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REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS • 82



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MAGNEPLANAR MG1.7

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The result is a loudspeaker with holographic imaging, free-breathing dynamics and unrestricted sonic detail. A speaker that takes sound onto a new and rarefied plane. A speaker for people who don't know the meaning of ordinary.



EDITOR

Alan Sircom

Email: editor@hifiplus.com

CONTRIBUTORS THIS ISSUE INCLUDE:

Dennis D. Davis, Steve Dickinson, Richard S. Foster, Neil Gader, Wayne Garcia, Roy Gregory, Jimmy Hughes, Mark Lehman, Paul Messenger, Mark Prendergast, Andrew Quint, Malcolm Steward

GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Louise Cowburn

Fonthill Creative, Salisbury

DESIGN DIRECTOR

Richard Hamshere

Fonthill Creative, Salisbury

PRODUCTION

Aaron Chamberlain, Shelley Lai

PHOTOGRAPHY

The Hi-Fi Plus Team

ADVERTISING/ ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER:

Pete Trewin

Tel: +44 (0)1425 655699

Fax: +44 (0)1425 655477

Email: pete@hifiplus.com

PUBLISHER

Chris Martens

THE EDITORIAL OFFICE CAN BE CONTACTED AT:

Hi-Fi Plus Editorial

Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd
Unit 22, Sandeath Industrial Estate,
Sandeath, Hampshire
SP6 1PA

United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)1425 655255

Fax: +44 (0)1425 655477

Net: www.hifiplus.com

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subsidiary of Nextscreen, LLC, Inc.
8868 Research Blvd., Ste. 108
Austin, Texas 78758, USA
Net: www.avguide.com

CHAIRMAN AND CEO

Thomas B. Martin, Jr.

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editorial

It's funny how things work out. A decade ago, the idea of putting a turntable on the cover of a hi-fi magazine was a questionable one. Sales of vinyl were in the doldrums, new products were relatively rare and people were discussing their 'final vinyl' system. Many took the ultimate step and sacked both turntable and – a fatal error in my opinion – their LPs to move into the bright future of the polycarbonate disc.

In 2011, the reverse is true. Sales of LP and record players are growing once more and people of all ages – even those who were born long after LP was scheduled for termination – are getting back into the format. Its perceived biggest weaknesses of a decade ago (the inherent clicks and pops of vinyl, the 'cumbersome' sleeve) are now its greatest strengths (those clicks are organic and the sleeve is a physical thing in a virtual world) and as for CD, well now it's CD's turn in the doldrums.

I suspect CD's fortunes are due for a revision soon. The backlash is growing and people are not quietly migrating to ripped and file-base music in the sort of numbers expected. Sales of streamer hardware are buoyant, but revenue for the music companies is still lower than

expected. More significantly, there's a small group of 'tried it, no thanks' rebels beginning to mount a 'hands off' campaign in favour of keeping digital discy. No riots in the streets (as a Londoner, we've had enough of those lately), but just asking the question 'are we really ready for this yet?' And many are pointing that question directly at the sound quality of ripped files, compared to their polycarbonate originals.

Is CD still better? Many people think so.

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

It is with great sadness that we write to report the death of our Office Manager, Jackie Williams. After a long battle, fought with great stoicism, Jackie passed away in July. She maintained a positive attitude throughout her illness and will be greatly missed by all at Hi-Fi+.

Many friends of Hi-Fi+ knew Jackie, be they subscribers or clients. She was the face of the magazine at all of the UK shows and the voice behind the phone to whoever called the office.

She was a tremendous colleague, always willing to work outside her remit in order to keep the office running smoothly. All who knew her both personally and through the magazine will sorely miss Jackie's friendly face.

Our thoughts at this time go to John, her partner, Dylan, her son, and her daughter in law, Arzu.

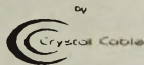
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For all information about Crystal Cable's Arabesque range and Crystal Cable's comprehensive range of Interconnect, Speaker, Digital, HDM, FireWire, USB and AC cables please contact our UK distributor Absolute Sounds, +44 (0) 2089713909, www.absolutesounds.com

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Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming!

Keep the CD flying!

I read with interest Art White's letter in issue 81 and I too feel that the audio press in general are prematurely assuming the imminent death of CD. I have just bought a streamer to connect my computer to my Hi-Fi in order to stream Spotify but this is in addition to my habit of buying vinyl and CD. It allows me to try before I buy a higher quality medium. I suspect a lot of your readers are probably doing the same thing. Not replacing their CD players but adding a facility. Also, I like to have a physical artifact, which is probably something shared by many of my 50+ generation. And few of us have download speeds to properly cope with HDmusic files anyway.

Nigel Thorpe, via email

We are seeing an increasing backlash against the day of the download. Some of this gets lost in the whole vinyl revival extravaganza that seems to have taken the audiophile world by storm once again. But there does also appear to be resilience to just rolling over and letting CD die. I can only applaud this, even though I also use a file-based system, my CD player is still a key part of my listening process and I suspect it will be for some time – Ed.

When is long too long?

Re Issue 81; The effects of interconnect and speaker cable lengths is something I have pondered upon many times in hi-fi systems, as it is important to consider these cables as part of the systems circuit rather than just an interconnecting accessory – as such it does seem to me that there is as much to matching the interconnect and speaker cables to a system as there is the actual components matching of a system into one coherent matched whole, as it were.

The effects of the UK vs the American system layout was very interesting and much as I have discovered in my own system when moving from one system layout – in a smaller house – to the 'American' layout in a house with a larger lounge.

Of course in the case of fibre optics linked equipment, there is only the optical op-amps to consider – which are of course part of the components anyway – unless you adopt the method of 'add-on' optical op-amps – but in this process you are adding complexity and further connectivity into the system in an area, where quite frankly, it is likely to reduce performance rather than enhance it as with so already optically equipped equipment.

But there are good fibre optics, then there are very good fibre optics, so the same could equally apply to the matching of fibre optic cables. But such linked systems are rare at present – but may become more common in the future as radio linked equipment may end up swamping the radio waves to such a degree that interference becomes unacceptable.

Mains cables are a slightly different matter, even though again, the choice of cable and length can and do affect the performance, this may be subtle in most areas of sound, but certainly affects the lower registers of bass and the higher registers of audible treble to a degree it can be clearly heard – the difference between a deep bass and a clear deep bass, a high clear treble and a sparkling clear treble. The length of a mains cable will not affect the sound quite so much per-se, as with an interconnect cable, but might render the cable susceptible to RFI (Radio Frequency Interference) which will portray itself in a diffused sound and/or introduction of distortion components.

Poor Interconnects are also susceptible to such interference, especially near areas of very strong radio signals, where the radio station or transmitter noise can be superimposed on the systems sound. Having very good screening and a very good earthing is all important here.

Our lounge is approximately 24' x 14', so the sensible approach here is to 'fire' down the room – using the 'American' layout – components along the side wall at one end – My wife said so!

Being an old dinosaur, I still use analogue reel to reel, cassette, radio and vinyl, though I have advanced into the cretaceous with digital cassette, CD/SACD and a CD recorder – no digital radio as yet. Using a Mark Levinson pre-amp and two pairs of Michell Alecto monoblocks driving a pair of MF-9's, interconnect here is single ended to the Alecto's, it was originally a single interconnect per channel of 8.5m length each, piggy backed at the Alecto's, using pure silver stranded interconnect, adding a second 8.5m length to each channel, so each Alecto's signal came direct from the ML brought a large improvement in sound performance.

All other components in the system use the same pure silver stranded interconnect with the exception of the SME arm to phono pre-amp. Using RA Reference powerkords for all the equipment except analogue cassette, Speaker cables are 4 x 1.5m Kimber 8TC.

Being an electro-mechanical engineer, now retired, working in R&D for very many years allowed me access to numerous different types of cables for a multitude of purposes – mainly in signals and radio transmission-receiving, ‘borrowing’ cables from time to time to test their audio performance in my system, choosing the pure silver stranded PTFE insulated screened cable over everything else. (originally a high spec. military signal cable for use in hazardous areas), using Neutric phono and XLR balanced connectors soldering with pure silver solder. I have tried many interconnects (some very expensive others not so) over the years, but none to match these.

As a post script, there are still many good blank 10 ½" ¼" reel to reel and analogue ‘metal’ cassette tapes around – though analogue cassettes are getting harder to find now, I bought a large amount of both some years ago when I first saw the digital writing on the wall. Interestingly, there is a small shop (by UK standards) in Gamla-Stan, Stockholm, with wall to wall, floor to ceiling LP’s – literally thousands of them - a real Aladdin’s cave for vinyl lovers – vinyl is still quite strong here, all the more attractive as there is an old coffee shop next door that serves the best coffee I have ever tasted, as for Swedish cakes, mmmmmmm, but we won’t go into that one though.

