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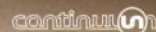
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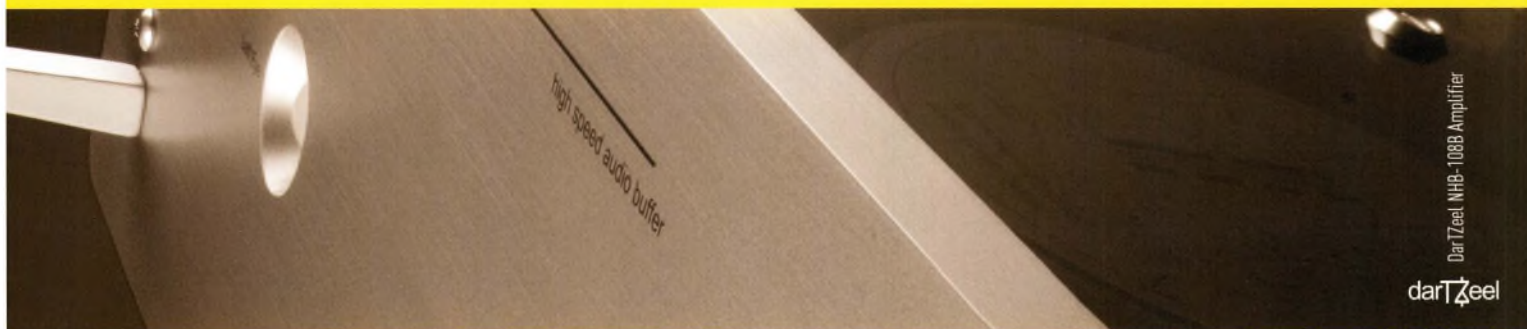
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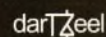
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editorial

Welcome to the Hi-Fi Plus Awards 2009. In a slight break with tradition for the magazine, we've chosen the best possible products from the most important categories in hi-fi today. This, I feel, gives a good indicator of just how the audio industry is shaping up across the board. And we do mean the audio industry, not simply the high-end audio industry; what other roll-call of awards would place a £350 CD player and amplifier on the as high a pedestal as nearly £30,000 worth of loudspeaker? This is where we hope the future of audio lies; not inexpensive audio, not high-end audio, but good audio. Whatever the cost.

Awards-haters please note; we've also including reviews of ten of the latest products in the magazine too. Many of these are award winners in their own right (we had a lot of products released this year that demanded attention and many have been sitting patiently waiting for their reviews). Some arrived just over the deadline for submission and there is still at least two magazine's worth of products to get through arriving every issue. It's a tough life, spending your hours listening to music!

So, we've tried to cram as much into this issue as possible, in addition to the Awards themselves, including the long-awaited conclusion to the tales of Roy's Room! Naturally, something had to give, and in this issue, it's a full set of music reviews and features. So, those looking for an interview, a Top 10 or a full spread of music reviews will find this issue wanting, I'm afraid. But, fear not... the music section is not going away and there are still a good selection of the latest recordings on tap; it's simply that our full-on music section will return in full effect next issue.

Before then, we'll be at the new Sound & Vision Show in Manchester on Saturday 17th and Sunday 18th October, in room 308 on the third floor of the Renaissance Hotel in Central Manchester. But this time, no demonstrations, no lectures, no listening tests... just a relaxed chill-out room to get back to good music +

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ARABESQUE

by



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acoustics

for the love of music...



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The sad passing of three sensible audiophiles

music matters

By Alan Sircom

BECAUSE IT IS (USUALLY) A BI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE, *Hi-Fi Plus* isn't big on news stories. By the time we get round to them, 'news' items are usually 'olds'. But this is slightly different. The sad news of the passing of Jim Thiel, following the recent deaths of both J Gordon Holt and John Crabbe, marks the closing of the era of the sensible audiophile.

John Crabbe (1929-2008) joined *Hi-Fi News* in 1962 and was editor of the magazine from 1965-82. Under his guidance, the magazine developed a keen sense of slightly eccentric humour, and a reputation for technical accuracy and integrity. A keen recording engineer (he was resident recordist for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the late 1950s and interviewed such luminaries as the philosopher Bertrand Russell during that time) and Berlioz enthusiast, Crabbe was first and foremost an engineer's engineer and found his stance very much at odds with the increasingly subjective hi-fi enthusiast of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Despite his firmly objective viewpoint, during his tenure as editor, he was keen to cover 'alternative' views, including printing the first English translation of Jean Hiraga's seminal feature *Can we hear connecting wires?*, which effectively kicked off one of the most controversially subjective aspects of modern audio.

J Gordon Holt (1930-2009) founded *Stereophile* magazine in 1962 and remained on the magazine's masthead as 'Founder & Chief Tester' until 1999. Holt developed a subjective stance to his magazine, rejecting the then-popular concept of using measurement alone to describe the performance of a product. But his subjective testing was built on a protocol of well-defined listening tests. These were his measurements, in essence; at least as important as knowing the objective performance of a product. A life-long fan of the works of Ralph Vaughan Williams, Holt came to despair about the change in direction in high-end audio in his later years (moving, he felt, from providing greater musical accuracy to providing musical 'beauty'). At *Stereophile's* 30th Anniversary dinner at the 1992 CES, Holt famously said, "People, let's start getting back to basics. Let's put the 're' back into 'reproduction'." 17 years later, his entreaty has yet to be realised by many high-end companies.

Jim Thiel (1947-2009) founded Thiel Audio Products in 1976. From the outset, he was a champion of using coherent loudspeaker design, eschewing complex crossover systems in

favour of a first-order design. He pioneered time and phase alignment at a time when such issues were not even considered 'issues'. A man of great talent, great modesty and great humility (in an industry where all three are thin on the ground), Thiel could explain relatively complex and abstract aspects of audio engineering in a manner that even a reviewer could understand, but would never patronise. Every inch the man of science (his academic background was in physics and mathematics), his loudspeakers reflected his passion for inquiry and his love of music. As a consequence, Thiel was never one to rest on his (many) laurels, constantly designing better and better products, culminating in his CS 3.7 loudspeaker.



Jim Thiel 1947-2009

In their own rights, Crabbe, Holt and Thiel were all a breed apart and we are all diminished by their passing. All three espoused an ethos of sense and sensibility in audio, in an increasingly left-field high-end world. Despite some fundamental differences in outlook, these three gentlemen (and in every sense, they were 'gentlemen' of the old school) all shared a passion for music and for excellence in audio, and it behoves all of us in the audio business to grow a little bit more sensible if we are to follow in their footsteps. +



Fidelity, or music?

Digital Dreams

By Jason Kennedy

I HAVE JUST SURFACED AFTER A MONTH submerged in high-end audiophilia. Its been a heady experience, with the pain of lugging heavyweight kit around offset by the sonic magic that the best of it can find in your favourite music. The reviewing process can all too easily screw up your ability to appreciate music as you are constantly analysing the way it sounds rather than allowing it to communicate in its own unique way. The better high-end gear breaks through this by revealing more of the message along with more tangible aspects such as imaging, dynamics and timing. But the latter bridges the gap between hi-fi and music more definitely than the others and this is why it's a quality that's prized above others by many reviewers.

“In fact, wind up gramophones for all their shortcomings seem extremely effective in this regard; it's almost as if distortions of the right kind seem to help get the message through.”

Among the bevy of beautifully hewn boxes was what seemed the most resolute of digital sources in the Boulder 102. This is an exceptionally heavyweight and substantial disc spinner that has one of the highest asking prices among single box machines. The casework undoubtedly has something to do with this but Boulder's approach to the challenge of extracting maximum information from all manner of silver discs – it will play the hi-res WAV files on a Reference Recordings HRx – is, to my knowledge, unique. Instead of streaming the bits from the transport to the converter it buffers them and lets a DVD drive read and re-read until it has extracted all it can and thus avoids having to interpolate in the usual way. All of which results in a sound that is devoid of the usual digital characteristics and has a serenity that I've never encountered before. This allows it to produce fully immersive and precise soundstages in the context of timing that while on the stately side seems entirely precise. But there is a problem, somewhere along the line it fails to deliver the emotional content of the material. It brings you the drama and power albeit in a controlled fashion but it doesn't do goose bumps the way that many more affordable players do.

Emotional communication is clearly not linked to resolution, chances are that music reproduction would never have got of the ground if it were. In fact, wind up gramophones for all their

shortcomings seem extremely effective in this regard; it's almost as if distortions of the right kind seem to help get the message through. The valve amplifier is probably the most popular example of this, a device that runs into clipping a lot of the time and that has a high noise floor and yet which makes the most enthralling music is clearly plugging into something in our psyche. It's probably a simple trigger and yet one that high end kit sometimes misses because it gets so engrossed in removing distortion.

This is an area where CD players have always struggled in comparison to turntables. Its clearly got nothing to do with lower noise and better imaging and is all to do with emphasis and probably emphasis on the midrange, the portion of the sound that we are most sensitised to and which if spot lit in an appropriate fashion is more effective than out and out transparency. Fortunately you do get CD players that can do both, the funky two box Resolution Audio Opus 21 is one example as is the EMM Labs TSD1 transport and DAC2 that I've reviewed for Hi-Fi Plus. The former seems a little bit excitable by the standards of the latter but it does all the important things well, it times and brings you the heart of the matter in the context of a sound that is quiet and wideband. The EMM Labs is calmer and more sophisticated but also gets to the nub of things, and does so in the least digital fashion I've come across.

I recall listening to Radiohead's 'Karma Police' in the car once and thinking that it was the most powerful and beautiful piece of music, yet playing it on most hi-fi systems does not produce the same effect – clearly not enough distortion. So perhaps what someone needs to build is a DAC or preamp that lets you add the right sort of distortion and/or noise to allow the emotional message to come through. It must be a reviewer thing! +

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Maestro Utopia, Hifi News magazine

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Diablo Utopia, Hifi+ magazine




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Tone up for the multichannel future

the view from the other side

By the *Hi-Fi Heretic*

THE PURSUIT OF THE AUDIOPHILE IDEAL is holding back the next generation of music in the home. Move with the times or move out of the way!

Those obsessed with audio (not music, that's an altogether different obsession, although they do collide at times) have a whiff of the Puritan about them. Their prized possessions need to be as minimalist as possible and if that gets in the way of playing music, that only builds the sense of occasion. So tone controls get chased out of town, replaced by chip amps without even a source selector.

Trouble is, things like tone controls are actually really useful. Not every recording is pristine audiophile grade material; some are mixed for replay on some distinctly non-hi-fi products and low-fi radio airplay. Sometimes the master tape isn't available for the CD pressing in that country and the end result isn't that wonderful. Practically everyone who bought the Led Zep CDs bemoaned the sound quality, for good reason... they sound nothing like the original LPs.

“I'd rather spend a few hundred quid on an integrated amplifier with tone controls than a few thousand on something with twice the weight and half the features.”

Tone controls can help. Careful tone cuts and boosts might not transform the sound of poor CDs, but they can turn something unlistenable, listenable. Of course, for the last few decades, tone controls are strictly out of fashion with the audiophile brigade, preferring to hear an unsullied reproduction of a mediocre remaster than the more attractive sounding – but less ‘pure’ – tone-shaped version. Strangely, this uncompromising stance has less of an effect the cheaper you go, because many budget amplifiers are sold on the basis of a checklist of features. Personally, given that the sonic difference between well-designed amplifiers is negligible at best, I'd rather spend a few hundred quid on an integrated amplifier with tone controls than a few thousand on something with twice the weight and half the features.

Better yet, I'd rather spend that money on a multichannel amplifier, and it's here where I really think the hi-fi buffs are killing off their own industry. Since DVD and now especially with Blu-ray disc, there have been an increasing number of excellent multichannel music videos available. Not simply MTV

material, but complete concerts (rock, jazz and classical) and operas. This last is the clincher for me, and I'm not the biggest of opera buffs – if you can watch and listen to an opera, or just listen to an opera, which one do you think offers the most entertainment value? People tend not to go to Glyndebourne and listen with their eyes shut, after all.

Stereo isn't dead, but the replay of stereo exclusively through a pair of loudspeakers in a room is now the preserve of the older generation. Younger people are listening to music on iPods, or on external speakers to a laptop, not in the living room anymore. When they are in the living room, they are engaging with music by watching *T4* or playing *Rock Band* on their PS3s. When they aren't doing either of these things, they are sitting round watching music videos. And most *Hi-Fi+* readers know this because it's their kids and grandkids doing the sitting round.

As this generation grows up, they will want to play the music they love over and over again (just like we do; most of us are more likely to listen to Pink Floyd than Muse because Pink Floyd reminds us of our youth). They will not make the intellectual jump from iPod or laptop to living room easily, but they will want to expand upon the video collection they already possess, both in terms of bigger pictures and more immersive sound experiences. By dismissing both of these elements as ‘home cinema’ for seemingly no other reason than snobbery (Unless, of course there's a magic reason why putting a few more speakers and a TV in the room ruins the sound of stereo), the hi-fi industry has effectively disenfranchised itself from reaching out to any new generations of owners. Because if this generation doesn't get interested, the next will consign hi-fi to history.

It's called committing audiocide. +

[sometimes]
technology meets art...



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School Lane, Ringwood, Hampshire, BH24 1LG, United Kingdom.
Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming

ARABESQUE ADRIFT

I like the new 'look' of the magazine and don't object to the 'over-sizing'. It makes it a somewhat awkward size in some ways, but not enough so to fuss much about, from my standpoint. I really like the increased legibility of the articles themselves—for these aging eyes, whatever changes you made to contrast, font, paper stock, or whatever were a major improvement.

However as someone who pays his subscription dues, just as any UK subscriber does, I'm not pleased to be told that there's a "sublime cover-disk" by Crystal Cables that's being sent to one set of subscribers but not to the rest of us. I'm sure there are good, valid reasons relating to overseas shipping costs or packaging regulations or Crystal Cable's underwriting or whatever—but that doesn't change the negative taste in the mouth that it leaves with me, I'm sorry to say.

Other than my grouching, I love the magazine and will continue to subscribe to it, along with TAS, I suppose, so long as they continue to offer different reviews and perspectives, which is why I subscribe to both in the first place. Keep up the great work, building on the solid foundation that Roy Gregory created. I hope he continues to write regularly (as he did for the current issue) going forward, regardless of his 'corporate ties'.

Jerry Powell, via email

Unfortunately, it proved impossible for us to clear the worldwide rights to this disc in time for publication. And without permission to run that CD internationally, we would be engaged in copyright theft - Ed.

GAT YOUR FACTS STRAIGHT!

I have just read the GAT review and your 'Why Change' box has many inaccurate facts when you have followed the top c-j preamplifiers closely.

The ART Preamplifier is a true dual-mono preamp, with completely separate right and left chassis, not a single preamp box with a separate power supply. There were only ever 250 ART chassis ever made. The ART3 was released in 2007, not 2005. There were only an ACT2 and ACT series 2 models available. The ACT2 was never a limited edition model. And while there were still some ART3's available for sale, they were sold at the same time as the ACT2 series 2.

Shane Ryan, via email

We are suitably – and genuinely – humbled by your knowledge of the top c-j preamp history. And we stand corrected – Ed.

SCEPTICAL ENQUIRY

I take issue with Adam Blake's review of the Blue Horizon Proburn. Although Adam seems desperate to suggest an element of 'Emperor's New Clothes' scepticism about the product, he does nevertheless state that it does what it is designed to do: make cables sound better.

However, his scepticism takes a rather unhelpful turn when he states: "I could repeat the claims made by Blue Horizon about what the Proburn does to cable, about how the signals penetrates the conductors and how it rearranges all of the electrons in the dielectric, but I am frankly sceptical of this explanation."

Blue Horizon claims that "Proburn does more than simply synthesise music; using specially developed technology, the unit generates a sequence of unique ultra-low frequencies to penetrate the core of the conductor, and ultra-high frequencies that penetrate both the conductor and the dielectric. Using carefully controlled energy levels and frequencies, electrons are forced and attempt to enter the dielectric." So, I'm not surprised he's "sceptical of this explanation", as he appears to have fabricated it himself!

Tim Bower, Public Relations for Blue Horizon Ideas

The original text had a more thorough explanation of the claims made for Proburn, but space restrictions meant a large amount of editorial cutting took place. Any errors introduced in the process were ours, not those of the reviewer concerned. Our apologies for any confusion caused – Ed.

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

VPI Classic turntable

By Roy Gregory. Photography by Simon Marsh.

When the late, great Edgar Villchur designed the three-point suspended sub-chassis turntable, first seen in the compact shape of the AR-XA, he could have little dreamt of the dominant effect his design would create across the Atlantic. It's not that there was a shortage of competing products and technologies, but the hegemony established by Linn and its cohorts simply shouted down the likes of the Trio LO-7D, Technics SP10 and Goldmund Studio, not to mention uni-pivot and parallel tracking tonearms, moving iron cartridges, DC motors and a host of other approaches which have since resurfaced and more than proved their worth.

Across the pond, things were rather different. The LP12 was sufficiently expensive in the US market, which allowed breathing room for 'tables that conflicted markedly with its design strictures. For example, with each iteration of Harry Weisfeld's VPI designs, suspension became less and less laterally compliant until, in the Aries, it was gone altogether. Meanwhile, motors became free-standing, suspended mass increased and fly-wheel assemblies became the order of the day – all in the name of increased speed stability.

Little surprise then, that in seeking greater performance at lower prices, Harry has taken the final, almost taboo step of bolting the motor directly to the same plinth as the main-bearing. Doesn't that send vibrational energy straight through the structure and into the stylus, where it's added to and thus horribly distorts the signal?

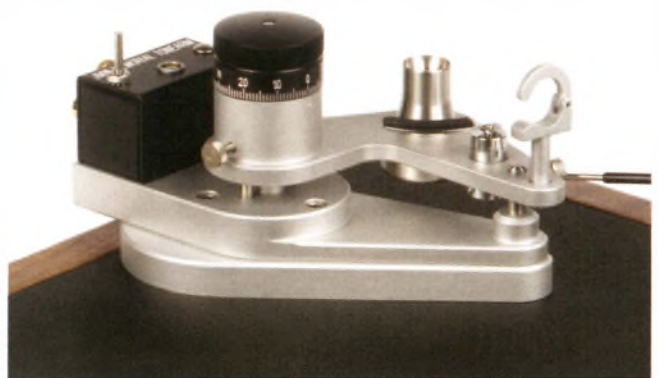
Well, turntable power supplies are significantly better than they used to be, which allows synchronous motors to run far more quietly. Phono-stages have improved too, meaning that we can now hear the underlying costs of the floating sub-chassis as well as its benefits. CD has given us a greater appreciation of speed stability, while the increasing understanding of the crucial role of phase coherence in audio performance has further underlined that need. So, did we all imagine that the LP12 was good? No – it remains a genuinely great deck, but as is so often the case, its greatness is ascribed to the most obvious facet of its design, rather than the complex underlying strengths that really mattered (main bearing, heavy platter, the MC/medium mass tonearm match). Just look at what has pretty much remained unchanged, against all the things that have changed in the design if you want the proof of that particular pudding.

Nevertheless, the sub-chassis suspension is so deeply ingrained in the audio community that the Classic's direct coupled path is an eyebrow-raising one. All of which makes VPI's decision to develop and launch the Classic either very brave or very foolish; but given that Mr Weisfeld has been making turntables for longer than most of the competition (this is a 30th Anniversary product), we should be prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt...

The Classic is a large and actually rather handsome beast, in a foursquare, uncluttered sort of way. Its deep, wooden plinth and massive, one-piece aluminium platter create a seriously retro feel, and I'm certain that DNA testing would show up some deep-seated throwback to the Pioneer PL12D. The solid plinth is constructed from three layers of MDF, comes in

black or Walnut finishes and is supported on four adjustable feet. These are derived from the TNT in terms of shape, and compliant mounting of their threaded posts provides a measure of isolation from the outside world, while three tiny balls sunk into the underside of each one ensure a stable footing. The platter revolves on a large diameter inverted bearing, bolted securely through the plinth and employing the VPI trademark thrust-pad, although in this case made from PEEK, chosen to support the heavier platter mass.

The motor occupies the front left hand corner of the plinth, rigidly clamped between a thrust plate and the triangular top-plate, topped by a stepped pulley to allow adjustment between 33 and 45RPM. The pulley itself runs very close to the platter periphery, which it drives via a round section, stiff rubber belt. A spare is provided with the deck. There is no platter mat, just a label recess in the centre of the aluminium top surface, while the spindle is threaded to



accept the supplied VPI clamp (or optional record weight). Flip the platter over – no mean feat given its 18lb mass – and you'll see a stainless steel damping plate firmly bonded to the underside, there to add mass and stop the whole thing ringing.

The 'table will also take the VPI peripheral clamp and can be used with the SDS external power supply, but the star of the show is undoubtedly the Classic tonearm. One benefit of such a straightforward plinth is that it frees up more money for the

▶ tonearm, and here you are getting what amounts to a refined and simplified version of the VPI JMW 10.5, complete with detachable armwand assembly and the option of 'on the fly' VTA adjustment if you are prepared to pay \$700 for it (and I would be). This versatile uni-pivot design allows precise alignment of the cartridge in all three planes, alignment that's preserved if the armtube is swapped. Stability and azimuth come from a low-slung, weighted collar around the bearing housing and the under-hung counterweight, while a simple falling weight bias system is provided, although I prefer the sound without it. Bear in mind that this might lead to uneven cartridge wear, although as a long

You've basically got a full-blown 10.5 arm in its own right, which on a deck that lists in standard form for less than £2,500 is little short of astonishing..

time JMW user I've yet to experience this problem. Add in the VTA option and you've basically got a full-blown 10.5 arm in its own right, which on a deck that lists in standard form for less than £2,500 is little short of astonishing.

The deck that arrived for review was the standard model but with the VTA option on the arm and a second armtube to allow quick cartridge swaps. Of course, I've also got the SDS and Peripheral clamp from my TNT, allowing me to ring the changes as far as options are concerned, but I started without any extras, simply using the deck as supplied with the centre record weight and a Lyra Skala mounted in one tonearm and the Dynavector DV-20X in the other.

