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MARK LEVINSON
N° 53



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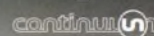


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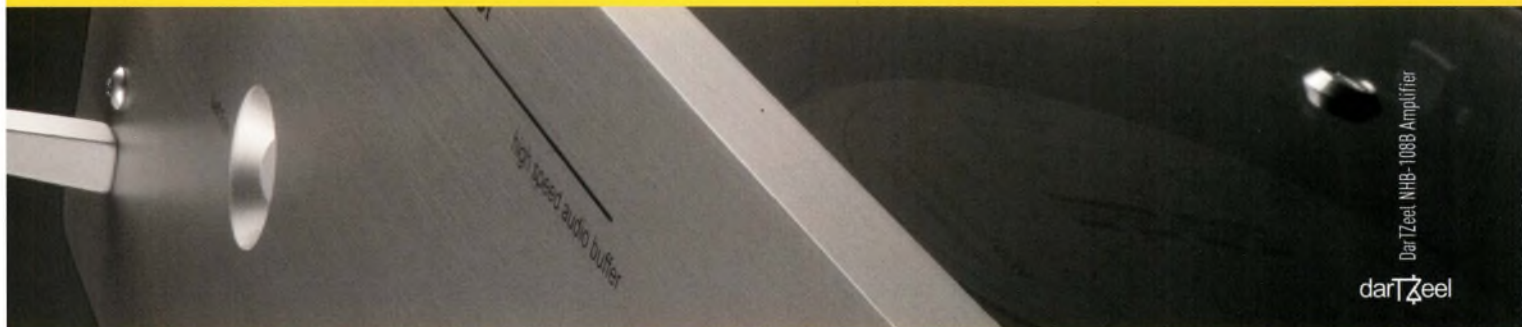
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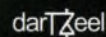
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editorial

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The audio world is in something close to turmoil. On the one hand, it is seeing marked downturns in sales of CD players; on the other, it relies on high-quality audio to ply its wares. If the CD market goes away, few people will invest in high-end audio if the sound files they play through the system are of relatively low quality. Fortunately, there are some glimmers of hope for audiophile life after CD.

Although still not available in the UK yet (you need a US billing address), HDTracks announced that the ABKCO 24-bit remasters of The Rolling Stones first 27 albums will be available to download online. Priced between \$20-\$30, the albums are taken from the now-unavailable SACD remasters of these albums released between 2002-4. Meanwhile, Apple is strongly rumoured to be in discussion with key players in the music business to release 24-bit files on its iTunes service as premium downloads.

As with all things music-related, this has drawn praise and hatred from the chattering e-classes in equal measure. Apple, it seems, should be simultaneously praised for making a step toward better sound quality, and be drowned in bleach for ripping us off yet again with a format that cannot sound any better than MP3. And we 'audiophools' are once again 'suckers' for daring to ask if there's anything better than 128kbps AAC.

We need not to be tied to physical formats; trying to second-guess the future is a futile exercise, but both CD and CD players sales are already in decline, and the Bristol Show & Vision Show highlighted yet again just how many companies are pinning their hopes on a computer or network streaming solution. Whether built on a foundation on market data, idle gossip, empty rhetoric or late-

night drunken pontificating, the view held by many is that the war for tomorrow's front-end is almost over, and we lost; audio companies must concentrate on making good products that make the most of music delivered from online suppliers, rather than hope that people will continue to buy discs in the long term.

I still maintain that the computer-side products add to the pantheon of products in our audio systems, rather than necessarily replace CD. In part, for me this is because the disc ripping process is so daunting when you are faced with hundreds and hundreds of discs staring back at you. There is also the joy of holding a physical format in your hands, something that LP remains so good at capitalising upon. And some still prefer the sound of CD, even when compared to the uncompressed files stored and played through a hard drive. This is why we won't be giving up on CD just yet.

But fortunately, it looks like the future of high-quality downloads might prove promising, after all... +

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com



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Stop listening to hi-fi...

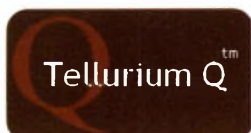
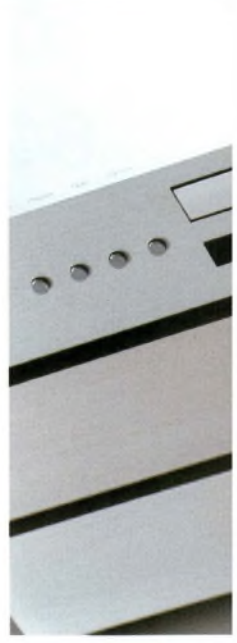
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news



Clearaudio Magnify

Vinyl expert Clearaudio has introduced the £2,375 Magnify tonearm. The new arm features a new hybrid arm bearing, combining vertical precision ball races with a magnetic horizontal bearing with adjustable magnetic horizontal damping.

The Magnify's two piece carbon-fibre armtube also sports micrometer adjustment of both tracking force and azimuth. It can be fitted in a standard Linn mounting and supports the optional Clearaudio on-the-fly VTA adjustable base. It can be supplied with either a metre of Clearaudio's Sixstream cables or with a RCA junction box for aftermarket cable hunters.

www.clearaudio.de, www.audioreference.co.uk

ISOL-8 SubStation family

Power-meister ISOL-8 has developed a modular high-end approach to mains conditioning for 2011. The starting place is the £1,899 SubStation LC, a half-size four socket, 8 amp conditioning unit, featuring DC blocking and separate stages on its transmodal filter to prevent pollution between components. A £1,999 high-current version (called SubStation HC) of the same provides a 16 amp solution for those with larger integrated amps and power amps to feed. Both SubStations feature high-purity OFC wiring and inductors and premium-grade caps to keep series resistance low. Both are designed to sit side-by-side on a standard equipment shelf. We will be investigating both HC and LC in the next issue.

Of similar size, the £1,399 SubStation Axis delivers 16A current capacity and DC blocking, but without the multistage filtration of the LC and HC devices.

www.isol-8.co.uk



conrad-johnson ET5

One step down from the awesome GAT preamplifier, conrad-johnson's new ET5 preamp is clearly cut from the same cloth. This single-chassis, 'enhanced triode' line-stage features just a single valve to provide the voltage gain, connecting to a low output impedance, high-current MOSFET buffer. The input and operational control is microprocessor driven, with two-dozen laser-trimmed metal foil resistor network forming the custom 100-step volume control.

As ever with all c-j devices, there is no overall feedback and no electrolytic capacitors in the signal path. The circuit sports custom CJD Teflon capacitors, used in the musically important areas such as coupling output caps and in post-regulator power storage.

The new ET5 is priced at £9,500, or slightly less than half the price of the GAT.

www.conradjohnson.com

www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Kaiser Vivace

The new Kaiser Vivace loudspeaker is said to be invisible to radar and can – at a pinch – be used as a nuke shelter. That's because the speaker's crossover is screened in a material developed for the Stealth aircraft programme, while the cabinet is made from synthetic Tankwood; so dense, it's said to be the neutron shield of choice for aspiring nuclear physicists. Fortunately, new UK distributors The Right Note has no plans to investigate the loudspeaker's other career paths.

Based on the Bavarian company's Kawero flagship speaker, the slim fronted design is intended to produce a sound big enough to fill a concert hall. It features a front-firing Mundorf Air Motion Transformer and a front driving Scanspeak Illuminator mid-bass to the front and a second passive radiator to the rear. The crossover is also treated with Vertex AQ proprietary RF and EM control techniques.

The price for the Kaiser Vivace starts at £23,000 per pair, depending on finish.

www.kaiser-acoustics.com

www.rightnote.co.uk



NEWS IN BRIEF

Harbeth Acoustics is auctioning a limited number of loudspeakers to raise money for UK charities involved in relief work in Japan, following the devastating earthquake and tsunami on March 11 this year. The auction will only be conducted through Harbeth dealer Radlett Audio, and is open to UK residents who are able to collect the loudspeakers in person from the Saffron Walden store. More details are available on the Harbeth User Group website.

www.harbeth.co.uk

www.radlettaudio.co.uk

Arcam has been waving its dongles around. The Cambridge company has added a pair of Klear wireless devices for its wireless equipped rCube and rDAC-kw products. The £80 rWave is a USB dongle designed for laptops and desktop computers, while the rWand is a £70 dongle with the 30-pin plug specific to iDevices. An update of our rDAC review that dabbles with dongles will be in the next issue.

www.arcam.co.uk

Packet Video has introduced a version of its popular Twonky media streaming system specifically for the iPhone. The Twonky Mobile app allows you to share your music, photos and videos and discover local networked media content on your iPhone, and then play it through web-connected devices like a PlayStation 3. Twonky Mobile for Android users has been updated for AirPlay support.

www.twonky.com

It's a wireless world, as KEF has announced its own £450 Universal Wireless System 2.0. The narrow-band RF transceiver system features KEF's own Advanced Frequency Hopping Spread Spectrum (AAFHSS) that hops from channel to channel in milliseconds if it detects conflicts. The system comprises a transmitter that connects to an existing source and a pair of powered receivers with built in 50W amplifiers. The system is claimed to deliver CD-quality sound and can be expanded up to a 7.1 channel system.

www.kef.com

The High End show in Germany (May 20-22) is celebrating its 30th year of bringing Europe the best in audio and video equipment. Starting small in 1981 as a 20 exhibitor show in Düsseldorf, the show quickly out-grew its humble beginnings, moving first to the Hotel Kempinski in Frankfurt and – since 2003 – the large MOC exhibition centre in Munich. It is now considered by many to be the most important high-end audio show in the West.

www.highendsociety.de

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Win Linn!

WIN A CHANCE TO EXPERIENCE THE INNERMOST WORKINGS OF THE LINN FACTORY AND TO MEET LINN MD, GILAD TIEFENBRUN

Scottish manufacturer of high-performance music systems, Linn, has teamed up with *Hi-Fi+* to offer readers the chance to visit the Glasgow-based Linn factory and meet the people behind the products.

One lucky winner and a guest will be given an in-depth guided tour of Linn's purpose-built, Richard Rogers-designed facility and have the opportunity to listen to the latest Linn systems and music in their new Visitor Centre. Discover firsthand the care and attention to detail that goes into every hand-built product, and learn more about Linn's unique manufacturing process as well as their unique understanding of the entire musical journey from artist to listener – all of which guarantees the unrivalled performance you enjoy from Linn.

The winner will also get the chance to meet Linn's Managing Director, Gilad Tiefenbrun, as well as receive an exclusive preview of forthcoming releases from the *Gramophone* Label of the Year, Linn Records. In addition, five lucky runners up will each receive two Studio Master album downloads from Linn Records.

Nearly forty years ago Linn was borne out of a simple truth: the more accurately a system reproduces sound, the greater the impact it will have on the listener. Ever since then Linn's goal has been to produce music and movie systems capable of delivering the full emotion of a live performance in the home.

Linn's commitment to sound quality, attention to detail and understanding of customers' needs has led to the development and production of their high-quality digital stream (DS) players that form part of Linn's three high-performance ranges: from the flagship Klimax range through to Akurate and Majik.



For your chance to win this exclusive prize, simply answer the following question. Five runners-up will be selected to win two free Studio Master download albums of their choice from the Linn Records catalogue:

Q) Which of the following is not a Linn DS player?

- a. Klimax**
- b. Sondek**
- c. Majik**

Send your answer on a postcard to *Hi-Fi+* (Linn Competition), Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd, Unit 23, Sandleheath Industrial Estate, Sandleheath, Hampshire SP6 1PA, or email editor@hifiplus.com (placing the words 'Linn Competition' as the subject line) with your name address, and contact details. The lucky winners will be randomly selected from the correct answers received by that date. Competition closes 2nd June 2011. For more information about Linn please visit www.linn.co.uk.

Terms and Conditions

No purchase necessary. Competition open to UK and Eire residents aged 18 or over. Competition closes at 23:59 GMT on 2nd June 2011; entries received thereafter will be discarded. One entry per person. One winner and five runners-up will be selected at random from all valid entries and informed by 10th June. The editor's decision is final. Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd and Linn Products Ltd reserve the right to select alternative winners, should the original winners be beyond reasonable contact further than seven days of original notification. Prize details: 1x prize consisting of; one winner and a guest to receive a guided tour of the Linn Products factory, a meeting with Gilad Tiefenbrun and return travel expenses covered; plus runner up prizes of 5x two Studio Master album downloads from www.linnrecords.com. Additional expenses are not included and prize must be redeemed at a time of mutual agreement. Prize is non-transferrable and there is no cash alternative. The promoter reserves the right to withdraw or amend this promotion. Promoter: Linn Products Ltd, Glasgow Road, Waterfoot, Glasgow, G76 0EQ.

Please send your letters to Hi-Fi Plus, Unit 22, Sandleheath Industrial Estate, Sandleheath, Hampshire, SP6 1PA, United Kingdom.
Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming!

Dreams are made of this

Having read and re-read your review of the DarTZeel NHB-458 (issue 77) – what an amplifier, gaspworthy is certainly the right word, the hernia inducing weight of 67.5kg – (148.5 lbs in old money, almost my weight – I wish!), but such an amplifier would demand of the best of not just the associated hi-end equipment partnered with it along side the NHB-18NS and the Zeel connections.

So I started looking at the type of equipment you would need to partner such an amplifier (dreams are free – at the moment), apart from it all being the *crème de la crème*, to justify the cost and performance of the NHB-458's and of the associated equipment partnering them.

You would have to have speakers capable of reproducing a 16hz organ pipe perfectly with no appreciable drop in dB relative to 20Hz – hell, no, No drop at all in dB relative to 20Hz and no phase shift throughout the entire frequency range up to 40kHz (Of course the human ear cannot hear 40kHz we know, but you can hear the semi-tones and the harmonics of those frequencies as they come down the scale, which is of course where the analogue LP in a top flight system still scores over CD and even SACD and DVD-A by a very large degree).

Speaker cables and interconnect cables – aside from the Zeel connects would have to be the very best gold plated Ohno continuous cast pure silver.

When I finally reached just over £ ¼ m I looked longingly at our little piggy bank on our Swedish antique sideboard – into which we put all our loose small change – it became quite clear fairly quickly after the first gentle shake that, alas, it sadly did not contain £ ¼ m.

But then I thought to myself, such a system, the effortless power on tap and huge dynamic range would require a purpose-built listening room of at least 30 feet by 20 feet, with a cast radius dome concrete ceiling, similar to the late Alastair Robertson-Aikman's listening room – founder of SME. The floor would also have to be of at least 50cm thick of reinforced evenly poured concrete.

But this in turn would require a geological survey on the area the listening room was to be built, so Bach's *Toccatà and Fugue* 16hz organ note on the 32' organ pipe recorded on either LP or CD didn't induce ground cracking frequency pulses, which could of course upset the neighbours a hundred metres down our track, it wouldn't best please the elks, deer, lynx or the wolf that appears every now and then, as for the big male wild boar spotted in the forest – believe me, no one wants to upset him! Unless of course your hunting rifle is ready,

loaded and cocked and you have a damn big Bar-b-Q! - Mmmmmmmmm – Pork Scratchings and chops by the tens of kilo's – Yummy!

But then if I were to have a geological survey, I would also require a National Physics Laboratory survey to measure the exact force of gravity where the listening room was to be built, so the exact stylus pressure can be set to within the nano-gramm – contrary to popular belief, the force of gravity in Sweden, and indeed the UK and worldwide is not a constant force, it varies slightly depending on the various rock strata, various granites and the thickness thereof and mean height above or below sea level.

I would then of course require an Electrophysical Survey – different rock strata's can contain veins of minerals within having different electrophysical properties.

The very last thing you would want would be a superb listening room with the very best of high-end equipment, along with the afore mentioned DarTZeel's with a gaping crack appearing in the wall and floor.

The wrong stylus pressure on my prized mega expensive ClearAudio Insider Reference Cartridge, and horror of horrors as the Kuzma Airline 1 arm on the prized Kuzma Stabi XL turntable starts sliding towards the centre spindle due to the minutely slight tilt of the floor, bang goes that prized 300gm LP pressing of Ludwig Van Beethoven's 'Fidelio conducted by Otto Klemperer with the Philharmonia Orchestra and Chorus' on EMI classics label following the appearance of the cracks.

Then I realise – Oh God – the presence of Nepheline Syenite, one of the constituent ores from which capacitors are made in a vein in the plutonic granite rock under the listening room has now affected the capacitance of my prized cartridge too as if the sliding across my prized record wasn't enough – Oh God!

It is then that I turned around after hearing a noise that was not from my hi-fi or a further crack – Yes, the big and extremely angry male wild boar – all 400kg of him, is hell bent on getting through that crack and relieving me of a leg or two before – NO! turning his attention to my beloved hi-fi!

It was then I woke up in a sweat. Yes, my MF9's, 401 and SME12" arm, Frog, Beethoven's *Fidelio* and the rest of my hi-fi was all still there, intact – not a tusk mark anywhere, still had my legs too! so again looking at our piggy bank, 'we'll save that for a rainy day' I said to my other half – who was giving me a very strange look, meanwhile, until I win the lottery or dig up a Viking treasure or two from the back garden, I'll stick to what I have – But as I said, Dreams are indeed free – for the time being at any rate! Really enjoyed the review though and the rest of the mag of course, Pork Scratchings anyone?

John Ellis
Sweden, via email

Ah, the power of dreams. Just remember that the cost of virtual concrete can be offset by the high price of wild boar and venison sausages in dreamland – Ed.

Touch of Class

Thank you for including the review of the Squeezebox Touch in issue 75. I have just bought one on the strength of that review and am very pleased that I did. I got mine from Amazon and a one-metre digital coax cable from Blue Jeans Cable for a combined cost of just £219.02 – surely, small change in this hobby of ours for what is after all a source component that can deliver a very high quality signal to our hi-fi. I'm only interested in downloading 24/96 FLAC recordings and storing these on USB sticks and at this early point am amazed at the sound quality. My first taste of 24/96 was the five free tracks from HDTracks.com and these show what downloading music is capable of. I have since purchased three albums from them and this will be my preferred choice of music delivery from now if available. Incidentally, if you wish to buy Hi-rez downloads from an American site pay by Paypal and don't give your address or credit card details as they aren't allowed to sell them outside the United States. For anyone with a computer and a high quality DAC, the Touch is a no brainer.

All we need to do now is persuade the major labels to make available all their recordings in 24/96 downloads. If Linn and Naim can do it I'm sure the big companies can – maybe the global hi-fi magazines could have some influence here.

Terry (Surname withheld just in case HDTracks see it)
via email

Rumours of Apple and the recording industry serving up 24bit iTunes are rife at this time, Terry. I'd love to take credit for this on behalf of the hi-fi mags, but big business and a few rounds of strategically placed golf by some very wealthy champions of industry have worked even greater wonders – Ed.

Vive la différence

I recently read a reviewer (in a rival magazine) called people downright stupid if they don't like what he likes. Wrong! No reviewer can tell me what I like or dislike; we are completely different from one another – even a musician cannot tell me what a Fender Stratocaster sounds like – he can only describe what it sounds like *to him!*

While I am at it, when reviewers say such tripe as “the bass sounds well to the left, the singers voice soars out in the middle etc, etc”, unless you were at the recording session and have actually mixed the music down to a format you are listening to, the bottom line is you are listening to someone else's interpretation of **how the** music should sound. None of us really know what we are listening to and if we like what we are listening to on our own equipment in our own home, that is all that counts – I haven't heard any hi-fi yet that sounds as good to my ears as the concerts I go to pretty frequently

Peter McHale, via email

I would be surprised if any hi-fi will sound as good as the live event, Peter. The great advantage audio has is, when it comes to listening to great artists no longer with us, all we have is the (hi-fi) recording.

Reviewers have tracks that can tell them how a component performs simply because they can reference aspects of that recording against prior listening through hundreds of system combinations.

And as to reviewers trying to force their opinions on others, I agree. There's no need to call one another deaf for liking different things. Each room, each person's musical tastes and their budget is different to the next guy. Ultimately the best course of action is auditioning, but if that's impossible, try to find a reviewer who seems to like the same stuff you like; chances are you'll find some common ground – Ed.

FEATURE

The Bristol Sound & Vision Show 2011

by Alan Sircom

Since the end of the 1980s, the last weekend in February has been put aside for the UK audio industry to make the annual westward pilgrimage. The Bristol Sound & Vision Show has grown to be the country's premier audio event. A combination of atypically good weather, half-term weekend and key sporting fixtures – plus the continued economic uncertainty and all-time-low consumer confidence – meant there seemed to be less people walking through the door over the weekend, but those who did make the event were very much 'quality', not just 'quantity'. It's a shame the quantity didn't make it, though, because once again the Bristol Show proved a success in terms of the professionalism and energy many manufacturers put into their events. Perhaps because of this, sales were up slightly on the previous year, so those who made it were both keen and keen bargain hunters.

The Audio T/Sevenoaks group of stores that runs the show is one of the last great dedicated high street AV retail chains, and it got that way by providing the right products for the consumer. Although there were a few exceptions – especially on the video side, including a stunning £60,000 3D HD system from projector experts SIM2 – 'high-end' in the world of Audio T/Sevenoaks rarely reaches far above about £3,000, and the world of turntables and valve amplifiers is largely outside their remit. In fact, a lot of this company's sales are still in the multichannel home cinema arena. The show echoes that direction, and in fairness it is a direction followed by many audio buyers in this country.

Regardless, like the CES in Las Vegas, this year's big thing was audio streaming. Part necessity in the face of falling CD sales, part wanting a piece of the Apple and Sonos pie, practically every company making electronics was making either network streaming media renderers or computer-chummy DACs. One of the most talked about products to be launched at the show, Cyrus' new trio of Stream products were picking up a lot of attention. Designed with the classic Cyrus 'singing shoebox' look, the three UPnP-compatible networked devices include the £1,600 Streamline, an all-in-one streamer/amp in the Naim UnitiQute style, a £2,000 Stream XP, which combines the streamer with a built-in preamplifier, and the £1,400 Stream X. This last is designed as a streaming source component for an existing system. All three feature the company's custom n-Remote handset, but as the system runs on IR lines, there's no standard provision for iPad/Android remote control.

AirPlay signatory companies were keen to show off their wireless Apple mojo. Both Denon and Marantz have shown their Apple AirPlay-equipped streaming devices before (even though they were technically not allowed to shout about it because of

Apple preventing them from breaking the news), but Bristol was the first outing for the £499 Zeppelin Air from Bowers and Wilkins. Looks can be deceptive; hardly any parts from the (still in production) original Zeppelin are common to the new model, so it's not only capable of receiving iTunes wirelessly around the home, but sounds a lot better than its predecessor. Desktop systems were also proving popular (the show caters for an audience with a distinct price ceiling, but this gives a flavour of what real-world people buy outside of the audiophile domain).

Computer-friendly DACs were also proving popular, with first-showings of the new Electrocompaniet PD-1 DAC from its Prelude line, the first UK outing for Bryston's BDP-1 digital music player and the new Rega DAC. The former was making some exceptionally good sounds in an all-Electrocompaniet Prelude system – using as sources both an iPod Nano through Pure's excellent i-20 iPod dock and from a laptop into the company's EMS-1 wireless streamer. Bryston's not-streaming, not-a-DAC, USB-based music controller is an intriguing take on getting file-based audio into an existing system. Rega's DAC on the other hand was only being played rarely, because the company was playing a different classic album, every hour on the hour, through its flagship CD and amp. The 'room' itself (more a collection of wooden panels in reality) was something of a nightmare for Rega and – because the company's own flagship loudspeaker is still in development – had to opt for PMC Fact 8 speakers with their dip-switch sound tailoring. An ambitious project nonetheless, and the Rega DAC is on the *Hi-Fi+* list.

Even those brands with new CD players came with a computer audio solution too. Leema Acoustics new Elements series comes with both; the upcoming half sized CD player and amp are joined by a USB-ready DAC and a forthcoming streamer in the new



£1,000 per box line. In addition, Audiolab's long-awaited 8000CDQ CD player/DAC/preamp looks extremely promising; circuit designer John Westlake was showing off its main board, to admiring glances from other digital engineers. The room also sported the exciting new seven strong Wharfedale Jade speaker range.