John Ellis, Sweden, via email

Wow... military-grade war-zone interconnect cables. I'm jealous, really. That's true steely-eyed missile man stuff round these parts. – Ed.

Back to Back to Basics

Just when you thought it was safe to move on (from your back to basics feature) this e-mail arrives in your in-box. Inspired as I am by the excellent letter from Mr. Giles Morrison, published in issue #74, I am not about to rehash his words, rather reporting my findings and making a suggestion for readers to confirm their thoughts and ideas about their own system.

It might be in order at this stage to briefly describe my hi-fi system: Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD player, Classe CAM350 monoblocks and B&W803D speakers, interconnects are Nordost Heimdall balanced, speaker cables are Nordost Heimdall bi-wired, mains cabling is a mixture of Dalkey Audio silver with a Russ Andrews PowerBlock (one of the earlier models with hard wired mains cable). I am fortunate in having my system installed in what we call the music room and it shares space with my guitars and amplifier. The CD player sits on a finite element Pagode wall shelf, the CAM350s are placed on the floor and the 803Ds are sited fairly far apart with a slight toe-in. I like the sound (obviously) which appears totally divorced from the speakers when heard from the listening seat.

The room needed to be re-decorated so everything except the speakers, (which I am unable to move and which are precisely positioned, so they were covered with black refuse sacks!) and the carpet were removed and the work got underway. A few days later the work was completed and I had the room back. With the wall shelf refitted, the CD player and amps

in position and inspired by your article, I decided to go back to basics and confirm that my cable loom was actually giving what I thought it was giving. I dug up a pair of freebie interconnects, three computer grade power cables, a four way mains block from the local DIY store and a few metres of 1.5 m.m. squared twin electrical cable terminated Lavardin (bare wire ends) style. And the single wire jumpers that B&W supplied with the speakers got an outing.

First things first the system worked. Worked as in producing a sound that is. So I left it running for more than a week before any serious listening took place. Over the next three weeks I listened to a wide range of music through the system. Sound wise there appeared to be an increased level of compression, where every sound jumped out at you almost with a vengeance instead of ebbing and flowing as a system of that price range would be expected to do. The biggest loss was one of ‘connecting’ to the music and all that time I never felt the urge to take my acoustic guitar and play along with the singer!! The fact that the speakers were in exactly the same position as before gave me confidence listening and forming opinions about the sound as a lot of time was devoted finding the best position for the speakers when the system was first installed. So I knew that that variable was not an issue. I replaced the interconnects and speaker cable in one step and the sound improved considerably but was still short of that connection to the music. Fifteen hundred pounds worth of Nordost cables did not make a fifteen hundred pounds improvement to the sound. If I was trying out the Nordost

“Being an electro-mechanical engineer, now retired, working in R&D for very many years allowed me access to numerous different types of cables for a multitude of purposes”

cables, they would have gone back to the shop! It was not until I replaced the mains cables the following week that the sound 'came together'. The mains loom, in my system at any rate, raised the performance to the level (sonically) the overall cost of the system promised. The compression that blighted the sound before was diminished, the music was simply more relaxing to listen to while displaying all the attributes that a good hi-fi system gives. Now the acoustic guitar gets called upon to join in the fun. And fun is what was missing.

I think that everyone who reads your magazine (they are hi-fi people or they would not be reading Hi-Fi+) ought to check out their own system and confirm that the upgrades actually improve the sound. This is a scary thing to do as you are asking yourself to prove that the expensive cables you bought are actually delivering the goods sonically. It is all too easy to listen with your eyes, the top reviewed cable name inspires confidence but it might be the wrong choice in your system. I am of the opinion that everything will change the sound but a change is not always an improvement. So go back to absolute basics and make sure that you are hearing what you think you are hearing. At least it will give you the satisfaction of KNOWING that the improvements you paid for are actually being delivered in your system.

Thomas Fox, Republic of Ireland, via email

It's good to see that series of columns still have some 'legs'. And it's still exciting to see a lot of people come up with broadly similar conclusions, no matter what their system or circumstances. We're obviously on to something here! – Ed.

No ruts please, we're Scottish!

You asked in the current issue how you drive the mag forward. Having just taken out a two year subscription and also having an ongoing PDF sub for the Absolute Sound (unable to get physical copies since Borders in Glasgow closed) I would like to see dedicated mag reviews and not "previously reviewed in issue 213" at the end. I hate bands that keep repeating the same formula, so don't let it get stuck in a rut!

Hunter Ross, via email

If it ain't broke...

I write having noticed in your issue 81 editorial that there are changes planned for Hi-Fi+ magazine and I'd just like to add my humble views!

I'm a relatively new reader having subscribed at last years National Audio Show at Whittlebury Hall. (By the way I very much enjoyed your demo at the show). You can probably tell where my view is going when I say that I enjoy the mag so much I have just taken out a further two year subscription. Added to that if you are at Whittlebury and are selling back issues at £2.50 again I will be taking full advantage!

Personally I love the mix/style/layout of the magazine just as it is. I love that it is weighted very much towards high end – I may never be able to afford the majority of the equipment but it's incredibly interesting to read about it. There is a nice mix of 'real world' hi-fi and I enjoy the discussion features, letters, music reviews – pretty much everything and I really do look forward to each issue coming through the letterbox so I really hope that you don't change things too much.

“I think that everyone who reads your magazine (they are hi-fi people or they would not be reading Hi-Fi+) ought to check out their own system and confirm that the upgrades actually improve the sound. This is a scary thing to do as you are asking yourself to prove that the expensive cables you bought are actually delivering the goods sonically.”

To add some context I also read Hi-Fi Choice & Hi-Fi World. Hi-Fi Choice seems to have dumbed down recently – it seems to have taken a big step towards the style of What Hi-Fi SAV (yes sorry but I only read it for a short time when I was new to hi-fi!) which is a great shame given some of the excellent writers they use. Every month I think about cancelling my subscription and I suspect it won't be too long before this happens! I enjoy Hi-Fi World despite the writing style of editor David Price but as a digital only user, I sometimes find it a bit analogue heavy (and a bit anorak heavy!!)

I'm sure you'll get lots of conflicting views but in amongst them I hope there's a good few saying please don't change things too much!

Jason Watson, via email

Thanks for both your emails. We're still investigating what we can do to the magazine to get it in shape in time for the Olympics. Or maybe sooner. Keep 'em coming! – Ed.

news

Acoustic Imagery

A new start-up in audio is rare these days. A new UK start-up is exceptional. Acoustic Imagery is a new high-end amplifier company, albeit one with a heavy background in custom designed active monitor

loudspeakers for pro use. Its first domestic products will comprise a line-level preamplifier, a Class D mono power amplifier and a phono stage, all of which will be supplied in the same anodised solid aluminium billet case.

The £2,995 line pre uses a high-quality 24-step attenuator coupled with an active line stage in the hope to gain the benefits of both passive and line pres. The five input dual mono pre is single-ended throughout and features a 20V DC triple-path power supply. It is joined by a £1,995 per channel 400w Class D power amplifier. The company sources high-grade amp modules for their flat frequency response and their lack of electromagnetic interference or influence. These are mated to switch mode power supplies designed specifically for the task, to overcome some of the poor peak-power problems common to Class D.

Finally, the company has developed a high-quality £3,450 phono stage that uses SMD metal film resistors, a 21 step input loading and 34 step level adjustment, close-tolerance RIAA equalization with additional time constraints and the same dual mono 20V power supply seen in the preamplifier.

The products will be showcased at Whittlebury Hall
www.acousticimagery.com



Denon CEOL Noir

Denon has expanded its range of network streaming devices. Its new CEOL Noir features Apple AirPlay support, internet radio, network music streaming, USB memory play and iPhone/iPod support alongside its conventional CD player, AM/FM tuner and conventional optical digital input.

Priced at £500 (without loudspeakers), the 2x 65W receiver will support both PC and Network Attached Storage, as well as standalone internet radio, connected either wired through Ethernet or wirelessly through its own WPS-enabled wi-fi connection. It even offers support for Last.FM and Napster and can play compressed music up to 24/96 FLAC precision. All of which can be read on the three line organic electroluminescence display front panel.

The original CEOL proved popular when launched late last year. This all gloss, none-more-black variant will be available from September.

www.denon.co.uk

Atlas Hyper and Asimi

Atlas Cables has added new models to its Hyper range. The new £160/m Hyper Asymmetrical is an unbalanced coaxial design using 80 strands of 99.9997% pure OCC copper in the conductor, a polyethylene dielectric and a 272strand ultra-pure oxygen free copper braided return conductor, all covered in a soft, gloss black PVC. It's available in phono or BNC connections.

It's joined by the Hyper Symmetrical, which replaces its Navigator range. It features an OFC/mylar screen and PEF dielectric, with two OCC conductors with Teflon dielectrics inside and a soft black PVC outer sheath. This is available as pairs of phono cables for £250 per metre or a XLR pair for £375. There is also a Hyper S/PDIF cable available in phono or BNC for £75 for a mono metre.

