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Sonus Faber Liuto Monitor – *BBC Music* (September 2009)

"There is a graceful musicality about this speaker that marks it out as special"

Sonus Faber Liuto Monitor – *Hi-Fi Choice* (August 2009)

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The Toy collection

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editorial

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As you might guess by the front page, we've gone all DACtastic this issue. To be perfectly honest, that's more by luck than judgment, in reality. The Ayre, HRT and Weiss DACs all aligned themselves to the same issue almost totally by chance. I just take the credit and make it seem like all this is part of some master plan. Clever ol' me!

In fact, it's not all that surprising, when you think about it. It's yet more clear evidence of the continued rise in interest in computer audio. What's a bit less clear is precisely who (outside of the manufacturers and the press) is really interested in this? Yes, we've seen sales of CD (both discs and players) drop of late and yes, sales of streamer products are on the rise, but it seems as if a lot of audiophiles have no intention of getting involved with computer audio.

Jump back 20-25 years or so and you hear exactly the same dismissal of CD and it's true that vinyl lovers still abound today. But many of those who thought CD was something pure evil a quarter of a century ago are now happy with their polycarbonate lot today. I suspect what happened to vinyl will happen to CD; the disc will disappear from the mainstream for a while, audiophiles will keep telling people that CDs sound better than downloads, CDs will reappear in small numbers as a collectable and then a cult object, at the same time that downloads get really good. All the while CD players continue to be made by the specialists, becoming increasingly custom made as the parts become harder to source. Then, along comes some company that beams music direct into your head, and then it's the turn of the download generation to fight the good fight.

At the moment though, new CD players and discs are not going away, even if they are relatively thin on the ground. The glory days of everyone buying a new mid-priced CD player every two years are gone, but perhaps – like vinyl – manufacturers will save the best until last. Even if we still don't know when or even 'if' that last day will come for the veteran format and all but the most anti-LP pundits have given up on the 'final vinyl' snipes (even if some have decided to start calling CD 'legacy'). Fortunately though, the quality of music played through a computer keeps getting better, as this new bunch o' DACs ably demonstrates.

In other words, we're not abandoning CD, we're welcoming computer audio to the audiophile club. But notice our new address, because we just moved the clubhouse to a bigger, better place. We have big plans for our new home. Watch this space!

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com



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Back To Basics III – Testing the Tests

music matters

by Alan Sircom

HIGH-END AUDIO HOLDS CLAIMS AS SELF-EVIDENT, WHICH THE REST OF THE WORLD SEES AS ANYTHING BUT. That's not helped by those claims eluding established scientific methods of evaluating if sonic differences exist.

That established method is a series of controlled ABX tests. In essence, the listener hears the same piece of music three times; the first under set of conditions 'A', then through set of conditions 'B', with no other changes. The listener now tries to identify whether a third play ('X') is A or B. To eliminate chance, the test is repeated numerous times. The results of such tests typically show no statistically significant differences between different types of interconnect, speaker cable, or even between two amplifiers or CD players. Correctly identifying 'X' 13 times or more out of 16 would represent a significant result.

At the other extreme, we have a fully sighted test. Different volume levels, reviews, sales pitch, history, appearance, price and peer pressure can all influence this type of test. While such tests are an analogue of everyday life, the potential for bias does limit the opportunity for robust results.

Like any aspiring mad scientist, I'm partial to a spot of experimenting on friends and family. So, it's time to test these tests. A good methodology should overcome as much bias as possible, while not masking legitimately audible differences. I figure that if a test can readily identify the difference between two different versions of the same piece of music, it's resolving enough to determine subtle changes in audio electronics. The musical candidates were taken mostly from the classical realm (among them, the 1960s von Karajan and the 1970s Kleiber versions of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, second movement proved very useful) and instead of flipping between the two tracks side-by-side, I considered it more constructive musically to play the entire piece for each test.

As you might expect, the test subject could identify which piece of music was being played with great accuracy when he knew what was playing! He also expressed a distinct (and unprompted) preference for the von Karajan when comparing Beethoven versions (if I was influencing this, I did a dreadful job – I prefer the Kleiber). However, the results of a series of ABX tests of the same demonstrated no statistically significant difference. Blind A-B comparison testing delivered inconsistent results; the subject could identify differences relatively well, but was unable to identify which was the 'better' recording.

A differently structured A-B listening test began to return more reliable results. Once again the listener was blind to the versions being played, but this time was asked about his feelings toward the music rather than attempting to identify the

recording in an objective manner. Each time, he correctly spotted what he considered the subjectively 'better' recording. The longer he spent listening, the more reliably the results.

Two other interesting aspects emerged when the listener was given control over the recording's 'destiny' (the volume control and the stop button). Despite starting from the same volume position, the listener routinely turned piece of music 'up' while another interpretation was turned 'down' slightly. In addition, the length of time spent listening to each piece was noted, and the listener consistently turned the track off sooner on one specific version of a piece of music.

Unlike gross changes in performance that are easy to spot (comparing Mozart with the Wu-Tang Clan, for example... most listeners should identify the difference with statistical confidence under any test conditions), these tests appear to help identify subtle preferences that defy 'surface' or 'immediate' observation.

Back to audio, and you find what holds for music holds here too. A good system should provide no limits on your musical enjoyment, so listening sessions will extend, a wider diversity of musical styles will be played and you'll find yourself listening to albums instead of tracks. You will also find yourself engaging in these listening sessions more regularly. Moreover, by focusing on how the music makes us 'feel' rather than what we 'think' about the sound, we can define improvements, instead of 'changes' to audio systems.

Now more homework: I've given you the bare bones of a range of tests. Try them for size. Find your own musical changes – similar to the ones identified above – and find your own smallest quanta of change that applies to music and musical hardware alike. As ever, send your comments and queries to editor@hifiplus.com +

Next time: Standing tall

Why change for the sake of change? the view from the other side

by the Hi-Fi Heretic

IF THERE'S ONE CONCEPT I REALLY DON'T GET IN HI-FI, IT'S THE 'SERIAL BOX-SWAPPER'. An odd-ball subset of the audiophile community, the box-swapper community trade products on eBay and among themselves with alarming regularity.

Box-swappers are probably an ultimately small subset of the audio buyer, but they are also the vociferous sort who hang around forums, perhaps to show off their latest conquest, maybe just to keep engaged with the hobby. It sounds like a good idea on paper. As bricks and mortar dealers vanish, finding a demonstration is becoming increasingly unlikely. So, instead, buying a secondhand product and becoming your own demonstration exert sounds like a logical idea. Unfortunately, instead of using these secondhand sessions to find something cheaper than it was, they soon decide that isn't right and sell it or swap it for something almost identical.

“You might as well replace all your light bulbs with identical ones and bask in exactly the same light while telling everyone how different it is.”

Box-swapping kind of fulfills none of the goals of audio. If most of the differences in audio are little more than fantasy, then swapping out one product for another is pointless in the extreme; you might as well replace all your light bulbs with identical ones and bask in exactly the same light while telling everyone how different it is. I know that's not a popular viewpoint in audio, but there's little to commend box-swapping from the other side either. Most of those who used to regularly demonstrate kit always advise limiting the number of changes before settling down for a few years, and then go through the whole process once again. The box-swapper settles down with a component for a week or two, moves it on and tries something else, only to repeat the process ad infinitum.

OK, buying and selling secondhand goods is usually a zero loss, zero gain affair, as those who engage with the sport aim to sell the product on for as much as they bought it for. But, there's commission charges and second-hand dealer mark-ups to contend with too. All of which mean each time you change, the box-swapper gives a little bit of money away to a third party. All to do it again a few weeks later.

Strangely for me, I'm with the reviewers here. Most of them have a relatively constant system that slowly changes over time. On the other hand, perhaps because reviewers have the chance to constantly swap products they are reviewing,

that helps get the desire to engage in a touch of box-swapping out of their systems.

Box-swappers gain unearned brownie points among audiophiles. Because they flit from product to product, they get asked their opinions on what's passed through their hands. Are they really the right people to ask? I think it's a bit like discussing football with someone who supports whoever's at the top of the Premiership that week. I'd much rather pull in opinions from someone who used a loudspeaker through thick and thin; comparing it with other products yes, but keeping the speaker as a reference point throughout. I suspect this is the real reason why reviewers tend not to change products every few weeks.

I have seen parallels in other fields. A neighbour seems to change car with almost every empty petrol tank (although that slowed recently). Every car is between three and five years old and he drives them around for a couple of months before changing for another similar product. Curiously, his best ever car is always the car before the car before last.

It seems most collectors on the planet are hoarders. Keen anglers tend to have a collection of quickly discarded 'best ever' lures, reels and tackle boxes, camera nerds are pack-rats, carrying round a room full of gear in yet another slick new (or designer war zone distressed) bag. They all hoard, and you can add record collectors, book lovers and the rest to the list. Hi-fi box-swappers don't fall into that category; they simply buy something, play a few discs on it, move on, then talk at first disparagingly and then wistfully about the product they moved on. I can get this, as a house filled with expensive and large boxes collecting dust is a recipe for financial ruin.

I just don't get it... no one replaces their TV once a month or the computer every time it needs defragmenting. So, why make exceptions for audio? +

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We're knocked out by the response to the call for questions about our little survey. This is just a cross-section of the responses. But please, keep 'em coming, to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming

ALL THE SAME

I am writing to applaud your intention to test cables, supports, etc., using the same CD player, electronics, and speakers. I believe that what you will find is that everything affects the sound, sometimes in a musically meaningful way, most times, not. But, that is only speculation.

Regarding the choice of equipment, I recommend something between mid-price and high-end because most of us subscribers are probably beyond the entry level. Further, I think there is virtue in having all the equipment designed and manufactured by the same company, since this should do away with electrical mismatches, obvious and otherwise.

Leroy B. Schwarz

I hadn't strongly considered the importance of the one-brand system, although the Cambridge Audio equipment fits that role well. Hopefully, as we delve deeper into all this, we can see how important a coordinated or systematic approach fits in with both one-brand and 'bitza' systems. It will be interesting to see if different brands demand different ethos, or whether the 'flavour' produced by the support system, cables etc, applies throughout - Ed

THE DEALER DIMENSION

Given your current investigations, I thought I'd pass on some comments about my experience with Vertex AQ components. Over the years, I have found these components to be absolutely fundamental in making a system work properly and I've not found another company that tackles the problems of electrical and mechanical pollution so effectively and holistically. Some of the newer HiRez items reveal levels of information that make the hair rise on the back of your neck.

Recently I had a very precise example of that: in a system worth about £25k, which already featured a lot of Vertex items, I changed two mains cables between listening to Chopin concerto excerpts. Taking out one Silver Vertex cable and replacing it with a HiRez version and changing a good cable from another manufacturer for a Vertex Silver mains lead simply made the music more beautiful. The first time it was good, the second time it brought tears to my eyes.

"The law of diminishing returns" – I completely disagree! What's it worth to move from a competent performance to one that rivets you?

The only danger with the energy-absorbing Vertex components is that people may buy individual items at random and be disappointed with the results. It's very much a matter

of building up the installation in a planned fashion, taking into account the system's characteristics and components. For instance, a valve preamp will be especially vulnerable and it might pay to place that on a platform before supporting a CD player. I think of the damaging energy in a system as being akin to water in a leaky circuit: plug a leak somewhere and the increased pressure will prompt a leak somewhere else. In an audio system, that new 'leak' might be actually more offensive, highlighting a weakness, than the previous evened-out damage.

What the customer needs, of course, is expert advice!

Jeremy Baldwin
The Right Note, Bath

I think the importance of expert advice is greatly underrated in the age of that t'interweb, especially when trying to adopt a systematic approach to system building. With good dealers becoming something of an endangered species, it's easy to make too many wrong turns in the absence of good direction. This becomes especially important when dealing with step-by-step changes – Ed.

WHY 1

Hello! I'm a regular reader of *Hi-Fi Plus*, and live in the southern part of Sweden, and have just lived through the worst winter since the middle of the 1980s. I just read in your 'Music Matters' that you will start testing the influence of mains products, interconnects etc. on the sound of a specific sound system. Don't we already know there is quite a big influence on the sound quality of a system according to what kind of interconnects, speaker cables etc. you use? The giveaway cables are almost always worse than the better quality cables, but the influence on the sound varies with the components building the system.

In your survey you will should one fixed system. That will react in its system-specific way. I have tried to use my beloved Harmonic Technology interconnects in other systems, and the influence on the sound is always unpredictable. It seems to be an individual reaction of every combination of electronics to, for example a certain interconnect. The conclusion is that you have to test in your own system, if giveaway cables are good enough, or you need something better. I'm not sure that your survey will bring us closer to the 'truth' about this subject, as it is all about interaction between individual components.

I suppose that you will find that products of good quality that many reviewers also think are good from an audio point of view, also often makes sense in the system you will test them.

I think you should use a mid-high-end system because it's more demanding on the surrounding equipment, and will give you more 'reliable' results, but still difficult to interpret.

Göran Lundmark, Norrköping, Sweden.

WHY 2

With some amazement I read your column. I was thinking the discussion about good quality cable versus standard (mediocre) stuff ended about twenty years ago... Perhaps you can ask your friend Robert Harley (TAS) about cabling; he knows all about it. Or would he be wrong?

Speaking from my own experience, upgrading interlinks, loudspeaker cables and power cords has given enormous improvements in my systems. To go back to standard 'ropes' would be completely silly; I could just as well smash my main system out of the window.

I don't see how the test you plan can lead to general conclusions. Suppose you test expensive cable from brand A against a standard cable and you hear no difference. On another system there might be difference and you can't conclude anything concerning brand B to Z.

Furthermore, it only makes sense to test expensive high quality cable on a system of reference quality. Otherwise, the system will not be able to show the quality of the cabling in the first place.

In short, I think the experience of a vast number of audiophiles around the world provides more evidence than the tests you are about to start.

John van Polen, The Netherlands

The purpose of this survey is not to find whether a specific cable, table or what-have-you makes a difference in a specific system. Instead, it's to try to find a way of discovering whether there are any universal attributes to these devices, or whether everything is truly haphazard. This is why the 'homework' section of each feature is so important. Without that, it's just the random noodlings of one man – Ed.

POOR POULENC

I'm pleased to say that I'm enjoying the changes that you've wrought at *Hi-Fi Plus*, and I'm following the 'do cables/supports work' saga with interest.

The music coverage certainly has improved. Less rock/pop from the 'reproduction furniture' camp, and more hip and happening stuff – the Dirty Projectors review piqued my interest, but I've not found them in stock at my local record shop. Buying off the internet is all very well, but occasionally I like the thrill of the chase. And thanks for bring the XRCD of Hank Mobley's *Soul Station* to my attention; I'll be interested to see if it's much better than the CD I have already.

One small gripe concerns RSF's review of the Poulenc SACD on Oehms. RSF is a champion of the SACD, so at heart a good man, but his review ignores the fact two of the three works on the disc are not in their original orchestral versions, but in arrangements for soloist, organ and percussion. This isn't made clear on the front cover of the disc, but I'd have been a bit cheesed off if I'd bought this disc, only to find that I was getting Poulenc Lite.

Mark Short

Richard Foster has been suitably chastised for his crimes. He's been forced to listen to 'El Bimbo' from mid-1970s French disco combo Bimbo Jet 100 times in a row – Ed.

SPLITTER!

I enjoyed your article regarding computer audio, it cleared up some issues for me. Perhaps you could give me some practical advice. I am running an iMac which has one mini jack output. I have put a splitter on that so that I can run a cable to speakers in another part of the house as well as to speakers next to the computer. I would run cable to other parts of the house in the future. It seems from your article that I could do this more efficiently with a DAC, and I don't mind running firewire (or USB, or Airport), but I can't seem to find the hardware that I need on the internet.

I am really used to thinking in terms of good old fashioned pre-amps with multiple outputs. And even my old PC had a sound card with about four different mini jack outputs. What kind of hardware do I really need to bring my music from the computer to the different corners of the house, for example, and where, for example, could I look to buy it.

J Silverman

USB has a notional limit of 5m, so it hardly gets you out the door of the room. Firewire is not much better lengthwise, and both of these options are best for local DACs to your main iMac. The easiest multiroom solution for iMac users is to either use an Airport Express or an Apple TV box in the second room. The former delivers a surprisingly acceptable digital output for a DAC, while the latter (with the addition

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- ▶ of a small TV screen) gives you the opportunity for even greater control in the second room. I've seen some extremely successful second systems featuring both these solutions. More hi-falutin' wired and wireless options are available, of course, but for that you probably need the help of your friendly neighbourhood CEDIA expert – **Ed**.

HELP! HELP! HELP!

A good friend of mine referred to 'This Charming Life', the first track of Joan Armatrading's latest album, *This Charming Life*, as migraine music and I have to agree. The bass on the first track is unbearable. This has prompted me to ask your advice on how to improve my system.

I have had bass problems on some of my blues music since purchasing a pair of PMC EB1 speakers three years ago. I had the demonstration pair for one month and to be honest made the purchase against my better judgement. My dealer, who knows my room layout, said the speakers would be fine in my system.

I have no problems with Classical material as the music just hangs in the air behind the speakers and there is good depth of image. The speakers sonically disappear. I recently spent £1,400 on room acoustic treatment and followed the recommendations of Auralex. I have produced a very warm/dead acoustic.

My listening room is L shaped. 6.14 metres long, 3.11 metres wide at the listening position and 4.73 metres wide at the speaker end, i.e. in the foot of the L. The height of the room is 2.3 metres. The volume of the room is 51 cubic metres. The floor is concrete and the walls constructed from concrete blocks. I am considering constructing a free standing bass trap to be located to the left of the left hand speaker. Do you think this would help?

I have been lusting after a pair of Bryston 28B SST power amps ever since they were reviewed in issue 51 by Roy Gregory and Chris Binns. Do you think these massively powerful amplifiers would get a grip of the bass or would I be digging myself into a deeper hole?

My present system consists of: power amplification 2 Meridian 557 in balanced mode, preamplifier Meridian 502 and Meridian 502 CD player. Linn LP12, Akiva Lingo and Lento. Cables are by Atlas. My upgrade package three years ago included the Atlas cables, Akiva cartridge and speakers. The most remarkable result was the elimination of sibilance on Joan Armatrading, both CD and Vinyl, though I am unable to say which element in the upgrade was responsible for the improvement (previous speakers were Kef 105s purchased in the 1970s).

In one of my less sane moments I considered confining my sleeping arrangements to the small room and removing the stud wall between the two larger bedrooms thereby creating a dedicated listening room 5.97 metres X 4.18 metres, though it would be still slightly L shaped. The new room would be 53 cubic metres in volume. Who knows, perhaps I could claim the greatest improvement to my sound system was the purchase of a single bed and I would have the first listening room complete with en suite bathroom.

Room resonant modes: Room height 75Hz; Greatest length 28Hz; Width at listening position 55Hz; Width at speaker end 36Hz; Width at foot of L 67Hz.

David Bond

I'm not that surprised you find the bass on the title track of Joan Armatrading's new album a bit heavy. A talented multi-instrumentalist, our Ms A seems most proud of her skills with the electric four-string and seems

to pitch it up and out of the mix. I don't think that is the root cause of the problem, but excessive bass from an excessively bass-heavy track is not unexpected.

I suspect the problem is down to that 'L' of the L-shaped room, especially as the room is made of concrete. The two combined are more or less optimally designed to build-up bass. A lot of very well-designed bass trapping in that 'L' will help, but you would likely need to put traps into all eight corners of the open 'L'.

Another option might be to remove the speaker system to the other end of the room and let the 'L' be a natural extension of the live back end of the room. It will still boom, but slightly less ostentatiously. It's also worth experimenting with the listening chair position, back and forth relative to the room. For more information on this (and 'vowelling in' your speakers) read the feature in this issue.

*An amplifier like the Bryston might help matters, because the EB1 needs a lot of driving. But I suspect this would be throwing good money after bad, as the room needs fixing long before the system does – **Ed**.*

SECOND-HAND WOES

I know that some magazines focus on second-hand products, but I urge *Hi-Fi Plus* not to follow suit, please. There are hidden concerns that simply don't get discussed because people want to save money.

Far from saving a packet, my experience with old products is completely the opposite. I bought a Leak Stereo 20 power amp from the early 1960s and had to get an engineer to completely rebuild it, which cost more than a new amp. Yes, it now sounds great, but is that the old circuit or the new components?

Simon Frith

*At the moment, we have too many new products to review before we start plundering the history of hi-fi. There's a lot of good second-hand products out there, but you need to choose with care. For example, when buying a loudspeaker, ensure the drivers are in good condition and still freely available. If they aren't – and there's no easy and direct replacements – you could be buying an expensive white elephant – **Ed**.*

Small room, big sound

by Alan Sircom

Even before the Credit Crunch bit deep, the size of properties in the UK was shrinking. The period from about 1990-2006 saw the greatest expansion in new build homes since the inter-war years, and yet a recent survey by RIBA saw the average size of a modern home some 55% smaller than its 1920s equivalent. As the size of a new private-sector property has been deregulated, the typical inner-city apartment is now smaller than those in downtown Tokyo.