The first thing that strikes you about the classic is the absolute, rooted stability on which it builds the sound. If you are thinking staid or sluggish as a result you couldn't be more wrong. The firm footing under the music is a

perfect launching pad for whatever dynamic fireworks the disc wants to throw at you. Take a listen to 'Paper In Fire' from the John Cougar Mellencamp album *Lonesome Jubilee*. This was never a great recording but it's most definitely brilliant music. The Classic picks it up by the scruff of the neck and drives this high-tempo track right into the room, giving it a sense of both physical presence and musical purpose that belie the thin and glarey recording. The energy and sheer life are infectious, but not bought at the expense of poor definition or separation. Just listen to the clean, crisp leading edges on the wood blocks, or the natural tonality and separation of the vocals. Sure, the deck can't disguise the glaze that coats the crescendos, but it can dig through it to stop the instruments congealing into a single whole, keeping the band stable in space and the track on course. If this record on this 'table doesn't get you up and dancing then you are probably dead from the neck down.

But it's not just about get up and go. 'Real Life' is also a high tempo number, but its feel is quite different, the urgency tinged with an empty need and desperation. It's a shift that's well within the Classic's expressive compass and the deck makes no bones about what motivates this track, leaving the listener achingly aware of the underlying poignancy that fuels the lyric. In part, that emotive range is down to the sure-footed rhythmic agility of the Classic, a quality that allows it to deliver the drum accents that conclude each chorus and the bridge with real impact and precision. Grin factor? Off the scale and climbing fast!

Switching to something acoustic and arguably a little more delicate leaves the deck completely unfazed. The famous Romero's recording of the *Concierto De Aranjuez* (Alessandro and the San Antonio S.O.) may lack the astonishing immediacy and spectacular space and transparency of the Argenta/Yepes reading, but it is nevertheless a majestic performance with a wonderfully coherent acoustic spread, orchestral perspective and a solo performance that seamlessly blends fiery passion, poise and delicacy. The rock solid rendition delivered by the Classic helps bring the performance to life, enclosing the listener in the same ▶



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With its dedicated arm, the Model 30/12A possesses a majesty I hadn't heard before. Bereft of absurd, self-aggrandising over complexity exhibiting nothing but sane engineering and producing sound that's impossible to fault.

Ken Kessler Review – Hi-Fi News, March 2009

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Belt drive record player

Speeds: 33 and 45, manually shifted

Electronic Supply: Optional SDS

Platter: Aluminium/Stainless Steel

Platter Weight: 8.2kg

Clamp: Record weight or optional peripheral clamp

Lid: Optional

Finishes: Black or Walnut

Dimensions (WxHxD): 527 x 250 x 400mm

Weight: 20.5kg

Tonearm: JMW 10.5 Classic

Type: Medium mass with interchangeable arm-tops

VTA Adjustment: Optional vernier type

Prices –

Classic Record Player: £2139.95

VTA Adjustor: \$700 (UK price TBC)

Peripheral Clamp: £381.70

SDS Power Supply: £949.99

Lid: £(UK price TBC)

UK Distributor:

Analogue Seduction

Tel. (44)(0)1733 344768

Net. www.analogueseduction.net

Manufacturer:

VPI Industries Inc.

Net. www.vpiindustries.com

► acoustic space with a sense of real, living, breathing musicians. The sense of focus, of an instrument locked in space and a person playing it is noticeably enhanced by the use of the record weight, or even better the peripheral clamp. Transparency improves as does depth, while the stage boundaries become more apparent and the images more dimensional and solid. Listen to the carefully structured opening of Rodrigo's Second Movement and you quickly realize that the Classic got a full quota of the VPI spatial DNA, the various instruments beautifully located and stepped across the orchestral plane.

And the Classic isn't just about scale and power. Play something delicate like Janis Ian and the musical coherence and intimacy are underpinned by the easy musical flow, the levels of low-level instrumental resolution and detail. The stark, almost etched transparency that comes with a plastic platter is not part of the Classic's sound, but listen into the music and you'll soon realise that the detail's in there – it just isn't spot lit.

Its mastery of time and space, its almost boundless dynamic range and energy, its sure-footed confidence set it apart from almost all other decks at this price. Almost, because there's also the SRM Arezzo Reference out there (and reviewed in the last issue), a deck which shares more than a little of the VPI's attitude and musical virtues. There are clear differences between these two decks – but between them they conspire to set a completely new benchmark as far as musical performance at this price level goes.

Apart from anything else, aesthetics alone are going to split potential customers. The large footprint and retro-chic of the VPI will attract the nostalgia vote, but the compact elegance, shiny surfaces and supplied lid of the SRM will definitely appeal to the modernists out there. And in some ways, the differences in sound mirror the differences in appearance. Where the Arezzo, even with the new, heavier flywheel is all about deft agility and even-handedness, the Classic is much more about power and scale, its dynamic range being far broader and sheer presence more physical in nature. In that respect it is definitely and obviously a VPI, but the sense of unstoppable drive and energy that characterizes both these 'tables makes it a whole new enchilada compared to its predecessors at this price level.

The other big difference between these two record players is the upgrade path available for the Classic, but given the space I've expended already that is going to have to wait for another day. But what really binds these two 'tables together, places them apart from and above the crowd, is their uninhibited sense of musical flow and momentum. This isn't breakneck speed and it's in no way out of control. It's about the sheer power and drive inherent in the music

– be it sumptuous and all encompassing, or poised and latent. Yes, the VPI is warmer and richer, fuller and more explosive as compared to the SRM's leaner, cleaner approach, but they both bring this same compelling quality to the music they deliver.

Not so long ago, a musician friend of mine heard the Classic compared to what is one of the finest and most expensive decks in existence. Yes there were differences, but they were more presentational than musical and they weren't major. "How much is the difference in cost?" he said, "HOW MUCH?" For lo, a true audio bargain is a rare and wonderful thing – and I think I'm still struggling to come to terms with this one. +



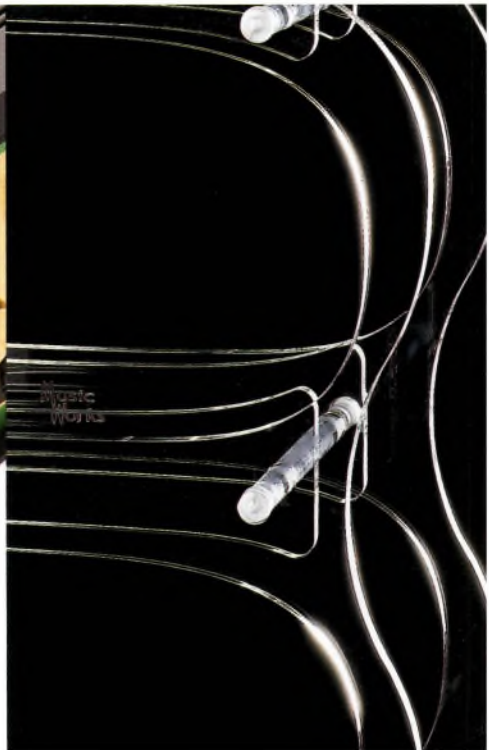
by Alan Sircom

welcome

to the

2009 HiFi+

awards!



Over the next few pages, you'll find some of the best products we've seen in the last 12 months, and even an innovation or two that are just around the corner.

As regular readers might have spotted, we're into changes this year, and our new Awards have also had a spot of retouching. Instead of highlighting products of merit as a standalone entity, this year we've created a series of categories – 15 in total – that we feel best sum up the individual components that make up a complete system; from the source to the speakers. We have also included to extra award categories – Innovation and Music – to recognise achievements that may not be directly related to a hi-fi component, but help bring better music to more people.

Our regular selection process that makes giving a product an award a slightly tougher job than in many magazines. There are products that don't make the cut, and never make it to the pages of the magazine. These are the products that, for one reason

or another, simply failed to gel with the reviewers and were quietly dropped from the review process. Which means every product that makes it to the magazine is pretty much a winner in its own right. Selecting a list of the greatest and the good from a list of already pretty damn great and good products is not an easy task.

Nevertheless, in most categories, we found there were at least three outstanding products deserving of that extra mention. In a couple of cases – CD players and floorstanding loudspeakers – it would have been impossible to pin these categories down to just one winner and two runners up without sacrificing a superb product in the process. So, we caved in and allocated three runners up products instead of just two in these categories. It's interesting that when so many music pundits are calling time on the shiny disc of polycarbonate, we've found new life and excitement in the design of CD and SACD players (we've grouped both under the CD banner, because sadly CD is more immediately recognisable than CD/SACD combined). This is reminiscent to a time 20+ years ago, when LP was revitalised in the face of challenges from CD. Perhaps, those rumours of the death of CD are greatly

exaggerated, and even SACD is holding out against those who predicted its demise (including this humble-pie-eating editor).

A problem we face in dividing our awards into specific product categories is 'award system syndrome'. There's a potential risk for people to assume that because a specific CD player, amplifier and loudspeaker are all award winners that they will work well in combination. This is seldom the case; we would not recommend – for example – using this year's award winning integrated amplifier with this year's award winning floorstanding loudspeakers. The combination is not a happy one. Other components work exceptionally well together. And, there are many compatible products from the Highly Recommended list (or, for that matter, many of the products on the pages of *Hi-Fi+*, irrespective of whether they made it to the Awards list or not).

These really are the best of the best we've heard recently. Enjoy! ▶



turntable of the year

VPI Classic

Reviewed this issue

Because of products like the Linn LP12, many UK turntablists have forgotten that there's life beyond turntables with suspended sub-chassis. American turntable manufacturers are not so attached to one design brief for their high-end models, and products like the Classic are the result.

An upgradable, direct-coupled design, featuring a PEEK (think PTFE for the husky fellow) thrust bearing and a stripped-down version of the JMW 10.5 arm, this is far removed from the modular, upmarket HRX turntable, but Harry Westfield's celebration of the company's 30th year in business is arguably his best yet.

This deck has the sort of stability of pitch that is almost impossible to find elsewhere, coupled with a sense of dynamics and pace that

even suspended turntables would find impressive. "If this 'table doesn't get you up and dancing then you are probably dead from the neck down." Says Roy Gregory.

It's more than just power, too. It's a subtle and deft product that is an excellent conveyor of musical flow. A warm, rich and dynamic performer in its standard guise, the upgrades to the arm, the peripheral clamp and power supply all make for a slightly better performance... but these are the subject of later tests. In its basic guise, the turntable is the turntable to take on even the top of the high-end.

Price: from £2,139

Manufactured by VPI Industries

URL: www.vpiindustries.com

Distributed by Analogue Seduction

URL: www.analogueseduction.net

Tel: +44(0)1733 344768

Highly Commended

Well Tempered Amadeus GT

Reviewed in issue 66

Price: £2,500

Manufacturer by Well Tempered Lab

URL: www.welltemperedlab.net

Distributed by Pear Audio

URL: www.pearaudio.com

Tel: +44 (0)1665 830862

Highly Commended

SRM Arezzo Reference

Reviewed in issue 67

Price: £2,998

Manufactured by SRM

URL: www.srm-tech.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1767 313691

Distributed by Moth Group

URL: www.mothgroup.com

Tel: +44(0)1234 741162



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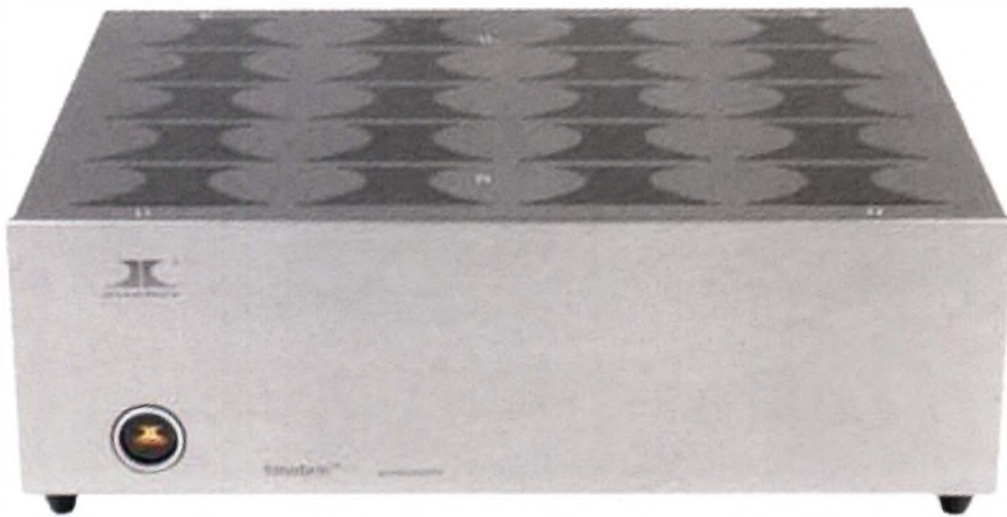
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turntable component of the year **Ensemble Fonobrio**

Reviewed in issue 64

The solidly built Ensemble Fonobrio is designed on industrial levels. The thick bulkhead separates the phono stage proper from its power supply, which is itself isolated on eight decoupling legs to keep it away from the chassis floor. This would be enough anti-vibration systems for most phono stages, but the Fonobrio floats the stacked phono boards in their own decoupled section.

An all-discrete MM/MC stage – with DIP switches and jumper connectors to adjust the stage to suit every kind of cartridge – the phono stage is as tidy and as ordered in sound as it is in build. It “draws the listener into the playing rather than leaving you to decipher or unravel the event”. More of a cerebral than a visceral listening experience, the

Fonobrio will appeal to those wanting a sense of structure to their phono replay, and want it from a product that’s built like a tank.

We think it deserves an award for its uncompromising build and fine, ordered sound. That it goes toe-to-toe with some of the best phono stages (a lot of) money can buy makes it a clear class leader. If you like your music cool, calm and collected look no further than the Ensemble Fonobrio.

Price: from £2,999

Manufactured by Ensemble Ltd Inc

URL: www.ensembleaudio.com

Distributed by

Signature Audio Systems

URL: www.signatureaudiosystems.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)7738 007776

Highly Commended Lyra Erodian

Reviewed in issue 62

Price: £1,995

Manufacturer by Lyra

URL: www.lyraconnoisseur.com

Distributed by Symmetry Systems

URL: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1727 865488

Highly Commended Audiolab

8000PPA

Reviewed in issue 63

Price: £559

Manufactured by the IAG Group Ltd

URL: www.audiolab.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1480 447700



◀ Playback ▶

We all remember rushing out to buy our first CD, making our first mix tape or listening to our parents' old vinyls. Quality music evokes memories. It deserves the best playback through the best available **technology**.

Immerse yourself; Onkyo's C-S5VL Super Audio CD Player combined with the A-5VL Stereo Amplifier.

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CD player of the year

Audio Research Reference CD8

Reviewed in issue 64

The look might not change drastically over the years, and the company will always use tubes in the output stage, but the Audio Research Reference CD8 is something really special in CD players. The latest flagship player from the electronics specialist, Audio Research combines a top loading, Philips-pro mechanism, a Burr-Brown chipset and more tubes than many a good small valve amplifier; five 6H30 and a 6550C.

It had a difficult enough task to follow the Reference CD7, itself one of the most well-received CD players ever produced. Fortunately, the Reference CD8 easily eclipsed its predecessor.

By moving to a 6550 tube in place of a pair of 6H30s (akin to the Reference 3 preamp), and moving to a Burr Brown 24bit/192kHz DAC, the Reference CD8 delivers a sound that's more focused, better separated and transparent performance. The CD8 also delivers far better bass than its predecessor and approaches the excellent Wadia 581se player. Almost SACD-like in its warmth and naturalness, the Reference CD8 is "quite possibly the best all round single-box CD player I've heard and certainly a match for anything at its price," we concluded. Audio Research's Reference CD7 pushed the brand into the top league of digital performance; the Reference CD8 builds significantly on that reputation.

Price: £9,498

Manufactured by Audio Research Corporation

Net: www.audioresearch.com

Distributed by Absolute Sounds

Tel: +44(0)208 971 3909

Net: www.absolutesounds.com

Highly Commended Lyngdorf CD-1

Reviewed in issue 67

Price: £1,795

Manufactured by Lyngdorf

Net: www.lyngdorf.com

Distributed by Gecko

Tel: +44 (0)845 262 2882

Net: www.geckohomecinema.com

Highly Commended dCS Puccini

Reviewed in issue 65

Price: £10,799

Manufactured by Data Conversion Systems Ltd

Tel: +44(0)1799 531999

Net: www.dcsLtd.co.uk

Highly Commended Esoteric P-03 CD/SACD and D-03 DAC

Reviewed in issue 65

Price £10,495/£9,995

Manufactured by TEAC Esoteric

Net: www.teac.co.jp

Distributed by Symmetry Systems

Tel: +44(0)1727 865488

Net: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk





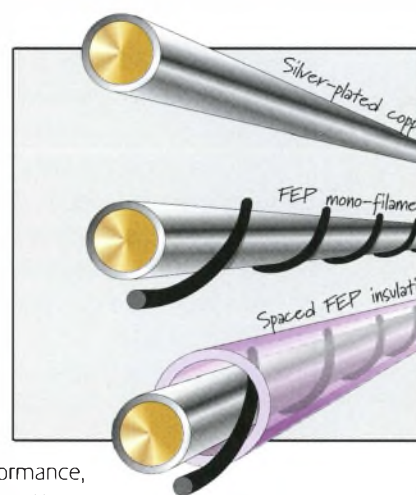
A Taste Of Heaven...

Good science delivering great sound

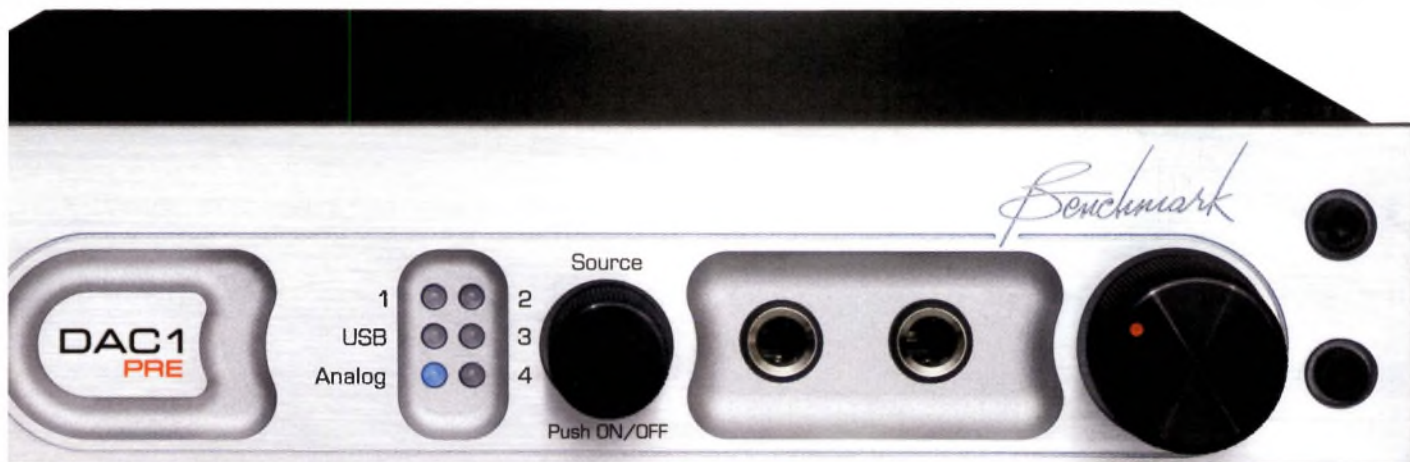
When Nordost introduced the Valhalla Reference Range it redefined cable performance overnight, becoming the standard against which the competition were measured – and found wanting. A true reference, where the term is actually more than just a convenient label, it rearranged equipment budgets and audiophile sensibilities with equal ease – at a price. A complete system's worth of Valhalla costs more than many people's complete system – which you might assume limits its benefits to the most dedicated or fortunate of listeners...

But you'd be wrong. We took the theoretical approach and proprietary technology that produced the Valhalla's stellar performance and applied it across our range. The innovative Micro Mono-Filament construction delivers the cable designer's Holy Grail of a "virtual air" dielectric combined with unparalleled geometrical accuracy and mechanical damping – and it can be found throughout the Norse Series and even in key elements of our WyreWizard range (the Magus power cord and Shaman digital lead) providing unprecedented levels of performance at these price points. Performance that is supported by exemplary numbers when it comes to both traditional LCR parameters and transmission speeds, as well as a cutting-edge research program

that is finally revealing just why cables have such a profound impact on system sound and musical communication. You can visit our web-site to learn more, or you can visit a Nordost dealer to experience Micro Mono-Filament technology for yourself. But don't be surprised if you get carried away because, when it comes to the musical performance, this isn't just technological trickle-down – it's more of a torrent!



NORDOST
MAKING THE CONNECTION



CD component of the year

Benchmark DAC1 Pre

Reviewed in issue 64

There are a few studio companies that made the jump to the home, but most of them are loudspeaker brands such as ATC, PMC and more recently Adam. Benchmark is the exception – a maker of highly respected products that cross the analogue and digital divide, the range of DAC1 models have all recently been adopted by audiophiles as one of the best next-generation audio products around.

We looked at – and loved – the Benchmark DAC1 Pre, which adds USB connection and a small, high-quality analogue preamplifier section (later models even include a remote control!). It's small, but made to survive both the rigours of pro life and the high-quality demands of audiophiles alike. Benchmark is particularly hot on the elimination of jitter, thanks to the

company's own UltraLock sample rate converter system.

Its biggest strength above all is the sound quality, as the DAC1 Pre is one of the most accurate and detailed converters you can buy, irrespective of price. Its level of treble insight means its best avoided if your system tends toward brightness, but that's just because it pulls everything off the disc without veiling or frequency shifts; in other words, it works "not by imposing its own sense of what stereo should do, but by adhering to the limitations imposed upon it by the recording."

