the bottom end of the X-Can that's flabby; either your support, or your system (most likely your speakers) can't handle the extra energy. But get things just so and you'll end up with a silly grin spread from ear to ear, wondering how you put up with what you thought was bass before. Because this isn't just about quantity – it's about quality too. And how...

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► impressive thing is that, once you take the requisite care, this little box does so much that's musically right and virtually nothing that's obstructive or destructive in the process. It puts the music firmly first and in doing so steps out of the limelight, allowing you to enjoy the music rather than the system.

Writing this (and listening to the X-Can) it's easy to forget, a constant task to remind myself, that this thing only costs £350. That's three hundred and fifty of our increasingly worthless monetary exchange units!

Currently it's playing in a system in which not one single element costs less than ten times that except for the feet it's sitting on, and they cost nearly as much as the X-Can – and it's right at home. Is it a limiting factor? No way. Could I live with what I'm listening to? No problem whatsoever – because it does the important things right, and it does them so well and so unobtrusively that you'll be looking for something very serious indeed (and probably seriously expensive too) to offer a significant musical advantage.

The X-Can V8 isn't a universal panacea. It offers limited inputs; it's less than elegant in application and has no remote control (it's £350 for God's sake). But in a world where musically competent pre-amps are few and far between, it doesn't just offer more music than you ever thought possible for the money, it will set your system firmly on the path to high-end musical performance, because once you've lived with this you won't tolerate anything less.

Musical Fidelity's Anthony Michaelson is nothing if not an old and wily member of the audio manufacturing community. He knows exactly what he's got here. He also knows that adding a few extra inputs and a rear mounted pre-amp output would remove the objections to the X-Can's quirky eccentricities, aberrations that only arise from its spectacularly successful misapplication. Add a remote control

worthwhile or even necessary) you can bask in that special, smug self-satisfaction that comes from the sure knowledge that you've invested in, and are enjoying, that rarest of all musical commodities, the genuine audio bargain. The X-Can V8 doesn't just do what it says on the tin, it goes way, way beyond that – and in the process, its affordable price, USB input and stellar musical delivery promises to introduce a whole new audience to the wonder of high-end sound. (Some of whom might be under the mistaken impression they're already there!) ►+



and it would be almost mainstream. But it would be more expensive too and therein lies the rub. As it stands, the X-can V8 represents a slightly weird, musically wonderful and astonishingly successful route to musical nirvana. It also offers the key to unlocking the musical performance buried in so many systems by inadequate pre-amplification or passive controllers. Get it while you can; sit back and enjoy the music; wait for the inevitable slew of external upgrades and aftermarket mods. And while you are waiting (and wondering whether those upgrades are actually

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Hybrid headphone amplifier – and part-time high-end pre-amp
Valve Complement:	2x ECC88
Inputs:	1x line-level (RCA/phono) 1x USB
Outputs:	2x stereo 1/4" jack 1x line-level (fixed – RCA/phono)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	180 x 88 x 240mm
Weight:	1.85kg
Price:	£350
Manufacturer:	Musical Fidelity Ltd Tel. (44)(0)20 8900 2866 Net. www.musicalfidelity.com



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# Future Classic... The Spendor A6 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

One of the most enjoyable and engaging speakers to come our way last year was Spendor's diminutive SA1, a speaker that could and should finally banish the LS3/5a to the annals of history. But as wonderfully musical and lucid as the SA1 assuredly is, there's no escaping the limitations imposed by its tiny cabinet. Well, for those who fancy that unobstructed mid-band clarity and musical coherence, but allied to the greater weight, scale and authority that comes with increased bandwidth, Spendor offer the new A5 and A6 compact floorstanders. The new models replace the existing, well-regarded A series equivalents, bringing with them cleaner, sharper and more modern styling. But the changes here are far more than just skin deep. Both designs have been deliberately engineered to pass the signal as easily as possible, with minimum disturbance to the sense of musical flow.

The A6 is the larger of the two speakers, a straight two-way as opposed to the A5's two and a half way (based on smaller bass and bass/mid drivers), standing a moderate 875mm tall and only 192mm wide. The rectangular cabinet is simple yet elegantly proportioned, and beautifully finished in a choice of four real tree veneers. The carcass is constructed from 18mm MDF throughout, with critically placed circumferential braces to create a rigid structure without adding mass. Indeed, despite its rigid structure, the A6 only weighs 18kg – far lighter than you expect when you go to pick one up. The tweeter is the familiar Spendor version of the 29mm SEAS ring-radiator design, its faceplate enhanced by a

sophisticated elliptical wave-guide. The bass/mid unit uses an ep38 plastic cone built into a 170mm die-cast chassis, which operates up to a high 4kHz cross-over point. The drivers are carefully pair-matched for consistency.

Which brings us to the crossover itself, a key component in the speaker's design and thinking. The S6 was never a particularly awkward load, but Spendor were determined to improve matters still further, off-setting the A6's low-ish 86dB sensitivity by combining it with a flat, 8 Ohm impedance characteristic. The network itself uses hybrid second/third order slopes and is engineered to offer minimal phase shift and good impulse response as well as a smooth frequency balance. Overall phase coherence is a key aspect of Spendor designs, and the crossover is a critical contributor to this goal. But it's not just the design but the execution that's impressive. The circuit board is mounted into a substantial MDF tray that is inserted into the base of the speaker, forming the upper face of the rear mounted slot port that exits at the foot of the cabinet. This both braces the components and provides a firm mounting for the single pair of WBT binding posts, removing the need

for a terminal panel and the weakness it would introduce into the cabinet.

The base of the speaker (and its port) is formed by a separate slab, securely bolted to the bottom edges of the front and side panels. The wide mouth is devoid of wool or any other damping, as is the inside of the cabinet itself, inline with the policy of minimizing energy storage within the speaker system

and projecting musical energy into the room. A firm footing is also essential in this regard, and here the A6's solution is both unusual and extremely effective. Four, 40mm diameter and 5mm thick discs are firmly screwed to the corners of the speaker's base. The outer edges of these are drilled and tapped to receive 8mm spikes, offering both the widest possible footprint without resorting to outriggers, and an incredibly solid anchor for the spikes, against which the locking nuts can really be tightened home. The steel threads run very smoothly

too, making it really easy to adjust the speaker for a solid footing and perfect level. It's a far cry from the countersunk brass or alloy ferrules used by the competition and contributes to the A6's incredible stability and solid placement, despite its intentionally



► lightweight construction. This speaker is noticeably more rigidly coupled than nearly all others – so much so that you have to conclude that this factor contributes seriously to the superb sonic results.

Ooops – that rather let the cat out of the bag! Well, no use hiding it now; Spendor have got another special speaker on their hands. Crucially, what the A6 shares with the much smaller SA1, the quality that so impressed and engaged in the little standmount, is the unobstructive, free-flowing nature of its musical delivery.



Both these designs really allow the music to breathe, giving both dynamics and phrases proper shape and expressive weight. Of course, on the subject of weight, the incredibly lucid clarity that comes with the SA1's limited bandwidth can't be matched by the larger A6 with

its deeper bass, but it's more than compensated for by the extra scale and more balanced presentation. With the SA1, as marvelous as it is, you can't ever forget the missing bottom octave, but the A6 does just enough to underpin the music in a more convincing fashion, removing the system even further from the experience.

Having lived with both these designs for quite some time, I feel that they represent a step change in quality over their predecessors.

In much the same way as the Avalon Isis, NP2.0 and Indra, or Focal's new Utopia series constitute a major advance for their respective producers, so too do these latest Spendor designs. What's more, all these speakers share two crucial features: remarkable top to bottom coherence, reflected not in the flatness of their frequency response, but in the evenness with which they deliver musical energy across their bandwidth, and partly as a result, significantly improved naturalness – what might once have been termed neutrality before that term became so debased and contorted as to be almost meaningless. In this case, "musically natural" extends beyond tonality and harmonic balance (both of which are important) but into the arrival time, shape and duration of each note. It's what makes the NP2.0s association with its far more expensive brothers more than merely fanciful. It's what makes the

### Living with the A6...

As well as the ease of maneuvering and getting the A6 perfectly vertical, the carefully engineered balance and beautifully executed rear port allow a remarkable range of placement possibilities, the speakers being surprisingly happy even quite close to the rear wall, seriously reinforcing their small room potential. Even the grilles have been carefully shaped to prevent constant spacing between the tweeter and their inner edge, an elliptical top to the cutaway passing unusually close to the dome to achieve superior performance. Even the grille structure has been cut back to save weight and reduce stored energy. Nothing has been left to chance or taken for granted. If advances in sound quality are the result of accumulated incremental development (well - it worked for British Cycling!) then the A6 is certain proof of that particular pudding.

A6 a very, very special speaker indeed.

How does it achieve this elusive goal? What's more, how does it do it from such a compact and affordable design? There are a number of contributing factors, and as always it's a case of balancing the whole equation, but there are certain features that stand out. Let's start with the bass/mid unit. Designed and built in-house by Spendor, they are not only engineered specifically for this purpose, but the company's extensive experience with the materials and technology involved allow them to produce the drivers with remarkable consistency, before further pair matching occurs. Nor is this merely anecdotal, as a destructive interlude with an SA1 bass unit recently proved. The repaired speaker fitted absolutely seamlessly back alongside its surviving twin, prolonged listening with mono material underlining just how consistent the performance of Spendor's drive units really is. Add in the low-loss/low-storage strategy and you have a speaker that belies its (extremely) modest sensitivity rating. The A6 might measure at 86dB, but it doesn't sound that way – at all. A string of visitors, hearing the speaker driven by the 40 or so valve Watts of the VAS Citation Sound 2 monos and asked



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▶ to guess their efficiency regularly placed it above 90dB, fooled by the quickness and unimpeded agility of the sound, the crisp, sudden dynamics and easy, unforced immediacy.

A second factor is the speaker's natural tonality. First acquaintance might lead you to judge them as warm or rounded, but you'd be wrong, misled by their remarkable lack of edge or glare. It's undoubtedly down in part to the superior behavior of the drivers, but also reflects the ease with which the speaker is driven – and the subsequent lack of strain on the amplifier. Then there's the careful placement of the only mechanical damping in the design, a constrained layer between each driver and the baffle, helping to eliminate intermodulation distortion and the smearing it produces. The sound of the A6 is so easy and integrated, the musical picture so coherent, that it's easy to miss the level of resolution and detail on offer, simply because it's all where it should be – rather than sticking out like a sore thumb, disturbing the temporal and musical picture and drawing attention to itself in the process. So play the incredibly transparent and natural Townes Van Zandt track 'Waitin' Round To Die' (from *Heartworn Highways*) and whilst the Spendor can't match the scale, absolute transparency and acoustic space of a speaker like the Isis or Martin Logan's astonishing CLX, it's remarkable how natural its perspective is, how easily placed and identified the many extraneous sounds are, from the muttered interjections and impromptu



backing vocals emanating from the far end of the room, to the dog howling in the yard. What's more, you can tell both the what and the why, the way TVZ's hangover recedes as he gets through the first chorus and comes out the other side, the natural timing in the interplay between the people present. A recording like *Heartworn Highways* will show you the soundstage limitations imposed by the A6's curtailed bandwidth – but only if you go looking for them. Likewise, large-scale orchestral works will reveal the limitations of the compact cabinet and single bass driver when it comes to really big dynamic swings – but only if you've heard something an awful lot bigger AND better (a surprisingly narrow field, believe me). Conversely, the intimacy and musical chemistry, rhythmic complexity and interplay of small group jazz can be absolutely breathtaking. Like the baby Avalons, the Spendor can undo much bigger and initially more impressive competitors by dint of its sheer musical coherence and direct communication. It just sounds like music, like people, like a band having fun – and a world away from the disjointed mess generated by so many expensive speaker systems. Given the A6's ability to step back behind the music and allow the performers and performance to speak for themselves, it should come as no surprise to learn that it responds magnificently to being fed a better, and particularly a more coherent signal.

If ever a speaker existed to justify the "foundations first" policy of paying attention to your cable loom and supports to maximize the performance of modest but well-designed electronics, then this is it. To say that the A6/VAS combination punches above its weight is an understatement of almost heroic proportions. Deliver a clean feed and the results are simply staggeringly engaging and enjoyable. Outings with other amps proved just as successful, although the Spendor also proved remarkably revealing of changes upstream, in both electronics and set up. But when you get it right, and they will point you in the right direction and let you know when you get there, these speakers will bring real, live, breathing music into your home – just like hi-fi is supposed to. Spendor's often forgotten reputation for engineering innovation is clearly in safe hands, with products like the SA1 and A6 setting exacting new performance standards at their price points. Easy to use, easy to drive and easy to get the best out of, I love the A6s. They're GRRRRREAT! ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way rear-reflex floorstander
Drivers:	1x 29mm fabric diaphragm ring-radiator 1x 170mm ep38 cone mid/bass
Crossover Point:	4kHz
Bandwidth:	58Hz – 20kHz ±3dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Sensitivity:	86dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	192 x 875 x 280mm
Weight:	18kg ea.
Finishes:	Light oak, cherry, wenge, black ash veneers
Price:	£1895

#### Manufacturer:

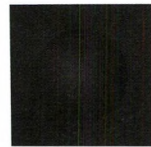
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# Close To You...

## The Avalon Acoustics NP1.0 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory



Avalon's NP2.0 has been a long-time favourite here at Plus; so much so that we've relied on its superb balance of transparency, detail, clarity, weight, dynamics and musical energy for more than one of our public demonstrations. Despite its compact, floorstanding cabinet, it is capable of projecting sufficient weight, scale and musical authority to satisfy and convince – and it does so at a price that is distinctly affordable, especially when you consider the musical virtues on offer. But it also delivers enough bandwidth to get it into trouble, especially with smaller amps or in smaller rooms. All that impressive, low-frequency energy can quickly get out of hand if your amplifier isn't up to controlling it or your listening room decides to sing along.

But don't worry, help is at hand in the unmistakable shape of the NP2.0's smaller brother, unsurprisingly dubbed the NP1.0. Using the same driver line-up (two Kevlar bass-mid drivers coupled to Avalon's proprietary composite dome tweeter) and the same cabinet footprint, the major visual difference between the two speakers – aside of course from the NP1's shorter box – is the central positioning of the tweeter, allowing for vertical or horizontal (for which read Centre) positioning. The smaller speaker also shares its larger brother's 90dB sensitivity and straight 4 Ohm load, again reflecting the dual personality of these products, equally at home in two-channel or mixed together to create multi-channel environments. Of course, maintaining the sensitivity whilst decreasing the cabinet volume results in reduced bandwidth. In this case it will cost you 14Hz, with a -3dB point at 48Hz as opposed to the 34Hz of the NP2.0. A pair of NP1.0s will cost you £1850pr, which is \$400 less NP2.0s – which should allow for a really decent pair of speaker stands.

Now, do the maths and it soon becomes apparent that a pair of





▶ NP1.0s plus stands will cost you nearly as much as a pair of the floorstanders. Why bother? Well, aside from the issues we noted above, which might well deny you full performance from a pair of NP2.0s, the stand-mounted speaker has its own cards to play, the smaller cabinet being inherently stiffer and less intrusive, which combined with the more limited low-frequencies promises still greater clarity and transparency, with a quicker and more coherent overall sound and wider system compatibility. Sounds like there might be a case for the NP1.0 after all...

I used Avalon's smallest two-channel offering on a pair of Quadraspire's Perspex stands, which combined with the centrally mounted tweeter made for a very tall package of limited stability which probably wouldn't mix too well with small children (or large pets). In that case, something heavier and significantly more solid would be called for. But there's no escaping the sonic benefits of the Avalon/Quadraspire combination. Perched high on the tall stand, the bass drivers are well away from the floor interface, helping to clean up their output still further, the musical results speaking for themselves. The NP1.0s, like all Avalons, are single wired via one of the familiar Cardas terminal blocks, and the angled grille should be retained for listening (although it is perhaps not as critical as with the more expensive models). A small reflex port is located in the centre of the rear panel and I found that the speakers worked best toed in to point directly at the listener in an almost classically equilateral arrangement.

The speaker the NP1.0 most resembles from the rest of the Avalon range is the Studio Pro, reviewed by CT back in Issue 39. Size, shape and configuration are virtually identical, although amongst other things, the

nearfield monitor design uses different drivers and a much more complex baffle. But the similarities are sonic too, especially when it comes to the spectral balance. Most small speakers are carefully tailored, firstly to sound precise and detailed, and then secondly to sound bigger and more immediately impressive than they really are. It's a well-worn path, generally involving a lean midrange (to give a heightened sense of



transparency and focus)

underpinned by a mid-bass hump to increase the sense of scale and weight. Done well, the results are undoubtedly impressive – and enjoyable too. But accurate? That's another thing entirely...

Jazz soprano is a rare thing, but can bring its own special quality to music. Lisa Ekdahl's distinctive voice is a challenge indeed. Most small speakers render her presentation almost childlike,

beguiling in its fragility and delicacy. But not the NP1.0s. They reproduce the body of her voice, the throat and chest that gives it substance despite the pitch. The result is far more sophisticated – smoky and knowing, sensuous rather than simply lilting. It's a reflection of the speakers' flat midrange response, delivering a tonality and energy that has much more in common with far larger and wider bandwidth designs. There's no cosmetic tailoring here and the result is a substance and immediacy, a solid presence that escapes most

designs of similar size – and a subtle, varied range of instrumental colour to match.

Of course, the relationship between the mid and bass is so intimate, that any aberration in one is immediately obvious in the other – which is what allows the lean mid/bass hump balance to function. But with the super flat mid balance of the NP1.0, anything other than a linear bass will stick out like a sore thumb. At first glance that could be construed as a problem, except that Avalon speakers in general have a knack of going deeper than their dimensions suggest. Combined with the NP1.0's generous internal volume (for a small standmount) you get a bass that goes way deeper than you'd imagine, but does it with considerably more poise and articulation than other speakers of this size. Lisa Ekdahl again, but this time the plucked bass notes of Patrik Boman; they have a tactile sense of pluck and release, a shape, pitch and placement that means that their dominant role in establishing the pace and rhythm of the trio, a balance that releases the drums and piano for more fanciful things, is both clearly defined and effectively realized. It allows the system to transit effortlessly from the meandering, contemplative lines of 'The Lonely One' to the riotous

► tumble of 'I Get A Kick Out Of You'. The punctuation of the piano chords and drum accents reinforce the surefooted and free-flowing bass lines, keeping the track mobile and vital, establishing the sort of stability and structure that can even cope with the almost scat delivery of a helter skelter 'Down With Love'.

That clean and even bass response carries its own bonus in the shape of the clarity and separation it encourages across that beautifully natural mid-band – always an Avalon hallmark. The quickness that comes with the absence of deep bass proper or exaggerated mid-bass, coupled with that clarity and presence in the mid makes the NP1.0 an explicit and immediate performer, giving musicians an expressive range that encompasses delicate right through to emphatic and even aggressive where required. Attack and bite are underlined by the solid body that follows the sharp leading edge, so that when Neil Young uses the rougher end of his guitar palette to add emphasis to tracks like 'Prime Of Life' or 'Safeway Cart' there's a real change in musical density and texture, a tangible difference to the musical presence. It builds mood and atmosphere, not just adding dramatic emphasis to the music, but revealing the how and why too.

This combination of controlled energy, an even balance and a tactile, agile bass add up to a communicative and lucid performer that allows music the space to breathe, a natural sense of pace, phrasing, ebb and flow. These are all qualities that apply to the floorstanding NP2.0, but the NP1.0's particular blend of strengths leans

in a subtly different direction, away from "enough bandwidth to actually convince" to "quick and clear enough to unravel", not just making sense of the whole, but telling you in the process all about its constituent parts.

The clever part of course, is that it



succeeds in isolating musical strands and instruments without ever sounding disjointed or pulling them apart. The NP1.0 is far too coherent for that. So the power-chord heavy mayhem of 'Piece Of Crap' might lack the sheer brutality that a wide bandwidth system will deliver, but otherwise the little Avalons take it in their stride, sorting it out and passing it on, intent intact.

If ever a speaker deserved the domestic monitor tag then this is it. Tonally faithful and unflinchingly coherent, it accepts its limited bottom-end extension and rather than trying to hide the fact it makes the most of the opportunities that presents. What's more remarkable is

the bandwidth it does produce, both qualitatively and quantitatively, given its uncompromising approach to mid-band accuracy and unwillingness to play games with tonal balance. Yes, it's bandwidth is limited in absolute terms and so is its sense of scale, but in all other musical respects it manages to combine a winningly engaging delivery with an utterly unforced insight into the recording and composition. Informative without being destructive, involving without being overly romantic, its ease of drive and overall musical coherence make the NP1.0 an astonishingly compelling loudspeaker as well as one that should deliver that performance even under difficult circumstances. Overall, the larger NP2.0 might be more convincing on a wider range of material, but I doubt that ultimately it will be more informative and it won't get you closer to the performers, a conclusion that in itself suggests the NP1.0 is something both a little bit unusual and a little bit special. ►+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way, reflex loaded
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm ceramic composite dome 2x 135mm Kevlar cones
Bandwidth:	48Hz – 22kHz
Sensitivity:	90dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	190 x 480 x 305mm
Weight:	13kg
Finishes:	Cherry
Price:	£1850

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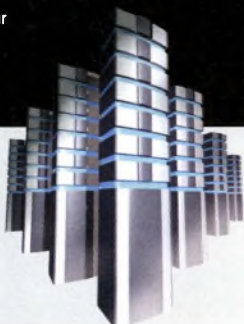
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# Latest In A Long Line...

## The PMC OB1i Loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy



An issue or so back I rambled on at some length about PMC's biggest domestic floorstander, the EB1i. It would seem that I failed to offend either the editor or the manufacturer on that occasion, because once again I find myself with a pair of PMC floorstanders on my hands. This time it's the rather more domesticated OB1i, a model which stands a relatively restrained metre or so high on its plinth and in the all black finish supplied almost disappears in the gloom of the listening room. These speakers appeared when I held a turntable blind listening test and needed some listeners to give me their opinions, one of whom was PMC's marketing maestro Keith Tonge. He got his own back by bringing these speakers down and loaning me some room damping panels with which to try and tone down some of the worst excesses of the reflective void I call a listening room.

It's a cunning technique really: if the speakers don't work that well in the reviewer's room, improve the room. My room is a bit larger than average and has a space in the ceiling for a roof light which does odd things to the bass. It is also a bit short on soft furnishings so the judicious placement of a pair of two metre tall panels containing MelaTech absorbent foam (see PM's comments on this) helps to calm things down. After much experimentation I found that putting the OB1is about 70cm from a rear wall and fairly close to side-walls with an absorbent panel in front of the wall, ie flanking the speaker, worked better than the alternatives. PMC's owner/engineer Pete Thomas goes in for very wide dispersion with his designs, which explains why this and other PMCs are that much more room sensitive than most speakers. Pete actually voices the speaker so that it delivers a flatter response off axis than on because ►



▶ he attributes the overall result to a combination of direct and reflected sound. Which is OK when you have a normally furnished room but sound a bit too lively if not.

The OBi is the most affordable three-way model in PMC's range and bears more than

a passing resemblance to the EB1i in its choice of drive units. The tweeter is the new Sonolex 27mm soft dome developed by SEAS with input from PMC. This is a ferrofluid-cooled unit with a distinctly green finish that has recently been added to PMC's domestic speaker range. The midrange unit is another dome, this time a 75mm unit also of the soft persuasion that has its own 'plant pot' enclosure within the cabinet. The latter is a heavily damped and acoustically inert housing that stops rearward energy from the bass driver affecting the midrange. The bass driver itself is a 125mm doped cone in a 170mm chassis that, as is PMC's wont, vents rearward into a line that in this case is 3.3m long. The idea being that this Advanced Transmission Line (ATL) augments the bass below the driver's roll-off. As with many prefixed descriptions it is not a transmission line in the true sense, but is cleverly damped so that its output is restricted to only the lowest frequencies and remains in phase.

The differences between this and the previous OBi lie in the tweeter and the component choices in the

24dB/octave fourth order crossover. The mid to high crossover point remains the same at 3.8kHz but the improved dispersion and greater extension of the tweeter required changes to be made. Changes have also occurred at the cosmetic



level, the cabinet has more sheen and the veneer is said to be of a better quality, more obvious is the new badge which is enamel and significantly

more attractive than its predecessor.

I might have overstated the notion that this is an elfin loudspeaker, that only applies when relating it to a two-man lift example like the EB1i. In practice this is a decent sized 21.5kg lump of the type that you don't expect to be able to abscond from the sonic picture with ease. Yet this is what they can do when appropriately set

up, producing imaging that

is both wide and deep without drawing attention to the cabinets producing the sound. It's the sort of trick that one expects of bookshelf designs but one that requires a pretty solid cabinet in a floorstander. Being of substantial volume helps when it comes to extending the sound down to the lower octaves and this is something that the OBi does with ease and power, it is particularly rewarding with kick drums which have real kick, shape and power. Going over to traditional vented infinite baffle speakers left me yearning for this solidity and punch even if absolute depth is limited compared to bigger boxes.