Small speakers were the order of the day in Bristol, with new sub-compacts launched by Acoustic Energy, Boston Acoustics and ProAc. ProAc is celebrating 30 years in business with a new version of the ever-popular Tablette mini monitor. Run on tall stands these tiny tots were making what many considered to be one of the best sounds at the show. Boston Acoustics was not being widely and publicly promoted at the show, but were on display in a private showing. The reason became clear later, when Mordaunt-Short and Marantz announced they were to part company in their joint cross-Europe marketing and distribution venture, and Marantz was teaming up with its D+M stablemate. The new European-led A-Series (featuring the development work of Karl-Heinz Fink) features three two-way bookshelves and two floorstanders, starting at £150 for the A23 and going up to just £799 for the A360. Ken Ishiwata of Marantz was particularly smitten by the sweet £200 A25, which seemed to combine the scale of older stateside Bostons with the imaging of small Euroboxes. Excellent!

Acoustic Energy was also taking the budget route seriously, with a pair of compact mini monitors called, unsurprisingly, the Compact 1. This two-way standmount uses the tried and trusted braced MDF cabinet, soft dome tweeter and paper cone mid/bass and is expected to retail at just £150.

At the other end of the scale, Cabasse was showing its distinctive iO2 2.1 channel

Above: Cyrus Stream XP streaming client and digital preamp

Middle: Focal Bird 2.1 channel amp system

Bottom: Bowers and Wilkins Zeppelin Air wi-fi iPod dock speaker system

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► loudspeaker system, with its spherical mid and treble coaxial 'eyeball' loudspeaker and clever active Santorin 25 subwoofer. This was just one of a slew of innovative and forward-thinking products from French speaker brands. Elipson's football sized Planet L loudspeakers were being shown for the first time (a review of these will be in the next issue of *Hi-Fi+*), while Focal were showing off the new Bird integrated amplifier and 2.1 channel system (cleverly the subwoofer fits inside the amp) and the XS book slimline active computer speaker system, as well as the Viva Utopia universal high-end LCR style standmount loudspeaker.

Wilson Benesch held one of the biggest launches at the show, revealing its new Geometry series speaker system. Comprising two models, the £4,500 Vertex standmount and the £7,800 Vector floorstander both feature the company's proprietary Advance Composite Technology monocoque cabinet construction and a unique 25mm semispherical tweeter and 170mm Tactic II drivers. The speakers will be available mid year and we hope to have a review of them in a later issue. The sound they produced – using a Mastersound Evolution 845 – was very exciting.

Spendor and Neat Acoustics also chose Bristol as launch pad for new loudspeaker models. Spendor introduced a new £1,295 two-way floorstander in the A-Series, the A3. Borrowing from its SA1 and A5 models – both of which are firm favourites at *Hi-Fi+* – the compact A3 floorstander features a 150mm ep38 mid-bass unit and a 22mm wide surround tweeter and looks set to extend the popularity of the A-Series still further. The S3/5 R2 is more in the classic Spendor mold, a thin-walled, sealed box mini-monitor two-way for £850 that takes the classic BBC LS3/5a design and potentially brings it up to date. Meanwhile Neat Acoustics added a £6,000 standmount to its flagship Ultimatum line. The XLS features isobarically-loaded mid-bass, a 26mm front-firing tweeter and two upwards firing supertweeters.

Turntables weren't completely forgotten at Bristol, and there were a few companies (including Neat) using vinyl sources alongside their CD and file-based alternatives. But the job of keeping the faith was largely down to Henley Designs and Mitchell Engineering, with Keith Monks showing its record cleaning systems, and Denon with a static display of its 100th Anniversary direct drive turntable. Henley was showing off its excellent new Pro-ject package system – the £1,000 Xperience V Pack – comprising Xperience turntable, Evolution tonearm and an Ortofon Vivo Blue MC cartridge, in a handy plug 'n' play turntable solution.

New amplifiers and CD players were thin on the ground, but there were two notable and excellent exceptions. Primare returned on form with its CD32 player and I32 integrated amp, both priced at £2,200. Of the two, the amp is perhaps the more exciting, as it uses Primare's UFPD (Ultra Fast Power Devices) – a new form of Class D topology that appears to realise the performance promised but arguably never quite achieved by previous switching amp designs. But perhaps the surprise system of the show for me was Onkyo's return to serious audio equipment. It's £1,500 C-7000R CD player, £1,700 P-3000R preamp and hefty 170 watt £2,500 M-5000R power amps were tucked away in a room at the end of a busy corridor, but made a pair of KEF Reference floorstanders truly sing.

Finally, the cable market was exceptionally well covered as always. Atlas Cables had a bewildering array of 19 new cables covering all the bases and all the prices. DFA was showing its new Perfect Wave digital interconnect. Nordost was demonstrating its new entry-level Leif ranges and (not so) newcomer TMSystems ('TM' stands for Touraj Moghaddam of Roksan fame) was showing his new Pulse range of cables. Touraj is still heavily involved in



Wilson Benesch's new Vector floorstander from the new Geometry range.

Roksan, but he also has some insights into system set-up and feels that – despite all the time and energy that has gone into cable development – it's still something of a weak, ahem, link. Then there was Chord company, demonstrating – with considerable success – what a difference a plastic sleeve on a phono plug can make to the sound of a cable.

There was much, much more. Eight floors and dozens of companies showing off their wares. Overall the sound was mixed, but got better over the weekend, especially when the visitors tailed off, the volume got turned down a bit and people stopped playing their demo discs and let their hair down a bit. +

Sonnis faber



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Sonus Faber Amati Futura Loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom, photography by Adrian Lyon

The Sonus Faber – that very limited, gargantuan and just all-over extreme speaker titan, which was already pre-sold long before it became a real product – taught the company a lot. The ‘trickle-down’ effect that brings Formula One technology to tomorrow’s automobiles applies here; the skills learned in making the Sonus Faber statement has trickled down to the new Amati Futura.

Apart from the name and being a boat-tailed floorstander aside, there are almost no points of contact between the Amati Homage and Futura. The cabinet is bigger, it uses different drivers... everything changes. And so does the price, but not so dramatically; the Futura model costing twenty-one grand is not so very far from the standard Amati Homage price today. It’s not hard to imagine that this is the first of a trio of Futura models rolling in above the Homage range. The Amati Homage stays in production, but one has to wonder for how long, given the stiff competition from above?

Part of the trickle-down effect from the Sonus Faber is the way the Futura is essentially built around an exo-skeleton of a combination of nickel and Avional, a very high-strength, high-stiffness and low-mass aluminium/copper/magnesium/silicon alloy. The CNC machined back fins and top and bottom plate form this basis, which controls, absorbs and transmits resonance away from more traditional front baffle, side panels and internal architecture of the speaker. But ‘traditional’ isn’t really the right word here; those multi-layered progressively rounded side walls act as constrained layers, are ribbed at key acoustically-significant regions and are thus self-damping. All of which defines ‘science in the service of art’.

The Sonus Faber ACT (Acronym Creation Team) have been hard at work too, moving the LVT (Low Vibration Transmission) system and TMD (Tuned Mass Damper) – as well as the Stealth Reflex System – from the statement piece over to the Futura. In fairness, these acronyms and buzzwords are backed up by a lot of mechanical engineering; TMD, for example, is essentially a tuned shock absorber, which acts to turn another set of stray resonances into heat (in much the same way that shock absorbers in skyscrapers work), LVT effectively ‘floats’ the loudspeaker on an elastomer suspension system to prevent local acoustic feedback and the Stealth system is a series of para-a-periodic enclosure vents. All of this means effectively no resonance on the inside, none on the outside and a ported speaker that is almost completely free from sounding like a ported speaker.

It’s a three and a half way reflex (make that Stealth Reflex) design, sporting a 29mm dome tweeter, a 179mm midrange cone and two 220mm woofers. In many respects, the midrange is the key to the Futura sound; it’s an air-dried doped paper cone fed by an oversized 43mm voice coil and special eddy-current reducing copper rings, and the whole driver is viscoelastically decoupled from the curved front baffle. The one bit of trickle-up technology is the crossover, because both the Amati Futura and the Sonus Faber flagship use the progressive slope crossover response first seen in speakers like the Liuto. Only this one has Mundorf Supreme caps and Jantzen coils that cost as much as the Liuto itself. Crossover points are at 80Hz, 220Hz and 3.2kHz, and all of those drivers are customised versions of designs made by Scanspeak.

There are those who think the main source of high-end loudspeakers should be well-meaning guys in sheds. But not Sonus Faber; the finish on Sonus Faber always made the grade, even in the early days. It was that top Homage range that really caught the eye. It made other speaker makers raise the quality of finish. But the Futura improves on the Homage on an unprecedented scale. I can imagine more than a few drivers asking Moderna why their latest Ferrari isn’t finished to Amati Futura standards. I can also envisage some angry screaming from other high-end manufacturers, demanding the same uncompromising quality from their woodworkers. It’s that kind of finish.

That’s seven layers of hand-finished lacquer kind of finish, the likes of which you would normally see growing out of the neck of the violin virtuoso. The red side panels have a glowing translucent lustre that will make you walk around and around the speakers, and not be disappointed, ever. Offset by the ‘chrome’ top (actually a ‘we are not telling’ high-tech chemical process that

▶ leaves that almost unbreakable polished finish just 30 microns thick) with the name cut deep, bottom and back and the black strings across the front baffle. These could only come from a Catholic country, because that sin of pride (of ownership) is going to need a lot of Hail Marys. "It's been two CDs since my last confession, Father." This is one of those loudspeakers that sings a siren's song, but this one does it even when there's no music playing. This is what you get when a country can list Sophia Loren and the Ferrari 250 GTO among its style icons.

There has always been something intrinsically lovely about the Amati sound. They have a richness of harmonic structure that befits a loudspeaker as elegant as the floorstanders. If there was a criticism, it was that they went for the 'elegance' and refinement over accuracy and dynamic punch. Not a big trade off, but those after Magico-grade honesty would find the previous Amati polite in comparison. Lovely, yes... but perhaps too lovely.

Which is where the Futura changes are so surprising. It manages to retain the refinement and elegance of the Amati, but gives it more of an edge. It still paints a sweet picture of the music, but there is a lot of detail and precision there too. It manages to give you a very precise sense of the studio, highlighting reverb tails and whether the spatial cues in a mix come down to a natural environment or panning.

Whoever voiced these speakers spent a lot of time listening to voices. They project into the room with the sort of naturalness you might expect from a three-way box from the BBC school. Except it goes further, not just the voice... the passion behind the voice is expressed perfectly. This might cause you to have some kind of X-Factor-esque play-off, trying to separate those who 'mean it' and those who 'phone it in' (because this speaker will let you know in seconds). When you listen to a musician that means it – Robert Wyatt or PJ Harvey, for example – you feel their pain. Playing Nick Drake or Schumann through these speakers is like a psychotherapy session.

There's an old statement in audio; get the voice right and the rest of the sound will follow. It applies across the midband, in part because it's the part of our hearing to which we are so strongly attuned. It's the crying baby range, and the sound of leaves rustling as the sabre-tooth tiger creeps up on us. It is also the place where any mistakes are easy to spot. Sadly, this seems to be the least remembered old statement in audio, with many companies skipping over the midrange to add more boom and tizz. The Amati Futura gets the voice and the midrange very, very right indeed. And then it goes on to do the difficult next step; and making that right sounding midband extend up and down the frequency range.

It's a truly homogenous sound, not in a wall-of-sound way, but a sense of music knitting together perfectly. It's like a small two-way loudspeaker that has subwoofer-like extension, but without the almost inevitable change in pace such a system produces. It does this on any kind of music it seems; even live cuts like Van Morrison's classic *It's Too Late To Stop Now* spring to life with a sense of rooted solidity. Not bass burbling along for the sake of having some bass, but taut, controlled and deep, with a sense of locking musicians to their physical spaces on a live stage. It's not uncanny, but it is extremely entertaining.

I'm going to get a lot of flak for this, but the main word that kept coming up was 'sensual'. The sound of these speakers is just so damn sexy, and I wish I knew what it is that made these speakers sound this way, because I'd bottle it and make a fortune. It might be the voice and the way it can extract the passion behind the music. Two things emerge from this; the first is that all you need is a bottle of good wine, your other half's favourite artist playing

softly through the Futuras and... well, lets just say things happen. The other big thing is if you listen to these for an hour of your own favourites and don't find yourself moved to tears, you have no soul.

In a way, the best of all possible Sonus Faber worlds would be a loudspeaker that combines the small-speaker clarity of the Guarneri with the grace of the Amati and the bass energy and dynamics of the Stradivari. And, while all of these Homage loudspeakers remain in the catalogue, the Amati Futura is that best of all possible worlds. It combines the benefits of all three, and adds that uncanny sensuality and passion. This is a real game-raiser!

OK, so it is first and foremost a Sonus Faber in sound, look and build. That it is possibly the best of all of them in combination doesn't change the fact it's still a Sonus Faber. Go looking for the sort of gut-churning bass-guitar impact at ear-threatening levels, or plan to make your speakers double up as a FA system and you'll keep looking. Likewise if you are expecting Quad or MartinLogan like imagery, buy a Quad or a MartinLogan. The fact that it can combine the benefits of

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

3.5 way reflex ported loudspeaker

Drive Units: 1x 29mm tweeter, 1x 179mm midrange, 2x 220mm bass units

Frequency response: 25Hz - 30kHz, including Stealth Reflex Port

Sensitivity: 90 dB SPL (2.83 V / 1 m)

Nominal Impedance: 4 ohms

Power: 30 W - 300 W without distortion

Dimensions (H x W x D): 116 x 40.5 x 63.5 cm

Weight: 111 kg per pair / 145 kg packed per pair

Finish: "Amati Red" or "Graphite"

Price: £21,000 per pair

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the Guarneri, Amati and Stradivari in one is pretty damn remarkable; expecting it to also do a good impression of every other speaker out there is asking a bit too much.

I have to find the good and the bad in every product. The bad here is simple; for many people, this will be the most expensive product they buy. Not just in more music, but in your furniture, décor, house, everything. This isn't the kind of speaker that ends up with a plant pot on the top three months after buying it. This is the kind of speaker that makes you call the interior decorator to rework your house to match the Futuras.

It even effectively cuts out the one big problem every speaker maker faces; cloners. The loudspeaker market is like the fashion trade, in that 10 seconds after some stick-insect sashays down the catwalk wearing ten-grand's worth of couture, the owner of a sweatshop somewhere on the planet already has pattern cutters at work making knock-offs. The audio business isn't so cut-throat, but a small army of bodgers and DIY'ers will take any new design and copy it. This has nearly killed off a number of relatively big names, that end up finding the ripped-off version of their own design undermining their own design. It's not possible here; the end result is just too elegantly constructed and it would end up costing more than the Futura to clone the Futura.

The worry with any really, really pretty thing is getting past the surface attraction. It's a seemingly natural human male affliction to put their critical faculties on hold in the presence of beauty. You just go gormless. The great thing here is beauty is not only skin deep; something looking this good really shouldn't sound this sexy too.

'Sounds good, looks bad' is not a way to succeed when designing luxury goods. We collectively need to get past the 'ugly as a sack of hammers' school of design, and the Amati Futura does that beautifully!

Let's look at it this way. Sometimes non-audiophiles cry "how much?" and laugh when faced with the price of some hi-fi. Not this time. This time the expense is justified and justifiable. Not only do the Futuras look the part, they sound the part too. Every particle of this speaker bespeaks the best of high-end. +



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Focal Stella Utopia EM

review by Roy Gregory, photography by Simon Marsh



The big problem facing any company that launches a flagship as impressive, imposing and expensive as Focal's Grande Utopia EM, is knowing how to follow it up. There is no avoiding the necessary* step and the gap (in technology and cost) to the Grande EM would need bridging.

So what has Focal left out in the Stella? Most obviously, the mid-bass driver that sits on top of the flagship model. The resulting reduction in height, along with a proportional reduction in depth and width makes for a speaker that is considerably less bulky than the Grande. You also sacrifice a degree of adjustability, with only three settings on the power supply (as opposed to the Grande's six) but given that you are also sacrificing ultimate extension, they should prove more than adequate. Finally, the cranking mechanism that enables you to 'focus' the Grande, curving its cabinet like a giant spine, has also been eliminated. Focal suggests that, with the elimination of the top-mounted mid-bass driver, its time-alignment function becomes superfluous. The fixed curve of the Stella, combined with its lower height and reduced driver spacing makes it far less critical in this regard.

So finally, what does all that save/cost in monetary and musical terms? At £63,500 the Stella is not exactly inexpensive – but it still slices a whopping £49,250 (or 44%) off of the price of the Grandes! It still goes deep, it still goes loud and it still offers similar room-matching capabilities to its bigger brother. It still comes in fire engine red (and other colours, including the elegant white of the review pair) and it's still one of the most sculpturally stylish loudspeakers on the market. In fact, the rather more svelte dimensions of the Stella are less imposing, more flat out attractive than the bigger model. The Grande goes deeper than the Stella, but it does so (in part) thanks to that extra mid-bass driver, allowing the EM bass unit to operate across a lower but more limited bandwidth. The down-side is a more complex crossover, and while the numbers look good on paper, there's no escaping the fact that the full capabilities of the Grande are really only revealed once you are running several hundred seriously high-quality Watts into them – and that's never cheap. In contrast, the Stella is both slightly more efficient and (subjectively at

least) a significantly less demanding load, making it easier on your system and in turn, making your system easier on your pocket. The Stella isn't just cheaper to buy than the Grande, it's cheaper to run too.

I ran the Stella with a whole host of partnering amps, including a couple of high-quality but relatively modest integrateds, just to see what would happen. Even the Storm Audio V35's 70 solid-state Watts were more than capable of raising music from the Stellas. Sure, the Berning monos delivered greater texture, detail and transparency, the VTL 450s considerably more colour and authority, but the Stellas seem to shine a light on their partner's strengths – rather than exposing their weaknesses.

Set up is surprisingly straightforward for a speaker of this size and weight, and while I allowed them plenty of room to breathe, their adjustability will make them more tolerant of cramped accommodation than many speakers of this size and bandwidth. Do remove the grilles and do tighten the driver mounting bolts. Other than that it's just about getting the position and settings right, for which a little experienced help will be invaluable.

Confronted with the Stellas, it's almost inevitable that your first impulse will be along the lines of, "Well, let's see what the bass is like?" It's a big speaker and it should go low, especially given the EM driver. Well, it does – and in emphatic fashion. But what is more interesting is how the low frequency extension affects the musical presentation.

The Stella cannot match the scale and soundstage dimensionality of its bigger brother. In real terms, it's far from a slouch in this regard, but it doesn't possess the clear delineation of soundstage boundaries, the breadth and depth, the three-dimensionality of individual instruments that the Grande is capable of. Take the Petrenko Shostakovich 11th Symphony as an example. The Stellas' soundstage is big, with good width and depth. But compared to the Grande, it doesn't extend as far outside the speakers, and doesn't end in a definite boundary. The timps and snare drum in the opening aren't located precisely relative to the rear wall, the trumpet call isn't surrounded by its own cushion of air. What does this mean in musical terms? In absolute terms, it robs this most atmospheric of symphonic openings of that last ounce of tension and chill, the ability that the bigger speaker has to pull you, almost bodily into the recording. Less obviously, it also lacks the absolute fluidity of pace and tempo that the Grandes can deliver.

Take a listen to *This One's For Blanton* and you'll hear the same effects on a smaller, more intimate recording. Played on the Stella, the presentation lacks the explicit placement of bass and piano, both in depth and height, while the astonishing rhythmic elasticity that flows between Ellington and Ray Brown is curtailed in its sheer expressive range. Instead, the playing is tighter, more driven, more locked in. Now consider that in the Stella the EM driver, with its incredibly powerful and responsive motor, coupled to a peak to peak extension of 36mm, is responsible for the range all the way up to 220Hz. No wonder the Stella's low frequencies enjoy such attack and clarity of note to note separation. Ironically, the EM driver in the Stella might be smaller than the one in the Grande, but its influence is wider ranging and could actually be considered more important. These are essentially the differences that you'd expect between a genuinely full-range design and one that just goes deep, but the equation is far from being entirely on the debit side, especially once you place both designs in context.

The Stella is a far less demanding beast, especially of space and matching equipment. Its potential performance at the bottom end might not match the Grande, but I'd rather have all of the Stella than some of the Grande. Also, factor that more purposeful, directed presentation into proceedings and you quickly discover that, even if it lacks that last ounce of "you are there" frisson that comes with the Grande, it makes for an undeniably compelling physical performance. What extra bass does come out of the Grandes has more to do with space and the acoustic than the notes from the instruments. Just listen to the mounting, climactic waves that carry the second and fourth movements and you'll hear exactly what I mean. There's no shortage of orchestral weight and no diminution of the sheer musical power that Petranov conjures from the score and the Liverpool Philharmonic, which given the music in question, is no mean feat!



*Necessary, because flagship models are expensive to produce, expensive to buy and remain for the vast majority, an unattainable dream, "Why bother then?" I hear you ask: because they serve as development platforms and attention grabbers, generating "trickle down" products and sales. So, for every pair of Nautilus 800Ds they sell, B&W will look to sell at least ten pairs of 802Ds. Likewise, in smaller numbers, the Wilson Audio X2 and Maxx 3 – or of course, the Focal Grande Utopia EM and the Stella...

► So, while there are very real differences between the bottom end of the Stella and its more expensive, older brother, for most of us, either practicality or taste will render them irrelevant. But, whilst bass **presentation** and power are key to the sound of this speaker, certainly in commercial terms, it's only half of the story. What really impresses me about the way they play the **Shostakovich 11th** is their ability to transit from shatteringly loud to the quietest, most fragile phrase without hangover, spatial or dynamic collapse. The score **takes** you from *fff* straight to *ppp* without hesitation, deviation or repetition, one musical phrase growing literally from the decay roots of the other. Live, it's a shatteringly emotive effect and the Stella is one of the very few speakers **that** has both the bandwidth and the unfettered dynamic range to pull it off **convincingly**. Where other systems make the transition more of a slope, less of a cliff, the Stellas give you Beachy Head, complete with the impact as you hit the bottom!

This ability to play genuinely loud, without placing such a strain on the amplifier that the orchestra congeals into a single, screeching mess, combined with the tactile microdynamic immediacy that holds the quietest **passages** together allows the Stellas to run the full musical gamut, from quiet to loud as well as quiet and loud. Their ability to hold separate the quieter instruments, maintaining their integrity in the face of much larger forces, is bettered only by the likes of the Grande and other speakers in that class. Just listen to the opening of 'Way Out Basie' (Farmers Market Barbeque) and you'll note the guitar, quietly strumming along with the rhythm section. Now ask yourself how clearly you can hear it under the brass tuttis? With the Stellas it's a quietly confident and constant presence, locked in space behind the piano. Likewise, the impromptu backing vocals and noises off (dog barking, mechanicals) that accompany Townes Van Zandt on 'Waitin' Round To Die' are crystal clear parts of the whole, without distracting from it.

That impressive weight and power that gives the Shostakovich such musical and emotional authority underpins the fact that the Stellas' agility and detail isn't won at the expense of tonal colour and harmonic complexity. The conversational give and take of Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante K.364 is built on the contrasting voices of violin and viola. It's amazing how many speakers confuse or fail to separate the two instruments, yet the Focals keep that separation clear, even when the two are playing in unison. The viola's richer, woodier tone is unmistakable, as is the characteristic colour of the cor anglais, in the hauntingly fragile and evocative solo passage that graces the fourth movement of the Shostakovich. And when that mighty performance crashes to a close, the accusing tone of the bell's final toll rings on – and rings true.

Tracks that depend on their measured pace (Janis Ian's 'Some People's Lives', for instance) lose a little of the pathos, but make up for it in terms of intensity and purpose, while those tracks that demand drive and energy take on a whole new life and energy. Everything from Elvis Costello and Steve Earle concert tapes to the Cure's *Head On The Door* were let off the leash, to impressively compelling effect. Volumes were advanced and sessions extended, but the Stellas took it all in their stride.