Now that new-build properties are just beginning to reappear, the specifications for UK homes look smaller than ever. The Commission for the Built Environment's recent survey of new houses in the UK found that the average home had a floorspace of just 818 sq ft, against 2,303.5 sq ft of the typical new home in the US. Part of the issue for UK house buyers is that we have a disturbing habit of choosing properties by the number of rooms, not the overall size of the building. This, coupled with shrinking property sizes, means ever-smaller rooms.

Even the well-heeled are not immune from these forces; with the most expensive London real-estate hitting a peak of almost £1,500 per square foot, the opportunity for a large, dedicated listening space became something of a distant memory for most city-dwellers.

It's not just the UK that is suffering from ever-shrinking room syndrome. Many city dwellers around the world end up with expensive apartments and premium price property means smaller rooms for our entertainment. Also, the economic realities of the second decade of the 21st Century seem to involve a lot of staying put and down-shifting of priorities, that means smaller and fewer rooms in our dwellings.

And yet, we still lust after giant audio systems. It's time we get realistic about our rooms... and also the equipment we put in them.

Problem, what problem?

To many, this concern simply doesn't exist. Those with a large room are able to handle almost any loudspeaker, aren't they? Well, that depends on your definition of 'large'. A UK resident might consider a 320sq ft room (20x16') to be large enough for most purposes, but many full-range loudspeaker designs are built with a room closer to 480sq ft (24x20') in mind.

With the difference in construction methods between continental Europe, the UK and the US as an additional concern, it's little wonder that some full-range loudspeaker manufacturers have to adjust their crossover slightly depending on where their products are sold.

Nevertheless, there's a distinct bias against high-quality equipment designed for smaller rooms. The idea of a top-end mini-monitor design runs very deep; when I discussed the performance of the excellent (if tiny and very expensive) Kiso loudspeaker from Japan on the AVGuide.com forum, most people dismissed the idea out of hand, because they couldn't get past the idea that 'big is better'.

Room acoustic treatment

Hi-fi magazines often play down the importance of room acoustics. If the room is dedicated to audio and nothing else, then carefully applied treatment is incredibly useful; if you start bringing in bass traps in the corners, absorption panels behind the loudspeakers and diffuser panels to the rear of the living room you share with your loved ones, expect a cool reception. And the smaller the room, the more intrusive room treatment gets, even if styled to match the surroundings.

Future features will focus on room acoustic treatment in greater depth, but the basic scheme is to smooth out the frequency response of the room – and reduce reflections of the sound interfering with the sound of the speakers themselves – at the listener's chair. Ideally, this entails using a spectrum analyser and a series of different types of absorption and diffusion devices, although this can also be performed using digital signal processing in the audio chain itself.

We humans are natural acousticians, and our ability to make a house seem 'homely' with soft furnishings and carpets can go some way to rectify some of the inherent problems with listening in a rectangular room. However, smaller properties and a drive to 'chuck out that chintz', a move back to bare wood floors and minimalist decluttered lifestyles all weigh heavily against this.

Whether performed using 'organic' home furnishing or (preferably) room acoustic treatments, it's worth considering treating the room as two separate 'ends'; the Live End (where the listener sits) and the Dead End (where the loudspeakers are placed). This helps minimise reflections at the speaker end, ►



Small room, big sound

▶ yet retain some of the natural ambience of the room. In many cases, there's a trade-off between flatness of frequency response and room 'deadness'; a room that could double up as an anechoic chamber is not a good place to listen to music.

The advantage is clear though. Eliminating much of the problems that beset a typical listening room does mean the system can deliver surprisingly deep bass and full-range designs can be used with greater success, even in the smallest rooms. Whether you can bring yourself to use two ceiling-scraping behemoths and their attendant room full of amplifiers in a room the size of a crash-helmet is an altogether different matter.

The DSP dilemma

Another great method of getting big sound in a small room is to use room-correcting digital signal processing, or DSP. Systems designed by Rives, TacT, Lyngdorf and more all introduce adjustment to the original signal in the amplifier to try to overcome the influences of the room itself. The systems work

DSP does have a distinct advantage over traditional methods of room correction, though; it's domestically friendlier. At most, you add an extra box in the audio rack. This is far less intrusive than corner-spanning bass traps and the rest. In addition, unless you have a dedicated room, DSP systems are actually cheaper to run than their wall-hanging equivalent; the up-front costs are greater, but acoustic treatment dotted around the room will require regular maintenance; many will hear a persistent whine from the wife's upper slopes can only be repaired by frequent visits to expensive restaurants, the theatre, jewellers and so on.



“Many will hear a persistent whine from the wife’s upper slopes, which can only be repaired by frequent visits to expensive restaurants.”

very differently, but all strive to overcome the same goal; to correct the bottom end of the audio signal as it leaves the amplifier to compensate for the room itself. This means the DSP system requires some method of measuring the room, analysing the measurements made to the room and applying boosts and cuts to the signal at key frequencies to overcome the iniquities of the room's basic 'sound'.

Naturally, this sits uncomfortably with the concept of absolute fidelity to the original recording in some people's minds. Part of this is down to the inherent conservative nature of the audiophile; we've spent the last 30 years bemoaning the presence of tone controls on amplifiers, so what makes DSP different? In reality, what the DSP system is attempting to do is restore a sense of balance, correcting in advance the way the room alters the sound of the system. Of course, there appear to be good and not so good DSP systems on the market. Whether those who report negative issues surrounding room-correcting DSP are merely expressing their in-built bias against DSP on any level, or they are responding to sonically-deleterious aspects of the performance remains to be seen, but – like 3D TV – there are those who get nothing but enjoyment out of DSP room correction and those who find it sounds like someone threw a sack over the loudspeakers.

Speaker size

Although it's possible to get a full-range loudspeaker in a small room, even with acoustic treatment and correction, frequencies up to about 200Hz can remain problematic because of the dimensions of the room creating standing waves that interfere with the original sound radiation from the speaker. Tones above 200Hz have a wavelength short enough that they no longer create resonant peaks and troughs in typical listening rooms.

Standing waves occur when sound reflects off parallel walls. In a 10' long room, this results in a fundamental frequency of 56.5Hz, while a 20' long room will have a fundamental frequency of 28.25Hz. This will create an interference pattern along that room dimension, with cancellations (nulls) and loud spots (peaks) at that frequency. While the influence of standing waves can be mitigated, the easy way of overcoming this is using loudspeakers with relatively limited energy at that fundamental frequency, to prevent exciting those room modes. ▶

"I just wish more hifi was like this."

Steve Dickinson, Hifi+

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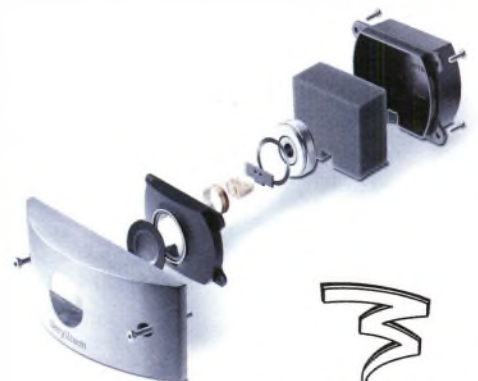
Electra 1000Be 2 - small details, great effects.

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Small room, big sound

► Speaker placement

Manuals for free-standing loudspeakers recommend placing them six to eight foot apart and three feet from rear and side walls. We agree. But that means you need a room at least 12-14' wide. What happens in a room 10x8'? If you have the speakers three feet from the side walls, that gives you just two feet between the speakers; if you place the speakers six feet wide, there's just a foot to the side wall.

Neither of these solutions work, which is why so many people recommend boundary speakers for smaller rooms. But what happens if you want free-standing speakers? In such an environment, compromise (and careful listening) is key. The options include positioning the loudspeakers across the length of the room and scaling down those proscribed distances. If possible, I favour the latter approach. So, in an eight-foot wide room, start by placing the loudspeakers four feet apart and two foot from the side and rear walls. Another option is to use the golden ratio placement recommended by George Cardas on the www.cardas.com website; this involves measuring the width of



the wall behind the loudspeakers, placing the tweeters of the speakers precisely $.447x$ the width of the rear wall along the centreline of the room and exactly $.276x$ the same width from the side walls. It's also worth checking out the 'Vowelling in' or Wilson Audio Set-Up Procedure (check out www.tnt-audio.com/casse/waspe.html for details), although this seems to work best in larger rooms.

Now focus on the listening chair. Move it along the centreline of the room until it is almost exactly 38% of the length of the room from the rear (or even the front) wall. So, in our pretend 10x8' room, the middle of your head would end up precisely 4' from each side wall and 3'9 1/2" from the back wall.

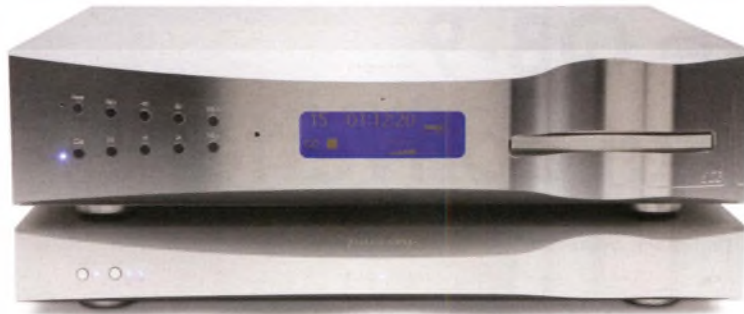
Fine-tune the loudspeaker position in terms of toe-in and positioning; the loudspeakers should form the bases of an equilateral triangle, with your head at the apex. This is best done with a friend moving the loudspeakers around until the tonality of a well-known simple recording is at its best.

The Small Room advantage

We've thus far concentrated on the loudspeakers, but having a small listening room does have an effect on the choice of electronics, too. Fortunately, the effect is mostly beneficial, especially on the wallet. Small rooms rarely need much energy from the loudspeaker to come to life and that means the need for a powerhouse amplifier is often less significant. In part because your loudspeaker selection process is constrained by the practical limits (physical and decorative) of the room itself, this also tends to lend the system toward smaller, more efficient (or at least, slightly less demanding) loudspeaker systems. The result is that it's possible to make a very high quality sound without spending a fortune. Of course, spending a fortune is possible too... +



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Ayre QB-9 digital converter

By Alan Sircom. Photos by Adrian Lyon.



Ayre's QB-9 DAC is the current audiophile 'killer app' in computer audio circles. The USB only DAC represents the zenith of computer audio performance from an audiophile perspective at this time, because those who have heard it know that it takes on CD... and usually wins, without calling on apology or excuse.

The QB-9 is one of the first generation of products to crack the USB nut from a purist audiophile perspective, thanks to its use of asynchronous USB connection. In Ayre's case licensed from Gordon Rankin of Wavelength Audio fame, asynchronous USB allows the master clock in the DAC to control the requesting of data from the computer. This means jitter-free playback. Most USB converters use regular adaptive USB connection, which affords no such master clock control over the USB data from the computer. There are other ways to crack jitter – most notable sample-rate conversion – but asynchronous USB has the advantage of not folding the jittered signal into the DAC's reinterpretation of the sound.

There are those from the deep-geek side of the computer industry who suggest jitter is nothing like the problem we claim it to be, and thereby dismiss the advantages of asynchronous USB as yet another slice of 'audiophoolry'.

Of course, the same people also expound the 'all amps sound the same' argument, the 'no investigation of sound quality is possible without first extracting the emotion from the musical content' argument and the 'if you spent more on audio than I make on my paper round, then you are an idiot' argument. Let them have their jitter-free, bloodless arguments, I'll just enjoy the QB-9 in the meantime.

One of the big potential problems with computer audio is the computer is a perfect place to generate all manner of radio-frequency and electromagnetic interference. As we move to a no-moving-parts computer, things are improving, but the problem is not an easy one to solve. The easiest pathway into the audio system is through the mains and through the USB cable itself. Ayre products are always well isolated, power wise (although isolating the computer power from the audio as much as possible is better still), but the QB-9 features opto-couplers so

that the USB cable has no direct electrical connection to the rest of the audio system. This sort of isolation is a vital ingredient in good computer sound.

It's this sort of attention to detail that Ayre's Charles Hansen brings to the game. The company isn't known for using 'big name' parts, but good, solid components built in an incredibly thorough manner. So, where every other company proudly proclaims how good they are at delivering the best quality chips and special components that cost a fortune, Ayre just builds a good circuit with good components that can be repaired should the need arise. So, the QB-9 features the Burr Brown/Texas Instruments DSD1796 (a 24bit, 192kHz Delta-Sigma DAC) and the Texas TAS1020B USB receiver chip. The former is not the most expensive chip in the Texas catalogue, but listening tests showed no difference between it and its more expensive, more power hungry rivals (especially when the built-in digital filter section is not used). The USB receiver, on the other hand, is absolutely top-notch in today's chip catalogue. The goal is using the right part in the right place.

The digital filter is custom designed and is in a FPGA (field-programmable gate array) chip. The QB-9 has two filter settings, controlled on the rear panel as a part of a quartet of small DIP switch settings. As standard, the DAC is set to 'listen', which gives the most time-domain accurate setting, although the other option is the more frequency-domain accurate 'measure' algorithm. I preferred the 'listen' setting and those who I played this to in their systems mostly agreed on this. One listener, however, preferred the 'measure' setting because he felt it sounded 'sharper' at the top end. Those who follow the affairs of digital audio closely might see a similarity to Ayre's latest 'MP' versions of its CD and multi-format players, which use minimum-phase (or apodizing) filters, the 'measure' version in standard form and the 'listen' setting with less ringing. This has proved a huge success for both Ayre and Meridian, which uses the same to good effect.

Connections are limited to USB input, balanced and single ended output and two 'ayre link' connectors. Nothing else, no coaxial, ST or AES/EBU digital out. I admire its single-minded, 'no retreat, no surrender' stance, because



“Let them have their jitter-free, bloodless arguments, I’ll just enjoy the QB-9 in the meantime.”

you can only use this with a computer. There are reasons for this, according to Ayre, introducing other digital inputs would bump up the cost or undermine the USB performance, and neither was acceptable.

As ever with an Ayre product, it takes an age to run in (100 to 500 hours says the manual). And yet, when you compare it to a rival, it takes about 15 seconds to put the rival in its place. It does that even from cold, but as it comes to life over the days and weeks, so it turns from audiophile knockout slugger to refined, elegant and detailed audiophile knockout slugger.

In addition, the QB-9 retains the typical Ayre sound; remarkably clean, very detailed, extremely musical and a tiny bit dry, especially at the top end. There's a lot in common with the Naim Audio sound in all the right ways; tidy, well-ordered, the sort of product you tap your foot to, but too 'bright' for some. I'd argue that those people are mistaking treble extension and accuracy for brightness, but audio's a broad church. Thing is, even those who dismiss the QB-9 can't help respecting the sound it makes.

Ayre's products are almost universally best used in balanced mode, and the QB-9 is no exception. That said, this is a very egalitarian product and the difference between balanced and single-ended is not a vast one, but if you have a good balanced input on your amplifier, use it... you'll like it.

At the moment, the QB-9 is limited to 96kHz, 24bit precision. This may well change in the very near future. It's a functional limit, because the Ayre uses the Texas USB receiver chip (Ayre plans a replacement, with a new USB 2.0 chip that will take the rate up



“It was more detailed, more natural, more musically complete, just more ‘more’ than the disc playing rival.”

up on an almost weekly basis. However, you can be reasonably confident that the QB-9 is at the top of its game and will spend many years there. It really has no great challenger on the USB DAC stakes, this side of dCS; the nearest rival in the UK at this time is the HRT Streamer series (tested in this issue) and – although those three take apart pretty much every other USB DAC on the market – none compete with the QB-9 on a sonic toe-to-toe standing.

A lot of people have praised the QB-9 for its ability to handle 26/96 files and indeed, it does wonders with these hi-res recordings, as it plays them with an honesty that will make hairs rise on the back of your neck. But I figure that many will be using their computer and DAC set-ups with good ol’ 16/44 PCM Red Book CD files, burned onto their HDD, turning it into a giant jukebox. How does the Ayre fare there?

In a word, wonderfully. I compared my MacMini with (mostly) ALAC files into the QB-9 to CD; first the Lyngdorf CD-1 and then upping the ante significantly with the dCS Puccini and U-Clock. Then I got to compare Ayre with dCS directly. Round one (Mac+Ayre ▶

▶ to 192kHz, 24 bit precision). Ayre provides set-up details for both PC and Mac on its website, but notes from the field (as in reports back from US dealers) suggest additional hoops are best jumped through to give the finest possible sound. Hoops like ‘use a custom USB cable’ (I tried it with a Cardas USB cable, although the jury’s out on the benefit of fancy USB cables), that AIFF or WAV is better than lossless (struggling to ‘get’ that one, too), as well as more commonly accepted ones like galvanic isolation for the computer, are all said to bring out the best from the QB-9. Fact is, it sounded pretty damn fabulous on lossless files (it sounded pretty damn fabulous at 320kbps AAC too, but that might be a step too far for some audiophiles) with a bog-standard USB cable and breaking all the rules. Still a bit of audiophile OCD is expected and possibly welcome in the transition from CD audio to computer audio.

OK, I’m likely to sound a little mad here, but I think the Ayre QB-9 should have a health warning on the side. It wouldn’t be the first, but most of those previous health warnings should have read “side effects include vomiting” or “do not connect to audio – your senseless act may maim or kill”. The QB-9 is different; it should have “may cause swearing” along its flank.

This is because this little one-source USB digital converter will unleash a stream of Tourettian verbal abuse from even the most upright audiophiles. My computer audio advocacy is well-known, but not welcome in some houses, such as those who have audio systems firmly wedded to the polycarbonate disc. I’ve tried the conversion process before, with ‘mixed’ success (either a failure, or a total failure). But this time the QB-9 took on all and won. It was more detailed, more natural, more musically complete, just more ‘more’ than the disc-playing rival. An hour or so of polite ‘told you so’ from yours truly and the swearing happens. Usually followed a couple of days later by a ‘how much is that _____ thing, you _____!’ and a soft sobbing as they start to reconsider their once-invincible player as a bit of a has-been.

OK, the news isn’t wholly damning for on-the-fly silver disc spinners, as there are still some players that can match or outdo the QB-9 in a straight fight. But, they’re rare. How it sits in the pecking order of next-generation audiophile products is slightly unclear, because new and refined next-gen products spring



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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Ayre QB-9

USB Audio Input Signal: 44.1, 48, 88.2, and 96 kHz

16, 20, and 24 bits

Maximum Output Level: 4.00 V rms – balanced outputs

2.00 V rms – single-ended outputs

Analog XLR Output Polarity Pin 1 = Ground

Pin 2 = Non-inverting (Positive)

Pin 3 = Inverting (Negative)

Frequency Response: DC - 20 kHz (44.1 kHz sample rate)

DC - 22 kHz (48 kHz sample rate)

DC - 40 kHz (88.2 kHz sample rate)

DC - 44 kHz (96 kHz sample rate)

Power Consumption: 20 watts

Dimensions (WxHxD): 21.5x29x7.5 cm

Weight: 2.3 kg

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▶ vs Lyngdorf) was close, but the Mac and Ayre edged past the Lyngdorf every time. The computer source sounded less 'digital' than its CD counterpart, with a more natural top-end and a sense of rootedness that the Lyngdorf – good though it is – lacked by comparison. This wasn't a 'throw your CD player in the bin' moment, and both were remarkably lacking in 'imposing' character, but music just sounded more enticing and listenable through the Ayre DAC.

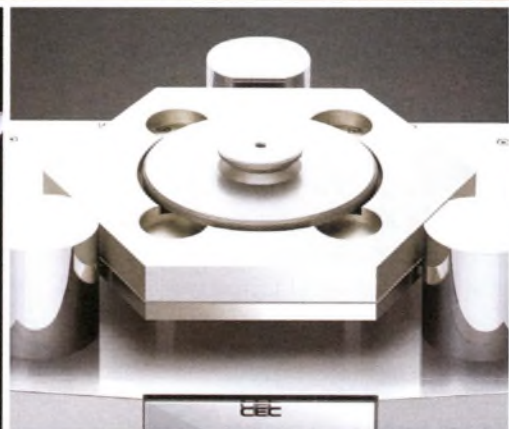
The dCS short stack was more interesting. Here, things were less clear-cut. CD was more detailed, precise and listenable through the Puccini in most cases. If anything, the Ayre was more 'earthy' and 'visceral' to the dCS's 'intellectual' approach. The dCS was in many cases 'better', but I can see why many might prefer the Ayre option.

Comparing computer audio sources (the dCS U-Clock also sports an asynchronous USB input) showed once again, it was a head vs. heart thing, with the Ayre sounding a fraction more 'meaty' and the dCS more 'ethereal'. Again, this was a close-run thing, although the dCS was more sensitive to less-than perfect ripping and computer audio handling. On balance, the dCS retained its edge, but given the huge price differential (I could buy a computer and QB-9 for almost every room for the same cost as a single dCS player), this shows just how much of a step-change you get with the Ayre QB-9.

The best audio products are often those that come with the least musical asides, the least calls upon the music played and very few pointers toward their musical performance. This is because what they do, they do universally and what they do deviates so little from what good audio is all about they leave you little to discuss in real terms. This is one such product; its performance is governed by what's on the file, not what limitations it imposes on the system. That alone would give it the highest recommendation, but the fact it trade blows with one of CD's royal family shows just why the QB-9 is the most important product I've tested in years.