There is a distinctly bodacious quality to the OBi's sound. It has real grunt, which underpins the music and there's a physicality to the imaging which gives you a ▶

► strong sense of the sound taking up space in the room. This is true of Avishai Cohen's double bass and Keith Jarrett's piano, the latter having a palpable solidity and weight while the player's grunts and groans



are clearly enunciated. Fortunately not so much that they get in the way of the music but it's a close call sometimes. These are

clearly revealing speakers, allowing you to hear changes to equipment supports and disc player tweaks with ease. One of the latter is the Marigo 3-D Stabilizer mat, a green slightly perforated disc that you place over a CD in the tray. This makes a far greater difference with the OB1i than it does with my reference B&W 802Ds, focusing the sound and increasing both the power of the bass and the resolution of low level details quite obviously with the smaller speaker. The reason for this difference is presumably because of the differing dispersion characteristics of the two speakers, the B&Ws having a more focused, calm sound in the first place which allows them to be played at high levels without the room joining in too obviously. It's almost as if the two schools of design are based on different replay levels, and in the real world speaker systems like PMC's that are balanced to work at lower and medium levels are going to be more useful to the average music lover.

The OB1i does particularly nice bass, the synth on Fink's 'Biscuits for Breakfast' oozing out like rolling glue and the bass guitar thumping along beside it in truly phat style. It does the mid and top extremely well too, in fact the company makes the point that the bass quality is directly linked to that of the treble because it's the upper harmonics that give bass notes their definition. When high instruments are in the mix they are reproduced with subtlety and precision, cymbals have real shimmer and give the soundstage an expansiveness that defies the

boundaries in the room. With a decent recording there is life and vitality aplenty alongside rhythmic integrity that makes for a very real experience, est's *Live in Hamburg* throwing up the hiss from the PA and the ambience of the venue behind the energy of the piano, bass and drums.

The OB1i is a very capable all round loudspeaker. It responds to improvements in the system in a very positive way, yet does not require state of the art ancillaries to deliver a highly engaging and enjoyable result. The changes that have evolved along with the tech world's favourite prefix (i) have brought a refinement to the sound which means it's as good with restrained music as the get the house jumpin' variety. But the bass is still so juicy that it makes you want to party!



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3-way transmission line
Drive units:	27mm Sonolex soft dome tweeter 75mm soft dome mid-band 170mm doped paper cone bass
Bandwidth:	28Hz - 25kHz
Sensitivity:	87dB
Impedance:	6 ohms
Input connections:	Tri-wire
Dimensions (WxHxD):	20 x 102.5 x 32.5cm plus plinth
Weight:	21.5kg ea.
Finishes:	Oak, walnut, black ash, cherry
Price:	£3,200 pr.

#### Manufacturer:

PMC Ltd  
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Net. [www.pmc-speakers.com](http://www.pmc-speakers.com)





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# Middle Weight Contender...

## The KEF Reference 205/2 loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory



KEF's long-running Reference series has seen many incarnations over the 30 or so years of its existence, some sonically and commercially more successful than others. But experience with both the flagship 207/2 and the smallest model in the range, the three-way standmounted 203/2 suggest that the current incarnation is a (if not the) highpoint in that illustrious history. So impressive and musically fundamental were the improvements in the 207/2 over the original version, that the sub-woofer, which had made such a difference to that earlier iteration, was rendered totally unnecessary. Improvements across the board to all the drive-units, but especially the latest evolution of the Uni-Q mid/treble driver, brought significant benefits in terms of weight, scale, coherence and resolution. They also obviated the need for the hyper-tweeter employed in the previous model, making for greater visual coherence too. Add in a range of flawless lacquered finishes and really well sorted accessories, combined with a more transparent but also more forgiving presentation, and the significant hike in price between the original and /2 versions of the speaker was more than justified.

But there's no escaping the fact that at £12000, the 207/2 is beyond many people's pocket, while its imposing bulk and considerable depth mean that fewer still be able to comfortably accommodate it. Look no further than the success of B&W's 802 and 802D models to appreciate just how critical speaker footprint is to market penetration. Which is what makes KEF's Reference 205/2 such an intriguing prospect. In many respects, it bears exactly the same relationship to the 207/2 that the 802s bear to their larger 800 and 801 cousins. The smaller cabinet contains the same mid and treble technology, mechanical construction, finish options and quality of crossover components as the flagship speaker, but coupled to a pair of smaller diameter bass units without quite the same thunderous reach. ▶



► You can read a detailed description of the technology in the 207/2 review, back in Issue 53, but here are the highlights. The Uni-Q cone has been re-shaped, a shallower profile and flat surround improving dispersion, while developments in the nature and disposition of the cone material itself have also improved its mechanical behavior. Simultaneously, a new dome profile, arched former and more powerful magnet assembly have allowed venting of the co-axial tweeter as well as a considerable increase in high-frequency extension. The result is a more natural balance, lower colouration and increased dynamic range across the output from 350Hz upwards to a claimed  $-3\text{dB}$  point of 60kHz.

The Uni-Q driver peeps from the top of a slim, boat backed cabinet whose curved walls and extensive bracing create an extremely rigid cabinet without resorting to sheer mass, with all its associated problems. The two, 8" bass drivers are each housed in their own, separate, front ported enclosure, the whole system being tri-wirable. In addition, sockets in the top of the terminal panel allow the listen to trim the treble output level in four discrete steps between  $+0.75$  and  $-1.5\text{dB}$ , and align the bass contour for free-space or near-wall siting. Together these adjustments provide a useful and usable degree of room compensation. Spikes are large M8 types, with even larger locking discs that also serve as visual "feet", but the narrow footprint of the 205/2 does mean that overall stability is compromised somewhat, so bear that in mind if boisterous children or large dogs play a central role in your life.

One of the things that separates the different ranges of KEF Reference speakers, is just how critically revealing

they are. A speaker like the 105/3 was way to critical for its own good, telling you altogether too much about the system feeding it, with the result that it was a seriously underrated performer.



KEF learnt that lesson well, and over the years they've managed to dial back the destructive tendencies whilst retaining still astonishing levels of musical insight. It's a path that's achieved an apex in the 207/2 and a quality that's only slightly diminished in this model. Which means that whilst the 205/2 will rarely sound unpleasant, no matter the system indignities heaped on its back, the requisite care and attention to set-

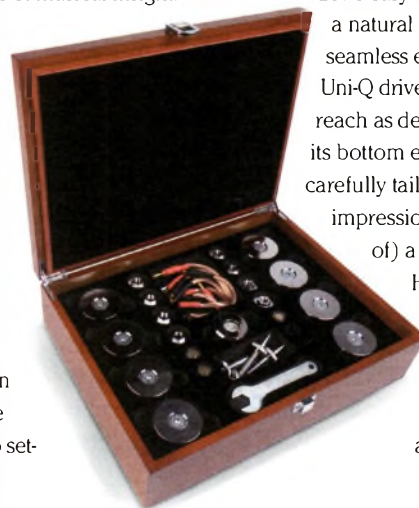
up and matching will reap rich rewards.

They don't require anything fancy, just good practice done properly, when it comes to placement, leveling and wiring them up. One thing that really needs to go is the tri-wire links provided, which might be better than the average bent metal plate, but are readily improved upon, with obvious sonic benefits. Indeed, rather than tri-wiring the speaker, I'd use the best cable I could afford to single-wire them, and then have two sets of straps made from the same wire. Chord Co. cables do seem to offer a particularly happy match to the KEFs, and they already offer links of this type.

Having said all that, the 205's role as "almost 207s but easier to live with" is perhaps the biggest obstacle to realizing their potential performance in the real world. Paradoxically, the very cost and expense of the 207 makes people give it the space and respect it demands. The more benign and manageable exterior of the 205 might encourage the taking of liberties – which would be a huge mistake, for if anything, the performance of the smaller speaker is even more placement critical than the bigger model. Good practice done properly means exactly what it says – with heavy emphasis on the good and the properly. Why? Just like the 207s, the glory of the 205 is in the continuity and unexaggerated coherence it brings to reproducing music. But whereas the

207's easy extension provides a natural balance to the seamless extension of the Uni-Q driver, the 205 doesn't reach as deep and as a result, its bottom end has been carefully tailored to deliver (the impression if not the reality of) a little extra weight.

Half an inch too far back and the bass goes soft, rounded and disjointed. Half an inch too far ►

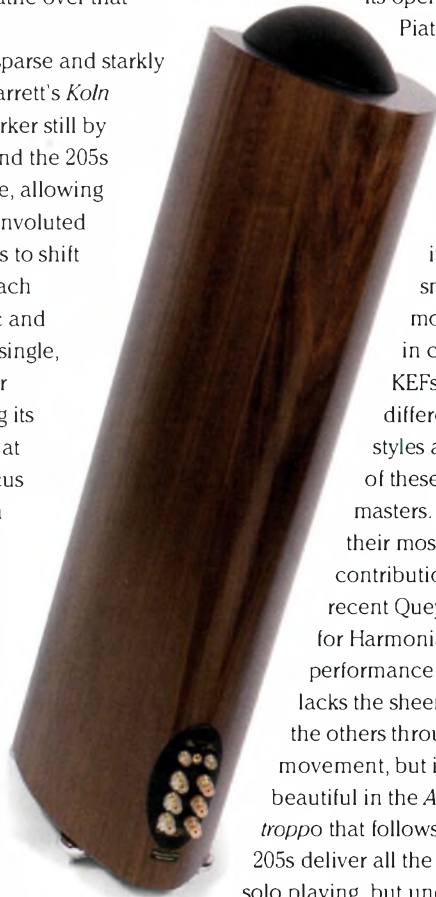


► forward and it becomes lean and musically disconnected, robbing the music of drive and purpose, structure and foundation. But get it in the right place... Get it in the right place and the 205 rewards you with a measure of coherence and communication, a rhythmic and structural integrity that anchors the performance and allows the performers to breathe over that secure footing.

Play something as sparse and starkly unadorned as Keith Jarrett's *Koln Concert* (rendered starker still by the ECM recording) and the 205s are utterly unobtrusive, allowing the protracted and convoluted musical developments to shift and evolve through each theme, each rhythmic and melodic pattern, in a single, continuous line, never wavering, never losing its way, never stumbling at the transition. The focus is on the playing, with Jarrett's masterful command of shape and tempo, melody and development holding the music together and conjuring an ever-shifting emotional landscape. It's only when the disc ends that you realise that you never even noticed the system playing it. Yet solo piano, with its range and percussive qualities is one of the hardest instruments to reproduce. The 205s do so without leaving their mark, and that's impressive indeed.


Of course, it would be unreasonable to expect the 205 to match the remarkable performance of the 207. The junior model can't match the effortless scale and sheer dynamic range of the flagship. It doesn't conjure the acoustic space with such natural transparency, or deliver images with

quite the focus or dimensionality – but it gets close; surprisingly close. Close enough that, if you hadn't heard the bigger speaker, you wouldn't feel the lack. So, comparing and contrasting different performances of the Dvorak *Cello Concerto*, the Starker reading on Mercury is satisfyingly, almost bombastically explosive through its opening, the



Piatigorsky on RCA is warmer, more rounded and more lyrical, less purposeful or pointed in its playing, but smoother and more seductive in character. The KEFs effortlessly differentiate the styles and strengths of these two musical masters. But perhaps their most telling contribution is on the recent Queyras reading for Harmonia Mundi, a performance that maybe lacks the sheer authority of the others through the first movement, but is achingly beautiful in the *Adagio ma no troppo* that follows. Here the 205s deliver all the grace in the solo playing, but underpin it with a sweeping orchestral majesty that dials up the romance without adding a layer of schmaltze. It's a stunning performance – from everyone (and everything) involved.

That easy flow and natural tonal warmth is equally evident across the vocal palette, with voices as disparate as Zinka Milanov and Lyle Lovett feeling the benefit. Subtle inflexions and the catch of a breath bring singers to life, again leading your attention into the music and its making – and away from the system reproducing

it. This ability to step away from the performance is what marks the KEFs apart from so many speakers that fall into the trap of desperately trying to impress. Work with them and you'll discover hidden depths when it comes to musical expression and involvement. I loathe the kind of mathematical formulae that try to express performance as a function of price; 90% of the sound for 60% of the cost always struck me as overly simplistic and way too pat, but in the case of the 205 it really is that straightforward. It's not just shared DNA we're talking about. So much of the technology, so many of the parts in this speaker are shared with the 207, that realizing the benefits comes down to the engineering implementation (and a bit of care). KEF have done their part spectacularly well – the rest is down to you... 

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way reflex loaded loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm titanium dome Uni-Q tweeter 1x 165mm Uni-Q midrange 2x 200mm pulp cone bass
Bandwidth:	45Hz – 60kHz ±3dB 35Hz –6dB
Sensitivity:	90dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal 3.2 Ohms minimum
Dimensions (WxHxD):	285 x 1105 x 433mm
Weight:	33kg
Finishes:	High gloss black, walnut or cherry. Satin black, walnut, cherry or sycamore
Prices:	High Gloss – £6850 Satin – £5625

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# More Than You Bargained For... Audionet AMP V Five-Channel Power Amplifier (and PRE I G3 Pre-amplifier)

by Roy Gregory

It has always been a matter of considerable surprise to me that bi-amping isn't a more popular part of system building. After all, with pre-amps offering multiple outputs virtually as standard these days, and an increasing number of integrated amps providing a pre-out facility too, the option to simply add a second power amp has never been easier.

Against that, the nay-sayers will point out that bi-amping involves both a proliferation of boxes and cabling to go with them, and investment in two sets of chassis work – the most expensive part of most amplifiers – thus making it far from cost-effective. Better, they say, to invest in an upgrade to a single amplifier of higher power and quality. But is it? I remain skeptical, my suspicions based on both logic and experience. Add a second, identical amplifier to a system and you should hear a dramatic increase in dynamic range, separation, transparency, immediacy and presence – all qualities that go straight to the heart of the musical performance. Now try the same experiment with a single, more powerful stereo chassis and you'll struggle to achieve anything like the same leap in performance. The system will go louder, but in most other respects it will struggle to compete.

It's the difference between making the amp more capable or making its job easier. Think about driving across a plowed field; if you want to go faster, you can get a bigger engine and more suspension – or you can simply flatten the surface.

What's more, there are serious practical advantages too. Not

only does bi-amping open up a staged upgrade path, but it broadens the available options when it comes to matching amps and speakers. Cable wise, yes, you will need an extra pair of pre-power interconnects, but any system that can be bi-amped should probably already be bi-wired, so that's a simple case of retermination. Which leaves us with the often thorny issue of accommodating an extra box, involving both space and expense, normally taking the form of an extra shelf for your rack.

But there's another way of looking at this. If the plowed field analogy holds true, then why not adopt bi-amping as the standard configuration rather than an optional upgrade. Yes, you lose the

stepped upgrade option, but put four channels into a single box and you also lose the cost of that expensive second chassis. It's a marketing approach that's been tried occasionally in the dedicated two-channel arena – with a notable lack of success. But cast your eyes a little further afield and there is a plethora of AV amplifiers offering anywhere between three and seven channels of identical amplification from a single chassis. Some are even modular

and configurable, meaning that additional channels can be added at a later date. Suddenly, bi-amping becomes a whole lot easier, more a question of should you, rather than could you.

Of course, ultimately the success of any system approach will depend on the quality of the hardware employed, but buy a multi-channel amp from a company with a firm footing and solid reputation for its two-channel product and you've a fair chance of success. It's a mantra that's been adopted by Wilson Benesch, who have taken to using Audionet's five-channel AMP V to bi-amp two-channel systems – to the extent that they supplied the amp along with the Trinity/Torus set-up reviewed in Issue 59. The results were sufficiently intriguing to make me wonder how ▶

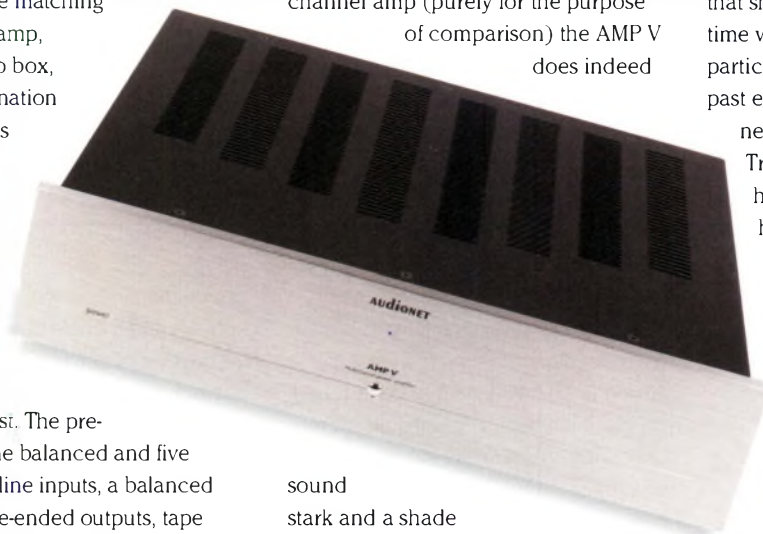


▶ well the approach might work with other speaker systems, generating a request for the matching PRE I G3 pre-amp, creating a two box, stereo combination with 500 Watts of power amplification spread across five 8 Ohm channels at a very reasonable combined cost. The pre-amp offers one balanced and five single-ended line inputs, a balanced and two single-ended outputs, tape monitoring and a separate record out, remote triggers and even a rear-mounted headphone socket. The simple fascia is devoid of all but four push buttons and a display, with comprehensive controls on the remote handset.

The AMP V is similarly plain to look at, and devoid of facilities, with a single-ended input and a pair of good quality WBT binding posts for each channel, mounted on the rear panel of its compact chassis. But despite its understated appearance (no larger than many stereo amps) pick it up and its sheer density and 19kg weight is definitely going to make an impression. So whilst the external feature count and simple exterior of this combination might not seem overly impressive, look a little further and it soon becomes clear that any way you cut it, given the build and component quality of these units, they represent an awful lot of amplification for the money!

In use, there's no mistaking the solid-state nature of these electronics. Their sound is clean, clear and cool, with none of the cloying warmth that tends to slow and muddle the presentation of those transistor amps that claim "valve-like" sound. It's all about resolution, transparency and precision. But what saves it from the

accusation of clinical sterility is the bi-amped option. Used as a straight two-channel amp (purely for the purpose of comparison) the AMP V does indeed



sound stark and a shade stilted and hesitant, its grasp of rhythmic subtleties clumsy and somewhat mechanical. But hook up another two channels and all that changes. The increases in dynamic range, control over the speaker and the speed with which the system responds to the signal, all inject a dramatic dose of life and verve, delivering a well-directed kick up the woofers. Scale, impact, presence and immediacy step well to the fore; less obvious is the lack of strain and an easing of edge or glare to high-frequencies (especially transients) which in

easily handle warmer sounding speakers. The KEF Reference 205/2s that shared house space and system time with the Audionet were a particularly efficacious match, while past experience with the unfailing neutrality of the Wilson Benesch Trinity and other loudspeakers has demonstrated the essential honesty of this amplifier. It's no frills presentation clears away the grunge, letting you hear exactly what is going on. Play Art pepper's smack Up and the crisp snare strikes are taut and alive with attack, while the stabbed piano chords give a real sense of pace, direction and accent. Brass tuttis on 'Way Out Basie' are beautifully ripping and properly bright, with real presence and substance, the multiple voices held separate and distinct.

Having said that, the price you pay for that clarity and separation is two-fold. Despite the impressive impact that the AMP V achieves in bi-amp mode, the essential character of the unit, with its lean bass, means that the musical nether regions lack a little weight and generosity.



combination with the dynamic boost make music both more exciting and less tiring to listen to.

Given its unadorned neutrality and tendency to the cooler side of the tonal palette, the AMP V will

The left hand of piano lacks sonority and harmonic texture and complexity, double bass tends more to strings than body. In turn this leads in part to the second area of subtle weakness, a lack of real intimacy and colour to the sound.

But against those failings you must balance the unburstable energy and musical enthusiasm the Audionet ▶



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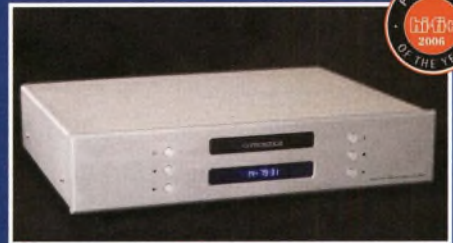
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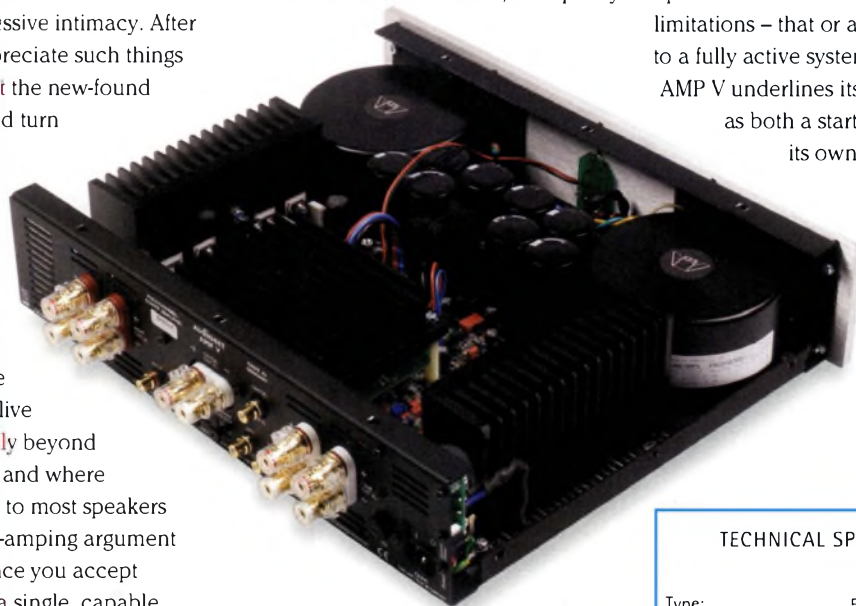
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J-fets are employed in the output stage, replacing the more commonly used but less desirable op-amps, resulting in a cleaner more natural sound not found in more complicated players.

► injects into the performances played on your system. It doesn't matter whether it's Moby or the brilliantly bombastic opening to Britten's 'Young Person's Guide...', the sheer presence projected from your speakers is big on scale, impact and excitement. For many listeners, restricted to a diet of small drivers and constricted dynamics it will come as a revelation – one that's well worth the finer subtleties of tonal shading and expressive intimacy. After all, it's hard to appreciate such things whilst marveling at the new-found dynamic agility and turn on a sixpence responsiveness of your previously recalcitrant speakers. In a world where just trying to match the dynamic range of live music is so woefully beyond most hi-fi systems, and where the space devoted to most speakers is shrinking, the bi-amping argument is hard to fault. Once you accept that logic, buying a single, capable box with sufficient power to drive the vast majority of speakers starts to become an attractive and cost effective option – even if it has relied on multi-channel system requirements to make it a reality. In fact, the only fly in this particular ointment is the number of speaker manufacturers turning away from bi-wired crossovers, but that's another story.

Time spent with the Audionet AMP V demonstrates two things: bi-amping can transform an otherwise ordinary combination of amp and speaker, bringing out the best in both, while the desire of various manufacturers to offer higher quality, multi-channel solutions has opened up a two-channel opportunity to embrace the approach without the previous cost and proliferation of boxes. If you value scale and dynamic range, immediacy,

presence and musical substance – or if you want your speakers to sound bigger and more capable than their size and looks suggest – then bi-amping is a concept you should examine seriously. Having said that, there are plenty of multi-channel amps out there that don't cut the musical mustard. The AMP V wears its solid-state heart very much on its sleeve, providing five channels of real, hi-fi quality



amplification. You can find warmer sounding amps. You can find amps with a more intimate or delicate presentation. But I'm not aware of an amp that offers more punch, more clarity or more grip than the Audionet achieves in bi-amped mode – and all from a remarkably compact chassis. It might have arrived as a stopgap, a known quantity to help set up the Trinity/Torus speaker system, but that it stayed so long (and was used so much) speaks volumes about its practicality, potency and performance.

Generally I'd tend to shy away from an amp that sounded this lean and stark in a straight stereo set-up, but using it in bi-amp mode, the dynamic and expressive range and emphatic musical delivery easily compensate for the rounded weight that most

amps rely on to deliver any sort of musical impact. Why make do with an impression of dynamic range, a sense of musical power, when you can have the real thing. Bi-amping works and so does the AMP V, providing real music and serious excitement from a compact and affordable chassis. Once upon a time, running multiple channels into one pair of speakers was an interesting option to overcome space or power limitations – that or a step on the route to a fully active system. The Audionet AMP V underlines its value and validity as both a start and an end in its own right – and one that you should consider seriously. ►+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	5-channel solid-state amplifier
Inputs:	5x single-ended RCA/phono
Impedance:	50 Ohms
Outputs:	5prs WBT binding posts
Output Power:	5x 100 Watts, into 8 Ohms 5x 180 Watts, into 4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 110 x 360mm
Weight:	19kg
Price:	£3000

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# New World View...

## Naim's SUPERNAIT

by Paul Messenger

Naim's history demonstrates a remarkably obstinate commitment to its own operational concepts. It was one of the first (if not the very first) to abandon tone controls; it obdurately declined to fit its popular CD players with digital output sockets; and persisted with simple, low-tech cables and DIN connectors. But as Naim has continued to grow, so it has had to become more outward looking and happier to work with the world beyond Naim proscribed horizons. This was first evident around the beginning of this century, when the odd pair of phono sockets started appearing. However, that was merely a toe in the water compared to the full plunge into the deep end represented by the SUPERNAIT.

Like all Naim's NAITs, it's a one-box integrated unit. Unlike most previous NAITs it's very complex, very flexible, very powerful, and at £2,350 a good deal more costly too. That said it's still a lot less expensive than most of Naim's separate pre/power combos, yet it packs more features and facilities than virtually anything else in the Naim catalogue.