Price: £1,633

Manufactured by Benchmark Media Systems Inc

Net: www.benchmarkmedia.com

Distributed by SCV London

Tel: +44(0)208 418 1470

Net: www.scvlondon.co.uk

Highly Commended PS Audio Digital Link III

Reviewed in issue 62

Price: £799

Manufactured by PS Audio

Net: www.psaudio.com

Distributed by: Signature Systems

Tel: +44 (0)20 8480 3333

Net: www.signaturesystems.co.uk

Highly Commended Chord QBD-76

Reviewed in issue 62

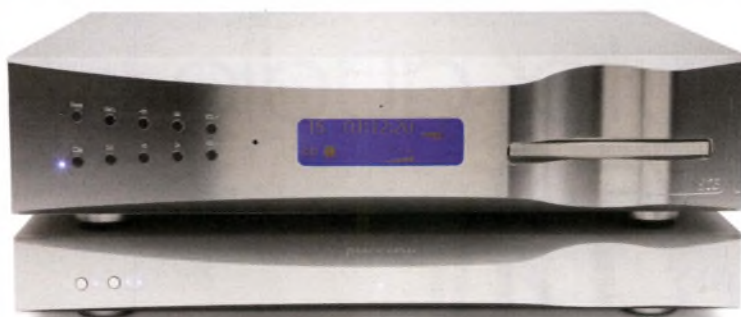
Price: from £2,990

Manufactured by Chord Electronics

Tel: +44(0)1622 721444

Net: www.chordelectronics.co.uk

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"Well there you have it: The best digital sources I've yet heard" [THE ABSOLUTE SOUND](#)

"You see, it delivers digital sound the likes of which I simply haven't come across before" [HI-FI WORLD](#)

computer audio of the year **Wadia 170i**

Reviewed in issues 61 & 63

Like it or not, the Apple iPod (and now the iPhone) revolutionised the way people approach their music listening. But, from an audiophile perspective, it's a bit of a closed-loop. The digital data inside an iPod stays in an iPod and most products that connect Apple's music player to the hi-fi system do so after the digital conversion process has taken place.

The Wadia 170i is different. It cracks open (not literally) the iPod and exposes the digital code. This allows the iPod's datastream to be read by a top-notch digital converter, as well as the standard audio and video outputs of any decent iPod dock. Coupled with a good DAC – another Wadia strength and a matching 1-series DAC and amp are expected any day now – the 170i turns the iPod into a pocket sized music server. If you run Apple Lossless or AIFF files on your iPhone, there is

nothing to prevent this from becoming a high-end source component you can send text messages from.

Other code-cracking Apple solutions are only now becoming available, but many rely on modifying the iPod and many cost many, many times the price of the Apple product. As it currently stands, the Wadia 170i is the most complete solution for those who want to welcome the iPod to the audiophile generation!

Price: £349

Manufactured by Wadia

Net: www.wadia.com

Distributed by The Musical Design Company

Tel: +44(0)1992 573030

Net: www.mdc-hifi.co.uk

Highly Commended Naim HDX

Reviewed in issue 65

Price: £4,500

Manufactured by Naim Audio

Net: www.naim-audio.com

Tel: +44 (0)1722 426600

Highly Commended HRT Streamer+

Reviewed in issue 64

Price: £299

Manufactured by High Resolution Technologies

Net: www.hiresolutiontechnologies.com

Distributed by Audiofreaks Ltd

Tel: +44(0)208 948 4153

Net: www.audiofreaks.co.uk





system of the year

Cambridge

Audio Azur 650A/650C

Reviewed this issue

Cambridge Audio isn't the sort of brand normally associated with winning Awards from *Hi-Fi+*. Indeed, our Award winning cables costs several times as much as this pair of budget beauties and it's not uncommon to find a reader who's spent more on special fuses than the cost of this CD player.

The company really pulled out the stops on these two. Thick front panels are only the start. Putting a pair of Wolfson chips and a high-precision clock in a CD player at this price is unheard of. The same applies to motorised ALPS pots, Sanken transistors and a non-invasive, adaptive protection circuit in the 75w dual mono in a single case integrated amplifier.

It's the sound that counts, though. As long as the speakers are not exceptionally bright or possessed

of insane loads, the Azur 650 models make a sound that is exceptionally detailed, exciting yet most of all 'likeable' – and more than capable of being used with some surprisingly high-end loudspeaker systems. And then, the duo really reveal their charms, "Suddenly, what most people consider as good mid-price electronics becomes a neutral platform to play music with a great deal of integrity."

Impressive at any price, at £700 for the pair, it's impossible not to be won over by the charms of the 650A and 650C.

Price: £350 per unit
 Manufactured by Cambridge Audio
 URL: www.cambridgeaudio.com
 Distributed in the UK by Richer Sounds
 URL: www.richersounds.com
 Tel: 0845 900 1230 (UK only)

Highly Commended Sugden Mystro CD and amp

Reviewed in issue 67

Price: £1,319+£1,225

Manufactured by JE Sugden & Co

Net: www.sugdenaudio.com

Tel: +44 (0)1924 404088

Highly Commended Carat i57

Reviewed in this issue

Price £1,499

Manufactured by InoVadis

URL: www.inovadis.com

URL: www.carat-audio.com

Distributed by Icon Distribution

URL: www.icondistribution.net

Tel: +44 (0)845 603 1375

intergrated amplifier of the year

Leben CS-300XS integrated amplifier

Reviewed in issue 66

There's something oh, so very, very lovely about 'retro', especially when it's done so right that you wonder why we went with 'modern' instead. Such are the obvious and delightful charms of the CS-300XS integrated amplifier from Japanese valve specialist, Leben. Take one ex-Luxman valve supremo Taku Hyodo, a chassis and design that looks like everything after 1965 never happened and the attention span to make a point-to-point hand-wired 15W per channel amplifier that makes model engineers swoon, and you have an amplifier that's the talk of the industry.

It's also refreshingly free from the febrile demands of modern audiophile equipment. It is not cable dependent and does not demand expensive tables to eliminate microphony – it's just a

good, well-engineered valve amplifier that just happens to sound enticing whatever you play through it. It makes a big, elegant sound, but not one that's anywhere near as warm as people have come to expect from valve equipment, but has that classic beguiling quality. "Like classic British valve amps from the early 1960s, the amp fills a room elegantly, making music that bit more listenable and approachable by making it a fraction richer, in a thoroughly 'good' way." If you like listening for hours at a stretch, it's hard not to love the Leben.

Price: £2,450

Manufactured by Leben hi-fi Stereo Company

URL: www.lebenhifi.com

Distributed in the UK by RT Services

URL: www.rtsaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0) 1235 810 455

Highly Commended Luxman L-550A-II

Reviewed in issue 66

Price: £2,995

Manufactured by Luxman

Net: www.luxman.co.jp

Distributed by Select Audio

Net: www.selectaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1900 813064

Highly Commended Naim Supernait

Reviewed in issue 63

Price £2,350

Manufactured by Naim Audio

Net: www.naim-audio.com

Tel: +44 (0)1722 426600





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preamplifier of the year

Ayre KX-R

Reviewed in issue 64

Ayre has a giant-killer reputation with preamps like the K-1xe, but in the company's KX-R flagship preamplifier, it has built a bigger, better giant than most. There are precious few world-class preamplifiers, but this deceptively simple-looking single-box design holds one of the most uncompromising balanced and single-ended line preamps on the market today.

Hewn out of a 75lb billet of aluminium, the 21lb chassis ends up being one of the most rigid on the market. Inside is a true dual mono design with separate volume and source selection controls, while the Variable Gain Transimpedance circuit improves upon the already outstanding performance of the stepped Shallco attenuators in the K-1xe preamp, making this one of the finest low-level preamps in history.

Those who think American amps are big, lazy and slow sounding will be in for a shock. This preamp has one of the most accurate tonal balances with bandwidth, speed and precision to match. An obvious partner for the excellent Ayre MX-R monoblock power amplifiers, the combination brings its own rewards, as it seems the preamp gets to find a power amplifier that can keep pace. If you want the ultimate in high resolution sound and are prepared to build a system without compromise, this is one of the best choices in the preamplifier stakes. "This thing is a joy to own and a joy to use," we said... and that can be said of surprisingly few truly first-rate preamps.

Price: £11,995

Manufactured by Ayre Acoustics Inc

Net: www.ayre.com

Distributed by Symmetry Systems

Tel: +44(0)1727 865488

Net: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Highly Commended

conrad-johnson The GAT

Reviewed in issue 67

Price: £19,500

Manufactured by conrad-johnson

Net: www.conrad-johnson.com

Distributed by Audiofreaks

Net: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)208 948 4153

Highly Commended Belles LA-01

Reviewed in issue 67

Price: £6,000

Manufactured by Power Modules Inc

Net: www.powermodules.com

Distributed by Coherent Systems

Net: www.coherent-systems.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1684 593085

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Brentwood 01277 264730	Lancaster 01524 39657	Swindon 01793 538222
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Bristol 01179 264975	Oxford 01865 765961	Warrington 01925 632179
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*Subject to status. Ask instore for details. Not all brands are available in every shop so please check our website before traveling.

www.audio-t.co.uk



power amplifier of the year **David Berning Quadrature Z**

Reviewed in issue 61

Running alongside the mainstream in audio design, there are some extremely bright individuals who build products more as a hobby than a business. David Berning is one such individual, and his Quadrature Z power amps show that he's very, very good at his hobby. But, don't imagine that means Berning is an amateur engineer; his 'real job' is in power device certification and safety,

so if anyone knows their way around a power amp, it's David Berning.

The output-transformer-less Quadrature Z is a 200W valve mono-bloc design, using Berning's patented zero-hysteresis circuit, while the name Quadrature is an elegant way to describe the interleaving of the impedance conversion process, designed to eliminate conversion dead time. What this means to people who don't speak Technical Geek is that the amplifier can drive relatively low-impedance loads (something an OTL design typically fails to do) and yet with the sheer transparency and openness of OTL,

and a sense of pace and dynamics that you may not find anywhere else in audio – "Simply because things can happen as quickly as they need to, suddenly the sense of the system tracking the demands of the signal disappears altogether, allowing the music to ebb and flow, race or dawdle as the players desire." In short, this is one of the best power amps to date.

Price: £22,500/pair

Manufactured by

The David Berning Company

Net: www.davidberning.com

Distributed by Blade Audio

Tel: +44(0)1252 737374

Net: www.blade-audio.com



Highly Commended

Pass Labs XA160.5

Reviewed in issue 65

Price: £22,000/pair

Manufactured by Pass Labs

Net: www.passlabs.com

Distributed by Select Audio

Net: www.selectaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1900 813064

Highly Commended Coda CSX

Reviewed in this issue

Price: £5,150

Manufactured by Coda

Technologies Inc:

Net: www.coda.cc

Distributed by Metropolis Music

Net: www.metropolis-music.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1435 867 438

standmount loudspeaker of the year **Avalon Aspect**

Reviewed in issue 66

In truth, we spent some time arguing whether the Avalon Aspect standmount loudspeaker *is* a standmount loudspeaker. The sides of the speaker cabinet extend to the floor and there is no 'stand' to speak of. So, it's technically a standmounted floorstander. Or something. Whatever, it is one of the most innovative loudspeaker designs this year and produces a sound that's every bit as impressive as its looks are distinctive.

The side walls of the Aspect extend below the main cabinet and to the floor, giving the unique A-shape of the product. The two-way, three driver design also features ports built into the base of the main cabinet and the top panel is finished in a half-inch slab of granite, all packed into huge packing crates. The net result is a non-parallel cabinet (even the front and rear panels are tapered slightly) and a sound that is extremely deep, coherent and musical... and remarkably unfussy about what it's partnered with. Although it's a refined and delicate-sounding speaker, its energy makes you long to play loud rock through the Aspect, and the result doesn't disappoint. "These speakers don't just get down and get dirty, they get downright rude and do it with a smile" we said. And that means Avalon just made a speaker that rocks!

Price: £8,750/pair

Manufactured by Avalon Acoustics Inc

Net: www.avalonacoustics.com

Distributed by Audiofreaks Ltd

Net: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)208 948 4153

Highly Commended

Audiosmile Kensai

Reviewed in issue 64

Price: £1,499/pair

Manufactured by AudioSmile

Net: www.audiosmile.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)7952 478193

Highly Commended

Spendor SA1

Reviewed in issue 61

Price: £1,100/pair (stands £400/pair)

Manufactured by

Spendor Audio Systems Ltd

Net: www.spendoraudio.com

Tel: +44(0)1323 843474





Brainy and good looking!

According to the world's press, this is one of the very best CD players, even at twice the price! And now the "made for high-end audio" digital "engine" in this CD 8 SE has just been awarded "Technology of the year" by Hi-Fi Plus. Recognition that reinforces the fact that each of our three CD models are recognised as "best in class" all around the world.



The new Cyrus 8 XP amplifier has just been awarded "group test winner" by What Hi-Fi. The XP platform is upgradeable from the £900 6XP all the way up to the amazing DAC equipped 8 XP d Qx model with USB and SPDIF options, making this new amplifier range the darlings of both audiophiles and computer based music lovers alike.



The rack is the new HARK2. Like all Cyrus products it is expandable, so if you start with just a couple of our die-cast magnesium audio components, you can rest assured the rack will be able to expand all the way up to 8 boxes!

Our website has the contact details for our appointed retailers who will be happy to demonstrate why these new audio components set new standards.



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You can custom design your Cyrus amplifier? Select the output power you want, maybe choose DAC options such as a USB input so you can stream digital files from

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Cyrus sales 01480 435577

floorstanding loudspeaker of the year

The Wilson Audio Sasha W/P

Reviewed in issue 67

Wilson Audio's replacement for the WATT/Puppy was always going to be stepping into some very big shoes, but the new Sasha more than succeeds. Although there are family resemblances, the loudspeaker shares almost nothing with its predecessor. Instead, think of it as a wholly new product, with a sound far more like that of the MAXX 3.

Dynamic, exciting and powerful, the Sasha needs a lot of power to bring out the best in the speaker, but in return you get a sound that has more scale and depth than you might expect from a speaker far larger. "The Sasha has the throat needed to roar, but does so with subtlety as well as gusto," we said.

Although the speaker has the scale to serve up a real sense of orchestral scale, it is also capable of delivering the goods with smaller-scale music, scaling the soundstage and the dynamic range accordingly. The previous WATT/Puppy was a fine and dynamic speaker, the new Sasha manages to make the midrange more transparent than ever and make the sound more in line with current Wilson models.

Best of all, the Sasha is one of those few loudspeakers that manages to reconcile all kinds of music... whether you listen to jazz or thrash metal, the Sasha is the perfect loudspeaker for the job.

Little wonder that we agree... the King is dead, long live the King.

Price: £27,900

Manufactured by Wilson Audio

URL: www.wilsonaudio.com

Distributed by Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)208 971 3909

Highly Commended Focal Utopia Grande EM

Reviewed in issue 65

Price: £110,000

Manufactured by Focal

URL: www.focal-fr.com

Distributed by Focal (UK) Ltd

URL: www.focal-uk.com

Tel: 0845 660 2680

Highly Commended Avantgarde Uno Nano

Reviewed in issue 62

Price: £9,000

Manufactured by Avantgarde

Acoustic GmbH

URL: www.avantgarde-acoustic.de

Distributed by GT Audio

URL: www.gtaudio.com

Tel: +44(0)1895 833099

Highly Commended MartinLogan Summit X

Reviewed in issue 66

Price: £12,998

Manufactured by Wilson Audio

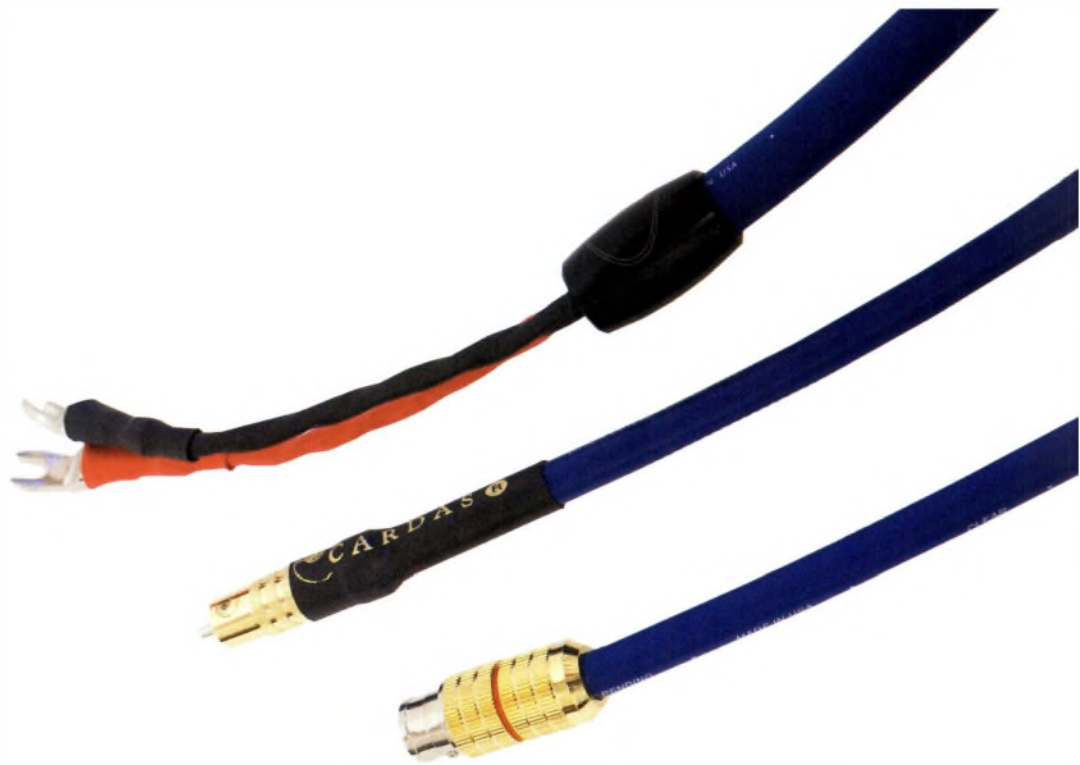
URL: www.martinlogan.com

Distributed by Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)208 971 3909





cable of the year Cardas Clear

Reviewed in issue 66

Cardas Clear represents the acme and the distillation of decades of work by cable pioneer George Cardas. Taking his Litz design geometry of the popular and successful Golden Reference to new levels, the cable features controlled propagation and crossfield construction, meaning the cable is built strand upon strand until it looks like a nautilus shell in cross-section. Cardas went right back to basics here, to determine foundational insights into metallurgy and the relationship between conductor and dielectric. The company even went as far as developing a new compression forge process to connect cable to connector.

Clear sets a new benchmark for Cardas cables, one that more than lives up to the name. It's hugely resolving of

detail, with a clarity and detailing that extends up into the very top of the scale. Where the Cardas magic kicks in is the ability to do that at the same time as creating a sound that keeps the treble as sweet as it is extended, yet does not do this by making a colored sounding cable. It's also one of the few cables that can sound both extended and retain the perceived speed of the system its playing through. No wonder then we simply said of the new Cardas cable, "Clear redraws the map."

Price: £1,650/m (RCA), £1,950/m (XLR), £3,550/2x2m terminated speaker cables

Manufactured by Cardas Audio

Net: www.cardas.com

Distributed by Audiofreaks Ltd

Net: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)208 948 4153

Highly Commended Atlas Asimi

Reviewed in issue 67

Price: £2,000/m (RCA)

URL: www.atlascables.com

Tel: +44(0)1563 572666

UK-only Freephone: 0800 731 1140

Highly Commended Siltech Classic

Reviewed in issue 64

Price: From £450 (SPX-300, 1m IEC)

Manufactured by Siltech B.V.

Net: www.siltechcables.com

Distributed by JE Sugden & Co

Net: www.sugdenaudio.com

Tel: +44 (0)1924 404088



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" And here's a small tip in case I have yet to inspire you; this is the best pre/power combo I've ever heard for driving LS3/5As. Ever ever. "

Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News November 09

" More important, though, than the limited edition status is their sound quality, regardless of the retro-appeal, for this is one of the finest valve pairings I've experienced in my entire career. "

Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News November 09



We are officially the UK's No. 1 McIntosh Specialist Dealer

power product of the year

PS Audio Power Plant Premier

Reviewed in issue 61

The PS Audio Power Plant Premier (or PPP as it's commonly referred to) is a regenerating power supply. It takes the incoming mains voltage and completely reconstitutes it to eliminate fluctuations in voltage and mains frequency, as well as remove the noise and distortion that comes from other components on the same mains (refridgerators, microwaves, PCs etc). The Regenerator (in the UK at least) comes with five fully isolated 13A mains sockets and can deliver 1500W of clean, reworked AC to feed your hi-fi system with nary a ripple.

We found the PPP has several feathers in its cap. First, unlike earlier generations of PS Audio power products, it runs extremely cool. Second, it helps eliminate transformer

buzz from products expecting a better AC supply than is possible in your home. Most importantly, though, its effects are cumulative (the more products in your system that pass through the PPP, the better) and we thought that while it "hadn't really altered the basic qualities and characteristics of my hi-fi system, it made it easier to appreciate its positive aspects." Like many mains products, once tried, it's hard to be rid of, because the improvement is subtle, but more fundamental than you might first expect.

Price: £1,800

Manufactured by PS Audio

Net: www.psaudio.com

Distributed by Signature Systems

Tel: +44 (0)20 8480 3333

Net: www.signaturesystems.co.uk

Highly Commended Nordost Odin

Reviewed in issue 64

Price: £7,250/1.25m IEC

Manufactured by Nordost Corporation

Net: www.nordost.com

Distributed by Atacama Audio

Tel: +44(0)1455 283251

Net: www.nordost-cable.co.uk

Highly Commended Furman IT-Reference 16E i

Reviewed in issue 67

Price: £2,225

Manufactured by

Furman Sound LLC

Net: www.furmansound.com

Distributed by Anders+Kern Ltd

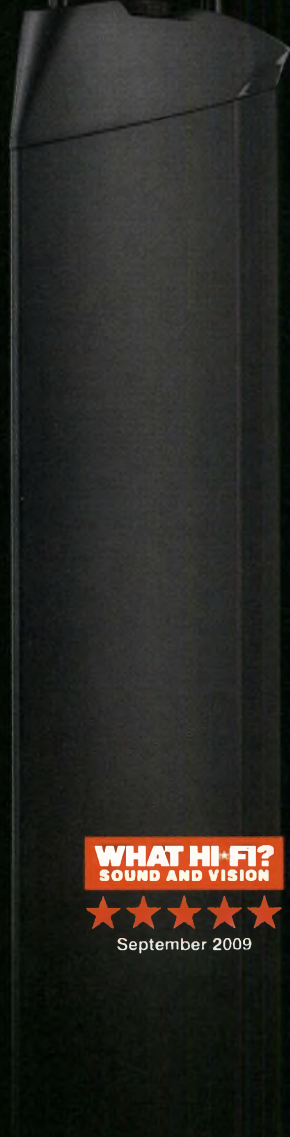
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September 2009

TD712zMK2

Just for the pure performance

stand & tables of the year

MusicWorks ReVo

Reviewed in this issue

This is a hard one to pin down. It's an equipment table in as much as there are levels designed to accept products and it provides support and a degree of off-the-floor raising of products. Normal similarities with 'tables' end there; if you try and rest a remote control or a CD on a shelf, you'll find there are no shelves to rest upon. No flat surfaces, no legs... nada.