The Ayre QB-9 shows computer audio has come of age. The convenience of iTunes with audiophile sound is not only possible, it needn't cost a bomb! +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Rega Isis & Osiris

by Jason Kennedy

To say that it was a shock to discover that Rega had created a high end CD player and amplifier is an understatement. After all, Rega is a bastion of affordable, no nonsense hi-fi. It took the company a good twenty years to bring out a turntable that was out of the budget bracket – and that despite dominating the sector for most of the 1980s and 1990s.

But what I really want to know is why it took the company so long to make the Isis CD player, as all you have to do is spin a few familiar discs to realise that this is the most musical machine of its type. And I'm not usually a pace, rhythm and timing junkie – I enjoy the finer qualities of high fidelity and am often untroubled by the demands of PRaT – but once I'd heard this I was in trouble, all those incredibly resolute players that the high-end produces are in trouble too. The entertainment potential of the format's bar has been raised.

Inevitably not everyone will agree with my findings and its price point could count against it when it comes to those looking for the very best. In other words it might get discounted for not being mega bucks: we don't just buy with our ears

after all. We look at price tags and we look at casework and while these two Regas are very solidly built and well put together, they are not exactly beauties. Rega will have to hope that potential customers get to hear before they see. Which is a little strange considering how nice the P3 turntable is especially in its shiny coloured paint finish. As a listener first, I can forgive the Isis for this shortcoming and I can just about cope with the manual nature of disc changing. There is no eject button you have to lift the lid and prize the disc out of the transport's jaws, but at least there's no puck to forget and the lid does shut rather nicely.

In terms of features the Isis is slightly better equipped than average by virtue of a USB B input on its backside. In other respects, it's pretty normal with balanced and single ended outputs alongside electrical and optical digital outs on the usual sockets. For reasons best known to the Rega styling department the analogue outs are set into the back panel, which makes it less easy to remove and attach the bigger varieties of phono plug – like as the Neutrik ones found on the Rega Couple interconnect. The socketry on the Osiris amplifier is of a higher quality than you see on most Rega components.

The Osiris integrated amp is a hefty lump that's specified as delivering 160 watts per channel and comes in a similarly styled clamshell case that sports one of the most distinctive volume controls in the business. It has one pair of balanced inputs to match the outputs on the Isis as well as four single ended inputs, a record input and a direct one. This latter bypasses the preamp section and routes straight to the power amp and is designed to make integrating the amp into a multichannel system straightforward. In theory, you could also use it to bi-amp with but the Osiris doesn't have a pre-out so that's not so easy. The preamplifier section is passive and controls a symmetrical power amplifier that has eight Sanken output transistors and a cascaded differential input amplifier. Inside the box a galvanically isolated power supply is built around two 400VA toroidal transformers mounted to minimise the amount of resonance that strays into the chassis. Getting power from the wall to the amp is aided by good quality mains lead that comes in the wooden case that is part of this lavish package. A sense of quality that's heightened by the substantial alloy remote handsets supplied for both amp and player. Thanks to Rega's appreciation of colour these are rather nicer looking than the hardware proper and use the popular RC-5 code system so might operate other components in your system. I found that both a Moon CD player and Naim components responded to its supplications.

As to why the Isis is such a compelling player, Rega suggests that its decision to take the current output from the DAC chip with no internal amplification plays an important part. This allows the company to use its own discrete amps which can be tuned to its own requirements, apparently these class A op-amps are closely related to those developed for the IOS MC phono stage which also has to amplify small signals without adding noise.

Isis has two Burr Brown PCM1794 DACs running in dual-mono and these produce a balanced signal that is carried through to the outputs. The output stage is an enhanced version of that developed for the Saturn CD player which as the previous range topper for Rega inevitably provided much of the groundwork for Isis. The digital section is made up of Saturn elements that have been improved for this relatively cost-no-object player (a Saturn costs £1,298). Attention has naturally been paid to the power supply regulation with 10 separate supplies used in the digital circuit alongside PSUs for the display, interface and motor. Rega has also paid attention to the USB input, an element that is likely to be increasingly under the spotlight now that so many of us are using hard drives to store our music. Here it's galvanically isolated, double clocked and given its own power supply in an effort to keep noise and THD levels down to those achieved with the internal player.

One unique feature to this player is matched laser archiving, this means that for every Isis that Rega produces it stores a pair of matched laser units for



that specific machine. Ensuring that as long as the company is in business it can replace this critical element. Given that the world is slowly weaning itself off optical drives the long term supply of specific examples is far from predictable so this seems a fine idea.

First impressions of the Isis were not that different to those made by the Rega Apollo when it appeared a long while back, nice timing but not up to par on the detail front. There is a heck of a lot more detail here but in the context of like priced players it's not likely to be a USP, imaging likewise is pretty good but lacks the scale that the best can deliver. Dynamics are similar – not what they can be by the standards of best in class. That was the analytical response, then I plugged it into a passive TVC from Audio Zone and thence to the mighty ATC SCM150ASL active ▶



► speakers. This was where it made its mark, I was totally swept off my feet by its ability to extract so much music from an oft amusical format.

In the more objective confines of the reviewing facility and using both units together it once again became apparent that while there is lack of expansiveness on things like 'Nude' by Radiohead, there it was, laid bare or even nude, the emotional core of the song. No longer was listening a process of analysis, rather it returned to whence it came: a conduit for the appreciation of artistic expression of the highest form. No other art form can get as close when it comes to communicating that which cannot be written than music and these components make this much abundantly clear.

From here on it was going to be difficult to remain objective about the Rega components, a situation I was 'saved from' by the need for someone else to hear the Isis for two weeks. It's a painful pastime this reviewing malarkey, you get a brief glimpse of nirvana then it's snatched away leaving a void which reference components can't hope to fill. I did have a very impressive player in the form of the Moon 750D at the same time and this does virtually everything that the Isis doesn't. It images in full three dimensional room filling effect, it reveals every last nuance of every note and does so in a calm but never dull fashion. Perhaps as a result it can't do what the Rega can, the discs it spins don't get under your skin in the same addictive way.

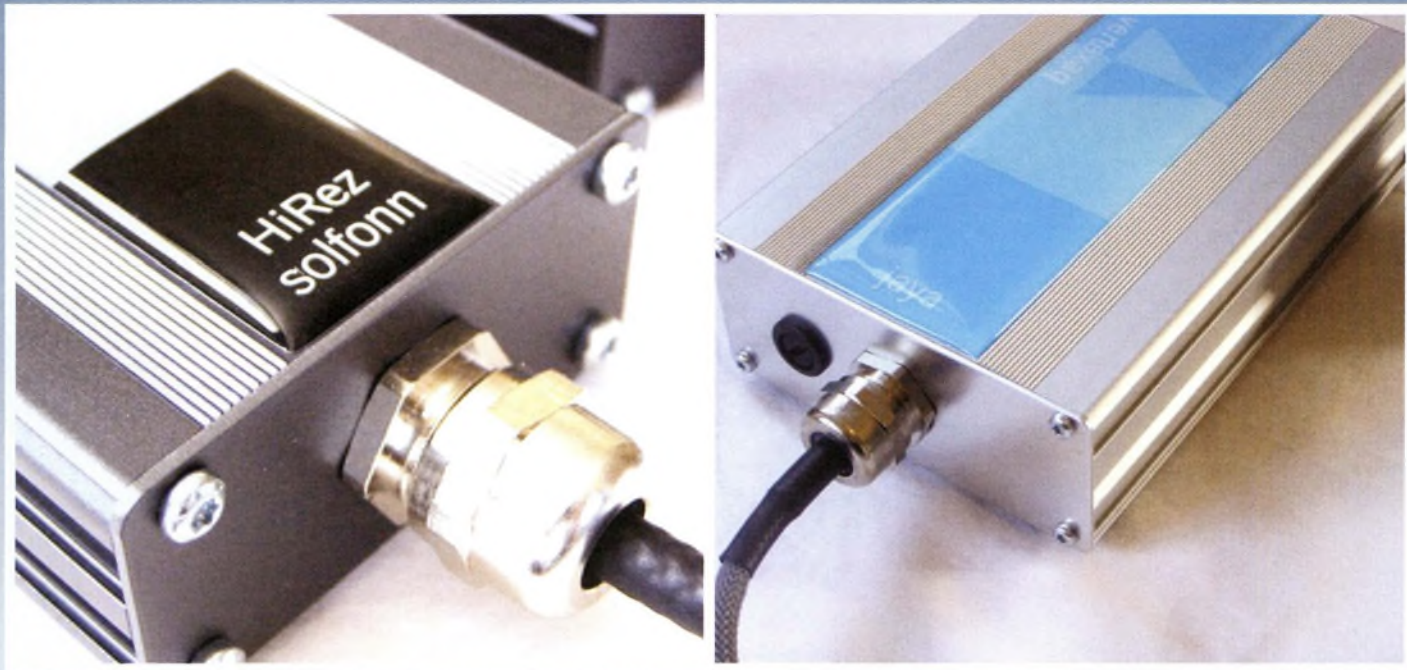
But it is very good and I used it with the Osiris and both B&W 802D and PMC's rather beguiling FACT 8 speakers to quite persuasive effect. This pairing allowed the amp to reveal that while it's capable of delivering the finer

high fidelity points its strength also lies in that elusive department of musical insight that seems intrinsically linked to timing. This being the area where it easily outshone what competition I could muster, a dearer Classé CP-700/CA-2200 pre/power combo had little difficulty in raising the imaging stakes but did not provide a result that came close in terms of engagement. Leema's more affordable Tucana II integrated delivers more energy but lacks a little refinement and temporal talent next to the Rega.

Taken on its own the Osiris does not strike you as being weak in any particular area, in fact it delivers a lot of low level detail and produces remarkably solid three ►

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▶ dimensionality with many discs. With the FACT 8 in particular the sound escapes the cabinets with remarkable ease, forming a cohesive and dynamic soundscape that is nearly enough to distract you from the music – depending on what that music is. It would be handy, to say the least, if these components could turn unappealing music into something you love but there are limits to what can be achieved with audio hardware, even if it's this musically capable.

I decided to see what the output of a MacBook laptop playing WAV files of material ripped from CD would sound like. The Moon 750D delivered a clean and delicate result that contrasted strongly with the earthy and forward sounding Rega. In neither case was the sound on a par with a spinning disc, but it had plenty of dynamic range and lots of fine detail.

Using the Classé amplification and putting these two players up against one another with Kraftwerk's remastered *Tour de France*, both players made this intense music sound very palpable but the Rega stripped away the decorative elements to reveal the core energy and its three dimensional structure. The heartbeat sound at the beginning of 'Elektro Kardiogram' is more realistic on the Moon but the track overall is more engaging on the Rega.

Isis and Osiris are highly entertaining if fed with a diet of appropriately essential music, the balance is on the forward side of neutral which discouraged me from playing it at full bore, but again this keeps the focus on the music. With the PMC Fact 8 this can be balanced by turning the feed to the tweeter to its minus position and you are then able to turn up the wick for as long as the neighbours can take it. The Isis is the more remarkable of the pair and is perhaps easier to slot into a range of systems but the Osiris is both revealing and musically engaging. Build quality is up there with the best in the business and the ability to deliver the musical message is in the case of Isis right at the forefront of the game. I want one, but there is an Isis with a valve output stage coming and that needs to be heard first. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Osiris

Power output: 162 Watts into 8 ohms/250 Watts per channel into 4 ohms

Balanced line inputs: 1

Single ended line inputs: 4 plus record

Direct input:

Record output:

Dimensions H x W x D: 12.2 x 43.4 x 35cm

Osiris Philips RC5 system remote

Weight: 25.6kg

Price: £6,000

Isis

Analogue outputs: SE phono 2.2v, balanced XLR 4.4v

S/PDIF digital outputs: coaxial electrical, Toslink optical

USB input up to 16-bit/48kHz

Dimensions H x W x D: 43.4 x 35 x 11.2cm

Required space for operation: 20cm height

Weight: 19kg

Price: £6,000

Manufactured by

Rega Research Limited
6 Coopers Way
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Southend on Sea
Essex
SS2 5TE

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Unison Research Unico Pre preamplifier and Unico DM power amplifier

By Alan Sircom

Unison Research really lives up to the name; it's a true unison; a combination of loudspeaker manufacturer (Opera) along with two parallel electronics brands – the all valve Unison and the valve/transistor hybrid Unico ranges. The Italian company has one of those richly deserved reputations for building lovely looking products, and even if the powder-coated Unison models represent the diffusion line, these aren't exactly fugly products, either.

The looks are new, even if the names aren't. There was a Unico preamplifier that came before, also called the Unico Pre. But that was big and tall and slightly clunky looking line-and-phono affair, where the new Pre just looks like a well-built, standard sized one-box line-only preamp. It's a hybrid design, featuring J-FETs in the input stage and ECC82 double triodes in the gain stage. This, the company considers, gives the best overall balance; the J-FETs for linearity, the triodes for four-o (smoooooth) smoothness across the mids.

It's a four-input pre, marked CD, tuner and two auxiliary inputs. There's also a tape monitor circuit. The inputs are run through both balanced and single-ended pathways, with a selector at the front. In theory, you could run four separate balanced and four single-ended sources (and the single-ended only tape) through the Pre. The chassis is laid out dual-mono style, with all the left and right channel inputs and outputs at either side of the pre, and the IEC mains and odd-ball spring-clip speaker cables-for-amplifier link in the centre of the rear panel. Each side of the Pre has one balanced and two single-ended connections to the power amp.

The DM power amp is also derived from its squared-off predecessor. It's still a big case, but shorter and wider than before. The DM name is short for 'Dual Mono', and once again it's two amplifiers in a box, sharing a common central power supply. The 150 watter is capable of being driven in bridged mode, at which point its power rises to a whopping 500 watts per channel. Like the ▶

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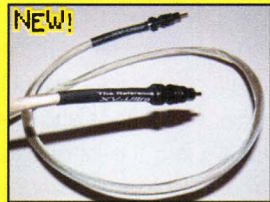
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► Pre, the DM is a hybrid design, but this time uses a pair of ECC82s in the input stage (again, think smooth, this time just a three-o) and push-pull MOSFETS at the meaty end. It can be used in balanced and single-ended mode.

Aside from the more conventional lines, the biggest changes to the amps involve increased logic control, especially on the Pre. Both models still have soft-starts and carefully controlled warm-ups (no sound for the first 30 seconds to give those tubes a gentle nudge into life), but now without the pink light show from the power button. In addition, the Pre now moves source selection from a simple four-position rotary dial to a logic-driven affair. This means little green indicator LEDs at each source and a central LED volume display. It also means the control surfaces have some of the worst feeling knobs around, completely free from resistance and with some deliberate play. This isn't a deal-breaker, as it's a sign of moving away from 'hard' controls on the front panel, but some still want their volume dials to feel 'right'... and that's not going to happen here. The remote, on the other hand, feels wonderful thanks to its wooden back panel. Unison alternates between handsets with the bare minimum of buttons and ones that can control anything in a 20 metre radius. This falls into the latter category – given the limited level of control on the front panels, this handset can operate balance, control matching CD players and more. Comprehensive... but you might spend a lot of time swearing at it because the pause button looks identical to the station selection control.

There is a schoolboy error to the reporting of the sound of the Unico Pre and DM, one that I confess to (almost) making. It's a remarkably natural sound, which can easily be dismissed as a 'soft, smooth, rock-free wallpaper' approach. This is almost a knee-jerk reaction to Italian amplifiers, as if we can't get past it coming from the land of gelato. But Italy is the land of espresso too, and there's more strength behind that smoothness.

If you begin with John Martyn and travel all the way to Lambchop, you'll hear a sumptuously natural, inviting presentation, with plenty of detail and good dynamics. There's something of the hybrid to the sound; not in terms of triodes and solid-state, but the way it manages to convey much of what American audiophiles look for in audio (expansiveness, precise and three-dimensional

imagery, and that sort of macro-lens up close dynamic contrast and detail) while retaining a lot of what ticks the box for British hi-fi buffs (a sense of rootedness to instruments within a soundstage, well-ordered and deep bass and a good sense of rhythm).

Even here, it's easy to still fall into that trap of thinking the Pre and DM are 'nice' rather than 'good'. But it's here you turn to the darker, stormier side of things; nasty, kiddy-scaring music like Tool or John Pickard, or grunty, rude bass-heavy leftovers from the 1990s like Leftfield or Aphex Twin. Even some evil jazz from the likes of Fringe Magnetic. It takes the lot in its stride and dispels the notion that this is merely some kind of laid-back smooth ride.

Whatever you put through the Unico duo comes out extremely natural sounding. The sense of scale to instrument sounds, and the way those instruments separate out within the soundfield is particularly exact and beguiling. It's not an imposition on the ►





“Truly a Quad for the 21st Century, and in a more convenient package than you can imagine, it’s a triumph” – Ken Kessler, Hi Fi News



A 21st century re-creation of the original 1953 Quad II amplifier by Peter Walker.

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QUAD II *Classic Integrated*

▶ sound and the duo won't try to turn processed pop into events dripping with ambience. But it does seem to step out of the way more readily than most.

Then there's the bass. Rich, deep and full, it can be understated when the music demands it and gut-churning when called for. This is the one time where the Pre takes a step forward past the DM though. The amp, though very good, doesn't have that sort of absolute control over the drive units as demanded by some of the more demanding loudspeakers. This may change when used bridged, but this isn't the first choice to drive amp-crusher speakers like the Magico Mini II. That's pushing it way out of context though, and in partnership with the sort of speakers you might expect on the end of a few grand's worth of amp (I used ProAc Response D Twos), it worked like a charm.

There's still a touch of softening to that naturalness on single-ended inputs and especially on the single-ended pre-to-power connection. On, ahem, balance, the sound of the amps in balanced mode is perhaps preferable to single-ended. Not by any significant amount, but balanced just seemed to give music an edge that it lacked in single-ended. Drums were snappier and tighter, with the buzzing decay of the snare springs more ably delineated from the beat itself. This wasn't down to improved detail in balanced mode, but the fact that the single-ended combo could sound too smooth at times, as if it were papering over cracks that didn't need papering over. A lot of this might come down to personal taste (in part because the difference is not substantial); if you listen to a lot of power chords, balanced will do it for you, but if your music tastes are pitched more toward the Francois Hardy/Scott Walker school, go single-ended (we could make the same statements between Beethoven and Mozart, or between Thelonious Monk and Dave Brubeck). So, when it comes down to it, I'm not sure if the 'preferable' part of balanced mode here is actually 'preference'. I'd certainly be happy with the amp in either mode.

Splitting the two apart for a brief period showed both were very good at their jobs, but were such an obvious partnering that the chances of someone considering one without the other seems almost absurd. They work together like conjoined twins. If you do split them apart, the pre has a character not unlike a classic Conrad-Johnson model, while the power sounds a little like a Counterpoint or Coda. In other words, taken separately, the sound of each starts to sound less 'honest' and more 'warm', but in combination the two 'warm' sounds patently cancel one another out.

I must confess to holding on to this amplifier for a lot longer than a reviewer has any right to. In part that's simply down to sheer weight of hi-fi traffic in the review roll-call, but another part simply didn't want to give it back any time soon. It may not have the sort of cachet of the big names in the game, and it doesn't make for shiny-shiny audio sounds that instantly attract listeners, but instead the Pre and DM play the long game. They are the natural choice for long-term listening. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

UNISON RESEARCH Unico Pre

Line inputs: Four balanced and single-ended inputs, one tape monitor input

Outputs: One balanced and two single-ended outputs, one tape monitor output

Valves: 2x ECC82 (12AU7/5814A)

Bandwidth: 10 Hz - 100 kHz at +/- 0.5 dB

Input impedance: 47 kOhm

Output impedance: <100 Ohm

Power consumption: 700 watt maximum

Dimensions (WxHxD): 240x170x520mm

Net weight: about 12 kg

Price: £2,160

UNISON RESEARCH Unico DM

Balanced and Single-ended inputs

Output power: 150 watt per channel

Bridge mode: 500 watt

Output impedance: 2 - 8 Ohm

Bandwidth: 2 Hz - 100 kHz at +/- 0.5 dB

Input impedance: 20 kOhm / 15 pF

Output Stage: Improved dynamic class

A symmetrical with power MOSFET complementary pair

Damping factor: > 50

Total feedback factor: 9.3 dB

Power consumption: 700 watt (at full output power)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 240x160x440mm

Net weight: 18kg

Price: £2,880

Manufactured by Unison Research

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Marantz SA-KI Pearl SACD player & PM-KI Pearl integrated amplifier

by Alvin Gold

Marantz in the UK – its signature designs anyway – has long been dominated by one man, Ken Ishiwata, whose listed skills include being a violinist, an electronics engineer, a fashion photographer, an audio designer, and who is widely known for his ability to stage a good audio demonstration. He is also known as a music lover – well it had to happen sometimes even in this business – and let's not forget his astonishing collection of signature extravagantly bright, colourful jackets. For a long time, he has also been brand ambassador for Marantz, with whom he has long been associated. He is if you like the public face of the company, and the limited edition Pearls are Marantz's tribute to the man, designed to celebrate more than 30 years with the company, much of which he has spent meticulously developing KI Signature designs based on the standard ex-factory components.