Surprisingly, alongside the expected pre-amp and power amp sections, SUPERNAIT also includes a digital-to-analogue converter. Not much use if your CD players don't have digital outputs? True, but it's not primarily intended for CD replay. Rather its main purpose is presumably to cater to the increasing number of enthusiasts using computers as a convenient source of music.

SUPERNAIT is housed in one of Naim's 'full size' alloy cases, and you only have to try and pick up its 12.8kg to realise it must have a big transformer and should happily deliver the rated 80W/channel of power. From the front it looks remarkably like my NAC 552 pre-amp, with large volume and balance knobs plus two rows of pushbuttons, one to select inputs, the other, independently, selecting record-out. Although both rows have mutes ▶





▶ alongside, closer scrutiny reveals the absence of any mono mode, and the presence of two little mini-jack sockets (one analogue/digital hybrid input, one headphone output).

The rear panel is altogether more intimidating. It simple bristles with socketry. The analogue DINs are there, paralleled by phono pairs, and there are also numerous optical and electrical digital inputs.

Allegedly there are six analogue inputs and five digitals, but it seems that just seven in total are available at any one time.

One of these is the front panel optical digital, accessed automatically simply by plugging into it; another (270-DIN type) is probably only for connection to a Naim outboard vinyl stage (it's not too clear from the manual). An assignment procedure is therefore used – and not very well explained – to tailor the selection of analogue or digital inputs to individual requirements. 'Record out' is also available. Outputs are available to feed sub-woofers and external power amps, RS232s for multi-room integration, plus sockets to use Naim's various external power supplies to feed the pre-amp section separately and upgrade sound quality. Speaker output terminals are Naim's usual 4mm socket-only connectors. Phew!

Happily one doesn't have to wade through all the options to get the amplifier up and running, though the default settings (three 'normal' analogues, one 'phono stage' analogue, and two digitals) weren't ideal for my purposes. Although I felt obliged to check out the digital input modes

for the purposes of this review, I need more than three 'normal' analogues day-to-day, so was compelled to get involved in the assignments, which actually didn't prove too troublesome.

From the user's point of view, the remote control handset is just about the most important part of any component, yet it has never been a Naim strength, nor, it appears, much of a priority, given the

limited information on its website. Happily the multi-component, multi-lingual manual that accompanied the SUPERNAIT describes two relatively new handsets, both of which look like improvements on earlier attempts. The Narcom 4 that was actually supplied is neat, nicely shaped for one-hand operation, and

better laid out than Naim's previous system handsets, though it's a shame the back surface isn't flat (so it can be easily operated on a flat surface without rocking).

Before getting into the performance side of things, some description of the interior contents is appropriate. Power output is rated at 80 + 80W continuous into 8ohms, with up to 400VA peaks available on transients, and full protection against misuse. The power amplifier is based on NAIT 5i circuitry, boosted by higher power NAP

200 output transistors, while the pre-amp section derives from the NAC 282.

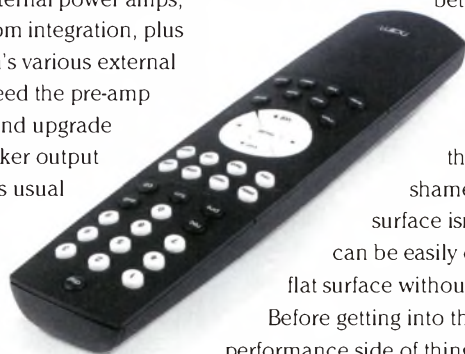
The digital section is based on an advanced Burr Brown DAC which can handle all likely digital formats and is capable of resolving up to 24-bit/192kHz. To minimise jitter, re-clocking is specifically provided for 32, 44.1, 48, 96, and 192kHz sample rates, using phase-locked loop and voltage controlled crystal oscillators. Sensibly, the digital section is powered down when the analogue section is selected, and the control micro-

processors go into sleep mode during listening.

Since I regularly use Naim amplification – a NAC 552 pre-amp and NAP 500 power amp (costing more than ten times the price of the SUPERNAIT) – it was simple enough

to swap over to the integrated model. And since all the sources I use with the 552 are inevitably analogue, that was the obvious place to start.

Used in its standalone component form, the SUPERNAIT's basic sonic character is recognisably Naim-like, so it slotted very sympathetically and familiarly into my system, though its limitations compared to the more costly separates combo in terms of bandwidth and dynamic range resolution were audibly apparent. Tonally, the midrange seemed very similar indeed to my much more costly references, albeit with some constraints on the overall dynamic range and rendition of low level detail. However, the lack of subtle air and fine detail resolution at the extreme top end meant one tended to turn the volume higher in compensation, and this made the lack of sweetness ▶



▶ in the upper mid-band just a little more obvious, and the sound consequently a little less comfortable, especially at higher levels. Likewise the bottom end lacks the tautness, precision and tonal discrimination of more costly Naim amplifiers, showing a mild tendency to thicken textures and add a little extra 'thump'.

In other words, you do get what you pay for across the Naim range, but at the same time you'd probably have to pay quite a lot more on Naim's separates to obtain a worthwhile improvement over this integrated model's very impressive

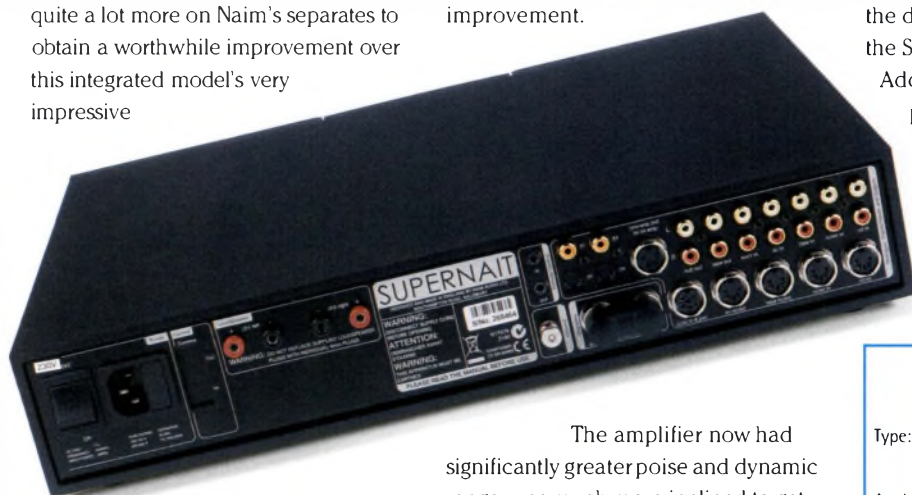
in computers as a source of sound quality, but all seemed to operate very satisfactorily, and decent quality sound was delivered through the speakers.

Having a recently refurbished HiCap on hand (reluctantly and temporarily taking the SuperLine out of commission), I tried out this relatively modest upgrade – and wished I'd done so much earlier, since it immediately brought a substantial and obvious sound quality improvement.

not have the prettiest sound around. It might lack the delicacy, subtlety and musical insights delivered by Naim's top separates, it's very informative and purposeful, with plenty of welly available for party animals too.

Considerably more complex than earlier NAITs, the input assignment procedures could do with a much clearer and more comprehensive explanation, yet at the same time the flexible future-readiness provided by the digital input options is arguably the SUPERNAIT's biggest strength.

Add into the mix the highly effective power supply upgrade options and it's clear that this is very much an amplifier for all reasons, and for many seasons to come.



capabilities. And you wouldn't get all those potentially useful digital input capabilities. Although a stranger to the world of digital interconnection, I felt obliged to try and investigate this capability. After several failed attempts I managed, more by luck than judgement, to assign one of the inputs to 'digital co-axial', connected this to the digital co-axial output socket of a Rega Saturn CD player, and was pleased to get music coming through the system. Pretty good quality music too, it must be said, though not obviously different from that available via the analogue phono connection, and clearly retaining the fundamental character of the amplifier.

Likewise, after another brief struggle, I managed to re-assign a digital input to an optical socket, and connected my MacBook Pro, selected iTunes and played a few WAV tracks. I can't pretend any comparative expertise

The amplifier now had significantly greater poise and dynamic range, was much more inclined to get the feet tapping, and seemed altogether less 'characterful' than before. The soundstage was bigger and less box-bound, and the tendency to add a little too much bass 'thump' was also reduced. This HiCap was the only Naim outboard supply I had available to try, and several others are available at different price points, and I would strongly urge anyone contemplating or owning a SUPERNAIT to explore this option.

Naim amps do have a distinctive character, no question. They might not have the sweetest or most transparent sound around, but they are effective musical communicators, tending to ignore the subtler cosmetics of sound quality in favour of staying true to the timing and intentions of the musicians. That's certainly the case with this SUPERNAIT. SUPER or not, it's still a NAIT, which means it's a conveniently integrated single-box unit, but might

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Line level analogue/digital integrated amplifier
Analogue Inputs:	5x line-level (5-pin Din or RCA/phono) 1x 5-pin Din (for outboard phono-stage) Power amp input
Digital Inputs:	2x co-axial, 3x optical (one on front panel)
Power output:	2x 80W continuous, 400VA transient peaks
Outputs:	2x tape (DIN and RCA/phono) Pre-out; sub-out (phono); bi-amp out (DIN); 2x spkr out (4mm sockets); headphones (mini-jack)
Other:	2x RS232; 2x RC5
Voltage gain:	29dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 87 x 320mm
Weight:	12.8kg
Price:	£2,350

#### Manufacturer:

Naim Audio

Tel. (44)(0)1722 426600

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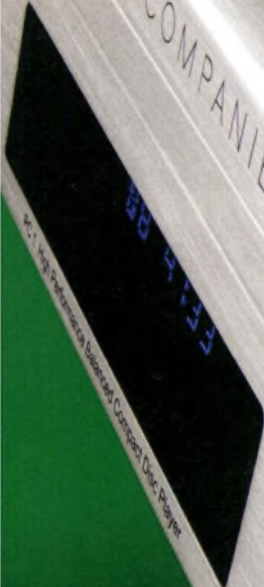


PI 2 High Performance Balanced Integrated Amplifier



Navigator

ELECTROCOMPANIET



PC 1 High Performance Balanced Compact Disc Player



Navigator



# Organic Pair...

## The Electrocompaniet Prelude PI-2 integrated amp and PC-1 CD player

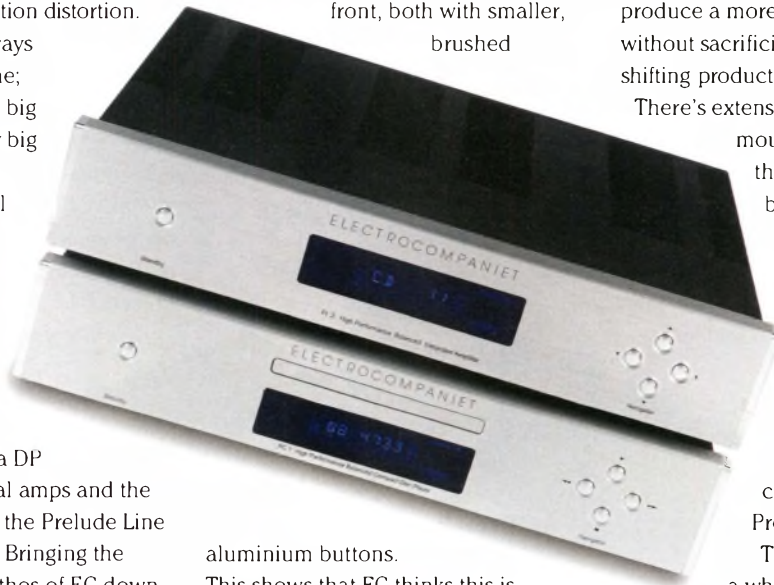
by Alan Sircom

When you think 'Electrocompaniet', your thoughts naturally stray towards high-end separates. Those with long, long memories might recall a giant-killing 25Watt power amp from more than three decades ago. Others might come from a more technical perspective and remember that Electrocompaniet was the company that began the quest to eliminate transient intermodulation distortion. But the end result always seemed to be the same; gold on black fascias, big products with equally big price tags.

Those products still exist, and are still a core part of EC's strategy, but they're now called the Classic Line. The products need to be delineated because there's also a DP line of high-end digital amps and the Prelude Line, and it's the Prelude Line that interests us here. Bringing the unstinting high-end ethos of EC down to prices affordable to the rank and file audiophile, that can't be a bad thing, can it?

These are the key Prelude Line products; there's a smaller 50 Watt PI-1 integrated, a 2.5-way floorstanding loudspeaker called the PSF-1 and an as-yet mystery, all-in-one Arcam Solo type product provisionally called Maestro, too. Both the Prelude PC-1 CD player and the 100 watt PI-2 integrated amp are styled in a broadly

similar manner to the Classic Line products, with a single standby button on one side of the box, a four-way push button matrix to operate basic functions on the other and a centre-mounted readout and drawer in the middle. But these aren't the big gold buttons on or shiny black fascia found in the Classic Line; the choice is down to a flat black or brushed aluminium front, both with smaller, brushed



aluminium buttons. This shows that EC thinks this is a wholly separate line, not a soft-start to the more upmarket products in the range.

Both Prelude Line products are maximally minimalist, with only a limited-function display, and most of the functionality removed to a remote control. Concessions to modernity, like RS232 ports or USB sockets... forget it. In addition, the amplifier has just two balanced and two single-ended inputs, while the manual for the CD

player seems to show that the single-ended output was a late addition to the schema, it being absent from the eight-page booklet that accompanies the product. There is though, an S/PDIF coaxial connection for digital recording or processing.

The modern bit is on the inside, and this shows one of the ways that Electrocompaniet has managed to produce a more cash-conscious line without sacrificing quality control or shifting production out of Norway.

There's extensive use of surface-mount technology on the PCBs, which keeps board-stuffing costs to a minimum while the digital volume control is taken from the EC4.9 pre-amp. That's not a cost-saving measure, though; it's a sign of just how seriously the company takes these Prelude products.

The amplifier also sports a wholly new protection circuit. This manages to prevent high temperature, DC offset and short circuits the output, but is said to have no deleterious characteristics on sound quality and even improves matters because it has allowed EC to reduce the number of contact points between amp and speakers by eliminating a relay at the output stage. The amp comes with a good sized toroidal transformer and a healthy amount of reservoir capacitance; ▶

▶ more than enough to keep it ahead of the competition, although the limitations of price means it doesn't have a particularly 'stiff' power supply. That being said, in the context of amplifiers at the price, the PI-2 is more than powerful enough to cope with any speaker this side of about three grand.

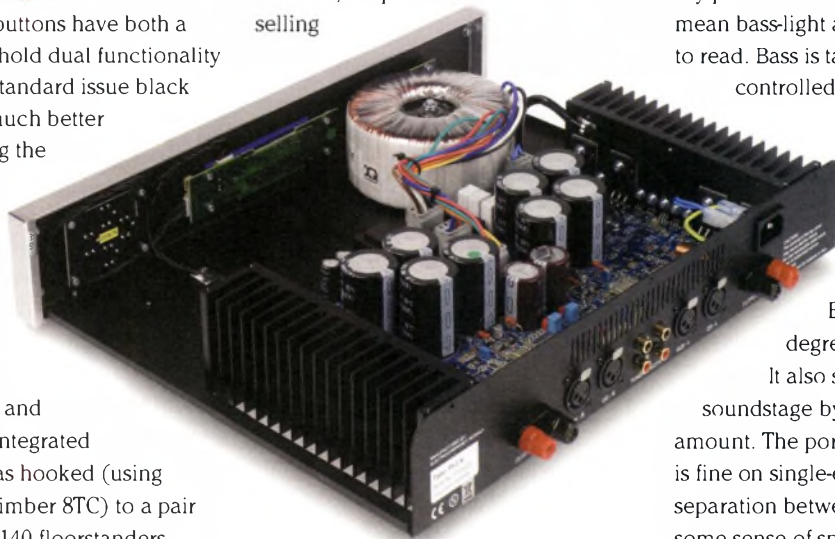
The CD player features a DVD-based transport mounted on a new, centrally located, anti-vibration mechanism. This is claimed to reduce the need for error correction, reduce the influence of external interference and run very quietly. The latter is certainly on the money; it's one of the quietest CD spinners you can get, short of resorting to a huge and heavy VRDS or CD silo found in considerably more expensive players. The data read off the disc is then fed to a Cirrus Logic 24bit/192kHz digital converter, running into a fully-balanced analogue output stage. This last runs in pure Class A.

Although the front panels of both are limited to the four-button diamond on the right hand side, there is a considerable amount of control available. No direct track access of course, but the buttons have both a press and press/hold dual functionality that helps. The standard issue black remote does a much better job of controlling the kit, even if it's not the most up-market of handsets.

This duo replaced a Cyrus CD 8 SE/PSX-R CD player and Sugden A21 SE integrated amplifier and was hooked (using a single run of Kimber 8TC) to a pair of ProAc Studio 140 floorstanders. The first reaction was, it must be said, one of disappointment. The products had been happily running in for a few days, everything should be good, but the overall sound was bland. Nothing you could necessarily pinpoint as

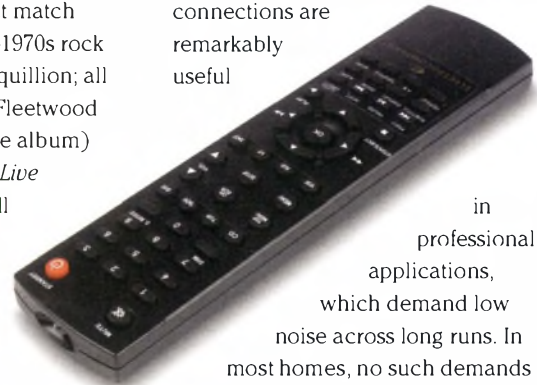
out of sorts, and very smooth and well-controlled. But bland; sort of like chicken soup, without the chicken. That said, it's very easy on the ear; the sound is almost valve-like in its sweetness and is a perfect match for those late-1960s/early-1970s rock albums that sold by the squillion; all those sweet Peter Green Fleetwood Mac cuts or like *Layla* (the album) and *The Allman Brothers Live at Fillmore East*. It was still far from emotionally gripping, though. A quick round of experimentation solved the problem.

I'd initially connected the EC duo with a single-ended cable. In desperation I replaced this with a "pair" of balanced leads; one of these XLR cables was a meter long, while the other was nearer three meters. Under any normal circumstances, that should end with being drummed out of the audiophile community, facing backwards on the horse, wearing a tunic with all the brass cut away. In defence, shops selling



matched audiophile-grade XLRs are hard to find at 9:30pm on a Sunday night, and better replacements were quickly pressed into service - because the change was significant. The reason

why XLR cables were so thin on the ground that particular Sunday night was that I'm not convinced of their efficacy in smaller audio systems. Balanced XLR connections are remarkably useful



in professional applications, which demand low noise across long runs. In most homes, no such demands are made and single-ended often sounds better. Exceptions are rare, but the Electrocompaniet PC-1 and PI-2 are definitely one.

The sound springs to life with XLR, while still retaining the smoothness and accuracy of the single-ended performance. It's extremely tidy and ordered, but not neat-freak OCD tidy; instead the sound just seems precise and has all its ducks in a row. It's a dry presentation, but that doesn't mean bass-light as it's usually taken to read. Bass is taut, deep and well controlled, capable of handling the rhythmically tight, but often wayward and overblown bass guitar on Rory Gallagher's *Live in Europe* CD with a real degree of charm.

It also seems to expand the soundstage by a not inconsiderable amount. The portrayal of imagery is fine on single-ended (with good separation between instruments and some sense of space and solidity) but it lacks the image depth and dimensionality possible from a recording like Evan Dando and Juliana Hatfield singing 'My Drug Buddy' on *Rare on Air Vol 1*. Moving over to the balanced option, the



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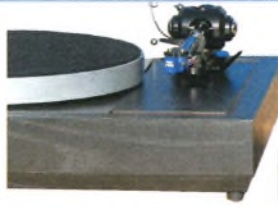
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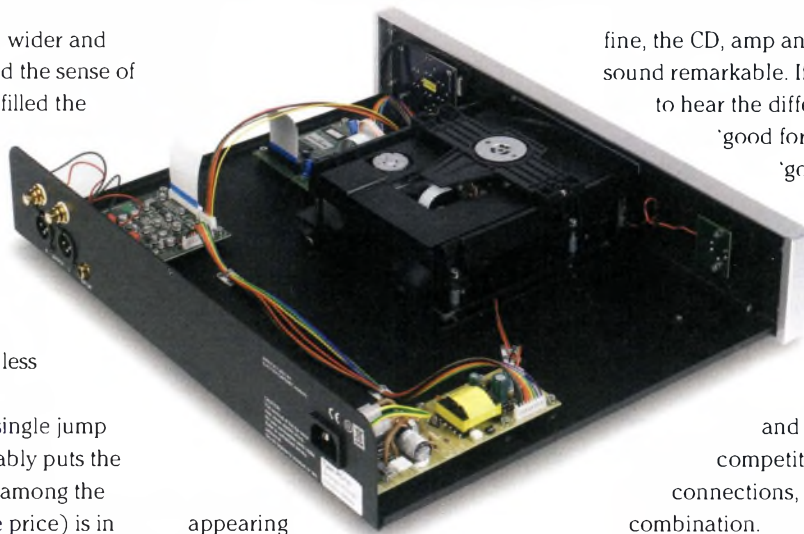
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▶ soundfield opened out, wider and behind the speakers and the sense of radio studio ambience filled the listening room. This also worked well with classical music, making the classic Klemperer/*Bruckner 6* recording from EMI's 1960s output seem less claustrophobic, but no less tightly knit.

Perhaps the biggest single jump (and the one that arguably puts the Electrocompaniet duo among the best you can buy at the price) is in the portrayal of dynamic range. This was what made the single-ended sound appear so bland, seeming to curtail the dynamic expression of a performance; but in balanced operation, it's like listening to a different combination. Where once was flat, now the swings of energy make even the likes of Rachmaninov's *Isle of the Dead*, er, come to life. It's not just an improvement in large-scale dynamics that benefits, either; the interplay between musicians on Paul Desmond's *Pure Desmond* album is extremely natural and unforced. This was perhaps the defining moment in the Electrocompaniet turn-around; the laconic 1970s jazz was deeply soporific in single-ended mode, but on XLR this was a concert you'd really like to attend.

Splitting the two proved difficult, simply because the boost in performance from balanced operation meant playing a single-ended source into the amp, or the CD into a single-ended amp, so you were listening to the Electrocompaniet products hobbled from the outset. This did show that the richness of the sound is amplifier-derived and the ordered, deep and rhythmic bass comes from the CD. Going back to the pairing as a single-ended entity showed the two were still running-in and getting better, some of the blandness to the sound



appearing to have lifted. An unusually electrically quiet evening helped too. This late-night session also highlighted one of the great arbiters of good systems; the ability to play at whisper-quiet levels as well as when the volume is pumped up. The ECs' bass does not fold under when played quietly and there was even some dynamic range to be had, although the foreshortening of low-volume dynamics is more to do with the drivers slumbering in this case. The tonal unevenness of late-night, low volume listening sessions was mercifully absent.

So, did Electrocompaniet really manage to bring the ethos of their high-end models to this entry-level range? I really think so... EC products were always praised for their chocolatey rich upper bass, extended bottom end and extremely smooth overall presentation. The only thing that's missing is that deep bottom end; although it's there as much as is needed for the sort of speakers that might be partnered with the duo. It leads to a slightly leaner overall balance, but again, with the majority of partnering speakers that will only be a good thing.

It's all very well talking about the whole being greater than the sum of the parts, but the parts still need to be very good. Here, that maxim becomes all-important; the CD and amp sound

fine, the CD, amp and XLR cables sound remarkable. If you ever want to hear the difference between 'good for the money' and 'good at any price' then try this EC duo with single-ended and then balanced. Staying single-ended, the PC-1 and PI-2 are fine competitors; with XLR connections, it's a winning combination. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### PC-1

Type: Integrated CD player  
 D/A conversion: 24bit, 192kHz  
 Audio outputs: 1pr single-ended (RCA/phono)  
 1pr balanced (XLR)  
 Output Impedance: 100 Ohms  
 Output Level (Balanced): 4.5Vrms  
 Digital Output: 1x 75 Ohm co-axial S/PDIF  
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 420 x 77 x 270mm  
 Weight: 4kg  
 Finishes: Black or silver  
 Price: £995

##### PI-2

Type: Integrated amplifier  
 Inputs: 2x line-level balanced XLR  
 2x line-level single-ended RCA/phono  
 Input Impedance: 47kOhm(balanced input)  
 Outputs: 1pr single-ended RCA/phono  
 1pr balanced XLR  
 Rated Output: 2x 100 Watts/8 Ohms  
 2x 150 Watts/4 Ohms  
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 420 x 77 x 340mm  
 Weight: 10kg  
 Finishes: Black or silver  
 Price: £1490

##### UK Distributor:

EC Distribution Ltd,  
 Tel. (44)(0)20 8893 5835

##### Manufacturer:

Electrocompaniet  
 Net. www.electrocompaniet.com



▶ detail was like CD, only better. Early samples were occasionally accused of brightness, although listening again to my original 8000PPA for this review, it didn't strike me as being excessively bright or sharp. It certainly sounded lucid and detailed, but the tonal balance did not seem lifted or spot-lit.