Instead this skeletal clear acrylic support system comprises two figure-8 acrylic uprights, separated by acrylic bars with acrylic inserts that your equipment's feet rest upon. It looks odd, but is remarkably consistent; the use of acrylic acts as in a self-damping manner, while the lack of straight lines helps reduce energy build ups and stress nodes. The ReVo rids the system of any sense of metallic ringing or harshness. It gets rid of the congestion and confusion that sometimes plague systems, as the review says "everything becomes more intelligible." And by everything, the MusicWorks people do mean 'everything'; the ReVo has transformed the sound of everything from a pair of Creek products to a Spectral preamp... and beyond. Like any good piece of hi-fi, once you try it, there's no going back and conventional tables sound smeared and tuneless by comparison.

Price: from £1,250

Manufactured by MusicWorks

Net: www.theaudioworks.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)161 428 7887

Highly Commended Quaraspire QX600 acrylic speaker stands

Reviewed in issue 63

Price: £250

Manufactured by Quadraspire

Net: www.quadraspire.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)117 9863228

Highly Commended Finite Elemente Modul

Reviewed in issue 64

Price: modular system

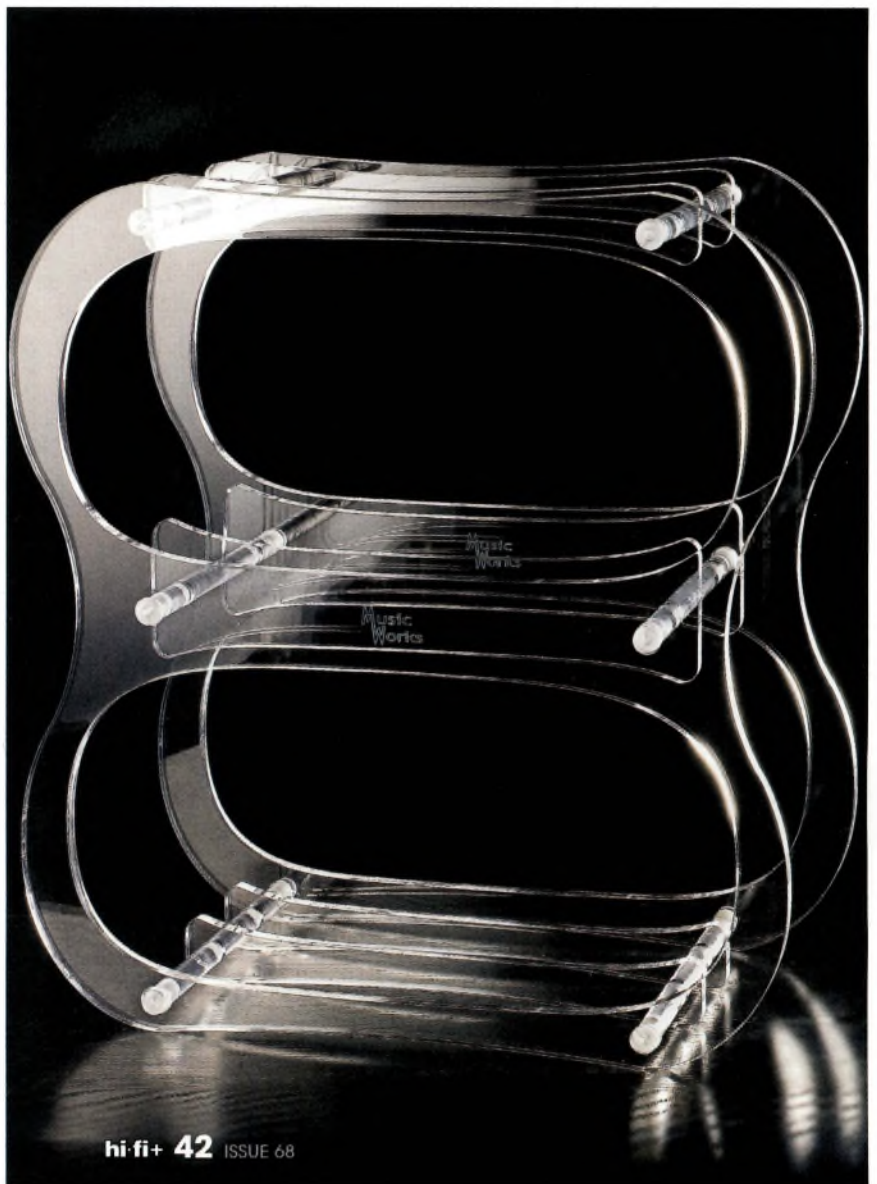
Manufactured by Finite Elemente

Net: www.finite-elemente.de

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accessory of the year

Sennheiser HD800

Reviewed in issue 65

It's a curious aspect of hi-fi buying that a pair of headphones – to many listeners the principal way of getting music at home – is considered an 'accessory'. In part, it's because we tend not to have headphone sockets on high-end sources and amplifiers. But if there's one pair of headphones that perfectly describe why they are so much more than an 'accessory', it's the Sennheiser HD800. With the sort of detail retrieval and accuracy that most loudspeaker manufacturers dream of and a stereo imaging that puts most other headphones to shame, the HD800 represents the pinnacle of dynamic headphone design.

Part of the reason for this is the large toroidal drive unit made of a special plastic, which combines incredible headroom with excellent frequency response. This is coupled to a design built for long-term listening and long-term reliability. The result of all this is a product that Sennheiser simply can't make enough of, and the only problem HD800 users face is not turning up the headphones too much and damaging their hearing, because your ears will suffer long before the headphones will. Little wonder then that we concluded that the HD800 is the "£1,000 headphone that could be your next £25,000 loudspeaker."

Price: £1,000

Manufactured by Sennheiser

Net: www.sennheiser.com

Distributed by Sennheiser UK Ltd

Net: www.sennheiser.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1494 551551

**Highly Commended Lehmann
Black Cube Linear USB
headphone amp**

Reviewed in issue 65

Price: £900

Manufactured by Lehmann Audio

Net: www.lehmannaudio.de

Distributed by Henley Designs

Net: www.henleydesigns.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1235 511 166

**Highly Commended Musical
Fidelity X-Can v8**

Reviewed in issue 63

Price: £350

Manufactured by Musical Fidelity Ltd

Net: www.musicalfidelity.com

Tel: +44(0)20 8900 2866



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Silver Arrows -12 (DIN.RCA)



Ag-12 Phono Cable

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— Michael Fremer, Stereophile July 2009 Vol.32 No.7

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www.metropolis-music.co.uk

innovation of the year

Cyrus Servo Evolution

Just as everyone in the mainstream begins to write off CD as a lost cause, so Cyrus starts the backlash. At a stroke, it joined a select list of mostly Japanese high-end manufacturers who treat the CD transport as more than just an off-the-shelf component. Cyrus – like TEAC and Accuphase – has made its own transport mechanism.

The company hired engineers who worked on the original project (as in the people who developed CD transport mechanisms at Philips) and put them to task to make a transport mechanism designed specifically for audio, and not for PC, portable or in-car use. The result was a mechanism that features a servo designed to read the disc with less call for error correction than previous models could produce. The result is players like the Cyrus CD 8 SE, a slot-loading mechanism where the loader, laser and motors are controlled by custom software developed for Cyrus.

As the Servo Evolution upgrade works with existing CD 8 players and the two can be demonstrated side by side, Cyrus easily demonstrates the results. And the results are usually 'I want an Servo Evolution now, please.'

This is a sign of Cyrus taking the long, but correct, route to engineering excellence. It's no mere OEM CD transport, it's a high-end CD solution in a distinctly reasonably priced product. How cool is that?

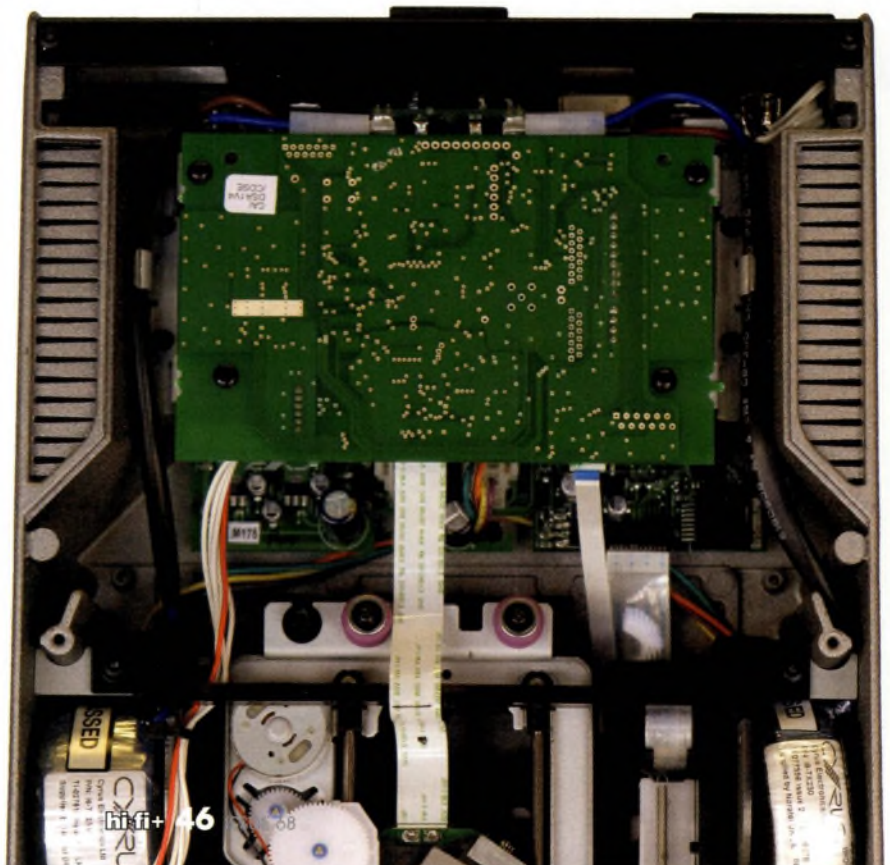
Cyrus Audio Ltd
Net: www.cyrusaudio.com
Tel: +44 (0)1480 410900

Highly Commended Spotify

Spotify may just be the future of music replay. A 'freemium' music on demand service (free subscribers have to sit through occasional adverts, £10/month subscribers don't and get bit rates of up to 320kbps, mobile listening, international roaming and more), Spotify quickly obtained the backing of a considerable amount of the music business and is set to break into the US soon. Almost immediate streaming and a huge catalogue, together with easy playlist construction makes Spotify the best of the next-gen listening options, even if it's still free from the likes of AC/DC and the Beatles, and it's treatment of symphonic music is as spotty as the name might suggest.

Highly Commended Asynchronous USB

We're taking a bit of a punt on this one. Asynchronous USB connections have just started to appear on the next generation of computer audio products, destined for the audiophile. Wavelength (so far, US only), Ayre and dCS are all using Asynchronous USB. Unlike conventional USB connection – which uses a one-way digital connection for music replay and subsequently uses the computer's own clock as master. Async USB places the master clock local to the DAC and allows this to drive the converter directly. Early reports suggest this is a revolution in computer audio sound and we will be testing suitably equipped DACs from Ayre and dCS soon.



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Visit our always crammed **Special Offers** and **Demos and Used** sections. For example, for a limited time we're offering a FREE Nordost Vishnu power cable, a £599.95 value, with the astounding Leema Acoustics Antila II CD player!

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music of the year

Esoteric Exclusive SACD Remasters

With companies using the word 'remaster' as an excuse to push up the volume and push down the dynamic range of rock records of the last 40 years, it's refreshing to find a company that's taking a more considered route. Esoteric (that's right, the same company that makes CD and SACD players) has been digging into the back catalogue and delivering musical masterpieces from the Decca label. These uncompromising remasters – both on CD/SACD and on limited edition 200g vinyl LP – have been introduced to deliver the best possible sound quality on either format.

So far, just four albums have been produced (Falla's *The Three Cornered Hat*, Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, Beethoven *Overtures* and Mozart *Piano Concerto No 20*, three of which have already been reviewed in *Hi-Fi Plus*), such is the time and energy being used to deliver this project with the appropriate gravitas. The master tape was played through Esoteric's D-01 digital converter and a G-0Rb Rubidium master clock generator (and played through Esoteric's Mexcel cables) to provide the best possible signal for the recording. Esoteric (in association with JVC) deliberately made an audiophile recording using audiophile technologies that we can use in the living room... to replay these audiophile recordings.

Manufactured by TEAC Esoteric

Net: www.teac.co.jp

Distributed by Symmetry Systems

Tel: +44(0)1727 865488

Net: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk



Highly Commended Bowers & Wilkins Society of Sound

Loudspeaker experts B&W have teamed up with Real World Studios and musicians like Peter Gabriel and Martyn Ware to create a vibrant download space where you can obtain albums in lossless CD and 'studio master' quality (24bit, 48kHz). These are downloaded in FLAC, so the compression is more like Zipping picture files than compromising sound quality. Although B&W isn't the first hi-fi brand to deliver CD quality and beyond files online, it's one of the few that doesn't charge premium rates for the privilege, as a £33.95 per annum subscription buys you 21 albums a year curated by Peter Gabriel himself.

Net: www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk

Highly Commended HDtracks

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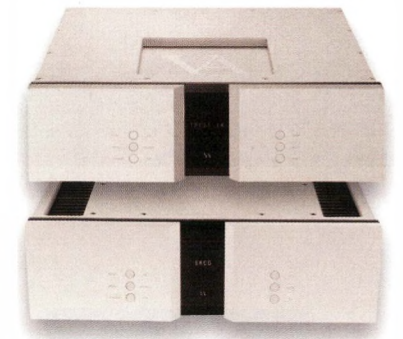
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The MusicWorks ReVo

By Steve Dickinson

When is a table not a table? No, actually, this isn't going to turn into a 'how many audiophiles does it take to change a lightbulb*' joke; for once, it's a serious question. You see, the MusicWorks ReVo has the essential quality of tabley-ness in that it sits under something, raises it to a height and supports it in place but there is no top, for example, nor what might reasonably be described as legs, for that matter. 'Equipment support platform' sounds pretentious and, once again, the ReVo lacks an element of platformicity in the manifest absence of any kind of level, flat surface. Not, you might be thinking, a very auspicious start.

I got my first introduction to the ReVo during the work-up to the piece on the AudioWorks in issue 63. Those of you who have attended any of the recent UK shows in Manchester, Bristol or Heathrow may also have seen it in action. Suffice to say,

repeated exposure left me just as intrigued by its remarkable capabilities and I was keen to get one home to familiar surroundings and equipment I know well, to give it an extended period of listening.

Frankly, with a bit of judicious padding I could have pretty much written the review from what I had heard during those sessions. It seems that regardless of the circumstances, and regardless of partnering equipment, whether budget, mildly aspirational or serious high-end, the ReVo does much the same thing and to a similar degree. What it does, in essence, is to soak away a layer of inner congestion and confusion: everything becomes more intelligible. ▶

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▶ Most of its competition sounds limited in dynamic range, or coloured, or smeared and tuneless by comparison; some, unfortunately, manage to be all of these. The improvement is one you can hear, quite literally, the moment the first note is struck: with the Revo in place, the notes are instantly more tuneful, the instruments more clearly defined in terms of its location and size. The rest of the ensemble benefits similarly; as each instrument takes its proper place on stage there is less blurring of the boundaries between them with improvements in other aspects of performance, such as timing, attack and decay. Acoustic spaces take on a distinct character, dynamic shifts become more emphatic. Musicians play with more sense of commitment and élan and their instruments have more form and substance.

At first listen, though, it can appear that the soundstage is foreshortened, a shallowing of the performance space. More careful auditioning confirms that the stage is as deep as previously, but the most distant instruments are more easily discernible; the best analogy I can think of is the way distant mountains appear closer on a clear day.

The generally accepted explanation for these effects is that microphony is responsible for introducing a great deal of crud and hash into the delicate musical signal. It's a bit like driving a car with the wheel nuts just finger-tight, then again with everything torqued-up properly (don't try this at home). Reduce the amount of musical energy which feeds back into the equipment and you make its life a lot easier. Music can be played at higher volumes without sounding strained, while bass is better controlled and more tuneful.

The ReVo approaches this in two ways. Firstly, choice of materials: the guys at MusicWorks like their acrylic. They appreciate its self-damping characteristics, the fact that when struck it sounds no obvious note - unlike a sheet of glass or wood, for example. The ReVo design has been carefully thought through to eliminate all other materials. I heard an early prototype in which the screws holding it together were metal. It didn't sound as good as one with the metal screws replaced by acrylic ones. There seems to be something about the discontinuities between different materials (not unlike the effect materials with differing refractive indices have on the propagation of light) and it is clearly audible. Secondly, the shape: by eliminating any large, flat surfaces, the Revo reduces the opportunity for sound to energise the structure, and by scant use of straight lines and right angles, nodes of stress or energy concentration are also minimised.

The result, in best Bauhausian fashion, is a distinctive and attractive design where every element is there for a reason. It has a curiously modern, yet slightly retro air and wouldn't look out of place in Habitat. My wife likes it because, like the Quadraspire loudspeaker stands before it, the ReVo tends to disappear. Audiophile performance and domestic harmony, who'd have thought it?

ReVo users may need to make some, relatively minor, practical compromises however. There is no levelling option in the standard unit, it simply sits on the floor. Turntables therefore require a top shelf, supported and levelled via threaded inserts into the top support bars. The shape of those support bars does mean a modicum of lateral levelling of equipment can be achieved, but not front-to-back. The use of secondary equipment supports like Stillpoint cones or Nordost Pulsar Points are tricky because of the narrowness of the support. In my limited experience, going back to the dissimilar materials argument again, the results on the ReVo don't merit the risk. One option definitely worth exploring, however, is that of resting equipment casework directly onto the support bars, bypassing any feet. Not always recommended,

but when it works, it can be revelatory. The standard design is a 3-tier with openings big enough for all but the chunkiest power amps, if you need 4- or even 5-levels, there are optional dividers which convert one deep opening into two, shallower ones. There is also a half-height 2-tier version intended for heavy or bulky power amps. If you are short of space, as I am, use a turntable as well as a CD player, with a phono-stage, pre-amp and chunky monoblock power amps, not to mention mains distribution boxes, you may need to give this a little thought. One quick listen, however and you may decide a modicum of head-scratching is worth it.

**It doesn't matter how many there are, one of them will always say they preferred the old one. +*

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

MusicWorks ReVo equipment support stand.

3-tier unit in 15mm acrylic and 10mm centre support, 35cm deep, £1250.00

3-tier unit in 15mm acrylic and 10mm centre support, 46cm deep, £1250.00

One-to-two shelf converter for use with 3-tier unit £290.00

2-tier unit in 15mm acrylic, 35cm or 46cm deep £775.00

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Cambridge Audio Azur 650 series

By Alan Sircom

Sometimes I worry about stuff. Stuff like ‘is the audio industry recession proof?’ It’s all well and good recommending fantastic audio works of art that cost as much as a small village in Wales, but in a time when our economy is so broken that you could buy half of Canary Wharf for a packet of Wine Gums, we have to plant our feet back on the ground. Not everyone can afford to spend tens of thousands on audio equipment and even some of those who can right now, may have to make some serious downshifting decisions in the near future. But, can you make high-end sounds without the high-end price tags?

The good – make that great – news is that it’s perfectly possible. Cambridge Audio’s Azur 650 series is leading the charge in producing economical components that look and sound like they are more expensive than they really are.

The Azur 650C CD player is a perfect case in point. Its spec sheet could comfortably be applied to products costing considerably more than £350. It’s EnergyStar efficient, consuming less than 25W at play, less than a watt at rest. It sports a pair of 24-bit, 192kHz capable Wolfson WM8740 converter chips, arranged in a double differential, four-pole balanced topology, a very high precision clock with impedance matched clock buffering, the company’s latest servo mechanism (which makes the transport open in geological time, it must be said) and a choice of sharp or slow roll-off filters. That would read impressive for a £2,000 player; at £350, it’s almost insane.

The back panel of the CD player is sparsely populated by high-end standards. Just a pair of phonos, another set (with a minijack) for multiroom connection, a toslink and a coax digital

output. Where are the balanced outputs, the RS232 port, the AES/EBU connector? Interestingly, it’s not that they are missing that’s the kicker, it’s that you are surprised to find them missing. In looking over the product, you automatically expect it to be a middleweight and the few parts that show up its bantamweight nature almost catch you out.

The Azur 650A amplifier is not quite as much of a surprise, but only because you are used to seeing its spread of controls on amplifiers at the price. There’s only so much you can do with a set of tone controls, source selection and a volume knob. Nevertheless, the product is built far better than you expect and the odd touch of class (like the start-up diagnostic that runs up and down the blue LEDs for each source, the inset logo on the top plate, the little trim ring around the volume, balance and defeatable tone controls and the red protection LED to show when it’s time to play nice) really counts. And then there’s the thick front panels and the rolled edges of the black or silver cases. It’s all very, very professional and can put many a more expensive product to shame.

Under the hood, the same impressive price-busting spec dominates. It’s essentially ▶

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Roy Gregory, HiFi+ issue 54

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“No ‘the wolves of the sea have many beards... fear them’ here, just good sensible advice about the products and their use.”