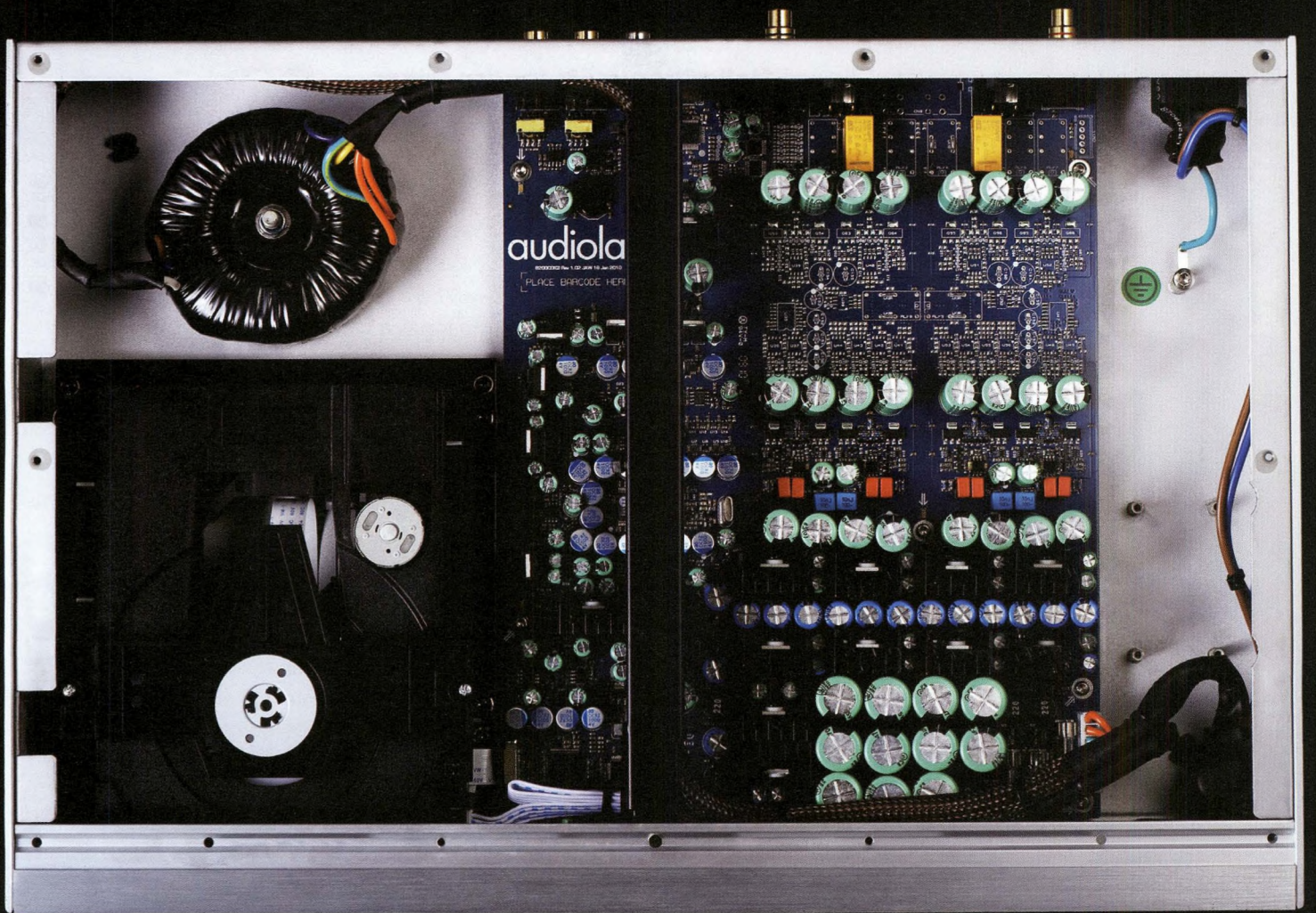
Which invites the question, leaving aside sibling rivalry, just how do they compare to the likes of Avalon's Time and Nola's Baby Grand?

Of those two, the Time is both the better balanced and the more serious competition. Capable of matching the fit, finish and engineering/technology

content of the Stella, it offers a distinctly different musical presentation as well as a smaller and less dramatic physical one. Tonally, the accuracy and richness of its palette eclipses the otherwise impressive capabilities of the Stella in this regard, and it has a poise and easy precision that is both engaging and musically seductive. Where it loses out to the French speaker is in the demands it places on the partnering amplifier, and even when those are met, in its ability to track the dynamic demands of the performance. The Stella can simply jump further – and faster.

But each time the Avalon shades the Stella in one regard, the Focal responds in another. Both are truly exceptional speakers, offering a level of performance I wouldn't have thought possible not so long ago. Which of these speakers you'd prefer is going to be a largely personal choice. Let's take the top-end as an example. Would you opt for the purity and incredibly natural tonality of the Avalon's diamond tweeter, or the immediacy, energy and speed of the Focal's beryllium? Both are exceptional, both integrate beautifully with the rest of the design they grace – but the benefits are quite distinct, and in the case of the Focal, which is after all the speaker under review, they lean towards excitement and drama. If you like your music live, then look no further.

Which brings us to the area in which the Stellas truly excel. Just like the Time, they are able to project musical energy evenly across the entire range, from their deepest bass to beyond audibility at the high end. It makes them seamless in presentation, allowing them to step back behind the performance, allowing the music to speak for itself. Impressive enough, except that the Stella takes this to a new level, exceeding in my estimation, even the ability of the Grande in this regards. Maybe it's the smaller bass unit, maybe it's the slightly higher efficiency and I'm sure it has a lot to do with giving the driving amp an easier job, but when the music (and amp) says "jump", the Stella simply says, "How High?" ►



TRUE BEAUTY IS ON THE INSIDE

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8200CD



▶ The effect (and benefit) is so obvious, so unusual, that they're apparent whatever you play. Try Beausoleil's 'Zydeco Gris Gris' (I know, but you'll find it on the excellent Big Easy OST); It has exactly the kind of tub-thumping bass that becomes a one-note thud on most speakers. On the Stellas, the notes don't just have pitch and shape – which is remarkable enough – but they actually project too, pushing the track along, rather than dragging it back. Meanwhile, the rattles and brushwork at the other extreme are just as clean and purposeful, insistent without ever being intrusive. It is just apparent on more poised and controlled material too, bringing new illumination to Julia Fischer's precision and technical virtuosity, further revealing how that technique is harnessed to the musical whole, while the astonishing control of Zinka Milanov, even past her best, is clear to hear.

If power, weight and impact are high on the list of Stella attributes, it's voices that really bring this speaker's strengths together. Familiar voices are instantly recognisable, so Eleanor McEvoy's accent and contralto pitching, the particular slant they give her sardonic social snapshots, carry you straight back to her live delivery. It's an effect that's reinforced by the sheer presence and lifelike scale that the Stella invests in its images. This is no pint-sized facsimile of the real event. The speaker's height and its ability to project energy creates solid, substantial images that both convince and reveal the degree to which most speakers scale down the musical event – both in physical and dynamic terms. This is about big, bold musical presence; if it's on the disc then the Stellas will project it into your room. It makes great live recordings (like Elvis Costello *Live At The El Mocambo*) an almost visceral experience – just like they were. When the Attractions pile into a gloriously over the top 'Pump It Up' it sets the whole room jumping – just like it was! Costello's laconic, almost deadpan delivery provides the perfect foil to the tight, frenetically driven energy of tracks like 'Mystery Dance' and 'You Belong To Me'. When the music gets out of control it's because the band takes it there, rather than because the speakers lose their grip on proceedings.

Indeed, beside the discussion of what the Stellas don't do there's the parallel issue of just how they do do what they do do; the mark they leave on the musical performance. It's perhaps most easily understood as an underlying attitude, the speakers giving the performance a forward facing stance. In the same way that, by the highest possible standards, they rob the acoustic of a little space, they almost seem to pull in the temporal verges too, leaving the

players a little less latitude. But that's the price you pay for their ability to react so fast and so emphatically to the dynamic demands of the signal they receive, and for many a listener it will be a trade-off they are more than happy to make, a trade-off that's less intrusive, less musically emasculating than those chosen by other speaker designs.

And that's the key to the Stella; what you get (in musical terms) for what you pay (in cost and system terms). For of all the serious contenders in this price bracket, the Focal offering not only provides a unique blend of virtues – and "me too" really isn't an option at this point in the market – that potential is by far the easiest to realize in practice. Adjustable and drivable, not only is the Stella more amenable than most of the competition to less than perfect rooms, the bill for the driving amps is likely to be lower too. When it comes to scaling down the Grande Utopias, Focal have got their mix spot on: Practicality and commonsense infecting a genuinely high-end product? Whatever next... +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Floorstanding three-way, reflex loaded loudspeaker system

Driver Complement: 1x 27mm inverted Beryllium dome HF, 2x 165mm W sandwich MF, 1x 330mm W sandwich, electro-magnetic LF

Connections: Bi-wire inputs for signal IEC power connection for bass unit

Bandwidth: 22Hz – 40kHz ±3dB

Sensitivity: 94dB

Nominal Impedance: 8 Ohms

Minimum Impedance: 2.8 Ohms

Crossover Frequencies: 220Hz and 2200Hz

Dimensions (WxHxD): 553 x 1558 x 830mm

Weight: 165kg ea.

Price: £63,500 per pair

Manufactured by: Focal

URL: www.focal.com

Distributed by: Focal UK

Tel: +44(0) 845 660 2680

[sometimes]
technology meets art...





EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Rogue Audio Cronus Stealth integrated amp

by Alan Sircom

American audio is big and expensive. Everyone knows that. Rogue Audio is the notable exception. Take the Cronus Stealth for example (what is it with 'stealth' now? It's getting close to words like 'quantum' in the buzzword bingo stakes). This is a US built, 90 watt, KT90-based integrated amp with a built in phono stage, a headphone amp, a remote control, a relatively large footprint and an attitude. But it doesn't weigh a ton and doesn't cost a fortune.

The amp is simplicity itself to use. Just power, volume, balance and source selection (three line inputs and a MM phono) and a full-sized headphone jack socket on the front panel, fixed (tape) and variable (preamp) line outputs, an IEC socket and a single set of gold-plated speaker terminals for each channel at the rear. Even the remote comprises an up and a down button for the volume. It really doesn't come much simpler. If you want to adjust the impedance from eight to four ohms, you need to take the top plate of the amp, unscrew the positive terminals on both speaker sockets and swap the connected green wire with the unconnected yellow one, swapping over the protective poly tubing in the process. Rudimentary, but it works, even if it's not the kind of thing that you want to experiment with too often.

If you are reading this outside of the EU, buy the optional protective cage (fortunately, the wise burghers of the CE mark insist that valves are things that can simultaneously burn you, cut you and electrocute you when you drop a screwdriver on them, so the cage is mandatory here). Although the amp looks classy with exposed valves, it's probably best to retain the cage because there is also a gap around those transformers and caps on the top plate. Although you need to remove it when you bias the power valves, because the bias plate sits just behind the right channel pentodes.

Adjusting power pentode bias is easy. The spring-screw panel in between valves and transformer exposes four DIP-switches and pots controlled by tiny grub screws. The back left has a clipped beige plastic screwdriver for the task. After the amp has been powered up for half an hour, turn the volume down, switch each valve switch in succession to measure mode and turn the grub screw until the DC milliammeter in the centre of the top plate reads 35mA. Flip the DIP-switch back into 'run' mode and move on to the next valve.

The valve roll-out couldn't be simpler, too. Two 12AX7, three 12AU7 and four EH KT90s, taking respectively the roles of input

stage, gain and phono stage and power delivery. In the standard Cronus, these EL34 power pentodes deliver a healthy 55W per channel in Class AB1 push-pull mode, but in the Cronus Magnum, that figure rises to a very healthy 90W, also in Class AB1 push-pull. This is very much at odds with most audio amps today, which typically run the EL34 in Class A and at around 25-30W per channel. The key to the increased power delivery in the standard Cronus is the move from Class A to Class AB1, while in the Magnum it's down to the change of tubes. The KT90 is a relatively uncommon valve, a beam 'kinkless' power tetrode that can often be used in place of the better known 6550 and KT88. The advantage of the KT90 is it can really take on a lot of plate voltage. If you think what's needed to push out 90w per side with a relatively cold 35mA bias, we are talking big voltages indeed. I spent many hours waiting for the tubes to red-plate or screen-glow or any of the other things that happen to power valves when being driven past their limits, but they stayed healthy and happy. I guess if these valves can have relatively long lives inside the guitar amps of the loud and metallic, domestic use is a breeze.

“Precisely the same thing happens to the sound here; it becomes engorged with the music. Any kind of music.”

Given that high plate voltage however, there are two points worth noting; if you are a tube-rolling addict, I'd suggest using the standard Cronus or sticking to playing with the double triodes at the front of the amp, and take the 'do not use without connecting to loudspeakers' warning very seriously. Swapping out the Electro Harmonix KT90s for even a set of NOS boxed KT88 might not be a bright move, and expect the unexpected when loading up a quartet of rancid no-name 6550s that you picked up for a song at a car boot sale, which

had hitherto spent their nasty, brutish and short lives being profoundly roasted inside some questionable guitar amp.

The worry with the combination of Class AB1 operation and relatively high-power from comparatively cold-biased tubes can spell uninspired, undynamic sound. Fortunately, that isn't the case here. The amp is more of a fine player of small-scale dynamics than one that goes for the sweeping bombast of single-ended designs, but it covers all the bases very well. So, you might not get the gut-churning drive of Mastodon in full graunch, but instead you get the delicacy needed to define the voice out of the mêlée.

It can really strike up the whole mêlée, though. No matter what kind of audio maelstrom you put in front of the Rogue, it takes up the challenge with all the boundless energy of a wiry terrier. Except that it's also one of the biggest terriers around, because the Rogue throws out a huge, meaty, full-fat kind of sound. Not simply a big soundstage, but the sort of sound that seems big for its size. I'm really struggling to get this concept across in print; it's closely allied to healthy power deliver, but it's something more – the closest I can describe is like watching Alice Cooper (the man) walk on stage; he immediately seems taller and broader than he actually is. Precisely the same thing happens to the sound here; it becomes engorged with the music. Any kind of music, from a Shostakovich piano trio, to Charlie Christian redefining the sound of guitar, to the nu-country of The Low Anthem, to even ▶





▶ the broken new-wave beat of Gang of Four, the Rogue takes all in its stride, and really fills the sound with sound, if that makes sense.

This enthusiasm for the task in hand almost completely glosses over the two blots on the copybook; it does deep well, but there are amps better at the excavating part of audio, and it's a touch course-grained, both of which are especially noticeable next to solid-state designs. The former is not a great problem unless you choose to partner the amp with full-range speakers; and even here speakers with a bottom end tauter than the Brazilian women's beach volleyball team will be fine here, but speakers like PMCs that are really destined to live comfortably with solid-state might show up a touch of thinness.

The grain is also not really an issue, unless you are a big fan of the blandness of audiophile recordings. In music where the music is uppermost, this will just come across as gutsy sound in the mids and top. On the other hand, if you listen intently to the sound of the background and focus on the tonality of the instruments instead of the way the music ebbs and flows, you might just detect a grittier, grainier sound than typical Class A valve and solid-state devices. This is no bad thing – it's original Naim Nait-level grain – and could even add a spot of excitement to some of the more drab audiophile pressings.

I'm going to rattle out that little Naim Nait once again, because the sound has something of that device's ability to cut through the hi-fi nonsense and just make bloody good sound. It is good with the beat, laying down a good sense of rhythm if the disc demands it. Most of all, the comparisons with the old Nait work simply because the thing is fun to use. It's the sort of amp that isn't content with just one disc; 20 minutes after it warmed up, it's in its stride and you will spend a few hours more than you expected playing music through the Rogue.

The good news is what happens in line level also occurs through phono and – albeit to a lesser extent – through the headphone socket. The phono is quiet, well crafted and fun (although it's relatively low gain for high-output

MCs) – the perfect partner to the line stage. The headphone socket meanwhile is good, although no match for the 'whole amp through the cans' sound from the (admittedly more expensive) VTL IA-80 integrated.

This is one of those products that makes me think there is still hope for finding high-end sounds without the sort of high-end prices that currently dominate the market. Power, big valve sound and a lot of fun, all wrapped up in a package that doesn't need a banker's bonus to own. Check it out now! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power output: 90Wpc

Tube complement: 3 x 12AU7, 2 x 12AX7, 4 x KT90

Inputs: Phono, CD, Aux 1, Aux 2

Outputs: Fixed and Variable, headphone jack

Dimensions (WxHxD): 37 x 18 x 48cm

Weight: 22.7kg

Price: £2,195

Manufactured by

Rogue Audio

URL: www.rogueaudio.com

Distributed by

Audiofreaks (UK) Ltd

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)20 8948 4153

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...will be in Bath on Saturday, 4 June, at the Bath and County Club. We'll be featuring several fabulous stereo systems, ranging from the eminently affordable to the ultra high-end. No AV, no surround-sound, no TVs, just pure two-channel sound with a focus on analogue, plus a few digital front ends.

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Eclipse TD will have their speaker range for audition, including the top-of-the-range **TD712z Mk 2**, "more life-like and cohesive than just about anything you can buy" (*What Hi-Fi?*).

Leema Acoustics will be showing their new **Elements range** of compact components, perfect for a budget or second system, plus of course the rest of their fabulous range.

The new **Stax earspeaker system range** will be on dem, also for the first time at any UK event.



There'll be a demonstration of the **Keith Monks** record cleaning system, our reference here at Cool Gales.

And our guest speaker this year will be the **Acapella Violon**, an uncannily vivid horn design with a plasma tweeter.



There'll be loads more. **Diverse Vinyl** will be on hand, offering the best of new vinyl pressings. Also on hand will be Jim White of Aesthetix, Mallory Nicholls and Lee Taylor of Leema, Jon Monks of Keith Monks, and Alan Sircom of *Hi-Fi+*.

The Bath and County Club is located just off Queen Square in central Bath, a short walk from the Charlotte Street car park. Doors open at 10 AM, and we'll close at 4:30 PM. The £3 admission includes tea and coffee, with all admission proceeds going to **Action for Children**.

For more information, visit www.coolgales.com/analoguefest

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Mark Levinson No.53

by Jason Kennedy



The Mark Levinson website has all the usual sections alongside one called 'gear'. Click through and you get to the Harman International Merchandise Store, where you can buy a number of Levinson branded garments and a small selection of golf equipment, which includes the Callaway Warbird X bag. This discovery didn't enhance the company's image in my mind, but the big G is seen in a different light in the US. And I know that there are some silly names in audio, but really... 'Warbird'?

I would rather associate Mark Levinson the brand with the high-quality engineering and muscular amplifiers that made it famous in the first place. Thankfully these characteristics still exist in the mere four products that are featured on the website; having seen at least two others in Munich last year, I'm wondering why there aren't more, but rumour has it that they are not far off. They will not challenge the No.53 monaural reference power amp for top spot in the range, that much I do know. This twenty-plus-grand tower of a 500 watt megalith will remain the ultimate ML power amp for the foreseeable future. Its antecedent, the No.33, shared its shape but was considerably larger, yet it had a lower specified output of 300 watts into eight ohm. The reason that ML was able to make the No.53 smaller is that it's actually a Class D switching amplifier, the first one that the company has built.

This is not as usually is the case – an amplifier with a switching power supply such as those made by Linn – but one with a switching output stage. Mark Levinson decided to use this technology for many reasons and these are listed in an extensive white paper, but the crux is that the engineers at ML consider it to offer the best performance. This is because it's claimed that it can handle the worst speaker loads with ease with great dynamic range.

The power supply itself is a relatively conventional linear type. A practical advantage of the technology is that its higher efficiency means that it runs cooler than linear designs ▶

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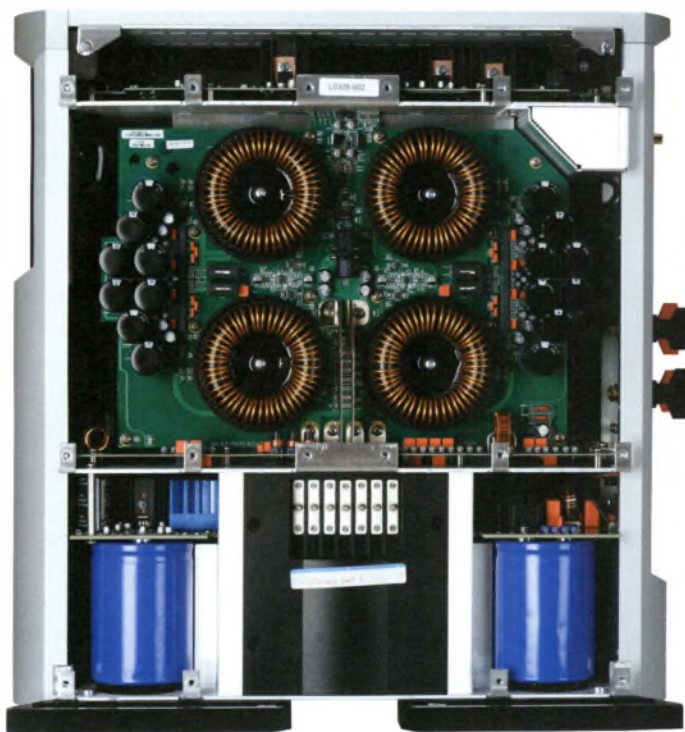
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▶ and thus requires less in the way of heat-sinking. Mark Levinson describes the No.53 as weighing “only 135lbs”, which doesn’t seem that light but compared to the 200lbs plus of the No.33, it’s almost manageable. They still get warm though; 500 watts is after all a fair amount of power and it doubles that into four ohms, so we’re talking serious grip in terms of cone control.

Construction lives up to Mark Levinson’s enviable reputation for build quality, the chassis is made from machined and extruded aluminium and its interior is broken into three sections with the power supply at the bottom, four amplifiers in the middle and control circuitry on top. I’ve not seen air core inductors the size of the eight in here before and the PSU caps are pretty monstrous too. The element that makes the amplifiers special, the interleaved power technology (IPT) is what makes the control circuitry so densely packed with SMD devices; there are 1,500 components across six layers of PCB. This puts the amp’s switching frequency up at 2MHz to ensure that none of its artefacts effect the audio band.

This amp has both balanced and single ended inputs with no need to switch between the two, I used cables from Townshend and Van den Hul for both interconnects and speakers. The latter could only be hooked up with spade terminals or bare wire to the amps which have very beefy ‘Hurricane’ terminals that are easy to tighten/undo (apparently banana plug friendly terminals are available). Ethernet and Link 2 connections are provided for custom install set ups and there is a pair of trigger sockets for ease of power up. The most important feature of the back panel is the power save mode switch, which means that the amp powers down when switched with the big button on the front; otherwise that switch merely turns the lights off. Despite its switched operation, this is still far from a green product when idle.

Despite the rating, the No.53 doesn’t sound like a hugely powerful device however. This is the most obvious indication that we are not dealing with a regular amplifier, you get very little sense of how much grunt there is on tap. Initially this can seem rather underwhelming, five hundred watts should after all

sound like a beast should it not? But a good amplifier should not sound like anything, it should be the proverbial straight wire with gain. And this is what proves to be the case with the No.53, it imparts so little of itself on the sound that it effectively disappears, yet the music can be played at any level without strain. That’s the other thing that strikes you, and this is more closely related to the power on tap than its class of creation, there is no discernible difference in character whether you play quietly or at Ted Nugent levels. I have encountered this once before with Bryston’s 1,000 watt 28B SST which is also a behemoth (albeit of the more conventional power munching class A/B variety), but it has a distinctly smooth character – it’s good character but it’s still character. The ML is far more subtle and, one suspects, far more revealing as a result. Unfortunately I don’t have any Apogee Scintillas with which to really challenge amplifiers but it’s clear that the No.53 is different in a good way.