The new 8000PPA sounds similar, but by no means sonically identical, to the original. Tonally, it seems to be a shade smoother and fuller in the mid-band, producing a slightly more spacious sound. It seems to image better too. That said, the differences weren't huge, and if asked to audition either PPA blind, I'm not confident I could reliably say which of the two was being used. But given the choice, the extra features on the new PPA would incline me towards it, compared to the original.

I like the 8000PPA's stereo/mono switch, but the sound is filtered – on the basis that most mono recordings are very old and lacking in range. That being so, a little filtering should help clean up the sound without losing important detail. While there's logic in this approach, some mono recordings sound very clear and open and don't need filtering. It also means you can't evaluate the mono compatibility of stereo LPs.

Just like Audiolab's 8000PPA, the GCPH is the best phono-stage PS Audio have ever made. It's smaller than the Audiolab, and only offers inputs for a single turntable. However, this aside, it actually has more features. Again, it's a highly versatile unit, and should be able to work with all types of phono cartridge – MM and MC. Gain is switchable in four stages over an 18dB range, and you've the option of variable resistive loading. There's a choice of unbalanced or

balanced (XLR) outputs, and a built in volume control makes it possible to use the GCPH directly into a power amp. If you only play vinyl, this could be a very useful feature – it means you don't need a pre-amp!

There's a handy stereo/mono switch (no filtering this time), and absolute phase reversal is also offered. This is possible because the circuit used in the GCPH is a

completely balanced design. PS recommend you leave the GCPH switched on all the time. After a few hours it gets barely warm to the touch, but that's all. The mains on/off switch is incorporated into the volume control.

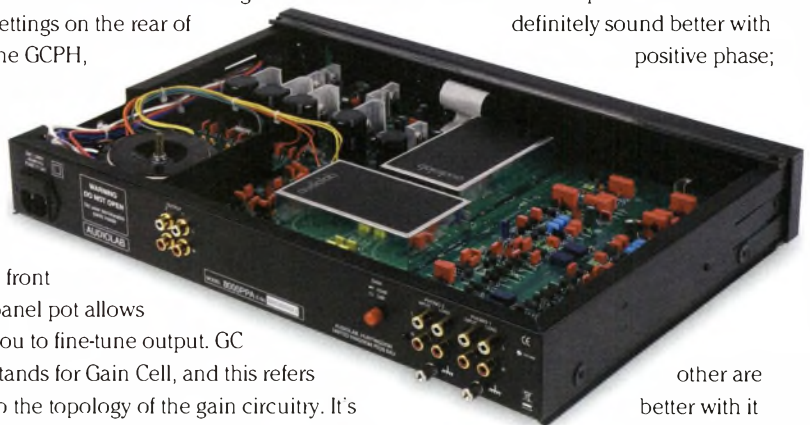
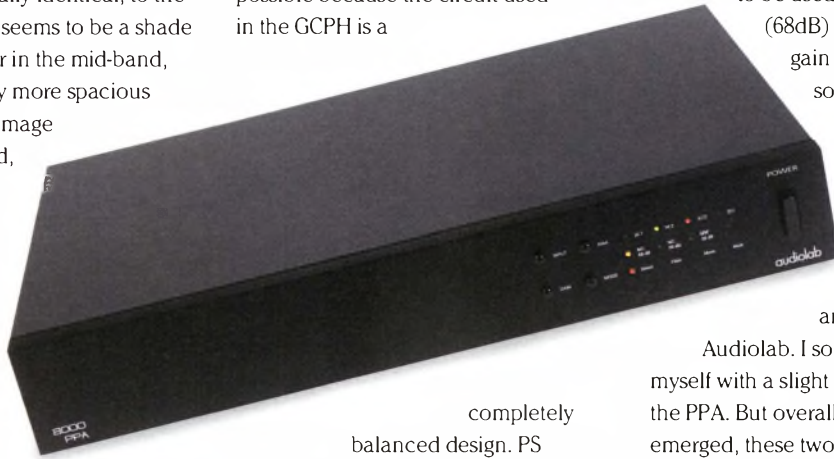
In addition to four fixed-gain settings on the rear of the GCPH,

a front panel pot allows you to fine-tune output. GC stands for Gain Cell, and this refers to the topology of the gain circuitry. It's exact nature is a secret, protected in traditional fashion – by being encased in epoxy resin, although rumour suggests that it's an i/c solution similar to the discrete circuit employed by Ayre in the KXR (see CT's review in the last issue). That would certainly explain why PS Audio recommend you use the GCPH on its highest input gain possible for best

sound quality, and then decrease the variable control if the output is too high for your set up. It's claimed the Gain Cell allows you to do this without loss of quality, presumably only possible if the overall gain of the circuit is set using discrete resistor values. The GCPH has good overload margins, enabling all but the highest output MC/MM cartridges to be used at the maximum (68dB) gain setting. Lower gain settings will take some immediacy away from the sound, making it smoother and less assertive. In use, the PS GCPH sounded just as detailed and open to the

Audiolab. I sometimes found myself with a slight preference for it over the PPA. But overall no clear pattern emerged, these two units sounding remarkably similar. Some LPs favoured the Audiolab, while others suited the PS. But, in terms of facilities, the PS offers a number of important advantages that might clinch the deal. First, it allows you to reverse absolute phase. Some LPs definitely sound better with positive phase;

other are better with it reversed. Second, you have built-in switchable cartridge loading. This can be set at 47k Ohms, 1k Ohms, 500 Ohms, or 100 Ohms. The higher the impedance setting, the more lively and open the sound will be. But if things sound too bright, selecting a lower impedance will help tame the upper frequencies. Indeed, it's more ▶



▶ than that; the sound will have more control and bass/treble extremes should integrate better. The Audiolab also makes provision for cartridge loading via parallel sockets, but you'd have to make up your own resistive loading plugs. So the PS approach is much simpler and easier. Lastly, the PS offers balanced outputs.

If you can use these, you'll get a bigger more dimensional sound, with greater depth and more powerful dynamics. You can also use the PS directly with a power amp – balanced if need be.

Both the Audiolab and PS are capable of stunning deep bass performance, with clean high treble. I was impressed

by how holographic both could sound, given the right LP, and how separate voices and instruments were kept. To all intents and purposes, both are hum-free, and hiss levels are very low. The Audiolab is cheaper than the PS, retailing for about \$559. That's less than half what

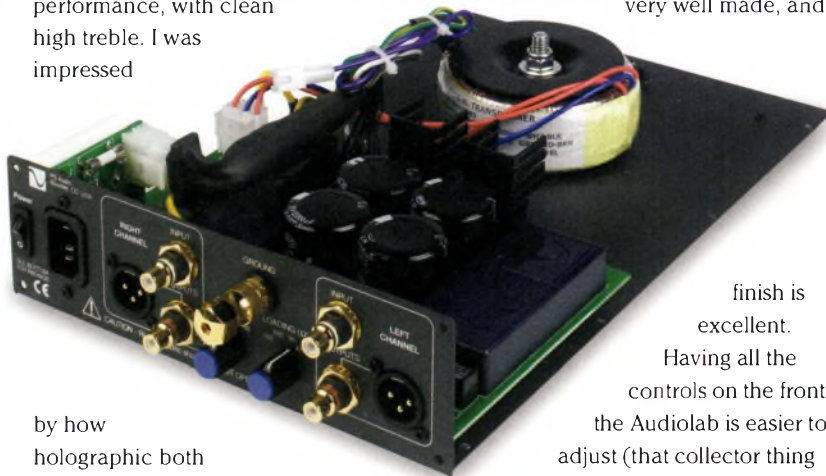
the original 8000PPA cost fifteen or so years back, and that has to make the new model an absolute bargain, especially when you factor in the additional versatility it offers. For collectors, those

running two decks or two arms, those running a mono cartridge and playing older recordings, it's a dream come true; great sound, versatility and affordable too.

The PS costs \$799, which is more, but still excellent value considering what you get with the built in loading and gain options. Both items are very well made, and

finish is excellent. Having all the controls on the front, the Audiolab is easier to adjust (that collector thing again) – the PS makes you grope around the back but offers greater one-time optimization. Sonically, I find it hard to choose between these two phono-stages. I prefer the versatility of the PS, its cartridge loading facility, and Gain

Cell variable output. But the Audiolab is cheaper and has inputs for two turntables along with a different type of versatility. It depends what you are after... However, if you are able to exploit the GCPH's balanced outputs, it pulls ahead of the 8000PPA in terms of absolute sound quality, especially when dedicated to a single cartridge. Nonetheless – not an easy choice to make: decisions – decisions! ➤



**TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS**

**Audiolab 8000PPA**

Type: Standalone phono-stage  
 Inputs: 2x MM/MC, independently configurable  
 Gain: 38, 58 or 67dB  
 Loading: User adjustable  
 Outputs: 1pr RCA/phono  
 Dimensions: 445 x 74 x 335mm  
 Price: £559

Manufacturer: IAG Group Ltd  
 Tel. (44)(0)1480 447700  
 Net. www.audiolab.co.uk

**PS Audio GCPH**

Type: Standalone phono-stage  
 Inputs: 1x MM/MC  
 Gain: Unbalanced 42/48/54/60dB  
 Balanced 48/54/60/66dB  
 Loading: 100, 500, 1K, 47K  
 Outputs: 1pr RCA/phono, 1x balanced XLR  
 Dimensions: 215 x 76 x 394mm  
 Price: £799

UK Distributor: Signature Audio Systems  
 Tel. (44)(0)20 8480 3333  
 Net. www.signatureaudiosystems.co.uk

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Stereophile Dec 2007

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Vinyl lovers tend to denigrate CD but then we find they often have rather "ordinary" players – a self-fulfilling situation, a vicious circle.

**CD:** ACCUSTIC ARTS, BEL CANTO, ESOTERIC, GAMUT, RESOLUTION AUDIO, STELLO, WADIA. **VINYL:** AESTHETICS, CLEARAUDIO, DNM, GRAHAM, THE GROOVE, LEHMANN, MICHELL, SUMIKO BLUE POINT SPECIAL, TRANSGURATION. **TUNERS:** MAGNUM DYNALAB. **AMPLIFIERS:** BEL CANTO, CAT, DNM, ESOTERIC, GAMUT, HALCRO, HOVLAND, SONNETEER, STELLO. **LOUDSPEAKERS:** AUDIO PHYSIC, DALI, ETHOS, GAMUT, NEAT, TOTEM. **CABLES:** CHORD CO., DNM, KUBALA SOSNA, NORDOST, SILTECH, VERTEX AQ. **MAINS:** Vertex AQ. **SUPPORTS:** ARCICI, STANDS UNIQUE, VERTEX AQ

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# Performance AND Value!

## Phono-stages from Audiolab and PS Audio

by Jimmy Hughes

Twenty-five years ago, the phono-stage was invariably part of the main pre-amplifier. But after the launch of CD in 1983, and the slow but inexorable move away from LP as the main music source, more and more amplifiers became line-level only. With increasing numbers of listeners only using CD, there seemed no point in forcing people to buy a phono-stage they'd never use. Also, there were technical benefits to be had by having the phono-stage as an outboard unit.

The original Audiolab 8000PPA was launched in the early 1990s, and formed part of an upmarket Audiolab separates pre/power amplification system. I reviewed it back then, and for most of the '90s (and beyond) I used it as my regular, reference phono-stage. The reasons were practical, as well as technical. I liked the sound of the Audiolab, finding it very analytical and revealing of differences. But I also liked its dual set of turntable inputs, enabling me to run two decks side by side.

The new Chinese-made 8000PPA comes courtesy of IAG – Audiolab having disappeared after being acquired by Tag McClaren (who brought out their own Tag version). This current version is virtually identical to the earlier ones, but has some useful 'extras'. These include a stereo/mono switch and switchable IEC/RIAA equalisation curves. The ability to run two turntables is retained, and like before it's possible to set gain and cartridge type (MM/MC) individually for each input.

Now, the original UK made 8000PPA sounded very sharp and highly detailed. If you enjoy vinyl because it sounds warmer and fuller than CD, the 8000PPA might not perhaps be your first choice. It sounded squeaky-clean and very crisp and you needed to use a good turntable, carefully set up, and your LPs needed to be spotlessly clean and undamaged. Nevertheless, I liked the original 8000PPA very much; it was clear and highly revealing; its crisp ▶





# AUDIO WORKSHOP NORWICH



Esoteric's new P-05 transport (left) and X-05 CD/SACD player.



## WORKSHOP NOTES 4a: SACD, Something For Nothing?

All agree that SACD is sonically a cut above CD, and despite the predictions of a number of audio scribes, SACD survives and even quietly thrives, with more SACD players & discs than ever. The question, then, is how to get it into your system effectively - with no extra cost & no extra box. Historically, a number of SACD players (Marantz SA1 and Sony XA3000ES spring to mind) have done both CD & SACD as well as their peers did just CD... the nearest thing we are going to get to a free lunch. With SACD a no-cost extra, the case for such a machine is difficult to resist and in this tradition comes the **Esoteric X-05**, a £3500 SACD players that plays CDs better than anything under £5000, & plays SACDs really rather well. Add Esoteric's peerless built quality & understated good looks and we have a machine that is already nudging its way to classic status. We have the X-05 on permanent demo at Audio Workshop Norwich so come and get yourself an audio free lunch...

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# Solid Citizen...

## The NAD M55 multi-standard digital disc player

by Alan Sircom



NAD's Masters Series (not Master Series or Master's Series... think tennis) is a high-end brand from a down-to-earth company. The range is small and select; two disc players, a tuner, a stereo integrated and a seven-channel processor/power amp. Of that range, the M55 is the 'universal player', designed for hi-fi and home cinema use.

The quotes are unfortunately necessary because time has moved on for the universal player; we now seem to have the choice of a universal player that plays high-res music, or one that plays high-res video. The M55 falls very much on the audio side of things, supporting Super Audio CD and DVD-Audio, alongside the usual slew of DVD-Video and CD formats. By way of contrast, NAD's upcoming T587 plays the latest Blu-ray HD video discs, but doesn't support SACD or DVD-Audio. Sadly, this rift between audio and video sides doesn't appear to have a resolution as yet. It's also an indicator of how eroded the price of video has become; £1,300 is a bargain for an audiophile universal player, but the £850 asked for the T587 is looked upon as being excessive. Some of this is also age-related; the M55 is very much a 2006 product, reflecting the pinnacle of development at that time; but if you want to handle SACD and especially if you have a legacy collection of DVD-Audio discs, 2006's products represent the top of the tree.

Enough of the philosophising; the M55 is styled in the company's high-end livery, befitting the Masters Series range. It's a grey-on-silver fronted heavyweight with a centre-mounted tray and minimal buttons on the front. The back of the player is every inch the video machine, with both composite and component video, S-Video, SCART (Remember SCART?), HDMI and VGA output alongside the coaxial and optical ►



▶ digital connections and fixed stereo and 5.1 channel analogue outputs. NAD is one of the front runners in implementing products into custom install solutions (doubtless a strong reason for UK distributor Armour HE to take on the distribution, given Armour's strong CI presence), and the M55 sports a switchable 12V trigger, RS232 port and an IR control jack socket, for passing remote control info at one remove.

On the audio side, the player uses Analog Devices 24-bit, 192kHz DACs to process the datastream; however, unlike the NAD M5 CD/SACD player, the M55 doesn't appear to process SACD qua SACD. So, instead of delivering a frequency response from DC to 100kHz, the M55 rolls off at a suggested 41kHz and bottoms out at a claimed 10Hz. As this renders the claimed response limits of the format lower than DVD-Audio, it suggests both are processed identically and SACD will typically come off worse under this scenario.

On the video side, the Analog Devices 12-bit, 216 MHz video DACs for Component output and the Cirrus Logic 10-bit, 27 MHz video DACs for Composite and S-Video are very handy, while the Faroudja DCDi upscales standard DVD video HDTV 720p or 1080i standards when through the HDCP-compatible HDMI lead. This represents about the pinnacle of DVD-Video development (although there are 14-bit DACs available).

Because this player has feet in both audio and video camps, it was used through two distinctly different systems. On the two-channel side,

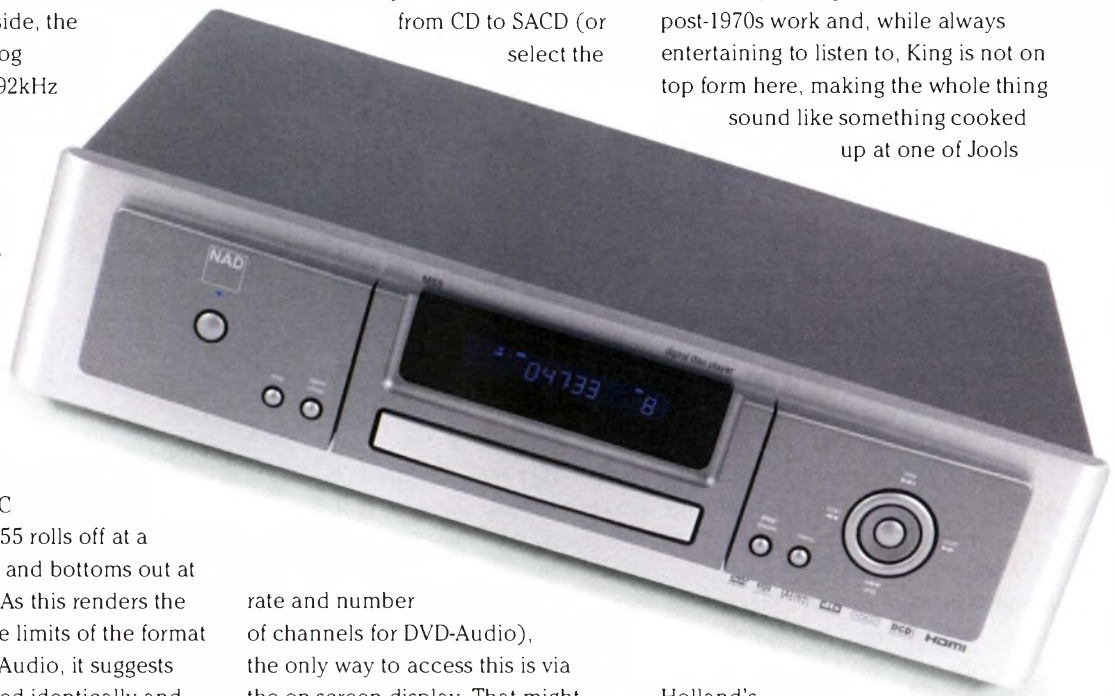
it went through a Sugden A21SE integrated amp to a pair of ProAc Studio 140 floorstanders, while on the video side it went into both the digital and analogue stages of an Onkyo receiver, and out through a septet of KEF iQ series loudspeakers (four iQ50, two iQ10 and a centre) plus the matching sub-woofer.

For a purist audio user, there is a significant issue that isn't easy to resolve. If you need to switch from CD to SACD (or select the

rate and number of channels for DVD-Audio), the only way to access this is via the on-screen display. That might not sit comfortably with those who don't want a screen in the listening room. There's not even a display on the front panel signifying how many channels are playing on a specific disc; it's not impossible to think you are listening to a two-channel disc but in fact it's playing in six-channel. Either check the OSD or hope for the best.

When the DVD-Audio/SACD debate was still raging, a universal player was the ideal answer. It also seemed the two formats split almost evenly across a musical divide, with DVD-Audio having a stronger presence in the modern rock market, SACD commanding the classical field.

With DVD-Audio out the way, it seems that was the case, because high-res rock recordings have all but disappeared. So, playing the M55 gave us a chance to have a pleasant revisit of what could have happened with rock and pop music; listening to *Driving with the King*, by Eric Clapton and BB King shows just how good the format was. This is not a good album by any means – arguably Clapton has been phoning in most of his post-1970s work and, while always entertaining to listen to, King is not on top form here, making the whole thing sound like something cooked up at one of Jools



Holland's Hootenanny gigs.

Nevertheless, the sound is beyond reproach and shows just how much we lose by going back to CD. There's a shimmer to the DVD-Audio disc that makes it seem like you are in the middle of a live event, where the CD version sounds flatter and less exciting. Put on Neil Young's *Harvest*, Randy Newman's *Little Criminals* or any of the handful of DVD-Audio discs that still remain in the collection and you get the same effect.

SACD is a less profound experience, mostly because the winner of that early 21st Century format war is better handled elsewhere. That being said, it's still a notch above ▶

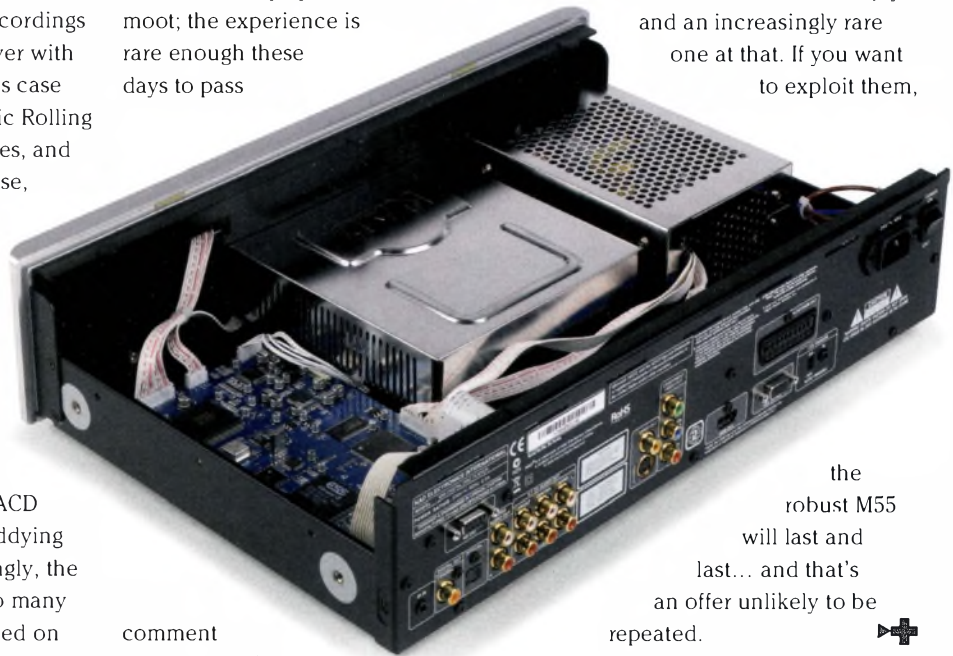
▶ regular CD sound, just not as eye-opening as some of the dedicated CD/SACD players (especially stereo CD/SACD players) from the likes of Pioneer, Sony and Yamaha. Once again, it's best to compare recordings both on the SACD and CD layer with an original CD issue, so in this case we're looking mostly at classic Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan re-issues, and *Dark Side of the Moon*. Of these, in stereo 'Hurricane' from Dylan's *Desire* album was the most insightful. The SACD layer helped isolate the fiddle player from the rest of the mix (as it was on the original LP), where the CD tended to blur this into Dylan's nasal vocal whine. The CD layer of the SACD handled this worst of all, muddying the mix still further. Interestingly, the same muddied mix applies to many CD layers of SACD when played on SACD players, but doesn't seem as profound when played on a good CD player... but we've absolutely no idea why that should be the case.

A shift back to multi-channel yielded interesting results on *Dark Side of the Moon*. Multi-channel SACD has been on a



considerable back foot in recent years, with most releases stressing the high-res stereo qualities instead. The Pink Floyd cut (from a more enlightened time when music was a vital component of many people's home lives and Quadraphonic might have stood a chance) shows what we are all missing. The sound is at once enveloping as it is disturbing (for all

the right reasons; the music sounds oppressive and brooding) and really adds to the experience. Whether this is better or worse than other multi-channel players is almost moot; the experience is rare enough these days to pass



comment for its own sake.

The M55 does have a last ace up its sleeve; it handles CD very well for a universal player. It falls very much in the high-end player camp on this one. Discs are loaded up fast, the sound is very well separated, dynamic and musically entertaining, albeit with a slight softening at the top end and a slightly woolly bass

(itself streets ahead of the peaky all-top, all-bottom sound commonly heard through surviving cheaper universals). This may not put it on a par with similarly priced CD players (that seem more detailed), but does make it a good performer nonetheless.

NAD's M55 fits will into the NAD Masters Series concept, but I can't help feeling that outside that domain, it faces some very stiff opposition that has eclipsed its performance

since its introduction, especially from stereo-only CD/SACD players on the music front and Blu-ray for HDTV. That said, playing through those DVD-Audio discs was a joy and an increasingly rare one at that. If you want to exploit them,

the robust M55 will last and last... and that's an offer unlikely to be repeated. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Universal Player
Formats Supported:	CD, SACD, DVD-V, DVD-A
Output level:	2V
Outputs:	Single ended stereo and 5.1 audio Digital coaxial, optical, HDMI, Composite video, Component Video, S-Video
Dimensions (WxHxD):	436 x 100 x 300mm
Weight:	8.5kg
Price:	£1300

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# Stepping Stone...

## The Cyrus CD 8 SE/PSX-R CD Player

by Alan Sircom



Imagine a scenario; you are in your spanky new supercar (not a Bugatti Veyron, but something fast and expensive with an animal in the logo) and pull up at the toll gates of a German Autobahn. At the gate next to you is a little Japanese hatchback and the guy is challenging you. Against your better judgement, you go for it; the roads are clear and you can do Warp Factor 9 down them. Thirty minutes and nearly 100 miles later, you realise the guy in the hot hatch is still at your side; sometimes you were ahead, other times he was. You can't help feeling it – performance-wise, you just got served by the little guy.

Welcome to the world of the Cyrus Servo Evolution.