- ▶ a stereo line preamp with a pair of 75 watt monoblocks in the same chassis. Once again EnergyStar certified (less than a watt in standby), the design sports an oversized transformer, a motorised ALPS pot and Sanken transistors and polypropylene signal caps. Like its predecessor, it features the company’s own non-invasive CAP5 protection circuit, retuned and updated prevent the amp from clipping, overheating or going short circuit. Although the 650A does not feature the company’s clever class XD output system, this is still an exotic spec for an amp that costs this little.

The manuals for these products are so well written and comprehensive, I almost hanker after Japlish translations or florid, Cantona-esque descriptions of performance. No “falsomely insert cable-centre leftwards toward” or “the wolves of the sea have many beards... fear them” here, just good sensible instructions about the products and their use. Cambridge Audio does not supply cables in the boxes and the amplifier is without phono stage. Cambridge Audio also supplies aftermarket interconnect cables and a phono stage. These last two sentences may be connected. Fortunately the phono stage is a bit of a honey in its own right and those who’ve tried the cables report positively about their build and sound quality.

What’s surprising on first opening the boxes is just how professional the whole caboodle is. The packaging is slick, the product is encased in its own blue cover, the remote handset is custom-designed for the Azur product line, the front panel is deceptively thick and the casework remarkably flex-free. Aside from a low whirring as the volume pot moves under its own steam, both products are remarkably free from niggles and noises (that near silent transport mechanism is especially impressive). In other words, all the things you should expect of a product costing five times as much (but are often disappointed to see are MIA).

It’s the sound though that really shocks, in a good way. It’s an incredibly exciting performance, packed with energy and drama and a great deal of grip. Faced with a world of hundreds and hundreds of watts, you might think a 75 watter will run out of steam, but partnered appropriately (or at least, partnered with a moderate amount of sanity) it works with a bags of energy on tap. Surprisingly dynamic, surprisingly bubbly and surprisingly musical sounding, were the tasting notes. Ending in “well, I’m surprised!” of course.

It’s clear a lot of time and energy went into making both these products work beautifully. And that time and energy paid off. There were a lot of discs thrown at this combo, to see just what the upper limit was. And it was hard to find. Playing a very dynamic piece of music (Mahler’s Eighth for example) at a fair volume – but not enough to trip the protection circuit – began to push the amplifier into sounding a touch hard and topky. And, compared to more upmarket products there was a sense of richness and openness to the soundstage, and a sense of control at high volumes that this amp could not replicate with the same authority. But we’re not talking huge differences here and given that the cost of this system was almost one-third of the cost of the interconnect cable of the other, you can see why this is extraordinary stuff.

The CD player is the perfect partner for that amplifier. It’s accurate and dynamic, but where the amplifier can be ‘zingy’ in the ▶



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▶ treble, the CD player is softer and more rounded sounding. These are not bold departures from accuracy even when taken separately, but in combination the two make for a remarkably natural performance. This highlights the biggest regret surrounding the 650 series; and it's got nothing to do with the 650 series! The prices of these two products will naturally end up with most of them being used with loudspeakers costing around £200 or so. While it will do a great job here, to really hear what it can do, try it with a pair costing five times that figure, ideally one with a soft dome tweeter too. Suddenly, what most people consider as good mid-price electronics becomes a neutral platform to play music with a great deal of integrity.

More than anything though, the Cambridge Audio combo makes inherently 'likeable' sounds. That doesn't mean it makes everything sound nice; stick on Pantera and you are in for an aggressive angry rant; exactly what you expect from Pantera, in fact. No, instead it makes a sound that makes you want to play music through, whatever your taste in music. It is perhaps this, admittedly somewhat nebulous concept that lofts the Cambridge Audio Azur 650C and 650A above the mainstream. There's none of that sense of great music, not so great sound here.

There's a small, but growing movement, that suggests the electronics are relatively unimportant in the creation of good sound. The loudspeaker and the room acoustic treatment take centre stage in this audio ethos. This could be the CD and amplifier that proves them right (of course, we'd say it's because these are the *right* CD and amp for the job). OK, some perspective is in order; anyone matching £700 worth of electronics with £7,000 worth of speaker is setting themselves up for major disappointment, but realistically the Cambridge Audio duo are capable of driving far better loudspeakers than they should be capable of.

In the insane world of high-end audio, this is the sanest choice you could make. +

“More than anything though, the Cambridge Audio combo makes inherently ‘likeable’ sounds.”

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Cambridge Audio Azur 650C CD player

D/A converter: Dual Wolfson WM8740

24-Bit/192kHz capable

Filter: 2-Pole Dual Differential Bessel

Double Virtual Earth Balanced

Frequency response: 20Hz – 20kHz

(+/-0.1dB)

THD @ 1kHz 0dBFs: <0.001%

THD @ 20kHz 0dBFs: <0.002%

IMD (19/20kHz) 0dBFs: <0.0005%

Linearity @ -90dBFs: +/-0.5dB

Clock deviation: +/-20ppm

Stopband rejection (>24kHz): >90dB

S/N ratio, A weighted: >104dB

Total correlated jitter: <140ps

Max. power consumption: 25W

Standby power consumption: <1W

Dimensions (HxWxD): 35 x 430 x 305mm

Weight: 4.8kg

Cambridge Audio Azur 650A integrated amplifier

Inputs: 6x phono inputs (including tape monitor in), iPod minijack

Outputs: 2x phono outputs

Power Output: 75 watts (into 8 ohms)

THD (unweighted) <0.002% @ 1kHz, 80%

of rated power

<0.03% 20Hz-20kHz, 80% of rated power

<0.02% 20Hz-20kHz @ 10W

Frequency Response: 5Hz-50kHz (-1dB)

S/N Ratio: (ref 1w) >92dB (unweighted)

Input Impedance: 47kohms

Damping Factor: >100

Max. power consumption: 600W

Standby power consumption: <1W @ rated mains

Bass/Treble controls: Shelving, ultimate

boost/cut +/-7.5dB @ 20Hz – 20kHz

Dimensions (HxWxD): 120x430x350mm

Weight: 8.4kg

Price: £350 per unit

Manufactured by Cambridge Audio

URL: www.cambridgeaudio.com

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Blue Horizon is a design and manufacturing company specialising in professional-grade audio accessories. The Proburn cable burn-in accelerator is the first in a new range of audio products from Blue Horizon, developed for music lovers who enjoy high-quality sound and wish to achieve an even greater level of sonic performance.

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CABLE BURN-IN **An acknowledged problem in need of better solution.**

It is a well-known fact that high-quality audio and video cables improve over time when used in a hi-fi or home cinema system. A hard, closed-in sound with a distinct lack of bass are the qualities most noted when a cable is new; a cable that has been 'burned-in' will sound more open, extended and three-dimensional, with a more natural, less sterile performance overall.

Unfortunately, most high-quality specialist cables only get close to realising their full potential after months of use. Playing wide-bandwidth music gradually improves the performance of speaker and interconnect cables, yet technically they will never reach optimum performance with music signals alone.

The problem is quite simple. Real music has very little high-frequency energy, and thus will have a limited ability to improve a cable. Research shows that musical instruments may produce energy above 20kHz, but there is little sound energy above 40kHz. Also, most microphones do not pick up sound at much over 20kHz.

Furthermore, even the best burn-in CDs have a limited effect, owing to the limited frequency range of a CD player. A typical CD player has a sampling rate of 44.1kHz (Red Book standard). Digital theory (Nyquist) suggests a maximum frequency of 22.05kHz; the highest frequency is always half the sampling frequency. In reality, 20kHz is about the maximum because of the need to filter within the replay device.

Therefore, while it is accepted that sound, be it composed music or carefully generated frequencies played through an audio system, will improve a cable's performance over time, it must also be accepted that the overall effect is limited technically. Cables conditioned in



Blue Horizon Proburn Cable Burn in machine

"I have absolutely no idea why it does what it does, but it does it all the same." "...the conditioned set sounded like they'd grown more base, the soundstage increased in width and the treble seemed more alive."

Hi>Fi+

this way will never reach their true performance potential. Thus, an alternative method is required. The challenge is two-fold: burn in time and burn in effectiveness. How can a cable be fully conditioned, and the time required to undertake this conditioning decreased from several months to just one day?

Proburn's patent-pending technique fully prepares cables for audio or video use in a way that no amount of music ever can. To put this into context, Proburn produces 10,000 times the upper frequency limit of a typical CD player, which not only dramatically reduces the burn-in time for new cables but also fully prepares and conditions your existing cables. Proburn will also keep your cables performing to their full potential; condition them for 24 hours every six to eight weeks and your cables will remain free from negative charges and static problems.

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

JPS Labs Aluminata interconnect cable

By Alan Sircom

It's considered good form in *Hi-Fi Plus* to review a whole 'loom' of cable as a single entity; interconnect, loudspeaker and mains cables as one. There's good reason for this – it gives a more consistent picture of what the cables can do, because they seem to work best as a team. It's also a good idea to review cables from a specific 'family' within the output of a cable company. Sometimes, though, a cable stands on its own. Aluminata, by JPS Labs, does just that.

OK, so it stands on its own in the context of JPS Labs Superconductor 3 interconnects, speaker cables and mains leads made specifically for digital and analog use (all to be reviewed soon), but Aluminata sticks out as the leader of the pack. JPS Labs uses Alumiloy, a copper aluminium alloy with a high tensile strength, to form its conductors.

In this case, it means 15-gauge solid-core conductors in a

Kapton insulator, but the real Aluminata twist is the use of

aluminium granules held in a polymer sleeve used as shield (PAS, or 'Particle Aluminum Shield' says the blurb, which sounds like the sort of thing the Romulans periodically 'raise' when bumping into Captain Kirk in the Neutral Zone). JPS claims this shield eliminates the ingress of RFI and EMI and even cuts out ground loop noise. The whole thing is finished off with a braided sheath, WBT plugs and supplied in an aluminium case, roughly the dimensions of half a dozen LPs.

The word 'uncompromising' springs to mind. Have the products too close together, have the stand too close to a wall and the cable (weighing in at a little over a kilogramme in its own right) will not accommodate. Use a lightweight passive preamp and Aluminata will push it clean off the equipment table. But, it's untroubled by running in – its sound doesn't really change over time.

This cable is the audio equivalent of Marmite; it provokes strong reactions of equal and opposite force, for exactly the same reasons; music flow, granularity of sound and absence of noise; those who love it, think it's the most natural, coherent, lucid and smooth sounding cable with the darkest silences you can get. Those who don't think it's 'smoothed over'. The only things both pro- and anti-JPS had in common was that

the treble was 'unforced' and the bass was 'deep, clear and taut'.

This reaction isn't even system dependent; it's person dependent. Put the same people in the same room with the same system and insert the JPS Labs cables and the result is instant – either "Wow!" or "Nah!", but never "Meh!". Put them in the same room at the same time and they will come to blows over the cable. Usually when differences of opinion emerge, you'll usually hear something like "the treble was sweet" by the supporters and "yes, but the bass was boomy" from the nay-sayers. Here, those who like and dislike the cable are arguing for the same aspect – "It's wonderfully smooth" vs. "It sounds too smooth", "it lowered the noise floor" becomes "an eerie sense of quiet" and so on. Weird.

That's the cable's greatest strength, though; the "Wow!" contingent will never be happy with anything else after hearing the JPS Aluminata. It makes changes that you can only feel very strongly about. And you won't know whether that's strongly "Wow!" or strongly "Nah!" until you hear it. But you must hear it. It's the sort of thing that might just leave a cable sceptic troubled. It also might just leave them with a set of JPS Aluminata. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Price: £2,395 for a 1m pair

Manufactured by:

JPS Labs

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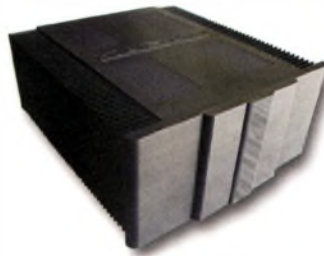
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Marten Coltrane Soprano Loudspeaker

By Roy Gregory

More often than not, a high profile, high-priced and technologically advanced design is followed by simplified versions at lower prices, models that dilute the performance whilst slashing the purchase price. Not so with Marten: Their first model, the flagship Coltrane was followed by an even more ambitious project, the massive, four-cabinet Coltrane Supreme. Now comes the smaller and outwardly simpler Coltrane Soprano (although personally I think that 'Favorite' would have been a nicer name and maintained a greater sense of Coltrane continuity) and again, Marten have defied expectations. After all, the new model has all the outward indicators of a cost cutting, cash in design: fewer drivers, a smaller cabinet, less bandwidth. That is until you notice that the Coltrane Soprano still tips the scales at a far from inconsequential €40,000. Not much cost cut there...

In fact, the rationale for this new Coltrane model is quite distinct and rather than offering a slice of Coltrane performance at a lower price, has more to do with delivering as much of the larger, three-way Coltrane's performance as possible in the confines of a smaller room and a smaller cabinet.*

So, far from cutting costs, it employs the same carbon fibre/honeycomb sandwich for its boat-backed cabinet, the same stainless steel outriggers and Black Diamond Racing cones as the larger Coltrane. It also uses a diamond tweeter (in this case the new 26mm model from Jantzen), ceramic drivers for the mid and bass frequencies and a laminated MDF baffle. Indeed, in most important respects this is, quite literally, a chopped down Coltrane – and that's no way to create a bargain, believe me. Despite the smaller size, most of the material costs are going to approach those of the larger model with only the driver complement pegged back. Meanwhile, building the beast and finishing it, packing it and guaranteeing it will also all cost pretty much the same as the larger Coltrane design. What savings there are come from the reduced driver complement and some detail changes. So why build a smaller version of the same thing, with less bandwidth to match the slightly lower price? Because it's going to do a different job – one for a different listener with a smaller room.

As impressive as the original Coltrane is, there's no escaping the fact that it's a large loudspeaker that, whilst it's capable of impressive performance in smaller rooms (largely due to its tightly controlled low frequencies), really blossoms once it's given space to breathe. That sonically unobtrusive cabinet allows the speakers to disappear whilst the driver area delivers enough bandwidth for a real sense of scale. In contrast, listen to the Coltrane Soprano and whilst it shares the same lightness of touch and precise transparency that characterizes the Marten sound, the fact that this characteristic extends much

lower in the smaller cabinet makes it even more tolerant of smaller spaces and closer boundaries.

But there's other things going on beneath that familiar exterior that bear closer examination and point quite clearly to a subtly different blend of virtues in this design, virtues that also clearly separate the Coltrane Soprano from its larger namesake.

Let's look at the detail. As mentioned above, the boat-backed, one-piece composite cabinet with its large, downward firing reflex port closely echoes the construction of the original Coltrane. Likewise the carefully shaped and beveled front baffle is unmistakable, although in this instance it's formed from laminated MDF (veneered or high gloss lacquered) rather than the layered, solid wood employed in the larger design.

“[The Soprano delivers] as much of the larger, three-way Coltrane's performance as possible in the confines of a smaller room and a smaller cabinet.”

Two slabs of differing thickness are used, with a damping glue in between to create a constrained layer and a baffle 56mm thick. The stainless steel outriggers and BDR cones are for more than just leveling and stability; they also optimize the distance of the port from the floor boundary. So far so similar: the real differences lie in the driver complement and crossover configuration – and in turn, the specific strengths and weaknesses that go with them.

Rather than the three-way, twin bass driver configuration of the Coltrane, the Soprano is a straight two-way design, both of the 7" ceramic-coned bass-mid drivers working across their entire range. The two circular cutouts in their diaphragms suppress the first break-up mode, helping their midrange performance and ensuring a clean

* Those wanting Coltrane bandwidth and dynamics in a more affordable package should look at the Bird, which while it might not seem to deliver much more on paper than the Soprano, is an easier load with a greater sense of scale and more expansive dynamics.

- ▶ transition to the high-frequency driver. This is a new design from Jantzen and whilst it can't boast the 100kHz extension of the Accuton design used in the larger speaker, 55kHz is far from shabby. Tying this together is a hybrid first/second order crossover consisting of just three, extremely high-quality parts and hard wired throughout with Jorma cable.

The end result of combining a smaller cabinet with the two-way configuration is a speaker that delivers the same 89dB sensitivity as the Coltrane and gives up 7dB of low-frequency extension (along with the cut at high-frequencies). But the news is a long way from all bad: smaller and easier to accommodate, the two-way configuration with its simpler crossover is also

“Smaller and easier to accommodate, the two-way configuration with its simpler crossover is also significantly easier to drive.”

significantly easier to drive. In comparison to the larger Coltrane, the rated impedance rises from four to five ohms, which may not sound like much, but an increase in the minimum value from 2.7 Ohms to 3.6 Ohms is definitely significant when it comes to drive time. The other big difference is in the bottom-end voicing, which whilst leaner and less obviously powerful than the Coltrane, is wonderfully transparent and surefooted. Combine that with a little welcome room reinforcement and the result offers surprising musical scale and stability from such a compact cabinet.

Use the Sopranos in a large room and they don't sound authoritative or commanding. Detailed, precise, focused and incredibly quick to be sure; just a little on the cool and lean side to offer the sort of substance and wallop that comes with from a real musical foundation. The orchestral fireworks that enliven the Enigma Variations are certainly impressively sudden, but the full-on tuttis don't have that grounded feel, that reach right down to the floor feel, that massed brass and heavily bowed strings should really deliver.

Now move them to a medium to small space and hear them blossom. They are the complete opposite of the Coltrane in that regard. The extra reinforcement from the room fills out the body and bottom end, Nimrod really gets to puff out his chest now, the seamless soundstage and cavernous acoustic making the far end of the listening room simply disappear. Of course, it's an acoustic trick, and comparison with larger, more fulsome designs will quickly reveal a lack of absolute bottom end texture and transparency, a vague rumble where the surface of the stage should be, but that doesn't stop it being immensely impressive and enjoyable.

And you know what? I won't tell anyone if you don't, because the vast majority of listeners will never notice. They'll be too busy marveling at the scale and dynamic range emanating from such unassuming boxes – and given a smaller listening space I'd be among them.

But there's more to the secret of the Soprano's success than a carefully weighted low-end balance. It's not just a case of what it gives you, but how it gives it to you too. One of the problems with any speaker this clean and this revealing is that those strengths can quickly become a double-edged sword if there's news you'd rather not hear. The Soprano's greatest strength is the way it manages to keep those attributes firmly on the positive side of



the balance sheet, a feat it achieves largely I suspect, as a result of its incredibly simple crossover design. There's a genuine lack of restraint or intrusion in the sense of musical flow, with voices and instruments easily able to traverse the crossover region without fracturing or stumbling in the process. It's this that gives the speaker its lucid agility and, whilst I don't have the virtue of having the two side by side, I also suspect that this is one regard in which the soprano actually betters the larger Coltrane, despite that speaker's dedicated midrange driver. It's not a question of continuity per se; more one of musical freedom and expressive range, aspects at which the Soprano excels.

Reaching for "the man" to make the point could be considered a bit of a cliché, so how about a bit of Miles instead, and *Sketches Of Spain*. Just listen to the fluidity and freedom of Miles' lines, the plaintive, stretched out, sinuous melodies that he places, note by unforced note over the muted instrumental backing. Listen too, to the detail ▶

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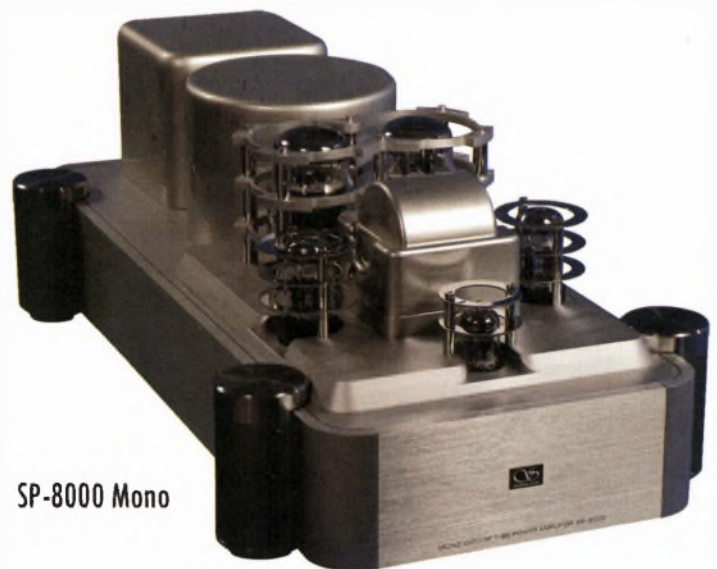
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▶ and crisp attack of the percussion, but more importantly, the way all those taps and clacks and rattles lock into the music, adding to the atmosphere rather than distracting from it. This level of integration and dynamic nuance are actually harder to achieve, their absence easier to expose, with the measured sparseness of a track like this than with some up-beat frenzy. Just listen and marvel to the way the track grows in density and complexity while Miles' horn grows almost imperceptibly to keep pace and proportion, always centre-stage, always riveting your attention.

Voices too, are handled with assured and easy grace. Sinatra's familiar tones and phrasing are unmistakable, Nice And Easy summing up the Soprano's delivery perfectly – and exceedingly enjoyably, the balance between Francis and the perfectly poised arrangements effortlessly captured and projected into the room. From the careful muting of the brass to the absolute clarity with which you can hear the percussive quality of the piano, the layout of the band, Sinatra's relationship to the mic and the way he moves for emphasis in his phrasing, the Sopranos deliver exactly the kind of natural intimacy and focused stability that make performances so much more convincing. You can hear the way that the instruments are being played, the way that Sinatra works both his voice and the mic – but rather than screaming, “Look, look at me – look at all the detail I'm revealing”, the Martens integrate that information into a more real whole. This isn't detail for detail's sake in the style of some, super-etched speakers; this is simply allowing more of the signal through and making more sense as a result.

Time then to step back a little and take stock. What we have here is a two-way speaker of compact dimensions that works in smaller rooms and delivers a sound of tremendous precision and insight; sounds like a classic mini-monitor. It even suffers from the classic mini-monitor trade-off of dynamic against harmonic resolution; the laws of physics pretty much dictate that you can have one, the other but not both, with the Marten sacrificing warmth and richness for transparency and micro-dynamic definition. But to less of an extent than you might think, especially if you really dial in the set-up and sit a little closer than you might expect – on the points of an equilateral triangle is about right. And that's an important point because in many ways it sums up this speaker.