Finally Atlas has upgraded its Asimi interconnect with a new solderless RCA plug and the cable now comes in a wooden presentation case.

www.atlascables.com



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MICHAEL FREMER - JUNE 2011 issue

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MartinLogan ElectroMotion ESL

Priced at £2,499 per pair in Satin Black finish and £2,900 per pair in Gloss Black, the ElectroMotion ESL is a new hybrid electrostatic/conventional bass driver design from MartinLogan. Combining a 865mm tall curvilinear XStat™ electrostatic transducer and a superbly integrated high-performance 203mm woofer, the EM-ESL is claimed to be the world's most affordable high-performance hybrid electrostatic loudspeaker.

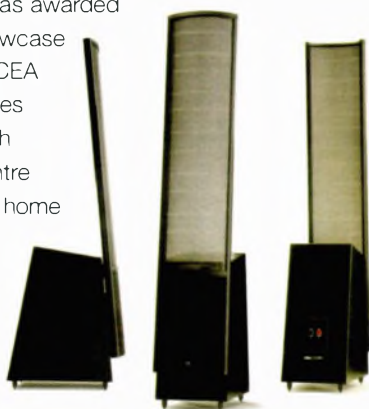
Delivering a claimed 42Hz-22kHz in room with a 91dB sensitivity and six ohms impedance, the new EM-ESL are destined to be used with far less powerful amps than most high-end designs.

First seen at this year's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, The EM-ESL was awarded

'Design & Engineering Showcase Honors' by the governing CEA body. It forms part of a series of new loudspeakers, which also includes matching centre and surround speakers for home cinema use, the Folded Motion thin film transducer technologies.

www.martinlogan.com

www.absolutesounds.com



Monitor Audio i-Deck 100 and 200

Monitor Audio has joined the ranks of speaker manufacturers turning their hands to iProducts in the shapes of the new £299 i-Deck 100 and £399 i-Deck 200. The two pod systems (shaped like a rugby ball cut in half width-wise and length-wise respectively) feature universal docks to accept recent iPhones and iPods from the Apple stable. They sport a pair of 19mm and 25mm tweeters and a pair of 75mm and 100mm metal cone bass units, driven by 15/30W and 25/50W Class D amplifiers respectively. Both feature a curious choice of 28/56bit DAC, digital signal processing, logic control and a 3.5mm input for external sources.

Where the two Monitor Audio products rise above their peers is in the innovative use of Automatic Position Correction. This circuit features a microphone that reads the size and position of the room and applies room correction DSP to compensate for poor room positioning, comparing the current room against an ideal (non-boundary) standard. It re-evaluates the room dynamics each time it's powered up. Neat!

www.monitoraudio.co.uk



NEWS IN BRIEF

Wilson Audio has announced its latest Mezzo centre channel loudspeaker. The new centre – which replaces the Watch – uses the same driver compliment as the Sasha W/P, but adds an additional midrange from the Alexandria X-2. Designed to match high-end Wilson speaker systems, the price of the new Mezzo has yet to be confirmed.

www.wilsonaudio.com www.absolutesounds.com

Boston Acoustics SoundWare XS 5.1 channel home cinema system is now available in a high-gloss special edition. Available in white or black, the compact and highly respected £350 speaker system features tiny satellites with a shaved off corner that still manage to feature both a 64mm woofer and a 13mm tweeter, while the 100W subwoofer sports a 200mm bass driver.

www.bostona.eu

Linn's Kinsky Desktop program – designed to control Linn's range of Digital Stream devices – has now made it to the iPad, iPhone or iPod Touch. The new Kinsky App (available from Apple's App Store) works with PC or Mac versions of the Kinsky Desktop, supports iTunes and can support radio plug-ins for internet services such as Shoutcast.

www.linn.co.uk

Wharfedale's new PowerCube SPC-8, SPC-10 and SPC-12 subwoofers feature 200mm, 250mm and 300mm bass drivers and 150W, 200W and 350W Class D power amplifiers respectively. They are designed to complement the Wharfedale range (naturally), but priced between £250-£500, with speaker and line-level inputs and available in a choice of seven finishes, they may find their appeal extends beyond the Wharfedale fan club.

www.wharfedale.co.uk



Ireland's premier audio visual show is back!

The Burlington Hotel in Dublin's City Centre will be the venue for the Sound & Vision 2011 exhibition, running from 10am-6pm on Saturday Nov 5 and from 10am-5.30pm on Sunday Nov 6. The event – organized by Cloney Audio – will feature a wealth of the best names in hi-fi and home cinema including everyone from Audio Research to van den Hul.

www.cloneyaudio.com

Classic Album Living Room at Vintage

By Alan Sircom

DISCLAIMER: As I was effectively compare of this event for the full three days, my objectivity must be considered compromised. However, this does give a unique perspective on the event that might not be so readily available had I been simply an attendee. Please take both of these points into consideration when reading the following. AS

In 1951, in an attempt to lighten the burden of post-war austerity measures, the Festival Of Britain transformed London's South Bank from a bombed out wasteland to a Modernist's concrete dream. Sixty years later, in an attempt to lighten the burden of post-Credit Crunch austerity measures, London's South Bank was once again transformed. The last weekend in July this year saw the Royal Festival Hall given over to the Vintage festival, run by Wayne Hemingway and honouring everything good, British and fun from the early 1950s to the late 1980s. Held over the RFH's six floors, it was like a vertical Woodstock, but with less mud and more petticoats.

As a part of the celebrations, and sponsored by Bowers and Wilkins, Loud and Clear (a high-end dealer based in Edinburgh and Glasgow in Scotland), and Classic Album Sundays assembled a Best of British system to play some of the Best of British albums from the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s. Classic Album Sundays is billed as a 'Collective and Audiophile Experience'; the idea is to 'respect the recording', playing the album from beginning to end, asking people to turn their mobile phones off, not to talk over the music and have that music played through a good system at 'reasonable' volume. There's a brief five minute or so preamble about the music played and, in this case an even briefer introduction about Classic Album Sundays, a short history lesson and how Britain still makes exceptionally good audio equipment.

In order of presentation, the albums played were Lonnie Donegan 'The Lonnie Donegan Showcase' (presented by Pete Donegan), The Beatles 'Revolver' (presented by Dean Rudland) David Bowie 'The Rise & Fall of Ziggy Stardust & the Spiders from Mars' (presented by Greg Wilson), and The Smiths 'The Queen is Dead' (presented by Danielle Goldstein) on Friday 29th July. This was followed by Billy Fury 'The Sound of Fury' (presented by Alan Sircom), The Beatles 'Sgt Peppers Lonely Heart Club Band' (presented by Greg Wilson) Pink Floyd 'The Dark Side of The Moon' (presented by Alan Sircom) and Joy Divison 'Closer' Presented by Mark Moore on Saturday 30th July. Finally, Tommy Steele 'The Tommy Steele Story' (presented by Jay Strongman), The Beatles 'Abbey Road' (presented by Greg Wilson), Led Zeppelin 'Led Zeppelin IV' (presented by Andy Smith) and Kate Bush 'Hounds of Love' presented by Ben Murphy were played over Sunday 31st. In addition to the complete album presentations, the intervening periods were filled with sounds from that decade.

The assembled system comprised a Rega P9 turntable with an Rega Apheta moving coil cartridge and a Rega los phono stage for the vinyl front end, a complete four-box dCS Scarlatti digital front end (for both CD and high-resolution file-based



music from a MacBook Pro), Naim NAC 552 preamplifier, a pair of NAP 500 power amplifiers into a pair of Bowers and Wilkins 800 Diamond loudspeakers. The equipment all rested on Quadraspire stands, the system was hooked up with Chord Company Sarum interconnects and power cords and Signature loudspeaker cables and all of the electronics were being fed from two ISOL-8 SubStation LC and one SubStation HC power conditioners. The total cost of this system was around £130,000.

Of the albums played, three (Lonnie Donegan, The Smiths and Tommy Steele) were played on CD, one (Abbey Road) was played file-based on 24-bit FLAC and all the rest were played on vinyl.

In all, the albums from the 1960s to the 1980s were played to full houses (approximately 70 people, in a very long room) while the earlier 1950s sessions reached a smaller audience, and the moments between albums had the room part filled. As a rough count, the system was played to more than 1,000 people, hardly any of whom would count themselves audiophiles.

The fascinating aspect of this was just how many people stayed from beginning to end and did turn their cellphones off as requested. In an un-air-conditioned glass room pushing 38° heat at times, in a large concert hall filled with distractions of all kinds, in an event that cost £60 admission,



*Left: The wall of sound
Top: Rega and dCS sources
Right: Bowers & Wilkins 800 Diamond loudspeakers*

people happily sat down and listened to a whole album with a group of people they had never met before, applauded at the end and then spent the next half hour discussing their memories and feelings about that album.