It makes my admittedly rather ancient Gamut D200 Mk3 sound positively colourful, overtly ‘open’ and lively – qualities which though quite appealing are clearly being added to the music by the amp when contrasted with the ML. Going back to the monoblocks you get a far cleaner version of events, there is less amplifier in the mix so the reverb you hear is what the recording gives up rather than something that has been added in a particularly euphonic fashion. Everything is clearer and more natural which comes as quite a shock, it’s easy to hear why some prefer the sound of more colourful amps because it takes a while to adjust to an unenhanced picture of events, but there’s no doubting that the approach gets you closer to the music. The enormous headroom afforded by the quantity of power helps, especially when you have a wideband recording. I played a few HRx recordings via the MSB Platinum IV DAC (which regular readers will know I love) and was rewarded with breathtaking vivacity and acoustic space. The Hot Club of San Francisco band is not quite Django and Stephan but the quality of recording almost makes up for it when resolved to this degree. It really does invite you to close your eyes, suspend disbelief and be transported to the venue ▶



image though, they can swing like a mother with a bit of Charles Mingus' inspirational *Ah Um* on the turntable, the combination of energy and finesse on this is phenomenal and when Mingus shouts "Oh yes lord I know" you think you do too. Even Brubeck's overplayed *Take 5* gives up harmonic detail from sax, cymbals et al that is usually masked by the amplifier. Once you get rid of character in the hardware there is of course more room for the colour of the recordings themselves, the juice that powers this whole hi-fi shebang. Once you get used to this, and it takes a while as I say, there is a whole lot more music to be discovered on your favourite recordings. And that, dear reader, is what living is really all about! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Control Connectors: Two Link2 ports (input & output), Ethernet port
3.5mm trigger input, 3-12Vdc
3.5mm trigger output, 3-12Vdc
3-pin IEC standard power connector

Dimensions HxWxD: 530 x 214 x 518mm

Frequency Response: Within ± 0.1 dB from 10Hz to 20kHz
Input Impedance:

100 k Ω (balanced), 50 k Ω (unbalanced)

Input Connectors: balanced XLR, unbalanced RCA

Output connectors: "Hurricane" binding posts, 2 pairs

Input Sensitivity: 2.89V for maximum rated output power

Operating temperature: 0° to 35°C

Rated Output Power: 500W at 8 Ω
1000W at 4 Ω

Signal-to-Noise Ratio: -85dB, reference level: 2.83 Vrms (1W at 8 Ω)
Voltage Gain: 26.8dB

Weight: Net weight: 135lb (61.3kg)
Price: £20,426 each

Manufactured by Mark Levinson
URL: www.marklevinson.com

Distributed by Karma-AV
Email: info@karma-av.co.uk
Tel: 01423 358846

▶ with the band. The scale of sound on *Symphonic Dances* from the same series is truly magnificent, this combined with the huge dynamics of the piece and the No.53's ability to deliver those swings without trying makes for a very powerful experience. If you want to reproduce symphonic crescendos there is absolutely no substitute for fast and extensive power and this sophisticated brute certainly does both with ease.

One thing that is not emphasised is the bass, usually you can judge the power of an amplifier by its seismic capabilities but here the bass remains as neutral as the rest of the range. It provides the drive to make the orchestra sound real and the extension to mark out the scale of the hall but refuses to poke its head out and say 'look at me'.

The MLs also allow the sound to escape the speakers entirely with many recordings, this is a quality that the Fact8 is rather good at revealing but nonetheless is achieved with a greater variety of material. It's not all about the

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Mastersound Evolution 845 integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

Italian audio has two main thrusts today; gorgeous design and a passion for valves. So it's perhaps no surprise where Mastersound comes from – the new Evolution 845 integrated amp and the brand comes from Vicenza in north-east Italy.

It's definitely got the looks. The oversized design with wooden side cheeks, the black transformer cans, the metal top and the exposed valves are extremely elegant and not too dissimilar from Unison Research models (built some 50 miles away), but the elegant stacked heat sink/valve cage of the Mastersound gives it an class of its own.

And it's certainly got the valves, a quartet of 845 power triodes. Until a couple of decades ago, large valves like the 845 (and 211) were all but forgotten. Their original use (radio transmitter power valves) was long since transistorised and aside from a few interested parties, they would have disappeared into complete obscurity. Fortunately, one of the interested parties was the late Hiroyasu Kondo of Audio Note who in 1988 released the Ongaku, which featured a pair of giant 211 power valves and delivered some 27 of the finest watts (a lot of) money could buy. This opened the floodgates and products featuring large power triodes culled from 1930s radio, cinema and telephony began to appear. Mastersound

– beginning in 1994 – is one of the leaders in the field.

There is a school of thought that a valve amplifier is only as good as its transformers. This is simplistic thinking, like saying a camera is only as good as its sensor, but there is more than a ring of truth to the claim. Certainly because the output transformer couples the amplifier circuit to the loudspeaker in conventional single-ended and push-pull valve amp designs, there's many a good circuit wrecked by inappropriate transformer use. Mastersound doesn't have that problem, because it designs its own transformers to its own specific specifics. Which leads us to the simplistic test for that simplistic thinking – the heavier the transformers the better. Once again, Mastersound wins out, with some of the beefiest potted transformers around. So heavy in fact, the two output transformers have two smaller power transformers in orbit around the rest of the top plate. Joking aside, this bespeaks of a truly dual mono design, ▶

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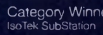



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▶ with only the plug, motorised volume and source selector shared between the channels. It also makes that 53kg load very rear-heavy, which can prove interesting if the two-man lifting team isn't aware of the unevenness.

OK, there's a little confession here; most weighty transformers are heavy because of the amount of metal, but these ones go a little further. Mastersound's designer precisely specifies the number of windings, demands Litz wire throughout, insists on a no-solder policy inside the transformer and then pots the thing inside a can filled with a resin and gravel (no, really... gravel) mix. This not only damps the transformer perfectly, and adds a lot of mass, it acts as a security measure; unscrupulous amp designers trying to find Mastersound's secrets will destroy the transformer in the process of removing it from its casing; short of calling in Lara Croft and a bomb disposal team, Mastersound's secrets are safe.

The amplifier itself dispenses with the old-school point-to-point wiring that seems to be the current valve vogue, instead using very serviceable large circuit boards and those 845 tubes sports a pair of ECC82 double-triodes as preamp drivers and a pair of 6SN7GT as drivers in the power amp stage. It has three line inputs and one direct input that by-passes the volume control. All these are single-ended, and the amp features decent gold-plated phonos at the rear. These are joined by four and eight ohm taps for speaker output. There are also biasing controls at the rear of the amp, but Mastersound recommends expert help here. Finally, there's an under the chassis power switch, a wooden remote that operates volume up and down and nothing else and the whole caboodle sits on four Michell-sized black cones. You'll need a large table too, because it's a biggie. Overall fit and finish is very good; just the right balance between bling and understatement for most people.

A zero-feedback, parallel single-ended design featuring a pair of 845s per side is capable of pumping out 55 watts per channel, but the Evolution 845 nevertheless demands an efficient loudspeaker design. A lot of this comes down to the dynamic headroom the amplifier delivers, which means instead of using up the power simply driving a moderately efficient loudspeaker, the Evolution 845 is in its happy place playing at a fair lick while cruising and

then delivering huge dynamic swings from its power reserves. A pair of Tannoy Definition DC10T floorstanders fit the bill perfectly (in fact, Mastersound and Tannoy should consider this review something of a matchmaker – the marriage is a very happy one, far better than, say, an Armani kilt or tatties and tagliatelle). I'm sure the usual valve suspects (horns, efficient paper coned speakers, products from Audio Note, Living Voice, Zu, etc, etc) will do just as well.

When appropriately partnered, the Mastersound Evolution 845 is a delight to listen to, especially with classical and vocals. It breathes with live, unamplified instruments and feels like it gives the instruments the chance to sing out as they were made to.

Like many good amps, this starts from the midrange out. The mids are intensely satisfying, in they way creamy scrambled eggs on hot buttered toast on a cold winter's morning is intensely satisfying – naughty, but nice. Midrange sounds here are lithe and entice you to listen longer. No, they won't turn PJ Harvey into Ella Fitzgerald, but the Mastersound's midrange combines vocal ▶



► clarity and articulation with a huge soundstage and a seductive richness that draws you in.

Moving away from the midband is not a wrench, because the treble is clean, extended and very attractive. The harmonic richness of the midrange appears to extend into the high frequencies, giving the overall sound a sense of coherence and natural balance that is often lacking in this 'boom/tizz' modern world. Once again, there seems to be a pattern to the way you discover the sound of the Evolution 845; that harmonic structure hits you like the top notes of a perfume, this is followed by the middle or heart notes of tying all the music together cohesively and finally a base note of a sense of soundstage scale. And yet again, I found myself drawn more toward vocals and acoustic instruments and away from wailing guitars and headbanging.

The bass is almost as strong as the mid and top. Once again, the sense of harmonic structure, huge soundstage and overall coherence hold a lot of sway and will win over many people. And once again, the way the bottom end charms and seduces you with live, unamplified music is hugely persuasive. But there is a slight euphony here, the bottom end is almost too lush – it's the sort of amplifier that makes the piano on 'Willow Weep for Me' from *Sarah Vaughan at Mister Kelly's* sound a fraction slow next to her voice and yet paradoxically speeds up the somewhat ponderous rhythm section on 'The Quality of Mercy' by Michelle Shocked on the *Dead Man Walking* *CST*. This is ultimately an image solidity issue, and is the place where this valve amp sounds most 'valvey'; musicians don't sound as rooted in space as they can when played with the sort of control of a top-notch solid-state design. But you need a good reference point to notice this kind of euphony. Having lived with a Devialet D-Premier for a while now, I don't think I would count myself among



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Stereo dual mono integrated amplifier in Class "A"

Parallel Single ended

Power tubes: 4 x 845

Pre-driver tubes: 2 x ECC82

Driver tubes: 2 x 6SN7 GT

Power: 2 x 55Watts

Inputs: 3 line + 1 direct RCA phono

Input impedance: 100 K ohm

Load impedance: 4 - 8 Ohm

Negative feedback: 0 dB

Bandwidth: 8Hz-40kHz – 0 dB

Dimensions (WxDxH): 54 x 47 x 27 cm.

Weight: 53 Kg

Price: £9,495

Manufactured by Mastersound

URL: www.mastersoundsas.it

Distributed by Jordan Acoustics

URL: www.jordanacoustics.co.uk

Tel: (UK only) 0800 121 4771

those craving that euphony anymore, but even being used to the bloodiest of bleeding edge sounds now, I have to admit this one sings a siren's song.

That's the magic of the Mastersound Evolution 845. Turn it on, wait half an hour and the sound is so seductive it's hard to resist its charms, even if what you normally listen to (both in terms of audio technology and the sort of music at which it excels) is very different. If you think valve amps are all about squidgy soft and warm sounding, the Mastersound is the natural way to show just how wrong preconceptions can be. Anyone with a penchant for acoustic music – especially if you own a pair of big Tannoys – might find their system undergoing some radical Evolution soon. +



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NORDOST
MAKING THE CONNECTION

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

PMC Fact 3 loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom



The Fact range represented PMC's first dedicated home loudspeaker project; previous models were domestic variants of the company's professional studio monitor systems. But, until recently, it wasn't much of a 'range', with just one floorstander in the line. The new Fact 3 standmount shows it wasn't just a one-off.

The first Fact speaker – the Fact 8 – is slim and elegant, and the new one continues the trend. It is designed to work with PMC's custom single-column bolt-in and mass loaded stand and the whole package is very 'now', design-wise. There aren't many speakers that would sit comfortably on the pages of arty-interior design magazine *Wallpaper*, but the Fact 3 gets closer than most.

Initially, PMC thought of the Fact 3 as being a separate entity from the stands; the two were priced separately and the idea was that people could pick and choose the right support for the job. Problem is, the thin form factor means it's easy to knock over unless the speaker is bonded to the stand, and Blu-tack and its kin can end up ripping veneer in some cases. The Fact 3 stand, by virtue of being bolted to the speaker with a single M8 sized thread, is going nowhere fast. You have to get the right amount of tension on the thread; too loose and you have a speaker that will spin around in a stiff breeze, too far in the other direction and you risk overtightening and threading, but the stand is simple and logical and a perfect match.

The Fact models retain a lot of what goes into the pro-am models, such as the small, high quality long-throw drive units and the ATL transmission line system. But it also includes things that draw audiophiles like moths to a flame, such as silver bi-wire terminals, magnetically applied grilles, high-quality components in the crossover and that lovely finish. It's a very different finish to the likes of the extreme high-end, though – which often draws more upon rich, glossy design, as befits the luxury car owner market such loudspeakers attract today. My take on this is that both reflect the kinds of modern homes these speakers are ▶

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► likely to go into. What is particularly attractive about the Fact models from an audiophile perspective is they manage to turn in a particularly fine sound and stay fashionable in the process. That's a 'you can have your cake and eat it' moment (a particularly odd maxim, unless there is an army of non-cake eating cake buyers out there).

In the Fact 3, we have a two-way, three driver design, featuring a pair of 140mm doped paper mid/woofers and a SEAS-sourced 19mm 'Sonomex' soft dome tweeter, in pretty much exactly the same configuration as the original Fact 8. The output of these can be tailored by judicious use of toggle switches on the back panel. The bass can be flat or cut by three or six decibels, while the treble can add or subtract two decibels overall away from the neutral. The idea behind this at the LF is to help compensate for room nodes or less than ideal surroundings, while the HF is there to help overcome heavily damped or extremely live surroundings. In a small London living room, I found a 3dB cut in the bass and no treble adjustment worked well, without making the sound too lean in the process.

Perhaps the biggest difference between PMC's pro-am range and the Facts is the latter's driveability. It's not too much of a reach to see why PMC distributes Bryston in the UK, when viewed through the pre-Fact range; they are speakers that need some muscle to drive them properly. The Fact 3 is a far less demanding load on your amplifier. While I don't envisage the speakers being used with flea-powered Class T or SET amps, and while the speaker seems almost exclusively comfortable with solid-state amp designs (I suspect those bass drivers need an amp with decent damping factor levels to come to life), it doesn't need arc-welder voltage or current levels to sing. The 89dB sensitivity and relatively benign eight ohm load show – at least at a surface level – that the speaker is not an amp-crusher, but I suspect some balance would be in order. So, no to partnering the Fact 3 with a 20W Class A design (unless you are listening in a very small room at polite levels), but also no kilowatt power unless you want big boxes in the room.

Moderation is key.

A standmount has a tough job to perform. Larger floorstanders essentially pre-select room size, because few people are willing to put up with a

“That’s the kind of key thing about the Fact 3; it’s the Fact 8 for everyone else, and that isn’t faint praise.”

big pair of speakers dominating a small room. Standmounts, however, end up in smaller rooms where their smaller form factor doesn't intrude. The trend seems to be swinging back to standmounts after years of tower speakers driving the market – and a good standmount needs to do the seemingly impossible; have enough bottom-end to energise a typical space, but not so much that it swamps smaller ones. PMC's bass contour helps, but in a big room the floorstander helps all the more.

That's kind of the key thing about the Fact 3; it's the Fact 8 for everyone else, and that isn't faint praise; the Fact 8 was one of the most well-balanced, 'right-sounding' speakers we've heard in its class. The Fact 3 just opens that option up to a new set of listeners, while adding no downsides in the process (not an easy task). It has that same sense of musical poise and balance that the Fact 8 does so well, just in the sort of package that will attract a larger audience with a smaller room. There's a precision about the Fact sound. It's not as 'studio monitor' (detail and sound analysis uppermost) as PMCs pro-am designs, but it's not hard to hear the family resemblance. Those thin front faces make this a remarkably good speaker at key aspects of imaging, with a large soundstage projecting into the room really well. If you are looking for electrostatic-like ►



► image placement, this scores a 'good' rather than an 'excellent', but what it lacks in focus it more than makes up for in image width.

I've found PMC draws strong opinion from audiophiles. Most love the speakers for their honesty and accuracy, but some dislike the sound, seemingly for exactly the same reasons. They seem to want fireworks, even when fireworks are not the order of the day. The Fact 3 doesn't do that; if there are fireworks on the recording, there are fireworks in the listening room, if there aren't, there aren't. It's that simple. Those determined to extract an exuberant experience from every track are going to want something with less control, less poise, less precision and ultimately less accuracy than the Fact range. For me though, honesty is the best policy.

This honesty is the Fact 3's winning hand. It does everything so well, but with an air of calm, level-headed restraint that never gets in the way of the music. In a way, it does this even better than the Fact 8 because the size of the speaker acts as a limiter. In the Fact 8, its biggest drawback is its inability to play at headbanger levels, but in the Fact 3, the chances are it will go into smaller rooms where the headbanger level demands are appreciably lower, so it's less likely to hit its end stops next to its bigger brother. This makes the Fact 3 a speaker that is always in its comfort zone and practically nothing is going to phase the design. Does that spell a speaker that never gets out of first gear? No, it's a speaker that has capabilities that far beyond its demands.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Frequency Response: 35Hz – 30kHz

Sensitivity: 89dB 1w at 1m

Effective ATL (Advanced Transmission Line)

Length: 1.7m (5.6ft)

Impedance: 8Ω

Drive Units:

LF: 2 × fact 140mm (5½") precision drivers

HF: 1 × fact 19mm (0.75") high-res SONOMEX™ soft dome ferro-fluid cooled with 34mm wide surround

Crossover Frequency: 1.7kHz

Input Connectors: Two pairs, 4mm silver terminals

Dimensions (WxHxD): 15.5x53.5x30cm

Weight: 9.5kg

Available in four finishes

Price: £4,100 per pair (including stands)

Manufactured by Professional Monitor Company

URL: www.fact-speakers.com

Tel: +44 (0)870 4441044

Where this becomes apparent is in moving from singer/songwriter material to full-scale orchestral or heavy rock. To say the Fact 3 took the change in its stride is understatement; everything I threw at it (and I do mean everything, when you start bringing out Oz Mutantes discs, you know you are on to something both special and pretty much invulnerable) was handled honestly, accurately, dynamically and with a large soundstage.

I'm personally surprised and happy that I made it the whole way through the review without recourse to 'that's a Fact' punning. Perhaps it's because this elegant standmount brings so much to the party, there's no need to reach for the joke book. Or perhaps it's because it's one of the most professional packages around, that off-hand quips seem cheap. But the fact remains that this speaker is going to remain a popular choice because of its excellent combination of designer-label looks and highly refined sound, and that's a fact. Oh damn! +

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The Music Chain

Much is written about music and the musicians who entertain us, and we rightly exalt great musicians. But there is an interlinked chain of participants, two of which are I believe are crucial to our music scene in today's world. For centuries the music chain was a very short one – composers or songwriters, musicians and listeners, and the judgement on quality was immediate. Recording technologies have changed all this exponentially.

Today, we listen to most of our music from a recording and this gives recording engineers the opportunity to avoid poor acoustics, duff notes and off days. This, of course, means the chain has grown to include the recording engineers, the music distribution system (retailers or downloads), hi-fi manufacturers, hi-fi sellers and the hi-fi purchasers, the latter being the listeners. I should start by saying that hi-fi has become an adulterated term that no longer has its original meaning because it's applied to much equipment that certainly should not be termed high-fidelity.

It's said that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. However, I believe there are two particularly strong links that, if removed from the chain, would seriously damage the quality of recorded music. These are the audiophile, or hi-fi connoisseur, and the specialist hi-fi retailer, the latter in nearly all cases also being the former because it's their interest that has driven them into their particular business. These are the people who most appreciate how exciting and involving music can be and how it can deliver an emotional experience.

Hi-Fi Connoisseurs

So why is the hi-fi connoisseur so important to the music industry? By their nature, audiophiles are generally avid music lovers who enhance their enjoyment through listening to music at its very best quality level, which means playing great recordings through hi-end hi-fi to achieve the most outstanding results. Without the audiophile, the main driver for quality would probably be removed from the chain. Let's be honest, over recent years the majority of music listeners now settle

for MP3 convenience and, therefore, mediocre sound quality. If the pendulum ever swings so far that all but a few listen to highly compressed formats such as MP3, music producers will not waste their resources on producing high quality recordings because it would be commercially unnecessary, even if their recording engineers wanted to achieve the best they could. After all, an MP3 or AAC file, the iTunes default format, downloaded at 128 kbps (the most popular download speed), is about one-eleventh the size of a full resolution CD track, 1411 kbps, so the quality is inevitably far inferior. Information is irretrievably lost and the full dynamic range is lacking. Using an iPod while jogging does not really raise a quality issue but playing low-resolution tracks through an iPod docking station that feeds into a decent hi-fi system, is a disaster area. It's rubbish quality made louder. Fortunately, there is still significant demand from audiophiles committed to sound quality to sustain the production of high quality recordings, but it would be a tragedy if there weren't. For example, most classical recordings downloaded as

THE TOP 20



an MP3 or AAC file are a complete waste of time because there is so much information missing that they are reduced to just the essence of a tune.

Specialist Hi-Fi Retailers

Just as essential a link in the chain as the hi-fi connoisseur is the specialist hi-fi retailer and the two are rightly dependent on each other. Without the specialist retailer the hi-end hi-fi manufacturer would have to rely on the internet and hi-fi magazine reviewers to try and assess the relative merits and performance of their products against that of their competitors – a notoriously unreliable decision making process. Specialist hi-fi retailers are constantly being offered new products for assessment and potential stocking and, as it is also their hobby as well as their livelihood, they are greatly interested in achieving the best performance and seeking out the most outstanding products and combinations. More than that though is their relationship with audiophiles for, if they are to stay in business, they must satisfy the most discerning customers in the industry.

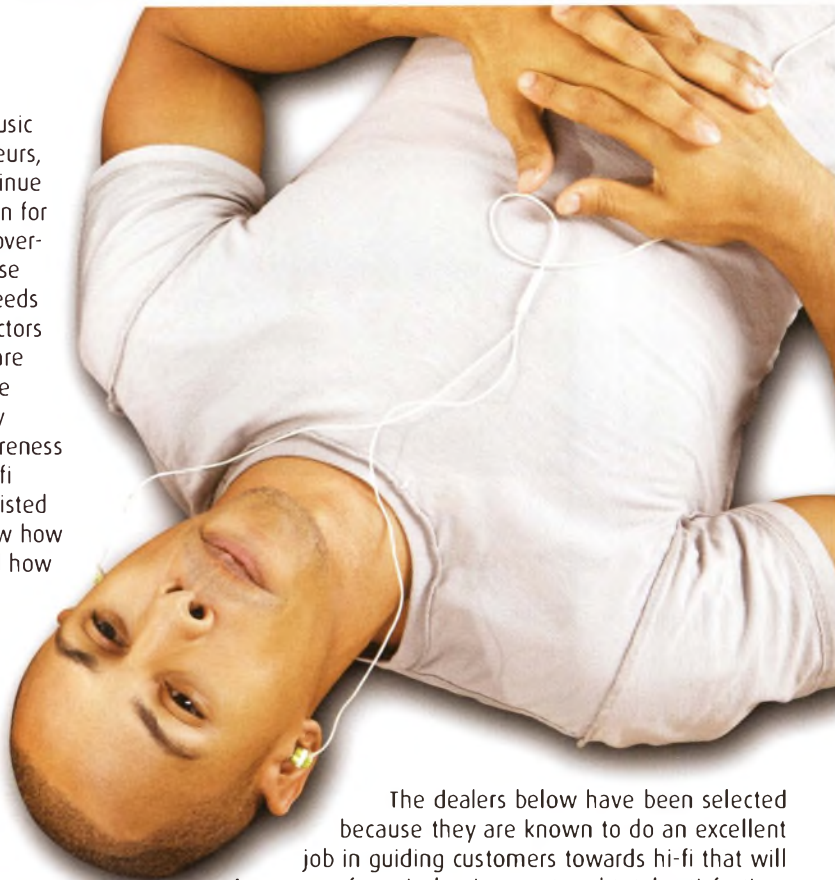
The reality is that audiophiles and specialist hi-fi retailers are essential to each other.