Yes, appearances can be deceptive; the Soprano looks like the bigger Coltrane but isn't. Nor does it look like what it is, which is one of the best (and most expensive) mini-monitors in the world. Actually, let's make that mini-ish – because the beauty of the Coltrane Soprano is that it delivers all the strengths of the best mini-monitors with significantly less compromise. It images with the best of them – but delivers a significantly larger and more defined acoustic space. That's because it's got more bandwidth and tons more dynamic range – a performance that it delivers with gusto, resulting in real musical impact, drama and dynamic contrast, without needing a direct connection to the National Grid. It takes up no more space than the high-zoot stand-mounts and leaves them all – without exception from what I've heard – comfortably in its wake; Transparency AND scale, rather than one at the expense of the other.

The rub – and there's always a rub – is the price. That's ameliorated to some extent by the Soprano's more modest power demands. 100 really good Watts will do it – 200 and they fly! A quality integrated and a decent, well weighted front-end and you'll be away. I had a high old time with the VPI Classic running into the Burmester O32 amplifier, whilst the fluid grace of the Crystal Dreamline was the icing on the cake. That's not exactly a heavy bill given the ticket on the speakers but it is a system that sings – and goes staggeringly

load with considerable grace in a smaller to medium sized room; should circumstances and the Devil demand, of course.

At this price, with a little more space you could run the Avalon Indra. A little more again and you might get away with the Crystal Arabesque, both speakers which can do the bandwidth, dynamics and harmonics thing better and bigger (or at least with even greater subtlety) than the Coltrane Soprano. But both need more system as well as more room and I don't know anything that comes close in performance terms to the Marten once the walls close in. Expensive yes, but for the listener who demands and will cherish its unique blend of strengths then I suspect that price will become secondary. Despite appearances, is this the best mini-monitor in the world? Probably... +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way reflex loaded loudspeaker

Driver Complement: 1x 26mm Jantzen diamond dome

2x 180mm ceramic cone bass/mid

Crossover: 1st/2nd order

Bandwidth: 27Hz – 55kHz ±2dB

Impedance: 5 Ohms nominal

Sensitivity: 89dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 310 x 1120 x 400mm

Weight: 36kg ea.

Finishes: Gloss black with baffle in Oak, Cherry, Maple, Walnut or Piano Black

Price: 40,000 Euros

Manufacturer:

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Coda 05X preamplifier and CSX stereo power amplifier

By Alan Sircom

Coda is one of those hi-fi brands that has a secret past. Coda Technologies might not trigger distant memories of excellent sounding electronics, but names like InnerSound, Legacy and Threshold certainly do. And the design team at Coda has strong connections with all of the above. More recently, the Coda people had two lines – Coda and Continuum (no relation to the Aussie turntable), but a few years back the lines blurred and the X Class – including this slimline line pre and high-current stereo power amp – represent perfect examples of what the Coda brand does best.

Like some of the best of the Jeff Rowland line, the Coda 05X preamp has to be one of the slimmest products to still score high-end cred points. It's so low profile in fact that the phono and XLR inputs and outputs need to be laid side to side on the back panel. Unlike Jeff Rowland however, the Coda ain't big on bling. With its light grey brushed alloy finish, chrome end cheeks, buttons and dial and the big blue LED readout behind an oval display, the 05X treads a fine line between 'classic' and 'dated'. It does match the CSX however and the two together really do look like escapees from a high-class high-end system of 20 years ago (save for the big learning handset and the blue LEDs). We'll give them the benefit of the doubt and call it 'classy' and 'timeless'.

Just because it's slim and doesn't have next-generation styling doesn't mean this isn't a fully functioning, state of the art pre in its own right. The 05X runs in class A and uses a FET control buffer output stage, although the preamp level

outputs mean it doesn't run toaster-warm. This topology allows the preamp to have very high input impedance, so a signal does not demand any attendant current draw from a source. Cable dismissers take note; this reduces the complexity of the interaction between source and preamp, meaning even wildly different cable designs will not drastically alter the sound of a source played through the 05X.

Usefully, Coda has included programmable gain on all inputs, from unity gain to +18dB, allowing the listener to precisely match the outputs of individual sources (or accurately level match components for listening tests). Its system logic remembers the most recent volume level and balance settings for each input too. With no global feedback, very low-noise circuitry and a low-distortion Burr-Brown attenuator in place of the normal volume pot, this is a very exciting design, even before you factor in the roll-call of high-end components (Holco resistors, Black Gate and Nichicon caps, Fairchild diodes and Vampire connectors).

The CSX power amp is basically a one-box version of the company's CX monoblock flagship designs. A 330w per channel device ▶

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“So used separately and together, they turned in a good, attractive and consistent performance.”

► (that doubles perfectly, delivering 660 watts into four ohms and is good for one-ohm impedances – a sign of a stiff power supply and very good load-stability) with the first 25w of that power in class A, the CSX is a high-current design (125A peak) with a differential JFET input and vertical MOSFET voltage gain stage. Under the hood is a 3kVA custom designed (and beefy) potted transformer and some 80,000 μ F of supply capacitance and a similarly wonderful roll-call of high-spec components. In terms that non-multimeters would understand, it'll drive practically anything without fuss or complaint.

There are just three lights and one button on the CSX. Two blue LEDs to indicate the DC power supplies of each channel are working and a green 'bias' LED between them, with a button marked 'bias on'. That it says 'bias' is accurate, but slightly misleading – it's actually showing whether the bias current of the amplifier is running or in standby (making it a true standby setting, capable of letting an otherwise huge amplifier jump into life in a fraction of a second). The somewhat sensitive button next to these three LEDs simply controls the switching on and off of the bias current. There's a bit of skill required to turn the standby control on without immediately turning it off again, but this causes the amplifier no harm and otherwise this amplifier is a paragon of fit 'n' forget simplicity.

The distributor seems to think the single-ended sound is superior to the XLR inputs and outputs. I'm not completely in agreement, here. I think XLR is on a par with the single-ended lines. However, it seems that the preamp runs best in single-ended and the power amp is best run balanced. The abilities of the designs are such that the any such differences in performance

effectively disappear when the two are used together. And they don't seem to mind whether balanced or single-ended is used throughout, either. Score one for Coda on the unfussy stakes.

Part of the lot of an audio reviewer is a fair stack of chopping and changing. Sometimes products show up their idiosyncrasies better when used out of step, so the preamp with another power amp might not sound as good as the preamp with its own regular partner. Not so here, these two were remarkably consistent. Moreover, you found yourself thinking how good the other Coda product was, whatever product was out of the system. So used separately and together, they turned in a good, attractive and consistent performance no matter what was thrown at them.

One of the great reasons why you know you are on to something good with the Coda products is the reception they garner from those who've heard them. Those who've heard the preamp, love the preamp, and the same applies to the power amp and the system as a whole. There are those who claim not to like the sound of one side of the combination, but when digging deeper, it's because they haven't heard that product and are going on the say-so of others. Such is the lot of the small manufacturer.

So let's separate them. The 05X preamp is a thing of joy. It's the valve preamplifier for ►



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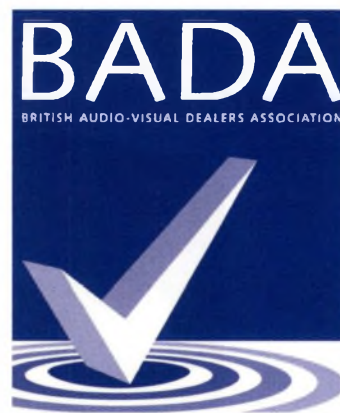


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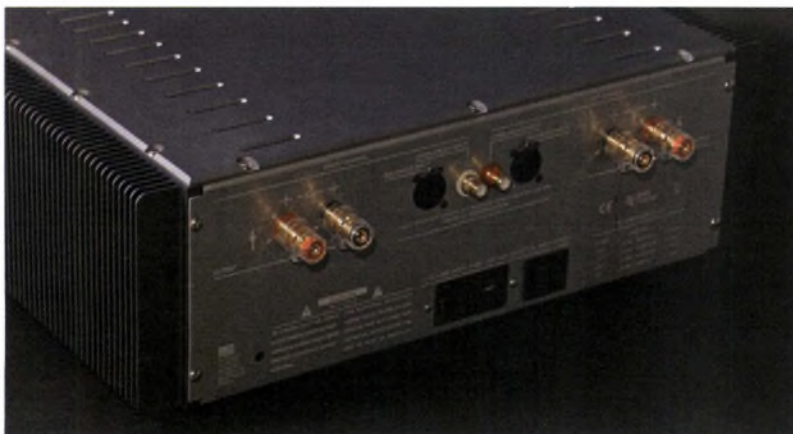
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▶ people who don't like valves. The richness and musical beauty that attracts people to ARC and Conrad-Johnson preamps is there in great detail (perhaps an unfair comparison, but I had the 05X at the same time as the c-j GAT from last issue. Although the GAT was the better preamp in terms of spaciousness, naturalness and musical enjoyment, the test was not as one-sided as the price differential might suggest and the 05X had the detail edge in some respects). The sound is smaller in scale and scope than those world-class valve pres, but the 05X more than holds its own in the precision and articulation of sound. The difference is akin to comparing an operatic aria (all space and staging) to lieder (more up close and personal) and the 05X is a lover of lieder.

Moving over to the Coda CSX, it seems to have seemingly endless power on tap, capable of delivering awesome dynamics (but without sacrificing those shades of dynamic subtlety that audiophiles crave). There's a sense of rootedness to the sound that holds whatever you are listening to. Double basses in particular seem to be locked firmly in place, whether bowed at the back of the string section or plucked up front and next to the pianist in a jazz trio. It can wail like a demon with screeching guitar solos and unveil the subtleties of the a cappella human voice, even one as finger-in-the-ear folkly as Ewan McColl.

Of the two, I marginally prefer the power amplifier, but this is more down compatibility with other products than intrinsic failings in the preamp. There are a lot of super-detailed preamps that can come across as fierce with the wrong equipment and the Coda power tames that perfectly. On the other hand, power amplifiers at this level seem to be designed to help tame such detailing and there's a thin line separating 'enticing' and 'soft'. The preamplifier – going for the enticing sound – can too often push similarly enticing sounding power amps into making a soft sound.

Granted, the Codas will never find favour with those who still want that up-front, uniquely British sound. Instead, this is a mature product for a mature audio audience. It can still rock with the best of them, but those who are fixated on 'PRaT' will not like the Codas. Instead, this is the kind of product that is refined, powerful and more than delivers the goods. Taken alone or together, the Coda 05X and CSX pre/power have got The Right Stuff. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

05X preamplifier

Inputs: 3x line-level phono, 1x XLR, 2x line-level monitor inputs

Outputs: 1x single-ended phono, 1x XLR, 2x line-level monitor outputs

Frequency Response: 5Hz-200kHz

Gain: Unity or independently variable on all inputs up to +18dB in 1 dB steps

Maximum Output: 10 Volts peak

Noise: > 100 dBA

Input Impedance: 20 k Ohms

Output Impedance: 50 Ohms

non-reactive unbalanced

100 Ohms non-reactive balanced

Crosstalk: 90 dB @ 20 kHz

Power Consumption: 10 Watts

Dimensions (HxWxD): 6x45.1x24.8cm

Weight: 6.35kg (shipping)

Price: £4,750

CSX Power amplifier

Inputs: 1x phono pair, 1x XLR pair

Rated Power:

2x 330 Watts into 8 Ohms (20Hz-20kHz)

2x 660 Watts into 4 Ohms (20Hz-20kHz)

1 Ohm load stable

Bandwidth: 5Hz-100kHz

Distortion: .03% 10Hz-20kHz

Gain: 26dB

Current Capability: 150 Amperes peak

Slew Rate: 50 Volts/microsecond

Input impedance: 50k Ohms

unbalanced/1k Ohms balanced

Output impedance: .04 Ohms

Noise: More than 110dB

Power supply: 3.0 kVA toroidal

transformer with independent rectifiers and 80,000µF of capacitance

Dimensions (HxWxD): 15.2x43.1x35.6cm

Weight: 28.1kg

Price: £5,150

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

EMM Labs TSD1 & DAC2 CD/SACD transport and stereo D/A converter

by Jason Kennedy



EMM Labs is the company that Ed Meitner founded in 1998 to produce digital electronics for the professional market and specifically for use with Sony's DSD 1-bit encoding system. I first came across Meitner's name when he produced a very unusual turntable called AT-2 which dispensed with the platter altogether and clamped LPs at the label, clearly a man capable of thinking outside the box. There is inevitably more to his story than that. Meitner was building mixing consoles for Olive Electroynamics in the early seventies and went on to produce electronics under the Meitner, Museatex and Melior brands. Among these was the Meitner IDAT DAC in 1993 which is claimed to be one of the first to upsample digital signals without ringing or overshoot. It was probably because of the technology created for that product that in 1997 he was commissioned by Sony to build A to D and D to A converters for use in the studios that were to make the first DSD recordings. Which is why EMM Labs hardware was used in all the early demonstrations of SACD and why it remains a key brand in the pro audio world with a who's who roster of labels and mastering facilities using the kit today. This was the first company to make

a no compromise multichannel preamplifier for DSD/SACD and the chances are it will be the last unless the fortunes of six channel SACD make an abrupt change for the better. Suffice to say that Meitner knows as much as anyone about converting DSD signals into analogue, so the TSD1/DAC2 pairing which is EMM Labs' flagship player should represent the pinnacle of what can be achieved with the medium.

The key technologies employed in EMM Labs products include MDAT or Meitner digital audio translator which is two times upsampling of the DSD signal at the transport to 5.6Mhz and the use of a single cable Optilink system for sending that signal to the DAC. In a recent AES lecture renowned mastering engineer George Massenburg mentioned that he doesn't like DSD in its standard form but thinks that 5.6Mhz is a good system, so presumably he's a customer ►

Diamond Signature Interconnect

Diamond Signature does everything that a silver cable should do but without sacrificing that all important visceral quality of good copper cables. It is, without doubt, the best silver cable I have heard.

N Grove Manchester Aug 2009

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SPL Series Cable

'By now I was enjoying a bigger cleaner sound that had greater projection and dynamics. Voices and instruments had more space around them, yet the cohesiveness and integration I value most was fully maintained.'

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**The New Angle on LP Reproduction:
Introducing the Lyra Delos MC Phono Cartridge**

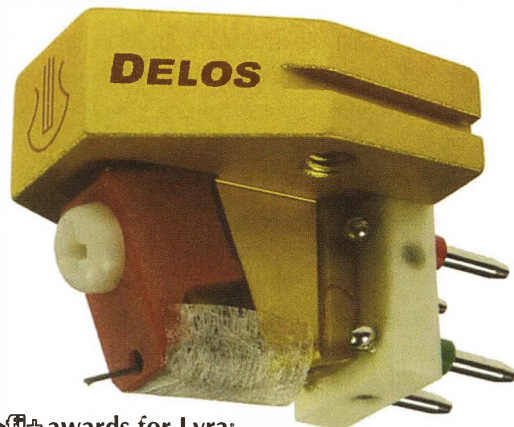
An analog LP played back with an MC cartridge can sound exceptionally good. Normally, the more cost put into the cartridge, the better the sound. However, sometimes what is required is not more cost but more clever engineering, as with the Lyra Delos.

A major problem with most cartridges is that the signal coils are located so that applying normal tracking force restricts performance. The reason is that the cartridge's signal coils **should** have the same angle as the magnetic circuit when the tracking force for playback is applied, but are nearly always designed so that applying normal tracking force pushes the signal coils out of alignment with the magnetic circuit. This impairs the sensitivity and linearity of the coils, and reduces the quality of sound.

The Delos solves this problem with a new body structure and pre-angled damping system. The pre-angled dampers work together with the angle of the body structure so that, when tracking force is applied, the signal coils are optimally aligned with the magnet circuit. The Delos also has a microridge stylus for outstanding tracking, a non-parallel solid metal body for low resonances, and nude construction for greater clarity. The result is clearly improved sound quality, particularly resolution, dynamic range, transient impact and immediacy.

Feel free to audition the Lyra Delos, and hear how good a new angle on LP reproduction can sound.

Jonathan Carr, Lyra Designer



hi-fi+ awards for Lyra:

- Lyra Helikon MC Cartridge**
- Product of the Year 2001
- Lyra Connoisseur 4.0 phono & line stage**
- Product of the Year & Editors Choice 2002
- Lyra Titan MC Cartridge**
- Product of the Year 2003
- Lyra Skala MC Cartridge**
- Product of the Year 2007 & Legacy Award.
- Lyra Erodion MC Step-Up**
- Product of the Year 2009



UK Lyra distributor: Symmetry - www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Please visit www.lyraaudio.com for a full list of distributors from other countries.

▶ too. The converter in the DAC2 is fully discrete which allows the company to build a system that works with MDAT from the ground up and offers complete freedom of tweaking for the desired end result, something that is very hard to achieve with chip based DACs.

Rather than using a PLL (phase locked loop) to synchronise the system EMM Labs has its own proprietary MFAST system which is claimed to be able to lock onto any digital source more quickly than a PLL and completely eliminates source jitter because it doesn't depend on the incoming signal for clock generation. The Optilink system that transfers the signal from transport to DAC uses an ST coupling to a glass fibre optical cable, and as the TSD1 has its own MDAT upsampling processing this part of the DAC is shut down when the two are operating in tandem.

All this technology, and to be frank that is just the bare bones of the system, is reflected in a high price and a very high standard of build and finish. The casework may look straightforward but the way in which the cover mates to the rounded corners of the fascia suggest an extremely high level of care has gone into their design and construction. It's relatively easy to stick a thick slab of aluminium on the front of a folded piece of sheet metal, it takes a lot more effort to get the two to meet so perfectly with no overlap.

One thing that confused me initially is that the display on the DAC2 shows no indication that it is receiving a DSD signal, the indicators merely show 44.1kHz or 48kHz which gives the incorrect impression that a PCM signal is being received. In fact these indicators show the base frequency and as DSD's 2.8MHz is 64 times 44.1kHz this is the light that shines. If you were to connect the 96kHz output of a DVD player to the DAC2 the 48kHz light would come on.

Hooking up alternative digital sources can be done via AES/EBU, RCA coaxial or two Toslink optical inputs alongside a USB socket which covers most of the options. Output from both balanced XLR and RCA phono can be varied between 2V and 4VdBu on the latter and 4V and 7.2V on XLR with a single switch. The TSD1 offers digital outputs in Optilink which is marked DSD and AES/EBU via XLR but the latter will only stream CD and MP3, the other connections are for an external clock link on a BNC, external remote sockets and service sockets.

The transport can be set to output either two or multichannel DSD layers where both are available and you can toggle between CD and SACD layers using a button marked M on the front panel. The DAC2 inevitably has a few more buttons to play with but unusually doesn't have a display to announce incoming signal sampling rate or similar, this apparently because Meitner believes that all display types have a negative effect on sound quality due to the noise that they add to the system. It has a row of input buttons which include the mysterious PDAI which selects a serial port on the back that is "intended for future use." The indicators on the top row include polarity invert, mute and alt, the latter also being for future use. These latter functions can be accessed from the high quality remote control, a hewn from solid creation with a good array of functions but no symbols and a strange layout – it takes a bit of scanning to see the word 'play' for instance, and however long I looked I couldn't see the legend 'drawer open' as, for some reason, it is not been included. The drawer itself is a chunky affair with side rails and a slightly laboured if largely silent operation, once the disc is spinning you can hear it whirring away in a subtle low frequency fashion that's audible two or three metres away. The transport is described purely as being a custom made German unit which makes it the first example of the genre that I for one have come across.

An awful lot of effort and original thinking appears to have gone into these products so it should not perhaps come as a surprise that the results they produce are pretty unusual. On the one hand this pairing can sound slightly smooth but on the other it is completely devoid of anything digital in its character. This is such a rare situation that it's almost as if something is missing, the mids and highs are so clean and yet incredibly revealing that it takes a while to come to terms with. It's like there's a subtle glare with nearly all other CD players that this combo manages to eliminate, a result which as you can imagine is extremely appealing to those of us who have an appreciation of what can be achieved with great analogue replay systems. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

TSD1

Dimensions W x D x H: 435 x 400 x 140mm

Weight: 15kg

Outputs: Optilink ST optical, AES/EBU XLR

MDAT 5.6MHz upsampling

Ceramic PCBs

Price: £8,995

DAC2

Remote control: Infrared

Dimensions W x D x H: 435 x 400 x 92mm

Weight: 12kg

MFAST jitter-free input interface

MDAT 5.6MHz upsampling

Dual differential DACs

Ceramic PCBs

Inputs: EMM Link, AES/EBU, USB, SPDIF

coax, 2x SPDIF Toslink

Audio Outputs: XLR 300 ohms

balanced, RCA 150 ohms unbalanced

Price: DAC2 - £7,995

Manufacturer:

EMM Labs

www.emmlabs.com

Distributed by:

Musicology

01273 700759



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WORKSHOP NOTES 10: THE C-03 PREAMPLIFIER, A-03 POWER AMPLIFIER & ESOTERIC'S ASCENT TO THE SUBLIME.....

Some companies have such a long history of making exceptional products that there comes a point where they transcend the merely excellent. Such a company is Esoteric. The 5 series players seduce all that hear them, while the 3 series offers the last word in silver disc replay. Now we have the state-of-the-art C-03 & A-03. The C-03 is, of all available today, the preamplifier that comes closest to reproducing live music. It has a natural grace and transparency that gives every note its own vivid, radiant dimensionality. Likewise the A-03 (50 wpc class A). Together they offer a level of musical reality that is peerless. And.... the C03 has beautifully weighted volume & selection knobs, not nasty buttons – oh joy!

The C-03 & A-03 are now on dem at Audio Workshop Norwich so call me, Julian Musgrave, and come and hear these sublime components.

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▶ It's not a case of the high frequencies being rolled off to create a clean result, there is plenty of extension and the fact that there is no shortage of attack when it's required suggests that the mid hasn't been cleverly reined in either. In fact this is an extremely dynamic player that responds to good recordings in an entirely convincing manner. Trilok Gurtu's percussion on John McLaughlin's Trio at the Royal Festival Hall '89 is revealed in all its power and glory in the context of the large acoustic of the venue. Joined by Kai Eckhart on bass the pair go a long way to making up for McLaughlin's ill advised use of the guitar synth on certain tracks.