As MC, I spent some several albums facing the audience and the collective experience is a remarkable one. For the whole of Ziggy Stardust, we had a complete air-band; air guitar, air bass, air drums and a room full of people who knew every last lyric. There was a waft of air – like the pump from a bass port – from 70 heads nodding in unison at those three drum beats before the chorus on Lucy In The Sky with Diamonds, a lot of headbanging and air guitar to Stairway and a powerfully cathartic experience (and some tears) after an album of Joy Division.

I took a chance after the first couple of sessions. When Ziggy Stardust had finished, I said “And that’s what a 39 year old album sounds like... on one-hundred and thirty thousand pounds worth of audio equipment.” I wasn’t sure if this would be met with incredulity, gasps, shock, or blank stares (this was playing to an audience with no preconceptions about audio, or high-end prices). The reaction was an understated smile, nod and a whispered “cool” (this was a British audience, remember; that’s virtually uncontrolled orgasmic pleasure by our standards). This sparked questions from a few freshly minted proto-audiophiles, mostly about

the sheer number of boxes (“well that one’s basically an atomic clock” went down exceptionally well) and people wanting to know how they could get similar.

Even though the system was set up by John, Andrew and Jem from Loud and Clear this wasn’t there to sell the system; Londoners are like all big city dwellers and wouldn’t dream of travelling to visit an audio dealer in Scotland. It was to plant the seeds of playing music in the way it deserves to be played, and playing it on a damn good system.

All in all, this was something special. Criticisms were few and far between and all musically-based (“too many Beatles albums” and “why didn’t you play the Jesus and Mary Chain/Echo and the Bunnymen/Frankie Goes To Hollywood” being the biggest ones), and those of us on the event side of things got to play a lot of music we like to a lot of people we’ve never met before and mutually enjoy the experience. Plus, climbing out on the roof of the Royal Festival Hall gets you a great view of London!

Finally, we also saw this outside, as part of the Tracey Emin ‘Love Is What You Want’ exhibition at the Hayward Gallery opposite the Royal Festival Hall. It seemed spookily appropriate. +



The 10 most significant amps in European history

By Alan Sircom

A few months ago, our American counterparts at *The Absolute Sound* asked 'what are the most important amplifiers in history?' The results were fascinating, but – as you might expect – very American-centric. Now it's our turn. Good sound is a universal thing. And good audio has been a popular pursuit among enthusiasts the world over for decades. There have been deeply innovative and important amplifiers from all points on the compass, but until relatively recently what happened locally, stayed local; the Dynaco ST-70, for example is virtually unknown outside of the USA, while the Leak Stereo 20 tube power amp was extremely popular in early 1960s Britain, but almost unheard of elsewhere.

The rise of the high-end movement meant good products were not so restricted by country boundaries, but what's prosaic in one part of the world is often exotic in others. This meant each part of the world developed its own trends; the big is beautiful movement of the US high-end, the lower-power minimalist amps of the British and the Scandinavians, the old-world opulence of French and German products, the suave turned-wood luxury of Italian audio. Eventually this isolationism all but dissolved, but the character of these 'flavours' of audio persists to this day.

Europe has a rich heritage of audio, and picking ten of the most significant products is always going to be an exercise in omission. Where is Arcam, Creek, Cyrus, Copland, Densen, Gryphon, Hegel, MBL, Musical Fidelity, Restek, T+A and the rest? Each one is worthy of inclusion, in its own right. But arguably – and such things are argued in perpetuity – these 10 amplifiers have changed the face of audio significantly in their own right.

Quad II power amplifiers



We could place any of the range of Quad amps from the 1950s to the present day here, but the Quad II is something special. These

small tube amplifiers first appeared in 1953, were in production until 1970, have been the subject of endless modification and enhancement and were reborn a few years ago as part of Quad's new Chinese production.

The little Class A 15 watt per channel cathode-coupled push-pull paraphase mono amplifier was a pioneering design, for among other things, it was one of the first to use a tag board rather than point-to-point wiring. By today's standards, it's also an ultra-minimalist design, with just 13 resistors, six capacitors and five tubes per channel. Back in the 1950s, 15 Watts was considered enough for any domestic setting, especially when used with Quad's original Electrostatic loudspeaker. It was obviously a successful formula, because 93,000 of those diminutive amps were sold.

Leak Stereo 30

Although an invention of the late 1940s, the first commercially available truly modern all-transistor hi-fi amplifier didn't appear until 1963, and came from H.J. Leak & Co, Ltd. of London, England. There had been transistor amplifiers before the Leak Stereo 30, but most used a transformer-coupled output stage





Naim Audio NAP 250

One of the most popular amps of the last 35 years is still made in Salisbury, England. Originally designed as a musical, ultra-reliable amplifier for his friends, Julian Vereker's Naim Audio company hit pay-dirt when he was commissioned to make amplifiers for the studios of London's Capital Radio. The 70 watt NAP 250 power amplifier was launched in 1975, formed the core of all Naim's amplifier designs until 2000 and – although not the same circuit design - the amp remains in production to this day. Original 'chrome bumper' NAP 250s are still highly prized by many, still fully serviceable by Naim and considered by their followers to still be the best amplifier in the world.

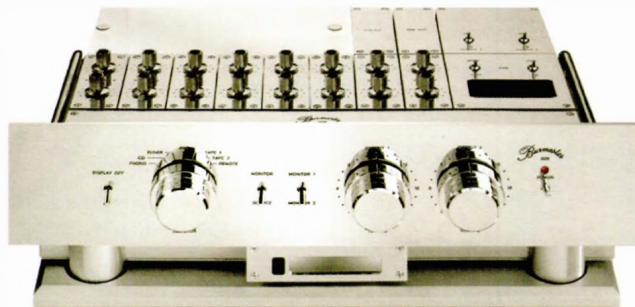
(in the manner of a tube amp). The Leak design featured the first commercially available transformerless transistor output stage, which set the archetype for almost all solid-state amps that followed. Leak improved on the basic Stereo 30 with the Stereo 30 Plus, which changed the transistors from germanium to silicon, thereby making the amplifier more stable, and there are still Stereo 30 Plus amps in daily use.

Harold Joseph Leak is very much the 'forgotten hero' in audio. His company was founded in 1934 and in 1945 it developed the 'Point One' range of tube amplifiers, so called because it was the first design to deliver 0.1% total harmonic distortion. This, along with the Williamson amplifier circuit published in *Wireless World* in the late 1940s, helped create a market for high-fidelity ultra-linear amplifiers.

Sugden A21

And the award for longest running product in audio goes to... Denon for the DL103 cartridge, which has been in production since 1963. Sugden's A21 amplifier comes a close second. One of the first solid-state amplifiers made (the Leak Stereo 20 beat it to the punch... just), Sugden's low power, hot running pure Class A design is still in production today, albeit several generations later. Sugden has based every product in its five-decade history on the same Class A design.

Perhaps part of the reason for Sugden's continued success is its beguiling sound, warm and comforting. Or maybe it's down to Sugden's reputation for building products that never, ever break down. Whatever the reason, the A21 in all its guises is still very much alive and kicking, despite being older than the Moon Landings. Those canny Yorkshiremen from Sugden really live by the maxim "If it ain't broke, don't fix it".



Burmester 808 preamp

Now in its fifth iteration and its 31st year, Burmester's modular Reference preamplifier is a timeless chrome masterpiece. The two-box Class A preamp can be configured exactly how the listener wants, with optional phono boards, balanced or single-ended connections and unique top-mounted input/output gain adjustment for each channel. From the outset, the 808 eschewed the use of capacitors in the DC-coupled signal path. The net result is a preamp that hardly ever appears on the second-hand market, because it's so good, few ever find anything better to upgrade.

The 808 set new standards in build quality, sound quality, finish and price way back in 1980, and through a series of constant improvements and developments, it's never been far from the top slot.

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► Electrocompaniet 'The 2 Channel Audio Power Amplifier'

Back in the early 1970s, the prevailing view among amp designers was to deliver high power amplifiers using large amounts of global feedback. They measured perfectly, but frequently didn't sound good, and no-one knew why. Then one Dr Matti Ojala started discussing Slew Rate or Transient Intermodulation Distortion, which undermined the performance of an amplifier but did not appear on steady-state measurements. Dr Ojala's concepts first appeared in a 25 watt Norwegian power amplifier called the Electrocompaniet. It wasn't easy to get, it wasn't that reliable and it was that powerful, but boy did it sound great. As a result, TIM became widely accepted and good amps sounded better as a result.