The Cyrus CD 8 SE is the top integrated CD player from the company, and it's £1,100. Add a PSX-R power supply and you stack a further £500 on the sum, with the two half-size, die-cast 'singing shoeboxes' now taking up a single shelf in the rack. Nevertheless, at £1,600, the full Cyrus digital banana barely scrapes the high-end CD player firmament from a price perspective.

There's more to high-end than price. And it's here where the Cyrus CD 8 SE shines. The Servo Evolution side of things is a bold move on the company's part. Cyrus dispenses with the usual off-the-shelf laser servo mechanism used in almost all CD transports; it's a stumbling block of the high-end – the mechanics of the transport might be made from materials only found in Star Trek and stealth fighters, the tray and disc clamp could be forged from gold mined in the bowels of Mount Doom and the whole transport could be welded onto a chassis so heavy that light itself could not escape its clutches, but the little laser that reads data off the disc and the motors that move it into place cost pennies and are identical to those found inside £20 CD portables, in the auto-changer in your car boot and cheapo CD-ROM drives. This is all delightfully hidden from public consumption by calling the transport an OEM device. ▶



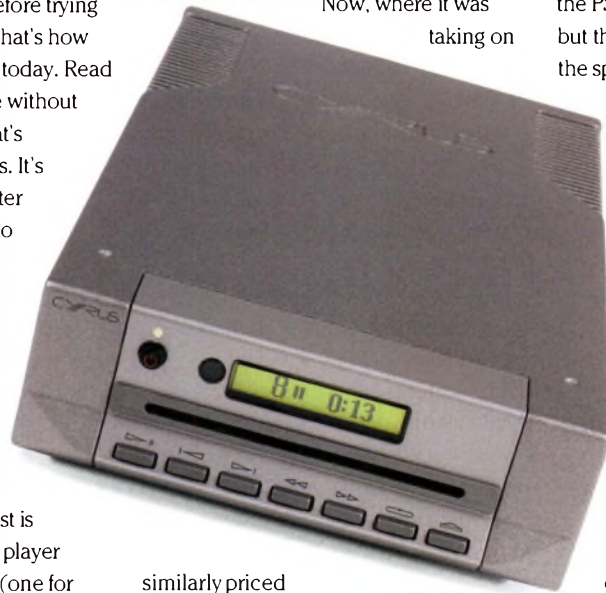
► Cyrus is virtually unique in not going down the OEM route. Instead, they have sourced a disc loader, laser and motors – and then written custom software – to produce a less-compromised CD transport dedicated for high-end audio use. This allows the laser to be precisely tracked into position by software, instead of a disc scrabbling round for position using a servo-control system. A simple experiment explains this well. Read this paragraph twice; the first time by reading a few words, then randomly looking around the rest of the page before trying to read the next few words – that's how your CD looks for digital data today. Read the paragraph again, this time without skipping around the page; that's what the Servo Evolution does. It's arguable whether this is a better plan than reading the data into a whopping great buffer (a la Meridian), but in comparing like for like, that's an order of magnitude improvement in on-the-fly disc-reading accuracy over the standard CD transport mechanism.

After this excitement, the rest is relatively straightforward. The player has two toroidal transformers (one for digital, one for analogue), feeding 11 separate and regulated power supplies and a built-in 24-bit DAC with re-clocking to help reduce data jitter. It comes with an MC-Bus connection (for connectivity in an all-Cyrus system)... and if all that sounds like the previous CD 8, well done. The Servo Evolution upgrade takes place on the previous player platform, and that allows owners of the last generation models to have their products revamped. Cyrus also prints a roadmap of upgrades to Cyrus-based systems, including the aforementioned PSX-R, a DAC X converter (with another PSX-R as an option) and finally the dedicated transport/DAC/pair of power supplies, four-box grande fromage system as the best Cyrus can do. We had a CD 8 SE, along with one PSX-R and a DAC X to play with.

Starting with the CD 8 SE on its own, the player has the ability to stun you with its musicality and integrity. For a while... then you become aware of the typical Cyrus etched midrange and glassy tops. It's not a deal-breaker necessarily, but is something that comes along. Nevertheless, the musical performance alone places it at the very top of the CD players you can buy for the money and would happily take on a two grand player. That makes it a solid recommendation.

Then plug in a PSX-R. Oh boy...

Now, where it was taking on



similarly priced players and trading blows, suddenly it's capable of not sounding outclassed by players costing twice as much. Or more.

The upgrade frees up an already free sounding, er, sound. And puts paid to the limitations in the mids and top in the process. So what you get left with is a remarkably natural sounding player that digs out a sublime amount of info from the disc. Realising that the sound of the CD 8 SE on its lonesome could tip over into brightness, the pairing got subjected to some of the brightest sounding discs around. Think Albert 'Iceman' Collins eviscerating a Fender Telecaster kind of brightness. This won't just highlight brightness in a player; it'll pick it out like a searchlight grazing the night sky, looking for Heinkels. You'd struggle to get

past track one on the solo CD 8 SE, but with the PSX-R in tow, you can happily play about four tracks in a row without dismay. Given this album – *The Ice Age Cometh* – can stump anything this side of a Zanden and even the Audio Research could only cope with about seven tracks before fatigue set in, it shows the Cyrus combo is up to something good.

Imagery too is improved in the upgrade. The baseline soundstage is wide, but pitched forward, like the sound is just in front of your lap. With the PSX-R in place, the width remains, but the sound drops back to between the speakers. There's a good sense of solidity to the mix, but this is not substantially improved in the upgrade. Nevertheless, images appeared nicely rooted and 'there' without sounding oversized or ponderous.

The big plus to the Cyrus combo is the way it handles dynamic range. The CD 8 SE is already a dynamic sounding player, but it's not 'obvious' in its presentation of dynamic shading. Add in the PSX-R and the already dynamic sound comes alive, with boundless enthusiasm for bumping along to Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* and yet the sort of subtlety that can follow the delicate interplay between the rest of the band when Mike Stern goes off on a ten-minute jazz noodle.

What sets the CD 8 SE and PSX-R apart from its peers is the seamless coherence it has. Music knits itself together beautifully when played through the Cyrus; even when the original can decay into a bit of a mess. The Fall is a perfect example of this, because some of their music can sound like a Transit full of instruments being thrown down stairs, but is actually extremely controlled... just listening to The Fall is an acquired taste. The Cyrus duo helps that acquisition process by making sense out of all that near chaos and presenting it in a more ordered form; not remixed or simplified, just ordered. ►

► Articulation of voices is good; not outstanding, but for the money, it's excellent. Eminem is a perfect tool... for this; his ability to spit out 50,000 words a minute means you can judge quality by determining how many words per recording you can focus on. And it's here that you begin to realise why the Cyrus duo is such a good player. Its ability to decode voices is far beyond the performance of its peers, and yet you are now so used to the best-grade performance from the player, you realise you are comparing it in-head with players costing far, far more.

Let's be a bit sensible for a moment. This player will not make you want to box up your Audio Research and will not make you start phoning up Salisbury to take back that big Naim CD player. But it does sniff the same heady air as those lofty superdecks. And in many ways, it toes a fine line between those two extremes; it has much of the dynamic shading and contrast of a good ARC player with a lot of the rhythmic energy of a fine Naim spinner. As such, used as head of a five-grand hi-fi family, the Cyrus CD 8 SE/PSX-R combination is not simply a must hear, it's virtually the obvious, default choice.

The upgrade in performance happened again with the DAC X too, although this time it was less profound, it must be said. Turning the Cyrus duo into a trio made a sound that was at once more refined, more accurate and altogether more 'high end' in approach. That being said, it did start to have a touch of the 'beauteous' about the presentation at this point, as the refinement came at the expense of some of the drive to the sound. Once again, not a stumbling block or a deal breaker, but something that will not appeal to those whose tastes begin with AC/DC and end with Lynyrd Skynyrd. Having run out of shoeboxes, there was no second PSX-R or CD Xt SE to make those last two upgrades, but it seems likely there's still some more

to go before Cyrus hits the limits.

What's the downside? The boxes are well-made, although the Cyrus remote is a cheesy plastic affair. There's a lack of the more esoteric connections – XLR, ST and AES/EBU are not in the plan. And – perhaps most importantly – the transport mech has a strange quirk when ejecting discs; the disc pops out of the slot, then returns about half an inch or so. Cyrus appears to do this because it's easy to eject instead of stop the player and this allows the user to reload the disc from an armchair. However, it also makes the discs difficult to extract without gripping some of the playing face of the disc in the process. Note however, none of those downsides are intrinsic to the music. And that's why the CD 8 SE deserves to be considered in amongst the high-end community; not as a poor relation, but as a true peer.

The player's roll out seems to have been marred by a touch of interweb foot-stomping, with some volubly complaining about the mechanism's reliability and ability to play discs. Having put this particular sample of the player through its paces with a variety of discs of varying levels of thickness, age and scratchiocity, we could find no such trickiness. It simply played disc after disc, without a grumble unless



the disc was grizzled beyond all readability.

Contrary to the opinion of some, hi-fi reviewers do not sit in splendid isolation, issuing forth our musings from ivory towers. The reality is that we often meet up at conferences, shows and at manufacturers offices... And when we meet, the talk comes round to music and hi-fi. The Cyrus SE project has been the quiet gossip of those press

jollies and happenings. Invariably one or two of the pack have tried the product in some guise and compare notes. Rarely has there been such universal agreement, universal praise for a product. Perhaps even more rare is the statement 'If Cyrus try and take it back, I'll have to buy one'. That's a '... from my cold, dead hands' moment.

From these industry gossip moments, one other thing has become clear. The transport-only version – the Cyrus CD Xt SE – is even better. We'll have to see... but as it stands, the CD 8 SE is a fine player that can turn into a superb one with a second singing shoebox. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### CD 8 SE CD Player

Type:	Integrated CD player
D/A Converter:	24 bit current output with fully balanced analogue filter topology
Transport:	Cyrus SE Isolated slot loading mechanism with high bandwidth optical pick-up
Analogue Outputs:	2prs single-ended RCA/phono
Audio Output:	2.1V rms
Digital Outputs:	1x co-axial SPDIF 1x TosLink optical
Communications:	MC-BUS™ System BUS
Dimensions (W x H x D):	215 x 78 x 360 (mm)
Weight:	3.5 kg
Finishes:	Quartz Silver or Brushed Black
Price:	£1,100

##### PSX-R Power Supply

Type:	Optional external power supply
Dimensions (W x H x D):	215 x 78 x 360 (mm)
Weight:	6 kg
Finishes:	Quartz Silver or Brushed Black
Price:	£500

Manufacturer:  
Cyrus Audio Ltd  
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# Open Book...

## The Wadia 170i Transport

by Chris Binns



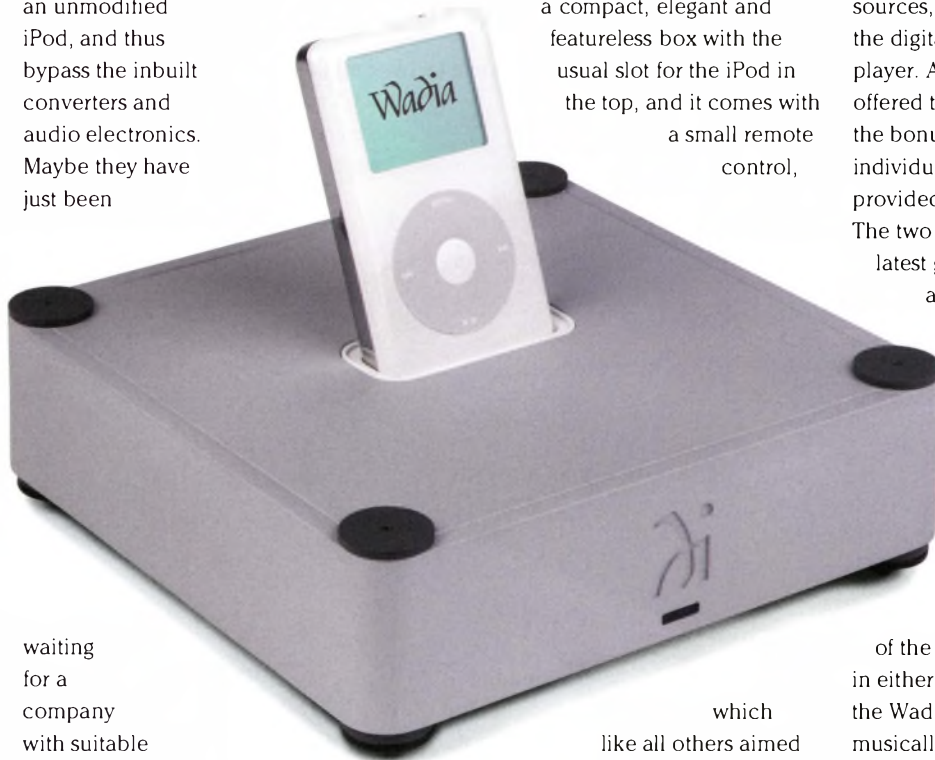
In an age where we are now comparing the sonic differences between hard and flash drives and all sorts of other computer related equipment it should come as no surprise that the ubiquitous iPod keeps rearing its ugly little head as a source of music. While no one would deny that it has been a runaway success as a mobile music player, and in conjunction with the wide range of available docks has become a serious competitor to all sorts of mini systems for general use in the home, it might seem a little absurd to consider it in the context of a more 'serious' hi-fi system. But looked at from a different perspective, the iPod is nothing more than a compact hard (or possibly flash) drive, a storage device for digital music files whose performance is dependant on the quality of the information, how it is put there and more importantly how it is retrieved. The fact that it has some inbuilt audio and control hardware is a bonus, as is the inclusion of the iTunes software. Being a Mac user I have not tried the alternatives, but despite the occasional frustrating glitch and the continuing flow of new versions available, I find it quite fun to use, particularly with all the available artwork to accompany the albums, and for anyone who has indulged in Nick Hornby type organising and classification of their music collection, it is a dream come true.

But for all that, it has only ever been a secondary source of music for the home (as well as travelling and in the car) where it duplicates some of my CD and record collection, and despite various docks around the house the iPod has never found its way into my main system for listening, with the exception of offering a backdrop for the odd gathering or two.

The Wadia 170i could well change that. I'm not exactly sure whether it's down to Apple being particularly picky about licensing (it wouldn't



be the first time) but the Wadia is the first and at the moment (as far as I know) only dock to access the digital data stream directly from an unmodified iPod, and thus bypass the inbuilt converters and audio electronics. Maybe they have just been



waiting for a company with suitable credentials to show an interest; certainly Wadia has the heritage and experience of first class digital engineering, innovative and above all thorough in their approach. While I cannot claim to be an expert on the subject, I have done a certain amount of experimenting with digital sources both domestically by ripping CD's in various formats, and handling files that have come hot from the mix of projects that I have been involved with. My suspicion that the optical drive involved with CD (and I guess SACD has to be included) might be one of the key compromises involved in digital playback has often been confirmed, when I have listened to music which has bypassed this particular stage. While the iPod might have been sacrosanct to digital intervention, the output from a computer is not.

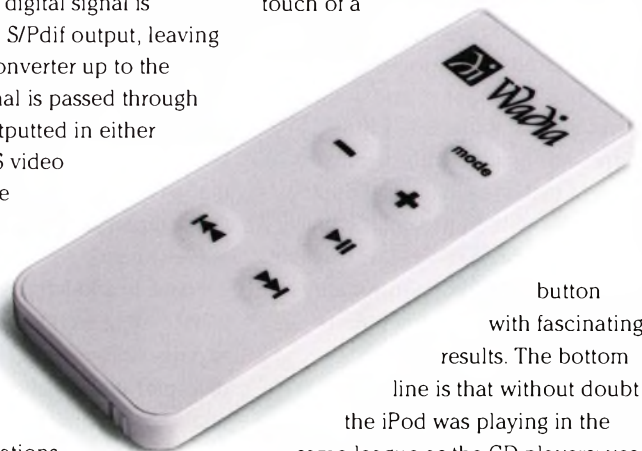
Alan Sircom has already outlined

the background and functionality of the Wadia in Issue 61 so I will not go into great detail here. Suffice to say, the 170i transport is a compact, elegant and featureless box with the usual slot for the iPod in the top, and it comes with a small remote control,

which like all others aimed at the iPod, can be a little slow. The standard audio outputs render a performance much like any other dock, as what you are hearing is the audio output from the iPod. The Wadia does not have its own internal converters. The digital signal is accessed via an S/Pdif output, leaving the choice of converter up to the user. Video signal is passed through the unit and outputted in either component or S video form. If only one could have the iTunes artwork displayed from this port, that would be the icing on the cake...

Two configurations immediately sprang to mind in the context of my system. The resolution Opus 21 has a digital

input that can be accessed from the remote control, and the versatile Cyrus DAC XP pre-amp enabled further experimentation with other sources, fed for the most part from the digital output of a Densen B440 player. Although the Resolution option offered the most direct comparison, the bonus of being able to trim individual input levels on the Cyrus provided the most interesting results. The two iPods that I used were the latest generation Classic 160 Gig and an 8 gig Nano, significant in that the Nano employs a flash drive with no moving parts (and for reasons I've yet to fathom was not happy with larger files as there was always an annoying four or five seconds silence into the track when playing). Most of the music material on these was in either AIFF files or Apple lossless; the Wadia ruthlessly exposed MP3 as musically vacuous and little better than noise in the context of a serious system. With some CDs ripped using Accuraterip and other similar software aiming toward bit-perfect copies, I was able to play the same track and swap sources at the touch of a



button with fascinating results. The bottom line is that without doubt, the iPod was playing in the same league as the CD players; yes there were differences between the two mediums, but coming in from the cold you would be hard pressed to ▶

► identify which was which.

Over a period of a few weeks there were a number of aspects that were a little unexpected. I often felt that the Nano sounded fractionally 'cleaner' than the larger hard drive Classic, and I was

the way through one evening with the Wadia feeding the Opus 21. The sound was vibrant, lively and quite engaging; quite capable of keeping my attention for nearly an hour while I

by the world it opens up – and the Wadia definitely delivers the keys to the kingdom. And here's a thought; the Wadia with its flexibility provides an interesting alternative to a hard disc/server system for moving music around the house and networking, and it won't be out of date six months after you have bought it. And best of all, it might just have fitted in all those Christmas stockings. ►+



surprised at how little difference there was between the Apple lossless compressed files and the full bandwidth AIFF type; I had always considered the former to be half way to an MP3 which it is in terms of size, but sound quality was only mildly inferior to full uncompressed files via the Wadia. Direct comparisons with the CD players suggested that the Wadia/iPod combination was doing a good job of preserving the recording's dynamics, and at times I wondered if it had just a little more cutting edge with percussion. Against that, it seemed as if the CD was better able to project the music away from the speakers and present greater depth and dimensionality to music, thus rendering it more believable and involving.

To put an end to the frantic A – B comparisons, I tried a slightly different approach by purchasing a CD that I had not heard before, Grace Jones new album Hurricane. I put it on the iPod and listened to it all

listened to the whole album. But playing the CD changed my view about the production; with the Wadia combination I was convinced that I was listening to a rather hard, Pro Tools engineered mix, an opinion that changed while listening to the original disc. It was slightly warmer with less electronic edge and seemed to flow more convincingly, with a more natural sense of musical timing. But to put this into perspective, these are the kind of differences that I often hear between CD players, and the fact that an iPod fed device is capable of the comparison is something of an achievement.

I have to admit that I find the 170i a fascinating product. It is difficult to judge in its own right, as so much of its performance depends on the quality of the audio files it is fed and the DAC it is used with, but on this showing it would suggest a great deal of potential. Ultimately, it might only be a portal, but any gateway is defined

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	iTransport with digital output
Digital Output:	1x S/PDIF Coax (RCA)
Analog Outputs:	1x Unbalanced (RCA)
Video:	1x set Component Outputs, 1x S-Video Output
Dimensions (WxHxD):	203 x 68 x 203mm
Finish:	Silver Aluminum
Weight:	1.1 kg
Price:	£349

**UK Distributor:**  
The Musical Design Company  
Tel. (44)(0)1992 573030  
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# Extending The Envelope...

## The Epoz AktiMate Mini loudspeakers

by Chris Binns



While the Wadia 170i creates the genuine possibility of using an iPod as a source to contend with (or, shock horror, as an alternative to) your CD player for serious 'high end' listening, in terms of the mainstream i.e. non hi-fi consumers, Apple's success story has indelibly changed the face of both popular culture and the way in which people listen to music. To go with the stratospheric number of iPods sold, there is an immense and diverse market for every conceivable kind of accessory, a large proportion of which is made up from amplifiers, speakers and docks to provide domestic sound systems that must be presenting a serious challenge to the more conventional – for which read, old fashioned – mini systems when it comes to sales. There are a number of such systems that achieve quite respectable sound quality, and certainly one or two that offer a very large sound from a diminutive package. But I would hazard a guess that the AktiMate was conceived to bridge the gap between the one-piece docks and a more conventional hi-fi system. As such, what you get is a pair of bookshelf size loudspeakers, one of which contains all the electronics while the other is a conventional passive enclosure, an idea first seen with the Wharfdale Active Diamonds some when in the mid-eighties. (Bear in mind though that these are not active in the sense of separate amps for high and low drivers.)

The 'active' one incorporates a dock for an iPod that sits rather awkwardly on top, and in certain situations might seem a little vulnerable. Built in China, they have been designed in Australia by a company called Epoz, who are the distributors for Creek and Epos in that corner of the world. So it should come as no surprise



▶ to discover that the drivers are fundamentally of Epos design, built under licence and consisting of a 130mm bass/mid unit coupled to a 25mm metal dome tweeter. The electronics package has been designed by Mike Creek, the man responsible for wringing the last bit of available performance from a National

for charging purposes and a video output. The small remote control covers all the usual functions, and probably through no fault of the AktiMate (it seems to

system and it soon becomes evident that there is a lot more on offer. For a start, positioning them too close to

a wall results in an overblown and indistinct bass performance, and unlike most docks you can put a reasonable amount of distance between the cabinets with obvious benefits. Replace the cheap supplied cable with something a little more respectable, even some basic 79 strand, and although this might sound a little

over the top for a iPod system, adding suitable supports under the cabinets will make a hell of a difference. I ended up with some unbranded cones with a little Blu Tak.

With these details in place, it soon becomes obvious that the AktiMate is operating on a different level to most of the docks that I have heard.

be an affliction of many iPod docks) is a little bit slow and unresponsive, but gets there in the end.

While setting up is as simple and straightforward as you would expect, being more hi-fi than dock. the AktiMate responds well to a bit of tweaking. On first hearing, the sound is respectable enough, but would seem to offer little or no benefit over much neater and less intrusive designs, such as the Bose that sits in my kitchen and often impresses people with the sheer amount of noise that it can produce from such a small package. But treat the AktiMate with the same kind of consideration that you would a hi-fi

semiconductor output chip, forcing it to deliver a healthy 40 Watts per channel, fed from a digitally controlled, analogue volume control. The finish is good (the review pair came in a high quality white lacquer) and the cabinets feel reassuringly solid and well constructed with a large rear firing port. Which incidentally, you should not use as a carrying handle...

An array of alternative inputs is provided for connection to computers, CD players and anything else (such as gaming consoles). There is also a separate USB socket



There are quite a number of designs that can produce impressive results in terms of their bass extension and volume capabilities, especially related to their size. But the truth is that they all seem ▶

▶ to suffer from a rather 'processed' sound, which of course is usually the case. The difference with the AktiMate(s?) is that it sounds far more natural and unforced, and unlike most docks that tend to produce lots of headache inducing, over

together with the iPod, does form an entertaining and very listenable system. Adding a CD player via the auxiliary inputs shows just how good the speakers are; they're

in a study, second home or student bedroom. Add a CD player and the quality issues disappear – but personally I can't help feeling that's somewhat against the AktiMate ethos. Of course, that's your

decision to make: iPod dock on steroids or real hi-fi on the cheap? The choice, as they say, is yours. ▶+



EQ'd bass, they are far easier to listen to for an extended period of time.

They are capable of quite decent levels, again without sounding forced or strained, with a surprising amount of detail and a soundstage that exhibits good projection away from the speakers, something that the majority of docks just cannot do. On a less positive note, the volume control has limited resolution at its lower end, making quiet listening difficult, hopefully a situation that can be rectified by the manufacturers. Set up in my office and playing music as we speak, I would have to say that the AktiMate,

actually not far from what I would expect a good integrated amp and separate loudspeakers to be capable of.

ActiMate does not have the portability or sheer elegance of some of the more sophisticated docks out there (the B&W Zeppelin being the prime example) and it is possible that it might not be as immediately impressive. But from the point of view of playing music, it demonstrates that there is still a line to be drawn between ghetto blasters and good hi-fi, a line the AktiMate is definitely on the right side of. With an iPod source it might fall short of real hi-fi, but it is compact, convenient and ideal for the sort of fixed installation required

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Self-powered loudspeaker with iPod dock
Inputs:	1x line-level (RCA/phono) 1x 3.5mm mini-jack 1x iPod dock
Outputs:	1 pr line-level (RCA/phono) Video & USB
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm aluminium dome 1x 130mm bass/mid unit
Amplifier Power:	40 Watts/channel
Voltage:	User adjustable 120/240v
Dimensions (WxHxD):	185 x 300 x 210mm
Weight:	12kg pr
Finishes:	Gloss white & black
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08

Music Works



# A Systematic Solution...

## Cairn, Sugden and Focal get the works from AudioWorks

by Steve Dickinson

I'll declare an interest, here. The AudioWorks is my 'local' hi-fi dealer. Not, strictly, my nearest, but the one I go to when I need something, or just fancy a coffee and some shop-talk. As a *Plus* neophyte a few years ago, RG introduced me to Larry Ogden, founder/owner, at a Manchester show with a cryptic "I think you'll find their approach interesting": and very instructive, as it happens. Larry and his colleague Ed Needham are single-minded in their requirements for good hi-fi. There is but one underlying philosophy, a constant search for better musical communication. To that end they choose their brands with care and a rigorous audition; if you walk into The AudioWorks with a shortlist based on 5-star magazine reviews you might quickly walk out again disappointed (and not a little non-plussed), but if you linger a little and place your trust in their judgement, you might just walk out with something as amazing as it was unexpected.