By removing digital glare the EMM Labs system is better able to expose the full scale and depth of recordings, this is apparent on all the discs that have something of this nature whether it be artificial or natural. Tord Gustavsen's *The Ground* is an ECM record of the pianist accompanied by a drummer and double bass player, they make fairly quiet, subtle music that is beautifully recorded. ECM uses subtle amounts of reverb to accentuate its studio recordings and this one is no different, here there is seemingly acres of space for the music to unfold in. In fact the speakers disappear in the process, close your eyes and you can't place them. This of course depends on the quality of those speakers but I'd be surprised if anyone were to use poor transducers with a source of this quality.

My listening was for the most part done with ATC SCM150 SL active speakers and an AudioZone TVC passive volume control, speakers that are not perhaps the greatest when it comes to imaging in normal size rooms but they can be induced to produce very believable results with a high quality source. I played a mix of CDs and SACDs and have to say that the player makes an excellent case for the high resolution medium. In this day and age it would be useful if the transport could handle the WAV files that Reference Recordings and Naim among others are beginning to offer extremely high resolution recordings on and which some of the competition is able to replay. I refer to Boulder's 1021 player which will play PCM and WAV files albeit not SACDs, this machine happened by the listening room whilst the EMM Labs was in-situ and proceeded to make what seemed like a most refined and resolute player seem boisterous. The Boulder is sedate by comparison and extremely revealing yet at the end of the day it can't deliver the musical goods in the same compelling fashion that this two-boxer can, and as most of my preferred music is not on HRx and the like, it's not difficult for me to express a strong

preference for the EMM Labs.

A closer call however is the MSB Platinum III DAC which was compared to the DAC2 using the AES/EBU output of the TSD1. In these circumstances the MSB brings considerably greater dynamics and harmonic detail to the party, making the DAC2 seem a little bit up tight and retentive by comparison – which was a surprise given the results achieved with the normal pairing. It was only when the EMM Labs units were connected with Optilink and

compared to a Denon 2930 universal player with an MSB digital output board connected to the MSB DAC III did the musical superiority of the EMM Labs become apparent. The MSB pairing is more open and has distinctly more precise imaging but the black boxes time rather better and makes for more compelling musical entertainment. Whether things would be different with an MSB transport is hard to tell but I would suspect not.

This quality of musicality is what sets the EMM Labs pair apart, it can find the groove where other players fail. For instance in the likes of Jerry Granelli's sparse improvisations, music that can all too easily sound like jazz noodling with little purpose on even very good CD players. So when you put something truly great on, I'm talking Lambchop's *Is A Woman* here, the result is entrancing. Kurt Wagner's voice is literally in the room with a backdrop of sound that extends outwards through the walls into the street. Quiet music like this is spectacular but so is more demonstrative stuff where the lack of grain allows you to play at higher levels without discomfort, the impetus on this occasion being provided by Yo Miles which drums up the spirit of that great trumpet player at his most adventurous.

I could go on, this is the most engaging and yet refined digital source I've had the pleasure of using. It's inconveniently expensive but if you have the wherewithal there's no real competition. +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Carat i57

By Alan Sircom

Back in the last days of the twentieth century, the idea of a quality one-box audio system was all but absurd. A couple of Japanese names had attempted the concept, but serious hi-fi companies just didn't make such things, did they? Linn Products was perhaps the first to break the rules with its Classik system of 2000. This combined CD, AM/FM tuner and amplifier (as well as some multicom connections) in one standard Linn case (Kase?). Arcam, Primare and recently InoVadis have followed suit.

InoWhois? The French manufacturer is parent to some distinctly clever brands like Highland Audio, Epsilon, NorStone and, of course, Carat. The company's i57 is an excellent one-box system, styled every bit as if it was the offspring of a passionate affair between Carat's C57 CD player and A57 amplifier. Well, it is French, after all!

To keep the lines elegant (packing an HDCD-ready CD player, AM/FM tuner and 50W amplifier with three exterior inputs, an MP3 socket and tone controls into one box with the bare minimum of controls) the i57 opts for a multifunction controller and a function key. CD controls meanwhile are actioned by a single joystick. This makes the operation, well, interesting. Interesting like having to press the joystick to eject the disc (in fairness, you get used to this quickly). This layout does mean switching from CD to tuner is more complex than usual, adjusting tone controls is an exercise in menu-mining and you might need to refer to the manual at times. Which you can't help reading with a fake French accent: "it should be placed on a non-vibrating furniture to get the best performances out of it." Fortunately, all the key functions are replicated on the remote handset, without need to delve into the LED display menu structure. The acrylic front panel, with a midnight blue backing, lights and displays and silver controls and CD transport give the i57 a slick look, from the front at least – if you are looking for high-grade speaker binding posts and the rest, look elsewhere.

A part of the reason why the audiophile brands have gone

down one-box routes is it's easy to micro-miniaturise these days. A CD player can be reduced down to almost a transport and a chip, class D and logic control can turn an amp circuit into a minimalist's dream and a tuner can easily sit on a circuit board that could hide beneath a Milky Way bar. It's also possible (and a surprisingly common practise) to take the circuits from products A, B and C and use them as building blocks or modules for the new one-box special. Carat, to its infinite credit, has taken the more arduous route, essentially designing the new device from the ground up, ensuring that the products talk to one another when required, but preventing board-to-board interference at all other times. There are shared components, but in reality this is more like saying 'both products use resistors' than 'both products use the same circuit topology'.

Which means Carat has been able to choose a discrete 50W circuit (80W into four ►

"CD controls are actioned by a single joystick. This makes operation 'interesting', like having to press the joystick to eject the disc."

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▶ ohms), a CD player that supports HDCD and plays to 24bit, 192kHz precision using a Burr-Brown PCM1796 chipset. The RDS-equipped AM/FM tuner is a bit out of step in an increasingly DAB-based UK market. But the ¼" headphone socket and the minijack MP3 input bring it right up-to-date.

There's an interesting dichotomy of sound with the i57. Not in a wild variance in the sound of the different sources (they seem reasonably consistent), but a sound that defies an easy pin-down. The sound is warm enough to make it almost a valve presentation, and yet the sound is drier than many typically valve sounding systems. This means music with a thick, fruity reverb will not sound as reverberant, but music with a lot of harmonic structure is well handled. Which means it's insightful rather than detailed, opening up the themes of the music played instead of focusing on its minutiae.

It's not the strongest sounding system around. If all your music is extremely dynamic, this will either tame it or make it too flat. That alone will turn off anyone with a penchant for Rachmaninov and probably Led Zep. But it has a hidden ace up its sleeve; it's absolutely fantastic for playing jazz. Whether the designer knows it or not, they are very much a jazz fan, in particular a fan of those classic Atlantic, Blue Note and Columbia recordings from the late 1950s. It's especially good with anything with some vocals from that period, like Sarah Vaughan's Live at Mr Kelly's or Lady in Satin by Billie Holliday. On this latter album, cut just before Lady Day finally succumbed to her addictions, her voice is painfully broken and melancholic. It's hard not to listen to this without feeling her pain, but through the i57, that pain seems a touch anesthetised.

When it is on song, there's really nothing similar to beat it. It's mellow, with a tuneful bass, a fine tenor and an open midrange. It paints a soundstage

that's seldom wide of the loudspeakers, but deftly rendered within that stage. If the treble isn't as clean as some, it makes up for the loss with natural coherence elsewhere. This does reflect the type of music you listen to; if it's a lot of complex orchestral or heavy rock, this is not the player for you. If it's string quartets and jazz trios... welcome aboard. The reason for this is simple; when you try it with something orchestral (especially something bold-sounding – Beethoven's Ninth for example) or rock out with some Lynyrd Skynyrd, the sound can be a bit muddled.

The inclusion of HDCD is an odd one. It was one of the most fashionable things you could put on a CD player a decade ago, but

“Whether the designer knows it or not, they are very much a jazz fan, in particular a fan of the 1950s classics.”

the number of new HDCD-encoded discs is strictly limited these days. I had to scabble round until I dug out Emmylou Harris' Wrecking Ball. The addition of HDCD makes you realise just how short-changed we are by regular 24-bit, 192kHz oversampling. The real money's on HDCD; it delivers a sound that is unforced, natural and flows beautifully. A shame then that HDCD is almost forgotten, especially by CD manufacturers.

Comparing like with like through the line input is an interesting exercise. With HDCD, it's a very fine source, but without it can be shown a clean pair of phono plugs when pitched up against a Cambridge Audio Azur ▶



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It has been known for a long time that the audio signal presented at the amplifier's terminals is electricity, but extremely difficult to transduce to the vibrations that we call music.

The crossover is the first problem and despite the attractive theory of avoiding it by active loudspeakers, the penalty has been an accuracy that is threadbare if indeed it is accurate! It is a compact monitor tool for a studio but fatiguing. **ProAc** have long ago solved the problems of passive crossovers with high efficiency and a great deal more.

The **ProAc crossover** has the benefit of reducing amplifier cost and compatibility problems and (most elusive) an excellent power transfer of micro detail in addition to an overall power transfer (efficiency).

The second problem is the drivers themselves. They are neither fast enough nor neutral and here is where most of the **Carbon '8** breakthrough resides; the effective and innovative use of the most ideal material for the purpose ever invented by man. **Carbon fibre.** (As neutral resonance energy dissipators on our **Grand Prix Audio supports** they are nothing less than astonishing. Adding a set of **three Apex feet** alone is a sonic revelation.)

The next problem of loudspeakers is room reflections and placement. All planar speakers in my experience with light diaphragms exhibit lack of neutrality (colouration) and extreme good luck required with your listening room. The best of them have a pleasing Hi-Fi sound that many people like and assume is neutral. When it comes to bass integration and hybrid speakers, I'm sorry, they just don't work on any level.

The ideal high-end loudspeaker must resolve all of these problems but unfortunately does not exist. It would have to be not too big, wonderful integrated bass, organic sound, speed, detail, etc. It does not exist at any price. So you have to choose by compromise.

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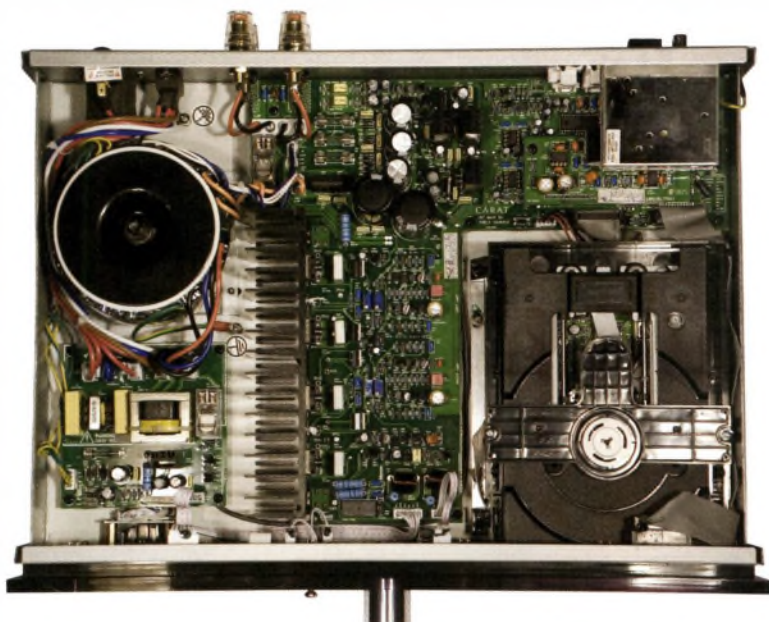
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John Jeffries

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- ▶ 650C on regular RedBook CD. There, the sound is cleaner, with a more open treble and a lot of musical detail. Here, the sound is more encompassing and enjoyable, but it's a bit like comparing a watercolour with a photograph. The Carat's watercolour like presentation is wonderful for digging out the warmth and the passion behind the music. But if you want the musical information itself rather than the passion behind the music, the photographic Cambridge Azur player wins out.

Nevertheless, there's something infinitely likeable about the Carat sound. Even when it's relatively speaking way off beam, it still manages to make the music light and enticing. There are many systems where the reverse is true, making a more accurate, but ultimately musically hard to live with sound. This will never make a bad sound, even when way out of its comfort zone with overly dynamic music. It will simply make too small a sound. Nice, but too small.

In the pantheon of integrated units at the price, it sits between the likes of the Arcam and Primare one-boxers. It's not as immediately exciting as the Primare or as neutrally musical as the Arcam, but it has its own niche. And that's perhaps why more than anything it deserves inclusion and a good listen in its own right. Many excellent products are somewhat samey in presentation. The Carat i57 is far too distinctive for that.

I've almost completely held off from corny lines until now, but unfortunately it's inevitable. The Carat i57 really is a diamond in the rough. Not everyone will like it, but if you are a bit of a jazzer, this is the closest you'll get to happiness this side of a nice valve system... and that will cost a lot more than this system. A cautious recommendation, then, but a strong recommendation all the same; there's lots of musical insight here for the right listener. Check it out! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Amp Section:

Continuous power: 2 x 50W / 8Ω - 2 x 80W / 4Ω

Frequency response: 20 Hz - 20 kHz +/- 1dB

Signal / Noise ratio: > 85dB (A weighted)

Outputs: Power Amp Out, Rec Out (phono), Speakers, headphone,

Inputs: TV, Aux, Tape (phono), MP3 (minijack, front)

Settings: Bass, Treble, Balance

CD Section:

Converter: Burr-Brown PCM1796 24 bits/96kHz

Supports: CD-A / HDCD, CDR

Tuner Section:

Band: FM (87.5 - 108MHz) AM (522 - 1620 kHz)

RDS: yes no

Sensitivity: 9dBu 57dB

Signal / Noise ratio: 56dB 36dB

Stereo separation: 39dB n/a

Distortion: <1% <1.2%

Dimensions (WxHxD): 43x10x36cm

Weight: 8.6kg

Price: £1,499

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The IsoTek Aquarius mains conditioner

By Alan Sircom



This product arrived just very slightly too late for consideration for this year's awards. So think of this as a preview for the 2010 Awards, because a mains product really has to do something extremely special to beat the IsoTek Aquarius.

The new 'EVO3' Aquarius sports a pair of 16 Amp, thermomagnetically fused high-current outlets, plus a quartet of 5 Amp, bayonet fused, auto-adjusting medium-current outlets. These feature the company's own 'Adaptive Gating' technology – an auto-sensing filter stage that adapts to the current draw of the load. First appearing in the high-end Nova and Sigmas power conditioners, this is claimed to provide the perfect filter delivery for each piece of equipment connected. It also calls upon IsoTek's new KERP (Kirchoff's Equal Resistance Path) technology developed for the latest EVO3 line of conditioners, said to deliver a more coherent sound, because it spells a very pure, symmetrical signal path through the unit.

IsoTek has also developed a new choke design, with improved magnetic material that is claimed to offer increased frequency bandwidth, 67,500 Amps of instantaneous and repeatable protection and a case that creates an effective faraday cage when closed.

I've been a GII Minisub user for some years. It was the product that above all others made mains conditioning a feature in the UK hi-fi scene, even winning over those most curmudgeonly of mains hold-outs, Naim users. It was keenly priced, sorted out the sound of mid-priced equipment perfectly and was the sort of thing that sat nicely in the equipment rack. I'm not the only GII Minisub user out there, and here's a hint... put it on eBay or trade it in before word gets out about just how good the Aquarius really is.

The whole auditioning process took about 30 seconds. Play piece of music on GII MiniSub. Play it again on Aquarius. Wonder why you were so attached to the GII MiniSub (in fairness, without the GII MiniSub, there would be no Aquarius, but those intervening years of development made their mark). What we have is a sound that is fuller, seemingly louder and more dynamic, rising out of a quieter background. All the things the MiniSub did to music a few years ago... but more so. Over the next two days or more, things get even better. Add in the Extreme power cable

(highly recommended in its own right, and if you buy the two together you shave £100 off the cable price) and things just improve still further. Going back to the original is like going back to hamburger when you've dined on steak. Going back to the original mains is like eating the box the burger came in.

And the downside? Well, the short answer is we're still looking.

Sometimes we worry about 'mk II' products when the original was so good. Will it be a *Godfather Part II*, or will it be a *Blues Brothers 2000*? Fortunately, it's a real treat and a giant leap forward, especially for (soon to be ex-) GII Minisub owners. Very highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Number of outlets: 6

Type of outlets: 16A UK unswitched

Standard mains inlet: C20 IEC

Mains voltage: 100 - 240VAC

2 x High current 16 Amps

4 x Medium current 5 Amps

Maximum current: 16 Amps continuous

External mains fuse: 5 Amps (13Amps UK)

Dimensions: 444mm x 85mm x 305mm (WxHxD)

Weight (boxed): 9.0Kg

Price: £795 (available in black or silver); £1,090 with Extreme power cable

Manufactured by:

IsoTek Systems Ltd

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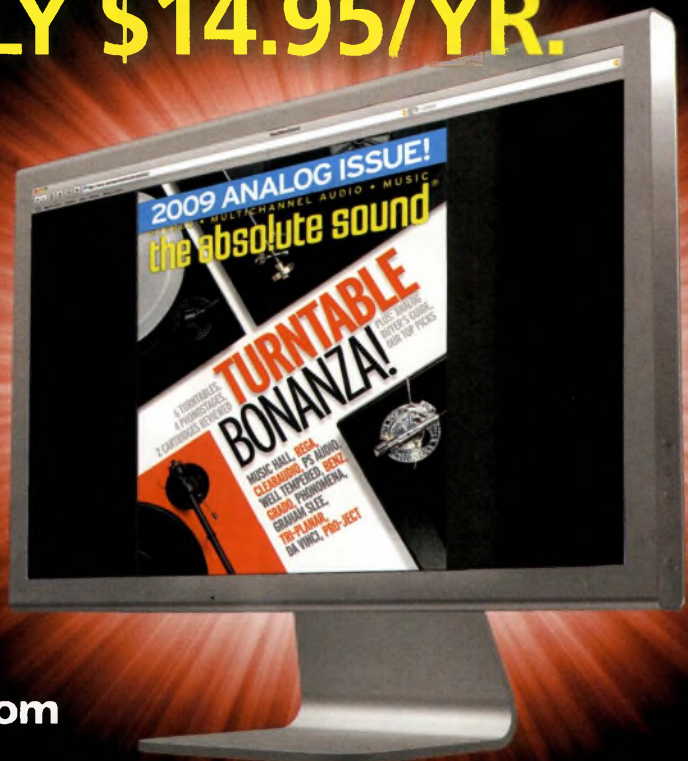
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listening room

Pt. 2

by Roy Gregory



certain things that if not exactly essential, are getting pretty close to it. If the bare naked room was frighteningly reverberant – think small church but much, much more so – then it was remarkably how quickly the basic demands of hi-fi life both filled the space and filled out the sound.

With a basic system installed at the speaker end of the room (I used the AvanteGarde Uno Nano/Model 3 combination, fed by the Wadia 861SE GNSC) it was time to start bringing in the furniture. First up was record and CD storage, disposed essentially symmetrically along the rear sidewalls of the room. Rising to a little over two meters in height, these comprised a mixture of the old faithful Bonde and Billy units from Ikea – by far the most cost effective solution, although one that has still come up short in terms of overall accommodation, leaving a fair selection of LPs and CDs in the lounge – as well as more than a few of the less played (for which read “more embarrassing”) items in storage.

Then of course comes somewhere to sit – in this case a largish, three-seat sofa with a nice low back to keep padded surfaces well away from the ears. And then last, but by no means least, comes the system itself, arranged in this case on three racks (two finite element and a Stillpoints) to the right of the sofa. Get that lot into the room and you’ve already taken the edge off of the reverberation. Add a thickish, wool rug between the sofa and the speakers and that’s the essentials dealt with, creating a sparse but perfectly habitable space.

Now, certain things clearly separate this from the average domestic space: Firstly, the symmetry of the arrangement – something I was determined to maintain; Secondly, for what is quite a large space, the lack of anything other than the basics when it comes to seating; Thirdly, the

With building virtually complete, it was time to discover what exactly we’d created. The structure and construction of the room are detailed in Issue 65, but with those aspects finished, the moment of truth had arrived; how exactly was the new room going to sound?

Having stated from the start that the plan was to create a space that contained little or no inherent absorption, one look at the solid concrete walls and equally solid floor should convince you just how successful we’d been when it came to producing a room in which each and every soft or dispersive surface would be elective. However, having said that, there are



► fact that, rather like a cinema, the room faces resolutely in a single direction and possesses but a single purpose. All of these things make it unusual, but in a country where houses are getting ever smaller and accommodation more cramped, it is the last one that is perhaps the greatest luxury.

Having dealt with the bare bones of hi-fi habitation it was finally time to grasp the nettle of room treatment. The essential furniture had done a lot to calm what was a more than lively environment, but the resulting sound was still hollow and echo-y, with a zip and zing that could be quite alarming. Time then to arm myself with a variety of basic treatments and have a play. These were divided into two types: absorbent panels from Echo Busters were mixed with sheets of BASF acoustic foam similar to the Basotech that PM has been playing with, while dispersive surfaces were provided by RPG Skyline panels. The Echo Busters have been in-house for some years, while neither the BASF foam nor the Skylines are particularly pricy, allowing me to play with position and quantity until I achieved the desired effect. At least – that was the theory.

“The essential furniture had done a lot to calm what was a more than lively environment, but the resulting sound was still echo-y, with an alarming zing.”

I started by simply standing the foam around the room, to hear exactly what it did to the sound. With two sizes, 630 x 630mm and 630 x 1260mm, cut from 50mm sheet it was possible to combine them in a number of ways, either single or double thickness to ring the changes. Initial results were fairly predictable, with 50mm thick panels 1890mm tall placed at the first reflection points and spaced around 100 off of the back wall offering the best balance of mid-band energy and staging. With the width of the room, the second reflection points proved to be non-critical, with various combinations of foam stood at these points making little or no difference to the sound.