Future of Recorded Music

What are the future prospects of maintaining high quality music recordings? We must hope that audiophiles, or hi-fi connoisseurs, or perhaps most accurately described, music lovers, will continue to drive the demand for quality. But another important reason for hope within the mass-market is that there is no longer any over-riding reason for MP3 and AAC to have such a following. These formats were designed to overcome very slow download speeds and expensive memory capacity. These are not significant factors for most people now. Full resolution, CD quality, downloads are already available and should become the norm as long as the general public can be made aware of the tremendous quality benefit. This has happened with HD TV so we know this awareness can grow rapidly. In the meantime, we must highly value hi-fi connoisseurs and specialist hi-fi retailers, of which the ones listed on this page represent the UK's finest. Specialist dealers know how to choose the products that combine as a superb system and how to get the best out of it by expert installation in the home. If there's a price premium over an internet purchase, it's probably a small one, but it's unquestionably worth the difference.

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GUIDE

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Heed Obelisk DT CD transport and DA DAC

by Alan Sircom

Any British audiophile with a long memory knows Richard Hay. Back in the 1980s, there was a wonderful little amp called the Nytech, which begat the Ion Systems Obelisk. Things went a bit off the rails in the early 1990s financial wobbliness, but Ion was reborn a few years ago as Heed Audio, and transposed about a thousand miles eastward, to Hungary. Heed – run by Ion distributor and designer Zsolt Husztl – started with a reworked Obelisk integrated, followed swiftly by a few useful boxes (like a headphone amp and a turntable power supply), all priced very sensibly.

The company's first digital product was the deliciously named – but with just a Toslink and a coax input, underpopulated – Dactilus DAC. Priced at under £400, this striking little DAC showed what can be done without titanic expenditure. Enter the company's first CD transport and DAC combination, the Obelisk DT and DA. Once again reasonably priced (in today's world, that means under £1,400 a piece), the DT is a fine quality disc transport and the DA is a great DAC with more inputs and outputs on offer. Both conform to Hay's unchanging goal of value-driven, valve-like simplicity

(no feedback), powerful buffers wherever possible, and this is perhaps why the output stage of the DA has more in common with the Heed amp than a CD player.

If beauty is skin deep, then Heed is built inside out. Because the product – on the inside – is built exactly the way you would want a modern digital product made; solidly, with the minimum of fuss and the best possible sound in mind. It's this top-quality circuit-first approach that means while the outside panel is finished in powder coat, the circuit sports a Wolfson/Cirrus chip combo that delivers the goods up to 24bit/192kHz and expensive Mundorf caps in all the sonically significant places. While both transport and DAC come with a good black Perspex front panel, the idea that they can both be upgraded (in theory at this time) is a sign of good things.

Of the two, the DT is the easiest one to dispense with. It uses what looks like a

standard Sanyo transport mechanism, can support HDCD (remember that?) has six buttons to the right hand side and a display beneath the transport mech on the left and has a Toslink and coax input. That's it.

Or so you might think. Actually, the DT sports an oversize toroidal transformer with separate taps for transport logic and DSP. It also features a very precise 27MHz clock and a 32MB buffer, and the datastream's amplitude is given an order of magnitude increase before it leaves on its journey to the DAC. This is claimed to have benefits aside from being able to run extra-long interconnects, although it's hard to separate benefits from this and benefits from the low-jitter design.

The DAC too has its buffered output, this time to allow the Heed to work with a wider range of amps and preamps; low headroom and passive preamp stages should consider the 2.5V buffered output. The DA has a total of five digital inputs (identified in blue LED on the front panel) and includes a pair of S/PDIF connections (one with BNC), two Toslinks and an isochronous USB input. Most significantly, the output of the DA – like the Obelisk amp itself – is capacitor coupled, rather than DC coupled. This acts rather like the transformer coupling of many good valve amps. Both devices are designed not to be powered off, with only rear-mounted switches. They come out of standby quickly and don't draw much power when taken off the boil, so you aren't killing too many polar bears by leaving the things powered up continually. I used an Audioquest VDM5 coax cable to good effect between the two.

Heed's digital design seems to strike a good balance between audiophile craziness and good, solid electronic engineering. And this is borne out in the sound quality; not so left-field to make it incompatible with all bar about one per cent of discs and amps on the planet, not so rooted in electronics as to make the combo bland. There's a tightly focused sound from the disc to the DAC that snaps music into sharp focus. It takes a few seconds for that 32MB buffer to fill with digital data, so don't expect an immediate start-up, but music

that emanates from the transport is every bit as precise as it is enjoyable, combining the two usually unconnected traits of vocal articulation with near perfect rhythmic qualities. Playing about with an Arcam rDAC confirmed these qualities are a function of the DT.

Moving across to the DA, there's less of those sharply-defined musical edges that often define good – but not great – digital audio. Instead, the overall sound is very 'analogue-y' with an extended but never

“The Heeds keep sonic company with a host of very illustrious digital audio brands.”

harsh treble, an open midrange and a clear, well-defined and deep bass. This puts it in the realms of 'great' digital audio. Just how 'great' is 'great'? Well, the Heeds keep sonic company with a host of very illustrious digital audio brands. The little Heeds might lack the battleship build of the big Meridians and Wadias of this world, but in sonic terms, the gap is nowhere near as wide as the price differential suggests.

As a pairing, it seems to be excellent at not making its presence felt. It's extremely detailed, articulate, precise, dynamic and possessed of excellent imagery. But like all top-notch CD players, none of this is drawn to your attention. Instead, what comes across first and foremost is the cohesive way ▶



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▶ music just hangs together. And it's this tying the music together that makes the Obelisk duo fight well above their weight class. Rosalyn Turek's statuesque mono renditions of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier shows this off perfectly. There is a tendency for modern stereo equipment to make this early 1950s recording sound as if there are three elements at play – a left hand, a right hand and tape hiss. One the Heed duo, there is always a sense of a pianist at an instrument and the tape hiss – though not suppressed – simply gets out of the way. Only top-flight players can do that, in my opinion.

In order of preference, coaxial sounded best, USB sounded worst and if I had a player with BNC connections, I would imagine it would be even better still. The difference between best and worst was not great, though. With the DT in place, the distance between coaxial digital and USB got a lot more noticeable; I suspect this could be down to isochronous USB, because the addition of a Musical Fidelity V-Link (with asynchronous USB) improved the computer-based option significantly, in exactly the same 'snap to attention' way the DT does to coaxial.

There's a delicious quiriness that is slowly being ironed out of the Heed products. Unlike in most cases, this is a good thing. By the time this review goes to print for example, Heed will be using better metalworking, so the tiny holes in the back panel will be folded shut. And the credit card remotes are expected to be more readable by the remote eyes of the transport and DAC. There may even be a manual. But not everything will change; those who use Virgin Media remotes can still look forward to having the up/down controls not only change channels, but switch sources on the DA. Then there's the understandable, but occasionally frustrating, 10 second wait while the buffer fills up on the DT. And finally, that blue LED read-out is best described as 'basic'; functional, yes... but basic. It will still be basic after the change.

None of this matters though, because the Heed combo cuts through all the quiriness thanks to delivering a really good sound at a really fair price. In writing this review, I found myself scratching my head twice; once to speculate why someone might consider buying a CD transport in 2011 and once more to try and place this combination in the great CD player hierarchy. In fact, both questions resolved themselves in seconds, for precisely the same reason. The sound quality – the closest I can get to the Heed sound is probably an Audio Research CD player. The two have the same tight focus and effortless musicality. You can see where the extra money goes on an ARC, but sonically it's more of a close run thing than might be expected. As to the 'why CD in 2011' question, the same thing applies; it sounds bloody good, and you would be hard pressed to find a file-based solution that will put a smile on your face as quickly as the DT.

Although these two can be separated, they work so well together in

combination you would have to struggle to justify splitting up the band. The DT and DA alone are good, the DT and DA together are remarkable. This could be the start of a beautiful friendship. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Heed Obelisk DT

Sanyo drive and servo (supports HDCD)
27MHz clock
32MB buffer
Digital outputs: 1x RCA, 1x toslink
Dimensions (WxHxD): 22x8.5x32.3cm
Weight: 6kg
Price £1,350

Heed Obelisk DA

192/24bit Wolfson DAC.
Digital inputs: 1 x BNC, 1 x RCA, 2 optical and 1 USB digital inputs.
The inputs can be switched via the Pre or CD remote control.
Analogue outputs: 2.5V buffered and 1.25V unbuffered RCA single ended stereo
Dimensions (WxHxD): 22x8.5x32.3cm
Weight: 6kg
Price £1,325

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

MIT Oracle MA-X loudspeaker cables

by Steve Dickinson

When you contemplate £25,000 loudspeaker cables, several things pass through your mind. This is an awful lot of money for what is, in effect, two pieces of wire. This invites the question whether the concept of value can even exist at such a price point; some will doubtless assert that it can't, so even raising the possibility proves how out of touch the writer is. Obviously,

Well, it can't. Can it?

Context is important, of course, so for the purposes of this review, I assembled a system appropriate to the price of the cables. The front-end was a dCS Paganini 3-box CD/SACD player; amplification courtesy of the new David Berning ZOTL Pre One and ZH230 stereo power amp; loudspeakers were the Focal Scala Utopias. Mains and supports by MusicWorks, interconnects also by MIT, and the MIT Magnum MA loudspeaker cables (around £8,000 a pair) for comparison purposes. This is a system where any meaningful upgrade would likely cost upwards of £25,000 in any event, so part of the exercise was to see what might happen if you were to change the speaker cables, rather than any of the boxes.

As a hi-fi system improves, one notices certain things. Firstly, it might be fairly gross changes to things like clarity, openness, soundstaging and imaging. Then we might expect

subtler, but no less important, improvements in dynamics, timing, timbre and tunefulness. Assuming we can assemble a system which achieves all these things, to a decent standard of performance, we've probably put together something which gets most things fairly right, most of the time. Going beyond this, I'd want to hear my music played on better instruments, by more skilful and talented musicians, preferably who are at their very best. These improvements are probably the most subtle of all but at the rewards, if your system can deliver, are immeasurably important.

'One Night in Paris' is probably the lovely Diana Krall at her absolute best. Pick a track, any track, 'Deed I do' will indeed do, very nicely. Through the system above it is truly delightful: superb musicianship, exquisite timing with real pace and swing, wonderful atmosphere and mood – oh, to have been there on the night. But here's the thing, substituting the Magnum MA cables with the Oracle MA-X, the previous version ▶



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Another live album, this time Sting: ‘All this time’ and the track *Brand New Day*. It’s not even my favourite Sting track, but the version on this album has got something. It’s the same sort of ‘something’ the Diana Krall album has – great musicians, great music and a chemistry which just comes together on the night (which is all the more astonishing when you realise it was recorded on the evening of September 11, 2001). With the Oracle MA-X cables in place, the track made me want to get up and dance – not something I’d recommend witnessing – which is a rare phenomenon indeed (I have no illusions about my abilities, so the impulse rarely occurs). Reinstalling the ‘regular’ Magnum MA cables, but upgrading the transport to the dCS Scarlatti was very instructive. It was immediately obvious that the Scarlatti is a significant step-up from the Paganini transport: detailed and involving, it has a degree of self-assurance not matched by the Paganini transport; a grainless, seamless, flawless presentation where everything is in proportion and nothing is overlooked. But, here’s an odd thing: with the lesser transport but the better cables, the music was more visceral and communicative - the urge to get up and dance was there in a way which it simply wasn’t via the better transport with the lesser cables. Scarlatti + Magnum showed just how well Sting chooses his musicians, Paganini + Oracle showed how well they were playing the music.

As a habitual user of Nordost cables in my regular system and as, in some ways, MIT is the antithesis of the Nordost way of doing things, it would be fair to say that I haven’t always found the MIT ‘house sound’ to my personal taste. That said, whatever is in those boxes can bring about some remarkable benefits in the realms of timing and dynamics, compared to more conventional cables at similar prices and I know people who are happy to forego other attributes, such as sweetness or grainlessness, for a taste of what MIT brings to the party. Some criticise MIT’s bass as over-exposed or dominant, others point to a lack of sophistication in the higher frequencies. MIT’s fans reply that these are hi-fi differences, not musical ones; that a great pianist, playing an indifferent piano, will produce a more captivating performance than an indifferent pianist on even the best piano.

It might help to think of music as being made up of two elements: information and energy. The information bit tells you which instrument is being played, at what pitch, and for how long. The energy bit isn’t just how loud, but also the dynamic shifts, the subtle but deliberate manipulation of timing, the inflections and mannerisms which tell you this is being performed by a person, not some sort of musical automaton. The Oracle MA-X cable seems to manage both information and energy better than anything else I’ve heard in a system up to now; it simply makes it easier to perceive the amount of effort the musicians put into their playing.

A recent, and valued, addition to my collection is Joanna Macgregor and the Britten Sinfonia’s *‘Live in Buenos Aires’* (Warner Classics & Jazz 2564 68475-9). The first three tracks are the Bach *Concerto for keyboard and strings in D minor*. She plays the piano with a rare physicality, reminiscent of performances by John Ogdon. The interesting thing that came out of this particular Bach performance was not just that the Oracle MA-X cable portrayed the assertiveness of the playing so well, but that when the orchestra played quietly, it was possible to appreciate the ‘held-back’ qualities of their playing,

there was a sense of restraint, a pent-up potency which was being deliberately and skilfully kept in check, not merely a bit of quiet playing. If it just sounds quiet, you’ve missed the point. And it is that point which the Oracles are so good at getting across.

The other side of the same coin is shown by the last track on the same album. A keyboard transcription of Astor Piazzolla’s *Libertango*, played at full-throttle by Ms Macgregor. Except that, through the Oracles, it isn’t. The Magnum MA cable gives a hugely impressive rendition, tight, fast and dynamic. Played through the Oracle MA-X cables, it is suddenly much more apparent that this is no hell-bent, pedal to the metal, rendition, but a considered and measured interpretation. There is light and shade, even within the rollicking ride she takes us on, sections which are scarcely less loud, but the energy has nevertheless diminished. This ability to discern subtlety where you least expected it - more than that, to have it shown to you when you weren’t looking for it - is something I’d not heard in the system before.

There are hi-fi benefits, most assuredly. Soundstaging is extraordinarily accomplished and convincing: images are wide, deep, stable and consistent; instruments gain solidity and substance, there is an overall sense of ‘presence’ which eludes many systems, regardless of price. Take the opening track, *Prelude*, on the second part of ‘Aerial’ from Kate Bush, its birdsong suddenly gains a sense of place, a feeling that this is truly open-air, real-life birdsong. There is a palpable sense of open space. Most systems create their sense of space from the subtle reverberant cues from the surroundings. Open air spaces are devoid of such cues, so it is all the more remarkable that the Oracle MA-X manages to convey a more perceptible sense of landscape, than the Magnum MA.

To describe these attributes in such hi-fi terms, however, risks missing the point. Instead, it is as though, once that part of my brain which is responsible for reconstructing the illusion of music is allowed to relax, it becomes able to discriminate those elements of a performance which it was too busy to appreciate when it was having to sustain the impression of music-making. You might think of it as a reduced requirement for error- ►

- correction within the brain. Whatever it is, and however it is achieved, I am in no doubt that the addition of the Oracle MA-X loudspeaker cables takes a system forward to an extent which is entirely consistent with the asking price.

So what's in the boxes?

MIT cables are distinguished by having boxes fitted in the line of the cable. The least expensive cables, whether interconnects or loudspeaker cables, come equipped with boxes the size of a small bar of chocolate; the more you pay, the bigger the boxes. The Magnum MA loudspeaker cables boast boxes the size (and weight) of a house brick, the Oracle MA-X' boxes are bigger than many monoblock amplifiers. (At least, with MIT, you can see some of what you have paid for). How the boxes work is something of a trade secret, but various white papers on the MIT website do help to explain the rationale behind their use.

In effect, MIT argues that signal propagation down a cable varies with frequency. The 'skin effect' of radio-frequency transmissions (which propagate almost entirely down the surface of a conductor) is fairly well-known, but MIT explain that even at audio frequencies, the signal uses different thicknesses of the cable at different frequencies. So low bass (which is close to DC, travels down the cable using most of its cross-section, whereas upper treble (which is closer to low-frequency radio transmissions than to DC) penetrates only part way down from the skin of the conductor.

This affects not only the measured resistance of the cable, but also those reactive properties such as inductance and capacitance, and these properties therefore are understood to be frequency-dependent to an extent which is audible. These reactive properties mean that the phase relationship between low and high frequencies is distorted, leading to smear, time domain distortions and, to use MIT's preferred term, a loss of articulation.

The boxes contain passive networks which compensate for this by 're-timing' the signal so that the low frequencies arrive at their destination properly synchronised with the high frequencies. These networks can be thought of as similar to filter networks, except that, being passive, the signal does not pass through them. Each network, or 'pole' of articulation, deals with a particular frequency band. The better the cable, the more poles of articulation and the bigger the box. More poles means each pole can deal with a narrower frequency range and can be more precisely tailored.

In the 'MA' series, MIT have developed networks which also preserve the harmonic structure within tones, so that the normal consonant and dissonant harmonics in a note retain their proper relationships to each other, the amplitudes of any given harmonic more closely resemble those of the original tone. What this means in effect, is that the tonal differences between, say, an oboe and a cello playing the same note, are down to the interrelationships between the various harmonics which make up the note. MIT argue that most cables affect the amplitude, and subtly adjust the frequencies of these harmonics, to the detriment of the sound. The MA technology is designed to minimise that distortion.

Because the boxes are such a large part of the budget in any MIT product, the price depends rather less on the length of the cable than it does in more conventional interconnects and loudspeaker cables.

The Oracle MA-X has another trick, and that is its adjustable articulation. The output end of each box carries a pair of rotary switches with five different positions. One is labelled 'Bass' the other 'Treble' and they permit the user to adjust the level of articulation in the lower or upper frequency ranges. The effect is like a subtle and well-executed tone control. Increased articulation in the treble brings high frequency information a little to the fore, decreased articulation in the bass makes the lower registers recede.

I haven't compared the MIT Oracle MA-X against any other über-cable; this isn't that sort of review. But I am convinced that this is one extremely important element of a high-end system, and one which pulls its weight, financially. The cost difference between Oracle and a lesser cable is comparable to the cost difference between a top-of-the-range high-end CD source and a mid-range high-end model. Both bring significant benefits to the system, but both do different things. If you can afford either, you can probably afford both, and you almost certainly should. One, without the other, is not complete. Which you give the higher priority to is something you can only answer for yourself, but I freely admit, I was surprised at the extra level of vital, musical communication brought about by the introduction of the Oracle MA-X into a system I'd previously thought of as, pretty much, as good as it gets. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

The MIT Oracle MA-X loudspeaker cables

Price:	2.5m pair	£26,000
	3m pair	£26,500
	3.6m pair	£27,000
	4.5m pair	£27,750

For bi-wire versions add £1,800 inc VAT to the above prices.

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Electrocompaniet PD-1 digital converter

by Alan Sircom

Like many audio brands today, Electrocompaniet has now built the device that can bring the company – and its customers – into the 21st Century. The Prelude Line PD-1 DAC is a balanced digital converter that allows users to access the usual slew of optical and coaxial connections as well as the computer link of the moment – USB. It is best used in balanced mode, but sounds fine single-ended too. It has a remote and a four-way front panel press-button system to select the source and a bit-reduction volume control. That alone makes it worthwhile of inclusion into the computer audio pantheon. But there's more.

Electrocompaniet also designed the 24bit, 192kHz PD-1 to work with the company's EMS-1, a RF wireless USB transmission system that takes the signal from a computer and plays it as if it were a wired source. The EMS-1 is a small breakout box that can beam signals through a few walls, but this also has an advantage in removing the potentially noisy spinning discs of a computer out of the room.

With a not-too-complex remapping of your home network architecture, it's possible to use a smartphone or tablet computer in the man cave to control the computer in the lair that drives the DAC back in the man cave. All completely wire-free. Sonos users may drop into smug mode here, as that system has been able to do this – under Sonos' proprietary Mesh wi-fi network – for some time, but we audiophiles are sometimes not exactly quick on the uptake. Some of us still think a remote control is a kind of magic stone that makes noise happen, so Electrocompaniet's offering is the stuff of sci-fi. By using their own wireless network Electrocompaniet (like Sonos before it) more or less guarantee there's no contention – part of the reason why audio companies are

wary of recommending wi-fi is the fact so few home users ever change from default channels, which means a whole street full of users might be using the same wi-fi frequency settings. Under such conditions, dropouts are a virtual inevitability. You need to make sure the EMS-1 and PD-1 are both on the same RF channel, and it's worth experimenting with different channel settings to minimise local contention, but installation is a breeze. Macs and Windows machines will not need drivers for the EMS-1 and all you need to do is adjust your computer's audio output settings as described in the manual. Most will be up and running in a few minutes.

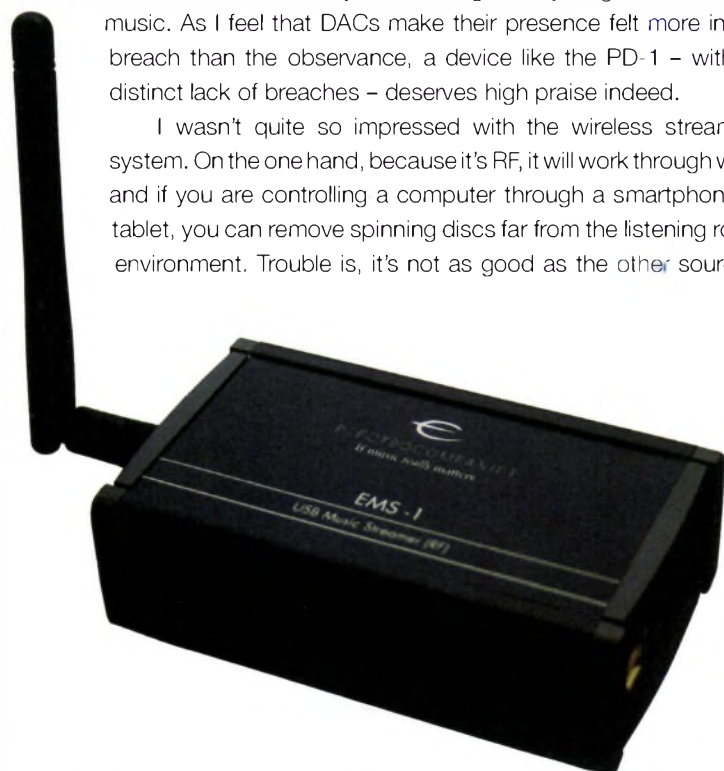
Back to the Electrocompaniet DAC. Ergonomics overall are good, although it's a DAC so ergonomics are not a key concern. It relies on Electrocompaniet's four-direction joystick-style control on the front panel; up and down work through the sources and left-right drive the bit-reduction volume ▶

▶ control. Its bright blue LED display can be a touch garish with the volume up full, but there's a dimmer control on the remote. The range of sources allow for both local (and with the EMS-1, remote) connection, with two coax, one Toslink, the RF connector and USB links, although the USB and EMS-1 are limited to 16-bit/48kHz signals and not designed for asynchronous operation. This doesn't have the thick acrylic and gold-on-black finish of the company's Classic line, but – aside from a top panel that clanks when given a knuckle-rap test – the PD-1 is every bit as well-made as the rest of the Prelude Line range, which is a high recommendation because they have gained a name for reliability.

Like a lot of Electrocompaniet products, the DAC is best in balanced operation. Single-ended is not far behind, but the DAC moves out of cruise control and into something slightly more exciting in balanced mode. 'Balanced' is not just the preferred choice of output, though, because it neatly sums up how the PD-1 sounds. Everything sounds balanced and right through this DAC; no need for artificial transient energy or excessive dynamics for that edge-of-the-seat drama. No need for slightly too much treble masquerading as detail for that energetic zing, or a gentle roll-off to take the edge off the clipped screams of the worst victims of the loudness war. Just good, honest, fuss-free digital conversion. The fact that this is so rare it needs pointing out perhaps shows why audio is missing the bigger picture.

It's been said that music lovers use audio equipment to listen to their music, while audiophiles use music to listen to their audio equipment. If that's the case, this is distinctly NOT an audiophile product. The sense of natural balance doesn't draw you to hi-fi aspects of the music, just draws you into the music. I tried a number of sources – including online sources like Spotify – and never once found myself focusing on anything other than the music. As I feel that DACs make their presence felt more in the breach than the observance, a device like the PD-1 – with its distinct lack of breaches – deserves high praise indeed.