Their preferred choice of high-end hardware is uncompromisingly small but eclectic: dCS, Spectral, Accuphase, Avalon, Focal, Cairn, Peak Consult, Electrocompaniet, err, apart from some similarly esoteric vinyl-playing stuff, that's about it. The budget-conscious will be offered Creek, Sugden and more Focal, or perhaps Monitor Audio – and entry-level is similarly restricted to a scattering of hand-picked brands, principally Onkyo and Harman Kardon. I do wonder if other dealers pick up trade from AudioWorks

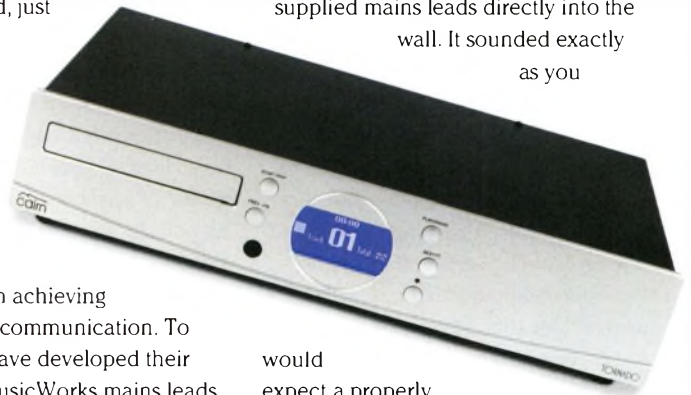
prospects, purely because they carry more of the brands people expect to see. Larry is philosophical about this; in his eyes his customers enjoy music and he is a facilitator not a businessman. The argument is persuasive – there's precious little selling, the music sells itself – and it seems to work; Larry's clientele is fiercely loyal.

But actually, it's more than that. The guys at The AudioWorks have discovered, just as RG and most of us at *Plus Towers* have discovered, the absolutely crucial role mains, cables and supports have in achieving proper musical communication. To that end, they have developed their own range of MusicWorks mains leads and distribution blocks and introduced some rather sophisticated support systems which originally started with improvements to the Quadraspire range, but which have now reached a level whose results are far from subtle. The reason for my visit today, apart from drinking my own weight in Larry's rather good coffee, is to see their approach in action, and hear for myself what they have achieved.

We start with one of their typical recommended systems. A Cairn Tornado CD player, Sugden A21a integrated amp, and Focal 806V loudspeakers. Interconnects are Chord

Chrysalis, speaker cabling Chord Rumour: all-in, a carry-away price of about £2850 for the boxes, perhaps £200 more for the cables. This is not entry-level; it's a properly sorted system that implies a certain level of musical commitment from the purchaser, who then has a right to expect a decent-sounding system in return. We sat it on a Quadraspire rack, with attractive cherry-wood shelves, and plugged the supplied mains leads directly into the wall. It sounded exactly

as you



would expect a properly thought-through system from a reputable dealer to sound, absolutely fine. I'd be happy to take it home, or recommend the combination to a friend, but...

Larry's experience mirrors what we have been finding: address the mains, system, supports and signal cabling, and reap the benefits. We added the \$600 MusicWorks ReFlex 6-way mains block, leaving everything else alone, and went back to the music. Tighter, more tuneful bass and better timing gave an improved sense of musical flow, but it wasn't just the bottom end that improved; there was more feeling ▶

► of life, a suggestion of vibrancy missing from the vanilla setup. Nina Simone was perkier, the Tord Custavsen Trio had more tension and a sense of poise that had been absent previously. Nor were we micro-analysing these effects. If you can appreciate the benefits of hi-fi separates at all, you'd easily hear this.

Replacing the supplied kettle-leads with a pair of MusicWorks IEC+ mains leads (£100 each) repeated the trick: further improvements to the bass and timing, with an undeniable cleaning-up at the top end as a side-benefit. Now, those tiny micro-dynamic changes, the pulse that pushes a piece of music along, that tells you you're listening to a real person playing an instrument with skill and subtlety, were presented in a natural, entirely un-contrived way. It was like listening to a decent tribute band being shouldered off the stage and replaced by the real thing. Now it was possible to hear that when a musician played just off the beat he was clearly doing so deliberately, not because his timing was duff; Pete Rodriguez' 'I Like It Like That' a bouncy, cheeky Latin number, really brought out the sense of fun. Party time! But it's not just about bounce and life. Adding a £150 Siltech Paris interconnect fleshed out many of the aspects I look for in a decent system. Kate Rusby's voice was simply more gorgeous, with better timbre and more fully rounded. Guitars had more attack, more of a leading edge to notes but also more depth of decay. Add these tonal colour benefits to the previous improvements and the system was really starting to come alive.

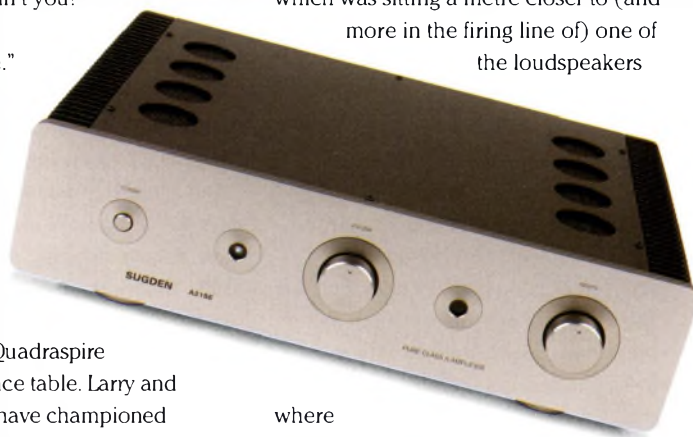
But, there's a problem starting to emerge. There's a bloom, an edge, that wasn't apparent before we started messing. Larry's view is that each improvement to the system allows more musical energy into the room, which is generally a Good Thing (it's what we're paying for, remember?) but unless you can manage that energy properly, there will come a point where what

should be an improvement may actually make things worse. This is where the experience and advice of somebody like Larry is essential. I find myself wondering how many disappointed music lovers have convinced themselves that mains leads, interconnects or supports don't improve matters, but simply change them, because their last cable upgrade enhanced one aspect of performance, but made obvious a flaw somewhere else in the system. In this case, my first thought was that we were starting to get problems from the room. Larry gave me a look, a sort of 'you'd think so, wouldn't you?' look...

"It's the table."

We duly removed the Quadraspire wood and aluminium rack, and replaced it with about £600-worth of Quadraspire Acrylic Reference table. Larry and his colleagues have championed the use of acrylic materials in system supports for some time now. Their MusicWorks operation is behind the entire Quadraspire acrylic range, from the Reference Table, through the much-lauded QX600 speaker stands, to the dinky little QX Silencer equipment feet and the MusicWorks Reflex mains block – which is also made from acrylic. In some ways it's a wonder material, sonically-speaking. Very stable, very strong and very inert, tap it and you get a dull thud; its self-damping properties are quite remarkable and it is this which makes it so amenable to use in hi-fi system supports. Whilst it definitely has a character, careful shaping and construction can minimize it, while its physical characteristics mean that musical energy doesn't easily find its way back into the equipment, so microphony becomes much less of an issue. It also looks pretty cool, which helps.

With the acrylic-shelved table in place, immediately there's less congestion, less boom; bass definition and overall timing have again moved up a significant notch: Kate Bush's 'Jig of Life' really lives up to its name - here were musicians playing for their lives, or so it seemed. I found this part of the exercise particularly illuminating. Problems I'd previously have associated with room modes simply went away. Larry's view is that actual airborne vibrational energy is much the lesser part of microphony. To prove the point, the system was now on a support which was sitting a metre closer to (and more in the firing line of) one of the loudspeakers



where the previous table had been set somewhat further away. That previous table, remember, was not just some generic coffee table, but a well-regarded audiophile support platform.

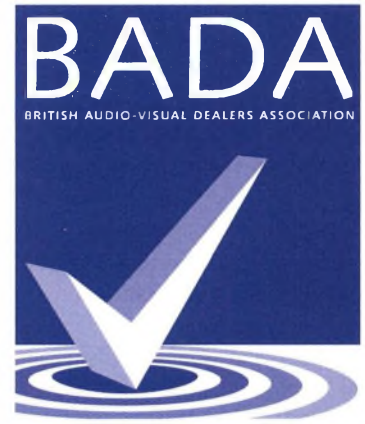
Now we'd got that bit sorted, we revisited the mains, substituting the MusicWorks IEC+ mains leads with MusicWorks ReCoil mains leads. At £200 apiece, they are twice the price of the entry-level MusicWorks leads, but still fairly inexpensive, as these things go. We immediately noticed a lift in the sense of airiness and better delineation of the musical components, amounting to an even more palpable sense of living players working in a musical space, which all serves to underline Larry's view that you have to spend time and effort on getting these fundamentals as well-sorted as your budget will allow, or you're not really hearing what your ►



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► system can deliver, given half a chance. But, and this is crucial, you need to take a structured approach. Every change we'd made to the system so far had been deliberately chosen to improve matters, or address a problem shown up by the previous improvement. This is by no means a random upgrade path. If we'd changed to the better mains leads before we changed the table, the support problems would have been even more obvious.

A Siltech Classic 330i interconnect, at about £600, replaced the Siltech Paris and brought with it a richer, more fulsome sound while also reducing sibilance. We're tinkering a little now, the previous interconnect was still performing strongly but Larry wanted to show me that there was still more performance to wring from the system. I was starting to feel that, perhaps, the £500 Focal loudspeakers were approaching the limits of their capabilities. Interestingly, my suggestion to upgrade the loudspeaker cable to, £70 per metre, Siltech London didn't bring about the results I expected. We got the anticipated improvements in tonal colour and general richness, but we lost a

significant amount of drive and push, a drier bass balance sapped some power and impact from the music. Not a positive outcome at all, and indicative of the fact

that price is not necessarily the most significant criterion for performance.

So far, then, we've spent a little over £2000 on upgrades to a £2850 system, we haven't changed the boxes one iota – and it is absolutely singing its heart out. Readers of a nervous disposition might wish to take a break at this point, because this is where it starts to get weird. If you contribute to any of the internet forums, gather yourself some bile and fire up the computer.

Larry brought out an acrylic support shelf they have developed as a drop-in replacement to the conventional Quadraspire acrylic shelf, the only difference being the shape. It is made from the same gauge of acrylic with the same machining detail for the uprights, and the same overall external dimensions. But instead of the Quadraspire's spreadeagled-man-in-a-duvet-cover shape, this MusicWorks shelf is, well, guitar shaped. The familiar figure-8 double-bubble of an acoustic guitar sound box rendered in flat, transparent acrylic. It's even got the hole in the middle, albeit a rather larger one. We put it on the rack, in place of the top shelf and put some more music on.

While we cleared up the coffee I'd just sprayed on the wall of the listening room, I asked Larry how he could explain such a profound difference. He's honest enough to admit that they have no hard scientific measurements to explain their results, just a feeling that perhaps the shape of the shelves, particularly the straight lines and tight corners, was influencing the sound, which led to some experimentation.

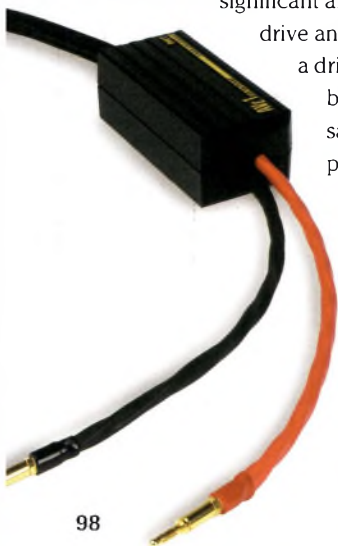
The guitar shape emerged as a strong performer so some very careful listening tests refined the design to the miracle of unexpectedness I'd just witnessed. This was an improvement on a par with the mains upgrades, the whole matter



of musical communication was simply elevated another, significant, notch. The character of ►

#### Equipment used:

Cairn Tornado CD: £950  
 Sugden A21aL Series 2 integrated amplifier: £1,400  
 Focal Chorus 806V standmount loudspeakers: £499  
 Siltech Paris Interconnect: £155  
 Siltech Classic 330i interconnect: £610  
 MusicWorks ReFlex 6 way mains block: £595  
 MusicWorks IEC+ Mains Lead: £100  
 MusicWorks ReCoil IEC Lead: £200  
 Quadraspire QX600 acrylic loudspeaker stands: £250  
 Quadraspire Acrylic Reference 3 tier rack (2 decoupled shelves): £565  
 MusicWorks Acrylic shelf upgrade: £130  
 MusicWorks Revo 3-tier equipment rack: £1250  
 MIT AVT 3 Loudspeaker cable (4.5m pair): £420  
 MIT AVT 1 Loudspeaker cable (4.5m pair): £700  
 MIT AVT MA interconnect (1 metre): £765





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▶ the change was a little different, I noticed an improvement in treble energy, tunefulness and attack whereas addressing the mains seems to work more on bass and timing. But again, the overall effect was simply one of closer rapport with the performer, and it was hard to accept that this was down to the substitution of one shelf. I can't explain it, but I heard it and it was, as mathematicians would say, 'non-trivial'. It turns out, however, that these upgrade shelves are but a waypoint on the journey.

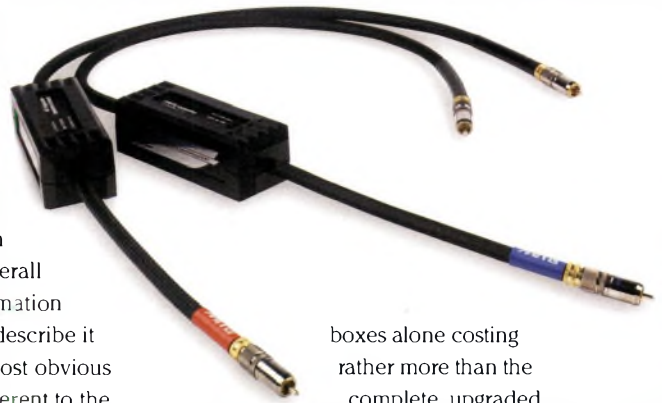
Their latest MusicWorks support table, dubbed ReVo, takes the figure of eight shape and puts it on its side, forming the uprights rather than the shelves. Clever design has eliminated metallic componentry, the ReVo is all-acrylic. It is also, perhaps, as significant an upgrade as all that had gone before. A layer of hash simply disappears, something Larry attributes to the removal of the last traces of metallic ringing. Suddenly, there is no question of the loudspeakers' ability to cope with the extra energy in the system. Dynamics are improved, the music is bathed in clarity and an inner lucidity, as if the band have decided that, perhaps, it might be a neat idea to face the audience during the gig. I have to remind myself that these are pretty modest (if well-chosen) components.

Now we can revisit the signal cabling. Out goes the Chord Rumour and Siltech, in comes MIT. Space doesn't permit a detailed analysis of the effect, but there is an undeniable and major shifting of gears at this point. Just as Nordost puts more treble energy into your system (sometimes

telling you things you might prefer not to know about your components), so MIT has a significant effect on the tonal-balance and overall level of energy and information being delivered. I might describe it as anti-Nordost, for the most obvious effects are somewhat different to the fast, light and airy Nordost sound, leaning more towards drive, dynamics and weight. As one who uses Nordost at home, this requires a period of readjustment but if you're still with me at this point, then please believe me when I say that Larry's choice of MIT cabling appears to be the perfect accompaniment to all that has gone before. We tried AVT3 loudspeaker cable, at about \$420 for a 4.5m pair, and moved up to AVT1 at about \$700 for the same length, together with AVT MA interconnect at about \$765 for a 1m pair. There is absolutely no question that the more expensive cables were easily justified, even in this modestly-priced system.

Remember, we're still using the original equipment we started out with at the beginning. It's an unconventional route and one most 'box-shifters' would abhor. Many would say that spending the same again on ancillaries as you did on componentry, is absurd. I disagree.

To hear the two versions of the same system one after the other is quite astonishing. To realise the full capabilities of one's equipment is, surely, a sensible goal. Just for fun, we set up a more expensive CD player and amplifier system (the



boxes alone costing rather more than the complete, upgraded system we'd been working with) using their original mains leads and set them up using the interconnects and table we'd now discarded. Using the same loudspeakers, this usually fabulous combination sounded excellent, as expected, but in terms of sheer musical communication, the system we'd worked-up all morning was now significantly ahead. I won't name the components we did this with, partly because it's not their fault, partly because they in turn respond even more strongly to this sort of diligent setup treatment, but mostly because the approach seems to work at any level, particularly the high-end. This is not a cure-all: the shortcomings of the original components are not eliminated by this process, the CD player still sounds grainy and grey compared to a decent high-end player, and the Sugden amp will only take you so far, compared to a serious high-end unit, but it is suddenly very apparent that these modest boxes have capabilities many users simply don't get to exploit. Imagine, then, what you get when you take this approach with some seriously good components. Larry and his team's unconventional approach sure does get results. ▶+



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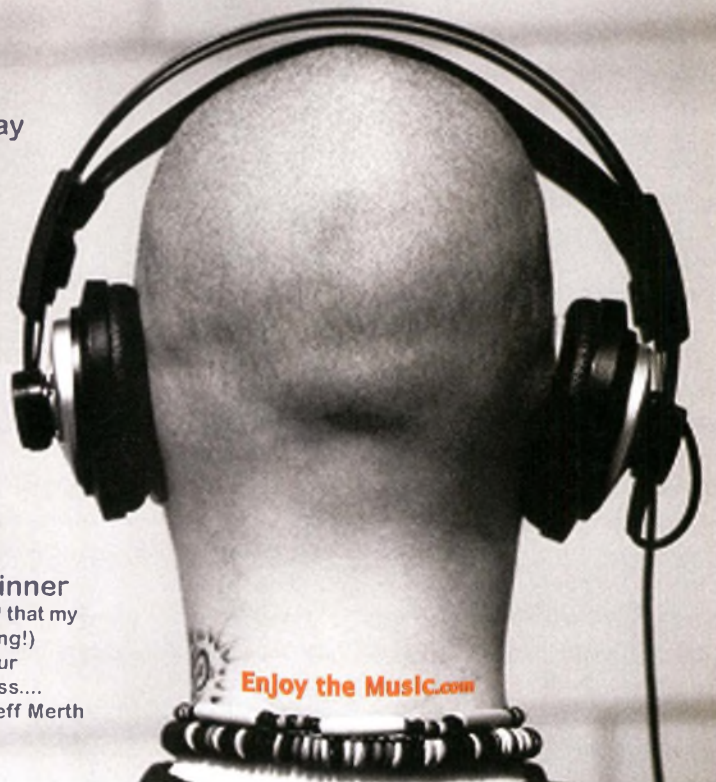
I have never replied to online audio reviews but wanted you to know that I have enjoyed several articles.

— Craig Mattice

What a great review! — Paul Kittinger

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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



# Bugge Wesseltoft

## The new conceptualist...

by Jason Kennedy

*Bugge Wesseltoft is a Norwegian keyboard player who made his name with the New Conception Of Jazz (NCOJ) albums he released on his own Jazzland label. Since 1996 NCOJ has released four studio albums and a live set, the most impressive of which was 2001's Moving. Bugge is now performing and recording solo and has two piano albums out, 1998's It's Snowing on my Piano on ACT and 2007's IM on Jazzland.*

*Bugge has been a major force behind the Norwegian music invasion that reached its apex with the staging of the first Punk festival to be held outside of Norway, an event brought to the UK by Late Junction's Norgophile Fiona Talkington and staged as the opening event at the swanky new Kings Place complex in London's Kings Cross last November.*

*For his part, Bugge played a short set that started with two piano tracks in a relatively straightforward style. However, the second one was 'Black Pearl Makes Dream' from IM, a tune which had him sample himself plucking at the piano strings with his fingers and then seriously warping the result before playing over it on the keys again. The third number took the sampling to a higher level, Bugge creating a surround effect from four speakers around the room, to produce a large-scale and extremely varied soundfield. Some of it clearly originated from the piano but many of the discrete effects seem totally disconnected, and seriously skewed by his sampler and treatments. At one point he placed something on or in the piano strings that resulted in a thin distorted but live piano sound with which to play*



*over the swirling backdrop; this was, for me, the highlight of his set. He finished with a slightly disrupted version of 'Take 5' which went off in numerous interesting directions but returned to its roots for the finale.*

*The following week I caught up with him to find out what he's been up to and where his music is heading.*

**JK:** What have you been doing of late?

**BW:** I'm at the end of a long tour that started in September. I started in Japan, then I was around Europe for some weeks, then I went back to China, then London and next Saturday it's Spain.

**JK:** Was this on your own or with other musicians?

**BW:** All solo.

**JK:** At the concert at Kings Place you only played a short set, why was that?

**BW:** I was invited with guests, it was supposed to be a concert with me presenting some new people. I played for 20 minutes, then it was some friends of mine, really great people. Because I play so seldom in London it would have been good to do a full concert but maybe next time. (Bugge presented waldhorn player and electronics master Hild Tafjord and percussionist Thomas Strønen)

**JK:** Norwegian music seems to have exploded onto the scene over the last few years, this must be at least something to do with the success you had with the NCOJ. ►



► Was this scene happening over there when you got started?

**BW:** I was a part of the nineties movement in Oslo, involving Nils Petter Molvaer, Sidsel Endresen, Eivind Aarset. Different Jazzland people but I think Nils Petter Molvaer is the most significant person. His debut album *Khmer* has sold more than 200,000 copies which is more than any of my albums, and it's a fantastic album. Part of his success was that he was on the ECM label rather than a small Norwegian label. It was a movement with us and other people mixing technology and electronic music into jazz, I think that was the reason behind the fresh sound coming from Oslo.

**JK:** You seemed to be the only people doing that at the time.

**BW:** You had the parallel direction coming from the club scene with Nu Jazz. Where I see it is that we came from each side, we came from the jazz side trying to mix with electronic ideas while the club people came from liking and trying to mix with the jazz element.

**JK:** Who were your influences when you were growing up?

**BW:** My father is a jazz guitarist so I liked listening to the music that he liked, basically American soul music and R&B and jazz from the 50s and the 60s. I was into Wes Montgomery, Jimmy Smith, all the Atlantic soul stuff and Tamla Motown, I grew up with Roberta Flack and Diana Ross. This is the first music I remember.

**JK:** What did you buy when you had the choice?

**BW:** I started playing in a marching band with the drummer Audun Kleive who is an amazing drummer and a friend of mine. He was playing the snare drum and I was doing the bass drum, so basically I bought everything that he suggested. This was Weather Report and that kind of music.

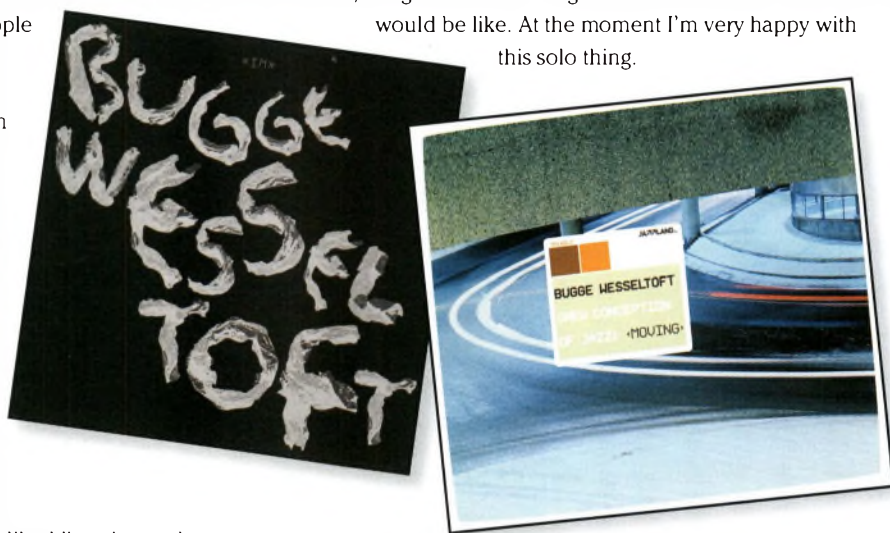
**JK:** How do you make the sounds that you do on stage?

**BW:** The grand piano is the source of all my sound constructions, both playing the old fashioned way and I can record it. I have a fabulous machine called an Electrix Repeater which is a four channel loop sampler – it's gone out of production unfortunately and mine is falling apart! It's a really amazing machine, you can pitch the sounds, you can

stretch them, you can play backwards. You can really do a lot of fun stuff with it. That's the heart of what I'm doing. Besides that I'm running all my sounds through a Mac and Ableton Live software which I'm using for effects and assorted stuff.

**JK:** Is the New Conception of Jazz (NCOJ) finished?

**BW:** Yes. I just brought out a box set, with a live DVD. It's two CDs, one is a compilation from the NCOJ albums and some unreleased tracks, and one CD with live stuff from Japan – and then there's a live DVD from the Montreux Jazz festival. It's over, I might start a band again but I'm not sure what it would be like. At the moment I'm very happy with this solo thing.