Usually Limited Edition means limited to the number that the company concerned can flog. In the case of the Ken Ishiwata Pearls however the limit is set in stone at 500 units of each unit – a thousand in total – so quite aside from their audio credentials, the units should have collectable value. I am only sorry I am not in the market myself, but anyone reading this who is interested

should not leave it too long to decide, even in the current economic climate.

For me, the most intriguing element of the two Pearls is what they are not rather than what they are. They're not obscenely expensive. Pricing, I would suggest, is firmly commensurate with the engineering, and with the ability of many people to afford them. This makes them very much in keeping with the general run of Marantz KI components over the years, rather than just being tarted up alternatives. ▶

“Marantz has a deservedly strong reputation for its disc players, and this one will only enhance that notoriety.”

▶ There is much to say about these two units, though in this case as with other high rollers, what they are physically and technically is not the essence of the story. The first thing you will notice is the silky finishes, and the general quality air of fit and finish. They're also quite heavy for their size, which tends to correlate with power supply attributes and their physical construction, and the general fit and feel of the controls and the rear panel socketry, which is visually impressive.

The SACD player of course is what the name implies: a CD player that is compatible with SACD single layer and hybrid discs, but it is resolutely two channel. There is no multichannel option, which for the majority of users, especially those that count themselves as audiophiles, will not be an issue.

From the CD layer, you can extract a digital output in optical (TOSLINK) or electrical (S/PDIF) flavours. Front panel fixtures and fittings don't really break with tradition, but there's plenty of them, including a comprehensive and legible dimmable dot matrix display, and a full set of controls and buttons, many of which are bathed in the glow from the two banks of blue lighting positioned each side of the loading drawer and display. One handy inclusion for those who enjoy late-night listening is a level control for headphones.

More interesting by far is the attention paid to internal build, and the parts that have been specified for the player, which include a 5mm thick top panel, a thick bottom plate and a copper plated chassis (standard fare with Marantz's better components) and solid aluminium feet. The output stage uses Marantz's proprietary discrete HDAM-SA2 and SA modules instead of the traditional monolithic integrated op-amps.

The case is described in the literature a 'bulletproof' and vibration damped, while the 'rock solid' power supply is built around a substantial shielded toroidal transformer. The player has selectable DAC filters (flat is best in my view) and a CS4398 DAC from Cirrus Logic. The player can be used as a standalone D/A converter using an optical digital input.

The amplifier design is in keeping with the disc spinner. It has similar mechanical attributes, including a heavy (low microphony) top plate and base, solid aluminium feet and, as usual for Marantz, the chassis is copper plated, and many of the passive components have been specified based on extensive hands on listening, an area in which Ken Ishiwata has long excelled. The amplifier is fully discrete internally, and includes a constant current feedback MM/MC phono input, and a CD Direct input buffer. The power amp can be accessed directly via a rear panel input. Power output is rated at 90 Watts/channel into 8 Ohms, and 140 into 4 Ohms. In common with the disc player, the amplifier has its own dot matrix status display, and there are five preamp level audio inputs. Both units are equipped with comprehensive remote control wands, with a metal top plate. There is just one finish for the player and amplifier – an appropriately classy pearlescent black.

Marantz has a deservedly strong reputation for its disc players, and this one will only enhance that notoriety. As a CD player it has muscle and drive, as well as the ability to reproduce musical dynamics. There is little or none of the flattening of perspectives that some players exhibit. It's all very together, which is exactly what you would expect at the price.

SACD adds another layer to the player's capabilities. I should add that SACD does not always necessarily sound better than Red Book CD, but when done well, it really does do something that CD can't quite match, adding an extra level of detail and poise to the sound. The bass is even more powerful, and the treble more open and lively, with a sparkle that compact disc can't match. The Marantz bought an SACD recording of Beethoven Strings Quartets No 10 and 11, played by the Tokyo Quartet, to life with a vividness and passion I have never previously heard from these players, certainly not on disc. As a Red Book CD, the same performances lack some of the SACD layers' grip and poise. They don't quite have the same energy, and layering of sound.

The amplifier is clean and full sounding and again it excels at the extremes of the frequency envelope. The bass is undeniably potent, with a train-like drive, and real depth to match. The treble is has the kind of quality that is often associated with valves, but it doesn't have the sloth and lack of grip that sometimes (note the caveat – and yes, I could name names) goes with it. The Marantz style is easy on the ear, and when required has an unusual subtlety and softness, but it doesn't mask detail. On consideration the point about the amplifier is not that its treble is necessarily ▶



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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

SA-KI

Playback formats: CD, /CD-R/RW (incl WMA and MP3 files), SACD

Selectable filters for CD and SACD

Copper plated chassis and shielding

Headphone, Coaxial and optical digital outputs

USB input

Dynamic range: 112dB (SACD), 100dB (CD)

Frequency Response: 2Hz-100kHz (SACD), 2Hz-20kHz (CD)

THD+N (@1kHz): 0.001% (SACD), 0.0015% (CD)

Signal to Noise ratio: 110dB

Silk Black Finish

Dimensions (WxHxD): 440x419x127mm

Weight: 14.5kg

PM-KI

Integrated amplifier

Number of audio inputs: six

Phono stage: MM, MC as standard

Audio outputs: two

WBT speaker terminals

Copper plated chassis and copper shielding

RMS power output per channel: 90W (eight ohms), 140W (four ohms)

Frequency range: 5Hz-100kHz

THD: 0.05%

Damping Factor: 100

Input sensitivity: 240mV (line), 2.8mV (MM), 0.27mV (MC)

Signal to noise ratio: 89dB (line), 87dB (MM), 75dB (MC)

Silk Black Finish

Dimensions (WxHxD): 440x444x127mm

Weight: 20kg

Price: SA-KI Pearl SACD player - £2,500

PM-KI Pearl integrated amplifier - £2,500

Tel: 02890 279830

URL: www.marantz.com



“It sounds in keeping with many of the better Marantz amplifiers over the years, with a house style of warmth and grace.”

superior to the rest of the audio band, because it's seamless across the whole gamut. Another point worth noting is that the sound stays consistent across a wide volume envelope. Voicing doesn't change significantly when the volume is turned up, within reason anyway, and this quality, this lack of consistency in many other designs is much more common than many people think.

The main limitation of the disc player is that it cannot derive a multichannel output from SACDs which, as noted earlier, may not be an issue for some. However, Sony's latest Blu-ray players can stream a multichannel output from SACD via HDMI. This may not be an optimal technical solution (the jury's still out on this), but it will take a lot of the complication out of configuring a multichannel systems using an HDMI equipped AV amplifier, of which there are a number of excellent sounding examples. The Marantz will only output an analogue output from SACD, though it can provide a digital output from CD. You can do your own math here.

The amplifier in my view is the more striking proposition of the two. It sounds in keeping with many of the better Marantz amplifiers over the years, with a quintessential house style of warmth and grace, without ever sounding sloppy or lacking in precision. In practice it seems more powerful than the numbers suggest. It worked well for example with Mordaunt Short Performance 6LE. And it is well equipped, without being excessively weighed down by gadgets that are more likely to undermine performance than enhance it. But both Marantz units are immaculately presented, and beautifully made, and both will suit musical ends in a way that many others simply don't. Buy them before they are all gone! +



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

HRT Streamer II and Streamer II+

By Alan Sircom

At the 2009 CES, Kevin Halverson (of Muse Electronics) and Michael Hobson (of Classic Records) announced the launch of High Resolution Technologies, with its two Streamer DACs. A year later, the same people in the same hotel room in Las Vegas announced the second generation of the company's Streamer and Streamer + USB decoders, plus an even better version, the Streamer Pro

Although these are audio components, they are rooted (both intellectually and commercially) in the computer world. It's funny how the perception of time is radically different between those two consumer electronics fields. A few audiophiles are filled with ire over HRT's short time-span between original and Mk II versions, while the computer enthusiast looks somewhat horrified that a product developed a year ago is still considered 'current', such is the pace of change in that market.

Externally at least, little has changed in a year. The clamshell case proposed as an alternative to the little red and grey trapezoidal ingot never emerged and side-by-side you could easily mistake old and new, except for those little roman numerals. The pair are also just as easy to use, just plug and play with no driver-loading issues (you might need to adapt your computer's output, but that applies to any USB converter). We could go for a comprehensive chip-by-chip comparison, but the easy way of describing the new Streamer II and Streamer II+ is they bring asynchronous USB and 24bit, 96kHz processing to the party. They still improve performance as you move from basic Streamer to + (and the improvement continues up the scale),

but the change from Streamer to Streamer II resets the field confidently.

Last year, the Streamer was a good, relatively cheap addition to the USB DAC world and the Streamer+ was the one with the really good sound. Now, the basic Streamer II gets the really good sound and the Streamer II+ raises the bar still further. Which means the basic model leapfrogs over the performance of last year's Streamer+. That's not just down to the 24/96 processing. A lot comes down to the asynchronous USB connection.

As discussed in the Ayre DAC review also in this issue, asynchronous USB essentially causes the output of the computer to be clock-locked by the DAC. This asynchronous pathway has hitherto been the preserve of some distinctly high-end devices (Wavelength, Empirical, Ayre and dCS already on the market, with Resolution Audio about to launch its own products). Although there are rumours of an Arcam DAC also sporting asynchronous USB, at the time of writing, the product is still on the drawing board. This makes the HRT Streamer II the cheapest possible way of getting state-of-the-art USB connection. ▶

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HRT STREAMER PRO

Alongside the Streamer II and Streamer II+, HRT went up-market recently with its Streamer Pro DAC. Intended for semi-pro use, the bright blue DAC pushes the specs to the limit of USB powered products. It also uses mini-XLR connectors, more commonly seen in the pro-world. There are a number of regular-grade adaptors available, and the likes of Cardas have stepped in to make audiophile adaptors that let the Streamer Pro DAC talk to regular phono and XLR cables.

Unlike the standard products, the Streamer Pro makes a lot of demands on the USB it is connected to. Unfortunately, it seems all USB ports are not equal in the eyes of this DAC, and an underpowered USB output will hobble the Pro's performance. Simply running it from the USB port on the side of my 1996-vintage black MacBook made a sound that really wasn't up to scratch, and the base Streamer II confidently outperformed it on all levels; it was more focused, more detailed, less grainy... the works.

A powered USB 2.0 hub (costing about £20 from PC World) caused the sort of dramatic transformation on a par with Clark Kent and his fondness for phone booths. Instead of a soggy, grainy and almost muted sound, the Streamer Pro came to life, delivering a detailed, almost intimate sound, as if you have just been parachuted into the control room of the studio. The soundstage opens out and makes a far wider presentation than either of the base models. But most of all, the detail levels take a huge step forward, allowing the listener to really get under the complex interplay between percussion and clavinet on Stevie Wonder's 'Superstition' from *Talking Book*. The clever, deliberately near-random hi-hat work is easily masked, but here it works well to build tension. The same applies throughout; you pick out the musical details that would normally be hard to find.

This £475 DAC isn't really a challenge for the £1,995 Ayre QB-9, even when you factor about £100 in adaptors and powered hubs; it gets close especially in the all-important musicality stakes, but the levels of insight and detail and the lack of background 'hash' are considerably better with the Ayre DAC, when compared directly. OK, order is restored, but I suspect Streamer Pro capable of running from its own power supply would close the gap greatly. For that, we have to wait for the Streamer HD, out later this year...

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Music Streamer Pro

Maximum resolution: 24bit, 96kHz

Input: Type II USB, asynchronous USB connection

Output: Mini XLR (balanced and single-ended adaptors available)

Output Impedance – 200 + 200 Ohms (balanced)

Frequency Response (20 Hz/20 kHz) – 0 dB/ - .6 dB

S/N Ratio (DC to 30 kHz) – 114 dB

THD+N (1 kHz FS) – 0.004%

Power requirements from USB: 350mA

Dimensions (WxLxH): 53x142x30.5mm

Price: £475

Does asynchronous USB make a difference? Definitely. It gives computer audio a sense of rootedness, solidity of instrument images within a soundstage and a sense of temporal rightness that it can sometimes lack. It's one of the reasons why the likes of the Benchmark and Naim are so successful – they also control the relatively wayward USB datastream (although using very different approaches). If your USB converter doesn't sport asynchronous connection or one of these other methodologies (sample-rate conversion or a look-up table of clock frequencies, for example), in many fundamental terms, the Streamer II might well have just made it obsolete.

It's easy to say that in the context of a multi-thousand pound product like the Ayre QB-9, because those products that cost hundreds still remain extant. But when we're talking the other way round (a DAC costing a less than a hundred and fifty quid taking on multi-thousand pound DACs on some fundamental sonic levels), things get heated. I'm sure there are standard-issue USB converters that don't need asynchronous operation to rise above the level of the basic HRT Streamer and its kin... I just haven't heard them yet.

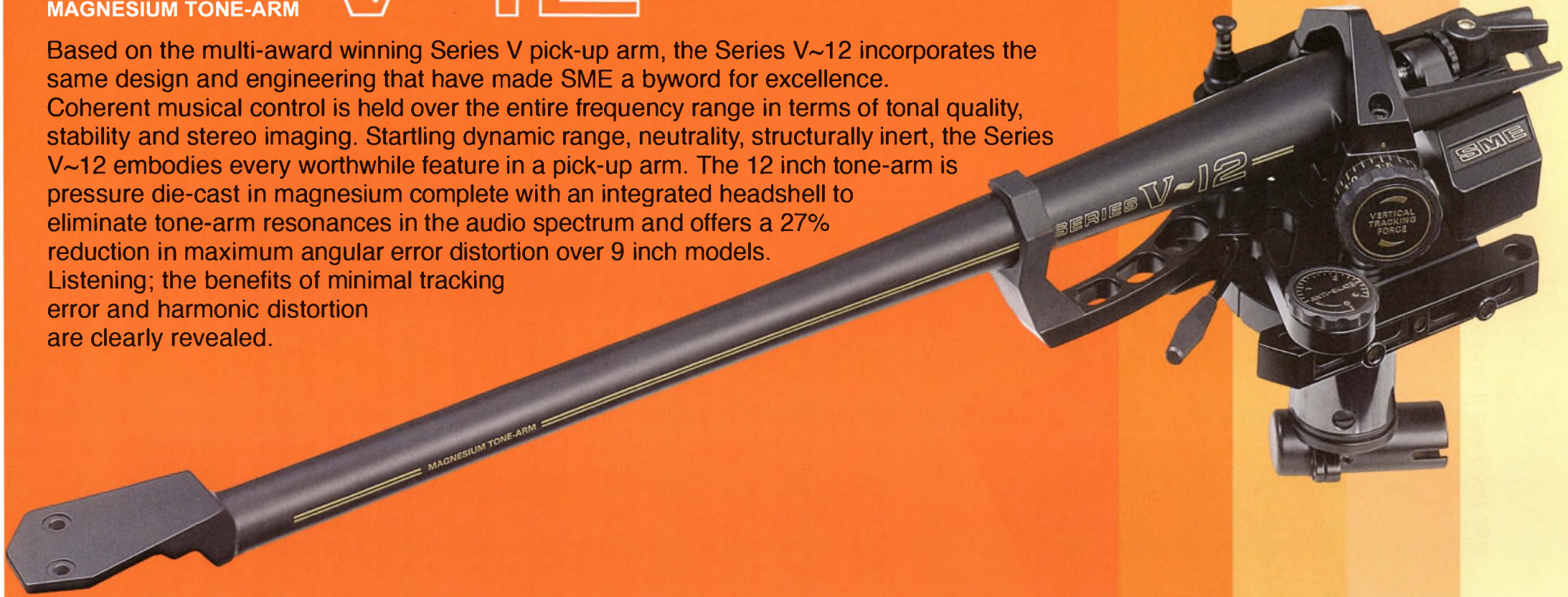
This is a significant jump in technology. Asynchronous USB is yet another link in the chain to good sound from computer audio, but it's a profoundly important one. The new Streamers give music that sense of cohesiveness and directness that CD suddenly developed in the 1990s, when the format suddenly got very good, very quickly. ▶



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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Music Streamer II

Maximum resolution: 24bit, 96kHz

Input: Type II USB, asynchronous USB connection

Output: two phono sockets

Frequency Response: (20 Hz/20 kHz) – 0 dB/ - .5 dB

S/N Ratio: (DC to 30 kHz) – 98 dB

THD+N: (1 kHz FS 44.1 kS/s) – 0.010%

Power requirements from USB: 200mA

Dimensions (WxLxH): 53x104x30.5mm

Price: £139

Music Streamer II+

Maximum resolution: 24bit, 96kHz

Input: Type II USB, asynchronous USB connection

Output: two phono sockets

Frequency Response: (20 Hz/20 kHz) – 0 dB/ - 1.4 dB

S/N Ratio: (DC to 30 kHz) – 101 dB

THD+N: (1 kHz FS 44.1 kS/s) – 0.0008%

Power requirements from USB: 350mA

Dimensions (WxLxH): 53x130x30.5mm

Price: £329

Manufactured by

High Resolution Technologies

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URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

- ▶ It's an immediate thing, you'll either notice the snap into focus, or it will simply pass unnoticed, much like there are those who are profoundly affected by a component's ability to keep time, dynamic range, or specific instrument timbre, and those who aren't. And count me among those sensitive to that focus. The received wisdom in USB conversion is that a self-powered DAC trumps one powered by the USB itself. The Streamer II challenges that head on.

Last year's Streamers were somewhat lacking in high-frequency extension (especially the basic model) and made a slightly mixed together plum-pudding of an image. That's all gone with the new models. The sound is much closer to the output of a good CD player; precise, accurate and tonally correct. The HRT soundstage is not an expansive one; sounds sit between the speakers rather than spread wide and deep. It's sort of string quartet sized, instead of expansive orchestral sized – both models can more than handle orchestral music well, whether that be the precision of Haydn or the romantic swells of Tchaikovsky, with the proviso of presenting a tightly ordered ball of sound fixed between the speakers.

'Luka' on *Solitude Standing* by the 'mother of MP3' (Suzanne Vega... under the circumstances, this seems appropriate) ably highlights the difference between basic Streamer II and Streamer II+ versions. That oh-so-eighties Yamaha DX7 synth sound and the compressed drum sounds is brought more to the fore with the II+, where the basic DAC leaves these sounds more a part of the mix. Instruments just seem to present themselves with more precision and fidelity on the Streamer II+ in side by side comparisons. As standalone entities, the Streamer II is a little grainy, something that simply doesn't figure on the Streamer II+. How big an issue that is depends on your musical tastes. If you listen to a lot of grungy rock guitar, the distinction might be lost, but if your music has a lot of pure tones in it (female vocal for example), the Streamer II+ becomes an easily-justified expense. For the audiophile looking to branch into computer audio, the Streamer II+ is a real no-brainer, then.

Where the Streamer II+ is clearly the better sounding product without commanding a huge jump in price tag, the Streamer II is perhaps the more significant of the two. If you are already into good sound, the chances are you would immediately pick the Streamer II+ because of its performance. If you want to know what all the fuss is about, the Streamer II will turn any computer into a credible music player, and turn any listener into a fledgling hi-fi buff. And if you already have a USB digital converter, even the cheapest Streamer II might be better... +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Cabasse Bora loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom. Photography by John Hytch

There's an aesthetic issue with three-way standmount speakers. Because they need a tall front baffle to house the tweeter, midrange and woofer, they look bulky by today's slimline standards. We can stomach multi-way floorstanders (or almost floorstanders, like models in the ATC range), but we like our standmounts proportioned like a scaled-up mini-monitor, it seems.

The Cabasse Bora solves that problem at a stroke. It's a three-way that looks like a two-way. The secret's in the top driver, that people automatically mistake for a tweeter. The white surround in that drive unit is, in fact, a toroidal (or annular) midrange driver in its own right; this coaxial driver is Cabasse's own BC13 drive unit. Aside from making the speaker more pleasingly proportioned to a wider audience, a coaxial tweeter and midrange effectively makes a point source for the mids and above and coaxial units are typically less fussy in installation.

A more conventional 210mm bass unit, made from Duocell, sits below the coaxial driver. Duocell is an ideal material for bass

units, as it's very light, very rigid and very well-damped. It's also easy to drive, a key requirement in Cabasse designs, and the Bora is a very easy 90dB sensitive, eight ohm impedance load that makes it ideal for anything from a low-powered tube or gainclone amp on up (the Bora's ability to handle 840W peaks means you'd have to be driving it well past comfort levels at the other end of the scale).

Looking like a two-way with an eight-inch bass driver gives the speaker the proportions of a classic BBC-derived design, but Cabasse has been canny with the front-firing port. Instead of the typical round port below the bass driver, Cabasse uses a flattened letterbox shaped port, built into what looks like the loudspeaker's base. It's discreet enough that most people miss it, ▶

▶ and mistake the speaker for a sealed box design. With a slightly boat-backed design and gently curved front baffle, the whole speaker looks elegant and understated, even in the slightly bling, but very well-finished piano black gloss option. The grille sits on the speaker with a series of magnets, although these are push-fits onto the wooden surround of the grille and are apt to go missing. The speaker looks and sounds better with the grilles off anyway. Well-made, single wire speaker terminals on the rear panel complete the package.