I wasn't quite so impressed with the wireless streaming system. On the one hand, because it's RF, it will work through walls and if you are controlling a computer through a smartphone or tablet, you can remove spinning discs far from the listening room environment. Trouble is, it's not as good as the other sources,



sounding slightly thin by comparison. Also, built-in USB provides a more balanced sound, but just lacks the focus and control of coaxial and optical. Ultimately it's not a big deal-breaking difference, but an interesting observation that this is a DAC that works best with 20th Century digital inputs.

I don't want to downplay the PD-1 here. In fact, it's a DAC of such poise and detail that it not only makes a lot of sense to existing Electrocompaniet owners, but is good enough to be the gateway into a wider Electrocompaniet world for those not yet one with their Danish side. OK, if you are already firmly ensconced in the post-CD future and all you need is a USB DAC, this might not be your best choice, but where it shines out is as a digital-only preamplifier for people mid-migration from CD-based to file-based music. And let's be honest, right now, that means most of us! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Audio Outputs: Stereo balanced line out (XLR)

Stereo single-ended line out (RCA)

Digital Inputs: 2 x S/PDIF Coaxial, 1 x S/PDIF TOSLink, 1 x USB Type B, 1 x RF Link

Digital/Analog conversion: 192 kHz, 24bit

Input sampling rate supported: S/PDIF 192 kHz, 24 bit, USB 48 kHz, 16 bit, RF Link 48 kHz, 16 bit

Upsampling rate: 192 kHz, 24bit

Frequency response: 1 – 48 kHz

THD + N: < 0.003%

Output impedance: 100 ohm

Output level: 3.4 Vrms

Noise floor (20 - 20 kHz): < -140 dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 42x5x34cm

Weight: 4.3 Kg

Prices: £1,250 (PD-1); £250 (EMS-1)

Manufactured by

Electrocompaniet AS

URL: www.electrocompaniet.com

Distributed by EC Distribution

Tel: +44 (0)20 8893 5835

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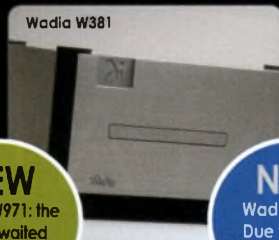


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MDC/HF-15377

HRT iStreamer DAC

by Alan Sircom

Another year, another product from the High Resolution Technologies stable. These small, immensely capable and affordable one-source DACs are a key part of the revolution that's taking place in audio today. This one takes a power feed to both drive the DAC and charge an iPod, iPhone or iPad (basically any 'iDevice' from the first generation Nano and Touch era and beyond). It also skirts round the iDevice's internal DAC, thanks to an Apple Authentication chip. And the whole caboodle is finished in the right shade of Apple white.

The iStreamer has to be externally powered, because Apple will not permit a product drawing power from an iPod/iPhone/iPad (it would also drain the iDevice's batteries at a frantic pace). There's nothing wrong with this, but it does mean the iStreamer creates its own cable spaghetti dish.

It's simple to use. There are three lights for 32, 44.1 and 48kHz sampling rates and when the DAC locks on, the relevant light blinks. There's no provision for 96kHz sampling rates, and there's nothing going on past 16-bit precision. But, this is designed to replay material stored on your iDevice, not replace a high-end replay system.

This is a smooth and satisfying sound, one that is quite unexpected given the reputation the iDevices have. But not smooth in a laid-back, blunted transients way, more in a keeping the top end in check manner. And the further you get from the audiophile ideal file-wise, the more this helps; my iPhone 3GS has music on tap, but a lot is reduced to 128kbps AAC – fine for commuting, not necessarily good for replay through a system. The iStreamer makes this sound perfectly acceptable, especially at the frequency extremes; good, tight and ordered bass and a clean treble and everything in between very easy on the ear makes the Belcea Quartet playing the Nocturne from Dutilleaux' *Ainsi La Nuit* less of a strain (string quartets playing structurally dense late 20th Century compositions and AAC encoding is generally not a happy marriage). Interestingly, it's the most significant improvement that's at first the least noticeable; the bass is deep, but not that tautly held in control on the standard iPod sound, but here it gave a fine rendition of Grinderman's epic punk thrash wig out on 'No Pussy Blues', keeping the balance between that fuzzed to death guitar and the edge of the seat percussion and bass line.

Its big drawback is a purely intellectual one; somehow, it just seems like last season's hot product. Apple is all iTunes and wireless now, and a device that physically tethers an iDevice seems like old news, no matter how good that news is. This is something of a personal frustration, because the potential sound quality of the wired iStreamer and some high-grade tracks on a tiny Nano into a proper audio system really has the 'wow' factor. But sadly, I suspect this is a step too far for today's iPod people.

Personally, I'm not troubled by this wire, because the 'wow' factor of just how good the iPod can be wins out. Play it with an iPod filled with lossless files and see just how close it gets to most sub-£1,000 CD players. You might be surprised at how good this iStreamer – and your iPod – really is. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

DAC: 16-bit, with support for 32 kHz, 44.1 kHz, and 48 kHz data rates
Digital Input: USB Transfer
Protocol: Host Mode (master)
Analog Output: Stereo analog audio (RCA jacks)
Full Scale Output: 2.25V
RMS Frequency Response: 20 Hz- 20 kHz, 0dB/- .4dB Noise Floor (DC -> 30 kHz): 28uV
Signal/Noise Ratio: 98dB THD + Noise (1 kHz FS 44.1 kS/s): .002%
Accessories: Power supply, power supply cable, Apple-compatible dock/USB cable, RCA interconnect cables
Dimensions (WxHxD): 5.8 x 2.2 x 11.7cm
Weight: Negligible!
Price: £195

Manufactured by High Resolution Technologies
URL: highresolutiontechnologies.com

Distributed by Audiofreaks
URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk
Tel: +44(0)20 8948 4153



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Vertex AQ HiRez Moncayo

by Paul Messenger

Following a chance meeting with Franco-Japanese hi-fi journalist Jean Hiraga in Tokyo (whose article I translated for *Hi-Fi News* the following year), I can fairly be accused of starting the whole connecting cables thing going way back in 1976. Little did I realise what a can of worms I'd opened up, or that, 35 years on, I'd be spending some thousands of my own pounds on Vertex AQ's latest HiRez Moncayo speaker cable.

Reactions to those Hiraga articles had varied dramatically, from the enthusiastic to the downright hostile. Japanese audiophiles were way ahead of the English speaking world here, but spreading some of this knowledge into the global community had an immediate impact.

This was not always for the better, I'll acknowledge. The idea of fancy cables had a huge appeal for the one-time snake-oil salesman that saw great opportunities to bilk naïve consumers in a then booming hi-fi industry.

As a long term Naim user myself, and therefore subject to Naim's unconventional connection protocols, I was well immune to most of this, and so remained quite sceptical.

I still believe it's quite possible to get plenty of pleasure from a decent quality hi-fi system without needing exotic connecting cables, but am equally now convinced that such cables may well be worth using, especially in the context of a similarly exotic system. Indeed, a significant proportion of the sound quality of a top class

hi-fi can be won (or lost) through the careful and systematic application of appropriate 'accessories' – by which I include all types of cables, support and any mains treatment.

Such a systematic approach to hi-fi set-up is very much the heart of the Vertex AQ operation. This small and relatively young company (founded 1999) initially focused its attention on avoiding microphony and vibration from interfering with the system components. More recently it has been exploring and adding techniques to combat the effects of RFI and EMI (radio frequency and electromagnetic interference).

I first encountered the products back in 2003, and was very impressed by the way progressively applying them steadily improved the sound quality of my system, mainly through enhancing the resolution of low level signals and reducing the 'hash' floor. Although the burden(?) of regular reviewing makes it quite difficult to maintain an unchanged system, most of the bits and pieces I purchased back then continue to contribute to the fine performance of my music system.

A key component in more or less constant use has been the Moncayo speaker cables, which use silver-plated OFC conductors with PTFE insulation. Crucially, these also incorporate two substantial and hefty 'acoustic absorption modules', designed to prevent vibrations generated by the speakers from feeding back into the amplifier, each module situated about a metre from the terminated ends.

Moncayo's current retail price of nearly £1,500 for a 3m pair (and nearly £2,000 for my 7m set) seemed quite costly enough for my system and regular reviewing activity, but when Vertex AQ's Steve Elford called me and asked me whether I'd like to try out the latest HiRez Moncayo cables, albeit for a short term loan, I naively assented (I hadn't asked the price). I was reviewing Bower & Wilkins' latest and greatest 800 Diamonds at the time, and the combination sounded promising and appropriate.

It was only after I'd tried and immediately and comprehensively been won over by these new HiRez cables – which, incidentally, made a wonderful partnership with the 800 Diamonds – that I discovered that they were also exceedingly expensive: £8,170 for a 3m pair, plus £1,430 per additional metre.

I know that a number of cables cost more than this, in some cases much more, but none have come in my direction, so I'm unable to put the HiRez Moncayo into an overall market context. However, I can unequivocally state that in my system context it delivered a considerable – indeed quite dramatic – improvement over the standard version, so much so that I suspect that its special features were actually helping the amplifier and speakers to work better.

These weren't small differences. Much as I'd grown to like the standard Moncayos over several years, it was impossible not to recognise immediately the considerably superior dynamic expression and vividness of the HiRez cable. That it also sounded rather brighter was not unexpected, given the anecdotal differences between silver and copper conductors. But those apparently expanded dynamics also somehow seem to reduce timesmear and give the impression of a 'faster' sound.

“It was impossible not to recognise immediately the considerably superior dynamic expression and vividness.”

Given the massive cost differential, HiRez certainly ought to be much better than the standard Moncayo, but the reasons for both the price premium and the sonic improvements are easy enough to see (as well as hear). Indeed, the only things the two apparently have in common are those acoustic absorption boxes, though even here the HiRez version incorporates much more advanced acoustic labyrinth absorption, as well as anti-RFI/EMI measures.

No less significantly, it also has pure silver (6x1mm per channel) rather than copper conductors. But perhaps the most important ingredient is that the whole cable is sheathed in a special woven material that supplies much greater immunity from RF and EM interference. (Incidentally, Vertex AQ has an intermediate Silver Moncayo cable at less than half the price of HiRez, but this has fewer conductors and much less anti-RFI/EMI immunity.)

One reason it's difficult to sum up the HiRez Moncayo cable is because it's part of a suite of Vertex AQ components that underpin the whole system. Perhaps the fact that my own system uses several Vertex AQ bits contributed to the dramatic improvements I enjoyed when upgrading to the HiRez cables. However, I suspect they will be equally impressive in a universal context,

because the underlying methodology simply makes a lot of sense.

I was so impressed after that initial week's loan, I immediately placed an order for my own set. These have now arrived, are performing beautifully, but have to be paid for, so selling my secondhand 7m pair of Moncayo cables will help. Sensible offers to the editorial office please! +



PRODUCT DETAILS

Cable type: HiRez Moncayo

Price: £8,170/3m pair

Manufactured by: Vertex AQ

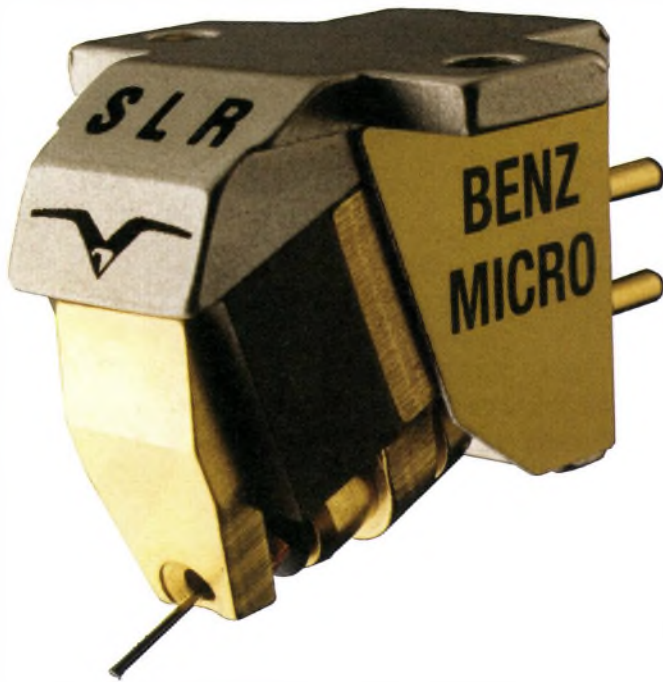
URL: www.vertexaq.com

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Benz-Micro SLR Gullwing MC cartridge

by Alan Sircom



It seems at first a silly name for a cartridge. Even if your company is called Benz, SLR Gullwing sounds pompous unless it's a £100,000 car. In fact, the name is mostly code; 'S-Class' is the hand made moving-coil range, 'L' is the low-output version, 'R' is to denote the use of ruby in place of iron in the generator, and 'Gullwing' because it's a derivation of the popular Glider cartridge. I figure people will forgive Albert Lukaschek of Benz the Mercedes reference if the cartridge is good enough, and it is good enough.

It's nude and it's a beast! That skeletal shell is brass-coloured because it's made of brass (funny, that!), and that means it weighs in at a whopping 12.2g. The cartridge's compliance (15×10^{-6} cm/Dyne) puts it in the friendly with high-mass arms camp, while the 0.35mV output, the 38 ohm output impedance and the recommended 400ohm (and then some) load place it squarely in the 'really good phono stage' department; if you have a phono stage with a relatively low gain (60dB and below) or a generic 'MC' setting, this probably isn't the cartridge for you. It tracks at somewhere between 1.8-2.0g, uses the new Micro-Ridge Gyger S-tip 5x120µm stylus and I found my sample tracked best at about 1.85g. Experimentation during the lengthy run-in process is a good plan.

I could write endless babble about a variety of different arms on different decks, but simple acronym arithmetic works wonders: SME+SLR=OMG. Put this on an SME IV or V (or even the Model 10

variant of the 309) and you can stop worrying about tonearms and cartridges. They just work wonders together; the character of one balances out the character of the other. And with a good phono stage it's like all the artifice between studio and listening room melts away.

I want to call this 'thrilling', but that misses the point. It could easily be mis-read as 'exuberant' and 'excitable'. Although the cartridge is exciting, it's not excitable, and the 'exciting' and 'thrilling' part of this comes from hearing your albums as if shiny and new to you. It's so transparent and naturally balanced, you go right back to your record collection and start again. What's truly remarkable about this combo – and this cartridge – is its sense of space around the notes, like it was opening up the imagery beyond the speakers itself. This comes from a profound sense of balance and poise, but also of a sound that ebbs and flows with the music in the way that so few audio components really do well. Forget subjective descriptions and just enjoy it for what it is; musically sublime.

One of nine cartridges in the S-Class range, there's still a long way between this and the legendary LP-S, but mixing the good things about this, the Ruby and the Glider cartridges makes for something truly special. If you have an SME arm, this is the cartridge it has been waiting for. It's that simple really. 2011 is proving quite the year for royal weddings! +

PRODUCT DETAILS

Price £1,999

Manufactured by Benz-Micro

Distributed by Select Audio

URL: www.selectaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1900 813064



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Burson Audio HA-160 headphone amplifier

by Chris Martens

The Burson Audio men from Melbourne are passionate (and I mean really passionate) about sound quality and they've devoted years and countless hours developing highly specialized, ultra high-quality components. A perfect case in point would be the gorgeous £450 Burson Audio HA-160 headphone amplifier.

Before we dig deeply into the sound and inner workings of the HA-160, there are a couple of things you first need to understand about Burson. These Aussies cannot and will not allow themselves to settle for circuit designs they consider to be compromised, either in terms of performance or build quality. If you spend any amount of time on the Burson Audio Web site, I guarantee you'll find the word "uncompromising" used early and often, and once you see the innovative thinking and self-evident build quality that goes into Burson products, you'll grasp in an instant that these people are serious.

Second, the Burson folk care deeply about craftsmanship, not just because they want to build products in which buyers can take pride of ownership (although that factor is no doubt at work), but also because the Burson team sees—and more importantly, hears—a direct connection between superior

parts quality and workmanship and the desired end result: namely, great sound. Implicit in the Burson approach, then, is a certain unmistakable willingness to go the extra mile where questions of sound quality are involved. Thus, the Burson team tends to reject design and construction shortcuts, if there is even the slightest possibility that they could limit sound quality in any way. Burson always puts musical enjoyment first.

Burson is also big on value. Their products are essentially handmade and quality control checked to an almost lavish extent, and yet they are sensibly priced. I can't help but think there are plenty of companies out there who would charge more, and I mean a lot more, if they were to offer comparable products. If you listen to the Burson HA-160 for any length of time, you may come to feel that it's a bit like getting a Bentley Continental GT for the price of a nice Honda. How cool is that? ▶

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▶ We don't have space to do full justice to the many details incorporated in the HA-160 (for that, you'll want to visit the [Burson Web site](#)), so the following represents a condensed list of highlights:

- **HD Op-amps:** The HA-160 uses Class A circuitry and what the firm terms HD op-amp modules that are based on hand-picked discrete devices.
- **Low noise power supply:** Burson uses discrete devices to create a "sophisticated noise filter and voltage stabilization system."
- **High-precision volume control:** Burson builds its own 24-position stepped attenuator that, again, uses precision-matched resistors.
- **Resonance Free Aluminium (RFA) Enclosure:** The HA-160 chassis is made up of panels precision-machined from slabs of aluminum, each designed to have a slightly different thickness and thus a different resonant "signature."

The Burson serves up a dead neutral, full-bodied, and highly detailed sound that is immediately engaging—deeply so. The unit needs about a half hour or so warm up to sound its best, and in sounds subtly smoother with more fully saturated tonal colour after it has been allowed to run-in for a week or more. In fact, I'd follow Burson's suggestion that you leave the HA-160 powered up all the time, so that it's always ready to go.

It's tempting and in many cases easy to describe components in terms of minor ways in which their response curves are skewed, even if only very slightly, away from strict neutrality. But the Burson sounds about as perfectly balanced from top to bottom as any audio component I can think of and, significantly, it maintains this balance regardless of the load being driven. Burson flatly rejects the notion that you have to match headphone amps to specific headphone loads, arguing that a well-designed amp can and should be able to handle any reasonable load.

No matter what challenge you give it, the HA-160 consistently responds with equal measures of finesse and with pleasingly rich and properly saturated (but not exaggerated) tonal colours. It always sounds poised and comfortable with itself, as if it's got additional reserves of power and speed in reserve, should you ever require them.

Exquisite detailing is the quality that really defines the Burson; you may well be floored by the sheer density of low-level sonic information that the HA-160 can pull from what you thought were familiar recordings. It's an impressive and intensely rewarding thing to hear. Interestingly, though, all of this extra information does not carry with it any sort of hidden sonic price in terms of upper midrange/treble edginess or stridency.

One disk that shows the deft manner in which the HA-160 navigates texturally challenging material is the eponymous jazz recording from Floratone (Floratone, Blue Note/EMI)—a band in which eclectic guitarist Bill Frisell and his cohorts figure prominently. Many of the tracks on Floratone serve up what I've described in the past as "angular otherworldly melodies" that are supported by a broad variety of both acoustic and electronic instrumental embellishments—some of them dark and hypnotic, other lighter and more evanescent. The result is a densely layered sound that is beautiful and intoxicatingly complex when properly reproduced, but that runs the risk of becoming—through some amplifiers—a compressed, formless mish-mash of sounds. But with the HA-160, no such problems arise.

There are also qualities of effortless suppleness and fluidity in the Burson's presentation. To appreciate what I mean, let's look at the track "Nothin' To Do Blues" as recorded by the Mike Garson Quartet [again from *Jazz Kaleidoscope*]. The track opens with a bouncy, syncopated piano line played by Garson—a

line that is quickly taken up by master bassist Brian Bromberg, who keeps pace with Garson note-for-note. In the background, you can hear percussionist Billy Mintz softly keeping time, gently working his brushes on the surface of his snare drum.

At moments like these, the Burson-powered system had ample reserves of transient speed and timbral control to draw upon, it was able to track with the music, measure-for-measure, note-for-note, and nuance-for-nuance.

Burson's Audio's HA-160 is a superb-sounding and incredibly well made headphone amplifier that is more than reasonably priced at £450. For headphone enthusiasts serious about pursuing top-tier sound, the search can begin right here—and for many, I suspect, it will also end here (because the Burson offers such terrific value for money that searching for something better is apt to become a very expensive proposition). Highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Frequency Response: 5Hz (-0.3db) -35 kHz (-1dB)

THD: <0.001% @ 6mW/300 Ohms

Analog Inputs: one stereo analog (via gold-plated RCA jacks with Teflon insulators)

Analog Outputs: two ¼" phone jacks (one "headphone out" optimised for lower impedance loads, one "line out" for higher loads)

Input Impedance: 47 kOhm

Output Impedance: "headphone out," 5 Ohms; "line out," 60 Ohms

Headphone Power Output: 650mW @ 300 Ohms, 800mW @ 60 Ohms

Dimensions (H x W x D): 4.4 x 11 x 28cm

Weight: 6kgs.

Price: £450

Manufactured by Burson Audio

URL: www.bursonaudio.com

Distributed by Angelsound Audio

URL: www.angelsoundaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 1923 352479

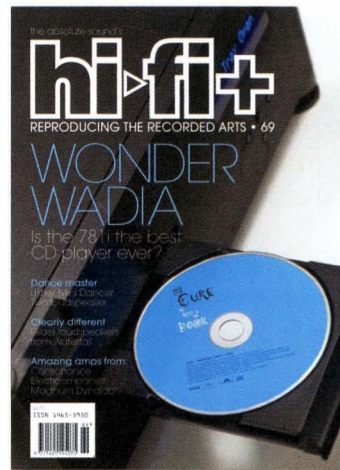
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Zu Audio Essence loudspeaker

by Neil Gader

Zu Audio is a Utah-based loudspeaker and accessory company that was founded in 2000. The brainchild of Sean Casey (R&D) and Adam Decaria (Chief Engineer), each formerly of Kimber and Talon respectively, these entrepreneurs have assembled a business with a clearly defined identity and strong sense of direction. For proof of this you need to look no further than their mid-line Essence loudspeaker. Not the product of cookie-cutter, been-there-done-that design and manufacturing, it's refreshingly plainspoken, almost severe—a monolith with no poetic aspirations. It's not trying to resemble a rocket ship or a totem pole or an aircraft carrier. Its unapologetically blocky dimensions seek no softening from a well-placed curve or gentle radius. It's just a big square slab of retro-loudspeaker, over a metre tall, that in any normal-sized room will not be ignored. Yet, in my listening room, bedecked in a soft, matte, avocado finish (not photographed) that made me crave guacamole every time I looked at it, the package somehow worked. It received nothing but nostalgic "oohs" and "aahs" from all who sat in my listening room, as if they recognized a kindred spirit from another time.

"It's just a big square slab of retro-loudspeaker, over a metre tall, that in any normal-sized listening room will not be ignored."

Appearances aside, the Essence is a high-sensitivity, hybrid-driver floorstander. Its key feature, central to Zu's philosophy, is a large 263mm full-range cone driver that covers the range from roughly 30Hz to 10kHz, reproducing all but the upper harmonics of the frequency spectrum. In one form or another this Zu-designed-and-built driver graces and grounds each model in the line. It uses a pulp-paper cone, which in turn is augmented by a 100mm whizzer cone driven by the same, single voice coil. The top octave is handled by a transformer-coupled, foil-ribbon tweeter via a Bessel-based, second-order high-pass filter—the only electrical crossover component in the speaker. So, except for the top octave, the Essence is essentially a crossover-free single-driver system.



- ▶ The enclosure is a rigid combination of MDF and Baltic birch ply. Cardas' patented cinch-type binding posts are a nice touch on the back panel. Zu Audio is an international factory-direct company and its aggressive warranty and return policy demonstrate its determination to satisfy all customers.