I'm very proud of the New Conception work but at some stage (we were working for ten years) somewhere in the end there it sort of stopped progressing, which I really don't like. I have to challenge myself, try to do new things.

**JK:** Is that why you have been working with a lot of other artists since then?

**BW:** I like to be inspired and to work with other people, I see my musical development as part of a learning process, I have to learn from people and from other kinds of music to get fresh ideas.

**JK:** Such as heavy metal?

**BW:** I was in a project with black metal group system: obscure, it was for one concert in Norway, it was fantastic. They're fantastic musicians. We have a great festival called the Infernal Festival in Oslo every Easter. It's always sold out, packed with people. I admire these people a lot, they're so into it, even more than jazz musicians.



**JK:** Which project have you found the most inspiring or interesting?

**BW:** I did like that one. I have a plan of starting some sort of avant garde jazz rock metal group at some stage. I bought this old Hammond B3 organ and always had this dream of sounding like John Lord of Deep Purple (laughs), so hopefully I'll do that one day. It could be fun. But I'm a family man so I can't fulfil all my dreams at the moment, I have to stay home as well so I have to do one thing at a time.

**JK:** What's next for you?

**BW:** I've just finished a new solo piano album, which is still in the same concept, and I'm travelling a lot with that and getting very good feedback.

**JK:** You were using surround channels for the London gig?

**BW:** I have a dream to release that kind of surround music. I think that would be a cool thing, especially for experimental music. A lot of experimental music is about the concept of the sounds and a lot of people buy a surround system when they buy a new television. So it would be cool for people to hear experimental music in a surround situation, then they would probably understand more about the idea of it. It would be an exploration instead of trying to understand: "what the f\*^! is this music?".

The set up that I'm using is really a fake surround because I'm just sending some extra stuff behind, but sound comes from different places and it's interesting.

**JK:** Do you get involved in the sound of your albums?

**BW:** I do everything myself. The last stage is the mastering, which is taken care of by professionals. I'm a real amateur, but I like to experiment and spend a lot of time after the actual playing, trying to make it sound good. Sound is extremely fascinating and very difficult, it's so abstract somehow, it's not very objective at all.

**JK:** What monitoring do you use in the studio?

**BW:** I have a Genelec system. Then I have the never dying

(Yamaha) NS10 which I don't really use any more. Then I bought this small, silly little DAB radio because it's actually easier to hear the balance with. The huge Genelec sub-bass system sounds fat anyway, so its hard to really get control. The small system is a Tivoli one.

**JK:** A real world monitor!

**BW:** Absolutely, what most people are listening to.

**JK:** Do you have a hi-fi at home

**BW:** Yes I do. I have B&W speakers. Not too good but they sound great, I'm not a stereo freak. I have a Technics SL1210 DJ turntable as well.

**JK:** Will you be working with Sidsel Endresen again?

**BW:** I hope so, I'm trying to pursue her to finish her solo album, which is fantastic; its very chorally oriented and extremely beautiful music. I'm starting to miss our work together. I was just listening to some of the old stuff that we did together. People have been putting stuff on YouTube, songs just with a picture

from the album. The music with no video. It sounds good, the stuff that we did.

**JK:** There is a great surround effect on Heim where the sound seems to travel behind your head, have you heard that?

**BW:** I haven't heard that! I can assure you that it was a mistake, a good one though. I'm not very clever with this phasing. Sometimes people can create this kind of surround sound with phase in the stereo field.

**JK:** Do you have any plans to come back and play in the UK?

**BW:** There's no definite plans, England is not the easiest place to play in. Everyone wants to play in England so it's hard to get a gig out of it. I'd like to come back but it's not up to me.

*Bugge Wesseltoft's New Conception of Jazz box set will be available in the spring on Jazzland records*





# 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.

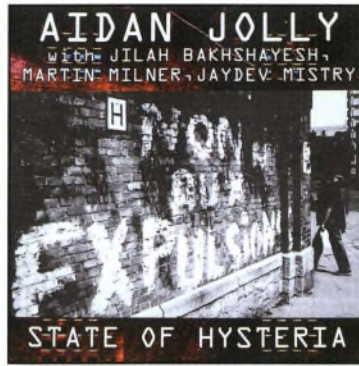
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard,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

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

They are:- Dave Ayers, Tim Britt, Anke K. Bronner, Mark Childs, Richard Clews, Dave Davies, Dennis D. Davis, Peter Downard, Richard S. Foster, Roy Gregory, Simon Groome, Jason Hector, Andrew Hobbs, James Michael Hughes, Reuben Parry, David Stirling.

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	SACD		
	Hybrid SACD		
	Multi-Channel		



Aidan Jolly

### State Of Hysteria

Well Red Productions Wr002 

Manchester's ethnic and cultural diversity is strongly represented within the contemporary roots oeuvre of musician Aidan Jolly who is based in the city. So are, to a lesser degree, the surrounding South Pennine, Dark and White Peak landscapes that he occasionally harnesses as a back drop. His themes though, and the wild stylistic shifts between traditional English folk forms and the Middle Eastern influence of the group's Iranian violinist, Jilah Bakhshayesh, courts controversy. Songs like 'Just Another Day (in Baghdad)' and the title track reflect upon suicide bombings and terrorist suspects through an activist's jaundiced eye, and this may offend those who do not share Aidan's politics. Others may find the musically diverse arrangements unsettling, but the poetic lyricism is undeniable on 'Ghost Hill Farm' and 'Swallows'. Generally, he throws down a challenge – one that asks us to put to one side our preconceptions and reappraise the world we inhabit. Most of all he is concerned about mobility. At one level its migration, immigration and asylum; at another he casts his gaze upon a society where the border controls are much more insidious, a place where every journey is monitored on CCTV and electronic transactions track almost everything we do. Starkly different songs like 'Captives' and 'Radio Independence' do a fine thought provoking job on this topic.

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John Campbelljohn

### Hook, Slide and Sinker

Peppercake Records PEC2038 

John Campbelljohn – not to be confused with the late John Campbell – is a Canadian with a ferocious appetite for slide-driven blues and bluesy rock. Influenced by Sonny Landreth and Johnny Winter, Campbelljohn excels at boogie-driven thrashing slide, although stick an acoustic in his hand and he'll honour that with the kind of respect one would expect from a true master. A solid singer, Campbelljohn knows how to give value for money; there are 16 songs on this CD and barely a filler in sight; that is, of course, if this honest-to-goodness music's your kind of thing. It's certainly mine; I've always had an unstoppable hunger for the dirtier side of the blues guitar – that sound of the street; the smoky, sweaty club with the band in the corner, dripping in sweat and earning every penny of their paltry fee. As mentioned earlier, influences come from Johnny Winter – all over this record in serious abundance. Same with Landreth, and whilst we're at it, we'd just as well throw in a bit of Clapton and Cooder and a smattering of the finest exponent of rock-fuelled slide...Duane Allman. He's been Blues artist of the year, guitarist of the year and slide guitarist of the year. He didn't get those accolades busking down a tube station all his life, he got them because he deserved them – plain and simple.

AH





Matt Andersen

Something In Between

Andersen Records Andersen008

Canadian Matt Andersen recorded this album in England, where he was helped out by members of Eric Clapton's post-Cream band. He's been making prominent inroads in his native country and the USA for a while now, giggering furiously to get his message and talent across. *Something In Between* is perfectly named; rarely have I heard an album cover so many different bases. It kicks off with a gospel-tinged country rocker, 'Come By', takes in a ferocious blues shuffle by way of 'So Gone Now', has quite beautiful ballads sung in the most expressive and sorrowful voice (Stay With Me and Broken Man) and rocks furiously and with real punch on the infectious 'Lonesome Road'. As I listened I was transported back to Clapton's 461 Ocean Boulevard period and those classic Band albums too - 'Tell Me' being one song that has their stamp all over it. Funnily enough, when he sings a heartfelt number like 'Broken Man' he bears more than a passing resemblance to the great Jack Savoretti, the timbre in his voice resonates with the same whisky-burnt quality. Too often albums tend to follow a familiar pattern and by the time you've got half way through interest starts to wane, but that isn't the case with *Something In Between*. There's something for everyone here.

AH



Paul Reddick

Sugar Bird

Northern Blues NBM0050

Canada's Paul Reddick isn't your average 12 bar blues artist. In fact, you could say he isn't a bluesman at all - more of a blues voyeur. He stands in the shadows and observes, and if he likes what he hears he twists it around, decorates it with a little spice of his own and sends it off down streets of original bliss. What one gets left with are albums like *Sugar Bird*; a quite extraordinary blend of the sensual, the gentle, the wise and the original. You see, Reddick is a supreme talent; one of the finest exponents of harmonica, a terrific singer with far-reaching expression, a master songwriter and a lyricist with a twist of poetic ingenuity. *Sugar Bird* is absolutely gorgeous. It bristles with acoustic glory and nestles in the heart like the finest 12 year old malt. Produced by legendary musician Colin Linden and helped out on three tracks by the Band's Garth Hudson, its 12 tracks catch the breath and open the pores. It dips its toes in the 30's, comes back to the present day to waltz its way through 'John Lennon In New Orleans' and has some of the best songwriting on a so-called blues album I've heard in ages. Truly a great talent, producing work this good has to elevate him to the major league sometime soon.

AH



Neil Young

Prairie Wind

Reprise 9361-49593-2

*Prairie Wind* finds Young back on familiar ground, surrounded by familiar faces, teasing out those gentle, deceptively simple folk tunes that worm their way inexorably under your skin. This is no *Sleeps With Angels* or *Road Rage*, no heavy metal stomp, full of jagged angles and hard edges. Here, the edges are emotional, and arrive velvet wrapped. Those who know and love everything from *Harvest* through *Silver And Gold* will find this album slipping on as easily and comfortably as an old pair of jeans. It's almost like you've heard it all before, but Young teases out new sense and new meanings from his simple melodic shapes and sparse arrangements, a talent so rounded and mature that it embraces love and loss, the simplest possible notions and the most profound with equal ease. The famed falsetto might have cracked (on 'Falling Off The Face Of The Earth') but there's no missing the understated beauty and sparse poignance of 'The Painter', 'This Old Guitar' or the title track. The music is beautifully served by an understated and immediate recording and the only thing that stops this CD being an automatic buy is the existence of an even better concert DVD, *Heart Of Gold*, that features most of this album. Oh, what the hell - indulge yourself and buy them both. They're worth it.

RG







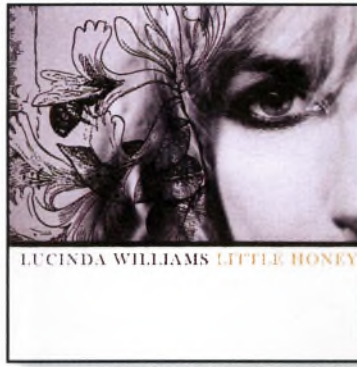
Josh Rouse

Best Of The Rykodisc Years

Rykodisc 812279909-3 

Josh Rouse is one of those under-the-counter artists that anyone in music retail will tell you is an undiscovered gem. He's been on Rykodisc for over seven-years, casually going about his business as only someone with his level of talent can do. He consistently kisses just about every Best Of The Year list, he's one of the best and most diverse songwriters on this fair planet and he can breeze from country to pop, folk to indie folk and rock to blues as lusciously and as profoundly as any artist working today. *The Best Of The Rykodisc Years* is clearly a best of, but in truth it's much more than that. Disc one concentrates on songs from six of his albums...19 tracks of quality popular music unrivalled and as exquisitely performed as you'll find anywhere. Disc two is that 'rarities and unreleased gems' thing that record companies often use to make this sort of release more attractive, especially to Rouse fans who have all the albums anyway. There are unreleased nuggets a-go-go plus all the songs from a very hard to find e.p. called *Bedroom Classics Vol 1*. It's absolutely beautifully collated and packaged and the best introduction to Josh Rouse's talents currently available. Two hours of brilliant music by a brilliant musician, and one hell of a clever guy.

AH



Lucinda Williams

Little Honey

Lost Highway: 1785915


Ms. Williams has always had a keen interest in affairs of the body. One of her most famous songs, 'Righteously' even managed to seduce Radio 2's Johnnie Walker into playing it on daytime radio. The effect was devastating and just goes to prove that sex, when handled by an expert, connects in a mighty way. Lucinda's at it again here. She's got somebody 'squeezing her peaches' on 'Real Love' and heaven knows who applying 'honey to her tummy' and 'sweetness to her hair' on 'Honey Bee'. The woman has no shame, and quite frankly, it's thrilling to let her loose to do her thing, because Lucinda's no ordinary songwriter – never has been, never will be. Little Honey, aside from referencing one of her favourite subjects, also touches on mortality/immortality with 'Heaven Blues'; she lost her mother last year and it quite understandably left a giant void she's struggling to fill. However, as always in life, there's the sweet to soften the sour, and it appears Williams has found her soulmate. She has a 'Plan To Marry' (she might already have done so by now) and she has 'Tears Of Joy'. Lucinda's clearly relaxed enough to throw in a loose version of AC/DC's 'It's A Long Way To The Top'. It was for her, but she got there in the most glorious fashion imaginable. She did it with real talent.

AH



Kenny Wayne Shepherd

10 Days Out – Blues From The Backroads

Reprise Records 49294-1 

Guitarist Kenny Wayne Shepherd hit the road replete with a portable studio and Double Trouble band members Chris Layton (drums) and Tommy Shannon (bass) to hunt down and capture one track each from the grizzled old blues greats featured here. It's an intriguing concept. Fifteen time capsules where the music of those sweaty, smoke-filled juke joints, sagging and paint-peeled front porches and those humid airless bayous of yesteryear resonates. There are some terrific cuts including performances by Henry Townsend – 'Tears Come Rollin' Down'; Wild Child Butler – 'Spoonful'; Pinetop Perkins – 'Grindin' Man'; Henry Gray – 'Rooster'; Hubert Sumlin – 'Sittin' On Top Of The World' as well as a truly remarkable 'Knoxville Rag' that was recorded in the kitchen of a 93 year old nimble fingered Etta Baker. *10 Days Out* is a spine tingling album that simply drips authenticity. Yes, it's definitely one of those wonderfully indulgent, emotional and reverential excursions that occasionally come spinning out of left-field, but the mastery heard from B.B. King in 'The Thrill Is Gone' or on 'Prison Blues' with archetypal bluesmen Neal Pattman and blind Cootie Stark, is undeniably magnificent.

RP





Andy Stedman

Causin' Havoc, Breakin' Hearts

Handsome Devil Music 339004

A few years ago, Sequoia produced a fantastic album of quality British music which nodded heavily in the direction of The Kinks and Paul Weller. It was chock full of inspired tunes, gorgeous melodies and fine lyrics – you know the sort, ones that make some sort of sense to a sensitive heart. The person mainly responsible for the songs was Andy Stedman, a hugely personable young man who just happens to be heavily blessed with real talent. Sequoia have now split and Andy went his own way, this being his first solo album. The Sequoia CD is one of those rare beasts that improves with every play, and this album is exactly the same. Repeated spins bring sparkling rewards for bathtime, bedtime and anytime in between, with Andy's ear for a melody and a sentence to help it swoon remaining as keen as ever. Again, Paul Weller and Ray Davies stand as principal teachers, and Stedman has to be one of their brightest students. Country pop, power pop, rock, country folk and a drizzle of pure originality decorate this exquisite little album and push Andy Stedman to the forefront of talented British writers. It is important to play this record at least four times to get the full benefit from the songs. Once you've done that, you'll understand why I rate this young man so highly. Terrific.

AH



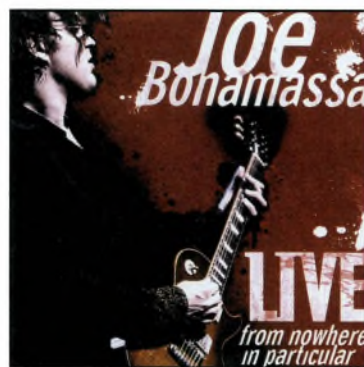
Pixies

Doolittle

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2033

Black Francis and the gang might seem like a strange choice for the SACD treatment, but then the revitalized MoFi have never played it safe and sound with pure vanilla, audiophile fodder, preferring instead to let the music do the talking – and boy can the Pixies talk! Along with the edgier and even more demanding *Surfer Rosa*, launched the previous year (and also given the MoFi treatment) *Doolittle* marks both a musical highpoint and arguably the band's most accessible album. Even then, those weaned on the slickly palatable melody and compulsive rhythms of 'Here Comes Your Man' or the iconic 'Monkey Gone To Heaven' could be in for a shock. Does anybody else throw themselves at a song with the intense physical abandon of a Black Francis? Is there a band that delivers such pointed musical mayhem with the intensity and control of the Pixies? Which is where the extra dynamic range, separation and control of the SACD format comes in. This new disc sees straight past the glassy opacity of the original CD, really opening out the dense recording and if it can't quite match the primal urge of the LP, it serves up more detail and a more telling contrast between the vocal lines of Francis and Kim Deal. The results are excellent, dusting down an old favourite and putting it back at the top of the play-list; moody and magnificent doesn't even begin to cover it.

RG



Joe Bonamassa

From Nowhere In Particular

Provogue Records PRD7248-2

Joe Bonamassa's standing in the blues rock arena is at its highest after the release of his last two studio albums, *You And Me* and *Sloe Gin*. Amazing virtuosity on guitar and vocals let the world know there was a new kid in town. Hot on their heels comes this live double album recorded on last year's U.S. tour and this year's trawl across Europe. *From Nowhere In Particular* captures the man and his band doing what they do best, and that's handing an audience a massive dose of heavy blues with all guns blazing. Bonamassa didn't get his reputation handed to him on a plate. He got it the hard way by constantly putting himself in front of a crowd and proving to them that he's something special. He can slam out a massive rock riff and work it 'til it bleeds, or he can play a blues shuffle and get it to walk around your living room like no other. Then there's his prowess on acoustic guitar, which has to be heard to be believed. The finest example of this can be found on the near-10 minute 'Woke Up Dreaming', a remarkable track with intricate finger-picking, exquisite chord changes and manic strumming, but all done with verve and impeccable taste. Bonamassa's in his natural habitat here, and he's one raging tiger.

AH







# Leaving the best till last... The Genesis remixes

by Jason Kennedy

Genesis aficionados will have been aware that the band's producer Nick Davis has been re-mixing the band's back catalogue for release on SACD, and two box sets have already been released. One covers the albums released between 1976 and 1982 while the other contains the last four albums. Both also contain a bonus disc with audio and video content of B-sides and rare tracks. The latest and final chapter in the series contains five of the earliest albums, produced between 1970 and 1975 when Peter Gabriel was the major artistic force in the group. The set omits *Genesis Live* and also the band's 1969 debut,

and surround mixes and Crispin Murray who co-ordinated the project and did some of the editing work.

**JK:** What is mastering?

**CM:** We take the stereo and 5.1 as separate passes and we give it a final tweak in the calm light of day as it were. When you've got 17 albums its very easy to start with one and end up with 17 times a little bit different, a bit like Chinese whispers. Obviously a lot of comparisons are done all the way through. Mastering is another set of ears and an extra level of confidence, it's a bit of a tweak for EQs just to balance things up a bit.

Also when a mix comes in and you play it on a big system like this its enormous and it's wonderful, but what's it going to sound like on a little system. We've got bass all the way round that's going to end up in a sub in a 5.1 system; this is a very tricky project to mix. We fold the sub signal into the bottom of the PMCs because to have a sub that works in here, it would have to be a one and a half metre cube, which for stereo would be a disaster.

A fair degree of what's going on in mastering is to make sure that when its played on a small system or a big system everyone will get the same enjoyment out of it. They won't suddenly go 'I've got to be a millionaire and have a big system to get a result. In a big system like this if you've got the bass phasey and moving around the room, it sounds wonderful full range but the minute you mix it down it just goes up and down in level and you get this farting noise disappearing and reappearing. There's a lot of different things you have to allow for.

**JK:** Do you have the best monitoring system in the record production chain

**TC:** In theory yes but it's not just that, it's that we stay put in this room, so we know what the room sounds like as much as the monitors and ultimately that's the critical thing. I used to work at the Townhouse and actually I had a bloody awful room. It had Westlake monitors in the wall. The room was a direct copy of the other mastering studio there but this room was about five per cent smaller and they tried to ►



*From Genesis to Revelation*, which is owned by Decca; the rest of the catalogue belongs to EMI.

For this final series it was decided to produce SACDs with stereo and 5.1 multi-channel mixes as well as a vinyl box set, both of which were mastered by Metropolis Studios at the Powerhouse in Chiswick. I was fortunate enough to be able listen to some of *Selling England by the Pound* in the best room, equipped with monster PMCs and must say that the phrase "flights of mellotrons" doesn't begin to describe it!

I spoke to Tony Cousins who mastered the SACD stereo



► do exactly the same thing, but the monitoring was just no good, and even if you put the white EQs across it to iron out discrepancies, if you listened to one side against the other side they sounded different. You could never get it right whatever you did because of the room – but I learnt to live with it and I did some really good records there. You learn it (the room) and even the stuff that you couldn't hear on a 'perfect' monitoring system, you begin to understand how that information works with the rest of the music.

I was working on a project recently when the guys came in and we listened to it and I said where's the bottom end? They hadn't noticed it because where they were before it was there, something was there. But bottom end isn't just the low frequencies – it's the relationship of bass drum to keyboard to bass guitar and all that. There was no energy in it.

**JK:** What are you aiming for when tuning a mastering room?

**CM:** We tried to make the rooms as inviting and friendly feeling sonically as a big living room. Historically, mastering rooms have sounded completely different to ordinary rooms, which made it difficult for people who came in to relate to the sound they heard in them.

**TC:** One reason we went for free standing monitors in here is that not only can you adjust the imaging precisely but they tend to react with the room more.

**CM:** You'll notice there's tape on the floor here that's not lined up with the speakers, that's because we built the room about two years ago and they've been subtly tweaked to find the best position. They haven't moved for a while now.

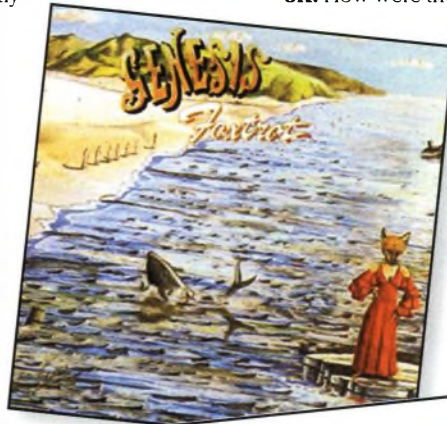
**JK:** Did the change from vinyl to CD give you more freedom or range that you could work with?

**TC:** Although the vinyl disc has limitations there were very good reasons for those limitations, and when you transfer it to CD you might have to worry less about putting the bass into mono because of getting it on the record, but essentially all the same rules still apply. If something has got too much high frequency on it, it would burn out the cutting heads, but it's also related to the fact that the cartridge won't track it when

you play it back. Too much HF is too much HF, not just for a cutting amp but it's too much for the human ear.

**CM:** Some of the rules that came in to make it work for vinyl were actually pretty good rules and still apply – they made it more listenable. If you've got screaming top end you can put it on a CD now, we can put another 40dBs on a CD, but it'll take your ears off.

**JK:** How were the Genesis mixes done?



**TC:** The multi-tracks were transferred at 192 to Pro Tools and those files were mixed to the Sonoma system in DSD, which was considered the highest resolution available and useful at the time.

**JK:** In what format do masters normally come in?

**TC:** Very, very rarely does anyone go the lengths that they did, to mix in the way they did. One of the reasons was the surround I'm sure. If they'd only wanted to produce stereo versions because its Genesis I'm sure they would have thought about it but whether they would have actually gone to those lengths remains to be seen. Don't forget, transferring multi-tracks from the seventies at 192 is going to show every single little discrepancy.

**CM:** There's nothing lost.

**TC:** You can count on one hand the people who have done that.

**CM:** They're often copied at 48k or at best 96, all of which is throwing away useful information. There is no doubt it was all there.

**TC:** When we mastered we went from Sonoma to 96k, all the final files were at 96 and then were converted to 44.1 (for CD) or to DSD [for SACD]. We could have done it at 192 but we would have had to buy a server just to store the information. The provenance of it, of the whole series, is as good as it gets.

**TC:** Nick Davies produced the last two Genesis albums but he's been working for them for at least 20 years and he did the original set of re-masters at Abbey Road. When we started ►



► doing the stereos for this project we listened to 90% of the originals and compared them to the new mixes. For 99% we thought the new mixes were better because the detail was there, the kick was always better. Punchier, clearer just better definition throughout. Except one or two where we used the original mix, but I can't remember which they were. When it really wasn't good enough Nick went back and re-did it. Re-configured the stereo mix because he mixed it in surround and then reduced it to stereo using the originals as his reference.

**JK:** Why not re-master from the original stereo mixes in the first place?

**CM:** Masters used to come out regularly for re-cuts and got worn out – another good reason for re-mixing this stuff. A lot of old master tapes are in very poor condition. You can use copies if you have to, but they are hissier. Sometimes you do a re-issue album and you add four tracks on the end that have hardly ever been played and they sound beautiful, but the rest of the album isn't the same – the top goes when the tape gets worn.



process earlier on when he cut Miles Davis albums for Prestige at 22.5rpm (for a 45rpm pressing) because he found its extra HF headroom reduces distortion on trumpet.