Lavardin Model IT

A relative newcomer to this line-up, the French integrated amplifier first hit the audio scene about 15 years ago. Lavardin's circuits rely on eliminating what the company calls 'memory distortion', a form of non-linear distortion in the time domain that is not recognized or measured elsewhere. The company suggests this distortion is inherently lower in tube amp designs compared to most solid-state models, and this is the secret to the continued success of tubes. Lavardin's solid-state circuits claim to reduce this temporal distortion to as low as 1,000th that of other solid-state designs.

The range has grown to include a cheaper integrated amplifier, two preamps, four power amps and a range of cables today. And there's also a 15th anniversary amplifier that improves upon the IT. But it's that first integrated amplifier that took the European audiophile world by storm that really started the ball rolling. Fifteen years on and, from a temporal perspective, few products still come close. ►



NAD 3020

A genuinely groundbreaking amplifier with a truly international lineage, the NAD 3020 was an amplifier from a company based in England, designed by a Scandinavian, and built in Asia. The 3020 appeared in the late 1970s, a tiny integrated low-power integrated amplifier that sounded better than many far larger, more expensive amps from then-famous names. It was the brain-child of Bjørn Erik Edvardsen, who designed the amplifier to use a flexible power supply to cope with real music and defeatable 'soft clipping' to prevent the amp from sounding harsh when pushed. It came to redefine what an amplifier could do when the prices (and style) was stripped to the bone. The brand moved around Europe before settling in Canada, but the 'designed in the West, built in the East' concept behind the 3020 set a precedent that is even more important today.

"A genuinely groundbreaking amplifier with a truly international lineage, the NAD 3020 was an amplifier from a company based in England, designed by a Scandinavian, and built in Asia."

► Lyngdorf/TacT Millennium

New amplifier topologies don't come along that often. The Millennium is the exception. When it first appeared (given the name, perhaps unsurprisingly at the turn of the century), the idea of a Class D, pulse width modulation amplifier was not new or exceptional, but such systems were commonly used in low-grade settings where their small size and low operating temperature was prized above sound quality. The problem was a distortion that rises with frequency.

So, when an amplifier that not only overcame the problems seemingly inherent to the performance of Class D (by switching at a far higher frequency than usual), but also managed to produce a sound that redefined clarity and detail, meant the world sat up and listened. Some stunning reviews, a whole slew of products that followed in the Millennium's footsteps and four iterations later, the amp still sounds like the future.



“It uses Devialet’s unique ADH architecture, which uses a small, high quality Class A amplifier with a Class D amplifier providing the motive force (in a manner not dissimilar to a 21st Century version of Quad’s Current Dumping 405 amplifier).”



Devialet D-Premier

Great audio products aren't just in the past. The D-Premier from Parisian design team Devialet has caused a stir since first appearing less than two years ago. The slim, chrome pizza box effectively combines a powerful integrated amplifier with very high-resolution analog-digital and digital-analog conversion, a high-resolution phono stage (designed for archival) and more. It uses Devialet's unique ADH architecture, which uses a small, high quality Class A amplifier with a Class D amplifier providing the motive force (in a manner not dissimilar to a 21st Century version of Quad's Current Dumping 405 amplifier).

Because it's still in its early stages, there still room for growth. And 'growth' for the eight processor D-Premier is a purely 21st Century concept, with firmware updates that radically change the amp-DAC concept, by adding daisy-chained multi-amp connectivity improved transients and a remapped, more responsive power supply. Forthcoming improvements include a unique asynchronous WiFi connectivity. Devialet call the D-Premier 'The Audiophile Hub', and for good reason. It's changing the face of amplification.

What do you think? Do you disagree strongly with our list? Did we miss out on the most important amp you ever heard? Let us know at editor@hifiplus.com. +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Kaiser Kawero! Vivace loudspeaker

By Paul Messenger



Kaiser Acoustics is a relative newcomer to the hi-fi scene. It has only been involved in speaker manufacture for the last three or so years, though the companies and individuals responsible for the two distinctly high end models have many years of experience in hi-fi and related fields, a fact that became very obvious during the course of the review.

This Kawero! Vivace is the more recent model, and our examples, attractively finished in a rather fetching high gloss magenta and with a carbon fibre front panel, made a brief UK public appearance at the March Heathrow show. This nominally Vertex AQ room was actually being operated by personnel from West Country dealer The Right Note, which is distributing Kaiser speakers in the UK. Those who visited the Munich High End show in May might also have found and heard this Kaiser speaker, this time presented in a high gloss orange.

The base price of the speakers is £22,360/pair, but picking several items from a comprehensive upgrade option list took the cost of our examples up to a substantially more extravagant £30,444. Many of these optional extras are listed separately (see Box), but the key items included on our samples were the Vertex AQ/Mundorf Supreme crossover network (+£3,400); replacement of copper internal wiring with Mundorf gold/silver (+£1,075); replacement of standard feet with Stillpoints (+£980); and the high gloss finish with carbon fibre front panel (+£2,580).

These are luxury, state-of-art prices, so how does the Kawero! Vivace measure up to competition near the top of the market? For starters, whatever the finish that is chosen it's a

very elegant loudspeaker, and is also significantly more compact than most models of comparable price and pretensions.

This is actually a two-and-a-half-way design, and although it doesn't look at all bulky, that's largely down to clever design choices, and the end result certainly doesn't lack bass output – if anything rather the reverse. The main body of the speaker contains a fairly small, front-mounted 150mm bass/mid driver operating in its own sub-enclosure at the top of the main carcass, and loaded by a rear-mounted 180mm Revelator ABR passive radiator. The main bulk of the enclosure is devoted to a 180mm rear-mounted, port-loaded bass-only driver. Judging by the swirly patterns on their diaphragms, both these units are very sophisticated drivers made for Kaiser by Danish OEM maker Scan-Speak, based on the Illuminator series, using cones made from a carbon fibre/foam/paper sandwich, and titanium voice-coil formers.

The Mundorf-made tweeter is mounted in its own little head unit, mechanically decoupled from the main enclosure and pivoted about a vertical axis. It's an AMT (Air Motion Transformer) unit, and as such somewhat resembles a ribbon transducer, albeit with a heavily pleated diaphragm that should considerably enhance the available headroom.

The delicious standard of finish here deserves more than a passing mention – the carbon fibre front panel combined with a high gloss magenta enclosure and a high gloss black 'head' gives a very stylish and hi-tech appearance. But what's really interesting from a technology perspective is that the enclosure proper is built from something called 'tankwood'.

No I'd not heard of it either, nor it transpires have Google or Wiki, though the original German brand name Panzerholz proved more productive and informative. Apparently it's made by just one German company, and I daresay the name derives from the fact that one application is to make the doors of VIP limos bulletproof. It's actually a form of beech plywood, but the layers are impregnated with resin under high temperature and pressure, which bonds the layers together, effectively to form a composite. However, the fact that it starts off from a fibrous – and therefore non-homogenous – base could well be advantageous in damping terms.

Not surprisingly, tankwood is also very dense – drop a piece in water and it will sink, not float – and is very difficult indeed to machine. It wears out diamond-tipped tools for breakfast, which apparently adds significantly to the cost of working it, but has the minor advantage of being able to take a bolt thread without the need for an insert.

The tankwood construction is undoubtedly largely responsible for a very substantial weight of 82kg, which invariably comes as a surprise when trying to move what is, after all, a quite compact loudspeaker. The sides are formed in two sections split at a slight angle, considerably adding to the elegance and helping avoid parallel surfaces, while the tapering shape that's substantially larger at the base than the top will ensure fine stability on the three Stillpoint feet. It should also be pointed out that this Vivace model is significantly better looking than the original, ongoing and more upmarket Kawero!

The links between Kaiser and Vertex AQ, and the fact that this speaker was fitted with the optional Vertex AQ crossover network explains why the review samples came from South West dealer The Right Note, which was the first to promote and sell the Vertex AQ accessories. And I suspect that my own longstanding enthusiasm for the Vertex AQ approach, including recently purchasing HiRez Roirama speaker cables, is a major reason why I received the speakers to review. Presumably it was also assumed that my system

would deliver the sort of signal that would work well with the Kaiser speakers.

That certainly turned out to be the case, ultimately at least. Even though the initial impressions weren't entirely positive, when the time finally came for the speakers to be collected, they'd truly won me over despite their quirks, and I'm missing them a lot now that they've gone.

Loudspeakers are complex devices: the sound that they create is essentially a slave ▶

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Quite a lot it turns out, especially when it's as curious as the one attached to this costly floorstander.

The word Kaiser makes it pretty obvious that this is a German brand. The speakers are actually made by Kaiser GmbH, a substantial and very advanced wood-based engineering operation that specialises in acoustic solutions. It's a family firm, was founded in 1948, and is located in beautiful alpine scenery near Untergriesbach, in the extreme bottom right hand corner of Germany.