Internal bass-loading is Zu's own design. Named ZuRG, for its co-designer Ron Griewe, it comprises a tall, high-density, foam-like pyramidal construction within the enclosure that widens from top to bottom and terminates above a slotted vent in the plinth at its base. This damps standing waves and controls progressively lower frequencies, reducing vent noise, and overhang artefacts that bloat or slow bass response. For Zu it's a more effective solution than the conventional fibre-fill or constrained-layer approach.

A relative rarity in the high-end, Zu's whizzer cone is a lightweight diagram concentrically positioned around a large, alloy phase plug, and driven by the main driver's voice coil. It resembles something like a circular horn, and it operates purely acoustically. With proper implementation it aids dispersion and extends the top end and reduces the tendency of a large cone to beam. By virtue of its comparative lightness it also promotes transient agility. In principle it's an inexpensive and expedient way to generate high frequencies without resorting to a second transducer and its attendant crossover circuitry.

Its 97dB sensitivity and 12-ohm nominal impedance mean that about the only amp that can't drive the Essence is a broken one. And that holds whether the amp is a 2W SET or a 1kW solid-state design. That's not to say it doesn't appreciate a good, clean signal. Whether it was the PrimaLuna Premium Prologue integrated on the tube side or the ARC DSI200 on the solid-state one, quality amplification invariably stiffened the Zu's spine in the bass and added transparency and liquidity in the treble.

“Its 97dB sensitivity and 12-ohm nominal impedance mean about the only amp that can't drive the Essence is a broken one.”

The Essence offers a fairly wide listening window, but small frequency shifts suggested that window was a little more height-dependent than expected. To achieve the most even balance I felt that I had to sit up a bit straighter than I normally would. So if slumping into the couch is your preferred listening posture, you might want rethink this habit.

The calling card for all Zu Audio product is the big full-ranger. It's Zu's gold standard—a hard-charging extrovert of a driver from which all aspects of sonic performance follow. It produces a warm voluminous soundstage, a realistically scaled acoustic with near life-sized instrumental and vocal images. There's a rewarding sense of dynamic thrust and impact as well—elements built on solid if slightly uneven mid-and-upper-bass response. With no crossover components, save for the high-pass on the supertweeter, and no multiple drivers splitting the critical midrange, the Essence achieves an alchemy of coherence and image resolution that called to mind the point-source ideal. Images were well-defined and locked in with assurance.

Zu will tell you that all its speakers are built around the human voice and, indeed, there's a strong element of intimacy and energy in the way it reproduces vocals from the deepest baritone to the loftiest soprano. The midrange is responsive yet has a warmth factor that fuses nicely with the extension and suppleness of its bass. There's an open, unobstructed wholeness to its midrange, a sense of effortlessness at any reasonable volume in a normal-sized room. Likewise the treble is well-lit and airy; however, even with an assist from the ribbon supertweet, don't expect the 'to infinity, and beyond!' personality of an electrostat or premium dome. I also noted that the very high crossover point for the ribbon tweeter creates a smooth transition that effectively removes a common coloration that occurs when transducers of different materials, radiation patterns, or general design bump up against one another. Historically, ribbons and cone drivers don't sing with a single consistent voice for this reason. For the Essence, the ribbon is outside the fundamental range of the orchestra and is only asked to blend in the purely harmonic range. And this it does well and unobtrusively.

Bass response is nicely extended in pitch and impressive in its lack of dynamic compression. The Essence plummets forcefully into the low 30Hz region, but rolls off quickly below that. Its sense of pace in these nether regions is somewhat easy-going, if not a bit woollen at times. An example would be the bass viols during the Korngold Concerto for Violin and Orchestra [Anne-Sophie Mutter, DG]—rich with resonance and immediacy off the bow, yet somewhat thickened and defocused as they descend in pitch. Whether this is due to a cabinet resonance or the loading design is difficult to say. It's an issue that won't get everyone's attention, but I prefer more control.



In tonal accuracy the Essence can get unruly at times. As vividly detailed as vocals can be, timbres lack consistency top-to-bottom and low-level cues will often recede and assume a softer focus. Thus, as I listened to Norah Jones' 'The Nearness of You' [*Come Away With Me*, Blue Note], a couple of things came to mind. Her voice was slightly hooded and laid-back on the sung notes but over-detailed during the breathy decays. This midrange recession underscores a glint of brightness in the sibilance range, which adds emphasis to high-hat and other metallic percussion cues. Further, a strong male voice like Frank Sinatra seemed lifted slightly in pitch, shortchanging the weightier contributions of chest and diaphragm. Conveying a similar impression, piano harmonics were reproduced with greater intensity and ring and marginally less weight on the fundamental.

For me, minimalist crossover designs have a sense of speed and attack that make them stand apart from typical two- and three-way designs. In the Essence's case, transient information is ricochet-immediate, with no trailing artefacts. Solo piano, in particular, exhibited terrific micro-transient speed. Beyond this attention to transient information, there was a delicacy of detail to acoustic guitar, mandolin, and banjo that communicated a greater sense of the human component—the finer gradations of volume and timing that make listening to the neo-Bluegrass music of Nickel Creek such a distinct pleasure. To be fair, there was also a hint of added sparkle in the upper octaves of these instruments, but that was easily forgotten after a few moments. Dynamically, the Essence is an unalloyed party animal. It gently prods percussions cues forward and snare drum thwacks land like grenades. Similarly the ping off of drumheads sound as if the skins were retensioned for crisper impact.

The Essence is a great lesson in the power of one. And much credit is owed the determined Zu keepers for pursuing the one-driver solution and delivering it with such value and mind-bending economy. For me, the Essence never failed to forge a strongly musical connection. But it also provoked me to consider the old conundrum about just what constitutes musicality and realism in a loudspeaker. Tonality hardliners will squabble that it misses the bull's-eye in a couple of significant areas. Conversely, many will applaud Zu Audio's more holistic approach. One thing we do know, however, is that there's no such thing as one-speaker-fits-all design. The Zu Audio Essence really needs to be experienced to understand its unique magic. In the world of cookie-cutter audio, there's really nothing else like it out there.

First Published in TAS issue 212 +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drivers: Ribbon tweeter, 260mm full-range driver with 100mm whizzer cone

Frequency response: 30Hz-40kHz

Sensitivity: 97dB

Nominal impedance: 12 ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 30x125x30cm

Weight: 29.5kg

Price: \$5,000 per pair in standard finishes (walnut and ghost black); custom finishes on application, plus shipping, duty and taxes

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www.zuaudio.com

+44(0)1273 700759

Room Acoustics #1 – Tools of the Trade

music matters

by Alan Sircom

LAST YEAR, I DEVOTED MY COLUMNS TO THE IDEA OF WHETHER THE SOUND OF A SYSTEM can be benefitted by the addition of power products, cables, equipment supports and the like. This year, it's the turn of room acoustics.

Acoustics is a complex subject that is best taken objectively, but its tenets can seem at odds with those of modern hi-fi enthusiasts. Audiophiles are traditionally less concerned with what happens after the speaker cones, which is precisely the place where acousticians begin to get excited. Audiophiles also think tone controls are The Devil's Work, where an acoustician will not shy away from DSP to try to compensate for room anomalies. This has led to a touch of 'them and us', with audiophiles criticising acoustically-treated rooms as 'overdamped' and acousticians dismissing hi-fi environments as 'too live.' As is usually the case, I suspect the truth lies somewhere between these two opposing views.

Unfortunately, acoustics books are usually dry or academic... or dry *and* academic. Buying – or building – a set of bass traps, absorbers and diffusers and placing them randomly in a room is likely to do as much harm as good and – although unlikely – you might just be adding heavy-handed treatment to a room that needs a light touch. So, where do you start?

Enter the XTZ Room Analyzer, a combination USB microphone and Windows program (the Mac software is expected this year). Used properly – and the manual makes proper use a distinct possibility – the analyzer gives you a series of useful snapshots to highlight your room's good and bad points. The analyzer is divided into two main sections – full room analysis (using either one-point measurement for the 'sweet spot' audiophile or more complicated three-point measurement for a more thorough investigation of the room itself) and basic 1/3rd octave frequency response measurement. The full analysis includes an ability to determine the nodes and reverberation time of a given room.

Simple 1/3rd octave frequency plots will give you a very basic view of what is good and bad about your room (the more this plot looks like a landscape painting of the Cambridge Fens and the less it looks like the Cairngorms, the better), but don't give you a lot to go on unless you know something about acoustics, but fortunately the full battery of tests helps more.

The full package gives you both a plot of your room and its room modes (more on this next time) and a spectrograph plot of your room's reverberation time. The manual is a good first port of call to start interpreting these graphs, but they really aren't the sort of raw data results that make you call

Acoustics Anonymous. The more you know about acoustics, the more you will get out of the data, but even the neophyte will see just how good (or, more commonly, bad) their room is and have some clue as to how to improve on things from the graphical results.

The advantage to the XTZ is it doesn't make high demands on the user. No dedicated spectrum analyzer or high-quality sound card required, and the computer spec can be comfortably achieved with any PC modern enough to sport USB connectors (Windows Vista/7 users need to download and install the program carefully, or it can end up with almost no volume through the system). From the measurement-making perspective, there are also no great hoops to jump through, just set the microphone in the right place(s) and you are away. The only difficulty is there isn't a great deal of help if things go awry.

If you own a decent audio system – and 'decent' in this setting is basically anything better than a clock radio – the XTZ Room Analyzer holds several huge keys to finding out just how much better that system could sound. It's that useful.

Next time, it's time to look at the good, the bad and the ugly rooms (from a purely acoustic setting, of course) using the XTZ, and learning how to begin to make them better without ending up in a divorce court in the process! +

PRODUCT DETAILS

Price: £160

Manufacturer: XTZ Room Analyzer

URL: www.xtz.se

Distributor: Advanced Acoustics

URL: www.advancedacoustics-uk.com

Tel: +44(0)1623 643609



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black dub: sound and soul

an interview with daniel lanois

by Sherri Lehman

If you've listened to any pop music during the past twenty-five years, you've heard Daniel Lanois—or at least heard the results of his influence on others. A who's who of musical giants—U2, Willie Nelson, Bob Dylan, Peter Gabriel, Emmylou Harris, Robbie Robertson, the Neville Brothers, Brian Eno and more—have sought him out for his creative approach to record making. Fellow Canadian Neil Young named his recent album *Le Noise* in tribute to their collaboration. Known as a “musician’s musician” and a full partner in the architecture of U2’s sound, Lanois’ success as a producer can be measured in an impressive accumulation of multi-platinum albums and Grammy awards. His musical resume also boasts several film soundtracks, including the haunting original score for *Sling Blade*.

One of Lanois’ heroes, Jimi Hendrix, once said, “I don’t play guitar. I play amplifier.” If that’s the case, then Daniel Lanois doesn’t just record; he plays the mixing console like an instrument. Behind the board, he turns into a sonic shaman, deconstructing and rebuilding tracks layer upon layer. Lanois opens the curtains on the recording process in his recent memoir *Soul Mining: A Musical Life*, where he describes long, intense days in the studio creating albums like U2’s *The Joshua Tree*, Bob Dylan’s *Time Out of Mind*, and Emmylou Harris’ *Wrecking Ball*. *Soul Mining* mixes recording tech talk with some behind-the-scenes stories about the making of these famous albums, including encounters with Billy Bob Thornton, Harry Dean Stanton, and Peter Gabriel. Lanois tosses in some philosophical musings along the way, too,

revealing an authorial voice that the *New York Times Book Review* called both “technical and mystic.”

Never content to simply do what he’s done before, Lanois keeps pushing forward. His latest project is *Black Dub*, an eclectic quartet featuring the fiery blues vocals of Trixie Whitley, Louisiana virtuosos Brian Blade on drums and Daryl Johnson on bass, and Lanois on guitar. Their self-titled album was released late last year.

Dub is a genre of music that grew out of 1960s reggae, predominantly focusing on remixes of existing recordings that emphasize the drum and bass, and manipulating tracks by adding extensive echo, reverb, and overdubbing of vocals. With *Black Dub*, Lanois takes dub a step further, incorporating psychedelia, r&b, and reggae-style beats along with Whitley’s soul-searing vocals.

SL: Tell us how *Black Dub* came to be.

Daniel Lanois: I’ve been wanting to assemble a band where I wasn’t responsible for all the singing. I met Trixie Whitley in Belgium—she’s the daughter of an old friend of mine, [the late blues singer] Chris Whitley. I heard her singing and song writing, then I invited her to be part of this entourage, and she agreed.

SL: At what point did you say “This is a record”?

DL: We built up a lot of courage after having recorded two songs. One was Trixie’s song called “I’d Rather Go Blind,” which we filmed and put on YouTube. Then a second one called

interview: daniel lanois

"I Believe in You," which also worked out real well on YouTube. We started getting all this response, and I thought well, maybe we should formalize this. Just a fascinating process, to test something out on the internet. We were excited, we posted a few things, we got hundreds of thousands of hits and said "Let's take this as a sign."

SL: Does she remind you of anybody else?

DL: She reminds me of her dad, funny enough. Chris had good musical taste, so she had a lot of very inspired music playing in her ears early on. She gravitates to soul singing and Nina Simone is one of her heroes.

SL: What was like working with Brian Blade and Daryl Johnson on this project?

DL: Well, how lucky are we to have two boys from Louisiana giving it their best. Brian Blade learned to play drums in the church. His father was a singing pastor, and those early lessons I think really provided Brian with a special touch—a lot of emphasis on the hi-hat. He's a very tone-driven musician. There's only a handful like him in the world. And Daryl Johnson is a great memorable bass line composer. You can always play bass in a rudimentary manner, but when you have an actual bass line that stands out and can be sung, that's a better place. They're a pretty high-grade rhythm section for sure.

SL: You're juggling darkness and light pretty heavily in both the sound and the lyrics of the album.

DL: Well, there's optimism in the lyrics that I like: "From where I was standing it was hard to see, hard to see/What has always been there will forever be." If I said nothing else on this album, that's a profound statement. It suggests that at any given time in culture, you can lean on what has always existed and will always be. It's what drives you to standards you operate by. The amount of love you have in you. And the darkness, well, we are Black Dub. (Laughs) The name came about at a time when I was feeling a bit black, having worked in Europe for two years. I didn't know what to do with myself. These days I hang my hat in Jamaica. I appreciate that I can be having a go with carrying the torch of dub music. It shows up on the record in a few spots, and it will even show up more in the next Black Dub record, which will be made in Jamaica.

Lyrical one of my favourite songs is "Nomad": "I may fall from this trapeze/But I will land down on my knees/Gotta sing with praise and roll with daily blows/The way the nomad knows." When that lyric is sung by a young woman, it suggests that she's not buying into conventional thinking, that she will be driven by her own values, and will carry herself to any part of this continent that will please her, her dreams and her vision. It's not written with Trixie in mind but she really owns the song now. I was very proud of Trixie for taking it to a place that belongs to her.

SL: Which tracks on the album are your favourites?

DL: I love "Surely," because it happened very quickly. I finished the song the night before the recording. The recording is the first take and it's all organically played. No overdubs so I was very proud to have gotten one that way. I also like some of the studio-built ones. There's an instrumental track called "Slow Baby" which operates in the other end of the spectrum from "Surely." It's much more of the studio junkie angle. (Laughs) I've always enjoyed the challenge of mixing flesh with machines. I think in these fast times it's nice to embrace technology, but still keep a foot in what we love about soul music.

SL: How do you keep music sounding so organic?

DL: Without any doubt I much prefer when something has an organic unfolding, and lives because it's already a song and captures a performance. But not everything happens that way. Maybe if I would have had been born 30 years earlier I would be doing things more like Motown, you know, work out all the arrangements, then go in and record. So it's a constant dilemma. I think "Surely" is a possible redemption to any "sculpture" work that happens on the Black Dub record.

SL: Is ambiance or clarity more important to you?

DL: I think as record makers, we have a responsibility to create, to establish a theme or a mood. Ambiance in the early 80s was very much about Brian Eno and the records that I made with him. What we hope to get in even a stripped-down production is a picture that will provide a listener with a cinematic view of a song or a subject matter. Just as if I were painting a picture, it never happens the same way twice. If we could use the word atmosphere as a cinematic term, it's a lovely complement to a shot. I still operate with all that in mind, if not specifically the sonics of atmosphere. Even though I left all that behind in the 80s, some of it turns up on the Black Dub album. When we put out that live record I think it'll be even more stripped down than the actual album.

SL: So, you're going to do a live Black Dub album?

NL: We've been recording and filming every show, and it's stacking up to be something very special. I'm hoping to find an angle for this work, because it's not just a live record. The way that U2 did *Live at Red Rocks* in the early 80s; it served them very well. Black Dub could do something similar, maybe a travel film.

SL: When you're listening to music, do you prefer to listen to digital or vinyl?

DL: I like the idea of vinyl quite a bit because it slows the pace down of this fast life that we've created for ourselves. Any place that we can chill out and have some friends over, there's something bohemian about that gesture that really works to counteract the small bits and pieces and bytes that

interview: daniel lanois

▶ we operate by. All sonics aside, because the way we make a record is not determined by the format you're ultimately listening to it on.

With vinyl, it's the sound of a moving part. The stylus is reading the groove of a record so it's a moving part, the way that the speaker is a moving part, the way that an eardrum is a moving part. You just have to put up with a little surface noise and the odd crackle. but that's okay.

Regarding what format we operate for recording the record in the studio, I don't think it's as important as what instruments you play. My turn-of-the-century Steinway B that I had restored sounds really mellow, but that's going to be very different than a brand new Bösendorfer. So, a decision like that is a very big part of how a record will sound. We use high-grade American preamps, and selection of microphones is a big part. If you use an RCA ribbon microphone then you get a velvety sound. If you use an AKG 414 you get a more trebly sound. What lives in the tool box, and what lives in you philosophically is much more important than the carrier itself.

You know it's very easy to simplify all this and think analog is great and digital is crap. But analog had its problems — what about cross-talk, what about inconsistency of azimuth, what about wow and flutter? It was hard to transfer a multi-track back in the day. At least with my digital RADAR system, I can copy a project and not destroy all the existing good work. I think the carrier is almost the least impactful component in the personality of the making of a record. People in the room, the instruments, the microphones, the size of the room, how you go about doing things, whether you're going to do things more organically all at once or separated, these are the components that determine the sound of a record.

The era plays a bigger part than the components. If you were to listen to Beethoven recorded in the 1950s compared to something that was done currently, you would hear a difference in sound. Largely because of the kind of strings people were using, what sort of rosin was used on their bows, what was the sonic sentiment of the time. We've had a race to high frequency since the 60s. Make things brighter, and that will be more beautiful. But when you brighten things, then you have fewer shadows.

I like classical recording of the 50s. I think piano recordings from the 50s are some of the best. You hear more contemporary recordings and they have more top end in them, it means a broader response frequency-wise, but is it more musical? Maybe not. I think the vocal sounds were pretty much at their peak in the 50s...Sinatra, Nat King Cole, and Tony Bennett.

SL: When you're working on a project with other musicians, do you anticipate the outcome?

DL: It's always different than I anticipate. I mean, we come into a project bringing something to the table, and we certainly

bring our optimism. The wisdom in a given situation is all about embracing these surprises that come one's way, perhaps at the expense of dropping a preconception. That's a luxury that we're afforded in the record-making process because it doesn't take much other than to be brave to change the course of the ship.

SL: Do you think you would always want to produce and work with other musicians?

DL: I'd be just as happy to be playing guitar on stage for awhile, I have to admit. You know I love my domain in the studio and I'll always be an experimenter and a studio rat. It affords me isolation and opportunity to come up with sonics that otherwise I wouldn't be able to come up with. But I do love the stage. There's a resourcefulness and an economy in people's efforts on stage because you can only do so many things at once. And when we get it right live, I actually prefer that to the record versions.

SL: You started out on pedal steel guitar when you were young—does that affect how you play now?

DL: I started out as a slide guitar player without the pedals and then when I was about 14 I switched to pedal steel. It's a finger-picking instrument, so I'm pretty much a finger picker on the steel and on the regular guitar. It's a bit of a rarity. Most players will play with the flat pick, but there's some of us out there that appreciate the available dynamic range from flesh to string. There's quite a array of tones available to me that way. I wouldn't wish it upon anyone. It's a skill that doesn't come easy, and as a kid I just developed it early on. I also studied classical guitar, so to this day it's still how I play. I don't use metal picks, just flesh on steel.

SL: Who influenced you when you were starting out?

DL: Jimi Hendrix was always with me as a hero, and still is today. I'm mystified by how much tonal variation he created just playing one guitar, with one set of hands. So on this current Black Dub tour I'm using no pedals and I'm just playing one Gibson Firebird—I'm very proud of that.

SL: What do you still want to achieve?

DL: I think my arranging skills are getting better by the year and I'd love to put out an instrumental record with Brian Blade that challenges already existing form and allows us to step into the future in the way that the splinter jazz combos of the fifties did. I see a window of opportunity right now to bring instrumental music to an unknown place. I want to mix my dub skills with hand-played instruments. To challenge form is part of evolution and I'd like to do that with my time if I can pull it off.

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record reviews

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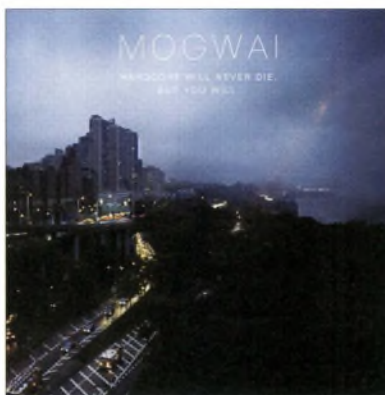
The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and – where possible – serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

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

This issue's featured reviewers are:
 Contemporary – Alan Sircom
 Audiophile/Jazz – Dennis Davis
 Classical – Richard S. Foster

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		45 RPM
	Multi-Channel		



Mogwai



Hardcore Will Never Die, But You Will

Rock Action Records/Sub Pop

Fantastic album name, fantastic band. Mogwai are a Glaswegian indie-rock band; think My Bloody Valentine mixed by Slint and cut with some proper dour Scottish shoegazy attitude and even no small amounts of humour and you get it.

Their seventh album is mostly instrumental, with vocals more as instrument than message. Mogwai are kings of the slow build, keyboard followed by one distorted guitar layering on top of another, but just when you get comfortable, they change up or down a gear. This, their seventh album has its excellent moments ('Rano Pano'), its less than brilliant moments ('George Square Thatcher Death Party'), its nearly cheery moments ('How to be a Werewolf') and its almost straight rock moments ('San Pedro').

Mogwai are a huge wall of sound that starts big and gets bigger and bigger. There is noise and distortion here, as well as gentle phased and chorused keyboards and powerful real and synthetic drum sounds, and even the occasional violin part. Subtlety is in the mix, but really it's meant to be played at the sort of levels that leave you breathless at the end of each track.

RECORDING



MUSIC



PJ Harvey



Let England Shake

Island

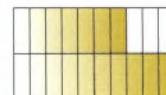
Polly Jean Harvey has had a glittering career. Her deeply autobiographical style has been painful to listen to at even the mildest times, but that doesn't prepare you for *Let England Shake*. This is not just her magnum opus, it's her taking music to places it hasn't been before.

We've had anti-war songs and albums in the past. They've been focused on a particular war, either a contemporaneous war or drawing parallels to ancient (or future) conflict. *Let England Shake* sees Harvey trying to understand our nation's overriding obsession with war.

The music is ethereal and almost completely at odds with the lyrical content, which makes it all the more poignant. And yet it's not some sappy 'war is nasty' album. This takes you places you don't want to go; to the trenches and the hospitals, to the camps of the displaced and the homes of those who mourn the lost.

It would be easy for PJ Harvey to simply turn this into an angry rant about how bad England has been over the centuries. But even this is too easy; she's someone who loves her country, but sees that patriotism can be poisoned and perverted. A magnificent, harrowing album. One of her best, and that's saying a lot.

RECORDING



MUSIC



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Rumer
Seasons of My Soul
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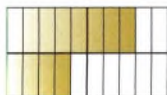
Rumer (real name Sarah Joyce) is being hyped up big time. She's very easy on the ear, and her soulful easy listening style and her silky voice has everyone from Burt Bacharach to Elton John on her side. Which is perhaps why she was nominated for two Brits only a couple of months after her first album appeared.