Working with the wall and corners behind the speakers it quickly became apparent that two of the Echo Buster panels stood across the angles of the corners made a substantial difference to the depth and

extent of the soundstage: Again, no surprise there, and all as expected. Where things became much more unpredictable was when it came to the wall between the speakers and behind the listening seat. A couple of Echo Busters centrally placed in both positions had a significant effect on transparency and soundstage depth/focus, but the effects also varied significantly with spacing of the panels and if they were changed for foam or other more disruptive elements. Most interesting of all (simply because it was so disastrous) was a brief flirtation with a row of empty Billy CD storage units stood between the speakers. Their uniform cavities produced a very obvious and nasty band of thickness in the lower mid that destroyed both timing and transparency, as well as collapsing the soundstage into a pancake flat vertical plane.

Time then to wheel in the RPG Skyline panels, square blocks of moulded polystyrene, 600mm square with a mathematically calculated, random surface that looks like a mix and match stack of building blocks. With nine of these on hand I started adding them to the wall between the speakers and it rapidly became apparent that it was a case of the more the better, at least within the limits of those available. At close to two meters square, the resulting block is either visually imposing or interesting, depending on your aesthetic sensibilities, ►

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Sonus Faber's introductions in the early "Noughties" of the floor-standing Cremona and the smaller Cremona Auditor were hailed as milestones in the industry's long standing quest to achieve the highly-desired marriage of both aesthetics and **sound** quality. Such a marriage would please both ends of the consumer spectrum, the audiophile as well as the cineaste.

Indeed, it seemed incredible that the legendary, exquisite craftsmanship of the original Cremona and the Cremona Auditor could have been surpassed.

However, the recent launch of two new models with 'M' designations, along with a flagship speaker, the Cremona Elipsa, were inspired by that most astounding of **transducers**, the **Stradivari**. Thus, they are testaments to the fact that Sonus Faber's designers are in a constant process of perfecting the art of music reproduction, and of pushing the boundaries in the creation and engineering of awe-inspiring handcrafted works of art. These speakers are all the more precious because of their rarity, in a world characterised by so much automation and mechanisation.

The Auditor M, the smallest of the new Cremonas and the successor of the original Auditor, is a versatile two-way system ideally suited for smaller environments craving a large-scale musical picture. Its natural maple enclosure follows the Sonus Faber signature form of a lute in cross-section, while its components and final sound have been ear-tuned by the Sonus Faber team.

For larger rooms, the original floor-standing Cremona has evolved into the new superior Cremona M, which displays a more elegant, stylish finish and benefits from the introduction of new components.

Like their *Homage* siblings, both the Auditor M and Cremona M reflect the findings of Sonus Faber team's longstanding research, with attention paid to every detail, from small components, to wiring, to the drive units themselves. Equally, the aesthetics and external details have been refined to indicate a new stage in the speakers' evolution.

At the top of the new Cremona range lies the brand-new Cremona Elipsa, designed for the connoisseur with both the means and the environment to exploit a larger system. The Cremona Elipsa provides near-Stradivari performance in a more compact, economical package. Its sound is room-filling, open and natural, while its form is as beautiful as the speaker that inspired it. The Elipsa is, without question, another Sonus Faber masterpiece.



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▶ a DIY construction project.

One trip to B&Q later I was the proud possessor of enough timber to construct a frame, wide enough to fill the space between the two doors and dimensioned to accept a four by three set of my foam panels, arrayed two deep. A feverish days sawing and hammering created a freestanding baffle that can be easily moved around to gauge effect, all without costing a fortune – a major consideration when results are so unpredictable. Once you've proved that it works – then you can start worrying about fit, finish and appearance. Fortunately, the benefits are obvious and exactly what's required, the sound filling out at the bottom end without becoming heavy

“Which leaves one issue unresolved; walk into the room and speak and it sounds hollow and very live, mainly as a result of the totally un-damped surfaces above the software storage.”

or sluggish. There are certainly those who'd like greater bass weight from a speaker like the Grande, but that's obtainable simply by tweaking the bass controls. Me? I love the speed, transparency and texture that I'm getting, along with the ability to throw a really big soundstage when called for, and float the bas notes within it.

Which leaves one issue unresolved: walk into the room and speak and it sounds hollow and very live, mainly as a result of the totally un-damped surfaces above the software storage and below the slope of the roof. Energy flying around up there seems to have very little effect on the sound once seated, but there's no denying that it can be a bit disconcerting when you walk into the room for the first time. That's something I aim to address with a few more Skylines, but I haven't got around to ordering them yet.

One other advantage to my reduced reviewing load is that the system and room can actually stabilize somewhat. I need to decide whether the first reflection panels can be made narrower and then dress them accordingly, probably with a fixing system that allows them to move forwards and back enough to accommodate different speakers and placement. The Skylines behind the speakers will be hidden behind a large, acoustically transparent fabric print of an album cover – title a question of hot dispute! Finally, the rear baffle will be finalized as regards design, dimensions and construction, and then built by someone a lot more skilled than me while the question of whether

the Echo Busters are the optimum solution for the front corners remains open, with a number of options out there to try. I'll revisit those, along with the various AC lines in the next update. +

MEANWHILE, THE SYSTEM IS TAKING SHAPE AS FOLLOWS:

Supports:

- 1 Stillpoints ESS rack with heavy duty shelves
- 2 finite element Master Reference HD-03 racks
- 2 finite element Master Reference amp platforms
- 6 Stillpoints Component Stands

Cables:

- Nordost obviously, but also:
- Crystal Cable Ultra
- Various Chord Cables

Analogue Source Components:

- Kuzma Stabi XL4 with Stogi 4POINT tonearm
- VPI TNT 6 with JMW 12.5 tonearm
- Triplanar Mk. VII tonearm
- SME 312 tonearm
- Clearaudio Accurate cartridge
- Clearaudio Insider Wood Reference cartridge
- Lyra Titan i cartridge
- Lyra Skala cartridge
- Lyra Dorian cartridge
- Lyra Dorian Mono cartridge

Digital Source Components:

- Wadia 861SE GNSC
- dCS Pagannini transport, DAC and Puccini uClock
- Wadia i170 i-transport

Phono Stages:

- Lyra Connoisseur 4.2PSE
- TEAD The Groove Plus

Line Stages:

- Lyra Connoisseur 4.2LSE
- TEAD The Vibe and Pulse PSU

Power Amps:

- Berning Quadrature Z mono-blocs
- Hovland RADIA
- TEAD Linear B mono-bocs

Speakers:

- Focal Grande Utopia EM
- Raidho Ayra C1

There are of course, other components that appear on a regular basis, but they'll also wait for another time. Meanwhile, these two chains are the main review tools employed on a day-to-day basis.

▶ but there's no escaping from the dramatic effect they have on the depth of image and sense of space in the soundstage, sonically demolishing the physical boundary imposed by the back wall. The increase in clarity and musical intelligibility that resulted finally started to deliver the sense of dimensional scale and volume that big speakers in a big room should be capable of.

Which brings us to the bass, more often than not the source of the most difficult problems facing the average listener confronted with a domestic environment. Refer to the first part of this article, back in Issue 65 (??) and you'll see that the constructional plans for the room presented something of a conundrum when it comes to handling low frequencies. On the one hand, the solid concrete liner and large insulation gap necessary for good acoustic isolation, combined with the comparative lack of windows provides limited opportunities for natural leakage of the bass energy generated within the room. On the other, and recognising that situation, we took steps to allow natural venting into the rest of the house, using the halls, stairway and rooms as a labyrinth to absorb and disperse those frequencies. So the big question was – did it work? The answer, as is so often the case, is yes and no. Initial listening demonstrated a light, agile bass character virtually devoid of overhang or undue emphasis. What is more, opening the door allowing energy to escape into the rest of the building clearly improved both the depth and tunefulness of the bass; so far so good.

Unfortunately, just because the bass wasn't suffering from the traditional ailments doesn't mean that it wasn't suffering. In fact, with speakers as wide bandwidth as the Grande Utopia EMs driving the room, it was clearly apparent that we were suffering a serious lack of low

frequency foundation and authority, as well as a deep mid-bass suck-out, leaving the sound refreshingly quick and responsive to rhythmic demands, but lacking real power and substance.

First port of call was the mezzanine office space, separated from the main room by an open aperture. In fairness, this was always a gamble, driven by aesthetic considerations and the hope that the irregular shape would actually help disperse bass energy. In reality, it looked horribly like it was acting as a Helmholtz resonator, cancelling a band of low frequency energy and creating that vicious suck-out. Sure enough, a solid oak door filling the aperture had an immediately apparent impact on the evenness of the bass response, virtually eliminating the suck-out in one fell swoop. Not without some regret, that door became a permanent installation, a solution which whilst aesthetically awkward was impossible to avoid once you heard the difference between the sound with the door open and shut.* But that still didn't solve the issue of deep bass power and weight...

It was time to call in the experts in the shape of a return visit from my acoustics guru. After spending some time in the room, listening to music and voices, wandering the space and generally getting a feel for things, Richard's suggested solution was surprisingly simple. He diagnosed cancellation off of the wall behind the listener and prescribed a permeable baffle to slow energy without killing it dead. Experiments with something as simple as a quilt, held around three feet from the wall, showed clearly audible effects of a distinctly promising kind, leaving me with ▶



There's an interesting aside here: my listening room in the previous house in which the system fired across a long narrow room with extensive windows at both ends, sounded significantly better with the door closed, at least in most cases; something that I discovered by accident after suffering erratic results when doing a series of close comparisons. The reason? A string of interruptions at the front door and as a result, a constantly varying position of the door leading into the listening room. Set your speakers up with the room arranged the way you'll be listening – door open or closed, curtains open or closed – or you might face a frustrating circular pursuit of optimum performance.

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 – where possible – 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.

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This issue's featured reviewers are:

DD – Dennis Davis
RP – Reuben Parry

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	SACD		Multi-Channel
	Hybrid SACD		



Buddy Guy

The Blues Giant

Pure Pleasure Records / Isabel
PPAN 010

 180g

Recorded at the Condorcet Studio in Toulouse on October 31st 1979, *Blues Giant* was the unconstrained studio album that Buddy Guy had threatened to cut throughout a career in which he too often conceded stylistic responsibility to others. For the uninitiated, he is at his best the most impassioned, gutsy, aggressive and electrifying blues guitarist ever and this is the album which demonstrates that a break with orthodoxy can occasionally recreate the kind of indulgent and visionary performance you'd have only ever heard live at a club venue. Guy's guitar playing has immense muscularity and his personality throughout is one of snarling dominance. In "Outskirts Of Town", "I Smell A Rat" and "When I Left Home" that each extend beyond the eight minutes mark, he reaches a level of intensity which propels like an afterburner. It is a shocking, primordial, instinctive and acerbic kind of music coming from deep within his guts – striking out at injustice, repression and loss serpent like through an unimaginable and almost inhuman expression of the pain and desolation within a blues idiom. **RP**

RECORDING

MUSIC



Diana Krall

The Look of Love

ORG 004

 CD

First things first—I am not and have never been a card carrying member of the Diana Krall fan club. I've owned most of her CDs, but when friends would fawn over how sexy she looked and sounded I wondered whether they saw the same awkward young lady I did. As tickets to her shows became hotly sought after, I began leaving them to others. Then ORG's two new vinyl pressings of Krall's *Look of Love* and *Live In Paris* arrived. With smug indifference I lowered the stylus first on the live album. I knew what to expect, having seen and heard Krall so many times. You can see where this is leading, and the word epiphany is not too strong here. I fell in love with both these vinyl reissues of Krall's CDs. One of my longest standing audio buddies came over for a listen and was even more impressed. Bernie Grundman has done an exceptional job here, and I don't always feel that way about his work, but it surely succeeds here. ORG has spared no expense on these double LP 45 RPM sets, and the packaging is awesome. Very heavy cardboard covers are finished with first class printing and paper. The covers are slightly oversize, perhaps to more easily accommodate the LPs without fear of seam splits. **DD**

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A close-up photograph of a silver-faced power amplifier. A vacuum tube is visible in the background. The amplifier has two knobs and a switch on its front panel. The Border Patrol logo is visible on the front panel.

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A photograph of a vinyl record with a colorful, artistic label. The label features a landscape with a tree and a building. The name 'NICK DRAKE' is visible on the label.

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Duke Ellington Orchestra & Count Basie Orchestra

First Time

Pure Pleasure Records / Columbia
PPAN CS8515

180g

Two great pianists and two great orchestras collide in one of those collaborations that on paper shouldn't work but which in practice transcends the technical and musical difficulties of recording full orchestras and a pair fulsome egos to deliver a momentous and memorable exhibition of musicianship. It is an encounter dominated by a generosity of spirit in alternating Ellington and Basie solos; the eloquence of material such as "Jumpin' At The Woodside", "Battle Royal" and "Until I Met You" and a number of brilliant arrangements like that heard for "Segue in C" as well as of course those fine accompanying performances by all of the band members. This makes for a satisfying and coherent album rather than the competitive and destructive locking of horns it might have become. The recording when you'd perhaps predict it to be a congested mess lacking any clarity is in fact a transparent, well organised whole that cleanly reproduces instrumental detail and the varied dynamic shifts they demand from soaring trumpets to fat lipped basses and chirpy woodwinds. *First Time* is quite simply a ballsy, big band extravaganza! **RP**



J B Lenoir

Alabama Blues

Pure Pleasure Records
PPAN LR42001

180g

This Mississippi born, dirt poor troubadour was the epitome of a bluesman. As a teenager he travelled to the North where he became a protégé of Big Bill Broonzy and there learnt to play modern style Chicago Blues. By the time this recording was made in 1967 just two years before his death, Lenoir was an acknowledged master of traditional storytelling blues, often adding a contemporary social twist as with the song "Vietnam". His interests also extended to the development of an African styled blues rhythm which can be heard on a marvellously evocative "The Whale has Swallowed Me" - a song that works effectively at so many thematic, musical and political levels. Joined here by Freddie Below on drums and Willie Dixon vocals for half a dozen songs, J B's acoustic guitar and committed singing releases all the repressed pain, hidden truths and that knowing wry intensity buried deep within this genre. In the end it's the sincerity of his stories in songs like "Mississippi Road" and "Move the Rope" together with that solid homespun advice on "Talk To Your Daughter" which leaves an indelible imprint. **RP**



Jefferson Airplane

Bless It's Pointed Little Head

Pure Pleasure Records / RCA Victor
PPAN LSP 4133

180g

Bless It's Pointed Little Head was taped live at the two Fillmore venues in October and November 1968. Well recorded and strongly performed with greater emphasis on harder bass lines and more densely textured guitars, this is an album that showed the bands growing maturity as they took their pop orientated songs like "Plastic Fantastic Lover", "It's No Secret" and "Somebody To Love" transforming them into rocking arrangements that have a distinctly different feel to their earlier studio based work. There's also the beginning of an obvious stylistic polarisation between band members, with the focus now on those powerful Marty Balin vocals and the impressive Casady / Kaukonen guitar axis. This is at the expense of Paul Kantner's and Grace Slick's hippie-folk sensibilities. The compactness and driven Jefferson Airplane style, together with those trade mark harmonies are still present especially in an extended version of Fred Neil's "The Other Side Of This Life", but there's a distinct smell of change on the wind. *BIPLH* remains one of the more telling moments in the development of the Jefferson Airplane sound. **RP**



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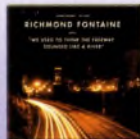
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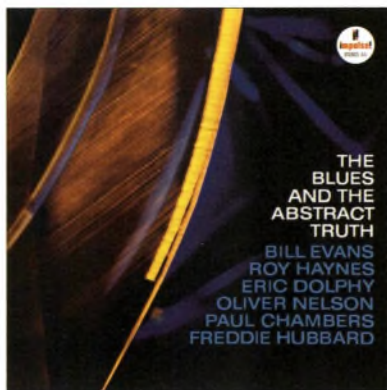
Full Tide

Pure Pleasure Records
PFAN 011



Irish pop, jazzy tunes and gently rocking performances with Celtic overtones are all constructed around and through a voice which conveys that sense of longing, those yearning absences and the essence of human imperfection. This alone makes *Full Tide* one of those breathtakingly intense musical and emotional experiences, whether it's during any one of the four Noel Brazil compositions where Black naturally flourishes or on an inventive and invigorating version of Bob Dylan's "Lay Down Ycur Weary Tune". Her covers are simply quite extraordinary, the side two opener being one of the best examples. This elegiac take on the Sandy Denny track, "Full Moon" delivers unto us a love song of intensity that it has an almost tactile and visual dimension. The depth and strength of feeling expressed here is done so without reservation. She lives these songs and conveys the innermost and sometimes most personal and private of moments of desire in their narratives. Exquisite insights like these deserve some equally well crafted technical solutions and the reproduction of piano lines, layered guitar hooks and translucent strings are beautifully resolved her too. **RP**

RECORDING
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Oliver Nelson

Blues And The Abstract Truth

Analogue Production/Impulse AS 5



What a no-brainer—one of the best jazz band recordings of all time, a septet with, among many others, Bill Evans, Roy Haynes, Eric Dolphy and Freddie Hubbard. It's one of Rudy Van Gelder's unqualified successes as a recording engineer. Now it is being released as a two LP 45 RPM record package. Oliver Nelson recorded many fine albums, especially the early releases on Prestige and New Jazz. But this 1961 Impulse title was his masterpiece. It one of the early releases on the Impulse label and helped define its image as a progressive jazz label. With its next release, *Africa/Brass*, Impulse became the house label of John Coltrane, but this LP stands among the best of the best Impulse releases. For those unfamiliar with the piece, it walks a perfect line of avant-garde music that does not stray as far out as later Impulse titles. Let me cut to the chase here and recommend that you buy two copies—one to enjoy and the other to hold for resale, because some day Acoustic Sound's license will run out and lots of jazz fans will be kicking themselves for not buying a copy. Kevin Gray has turned out a perfect remastering job and this is my choice for reissue of the year. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Quicksilver Messenger Service

Happy Trails

Capitol/Pure Pleasure PFAN ST 120



Quicksilver Messenger Service, along with Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead formed the cream of the San Francisco psychedelic band music scene in the late 1960s. This mostly live album was recorded at the Fillmore East and West clubs and released in 1969. This album is best known for its 25-minute rendition of Bo Diddley's *Who Do You Love*, with its twangy guitar sounds, extended solos and drug infused rhythms. Pure Pleasure has released reissues of both *Happy Trails* and *Bless Its Pointed Little Head*, thus making those acid flashbacks available to tripsters of all ages. Side one is the real attraction here with one of the best *Who Do You Loves* in existence, with a mostly jam session side two until the end where the band goes back to the Diddley opener. The recorded sound is well above average for a live concert although side two suffers at times with an electronic buzz. But what live concert of rock music in the sixties was without even worse problems? Pure Pleasure has done a first class job of remastering these tapes. The first class Pallas vinyl kicks it up several notches from anything released on 60's Capitol vinyl. Highly recommended. **DD**

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Bryn Terfel – The Vagabond

every home should have one

By Alan Sircom

ALMOST 15 YEARS AGO, WELSH BARITONE Bryn Terfel took some time out from his busy operatic schedule, in part to recover from back surgery. Accompanied by Malcolm Martineau on the piano, Terfel recuperated enough to sing *The Vagabond*, arguably the finest English song recital that has been recorded in recent years.

Taking a selection from Vaughan Williams, Finzi, Ireland and Butterworth, these are songs mostly written in the turbulent early years of the twentieth century. The lyrics are pulled from the work of Robert Louis Stevenson, John Masefield, Shakespeare and A. E. Houseman, but there's no mistaking the general malaise that was endemic at the time. The music is at times dark and brooding as befits the period, and yet it's also uplifting; Finzi's 'Let Us Garlands Bring' (written in 1942) is filled with hope at one of the bleakest times in English history. There's also a profoundly moving poignancy to George Butterworth's song of 'The lads in their hundreds' (from 'A Shropshire Lad'), written just five years before his death in the Battle of the Somme.

Not all the music is of the first water. There's a sense that Vaughan Williams is a master of the form and the others – though very good in their own rights (especially Butterworth, the song cycles show a composer who was growing into his artform, before being cut down so soon) – are perhaps deserving of their relative places in history.

English song is demanding lieder, especially for English ears. It demands a singer with excellent enunciation and articulation, coupled with a powerful sense of musical line, and Terfel is a master of both. He's also a sensationally dynamic and lyrical baritone, with a fine vocal range and being more than capable of controlling his voice from *pp* to *fff* with elegance. Best of all, you feel Terfel is a storyteller who sings, rather than an opera singer trying to tell a story.

The recording is excellent too. Curiously, given previous discussions about the Terfel's bass baritone voice, it's excellent because of the piano tone. Martineau is a sublime accompanist, but the piano recording is given the right sense of weight and power next to the vocalist. You really do get a sense of a genteel late Victorian evening of entertainment, with Terfel standing slightly to the back and the right of the piano, his vocals rich with harmonics as it seems like it bounces off the lid itself. It's slightly back in the mix compared to the piano, but this simply adds to the naturalness of the recording. Some have criticised this (with justification) for being over-blown and over-processed, but there's no denying the applause that

should be received by the engineer that was able to harness the sheer force of Terfel's bass-baritone. One of the biggest problems an audio enthusiast faces is setting the right volume level in this case. Catch him at one of his more pianissimo moments and you'll end up reaching for the mute button when his voice soars.

The Vagabond provokes strong reactions in those who hear it. You could say the same of Terfel at times. Some love the CD for its zest and some find it OTT in sound and voice. The truth probably lies somewhere between these two points. Best check it out for yourself then, to see where you sit on the Terfel continuum. +

THE VAGABOND



DGG 445 946-2 CD

Produced by Deutsche Grammophon GmbH

Released: July 10, 1995

Bryn Terfel – baritone

Malcolm Martineau – piano

Song Cycles

Ralph Vaughan Williams	John Ireland
Songs of Travel	Sea Fever
(Robert Louis Stevenson)	The Vagabond
	The Bells of San Marie
Gerald Finzi	(John Masefield)
Let Us Garlands Bring	
(William Shakespeare)	George Butterworth
	Six Songs from "A
George Butterworth	Shropshire Lad"
Bredon Hill and Other	(A.E. Houseman)
Songs	
(A.E. Houseman)	



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