The speakers are best on a stand approximately 18" (46cm) tall, but are comfortable on anything between 17" (43cm) and 24" (61cm) tall. Boras were happiest on mid-to-high-mass stands rather than light, open frame designs, but there was no strong preference either way... many speakers sound like someone's filled the enclosure with treacle, disconnected the bass driver or added a boomy, waffly subwoofer when used with inappropriate stands, but here the speaker just sounded a trifle 'flubby' (a burbling deep-to-mid bass) on a light stand.

It's deceptively easy to get good sound out of the Boras – just plonk them in the room, roughly in the right place and you are away. That 'first fit' installation will get you most of the way to making a good sound, and will often sound better than many loudspeakers after a careful, anal-retentive inch-by-inch set-up. As long as the speakers aren't pointing away from the listener (I'm lookin' at you, Jimmy Hughes...) they will make an impressive sound from the get-go. This is a double-edged sword, because many people will stop right there. But the Bora is capable of much, much more.

Two big improvements are possible from this position; getting the Boras position in the room right, and ensuring those two coaxial drivers are at the same height. And again, the Bora's ability to make a good sound right out the box almost holds this back. The problem here is the good sound masks the incremental improvements made in positioning until everything is at its best, at which point the performance takes a leap forward. So, you have to trust in your set-up skills in the hope you get things right, until they really come right.

Similarly, although the specs suggest a broad range of amplifiers (and sources) will suit the speaker, you can improve on the basic performance a lot with careful connection. There seem to be two amplifier happy places for the Bora; a medium-power Class A design (the Sugden A21SE was a perfect partner) and a fast, relatively powerful Class AB design. The key word in the latter spec is 'fast'; powerful and dynamic amps like the Musical Fidelity M6i sounded powerful, dynamic and a trifle slow through the Boras. Little wonder then that the Boras did so well at the Bristol Show, being driven by the pacy Belles amplifiers.

In my room, the loudspeaker came to life with the speakers 60cm from the rear wall and 2m apart, with a very slight toe-in. They work better in the mid-to-far field than as near field monitors; the coaxial driver is perfect for close listening, but the integration between mid/top and bass needs some space to blend properly.

The big advantage of point sources is good imagery. The big advantage of coaxial driver units is good imagery. So, it's not hard to think what strikes you first when listening to a coaxial driver that thinks it's a point source. Imagery is remarkably fine, creating a soundstage that gets close to electrostatic levels of precision. You hear layer upon layer of soundstage depth and a sound that projects well into the room. This can get almost oppressive with close-mic'd



"It's deceptively easy to get good sound out of the Boras – just plonk them in the room, roughly in the right place."

vocalists; one particularly intimate recording of Leonard Cohen speaking (at the introduction of *Rare On Air Volume One*) felt like you were standing toe-to-toe with the guy. On the other hand, Jimmy Smith's legendary *Back at the Chicken Shack* gave you a feeling of being in the room when the magic happened.

It's not all soundstaging though. That eight inch drive unit gives the speaker a healthy underpinning of bass for its size, well-damped enough to keep the rhythm methodologists happy and dynamic enough to put a smile on the face of any passing Wagnerian or metal head. The plastic cone 'quack' (a common by-product of using modern drive units at relatively high sensitivities) is noticeable, but not overtly so. It comes across as a mild coloration to the top of the bottom end; in other words it's an added thickness to the range of a good ▶

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► tenor; if you hook your TV to your hi-fi system, it would make you hate the Go Compare adverts all the more. It's easy to exaggerate this coloration by simply describing it, making it sound like Bryn Terfel transforms into Kermit the Frog, where the reality is a mild rounding to vocal tones – a sort of 'aawh' instead of 'aaah'.

The vast majority of listeners will find that an effective trade, when set against the wonderful coherence of the sound of the speaker. It's a seamless performance from top to bottom, and that really gives the sense of reproducing a bunch of musicians doing what they do best. That applies whether that 'bunch' is a moaning indie power trio like Hüsker Dü, Basie's big band or a full orchestra. In fact, the only people who will find the Bora's presentation hard to stomach will be those who collect bland audiophile recordings; although the speakers are adept at highlighting the effortless dynamics and huge soundstaging of such recordings, they will also lay bare the relatively



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Three-way standmount loudspeaker

Drive unit configuration: 1x Coaxial BC13 (mid/treble)

1x 21MD20LB (210mm bass unit)

Frequency response: 52Hz-24kHz

Efficiency: 90dB

Nominal impedance: eight ohms

Minimum impedance: 4.1 ohms

Crossover points: 800Hz, 4.4kHz

Power handling: 120W (typical), 840W peak

Dimensions (HxWxD): 50x27x33cm

Weight: 15kg

Price: £2,200 per pair

Manufactured by Cabasse

URL: www.cabasse.com

Supplied by Coherent Systems Ltd

URL: www.coherent-systems.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1684 593085

unrehearsed and musically flat nature of the same. While the Bora cannot pull a good sound out of a lo-fi or 0dBFS compressed recording, its ability to get past the recording and into the music and musicianship helps make Sonic Youth more palatable to an audio aesthetic.

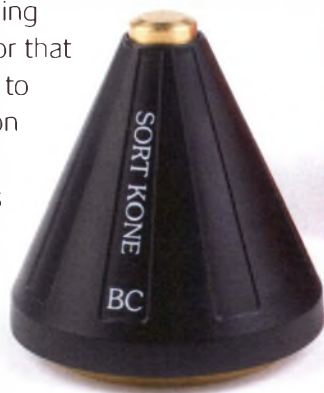
The Cabasse Bora enters an extremely contended speaker world confidently, because it has the sounds to fit the bill. It's an alluring and bold sounding speaker, in a market that often serves up rehashes of past glories. And it sounds good, too; good out of the box, better still when you take the time and trouble to install it and partner it properly. And it has all the advantages of a coaxial design, with the bass and dynamics (and the looks) of a good ported two-way. While some will stumble at its very slight tenor coloration, most will be beguiled by its effortless musicality. Because of that, it puts a smile on your face when you play music, whatever the music, and that makes it well worth the money. +

Meet The Ancestors...



The hi-fi industry refers to racks and other equipment supports as “isolation devices”, going to great lengths to describe how these products protect electronic components from the outside world. Unfortunately, structure born mechanical energy is the least of your system’s mechanical problems!

In fact, the greatest damage to sound quality is done by vibration generated within the equipment itself; from the mains transformer, the power supply caps charging and discharging, every resistor or transistor that passes the signal. And although that vibration might be small, it’s also right where the fragile audio signal is, right where it can do most damage. And to make matters worse, most of your equipment comes with soft rubber feet, meaning there’s nowhere for that vibrational energy to go. It just carries on circulating round the unit’s internals until it finally dissipates. That’s why hard cones or couplers work under audio equipment; they offer an exit route for that energy, so that it can dissipate in the supporting surface.



But not all cones are created equal...

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Audio Research Reference Phono 2

by Dennis D. Davis and Roy Gregory

Audio Research's Reference line had been without a phono-stage since 2005, when the Reference Phono 1 Pre-amplifier was discontinued. The PH7 was released shortly thereafter and garnered rave reviews over the last three years, but vinyl aficionados still hoped that ARC was working on a reference phono pre-amp, while some of us knew that the new product would include switchable equalization curves. I helped RG set up and run his 2007 road show at the Denver Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, where he demonstrated the effect of equalization curves using the marvellous Zanden Model 1200 with its three curve choices. Audio Research's Warren Gehl was at the show and was impressed with the demonstration. Perhaps that encouraged the company to dig out and dust off the switchable equalization first developed for but subsequently omitted from the Reference 1. The result, a couple years later, is the Reference Phono 2 offering three equalization curves.

The phono-stage is the jewel of the LP playback system. A great phono-stage brings more magic to the system than any other box of resistors and capacitors, even the line-stage. They come in all sizes and price ranges, but if you have not inserted a top phono-stage into your system, you are in for a shock when you do. If you believe that CD or SACD has closed the gap on vinyl replay, plug in a really good phono-stage and just watch that gap widen again.

The Reference Phono 2 Vacuum Tube Phono Pre-amplifier ('Ref 2' to its friends) maintains the same look as other AR equipment, but introduces a few cosmetic changes that will become standard on Reference products. First, the top plate is available in an optional Plexiglas version, which Audio Research claims sounds superior to the standard metal lid. Warren Gehl experimented with lids of various compositions, trying to achieve the superior sound he heard when leaving the lid off altogether (don't try this at home if you have children or pets). He experimented with various plastic prototypes, some of which sounded worse than metal and some better. I reviewed the unit with the Plexiglas lid. The etching on the faceplate of the Ref 2 is a bit bolder than on prior Reference products and the handles now come standard in silver, although black handles are still available as an option. I find the new handles mated with a matching silver faceplate attractive and do not miss the more retro look of black handles against silver. The casework is a bit wider, although this added girth is hidden behind the front panel. Inside, the layout resembles



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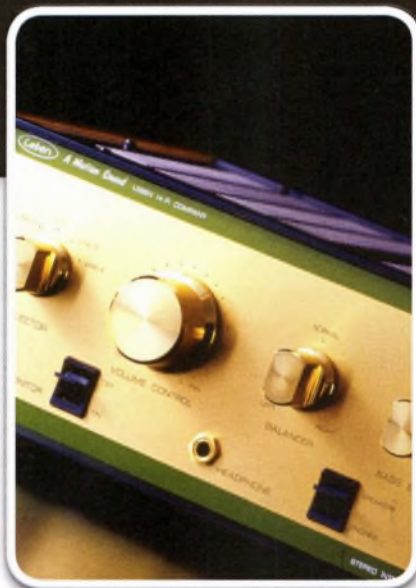


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and everything in its place" sense of order reveals far more clearly the inner dynamic of the orchestra, the idea of a single massive entity, controlled by the conductor. And as impressively as you demonstrate it on large-scale classical works, it's almost more critical to the chemistry and intimacy, the complex interweaving of musical strands that characterizes smaller pieces. The subtle, repetitive but slowly evolving rhythmic patterns that make The Cure's *Seventeen Seconds* so hypnotically fascinating are a compelling experience through the Phono 2, each layer effortlessly unravelled.

What if the recording itself is wrong? The Audio Research doesn't just highlight the problem, it actually offers at least a partial solution. Of course, it can't do anything about recordings that are just plain bad, but where the ARC can help is when it comes to correct replay equalization, and that's a problem that's far more widespread than even many experienced LP collectors and listeners understand.

What are the symptoms of incorrect equalization? Perhaps the best-known and most recognisable instance afflicts DGG pressings, with their reputation for turgid, syrupy sound and a brittle top end. That's because you are playing them through an RIAA stage, with its own replay curve – a curve that doesn't match the one that many DGG pressings were cut with. The earlier the pressing, the more likely you are to have a problem. But this is much more than just a tonal aberration. You can listen round tonal shifts – we do it all the time. The reason that correct replay equalization is so important is the effect that it has on the integrity and quality of the musical performance itself.

For years I hated von Karajan's DGG recordings. Heavy handed and overbearingly mechanical, they lacked any sense of intimacy or musical subtlety, with phrasing that's most kindly described as prosaic and as much musical flow as a mangrove swamp. Frankly, I wrote him and his recorded legacy off a long time ago, aided and abetted by DGG's early digital efforts. But two things nagged at me, lurking in the back of my mind. The first was my favourite Carmen, with Leontyne Price and the Vienna State Opera, a recording from RCA's Soria series, with none other than HvK wielding the baton – and delivering drama, pace and impact in abundance. The other thing that gave me pause for thought was the fact that the Berliner Philharmonic elect their conductors. Would they really have tolerated a musically bereft martinet?

But it wasn't until I heard the Zanden phono-stage with its switchable replay equalization that the mystery was resolved. Switch the equalization to the preferred setting and those old DGG recordings just spring to life, with an injection of pace, drama and energy that makes you wonder if you can be listening to the same orchestra. Of course, RCA used the RIAA curve! Suddenly, you've got a whole new collection of records to listen to! It's a neat trick if you can do it, and one that the ARC Phono 2 does too...

Let's look at a specific example: a 1969 recording of Mozart Horn Concertos with HvK and the BPO, in a nice early pressing. This is a record that I acquired as part of a collection, but the light-hearted, almost jaunty music was so crushed under the Teutonic weight of what I took to be a typical DGG performance and recording that it has languished almost unplayed for years. Queuing it up with the Phono 2 set to the RIAA curve, it's easy to understand why. But switch to the (generic)

far from perfect recording shine through as never before, creating order out of the chaos of a large chorus and orchestra. But it wasn't until I queued up Falla's *Nights In the Gardens of Spain* on Decca 2091 that I fully appreciated what Audio Research has accomplished. The Ref 2 introduced a sense of structured layering I had never heard before in this recording, with the harp, violas and piano occupying their own space and, for once, that space all seemed properly organized not just in three dimensions but in time. Perhaps it was the Paella and Vina Bosconia Rioja I enjoyed the night before that primed me for this Moorish wonder, but the real credit has to go to this remarkable phono section.

Yet the feature of the Ref 2 that most fascinated me was the equalization curves. To my surprise, this has turned out to be a somewhat controversial subject, with some online observers dismissing the whole concept as voodoo, often without hearing the phono section. Prior to 1955, all the record companies used their own equalization curves and in 1955 they agreed to standardize their equalization using what is called the RIAA curve. The major recording labels claim to have fallen in line with the RIAA standard by late 1955. The operative word here is "claim". Why some observers would take such claims at face value is somewhat surprising, given the industry's reputation for creative accounting practices. I would no more accept the claims of retired or departed recording industry executives as to their timely compliance with the RIAA standard, than I would accept their royalty accounting at face value. Before accepting a recording company's royalty accounting, I would rely on a forensic accountant (and in my day job have had occasion to do so), and in the case of a recording company's claim to have complied with an RIAA contract stipulation to change its equalization curves, I would trust my ears more than their lips. And my ears tell me that the equalization curves on the Ref 2 are correcting for many recording companies' delayed RIAA compliance and not merely applying an equalization patch. In any event, I own many hundreds of jazz recordings waxed before any informed person claims the RIAA curve was instituted, and it has been a revelation rehearing these

the interior of the Reference CD 8 and the new Reference 5. The circuit board is laid out horizontally with the transformers attached to the front of the chassis. The tube complement is also identical to the other new Reference front-end products—four 6H30s in the gain stage with a 6550C and 6H30 in the power supply. The analogue stage is also identical to these other units.

The Ref 2 phono-section is a wonder of convenience. In addition to offering a broad selection of adjustments, each one is accessible from the front panel, as well as from a well laid-out remote control. There is no need to pop the lid or reach around back to adjust loading or gain. User selectable gain choices are 45 dB low and 68 dB high. The low setting is ideal for virtually any moving magnet or for experimenting with a step-up transformer (if the fancy strikes you). The high gain setting supplies more than adequate gain for any low output moving coil cartridge. Unlike some prestige phono pre-amps, the Ref 2 uses low-noise FETs in the high-gain section rather than a step-up transformer. Audio Research claims this configuration provides superior sound to the use of a step-up transformer and I was skeptical—until I listened to the performance. There are seven loading options including six fixed settings (47K, 1000, 500, 200, 100 and 50 Ohms) and one "custom" factory established loading option to be specified when ordering the unit. In addition to the standard RIAA equalization curve, there are two selectable curves labeled as Columbia and Decca (more on that later). The remote does not toggle through the options but contains a separate button for each loading choice and equalization curve. That way, you know you have landed on the desired setting even if you cannot see the readout from your listening position. That is especially welcome to me, as I sit away from the components and use a wireless remote control extender to control my electronics.

The rear panel allows for hooking up two turntables, and the two inputs are selectable from the front panel or the remote. The inputs are single-ended only, with both single-ended and balanced outputs. The power socket requires a 20 amp IEC connection, rather than the more common 15-amp plug.

The unit requires a great deal of break in. A couple of hundred hours is recommended. I hooked my unit up to a solid stage CD player programmed to

repeat indefinitely, feeding the signal through a reverse RIAA filter for a week and a half. Keeping track of tube life is easy with a tube hour meter display on the front panel. Even after break in the phono section sounds much better after about an hour of warm up. Indeed, the Ref 2 sounds somewhat rough until it gets up to temperature, more so than most other tube equipment. I mated the Ref 2 to an Audio Research LS26 Preamplifier and Reference 110 amplifier, listening to Lyra Titan and Skala cartridges. I tried the phono section on its own feet but eventually settled on a Stillpoints Component Stand as best enhancing the phono section's strengths.

The phono pre-amplifier I used for a direct comparison was the Aesthetix Io Signature, which had just returned from the factory a few months earlier for updating. Although the Io has a reputation for being somewhat noisy, reports are that recent production models are much more quiet, and my refurbished unit was indeed surprisingly quite considering the number of tubes it employs. I have also spent a fair amount of time listening to the Zanden, the Audio Research PH7 and have heard several generations of the Lyra Connoisseur. How does the Ref 2 stack up?

One of the strong suits of the Aesthetix Io was its ability to deliver dynamic impact—the huge power supply assured you that it had unlimited reserves and I have never heard its equal before from a tubed phono-stage when it comes to delivering dynamic punch. The Ref 2 weighs considerably less the Io's separate power supply alone, and for that reason I was not optimistic that it could pack the same weighty punch, but I was wrong. The Ref 2 surpasses both the PH7 and the Io in this department, and does so across the frequency spectrum. It delivers quick and authoritative impact, and makes the effort seem unforced, like Alberto Contador leaving the rest of the world's best climbers behind in the Alps. The Ref 2 almost seems to draw on Contador's superior lung capacity. On large-scale orchestral works such as Stravinsky's *Rite* on Decca conducted by Solti, the percussion effects leap off the stage. And it delivers this dynamic punch without smearing. With the Io, the system ran out of steam on the largest scale dynamic swings, where now the Ref 2 seems to have blown





▶ the cobwebs out. The Ref 2 is no less impressive on smaller scale works, such as John Lee Hooker Alone on Labor LAB-4, a live small nightclub recording where his punchy guitar sound seems to dig deeper and with more impact than I've heard before.

But what truly sets the Ref 2 apart from the pack is the way it puts together the pieces of the delicate yet detailed sound in the upper midrange. Once the unit had broken in for 200 hours, I couldn't stop digging into my stack of violin LPs, drawn in by details of string tone that had escaped me before. At the 250-hour mark and beyond, the Ref 2 was still getting better and better at this—Audio Research claims it will continue to improve until the 600 mark has been reached. I've listened to Accardo play Paganini on 'Diabolus in Musica', a 1996 reissue by DGG, on many fine phono preamplifiers, but never heard the nuanced delicacy of string tone reproduced by the Ref 2. That's not to say that there aren't other phono sections in the same league when it comes to delivering beautiful midrange (the Zanden comes to mind), but there is something quite special here.

Is this delicate midrange beauty the result of a lower noise floor? Certainly the unit is quiet—the ear to the driver test proves it nearly as quiet as the best solid-state phono sections, with barely noticeable levels of hum and hiss. But I suspect that the contribution of a low noise floor is not an adequate explanation for the superb low-level detail that contributes to the magical midrange. It's not just low-level detail showing above the noise floor—somehow Audio Research has managed to organize these low level signals into a more coherent whole.


The Ref 2 is a world-class performer when it comes to structuring the elements of the soundstage. The best analogy I can come up with should be familiar to any computer user. Listening to a complex piece of music for the first time with the Ref 2 had the musical soundstage suddenly shifting into place and making sense. On recording after recording, it became clear that the spacing of instruments and events had become better organized. I've been listening to Giulini's performance of Verdi's *Requiem* on EMI since the 1960s, always hoping that some change in my system would clean up the soundstage of this marvellous recording. The Ref 2 has made this admittedly

SECOND OPINION

Writing a second viewpoint to any review is always a fascinating experience, not just because of the "do I agree?" or "would I have put it like that?" aspects (or more often, the "I wish I'd thought of putting it like that!" ones) but because of the way it lets you off of the leash. The main review covers all the technical details and the sonic overview* and you have the opportunity to concentrate on the one or two specifics that really define this product's special qualities.

For me, the thing that makes the Phono 2 special is perhaps best defined by its sense of rightness. It's a naturalness of presentation, of perspective and ordered communication that underpins both its musical quality and that extra dimension it brings to vinyl reproduction through its provision of switchable equalisation. It's also what elevates it head and shoulders above the PH7, good as that unit was. The Phono 2 is a game changing product for ARC, finally lifting record reproduction onto the same plane first reached by the Ref 3 line-stage, and since further refined by the Ref 5.

So much of what the Phono 2 does right seems to stem from the bottom end, which is noticeably deeper, more defined, much more transparent and offers a rooted stability that simply escaped the PH7. That firm foundation creates both the clarity and micro-dynamic discrimination that so impressed DDD, revealing harmonic textures and nuances of technique that remain resolutely submerged with lesser units. The rock solid immobility of the sonic picture also adds more than just authority to proceedings. Instruments aren't just placed in the acoustic space, they stay where they are put, even under the most extreme dynamic provocation. Orchestral tuttis pass without the standard rush to the front of the stage that afflicts most hi-fi systems, while the "place for everything



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▶ Columbia setting and the musical picture changes dramatically. The stage deepens and instrumental positions lock in. The pace quickens and the playing takes on life and verve, a new sense of energy and flow. Suddenly it starts to make musical sense. What was, before, turgid, disjointed, thin and frankly tedious, is now bubbling with life and joy – just as it should be and full of that fragile quality, musical rightness.