The Kawero! bit is a composite of the names of the three hi-fi enthusiast friends who originally worked together to design and develop the speakers. The 'we' part of the name refers to Technical Director Rainer Weber, who's based in the ancient city of Regensburg, 140km back up the Danube, where he holds a senior position as an acoustician in automotive component specialist Continental AG. This involvement gives him access to all manner of interesting new technologies and materials, and he's worked with Kaiser to create a top class listening room in the city, where the development work is carried out.

The Vivace word remains a mystery, though it does help distinguish this junior two-and-a-half-way model from the original and ongoing three-way Kawero! – not that the latter seems particularly lacking in vivacity!

► to the signal provided by the sources and amplification, and the result of their interaction with the listening room. It's therefore almost as difficult to listen to and evaluate a pair of speakers as it is to design them.

My first reaction after moving the Kawero! Vivaces into the listening room was to worry about their overall tonal balance, which seemed a bit wayward – a little too bass heavy and also rather presence light. That in itself is not particularly unusual. Larger speakers, possibly primarily intended for rather larger and/or more bass absorbent rooms than mine, often sound a bit bass-heavy in my 4.3x2.6x5.5m room. And although room-dependency isn't really the issue here, the ideal relative presence level is certainly a matter for some debate.

Furthermore, when first changing from one pair of speakers to another, it's all too easy to treat the first as a reference against which the second is judged, whereas results could easily be quite different if the order of presentation was reversed.

There's therefore really no alternative but to carry out extensive and extended listening to a given pair of speakers. However, even that approach is far from straightforward, as one's hearing adjusts to and compensates for the changes in the tonal balance of a speaker, just as it adjusts to the effects of different room acoustics as one moves around a dwelling.

In-room far-field averaged response measurements confirmed both the rather strong bass and the relatively weak presence. Excess bass need not be a problem, providing it's relatively even and doesn't significantly magnify specific room modes. Unfortunately, as delivered, the Vivace's ABR resonance was quite close to our room's 50Hz mode, so its bass resonance was re-tuned to a slightly lower frequency by mass loading. When this was combined with subtle adjustments to the positioning of the speakers, the initial bass problem was substantially sorted.

The rather sparse manufacturer's specification quotes a sensitivity of 88dB for 2.83V alongside a minimum impedance of 3.41ohms at 140Hz, both claims exactly corresponding to our own measured findings. Although the rear-firing bass unit is simply connected in parallel, with first-order rolloff giving -3dB at a relatively high 900Hz, the actual crossover at the crucial midrange-to-treble transition is certainly rather unconventional, adopting a serial rather than the usual parallel approach. The filtering here is also basically first order, but with an additional 'elliptical' 'notch' operating on the midrange arm.



THE OPTION LIST:

Base price: £22,360

Performance upgrades:

Crossover (Vertex/Mundorf)	£3,440
Wiring (silver/gold Mundorf)	£1,075
Stillpoints feet	£989

Cosmetic extras:

Fancy veneer	+£430
High gloss	+£1,720
Piano lacquer	+£4,700
Carbon fibre baffle	+£450*

*CF baffle only available alongside high gloss or piano lacquer finish

While it's arguably true that the Vivace is better suited to larger rooms, the tankwood enclosure is probably a major reason behind its very clean bass delivery. Although there isn't perhaps quite the dynamic grip one encounters in speakers that have a much larger driver area, it supplies a notably firm foundation with excellent agility, plenty of bass detail, and an exceptionally wide dynamic range.

If the bass is very good, the midband is quite outstanding. It's not only beautifully neutral and evenhanded, it has excellent coherence and a quite prodigious dynamic range. On several occasions, when playing very familiar tracks of music, I became very aware of very subtle nuances in vocal phrasing that had previously passed unnoticed on countless occasions. Joni Mitchell's delicately precise timing on the very jazz-oriented Dry Cleaner From Des Moines (on her excellent but often overlooked Mingus album) particularly springs to mind. This in turn helped make lyrics in general unusually intelligible, not only on Mingus but with numerous other recordings.

Another particularly intriguing feature of this speaker's sound quality was the way it

seemed to dig deeper than I've ever previously heard into the original recording process. As I pulled out and spun disc after disc whose origins stretched back several decades, I became conscious and much more aware of how recording studio technologies and practices have gradually evolved over the years.

I was also very conscious of the way these speakers were able to expose the substantial differences in recording quality between discs. It doesn't do this in an unkind manner, by making indifferent recordings sound in any way unpleasant, but it does clearly expose any weaknesses, and that also increases ones interest in and enthusiasm for re-exploring many past favourites.

Measurement might have indicated that the top end is rather more restrained than average – indeed the modern trend certainly seems to be for a somewhat brighter top end – but this speaker doesn't sound in the least bit dull, and actually seems very well judged. It's also silky smooth, as I discovered when playing my copy of Lyle Lovett's *Joshua Judges Ruth*. Plagued by background hiss at a much higher level than normally considered acceptable, this disc was clearly faulty when purchased. Yet I have to say that with these speakers the background 'sssshhh' was much more acceptable and easy on the ears than is normally the case.

The slight lack of presence energy was only occasionally noticeable. For example, I sometimes watch a movie late at night when other members of the household are sleeping, and I found I had to turn the volume up a little higher than I would have liked in order to hear the dialogue.

Some two-and-a-half-way designs seem to add a touch of timesmear through the lower midband, presumably where the bass and bass/mid drive units are overlapping, but that didn't seem to be the case here. Indeed, timing was invariably excellent, delivering the music with considerable poise and agility, with no hint of thickening textures through the 'cello region.

Stereo imaging is also exceptionally fine, thanks in no small part to the excellent mid-to-treble coherence, and also for the way phase relationships seem to be properly preserved. The soundstage stays mostly in line with the loudspeaker, but shows absolutely no inclination to cluster around the two enclosures, and delivers fine central focus with good depth perspectives.

Over and beyond the character imparted by the tonal balance, colorations are very low here, with not a hint of contribution from the enclosures. Once again, the tankwood proved its efficacy in suppressing, through mass and self-damping, any vibrations across a wide range of frequencies.

It's virtually impossible to figure out to what extent the habituation that results from long term listening compensates for any inherent balance anomalies in the loudspeaker being reviewed. Although the Kawero! Vivace's measured response might rule it out for any monitoring role in the traditional neutrality sense, its magnificent dynamic range, fine timing and superior coherence actually provided rather more information about the recording processes than any other speaker I can readily recall.

In fact, I thoroughly enjoyed the several weeks I had with the speakers, and was very sorry when the time came for them to be collected. Although the very high price must leave question marks over value for money, the Kawero! Vivace is an unquestionably interesting loudspeaker, for both its physical discretion and its superior musical communication skills. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Bandwidth: 29 Hz to 26 kHz \pm 1.5 dB

Sensitivity: 88 dB @ 2.83 V / 1 m

Impedance: minimum 3.41 \angle -10.3° at 140 Hz

Recommended Power: 50 watts minimum

Connectors: single wiring (bi-wiring on request)

Height: 47.5 in (120.5 cm)

Width: 13.0 in (33 cm)

Depth: 19.5 in (49.5 cm)

Weight: 181 lbs (82 kg) each

Manufacturer: Kaiser Acoustics

URL: www.kaiser-acoustics.com

Distributed in the UK by: The Right Note

Tel: +44(0)1225 874728

URL: www.rightnote.co.uk



ClearAudio Innovation Turntable

By Roy Gregory

When ClearAudio introduced their Reference turntable it represented a dramatic departure from more conventional design paths. It wasn't the first 'table to dispense with suspension or to use acrylic, but it was certainly the first I came across with an Acrylic platter THAT thick, while the bizarre, boomerang shaped chassis offended those conservative tastes that weren't already outraged by the Souther tonearm with which it was fitted. Not surprisingly it divided opinion, whilst in the US, competing egos and internecine politics added to the controversy – a furore that only seemed to heighten with the subsequent introduction of the even more elaborate (and far more expensive) Master Reference turntable and TQ1 tonearm.

Well, despite all the wailing and gnashing of teeth, the Master Reference has steadily evolved across the years, cementing its place in the high-end firmament and spawning a successful line of more modest (and more conventional) siblings – as well as an even more ostentatious flagship, at many times its own elevated price.* Along the way, ClearAudio have remained true to their early adopter roots, embracing new materials and developments and introducing a host of retrofittable upgrades and refinements available for the earlier versions. In fact, there are so many different decks and upgrades that it can be difficult to keep up with what's pertinent to the real world – especially with a range topping out at close to £100K! Fortunately, there's an elegant solution to this particular problem. Like most long product lines, there's a sweet spot where all the important bits seem to come together and in this case it takes the shape of the appropriately named Innovation.

The Souther arm is another matter, perhaps demonstrating that there really are two sides to every story.

If the ClearAudio Innovation looks familiar, that should come as no surprise. It shares the same basic chassis design as the Master Reference, along with most of the technology and materials now used in that model. But where its big brother uses two, interlocking three-pointed chassis modules (one supporting three motors, the other up to three tonearms) the Innovation uses a single chassis, with a single motor taking the place of one of the tonearm towers. Of course, that still leaves room for two tonearms, but more on that later.