If you thought Sade's last album was a bit edgy and think Norah Jones should cut more albums, this is for you. 'Slow' is the breakout track. And she's really channeling Karen Carpenter here. The one time she seems to break out of the early 1970s is 'Vertigo', where she has a go at being a little bit Lily Allen. It doesn't work, and serves to show why she'll always be in Karen Carpenter's shadow; where Karen Carpenter had a Sinatra-like ability to make passing tones flow toward the right note, Rumer just sounds almost off-key when she tries the same trick.

Sound quality is fairly good. Everything is very slick and polished, and no one in the band is going to do anything to get in the way of the talent. Perhaps a little too slick and polished; the last track on the album makes Holly Cole sound like Pantera by comparison.

Unless you've Horlicks pumping through your veins, give it a miss!

RECORDING
 MUSIC



The Low Anthem
Smart Flesh
 Bella Union



They made this one in a cold, abandoned pasta sauce factory in Rhode Island. And they make the sort of acoustic alt-folk, alt-country music that you could top yourself to. Which makes *Smart Flesh* by The Low Anthem 2011's masterwork.

OK, it spends a lot of time in low gear; 'Apothecary Love' is a classic slow country waltz and it's one of the most racy tracks on the album. Others play to a 4/4 time signature that could be measured geologically. The band includes 'natural' instruments (like bits of found wood as percussion), a huge range of instruments and uses the factory's space to create natural reverb. The result is less polished than the band's previous *Oh My God, Charlie Darwin* album, but wonderfully organic and hypnotic.

There's another key thing. More raucous tracks like the chilling 'Boeing 737' aside, this is a wonderfully recorded piece of live, acoustic music in a live, acoustic environment. The standout tracks for the audiophile are 'Wire', 'Burn', 'Golden Cattle' and 'Love and Altar'. These are of the finest demonstration quality, so good you can almost hear their breath freezing in front of their faces. And they are bloody good tunes, too.

The other tracks are merely outstanding. Buy it now!

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Gregg Allman
Low Country Blues
 Rounder



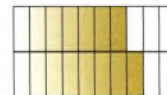
A liver transplant last year has not slowed Gregg Allman down. In fact, *Low Country Blues* is his first solo project in almost 15 years, so he must be back on form. This slice of effortless blues is also a tribute to those artists who influenced Allman (and, of course, the Allman Brothers). There's tracks by 'Sleepy' John Estes, Skip James, Muddy Waters and more.

Allman has assembled a dream team line-up for this one. Any album with Dr John on piano and T Bone Burnett at the faders is almost guaranteed to be something good, and when you add Allman on both guitar and Hammond organ, the result is naturally excellent, if a bit overblown. Probably not demonstration grade recordings, but neither are they far off the mark and for any good blues collection this is a modern must.

Allman has that easy, almost louche style of many white bluesmen down perfectly, and yet he's not merely going through the motions; the intro to 'Devil Got My Woman' for example is note perfect to the original and his voice harks back to the style of the 1930s. The band kicking in brings it up to date, but doesn't ruin the intention; a good mix that's beyond simply copying.

Well worth seeking out!

RECORDING
 MUSIC



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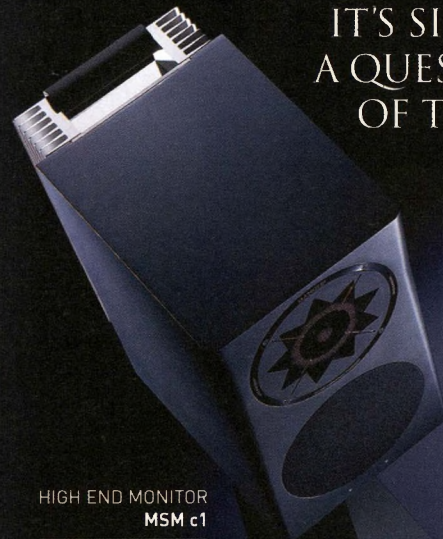
John Peel



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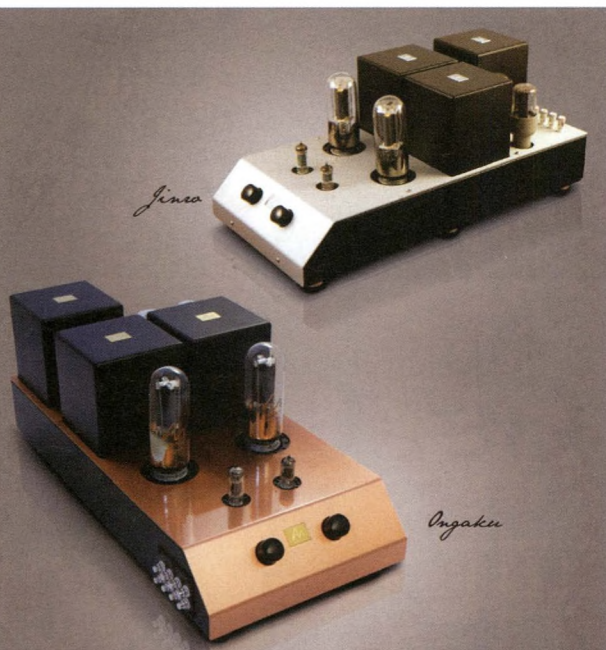
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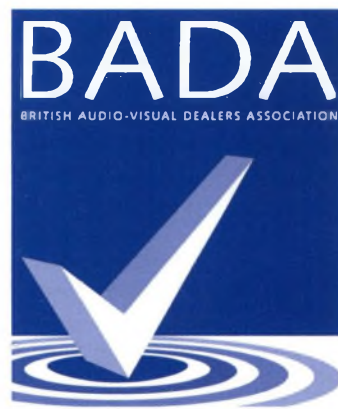
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**Bobby Darin****Love Swings**

Mobile Fidelity/Atlantic MOFI-005

Except for 'Mack The Knife' most music lovers under 60 would be hard-pressed to remember anything else recorded by Bobby Darin unless they saw the recent biopic movie *Beyond The Sea* with Kevin Spacey playing the lead. In the late 1950's, Darin was making the transition from teen idol to big band singer and Vegas act, before dying at the tender age of 37.

Love Swings, a 1961 release, captures Darin at the peak of his big band excellence. He's clearly going for a mature audience. His cover photo dresses him up as a rich playboy and makes him look 10 years older than his 25 years. He'd obviously listened to his Sinatra Capitol sides, and he's pulling off a bit of a Sinatra imitation here, yet it's still all Darin.

This is one of the first releases by Mobile Fidelity in its new Silver Label series, titles released on standard-weight vinyl at RTI, but still cut and mastered at Mobile Fidelity's facilities. The eclectic mix of albums in the series ranges from Rod Stewart's *Every Picture Tells A Story* to Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book* to Bette Midler's *The Divine Miss M*. This title is very well mastered and sounds like a million bucks despite the budget label price. One of Bobby's two best albums at a price that lets you explore uncharted territory for a song.

RECORDING
MUSIC

**Dave Holland and Pepe Habichuela****Hands**

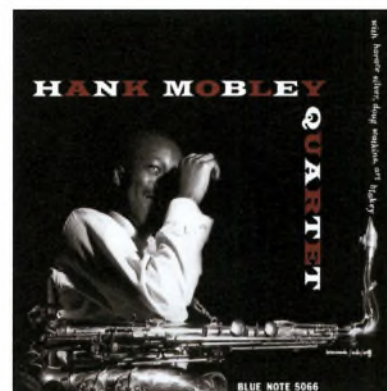
Dare2 Records DR2-006

What's with it with tiny companies producing fabulous recordings? Dave Holland hooked up with flamenco artist Pepe Habichuela in 2007 in Saville. The Habichuelas' (a stage name translating to "beans") real family name is Carmona and their flamenco tradition goes back five generations. Holland fell in love with the music and returned yearly to practice and perform with the clan until 2010 when they recorded this album.

While the jazz influence is unmistakable, the flamenco influence clearly predominates. Pepe is joined on guitar by his son Josemi and younger brother Carlos, while two other clan members supply percussion. Recorded at the CATA Studios in Madrid in March 2009 but not mixed and mastered until a year later, this CD somehow sat in my unplayed stack for months until it started showing up on end of the year lists and I dug it out.

This CD easily fits in my best of 2010 year's list. In addition to the fabulous music, the packaging is first rate, with a double pouch pack, one side holding a nicely produced and informative booklet and the other an opening for the CD. The recording quality is excellent, as good as almost anything on the silver disc.

RECORDING
MUSIC

**Hank Mobley Quartet**

Music Matters/Blue Note 5066

45 RPM

The Blue Note 45 RPM releases have been uniformly excellent, but there are some so good that I'll set aside an extra copy "just in case." This is one of those records—unobtainably rare, killer music and Rudy Van Gelder's sound recording at the top of his game. This is an infectious performance by the Blue Note all-stars: Mobley, Horace Silver, Doug Watkins and Art Blakey. In its original form, this album is crazy expensive. And the music? Unless you're one of those folks who just want to wait for the later Blue Note avant releases, it's hard to believe that any jazz lover can resist these performances.

This was Mobley's 1955 debut as a leader on Blue Note at the age of 25 and while some of his later albums may display a bit more invention and maturity, that does not diminish the impact of this unique performance. Mobley had spent five years paying his dues with Dizzy, Max and then the Jazz Messengers, and he always swung even if he never developed a voice as distinctive as some of his contemporaries. Add to all this some of the best Blue Note sound, a mono recording in Rudy Van Gelder's original home studio, brought to perfection by the mastering wizardry of Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray and you have a desert island disc. This gem won't be around forever.

RECORDING
MUSIC





Markus Schwartz & Lakou Brooklyn

CD

Equinox

Soundkeeper Recordings SR2002

Schwartz has spent the last 20 years learning Haitian percussion music, traveling back and forth between Brooklyn and Haiti to learn the secrets of the lakou drum players of Haiti. His quartet Lakou Brooklyn is composed of Jean Caze on trumpet, voice and conch with Monvelyno Alexis and Paul Beaudry supplying percussion.

And what a groove they supply in this June 2010 session, with Schwartz using a digital loop pedal sampler to make his playing sound like a whole battery of Haitian drummers. The music is the most infectious sound that's come into my home in a long time. SoundKeeper Records really shines in this department with outstanding recording and mastering by Barry Diament, who formed his own company after leaving Atlantic Records and he's recorded a Who's Who of rock and jazz stars. This tiny start up company is devoted to great sound and sells its music direct from www.soundkeeperrecordings.com. You can buy the music in several forms including mass produced CDs, a CD-R burnt in real time or various level of .aif or .wav files in 24/96 or 24/192 on a DVD-R. I listened to the CD-R and it's one of the best sounding digital recordings I've heard. Highest recommendation.

RECORDING
MUSIC



Nat 'King' Cole

CD 120g

After Midnight

Analogue Productions/Capitol W782

This is going to be easy. This is one of the great records. It's King Cole's best record, with extra songs not on the original. And it's the best sounding version ever. In case you don't catch my drift, the details follow. Unlike his popular albums, here Nat swings with an unmistakable jazz feeling. Willie Smith, Harry Edison, Stuff Smith and Juan Tizol join his trio on three selections each. Cole recorded jazz early on, but the sound of those recordings is by and large barely acceptable. *After Midnight*, on the other hand, is Cole at his absolute peak. There is no hint of the pop star standing at the mike behind a studio band or ensemble.

This is real jazz played by a tight group of musicians, even though it includes the "guest artist" approach of rotating in star players. And it's not like you are taking your medicine to get the jazz thrown in here—Cole sings a play list of familiar tunes that you've heard him sing before. He just sings them a little jazzier. This three record set gives you the original 12 sides plus eight bonus tracks. And the sound? Some years ago, Pure Pleasure issued a two record 33 RPM set of the same material that made the original release sound murky. This new set bests that effort with unbelievably good sound. Although the set is a bit spendy, if you want the best, this is the way to go.

RECORDING
MUSIC



The Horace Silver Quintet Plus J. J. Johnson

XR

The Cape Verdean Blues

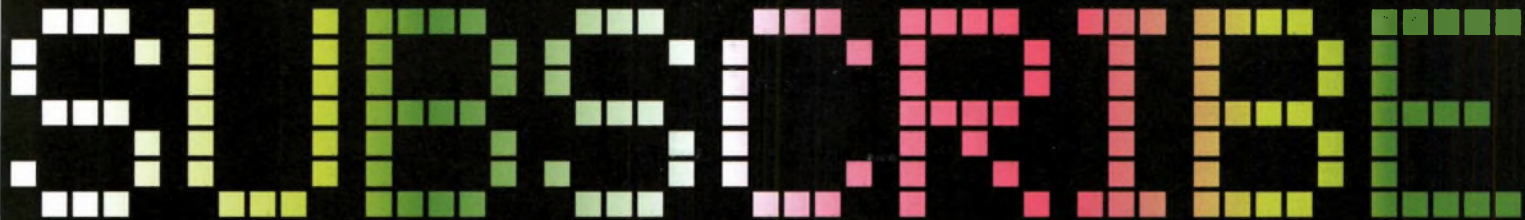
Blue Note/Audio Wave ST-84220

This is the 10th of what has grown to 12 XRCD releases of Blue Note titles by Audio Wave under the direction of producer Joe Harley, mastering engineer Alan Yoshida and owner Robert Bartz. This is a classic title with J. J. Johnson, Joe Henderson, Bob Cranshaw and Roger Humphries, but what makes it special for me is the trumpet work of Woody Shaw. Shaw fell under the influence of Dolphy and Coltrane early on. He replaced Carmel Jones in the Jazz Messengers and became a Blue Note regular for a few years, playing on a number of classic albums, before striking out on his own. Because he died relatively young at the age of 44 after being struck by a subway car, his recording output does not match his greatness.

For the best sounding Shaw recordings, look to his efforts as a sideman on Blue Note titles. Here, Shaw does not disappoint. His phenomenal and unique playing is matched by excellent sound. This not typical Jazz Messengers' fare—Henderson and Shaw play a much edgier, modern sound than that group's standard hard bop. That, along with the world music vibe of the Cape Verdean tribute to Silver's father makes for a very special album.

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Beethoven: Symphony No. 9 in D min, Op. 125; Mariss Jansons, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and Chorus.

Multi-Channel and Stereo Hybrid SACD. BR Klassik 900108.

This is a reissue of a previous CD only release of this performance. This particular performance was recorded in 2007 and was a live concert in honor of Pope Benedikt XVI. Jansons gives us a steady reading which builds to the final movement for an impressive finale. While there are many versions of this symphony available, Jansons offers something more than fireworks.

I find the sound to be quite superb and while I prefer the SACD layer, the CD sounds just fine. I have not always agreed with other Jansons recordings but there is no doubt this disc is right on the mark. Listening to Beethoven's masterpiece has always been something I've very much liked and this 'no frills' interpretation has moved to the top of the list. He strips away all extraneous supposition and as I've already stated, his finale is just superb. The artists and chorus are easily heard, words are clear and pitches secure that offer a sense of joy as was the composer's intention. Explore this disc if you are looking for a performance you can consider reference worthy.

www.sricanada.com

RECORDING
MUSIC



Beethoven: Piano Concertos No. 4 in G major (Op.58) and No. 5 in E flat major (Op. 73). Yegheny Sudbin, pianist with Osmo Vanska conducting the Minnesota Orchestra.

Multi-channel and Stereo Hybrid SACD. Bis SACD 1758.

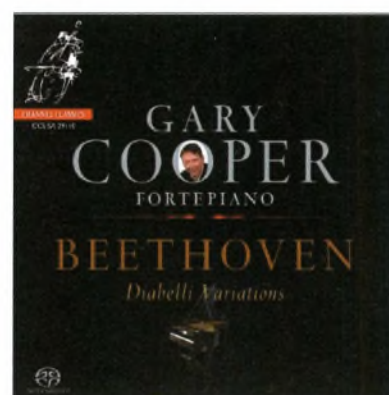
The two performances on this disc are superb. Sudbin has recorded some fabulous Chopin for Erato and his recordings for Bis are all worth owning. His playing of these concertos with the highly acclaimed Vanska/Minnesota collaboration reach new heights in artistic excellence.

Beethoven's first four piano concertos were not written for orchestral accompaniment. They were written for him to perform as soloist. This was the best way for Beethoven to show his composition skill to a wide audience in which he planned on receiving pupils. The character of the 5th piano concerto is quite different than the others and it is well known that Beethoven never performed this in public.

From the opening bars of the allegro moderato in the 4th concerto, you realize you are in for a very special treat. The soloist is in proper proportion with the orchestra and the sound quality is sublime. This is a fabulous disc and should not be overlooked for any reason.

www.bis.se

RECORDING
MUSIC



Ludwig van Beethoven: 33 Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli, Op. 120; 6 Bagatelles, Op. 126. Gary Cooper, fortepiano.

Multi-channel and Stereo Hybrid SACD, Channel Classics CCS SA 29110.

Anton Diabelli lived in Vienna and wrote a waltz tune and then invited major Austrian composers to contribute a variation on this theme. All would be published in one volume, and the monies raised from the sale would be donated to widows and orphans of the Napoleonic Wars. Why Beethoven wrote 33 variations probably has more to do with Bach's Goldberg Variations than anything else. Those were compositions that Beethoven admired. He was approached in 1819 and did not finish until 1822 while he intermittently composed his *Missa Solemnis* and late piano sonatas.

These variations are just that, variation on a theme and all told are very entertaining and give additional insight into the composition skill of the master. These performances sound very different on a pianoforte than on a modern grand piano and one should adjust for that difference.

Gary Cooper is a well-known forte pianist and has extensive experience in playing worldwide. He has a full plate of teaching positions and records often for Channel Classics.

www.channelclassics.com

RECORDING
MUSIC





Zoltan Kodaly: Dances from Galanta for Orchestra; Hary Janos Suite. Bela Bartok: Deux Portraits; Rhapsody for Violin and Orchestra. Gyorgy Ligeti: Romanian Concerto. Gulbenkian Orchestra conducted by Lawrence Foster.

Multi-channel and Stereo hybrid SACD, PentaTone PTC 5186 360.

The Hungarian composers on this disc offer something new (Romanian Concerto) while others here are well represented in the catalog. This disc is quite a treat having all these fine works in one place.

While not a big fan of Ligeti, I was surprised as to the romantic nature of his Concert Romanesc. The five dances from Galanta, as well as the six movements of the Hary Janos suite are each given their own tracks-not something that is always done. I must say I like the way this music was created for this SACD. There is stylish playing by the orchestra and the performances are quite polished in nature.

The works on this disc are very easily accessible and will be enjoyed by many. The disc is a generous almost 77 minutes and the sound is, as is to be expected from this label, quite excellent. Strongly recommended for both sound and performance.

www.pentatone.com

RECORDING
MUSIC



An Evening with Leopold Stokowski: Bach, Cesti, Purcell, Palestrina and Tchaikovsky. Further transcriptions by Richard Egarr of Handel and Ockeghem. The Brussels Philharmonic – The Orchestra of Flanders, Egarr (cond).

Multi-channel and Stereo Hybrid SACD. Glossa Music GDCSA 922209.

Leopold Stokowski is justly famous for his arrangements of traditional orchestral works and here we are given an absolutely wonderful 'evening' of some of his most famous transcriptions. Stokowski was also a very accomplished organist and he did some excellent orchestral arrangements of some of the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. They are well represented on this disc, not only the Toccata and Fugue, but also Air from Overture no. 3.

I must say that the orchestra is in top form and Egarr himself, most noted for his unadorned interpretations of these works, leads the group with a well guided hand. The sound quality is excellent on the CD layer, but as one would expect, really shines with the SACD layer. I thoroughly enjoyed this outing and it has gotten much playtime here at Chez Foster. A wonderful disc of excellent music that should not be missed.

www.glossamusic.com

RECORDING
MUSIC



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 9 in E flat major, K.271; Piano Concerto No. 12 in A major, K.414; Rondo in A major, K.386. Ronald Brautigam, fortepiano. Michael Alexander Willens conducting Die Kölner Akademie.

Multi-channel and Stereo Hybrid SACD. Bis SACD-1794.

Brautigam is an exceptionally well versed pianist and has been with the Bis label since 1995. I am going to have to explore this exceptional artist further. I had not heard of Michael Alexander Willens nor Die Kölner Akademie, but I will explore other recordings made by them, too.

There are many performances of Mozart piano concertos in the catalogs and I certainly hope that Brautigam and Willens, et al, bring us more. There is a blending of soloist and ensemble that seem to say, "We've been playing together for many years." From the opening bars of the E flat major concerto, the listener realizes immediately they are in for some very polished performances. The music ebbs and flows so naturally that you never want the music to come to an end. Yes, the CD layer is excellent, but the SACD layer is the tops in my book. Not to be missed.

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Elgar's Enigma Variations every home should have one

by Roy Gregory

FOR THE LISTENER AND COLLECTOR, ONE OF THE GREAT JOYS OF CLASSICAL MUSIC IS ITS MULTI-DIMENSIONAL NATURE; not only does it offer a

brehtaking range of repertoire, but each work within that canon is available in multiple readings, each offering its own individual perspective on the composer's art. So when it comes to Mahler symphonies, do you favour Solti or Bernstein, Abbado, Sinopoli or Rattle, to mention just a few. Perhaps you want vinyl – Barbirolli? – or SACD – MTT? You get my drift...

Indeed, there are some works that are so over-recorded that you wonder whether there's anything left to say – and on the face of it, Elgar's Enigma Variations could easily rank as a prime contender. Hauntingly beautiful, quintessentially English and addictively accessible, this is one piece of serious classical music that effortlessly crosses the genre divide, ensuring its presence on the list of Classical Albums You Should Own (Even If You Don't Like Classical Music). In fact, you probably know it even if you don't think you do. Whilst it's too long and too multi-faceted to suffer the ignominy of its adoption by the advertising and elevator industries, bits of it regularly crop up in movies, most recently *Master And Commander*. And let's not forget that Nimrod is played at every Remembrance Day parade, and it remains one of the most requested pieces of music to be played at English memorials and funerals. It's not music you can avoid.

Its episodic structure, a single theme and 14 variations, creates a series of orchestral vignettes, some as short as 30 seconds, others stretching out over the five-minute mark, which keeps things varied without the listener ever losing the thread, while Elgar's willingness to pluck the emotional heartstrings also keeps things interesting. In fact, it's this very quality that has made the work at once so popular, and the victim of classical music's own brand of snobbery. "Serious" listeners aren't interested in a recording unless it is at least, almost unobtainable – and of a work that no one's ever heard of (or heard, most likely). The more obscure and difficult the composer or his music, the more points they score, with an extra bonus every time someone mispronounces the name of the genius or his masterpiece. It's an attitude that forgets the fundamental truth that all music needs to engage the listener. If listening becomes a chore then we simply don't bother – and the real beauty of the Enigma Variations is that they never, ever become tedious or indeed, anything short of deeply moving.

So which of the myriad recordings should you choose? Personally I've a deep affection for both Barbirolli's 1965 Kingsway recording and Pierre Monteux's 1960 LSO performance on RCA (more recently re-issued by Classic Records on 180g



vinyl). But recently, it's a newer recording that I've been reaching for. Following the trend for orchestras to release their performances on their own labels, the Philharmonia has struck a deal with Signum Classics, and one of their (very reasonably priced) offerings features Sir Andrew Davis and a programme that couples the Enigma with the same composer's Concert Overture – In The South and Serenade For Strings. It's a powerful line-up (musically and in personnel terms) that is all the better for having been recorded live and in quick succession. If ever a work needed a sense of performance it's the Enigma, and Davis and the Philharmonia definitely deliver, bringing delicacy, dynamic range and a sweeping majesty on demand. There's a real tension and drama which underpins the emotional power of the music, heightening its scale and impact, while the unfettered dynamics and graceful fluidity are a world away from the stilted presentation of most multi-tracked, mega-mixed modern classical recordings. This is Elgar as he would have wanted it – and you should want it, too. +

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