It's a trick that I can pull again and again – and one that's not without its own twists and turns. DGG used non-standard (at least, non-RIAA) equalization well into the mid-80s. But playing a first pressing of a 1978 recording, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli – Debussy Preludes, the Columbia setting generates a heavy, ploddingly mechanical performance that bears no relationship to the Debussy that I know. Switch to RIAA and light and goodness are restored. But how so? Eventually, I notice a sub-heading on the (in)famous cartouche – Made In England! Proof if needed then, that your ears don't lie...

Roll out the Deccas and the same results apply. An early, wideband SXL2000 of Il Trovatore comes alive when the Decca replay curve is engaged: space, body, presence and drama, a sense of musical tension. A French pressed wideband of the Tebaldi Aida, delivers exactly the same result, and another vindication for good old Herbert. Even a mid-80s London of the Milanov/di Stenfanso La Gioconda, pressed at Decca's New Malden plant (betrayed by the prominent shoulders around the label) still sounds right with the Decca EQ.

And that's really the point: this isn't just about old records and it isn't just about classical either. Jazz and pop are all affected in the same way. Of course, modern 180g repressings will all be RIAA, but if you own an older record collection or buy second hand discs, then you will hear very real benefits from a phono-stage with switchable EQ.

Given the cost of modern high-end record replay systems, I think it's a no-brainer. I feel that unless you have a decent record player with a good clamping system, adjustable VTA and the ability to switch replay equalization, you simply aren't hearing what's on most of your records. To many, correct replay equalization matters just as much, and if you want to get the best from 20th Century vinyl pressings then it should definitely matter to you.

Audio Research has ticked all the boxes with the Phono 2. It's quiet – quiet enough to accommodate my vdH Condor without any problems. It shares the organized clarity and stable musical authority that characterize the other Reference models. It offers just enough adjustability to really optimise your cartridge interface, and does it in a versatile and easily used package. It even offers two inputs to accommodate a second tonearm. And finally – it offers switchable EQ. Taken together, these things don't necessarily make this the best phono-stage in the world. But they do make it the one to beat.

Roy Gregory

*Two brief (and personal) asides when it comes to DDD's observations: I'd hate anybody to get the idea that the ARC is underweight and anybody brought up on conventionally proportioned phono-stages is going to be impressed by the substantial dimensions and weight of the Phono 2. The other concerns the handles: call me old-fashioned, retro or just plain 'ornery', but I'll have mine in black, please. The silver handles might look more modern, but in my opinion they also make the unit anonymous, bordering on the bland.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Hybrid solid-state/tube phono-stage

Tube Complement: 5x 6H30, 1x 6550C

Inputs: 2

Gain: Switchable, 51dB or 74dB (balanced)

45 or 68dB (single-ended)

Input Impedance: 47k, 1000, 500, 200, 100, 50 Ohms, or Custom

Phono Equalization: RIAA, Decca, Columbia

Output Impedance: 200 Ohms (single-ended)

400 Ohms (balanced)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 480 x 178 x 394mm

Weight: 12.3kg

Price: £10,726

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recordings with the curve options. My ears tell me that no matter what Wikipedia claims, Columbia did not convert its boards over to the new curves as promptly as it claims, and listening to many of Columbia's releases in the "6 eye" label era bears this out. The same pattern holds true for releases on many other labels, both large and small.

Audio Research's new Ref 2 clearly joins the elite of the phono section world. It delivers a performance level for others to aim at. With its remote access to loading and gain settings, it offers unparalleled convenience and adjustability. The optional equalization curves offer a fascinating opportunity for exploration and discovery. In short, this is one piece of audio gear to be reckoned with – and, if you are fortunate, enjoyed. +

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Guru QM60 loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy

You may recall the Guru QM10, a standmount with an unusual wider than it is high shape and a pair of rather down to earth looking drive units. Unconventional, yet highly entertaining in a slightly colourful fashion, it is easily capable of reinvigorating a tired record collection. But it's somewhat limited in the power department. Guru has added a floorstander to its range that counters the QM10's shortcomings. The new QM60 stands just under a metre high and has a step in the front baffle which provides time alignment of the voice coils in the two drive units.

This step is 40mm deep and must create a lot of extra diffusion from both the tweeter above it whose output will bounce straight up and the mid/bass unit beneath it whose output will diffract off the hard edge. This should have the effect of enlarging soundstage height at the expense of image focus. I put this to Guru designer Ingvar Öhman who explained that it is designed to reflect high frequencies toward the ceiling which increases the vertical listening window so that the speaker should sound as good to someone standing as it does to a seated listener. The baffle shape is also designed to compensate for the shortcomings of stereo reproduction, specifically the fact that a phantom image is a construct created by two sources as opposed to the point source you have in reality. A singer only has one voice, but stereo systems attempt to recreate this with two sources which is bound to have its limitations and that's something which Guru is trying to overcome.

The QM60 was originally designed to research the properties of human hearing. Öhman lectures on this subject when he's not designing speakers – and it's what begat Guru speakers in the first place. What differentiates his design approach is that as well as aiming for neutrality, wide bandwidth and accurate reproduction of timbre Öhman also attempts to compensate for the colourations of the source and amplification. I have rarely heard a loudspeaker that has lower colouration than a digital source and solid state amplification, but such components do of course have characteristics which distort the signal in a small but distinct fashion. This might explain the QM60's slightly warm midband which serves to play down some of the grain that you get with some electronics.

As with the QM10 this speaker is a two-way design which is unusual in such a substantial box, what's more surprising is the crossover point which the drivers work



[sometimes]
technology meets art..



▶ around. This is less of a point than an area that starts at 700Hz and goes up to 7kHz, so the roll-off for each driver is extremely shallow indeed, the company refers to it merely as a 'non textbook function'. I did wonder whether Guru was using any filtering at all but Öhman explained that there's a low pass filter on the woofer in order to increase power handling. The tweeter's filter is also designed to fight power compression by using impedance matching. In practice this means that the large 176mm woofer has to cover an awful lot of ground, over eight octaves in fact. This is not unique, there have been other speakers that have done something similar with the purpose of increasing both sensitivity and power handling by reducing the work load placed on the tweeter, but it's asking a lot of the drive unit. Guru admits as much and says that the a titanium bobbin controls heat distribution and eliminates low frequency eddy losses while copper plated aluminium wire for the voice coil, a double vented dust cap cavity and an undercut pole piece all combine to linearise drive force. In order to reproduce higher frequencies the SPN dust cap acts as a dome midrange, Guru describes SPN as "a plastic material that is a little bit less stiff than polypropylene, is very lightweight, has excellent internal damping behaviour, and can take a lot of heat without changing its behaviour".

Not much is said about the tweeter but it's apparent that it's a 28mm soft dome mounted in a horn to increase sensitivity, beyond that it does not seem particularly different to the norm. Except that is in claimed power handling which is said to be close to 100 watts.

Given the size of the box and the main driver, sensitivity does not seem particularly high, it's specified at 88dB for a nominal 7 ohm impedance. The

box isn't quite as large as it appears because the bottom six inches are taken up by a void into which a downward firing reflex port vents, this is why there are a grilles at the front and sides of the cabinet. However there is no grille for the shiny black baffle.

Guru recommends the speakers be placed with the inner corner very close to the rear wall and the cabinets angled so that you can just see their outside edges. This combined with the space under the speaker means that the way that the bass interacts with the room can to some extent be predicted. It does its best to minimize the effect of the walls with foam feet that offer a degree of de-coupling, Guru is not keen on spikes and doesn't supply threaded inserts for that purpose. Cable connection is made via a single pair of inputs that accept only banana plugs and sit near the top of the cabinet. This approach minimizes internal wiring but does mean you need more speaker cable and it hangs out of the back of an otherwise attractive piece of furniture.

Dispersion was a strongpoint with the QM10 and so it remains here, the QM60 projecting a full size image that reaches up and over the speakers themselves. It's not out of scale however, you can get large but rather soft imaging from some speakers but this is not like that, in fact it's on a similar scale to the larger B&W 802D speakers I use as a reference. They create a more precisely etched image but in terms of size and placement of musicians the two are very close. The Guru does have a warm midband compared with most of the loudspeakers that I have heard in recent times. And this gives it a comfortable sound that works well at both high and low levels but which is perhaps better suited to the former. It's reminiscent of many classic speakers from back in the day, AR bookshelves from the 1970s come to mind – two-way speakers that also had a largish woofer albeit not the sort of power handling or bandwidth on offer here.

It's a balance that seems to work well with Naim electronics even when you use a ▶





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.

Blue Horizon's unique products are engineered to the highest possible standard and designed by a highly qualified, award-winning team with over 70 years combined experience in specialist audio.

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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▶ speaker cable other than Naim NACA5 which pushes leading edges a little too far forward for my tastes. I was fortunate enough to use the QM60 with a full Naim 500 system and got some remarkable musical entertainment out of the combo. Give it a tune with some density to work with and it pulls out the music in tremendously coherent and engaging form. I particularly enjoyed Fred Frith's take on the classic 'Killing Floor Blues', he gets so much attack out of an acoustic guitar that it almost hurts. In fact it would do if played at high level through a less forgiving speaker.

This system proved remarkably adept at revealing the musical qualities of everything I played, which was good with the good stuff but less so with tracks that are primarily used for assessing the sound of a system or component. Not necessarily material selected for its musical appeal, after all no one wants to wear out a great tune by picking it to pieces *ad infinitum*.

The soundscape does not merely extend upwards, with the right recording it expands sideways as well, reaching out to the sides of the room and providing a broad expanse for the music to project from. This was clear when playing the slower pieces from the double bass led Avishai Cohen Trio. Usually it's the more dynamic and muscular playing that appeals on this album (*Gently Disturbed*) but this system revealed the message within the more subtle pieces with skill.

Tonally it is on the rich side with a smooth top end, slightly dark midband and bass that is prodigious and fulsome. So much so that it can get the floor going with certain material and certain floors - wooden rather than concrete, I suspect it would suit the former rather better. This means that you get more bass at low levels, something that many loudspeakers struggle to deliver and also that at high levels the mid and treble are always balanced by the bass rather than the sound becoming mid forward as is often the case. As with all things it depends on the music, Steely Dan's 'Bodhisattva' from the remastered *Countdown to Ecstasy* album sounds its age while the bass seems a little pumped up but there's plenty of power on tap and the result is captivating. Engrossing in another way was Gillian Welch's *Time (The Revelator)*, which is a good if not stunning recording, however in the Gurus hands it transcends the boundaries of time and space and places the singer right in the room.

The Guru QM60 is as different a speaker as its smaller sibling. The mid is a little warm and shut in by most standards and it's not as focused as some of the competition when it comes to leading edge definition. On the other hand, it does deliver the level that Guru suggests and can produce an awful lot of low-end welly, which makes it a lot of fun. Dynamic range is also wide so you hear the full impact of the music's crescendos without compression. More important is the way it places the emphasis on the musical message so much more effectively than more analytical speakers. In this respect it has a lot in common with Naim electronics with which it seems to gel so well. Ingvar Öhman says "My ambition has never been to make loudspeakers that 'create sound' for people chasing spectacular experiences." And this product lives up to that by putting the music rather than the sound at the forefront, which makes it a speaker that will appeal to the music lover a little more than the average hi-fi nut. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Guru QM60

Sensitivity: 88dB

Nominal impedance: 7Ω (min 6Ω).

Mean value: 10Ω

Recommended amplifier power:
10W-250W

Enclosure type: Helmholtz resonator

Drivers: 1×28 mm (1.1in) dome tweeter,
1×176mm (6.9 in) doped polymer cone

Dimensions (WxDxH): 312×351×945mm

Net weight: 30 kg

Finishes: matte black, black piano laquer, white lacquer or a selection of veneers (reviewed in zebrano)

Price: £6,995

Manufacturer:

Guru Pro Audio

URL: www.guruproaudio.com

Distributor:

Tom Tom Audio

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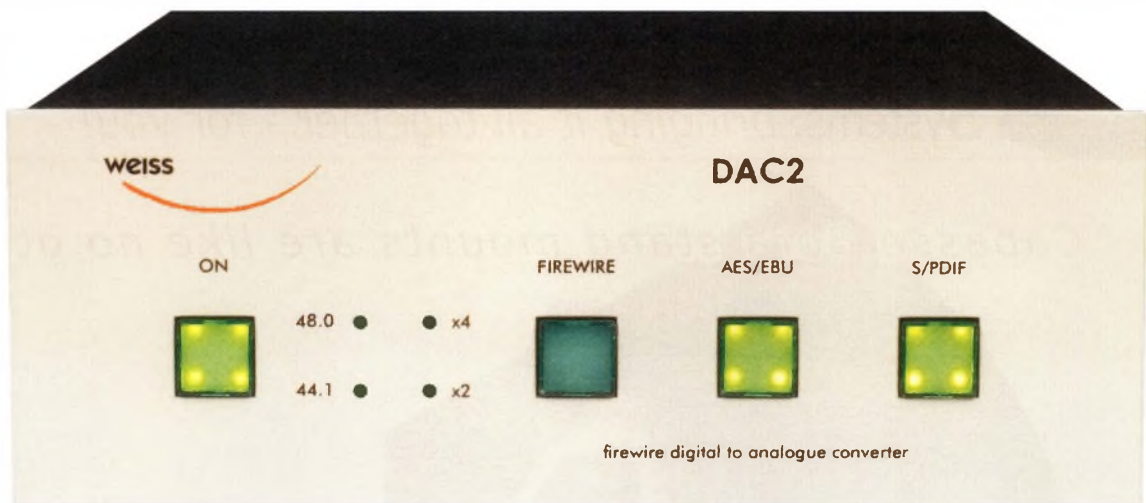


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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Weiss DAC2 D/A convertor

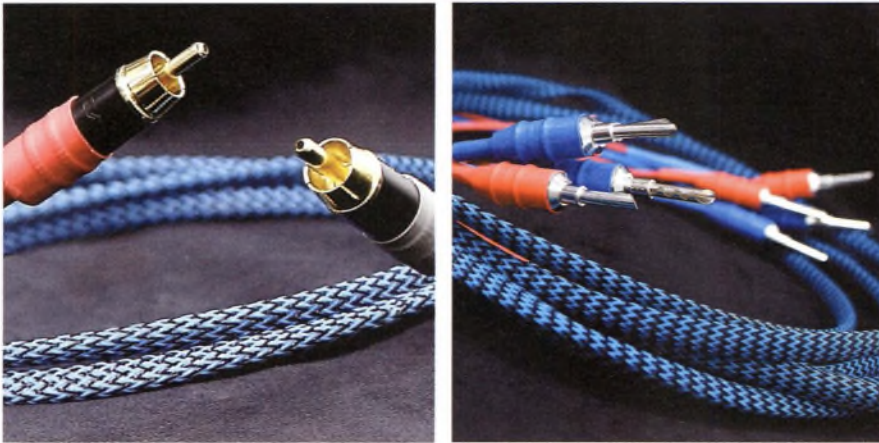
by Ed Selley. Photography by Kevin Ricks

Weiss Engineering Limited is not perhaps a name that people immediately come up with when asked to name the leading lights of digital audio. Founded in Switzerland by Daniel Weiss in 1984, the focus of the company was initially entirely directed at studio and pro audio equipment. The company released a range of products for the domestic market in 2001 but this was in addition to the professional line rather than instead of it. The DAC2 tested here is found on the professional side of the website, but in keeping with the rather blurry demarcation that separates the professional from the domestic, is also found on sale in conventional domestic audio dealers.

The studio origins of the DAC2 are clear enough when the unit is extracted from the box. The half width chassis is finished to a high standard but there is an inescapably utilitarian feel to it. The front panel is actually a pearlescent white rather than a flat finish but when combined with the large light up buttons, the effect still suggests something that has been borrowed from an operating theatre or complex piece of military equipment. There is definitely method in the madness though. Any studio operative kept awake for several days by the thoroughly unsociable hours of the musicians they have been tasked with recording will appreciate the fact that the DAC2 will tell you at a glance what it is doing and if anything is wrong. Select a digital input and the input button will flash until the DAC2 detects a signal whereupon the light becomes continuous. Those that regard digital as something to listen to when they have become too tired and emotional to operate a turntable may also find this helpful.

There are stronger reasons than the bomb-proof control interface to consider welcoming a DAC2 out of the studio however. Chief among these are the input options behind those light up buttons. As well as conventional S/PDIF supported over coaxial and toslink and an AES input, the DAC2 also sports a pair of firewire inputs. These allow for the transmission of digital audio from a PC or Mac at frequencies of up to 192khz. The DAC2 is therefore equipped to pull the best signal possible out of computers which should elevate it up the shortlist of any computer audio user. The Weiss is supplied with software for set up with both types of machine. Other areas of intelligent thinking include four output levels available from the analogue outputs which vary from a rather beefy 5.48 volts down to 1.35 volts. The ▶

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Hi-Fi Choice Editor's Choice: January 2006
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GAMUT CD3
Hi-Fi Choice Editor's Choice: January 2007
Hi-Fi Choice: The Hi-Fi Awards 2007 Bronze Award

▶ latter is a boon for owners of vintage gear who can often find that the output of many digital products is rather higher than their products were designed for. The Weiss also supports RCA and XLR outputs. I used the XLR's for the majority of listening as my Electrocompaniet is a better performer when so connected but some brief experiments with the RCA's suggest that there is no significant difference on the part of the Weiss from either set of connectors.

Weiss is not especially communicative about what lurks inside the DAC2 but claims that the company combines several re-clocking schemes for jitter suppression and as a result the DAC2 is “virtually immune to jitter over a very high bandwidth.” The Weiss uses a pair of eight times oversampling delta sigma D/A chips for the actual business of conversion and a very quick look under the lid suggests that the quality of individual components is high and that considerable attention has been put into the layout of the key internals. The society for the prevention of journalistic clichés prevents me from making Swiss watch analogies so I will once again cite an almost military feel to the construction of the DAC2 with everything in place for a purpose and no nods to the unnecessary.

Initial listening was carried out by simply inserting the DAC2 between my resident amp and CD player and using the S/PDIF input. The unit was brand new on arrival and was left running through for a few days before I really sat down and paid it any real critical attention. When I did start listening more intently, the first area that the Weiss makes a solid impression is the almost complete absence of a digital ‘fingerprint’ to the sound. The DAC2 is almost entirely without any of the occasional glassiness that can affect even very well sorted CD players and even strident recordings are unaffected by it. This is not to say that the sound has anything artificially analogue about it – it simply sounds wherever possible like it did before the recording was converted to ones and zeros or cut into a groove.

In keeping with Weiss’ studio heritage and the professional nature of the DAC2, there is an overriding sense of neutrality to the performance. If there is excitement or passion in the recording, it shines through unimpeded by technology but the DAC2 will not ginger up material that lacks this. Poor recordings are not torn to shreds but the Weiss will unobtrusively demonstrate where it might be a little lacking. Partnered correctly, the result is a stunning

“If you enjoy what you listen to, you will find the DAC2 to be an open window on your musical choices.”

insight into the music with any additional character being imparted by amplifier or speaker choices. If this sounds a little unexciting, this is not the case. If you enjoy what you listen to (and if not, why are you listening to it?) you will find the DAC2 to be an open window on your musical choices.

Within the overall sense of neutrality, the Weiss demonstrates excellent tonality with vocals and instruments. The realism it applies to piano from the strike of the key to the final decay of the note is compellingly accurate and increasingly addictive. There is no sense of any part of the recording being forced unnaturally to the front of the presentation and the placement of artists in relation to each other and their surroundings is easy to perceive and free of any unnatural distortion. ▶





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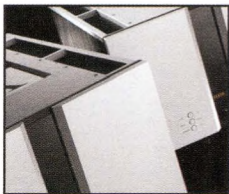
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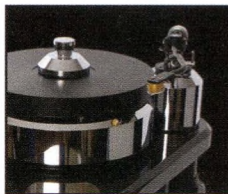




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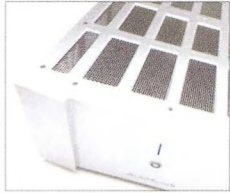
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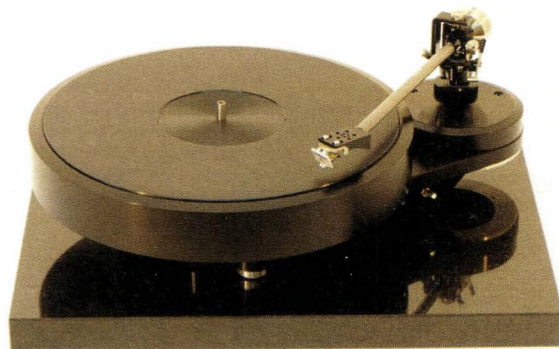
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Workshop Notes 13: A Tale of Two Turntables. British Brio versus German control.....