The main advantage of half-speed mastering, as Miles explains, is the enhanced frequency range; all of the tricky to cut high frequencies (which stress the system) are halved so as to become much easier to cut mid-range frequencies. The cutting amplifiers do not have to work anything like as hard and the cutter-head draws somewhere between 1/4 and 1/3 of the current that it would were it running at full speed. The cutting stylus also has twice as long to carve the intricate groove giving a more accurate representation of the recording. The resulting cuts have un-paralleled high frequency extension and a rock solid stereo image.

At the studio they don't have a fancy turntable to replay their test pressings on, but use a Technics SL1200 DJ turntable with a Stanton cartridge. They can also playback pressings on the Neumann lathe with an SME 3009 arm and Shure V15. We listened to 'Supper's

Ready' from *Foxtrot* on this through another pair of big PMC monitors and the result was pretty damn remarkable and you could easily forget that the source was not really made for the purpose.

Miles explained that Gabriel's voice is a real pain to master for vinyl because it is very sibilant; he had to manually de-ess each album prior to cutting. A process that took four hours for each of them because it involves replacing all the SSS and T sounds in the vocal with an HF limited version, something that is relatively easy compared to the pre-digital era when engineers would have to replace these elements by splicing in sections of tape.

The boxed set, *Genesis 1970–1975*, contains re-mixed versions of *Trespass*, *Nursery Cryme*, *Foxtrot*, *Selling England by the Pound* and *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* and is available on 180g vinyl and SACD now.



## The Black Stuff

The half-speed vinyl masters were cut by Miles Showell at Metropolis on a Neumann VMS80 lathe, a magnificent device from the early eighties which is one of only 140 ever made. Each one was custom built to order, so as a result most have slight differences from one another and no two are identical. This combination of vintage and variation makes these lathes difficult and expensive to keep running, but as Sennheiser ditched the lathe business when it bought Neumann you can no longer buy one even if you could afford it. It uses helium to cool the cutter head which is driven by a 600 Watt amplifier in a separate SAL rack that also includes custom built RIAA equalisation for half speed cutting and power supplies that weigh more than your average Krell.

The half-speed mastering system was developed by Decca and used by Mobile Fidelity co-founder Stan Ricker to cut *Dark Side of the Moon*. Ricker had been experimenting with the



## Genesis 1970 – 1975

### Charisma



As already noted, this is the final box set in Genesis producer Nick Davis' overhaul of the band's back catalogue. A multi-disc set that contains five studio albums made by the band over that period, all with Peter Gabriel as frontman. All that's missing are *From Genesis to Revelation* and *Genesis Live*. Again, and as detailed in the accompanying interview, this is no mere re-master; this is a complete re-mix into two and 5.1 channels, using the original analogue multi-track tapes, transferred to 24/192 and subsequently to DSD.

In some respects it's a pity that the first in the series, *Trespass*, wasn't ditched in favour of *Genesis Live*, which captured the band's stage show in 1973, and which is a much stronger album. The discs produced here are, nonetheless, a timely reminder of just how good this band was in what many fans consider its heyday. Maybe it was a reflection of the time, but the music they made with Gabriel is significantly more diverse and interesting than that which followed his departure. This despite the fact that he had only limited influence on the instrumental elements, often working on lyrics after the music had been written, a state of affairs that led to criticism from other band members who felt that tracks like 'Get 'Em Out by Friday' (from *Foxtrot*) became too busy and dense, the vocal contribution blanketing instrumental textures and detail. I am not alone in disagreeing on that count.

The complete box-set weighs more than you think and there's a surprise in store. Each jewel case contains a pair of discs, each of the hybrid SACD albums being accompanied by a DVD, with DTS 96/24 and Dolby Digital versions of each track, as well as video footage of the band from the time. Each also has a half hour documentary featuring interviews with the band members themselves. Watching the one for *Foxtrot* I found myself agreeing with Peter Gabriel, who says that the confidence that they were gaining at the time



"gave us the mental platform on which to build 'Supper's Ready'" continuing "it's still one of the things I like best, looking backwards."

If ten discs weren't enough there is also a hardback booklet with contributions from characters as diverse as David Baddiel, Jeremy Clarkson and one time Genesis cohort Richard Macphail amongst others. This is accompanied by two other discs (an SACD and matching DVD as per the albums) of extra tracks, some taken from the BBC's 1970 *Nightride* programme and others from a piece the band made for a documentary on artist Michael Jackson that was never used.

I wasn't able to get my mitts on the vinyl box, which will only just be out by the time you read this, but having heard test pressings of some of the albums, and having discovered the sheer effort that has gone into getting the best possible cut, I'm sorely tempted to splash out my own hard-earned cash – quite a statement from a journalist with access to review copies and the digital discs already safely sat on his shelf.

The SACDs do sound superb though, more precise and clear than my original (admittedly much

played) vinyl pressings, with greater space, detail and separation, but without obviously changing the original balance. Musically any large selection like this will run the gamut of quality, from the great to the not so good, and these recordings are definitely of their time, a time when studio-wise, there was no such thing as over-egging the pudding. In fact, most producers were on an almost religious crusade for more and more tracks, more and more effects. The sheer density of these recordings, the weight of all those layers presents its own challenge, but when they're good they're very, very good indeed, up there with some of the best that popular music has produced – so long as you like the sound of the Mellotron, naturally.

JK

RECORDING  
MUSIC









## Stevie Wonder

### Songs in the Key of Life

Tamla Motown/Speakers Corner  

Stevie Wonder went through a creative purple patch in the early '70s that expanded his appeal way beyond the bounds of R'n'B. It started in 1972 with *Talking Book* and finished with this 1976 double album that came with a four track EP as it does here; a sum total of 21 songs. It's a more refined work but still potent, thanks to the freaky funk of 'Have a Talk With God' and the killer groove of 'I Wish' among others. It also has some of his finest melodies with tunes like 'Ordinary Pain' and the outstanding 'Joy Inside My Tears'.

The hit singles 'Sir Duke' and 'Isn't She Lovely' are fine fare but those with a taste for something more substantial will appreciate 'Pastime Paradise', which Coolio reworked so effectively, and 'Village Ghetto Land', both tracks that reveal Wonder's acute political consciousness. In fact, the album is divided between the romantic and the gritty, the funky and the soulful, and he was clearly setting out to show the world that here was a renaissance dude of the first order. Speakers Corner has done its usual high calibre job cutting the vinyl, reproducing the original artwork and disc labels. It sounds superb in 70s analogue fashion, slick for its time perhaps but it seems pretty organic now.


JK

RECORDING  
MUSIC



## Jennifer Warnes

### The Hunter

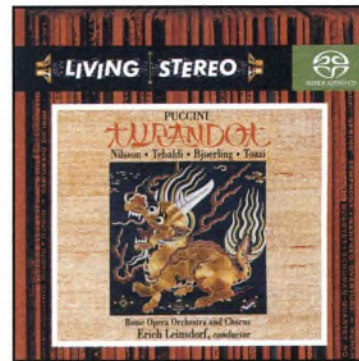
Cisco CLP 7063  

Whereas *Famous Blue Raincoat* has always been fairly easy to find, laying your hands upon an original vinyl release of *The Hunter* (there were a few thousand German pressings back in 1992) is really a tough ask. I've only seen two Hunters in the past decade. So, Cisco's decision to make this record their last will be a crowd pleaser. Musically, I think *The Hunter* is a transitional album that pitches up somewhere between the reverence of those popular Cohen covers and the deliciously organic compositional qualities heard on a more recent release, *The Well*. Tracks like 'Lights Of Louisiana' and 'Way Down Deep' would certainly not be out of place on the latter. Abiding memories from *The Hunter* have always been those of rich and carefully chosen musical textures, crafted ever so precisely, and of poetic lyrics delivered by one of the most beautiful voices of our time. Sonically, Cisco's superb re-master enhances all of those aspects, possessing much greater transparency and instrumental depth than can be found in either the CD or on an original LP which definitely sounds thin by comparison. With this record there simply are no reservations.

Supplier: [sales@redsparkmusic.com](mailto:sales@redsparkmusic.com)

RP


RECORDING  
MUSIC



## Puccini

### Turandot

Nilsson, Tebaldi, Bjoerling, Tozzi  
Leinsdorf / Rome Opera Orchestra  
& Chorus

RCA Living Stereo B2B76 B2624 2 

The stellar soloists in this excellent 1959 Rome Opera House recording and the vigorous yet carefully structured Erich Leinsdorf orchestral accompaniment are the selling points that put many modern performances of *Turandot* in the shade. Certainly, none of them possess the steely, overpowering iciness of Birgit Nilsson's Chinese princess simply because today's identikit air brushed sopranos are not big, muscular women with awesome powers of vocal projection. Renata Tebaldi, repeating the Liu slave girl role, delivers another persuasive and sympathetic interpretation with contrasting warmth always present in her voice, while the astounding Jussi Bjoerling, though nearing the end of his career, gives us another astonishingly youthful sounding performance as the fugitive prince Calaf. His sustained patience in 'Nessun dorma' is a revelation. Last of the big four soloists is Giorgio Tozzi, singing the bass part of the deposed Tartar King, Timur. "Authoritative", "robust" and "fulsome" best describes his work. The SACD format really suits opera and this Richard Mohr/Lewis Layton production is brilliantly realized from the outset. Its organisation of the orchestral and vocal parts brings our soloists to the fore and still recreates that cavernous scale and sheer depth of the soundstage occupied by the Rome musicians and chorus.

RP

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- Punctual, polite & appropriate.

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alexdouglas700@btinternet for more information.

#### 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 Beatles  
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:

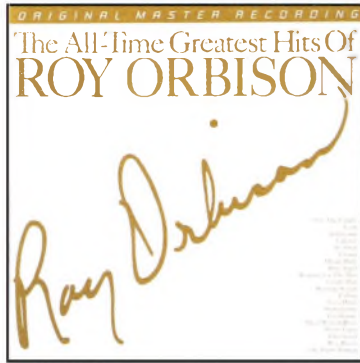
Summer Of 69 - Bryan Adams  
Mr Brightside - The Killers  
I Predict A Riot - Kaiser Chiefs  
Chelsea Dagger - The Fratellis  
Angels - Robbie Williams  
Don't Look Back In Anger - Oasis  
She Moves In Her Own Way - The Kooks  
Dakota - Stereophonics  
I Bet You Look Good - Arctic Monkeys  
Always Where 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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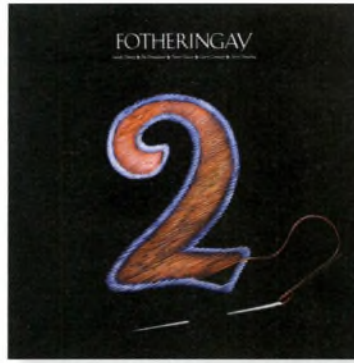
## Roy Orbison

### The All-Time Greatest Hits

Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab UDCD 774 

This is an indispensable anthology celebrating the work of a rock stylist who possessed both an extraordinary quavering voice and an equally eccentric personality. Here was a man blessed by a rare and effortless talent – able to move between snarling country blues, hard edged rock & roll and a seductive ballad in the twinkling of an eye – who only really found his oeuvre after a move to the fledgling Monument label in 1958. The signature songs are all here: 'Pretty Woman', 'Crying', 'It's Over', 'Running Scared', 'Dream Baby', 'Blue Angel', 'Only The Lonely', 'Love Hurts' and many more carried along by an emotionally indulgent and meandering delivery that plucks and plays with your sensitivities. Orbison, a performer who could chronicle and communicate the preciousness of intense and pent up feelings such as lust, fear and acute anxiety through just a few breathless words, was a marvellous and masterful manipulator of his audience. Roy, the dramatist, stage manager and songwriter extraordinaire who penned the vast majority of those songs; songs that are worn like a second skin, and whose parting shot in the event of any relationship breakdown is to expertly help you pick at those angry wounds?

RP



## Sandy Denny, Pat Donaldson, Trevor Lucas, Gerry Conway & Jerry Donahue

### Fotheringay 2

Stamford Audio STAMPLP 1001 

The forensic work of Jerry Donahue has, after nearly four decades, resurrected the skeletal vocal tracks and rhythmic remains of an embryonic second album that were interred at the start of 1971, following the demise of short lived British Folk group, Fotheringay. This gentle, folk-rock offshoot of Fairport Convention fronted by Sandy Denny and Trevor Lucas, delivered just a single unsatisfactory eponymous LP that failed to ignite audiences of the day despite its band member's obvious capabilities. *Fotheringay 2* alludes to what might have been. Sandy Denny, the darling of English singer songwriters, had put down versions of 'John the Gun' and 'Late November' – songs that were to feature later on her first solo album. There are those lovely inventive arrangements of traditional pieces like 'Bold Jack Donahue', 'Gypsy Davey' and 'Eppie Moray', and bold re-workings of Dylan's 'I Don't Believe You' and the Dave Cousins 'Two Weeks Last Summer', as well as the rousing Trevor Lucas penned tracks like 'Restless' and 'Knights of the Road'. These vocal and rhythmic threads have been sympathetically dressed with instrumental additions that embellish the basic unadorned musical fabric.

Supplier: Stamford Audio

RP



## Vivaldi

### The Four Seasons, Concerto for two violins Ricci, Stradivarius Chamber Orchestra; Lucerne Festival Strings

DGG 477 6674 

Ruggiero Ricci, violinist and conductor of this particular *Four Seasons* will always (like the seasons themselves) divide opinions. A dramatic, dexterous and sublimely virtuoso soloist, his approach is certainly fiery in parts, but there's plenty of delicacy and reflection too in this SCO performance. The overall interpretation is still very much of its time – recorded in 1964, this version, possibly one of the most exciting then – is by today's standards quite stately. While it's true to say that Ricci's fluidity pushes tempos, his account certainly has a lovely, considered beauty about it. The *"Echo Concerto" RV 552* for two violins, where Walter Prystawski and Herbert Hover are the principals, is from that same era. It's a nicely shaped, respectful and sympathetically rendered dalliance, with a generously warm, snaking dialogue between the violins – one that's kindly looked upon by Rudolf Baumgartner's Lucerne Festival Strings players. The balanced mainstream recording does absolutely nothing wrong, and the richness from the stringed instruments is well developed. Lastly, the two-minute excerpt from *Gloria*, fine on its own, is an unnecessary raid on the mid-1970s DGG back catalogue. It's musically misplaced, unless of course your raison d'être is a greatest hits album.

RP





**The Harvard Composers**

**Mendelssohn String Quartet & Lucy Shelton, soprano**

BIS 1264

The "Harvard" repertoire and finely etched musicianship of the Mendelssohn players show a rare commitment to innovative contemporary chamber works that's pretty hard to fault. Their approach to Piston's forceful, almost architectural *String Quartet No.1* is a hugely effective and intense experience. Leon Kirchner's *String Quartet No.2* continues much in the same vein, perhaps handled with greater delicacy as his purity of purpose unfolds in this unbroken three-movement construct. Lucy Shelton's voice communicates at all levels, for a haunting rendition of the Earl Kim *Three Poems in French*, while the brief yet dramatic qualities heard within the *String Quartet No.2* by Bernard Rands leave a prickly, inescapably adversarial sensation at the back of your neck. Closing with Mario Davidovsky's *String Quartet No.5 "Dank an Opus 132"* is something of a tour de force. His powerful images and discordant narrative landscape is a mentally bruising encounter that couldn't be further away from the Beethoven source material if it tried, making it the kind of jarringly uncomfortable and provocative single movement piece of which any of these music professors from this great American institution would have been proud.

RP



**Maurice Ravel**  
**Prélude, Le Tombeau De Couperin, Pavane Pour Une Infante Défunte, Valse Nobles Et Sentimentales, etc.**  
**Artur Pizarro, piano.**

Linn Records CKD 318

Having enjoyed Pizarro's first outing with Ravel (Linn CKD 290) I already had some preconceptions regarding this disc. Let me make this clear: Pizarro plays Ravel! With my fascination for earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century French pianists, I was quite surprised but delighted to have enjoyed the first Ravel disc. This one includes some of my favourite Ravel piano works including *Le Tombeau, Pavanne* and *Valse Nobles*. Pizarro's playing is simply exquisite from start to finish of this 75 minute outing. I've spent the better part of a day playing and replaying this disc and I can find absolutely nothing wrong here. I even found myself listening to some other artists play these works and I must admit to having changed some of my deeper-seated predispositions. Pizarro demonstrates admirable technique and displays some great insight into compositions that I felt I knew inside out. Ravel was a master painter with a really wide palette and this artist seems to have a real gift for offering the listener a rich, colourful and very satisfying experience from his outstanding playing. We are not short of Ravel discs but I would place this (and the first volume) the top of the list. A set of simply superb performances from beginning to end that gets my highest recommendation.

RSF

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



**Shostakovich: Cello Concerto No. 2**  
**Britten: Third Suite for Solo Cello**

**Pieter Wispelwey; Sinfonietta Cracovia, Jurjen Hempel cond.**

Channel Classics CCS SA25308

I first became familiar with the Shostakovich 2<sup>nd</sup> Cello Concerto through the Rostropovich performance with Ozawa conducting the Boston S.O. on DGG. Indeed, like the first concerto, the work was written for Rostropovich and I return to this recording of my favourite cello concerto often. So many of Shostakovich's works are highly percussive and this composition is no different. A three-movement work lasting approximately 35 minutes, Wispelwey and Hempel (the very able conductor) whisk the listener through this highly charged tour-de-force with the cellist giving an outstanding account ably accompanied by the Sinfonietta Cracovia. Britten was a big admirer of Shostakovich and a close friend to Rostropovich, writing at least five compositions for the Russian cellist. *The Third Suite* is a highly charged affair, comprising ten small movements. The mood changes often and the listener travels an emotional path set by the composer. This disc offers reference quality sound from the SACD layer and is equally convincing as a CD. Wispelwey is a master of the cello and it's been a pleasure to add this coupling in my collection.

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

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## Patricia Barber

### Verse

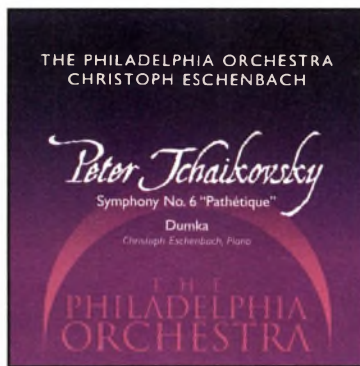
Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2027



Those won over by Patricia Barber's *Café Blue*, an album that made her a darling of the audio community, will wonder what's happened if they venture into the freer forms and heavy instrumental bias of *Verse*. This is MoFi's fifth Barber disc, in part reflecting that status, but recorded in a mere five days back in February 2002, this has much more of the verve and edge of her live sets, less of the studio polish that led to *Café Blue*'s popularity. It's all the better for it. She is backed by a band consisting of Dave Douglas on trumpet, and Neal Alger on guitar(s), while the rhythm section is driven by Michael Arnpol on bass and Joey Baron on drums, although Eric Montzka guests on 'You Gotta Go Home'. The horn lines are sparse and haunting, the guitar providing most of the texture here, while rhythms shift and shimmer underneath. It's a disjointed and disquieting musical soundscape – and all the more effective as a result. What it isn't, is easy listening or aural wallpaper for smart dinner parties. For those who find the likes of *Café Blue* too safe and insipid, *Verse* is the place to come. Barber is in fine and telling voice, and MoFi have done a superb job with the SACD transfer, which is both delicate and immediate, making the most of music that caresses rather than pummels the listener.

RG

RECORDING  
MUSIC



## Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 6 'Pathétique', Dumka Christoph Eschenbach cond. Philadelphia Orchestra.

Ondine ODE 1131-5



I'm pretty picky about my Tchaikovsky and over the years I've developed a short short-list of 'Pathétiques' I really enjoy. It includes performances by Pierre Monteux and the Boston Symphony – on RCA – and the wildly frenetic Eugene Mravinsky and his Leningrad Philharmonic. Mravinsky recorded the work twice for DGG and it's his second recording I prefer. Well, now I can add Eschenbach (alas, no longer the conductor of The Philadelphia) who delivers an outstanding performance on all counts. From the opening bars of the Adagio to the closing fanfare of the finale, the listener is wrapped in the sonic splendor that Tchaikovsky composed and the engineers have delivered. This is a near 50 minute outing of sublime musicianship and sound that both the neophyte and disciplined listener will enjoy. The coupling, *Dumka*, was requested by Tchaikovsky's Parisian publisher and was dedicated to the French pianist Antoine Marmontel. The composer has framed the piece with a somber folk tune to open and all the percussive fireworks a piano can deliver to close. Eschenbach is a very capable pianist and this exotic piece rounds out a superbly prepared Tchaikovsky disc. Stunning sound from both the SACD and CD layers make this disc strongly recommended.

Supplier: [www.ondine.net](http://www.ondine.net)

RSF

RECORDING  
MUSIC



## Richard Strauss Don Juan; Death and Transfiguration; Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks; Dreaming by the Fireside Marc Albrecht cond. Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg.

PentaTone PTC 5186 310



The conductor Marc Albrecht, in his debut disc for PentaTone, has given us a Strauss disc of monumental proportions. Aside from the demonstration quality sound, the immaculate performance leaves this listener wanting more. This was one of those discs I had to listen to several times to grasp just what I was hearing! While the disc opens with a rousing *Don Juan*, the grace and majesty of *Death and Transfiguration* had me thinking of Von Karajan and Fritz Reiner. Believe me it takes a lot for a performance to do that. We then move to the light-hearted fantasy of *Till Eulenspiegel*. This is a delightful frolic played wonderfully well by the Strasbourg Philharmonic. The 44-year old Albrecht has more than 20 years under his belt with many of the leading orchestras in Europe. By the time you read this, he will have debuted at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Please do read the accompanying booklet to gain some insight into the Tone Poems of Richard Strauss. I think you'll be surprised and delighted with what there is to learn. Did I mention the disc is thrilling? Highest recommendation.

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

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RECORDING  
MUSIC





# EVERY HOME SHOULD HAVE ONE

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

by Reuben Parry

### The Johnny Cash Live Prison Gigs

It is often said of Cash's earlier chart topping Folsom Prison album that its classic songs do themselves encapsulate the life of a prisoner. Thirteen months later, on February 24th 1969, his concert at San Quentin was not only recorded for the Columbia label, but an accompanying Granada TV crew was present too, visually capturing for posterity the powerful emotion, edginess and underlying humanity of those incarcerated in one of California's grimmest institutions. Both records are outstanding social documents, and they were eventually issued together in a two-record set, yet anyone who has seen the San Quentin documentary will know only too well that there is still a wealth of compelling material not present on the Columbia CS9827 LP. So, while the Speaker's Corner label has recently elevated those original master tapes in a ten song 180g audiophile vinyl facsimile, much is missing. Consequently, I would still insist upon also owning the comprehensive Sony Legacy Edition three-disc release. The sonics may not be great, but that aside, in addition to the Granada documentary DVD, they have spread thirty-one San Quentin tracks (many previously unissued) across another two CDs to give us a fuller appreciation of the role played by JC, The Carter Family, Carl Perkins, The Statler Brothers and San Quentin inmates at this concert. You certainly wouldn't want to be without John and June's 'Jackson', Carl's 'Restless' or John and the Carter Family performing 'Ring Of Fire'. All of them, including Marshall Grant, W.S. Holland and Bob Wootton, seem remarkably comfortable in this the most oppressive of settings. The humour and general banter between songs are testament to it and this adds greatly to one of the most atmospheric, committed and lively of moments from music history.

Of course at a personal level JC probably couldn't have made this record if he hadn't lived that bent out of shape kind of life he had, and then gone on to straighten it out some. His criminal misdemeanours were in the past; he'd kicked a serious amphetamine habit, found a spiritual side and cemented his relationship with June Carter. So while JC had always been identified with the underdog, the down trodden and society's unrepresented (these characters populate many of his songs) this was now tempered by conscience, fairness and a sense that you're going to eventually pay a



dreadful price for doing wrong. Strangely enough, the men held in San Quentin and the many other prisons in which he played responded to this honesty and candour... possibly because he treated them like people. Yes, throughout the concert there is that palpable

exhilarating sense of dangerous masculine excitement, but there's also an obvious connection between John and this audience. Their identification with and acceptance of Cash's slightly arrogant, cocky and straight talking demeanour is perhaps best exemplified in his famous introduction of the title-track – a song written the day before – that expresses all the darkness, rage, pain and black humour in a prisoner's daily life. The audience's response is immense. John's hoarseness - his voice was pretty beat up because he'd been up too long the previous night – heightens the emotive content. Here and throughout this concert those inconsistencies in the recording quality of the songs somehow suits that gritty realism of the men's predicament.

*San Quentin*, in any of its various guises, works in so many ways. It is a unique piece of social observation and interaction, a powerful expose on prison life. There's an unspoken commentary that says judge a society by how it treat its prisoners. Music is a vehicle that humanises us and has the potential to affect, influence and change our views beyond real and perceived boundaries. If this concert was in some small way to lead to the rehabilitation of just a single individual then it could be called a success. Merle Haggard was sat in the front row, having been an inmate since his conviction for armed robbery in 1958. So that's an answer of sorts to that one. And above all it's a truly captivating performance. ➤+

#### Johnny Cash

##### At Folsom Prison

First released June 1968 (CBS 63308)  
CD released Jan 1995 on Success label

##### At San Quentin

First released August 1969 (CBS 63629)  
CD released March 1994 on Sony Collector's label  
Speakers Corner 180g re-issue released 2007



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