The chassis itself is designed specifically to dissipate vibration, both through its shape and also its dual sandwich construction. The two layers are each constructed from 20mm of acrylic with a slab of aluminium bonded top and bottom. They are then spaced apart by aluminium bosses in each corner, again 20mm thick. The result is remarkably inert (which isn't particularly clever) yet at the same time, elegant (which is)*. The front boss carries the DC motor and the buttons to switch speed (33, 45 and 78), while tiny apertures in the side of the chassis allow you to make fine pitch adjustments (essential for 78), the speed held by an optically coupled servo reading a strobe pattern on the underside of the platter. The motor is fed from a standard wall-wart supply while nicely engineered and easily adjusted spikes below each boss allow for precise leveling.

The platter follows ClearAudio tradition – a 70mm thick slab of POM plastic – but supported in this case on a 15mm stainless steel flywheel base to aid the speed stability of the belt drive. The whole thing floats on a magnetically opposed bearing running on a ceramic shaft, an arrangement that is fast becoming the benchmark against which all main bearings are judged. The remaining “legs” of the chassis can both carry armboards and Clearaudio can supply a wide variety of such, cut to suit myriad different arms. The skeletal chassis also means that accommodating long arms is no problem, and keen to hear the deck itself (isolated from the sound of a matching ClearAudio arm) I elected to mount an SME 312, which made for a handsome match with the contrasting gloss and matt black finish of the Innovation.

With any solid plinth deck, the supporting surface will be critical and I placed the Innovation on the heavy-duty top shelf of a finite element HD03, which worked well. Of course the floating bearing and the additional isolation it offers from acoustic feedback clearly helps. Other than that, setting up the Innovation consists of getting it really, really level, with the arm and cartridge correctly mounted and aligned. This review only covers the table, so I'll leave the details of arm mounting aside, save to say that the supplied armboard was perfectly cut, while the single bolt fixing made achieving the correct spindle to bearing distance simplicity itself.

There is also a second version of the innovation, the Innovation Wood, which uses the dense, composite Panzerholz in place of the acrylic slabs for even greater energy dissipation at the price of a small cost increase (£335).

One other aspect of set up should be mentioned; most turntables that run from a plug-top supply benefit from the addition of a more sophisticated interface with the mains and the innovation is no exception. Inserting the plug-top supply into a PS Audio PPP brought a significant improvement in transparency, focus, detail and stability – mainly associated with a drop in noise floor. It also delivered a richer harmonic balance and greater weight, these last two being the most significant. That's because, straight out of the box, the Innovation is all ClearAudio, its sound just as unmistakable as its appearance. None of that warm, wooly bloom that characterizes old-style analogue here; ClearAudio's turntable production post-dates CD, and it shows. It shows in the evenness of the top to bottom balance and the lack of added warmth or padding in the sound. There are those who will be appalled by that prospect, but there's little doubt that the almost CD-esque spectral balance of the Innovation is both more accurate than the lumps and bumps you'll find in the response of many other decks, as well as more tractable when it comes to a system that needs to play both formats. It also means that stepping into the shoes of a previous deck could leave the Innovation sounding somewhat lean and exposed. Give yourself some time to adjust – you might just find that you like it. Here's why...

Play the Montoux/LSO Enigma and you'll hear the spread of the instruments, the space between, behind and around them. Add some extra muscle to the power supply and you'll hear the soundstage boundaries, extra layering within the stage (and better delineation of the tube trains running under the hall). The carefully structured dynamic steps that make ▶

“The chassis itself is designed specifically to dissipate vibration, both through its shape and also its dual sandwich construction. The two layers are each constructed from 20mm of acrylic with a slab of aluminium bonded top and bottom.”

▶ this such an emotive work are laid bare, delivering both the drama and the dynamic contrasts that underpin this great performance. The clarity and purpose that the ClearAudio bring to proceedings make it clear why it has stood the test of time.

This unfussy, stable and unobtrusive musical access is the hallmark of the Innovation. Just don't pair it with an arm and cartridge combination that is too thin or lean in balance or it could be too much of a good thing. Bass-light or overly etched transducers should be avoided – which is another way of saying, don't skimp on the cartridge. This is a £6K 'table, treat it with the respect it deserves and it will repay you in kind. I got particularly good results from the vdH Condor and ClearAudio's own Da Vinci and that's the sort of level you should be shopping at. With a suitable cartridge up front, the Innovation delivers a direct window onto the musical performance.

'Perfect Day' is a perfect example. Lou Reed's voice is held separate and intimate, the piano poised, the bass perfectly paced and fulsome, the whole swelling convincingly into the chorus. The ClearAudio may not match the sheer substance, vivid body and power that typify a deck like the VPI TNT, but its uncluttered, unflustered and above all, uncoloured presentation is a welcome alternative. Add the 'table's excellent speed stability, its ability to mount a second arm (essential for proper replay of mono or 78 RPM discs) and its long term stability and the Innovation demands serious consideration. Pay attention to the power supply (and ClearAudio offer their own regenerative supply for the Master Reference which would well worth trying) and this turntable will deliver a beautifully measured, polished and musically prudent performance ideally suited to the listener looking for a fuss-free and versatile record player to sit comfortably alongside a high-quality digital front-end. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid plinth, belt drive turntable

Motor: DC with servo lock

Platter: 70mm POM with 15mm stainless steel base

Speeds: 33, 45, 78 – user adjustable

Tonearms: Mounts for two arms up to 12" each

Lid: None

Weight: 23kg

Dimensions (WxDxH): 479 x 225 x 485mm

Price:

Innovation: £5930

Innovation Wood: £6265

UK Distributor: Audio Reference

Tel: +44(0) 1252 702705

URL: www.audioreference.co.uk

Manufacturer: ClearAudio Electronic GmbH

URL: www.clearaudio.de

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

conrad-johnson ET5 line preamplifier

By Alan Sircom



“Like the ET3 before it, the nomenclature stands for ‘Enhanced Triode’. The ET5 uses just the one 6922 double triode valve to provide voltage gain, one half of the triode per channel. This is direct-coupled to a MOSFET buffer at the outputs, which has an extremely low output impedance and means driving long interconnect cable loads is not a problem. It also uses a discreet DC voltage regulator to power this audio circuit – like its bigger brother.”

There's a lot of genetic engineering going on at Conrad-Johnson right now. The GAT genome developed in that fantastic – but at £20,000, 'athletically-priced' – line preamp from 2009 is not a dead-end. It has ultimately provided the source code for c-j's next generation of control amps. Last year, the ET3 – baby GAT to its many friends – followed in its footsteps and the 'Son of GAT', the ET5, has just followed that. The ET5 has even been dubbed the 'poor man's GAT', although how a £9,000 preamp can be a 'poor man's' anything is a bit of a mystery.

Like the ET3 before it, the nomenclature stands for 'Enhanced Triode'. The ET5 uses just the one 6922 double triode valve to provide voltage gain, one half of the triode per channel. This is direct-coupled to a MOSFET buffer at the outputs, which has an extremely low output impedance and means driving long interconnect cable loads is not a problem. It also uses a discreet DC voltage regulator to power this audio circuit – like its bigger brother. Also, under the strict rules of the Grand Triode Lodge, the ET5 would be cast out as being ideologically impure and harbouring hybrid leanings.

So, just how close does the ET5 get to the GAT proper? From a circuit perspective, closer than you might expect. The audio and power supply circuits are pretty much identical, but where the ET5 has a single regulated power supply feeding that one tube gain stage, the GAT effectively goes dual-mono. Each channel has its own regulated power supply, each channel is physically separated on the circuit board and each use their own 6922. The GAT also has a lot more capacitance (nine more 2µF caps in total, all of which are CJD's own Teflons). Vishay metal film resistors are common to both preamps, both skip over any polypropylene storage caps with Teflon by-passes and both eschew the use of electrolytic caps anywhere in the audio circuit and relevant power supply. In some respects, the similarities are easier to spot than the differences. And yes, they extend to the zero feedback design, the single-ended only design and the phase inverting output (remember to invert phase at the speaker terminals).

I've been somewhat critical of c-j's external product design of late, but this one seems more elegant than recent models. It's a big box for a line preamplifier and is about 2cm taller than the ET3. But it looks more in proportion than the ET3 somehow and the side Perspex tube protectors of the GAT are replaced with grooves in the front panel. The symmetry of the whole front looks right too. Operationally, the three preamps are very similar, with microprocessor controlled gold-plated silver relays making a fast clicking sound as the 0.7dB per step volume adjusts through all 100 steps, or the source selector changes lanes. The dual yellow/orange LED volume readouts are retained, but (unlike the ET3) there is a balance control justifying their place on the front panel. The remote is the standard issue c-j model, a kind of Tonka Toy of remotes; it's big and tough enough to help dig a trench, gold anodized finish notwithstanding.