It is an irony, 30 years it was laid to rest, that vinyl sounds better than ever. Brilliant, if fanatical, designers like Conrad Mas and Helmut Brinkmann have pushed the performance envelope so far that vinyl still gives even the very best of digital not just a run for its money, but very often a good kicking. And that's before we factor in the thousands of LPs we vinylistas still own and the very special magic of it all. AVID have perfected the suspended, belt-driven design and their double belts and sophisticated power supplies are way ahead of anything else on offer. Joining the fray is a particularly interesting turntable from Germany the Brinkmann Bardo – no belts, no suspension. Direct drive, mass loaded & electronic speed control. Which is better? That is for you to decide. These two outstanding, fresh-off-the-drawing-board designs are at Audio Workshop Norwich raring to go and eager for your attention. Please don't disappoint them.....

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- ▶ The low end is also particularly assured with the Weiss able to effortlessly reproduce both the natural thump of a large drum and the synthetic bass of electronica without bloat or overhang. If there is one criticism I can find it is the comparatively mild one that on occasions the handover between midrange and bass can leave some instruments and sounds less full bodied than on other digital devices, although given how unerringly accurate the Weiss appears to be elsewhere, this may be how the recording should be.

The real party piece comes when the firewire interface is brought into play. Connected to a MacMini in my case, and accessing AAC lossless files via iTunes, the combination starts to make a number of music servers look a little like yesterday's news. The Weiss maintains its superb neutrality and insight but now you can move rapidly around your music collection without pausing to dig the next disc out. That this convenience is being achieved without any sacrifice in performance is especially satisfying. I did some back to back tests with AAC lossless and CD versions of the same pieces of music, changing inputs on the fly and was not able to pin down any real differences between the two formats and connection types that would have me ruling out the use of one or the other. Similarly, the Mac gave little away (other than a mysteriously slow sync time) when connected over optical instead.

The DAC2 is not a universal solution that will be to everybody's taste. The neutrality and almost nonexistent sonic signature may leave it open to accusations of being uninvolved and sterile. Equally, the aesthetics and features are aimed squarely at the professional market and large, green light up buttons may not be what everybody is looking for in their home hi-fi. For others however, the DAC2 demands an audition. Even if you intend to use it solely using the conventional S/PDIF inputs, the superb performance with CD and the way it simply steps out of the way of the music are hugely appealing. When connected to a Mac over firewire however, the worth and potential of the Weiss really come to the fore. The excellent interface and self explanatory nature of the Mac and iTunes is coupled to a device that demonstrates the true hi-fi potential of the concept. The unapologetic and compromise free nature of the DAC2 removes any lingering requirement to make excuses for computer audio and this has to be a good thing. The DAC2 just might be the professional audio product that secures you a life of domestic audio bliss. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Weiss DAC2

Digital to analogue convertor

Inputs: Firewire, AES/EBU, S/PDIF over coaxial and toslink

Outputs: AES/EBU, XLR, RCA

Dimensions: 30x19x8 cm

Weight: 2 kilos

Price: £1,950 (inc vat and delivery)

Manufactured by Weiss Digital Audio

URL: www.weiss.ch

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the future of BLUES



by Drew Hobbs. Photographs by Lucy Piper

To the uninitiated, the blues is all about hard times, losers, hobos and wins, with the typecast image being of an unkempt, down-on-his-luck, middle-aged black guy with a beat up old acoustic, playing in some smoky backstreet club to a handful of undesirables worse for wear on drink and drugs. I'm sure there are clubs all over Europe and the USA still playing host to this very scenario, just as there are many clubs packing them in night after night with that most bizarre phenomenon – the tribute band. But the blues is more, so much more than a ride on the misery train.

While its origins can be traced back to the likes of Robert Johnson, Charlie Patton, Leadbelly and Bessie Smith – all brilliant pioneers – its tentacles have reached out and embraced so much more as the decades have progressed. Once the electric guitar befriended the blues community with artists such as Muddy Waters at the helm, it began to attract young and hungry musicians in another continent eager to explore and experiment. Leading the charge were Keith Richards, Mick Jagger, Alexis Korner, Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, Peter Green and the daddy of them all, John Mayall.

Mayall's Bluesbreakers became a veritable revolving door for some of the finest musicians of their generation, and it's where Clapton got his 'God' tag from. In the 1960's the blues was booming; amazing players were popping out of the woodwork and paying homage to their heroes in their own distinctive ways. Fans were keen to discover where The Rolling Stones, Free, Led Zeppelin, Fleetwood Mac and The Yardbirds found much of their inspiration, ▶

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.

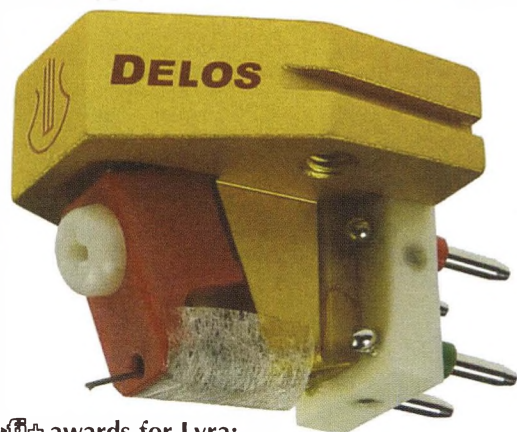
The Delos solves this problem with a new body structure and pre-angled damping system. The pre-angled dampers work together with the angle of the body structure so that, when tracking force is applied, the signal coils are optimally aligned with the magnet circuit. The Delos also has a microridge stylus 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

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

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



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Lyra Titan MC Cartridge
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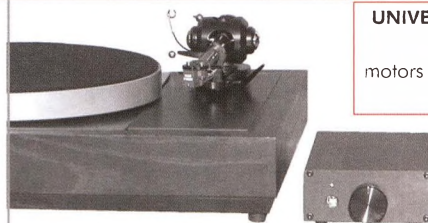
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the future of blues

▶ and this in turn changed the fortunes of the under-appreciated black creators of this delightful form around. Suddenly, white kids got turned onto Buddy Guy, John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters and a host of others and the blues became hip. It also laid the foundations for heavy rock; it's there in the belly of Whitesnake, Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, AC/DC and any other hard rock band one cares to mention – past and present.

The major labels down the years have been quick to recognise the money-spinning potential of the blues. They've made millions, and true to form have used everything at their disposal to get it to as many paying customers as possible. Not totally a bad thing of course. I still remember the scintillating buzz around Robert Cray when *Strong Persuader* came out in 1979. Here was a guy who had it all; good looks, brilliant songs, a voice plucked from the hallways of heaven and a talent on the electric guitar that was the envy of his peers. *Strong Persuader* even managed to hit the top 30 with 'Smokin' Gun' and handed Cray his first Grammy.

Music retail continued to reap rich rewards as far as fascinating characters were concerned. One to strike a very deep chord, in more ways than one, was John Campbell. The two albums he released for Elektra in the early 90's contained some of the most menacing sounds ever to emanate from mouth and guitar. He sang about graves, hell, voodoo, sorrow and all places in between with an unmatched ferocity. Maybe 'sing' is not quite the right word; it was more of a guttural roar from the pit of his stomach, but it collided spectacularly with the sounds he tore from the bowels of his electric/acoustic. On stage, Campbell was a frightening sight. With his tied back straggly hair, the facial scars from a horrific car accident and his long wiry frame, he looked like the last person you'd want to meet on a dark night, but once plugged in and rocking Campbell was an out and out star. He died of heart failure at the age of 43, just as his career was beginning to take off. The blues knows how to wound.

I've talked about how the blues helped create heavy rock but one artist actually found more success when he went back the other way. Gary Moore achieved plenty of sales in his hard rock guise but when he released his first proper blues album, *Still Got The Blues*, his career went into overdrive. Since then, this most enigmatic of performers has continued along that path, releasing album after album of ass kicking blues. The last two, *Close As It Gets* and *Blues For My Baby* positively melt the speakers with some of the most molten guitar playing ever. Beautifully recorded, they deserve their place in every music fan's collection.

Blues has throughout history made many vital contributions and it remains a form of music both versatile and adaptable. However, I have heard many times that if it is to survive, then it has to constantly reinvent itself. Why? I don't see rap, hip-hop or a lot of the sappy rubbish passing for pop these days

reinventing itself. What I see is massive media exposure and big budget spends that run close to brainwashing. Blues can and does appeal to the younger fraternity, but they need to be introduced to it in the first place. A case in point is Jonny Lang. He burst onto the scene with an absolute cracker of a debut, *Lie To Me*. His voice was big and sounded like it had been nurtured on a lifetime of bourbon and extra strength Marlboros, but he was only 16 years old at the time! I watched him play a sold out gig in Camden Town and down the front were loads of teenage girls swooning and calling out his name. It's the same with Aynsley Lister, another young gun who can pull an audience with ages ranging from 16 to 50 plus. And yet, mainstream success eludes new blues acts.



Of course, the question is how do the next generation of blues artists break out of the clubs and bring their sparkling talents to a much wider audience? It probably won't be via the major record companies; they're no longer what they were and certainly not run by people who live and breathe music. Oh no, record companies are now run by accountants who see only figures and a 'product' that has to be exactly that – accountable. What would have become of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd and all those other legendary artists with massive and still highly profitable back catalogues if they'd have surfaced in today's narrow-minded markets. Perish the thought.

With those thoughts in mind, *Hi-Fi Plus* took up an invitation to attend a showcase gig at the Jazz Café in London. We were there to watch a triple header, a coming together of some of British blues' most promising talents. The place was heaving, with a sense of tingling anticipation I haven't felt at a concert for some considerable time. The first of the three acts should have been Jay Tamkin but unfortunately he was unable to attend, so his place went to a young trio going by the name of Virgil and the Accelerators. I have to confess to knowing nothing about them, only that lead singer/guitarist, Virgil is 18 and the drummer weighs in at a very tender 15 ▶

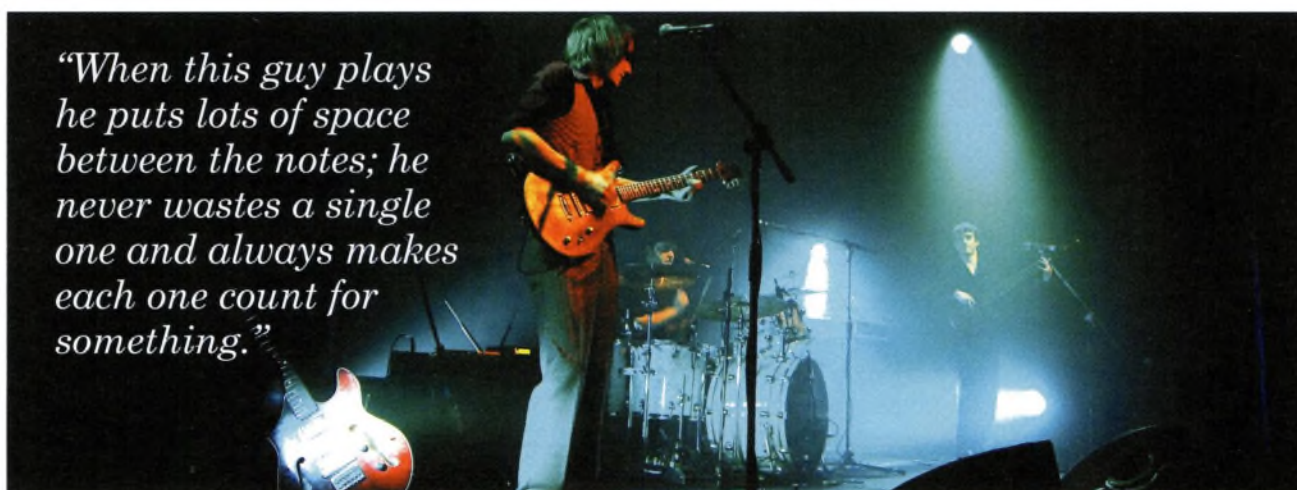
the future of blues

► years old! They treated us to a foot-to-the-floor set of blues rocking numbers and showed surprising maturity for ones so young. Virgil clearly comes from the Stevie Ray school of mastery and while this is as good a place to start as any, if they are truly going to make their mark and stand out from the pack they need to inject a little more originality into their repertoire. That said, they have time on their side and are clearly talented, so watch this space.

Joanne Shaw Taylor had flown in from Detroit only three hours before she took to the stage. She remained quietly patient while technicians sorted out a glitch in the sound system, but once up and running this young Brummie made her intentions clear to the crowd with a set culled from her terrific debut, *White Sugar*. 'Your Time Has Come' found her prowling the stage with her eyes closed, feeling every note as deep and sensuous sounds burst from her Fender Strat. 'Blackest Day', one of *White Sugar's* defining moments, floated in on a flush of caressed guitar. Her honey-smoked voice wrapped itself around the song as it built towards a finale of red hot soloing – I swear I saw flames coming off the fret at one point! The sound this girl gets in the studio is highly

Road', the title track to his debut CD, with gusto and power as the crunching chords reverberated all round the walls of the Jazz Café. The tender blues of 'Love's Gone Cold' came next and nestled sweetly in the lap of our emotions, building and building before settling to an almost jazz-like pace. When this guy plays he puts lots of space between the notes; he never wastes a single one and always makes each one count for something. The less-is-more approach is where he's at. However, when the need arises he can give the sound more muscle or dress it in velvet – and he often does it all in the same song! It's not art for art's sake, it's a gift that only the best possess.

One of my favourite numbers got an airing next. 'Roxanne' fizzed and crackled and sounded so fresh and vibrant in a live setting. Oli projected the vocal with real panache and the way the band weaved and flowed to the chorus was pure delight. Midway through the song Oli stepped back from the microphone with his guitar draped by his side and proceeded to sing to the crowd in true unplugged fashion. It showed the immense power he can unleash with that voice and sent a shivery tingle up the spine. After a wander upstairs



polished but live she's a totally different animal, preferring to beef the sound up with less soul and a whole lot more blues. On the rattling shuffle of *Bones* the volume went up a notch or two and her vocals got drowned out in the mix, but there's no denying the talent Joanne possesses. She works a fretboard like she's been doing it for half a century, yet she's only 22 years old. The six songs she played were enough to convince me and the packed out crowd that Joanne Shaw Taylor has what it takes to lead from the front.

Last up to hit the stage was 19 year old Oli Brown, the prince of modern blues. In his pin-striped suit and purple shirt and with chiselled good looks and tapered flowing hair, Oli looks more like a film star than a bluesman. Oozing confidence, he struck up an instant rapport with the crowd, commanding the stage like a veteran. He belted out 'Open

where he serenaded the dining punters, he returned to the stage for a rousing stab at Ram Jam's 'Black Betty'. He was clearly enjoying himself and wanted to carry on playing, but the dreaded 11pm curfew kicked in and he left the stage to ringing applause.

The whole evening was a stunning success and proved without doubt that the future of British blues is in safe hands. Artists like Oli Brown and Joanne Shaw Taylor are, dare I say it, sexing up the blues and giving it a makeover. Get them on Later...with Jools Holland, play their songs on mainstream radio, put them on morning TV. Do whatever it takes and then let them do the rest - but for God's sake give them a break!! Then we might just introduce the blues to a generation that think the world only revolves around the likes of Beyonce, Lady Gaga and Kanye West. +

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record reviews

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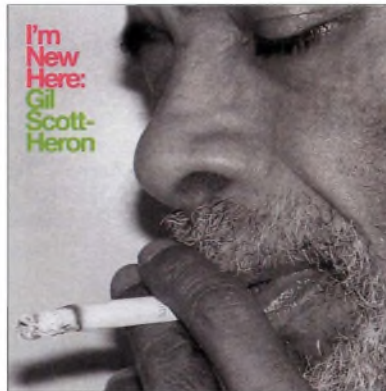
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This issue's featured reviewers are:

- DD** – Dennis Davis
- RSF** – Richard S. Foster
- JK** – Jason Kennedy
- AS** – Alan Sircom

Key to Icons

	CD		120g LP
	Gold CD		150g LP
	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		200g LP
	Double Disc		10" LP
	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
	SACD		Vinyl Double Album
	Hybrid SACD		Multi-Channel



Gil Scott-Heron

I'm New Here

XL Records XLCD471

There's a prurient desire for music fans to love the 'broken record'. And Gil Scott-Heron's *I'm New Here* could so easily be his 'broken record'; prison, drug addiction and the rest all sit heavily on his weakened voice – yet this is the album of someone bent yet not broken by all that adversity.

It's been 16 years since his last album; this is simple and sparse, often just voice and acoustic guitar and piano. Other tracks feature his vocals in front of an ambient synth backbeat, like the menacing cover of Robert Johnson's 'Me And The Devil'. The album is a good mix of new material and covers, although it's a very short album; new cuts are rarely over two minutes in length and the whole album comes in around the half-hour mark.

Comparisons have been made with Johnny Cash's *American Recordings*. *I'm New Here* is not as sumptuously produced as Rick Rubin's series, but the outstanding tracks (especially the title track and 'New York Is Killing Me') sound expansive and powerful. Some of the spoken word recordings seem like they were recorded in the field, though.

Rubberneckers hoping for a musical suicide note might be disappointed by *I'm New Here*. This is a man who is picking up the pieces of his life. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Gorillaz

Plastic Beach

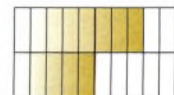
Parlophone 5099-96261662-1

Plastic Beach is the third album outing by Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett's 'virtual band' Gorillaz. It's a kind of eco-concept album that defies description, weaving bhangra, orchestral, trip hop, hip hop and electro pop.

The album also features just about everyone. Some of the collaborations – The Horrors, Barry Gibb, even Una Stubbs (!) – did not make the final cut, but there's work from De La Soul, Bobby Womack, Lou Reed, Mos Def, Paul Simonon, Snoop Dogg, Mark E. Smith, as well as the Derby-based VIVA sinfonia and the Lebanese National Orchestra for Oriental Arabic Music. Yet, for all this diversity, the underlying theme is lots of synths, lots of bass lines and a compressed, shouty mix. As a consequence, it takes several goes to 'get' the album, even if many of the individual tracks have a great hook.

This sounds like a soundtrack to a movie that doesn't exist. Interestingly, the weakest cuts are those that feature Albarn's vocals, which was never a problem in previous Blur/Gorillaz/Monkey projects. In the main though, this retains the dizzying ability for Gorillaz to sound like someone just beamed tomorrow's pop classics back through time. Well worth taking the trouble of repeated listens. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC

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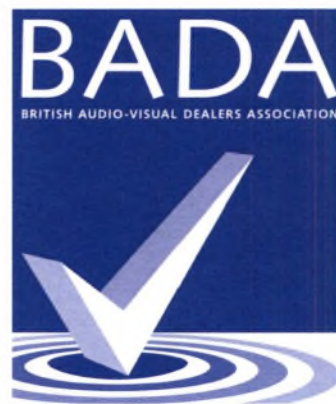
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Joanna Newsom

Have One On Me
 Drag City DC390CD

'Genius' is a term too often used in music reviews, but this two-hour, three CD from Joanna Newsom could use the G-word with some justification. That said, some will never get it; 'Kate Bush with a harp' is the easy criticism.

Despite the basic mix remaining unchanged – girl, harp, piano, folk – each Newsom album is very different from the last, and *Have One On Me* is as different from *Ys* as that album was from *The Milk-Eyed Mender*. Here, her voice is more matured and less wayward, but loses nothing of its gamine distinctiveness. The recordings too are excellent, free from compression and extremely dynamic (although those with the *Ys* Street Band backing lack image depth). But most of all, it's the sheer songwriting talent on show that inspires and excites time and again.

Two hours of acoustic music that defies description is always going to be something of a reach for many listeners. But cuts like 'Baby Birch', 'Go Long', 'Good Intentions Paving Co' and the title track are more than worth the price of admission, especially as the three-album set costs as much as a single CD. With albums like this and the latest cut by Bonny 'Prince' Billy, 2010 is turning out to be a top year of indie folk. **AS**

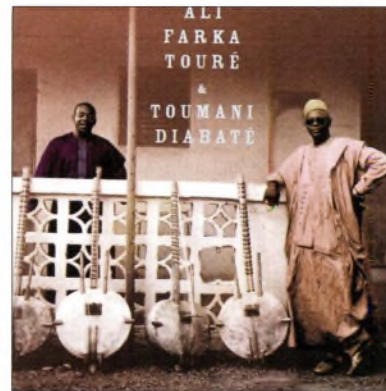


King Crimson

Red
 Panegyric

This comprehensive two-disc set comprises a CD and a DVD-A/V, which contains video content alongside two flavours of hi-res stereo (MLP Lossless 24/96, PCM 24/48) and another two of multichannel (MLP lossless, DTS 5.1). It's a format enthusiast's wet dream and quite a treat for Crimson fans too. One of three titles that have been released in this form, *Red* reveals the band at its highest intensity thanks to a core trio of tremendous ability and focus, the line up being Crimson linchpin Robert Fripp on guitar, heavy duty bass player and vocalist John Wetton and the incredibly powerful and inventive Bill Bruford on drums. All three are at their peak and arguably none repeated the level of ferocity achieved on the five tracks of the standard album. Here there are an extra three pieces on CD and 5.1 and a fourth in hi-res stereo, they are trio versions of the title track and 'Fallen Angel', a full version of 'Providence' and 'A Voyage to the Centre of the Cosmos', the latter two taken from 'The Great Deceiver'.

Of the three stereo options the PCM 24/48 delivers the most open and dynamic results although the MLP is not far behind. All versions sound better than an old Dutch pressing of the same album on CD albeit the mastering is clearly different. **JK**



Ali Farka Touré & Toumani Diabaté

Ali and Toumani
 World Circuit WCD083

Mali's late, lamented guitar hero Ali Farka Touré teamed up with the king of the kora Toumani Diabaté for a second time a year before his death in 2006. The album combines Malian folk songs and Mandé songs from Senegal and Guinea. If you think this leaves us Westerners at one remove from the song forms used here, guess again; there's striking parallels between blues, folk, ambient, funk, Indian ragas and even waltzes in these eleven mostly instrumental tracks.

Recorded in London over three days, this is a very up close and personal recording; don't expect a huge, atmospheric soundstage, but instead you get detail and directness, and some subtle percussion and bass from Orlando 'Cachaito' Lopez (this was also the last recording by the Buena Vista Social Club bassist, who died last year). *Ali and Toumani* is a fantastic and dynamic recording, one almost perfectly designed for defining a system's temporal properties.

World Circuit must also be praised for the complete package, as the album comes with some of the best and most comprehensive and informative sleeve notes you will find on an album. This is an album to revel in, and play and play until you've worn the digits off the disc. **AS**



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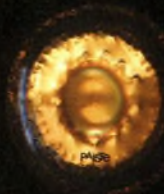
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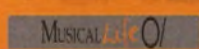


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Nancy Wilson

But Beautiful

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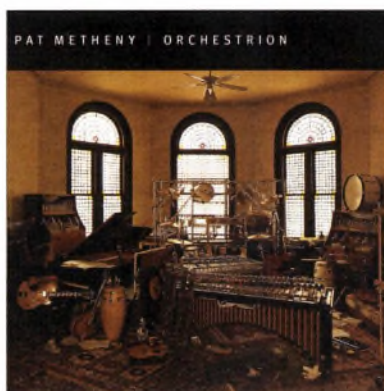


Nancy Wilson got her start after being pulled from obscurity by Cannonball Adderley in the late 1950's and signed to Capitol Records. There, she dissolved the boundaries of R&B, pop and soul, while always keeping a grounding in jazz, much like Diane Krall today.

This session, recorded in 1969 with an outstanding jazz quartet of Hank Jones, Ron Carter, Grady Tate and Gino Bertachini is one of Wilson's finest recorded documents, combining jazz sensibility with the undeniable pop appeal of Wilson's voice. Wilson takes a group of jazz standards and, without watering them down, turns them into tunes that stood a chance of popular radio play.

By the late 1960's Capitol's recording quality was a shadow of its earlier triumphs, and what its engineers didn't mess up, its pressing plants often did. This re-mastering by Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray makes the best of the situation. Wilson's voice was obviously the focus of the recording engineer and it is well reproduced. The recording space is rather lifeless, but Hoffman/Gray have pulled more magic off the tapes, and of the course the Pallas vinyl is a vast improvement. But it's Nancy's voice that defines this record and its never sounded better. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Pat Metheny

Orchestrion

Nonesuch 7559-79847-3

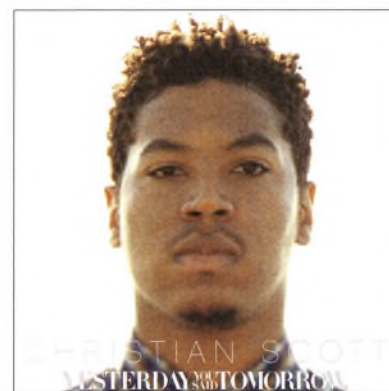


Now this is a true odd-ball. The *Orchestrion* of the title is a strange and wondrous collection of acoustic instruments controlled by computer program and solenoids, controlled by Metheny guitar and pedalboard. It's like a player piano (a childhood obsession of Metheny), built on Heath Robinson/Rube Goldberg lines.

There's no sense of Metheny's 'Orchestrionics' sounding in any way mechanical. It really sounds like Metheny's assembled a small orchestra of musicians to follow his improvisation, with not inconsiderable fluidity and charm. The music is ever so slightly limited in thematic range and scope, but this is not merely clever for its own sake; the musical themes explored here may not be the most substantial in jazz today, but it does have the benefit of these themes being explored by a single mind.

Judging the recording of this body of instruments is difficult. They ebb and flow together as if they were virtually on top of one another. Which is possibly how they are in reality. It's a mellow, rolled off sound, but with good midrange detail, but it's more about reverb 'tails' than ambience. Nevertheless, while this might not be Metheny at his best, it still deserves a listen, just for the concept, so much more than just a musical curio. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Christian Scott

Yesterday you said tomorrow

Concord Records



Trumpeter Christian Scott is only 27, yet this Grammy nominated album is already his fourth cut. His style has shades of Miles in his electric period and he can be compared with Jon Hassell but the arrangements are very much his own. The opening track on *Yesterday...* releases the torrential drumming of Jamire Williams, one of the most exciting exponents of the art since Billy Cobham. When William's gets going, Scott has difficulty in making his mute trumpet heard, but he seems to appreciate that less can be more when the sidemen are of sufficient calibre, and the band provides solid, uncrowded backing for Scott to mingle in and float over.

His style is described as blurring the boundaries between jazz, hip hop and rock and you can hear where that's coming from but while it strays close to the lines and there are definite rock aspects to the backing the root here is certainly jazz.

This is an original, diverse album that improves with volume thanks to the efforts of none other than Rudy Van Gelder, who engineered and recorded it. It's not hard to hear why he's still in business at what must be quite a ripe age, nor why Scott won Downbeat's critic's poll for trumpeter of the year in 2009. **JK**

RECORDING
MUSIC





Beck

Sea Change

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 2-308



MoFi is best known for rolling through the finest rock recordings of the 1960s and 1970s. So, this 2002 recording from alt.rocker Beck Hansen comes a bit of a shock. Musically though, *Sea Change* is perfect Mobile Fidelity fodder. It was a well recorded album, with master tapes carefully maintained and is musically interesting enough to appeal to more than just those who were around at the time.

Mobile Fidelity received the master tapes a couple of years back, each track arriving on its own master tape. The basic recordings were good, but with the half-speed masters performed entirely free from compression and dynamic processing, this is one of the best analogue transfers of an originally digital recording you can lay your hands on. This double album is a true reflection of the amount of work that goes into a MoFi's pressing. The sound quality is sublime, and far better than the CD mix.

Break-ups have long got the creative juices going, and *Sea Change* is one of those rare break-up albums that doesn't just wallow in the sorrow, but continues to the healing too. The combination of the songwriting and this kind of story arc, is hard to fault. That and a sensational sound quality, thanks in no small part to MoFi. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Gerry Mulligan/Ben Webster

Gerry Mulligan meets Ben

Webster

ORG 13



Norman Granz loved to team up two of his stars, stick the word “meets” between their names and see if he could accomplish twice the pleasure (and sales). The plan works wonders here. Teamed with the incomparable Jimmy Rowles on piano and LeRoy Vinnegar and Mel Lewis filling out the quintet, Granz produced one of the finest albums cut by either Gerry Mulligan or Ben Webster, and that’s saying a lot. Combining the sounds of these two horns was at once obvious and a stroke of genius, for each in its own way lays claim to the most erotic of sounds.

Mulligan brings to the table his songwriting prowess, but for me the stand out tune is ‘The Strayhorn Chelsea Bridge’, one of Ben’s trademarks. Val Valentine recorded the session and in either its mono or stereo versions has always been an audiophile grade record. Bernie Grundman mastered this new issue and it by far the best jazz reissue I’ve heard come out of Grundman’s studio. The horn timbre is perfect, the stereo spread while wide is not unnatural and the center fill just right. So what if you need to get up for frequent 45 RPM side changes—with music this good you need a break after each tune to regain your emotional composure! **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Fringe Magnetic

Empty Spaces

Loop 1011



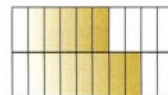
Jazz is alive and well and living in London. Fringe Magnetic is proof. The band, an 10 piece part of the Loop Collective and fronted by Jamie Cullam’s trumpeter Rory Simmons, isn’t one for easy categorisation.

A general crunking up of classical, folk and jazz ideas that is refreshingly hard work, there’s smart use of orchestration here. Kit Massey’s violin and Natalie Rozario’s cello add sophistication at times, at others they combine to sound like a distorted electric guitar. This is gnarly, genre-bending stuff.

That also means at times there’s a miserable angularity that gets annoying. Setting Bukowski poems to music doesn’t help cheer things up either. On the other hand, at its best, this sounds like good John Zorn, and there’s a lot of ‘at its best’ to choose from. It’s also well recorded, with a good soundstage and a sense of being in a live acoustic space.

Those who think jazz started in 1958 and died soon after will probably run screaming from the CD player at the blend of modern classical themes, avant garde conceptualising and dourness here. But if you view jazz as something vibrant and still capable of experimentation, this is worth taking the trouble to explore at length. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC

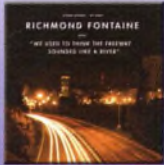
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JS Bach: Fantasia and Fugue in A minor, BWV904, et al.
Angela Hewitt, piano.

Hyperion CDA 67499



This disc was overlooked by me as I thought it was a compilation of previously released material. In fact, as Angela Hewitt states in the liner notes, 'these are the best of the rest'. Arranged as they are on this CD, they show Bach's great variety of form, style, influence and scope. This happened to be the last release in Hewitt's original set of Bach performances.

BWV963 is the only original keyboard sonata by Bach here – the others are transcriptions or used material by Reinken. Johann Adam Reincken was a Dutch/German organist and composer. He was one of the most important German composers of the 17th century, a friend of Buxtehude and a major influence on Johann Sebastian Bach.

Angela Hewitt is clearly the finest interpreter of Bach today and this collection, with some works clearly being transcribed for piano offer up a disc that has a magnificent grace about the playing and the genius that was Bach. While most performances on this disc are transcriptions written for other instruments, I would not want to be without this set. Strongly recommended. **RSF**

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RECORDING
MUSIC



Rachmaninov: Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, et al.
The Orchestra of the Mariinsky Theatre
conducted by Valery Gergiev.
Denis Matsuev, piano.

Mariinsky Live MAR 0505

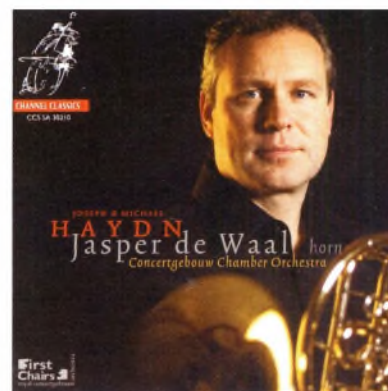


Recorded in February, 2009 in the Concert Hall of the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia, we are given thrilling performances of two oft recorded works by Rachmaninov. Not only is Matsuev and Gergiev as one in this recording but with the sound quality afforded us by the engineers, this sets the bar very high for any competition in the catalogue. Denis Matsuev won the Tchaikovsky International Piano Competition twelve years ago at the age of 23 and has been recording for several labels ever since. He is extremely accomplished and in these recordings is able to demonstrate his passion and skill as a leading interpreter of Rachmaninov. Gergiev and the Mariinsky Orchestra are the perfect accompaniment in these performances. There are those who may enjoy Abbey Simon at the piano with Leonard Slatkin's St. Louis Symphony or perhaps Philippe Entremont and Eugene Ormany with The Philadelphia, but I think this coupling represents the best of the best. Highest recommendation. **RSF**

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RECORDING
MUSIC



Joseph and Michael Haydn: Works for horn.
Concertgebouw Chamber Orchestra,
de Waal (horn).

Channel Classics CCS SA 30210.



This is an outstanding release by Channel Classics. Jasper de Waal is first horn for the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and is an extremely accomplished musician. The disc covers everything from Joseph Haydn's Concerto for Horn no. 1 in D major to Michael Haydn's (after Mozart) Romance for Horn and String Quartet and the outstandingly well performed Adagio and Allegro Molto for Horn and Trombone from the Serenade in D major.

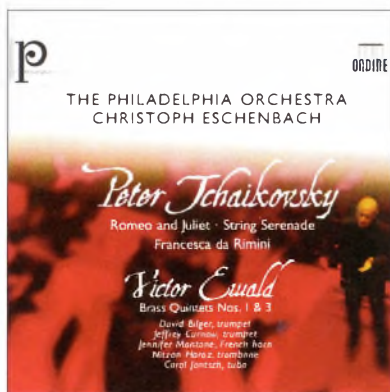
Recorded in the acoustics of the Waalse Kerk in Amsterdam the ambient information available on this disc is warm and rich, but not too reverberant. de Waal is an exceptional artist of great talent and this release shows off his very rich skills. The fabulous Adagio and Allegro which closes out this disc couples de Waal with Jörgen van Rijen, principal trombone of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and is a sonic tour-de-force. van Rijen and de Waal offer us a musical treat that should be experienced by all. Highly recommended. **RSF**

Supplied by:


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RECORDING
MUSIC





Tchaikovsky: Romeo and Juliet, et al. Ewald: Brass Quintet No. 1 and 3
The Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Christoph Eschenbach.

Ondine ODE 1150-2D 

Eschenbach and his Philadelphia Orchestra continue their hallmark of excellence in performance and the engineers have given us reference quality sound. Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet incorporates some of the world's best known melodies and they are played sublimely by the Philadelphia. The performance is an all out tour-de-force and aside from being some of the most beautiful music ever composed, will give your stereo system a full-range workout that should absolutely thrill you. I was totally surprised by the stunning performance of Tchaikovsky's String Serenade. It is to my memory, probably the finest performance I've ever heard and there are several that have been at the top of my list.

Disc 2 opens with a dynamic, controlled and yet explosive performance of the Symphonic Fantasy, Francesca da Rimini. The two Victor Ewald quintets were new to me and I think they are very charming and make an excellent coupling. Reference performances and not to be missed. **RSF**

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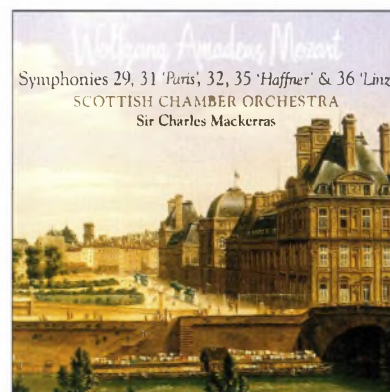
Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 "Choral". Royal Flemish Philharmonic, Philippe Herreweghe.

PentaTone Classics PTC 5186 317



Philippe Herreweghe and the Royal Flemish Philharmonic are almost finished a complete Beethoven Symphony cycle for PentaTone and this performance of the great "Choral" is one for the ages. Herreweghe's pace and tempo makes for a very musical production that ebbs and flows with ease. The performance is very lush, well balanced and sumptuously recorded. Herreweghe is a well-known champion of baroque music, but I can assure you that he is extremely comfortable in Beethoven. So far PenataTone has released previously Symphonies 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 8. I certainly hope Nos. 4 and 7 will be forthcoming as this would complete the cycle and make for a very fine set. There are many who are very picky about their Beethoven and certainly the 9th probably has one of the widest bases of enthusiasts. Whether you like Giulini, Karajan, Boehm or even Furtwangler, you will certainly be extremely satisfied with the performance on this disc. PentaTone always gives us great sound, and this is a reference performance. **RSF**

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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Symphonies 29, 31 'Paris', 32, 35 'Haffner', & 36 'Linz'. Scottish Chamber Orchestra conducted by Sir Charles Mackerras.

Linn CKD 350 

This is a set of Mozart one cannot be without. While we are dealing with some works by this composer that are considered his first mature compositions, this ensemble and conductor (Mackerras, turning 84, seems to shine in his senior years), coupled with an intimate and excellent recording quality afforded us by Linn, make this set very special.

The performances offered up of the great 'Paris', 'Haffner' and 'Linz' are of reference quality and have taken primary seat at the head of the class. These have become my new reference and certainly I think you will be hard pressed to find a better set of these symphonies in the catalogues. I am especially impressed with the exhilarating playing and performances of Symphonies 35 and 36. To me, they represent some of the finest, most well crafted Mozart available ever. Mackerras and the SCO set new performance standards. These are the best of the best and should not be missed on any account. Superlative recommendation and exceptionally enjoyable. **RSF**

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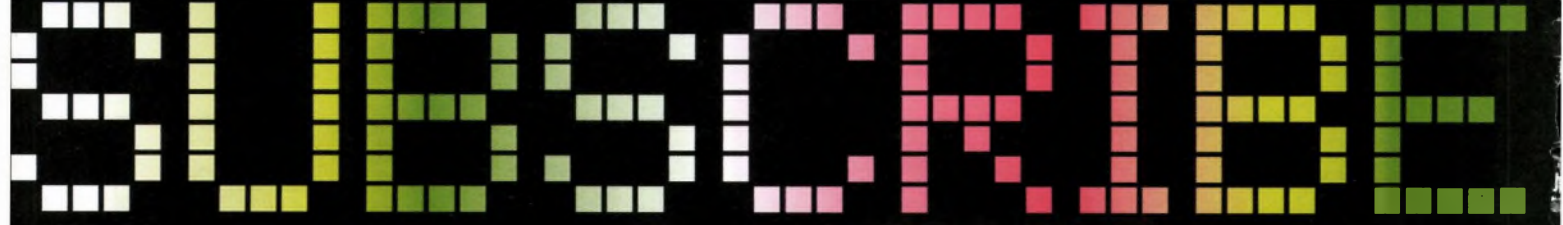
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Arab Strap – Philophobia

every home should have one

by Jason Kennedy

NORMALLY, OUR SURVEY OF THE MUST-HAVE ALBUMS FOR AUDIOPHILES HAS A DISTINCTLY WELL-KNOWN FEEL. This isn't the typical place for musical discovery, rather musical re-discovery. But in the case of *Philophobia*, this particular forgotten gem is worth revisiting.

'It was the biggest cock you'd ever seen'. As opening lines go the entrée into Arab Strap's *Philophobia* is as arresting as any I've encountered, and it's not as though it's buried in the mix. This is a startlingly visceral album in both sound and content. That line from 'Packs of Three' is one of the more explicit on the album, but it's far from the only such lyric on this disc. This is not your typical slice of late nineties indie; it feels like a naked autobiographical work, almost Irving Welsh in musical form. The fact that the band comes from Falkirk and have a predilection for songs about women, booze and drugs just might be a factor here.

"This is not your typical slice of late nineties indie; it feels like a naked autobiographical work, almost Irving Welsh in musical form."

I discovered *Philophobia* on a recent visit to Bowers & Wilkins' Steyning R&D facility. Engineer Steve Pearce, he of the golden ears, had chosen the track 'New Birds' to use in a demonstration of the new 800 Diamond speaker – the biggest beast in the range now that the 801 is no more. All of the music he played sounded superb but the Arab Strap topped the lot and I had to have it. 'New Birds' features a bass guitar line that has been created with two instruments or more likely the same one doubled up, it's a sound that Tortoise used to great effect in their heyday. But they never managed to record it as well as Paul Savage. He gave it extension, grip and timbre like you've never heard and this combined with the close miked voice of Aidan Moffat gives the piece a palpably electric atmosphere that takes over the room.

Credit must also be given to the man who provided 'most things musical' Malcolm Middleton, the other half of Arab Strap. There are various additional musicians but that bass line is Middleton's as are the drums. There are two producer/engineers cited in the liner notes, but their work doesn't seem to tally with the dramatically different styles of presentation that exist on the album. Geoff Allan produced the first three tracks, but two are high level, immediate and just a little bit close to the edge while the second is far more relaxed. In fact

most of the album is laid back musically and soundwise (even including the aforementioned 'New Birds'), but turn up the volume and the presence is immense.

The overall tone of the album is decidedly that of the drunk and his difficulties but it's not as depressing as many seem to think. It's downbeat for sure but it's also very real and even quite humorous in its excesses of self pity. Gritty in lyrical terms – the title means fear of love - but not so much so musically, where simplicity is the key to success. It reminds me of American Music Club despite the Scots accent, there is a degree of integrity in the lyrics that suggests total honesty. Something rather backed up by the disclaimer in the liner notes which states: 'All characters in this book are genuine and any similarities to persons living or dead are entirely intentional'. The 'book' contains all the lyrics in a continuous form without breaks for track titles, making, *Philophobia* more like a talking book with a rather effective backing track. +



ARAB STRAP – PHILOPHOBIA

Matador Records: OLE-315

Track Listing

1. Packs of Three – 3:23
2. (Afternoon) Soaps – 4:16
3. Here We Go – 5:04
4. New Birds – 6:27
5. One Day, After School – 5:01
6. Islands – 3:42
7. The Night Before the Funeral – 4:51
8. Not Quite a Yes – 3:42
9. Piglet – 6:48
10. Afterwards – 4:23
11. My Favorite Muse – 5:03
12. I Would've Liked Me a Lot Last Night – 7:26
13. The First Time You're Unfaithful – 5:38



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