A potential problem c-j faces here is it has created a 'good, better, best' line-up of preamps all using essentially variations on the same circuit. The

'best' is a given – it's one of the best preamps out there and certainly among c-j's finest preamps ever. And, as experienced last year, the 'good' is really damn good indeed. That makes the 'better' product (the ET5) face a difficult dilemma; it needs to be better than the ET3, but not so good that it undermines the GAT. I think it partially succeeds, but in a way that benefits the end user, because it gets a lot closer to the GAT sound than it really should.

On reflection, one of the big things I missed in the review of the GAT was one of the big things I missed about the GAT when it left my system. It was its complete absence of sounding 'electronic'. I'm not entirely sure what it was about the GAT that made it sound so un-electronic; an absence of distracting elements of all kinds that just kept drawing you into the music. In a way, this harked back to old c-j Premier models, but without the rosy glow. The ET3 had a lot of the GAT's charms, much of its neutrality and its dynamic shading, but it didn't quite have the same un-electronic sound. And that's where the ET5 comes in; the absence of sounding 'electronic' is back!

How captivating this is does depend on what kind of music you play, but it's never less than enticing. At least, after a few hours; this preamp sounds awful fresh out of the box, but even after an evening's listening, a dramatic transformation takes place. I suspect this must be something to do with capacitors becoming engorged, but why this change should happen so rapidly and why it's such a substantial change is not clear.

After this time, the ET5 practically defines the tenets of The Absolute Sound, as laid down by Harry Pearson – it excels at creating the illusion of a live, unamplified event in the listening room. The preamp's ability to get out of the way of the recording in such instances is truly first-rate. This exposes a great deal of the music, and ▶

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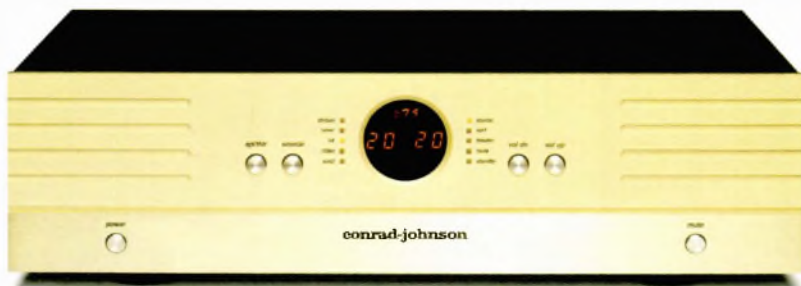


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► the space around the music, which makes for an expansive and supremely detailed reproduction of the studio space in microcosm in your living room. Smart Flesh by the Low Anthem is a perfect recent example. This album recorded in an abandoned (and allegedly freezing) pasta factory uses the natural ambience of the venue and often 'found' instruments to produce a recording of surprising beauty given it's not standard audiophile fare. On the ET5, you can almost see the breath freezing in front of the musicians faces, and the subtle changes in tonality that come from low temperatures affecting voices, instruments and microphones alike are readily identifiable.

Far from turning the music into an exercise in recording analysis, the ET5 manages to retain a good grip on the musical experience throughout. It is lithe, coherent and articulate, as well as being possessed of an expansive soundstage and sublime dynamic shades and contrasts. That brings it out of the live ambience world and opens the ET5 up to the entire canon of music. While it's not euphonic or musically sweet-sounding, the ET5 does manage to bring out the best in its musical charges. That it can do that to Pavement and The Fall just as much as it can to the best of Chesky and Reference Recording's output is impressive.

The ET5's big talking point for me is it challenges head-on the whole concept of Pace Rhythm and Timing, to the point whether I wonder if these elements truly exist. This preamp doesn't 'time' in the way PRaT advocates seem to define the term, it merely gets on with the playing of music. And it does so in a way that neither stresses nor avoids playing a beat. So, if you put Fela Kuti and Ginger Baker's Africa 70 album through the ET5, you'll feel the rhythm take you, and if you put some noodly ECM style jazz through the same, you won't. No transient collapse, no blunting of note attack, sustain, decay or release. Just good, honest sound, played well. Yes in fairness I was using this with a solid-state power amp – the Edge G6 – but I also used it with a pair of limited run low-power Berning tube power amps and the same applied. I can't help feeling this preamp is too neutral to be constrained by PRaT. Interestingly, I can't help reapplying the ET5 experience elsewhere; do PRaT-positive products do something right, or do something that simply seems right. I kind of failed to notice this aspect of the GAT's performance, simply because the overall experience was so outstanding. By backing of a couple of notches (and it is only a couple of notches) the ET5 invites questions the GAT skips over in the whole Shock and Awe thing it has going on.

And that's the c-j ET5's big selling point. Next to the ET5, most preamplifiers sound fake and arch. There's a sense of life and joie de vivre to the sound that simply doesn't make it through many line stages. The exceptions are the handful of preamps so outstandingly good they get talked about in hushed tones. Nine grand is still a healthy amount of money to pay for a preamp in times of economic meltdown, but as soon as you hear it, it begins to justify itself. And doesn't stop. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ET5 line preamplifier

Line inputs: five single ended, two external processor loops

Outputs: two single ended phono pairs

Gain: 25 db

Maximum output: 20 vrms

Output impedance: 100 ohms

Distortion: less than .15% THD at 1.0 Vrms output

Frequency response: 2 Hz to more than 100Khz

Hum and noise: 100 db below 2.5 v

Phase: phase inverting

Tube complement: 6922

Dimensions (HxWxD): 12.5x48x39cm

Total weight: 12.7kg

Price: £9,000

Manufacturer: conrad-johnson Design Inc

URL: www.conradjohnson.com

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hi-fi+

Alan Sircom, Editor
June 2011, issue 80

audience



Audio Research DAC 8 digital converter

By Jimmy Hughes

DACs the Way I Like It...

Once upon a time, buying an outboard DAC was simply an eminently sensible way to upgrade an older CD player that was starting to sound a little jaded. After all, buying a new DAC promises to rejuvenate the sound of your hi-fi system, upgrading your entire silver disc collection at a stroke. So – why not?

Certainly, that's the lure for CD playing audiophiles. Therefore, in one sense, the DAC 8 will stand or fall by the level of improvement it delivers over an existing player's internal digital to analogue converter. But, access to other sources of digital music is another reason to consider buying a DAC 8 – more on this later.

Like all Audio Research products, the DAC 8 requires a hefty burn-in period before sounding at its best – ARC reckon on at least 600 hours. Prior to being fully run-in, the DAC 8 may sound a shade tight and unbending – like a brand new pair of shoes that fit perfectly, but nonetheless feel a wee bit stiff.

However, with extended use, the treble opens up and grows sweeter. Overall, the sound will become freer and more relaxed, with no loss of definition or resolution.

Fortunately, our review DAC 8 had seen previous action, and promptly produced impressive results.

We were immediately impressed by the bold, big-boned sound of the DAC 8, which delivered massive presence, power, and scale. Of course, this is down to the quality of the sound produced. But there's another reason. Shrewdly, ARC has given the DAC 8's analogue outputs significantly higher gain than usual.

So, expect to hear an increase in volume of at least 2 or 3dB, (probably more), compared to most CD players. When comparing the DAC 8 against your existing CD player, this means you'll need to reduce amplifier volume levels with the former to compensate for this extra gain.

But, intriguingly, even when volume levels are reduced for the DAC 8, the subjective impression still seems to be one of increased power and greater drive. Via the DAC 8, music seems to have extra presence and immediacy, ▶

“The DAC 8’s state-of-the-art digital performance is the result of a low-jitter Dual Master Clock, which produces superior D/A conversion. But it’s more than a one trick pony, and ARC have taken great care to ensure the DAC 8 does full justice to a wide range of digital source options.”

► sounding ‘bigger’ and more dimensional, with increased dynamic range and enhanced impact and attack.

Curiously perhaps, this makes it possible to listen at slightly reduced volume levels. Because the sound has greater drive, it seems to fill the room more effortlessly. As a result, you don’t have to play things excessively loudly to create a big room-filling sound. The music projects with greater ease – just like good analogue.

While the DAC 8 produces tremendous weight and security, its musical presentation is subtle and finely shaded, with plenty of delicacy. However, there’s nothing effete or fragile about the sound; it’s always solid and authoritative. Tonally, the results are smooth and refined, with a nicely open, highly detailed, top-end.

Subjectively, the internal separation between voices and instruments is extremely good too. This produces an enhanced sense of space and depth, with increased dimensionality, plus the impression of a wider deeper soundstage, and less of that dynamic ‘flatness’ that can mar CD reproduction. Impressive stuff!

But while the sonic improvement delivered by the DAC 8 over your player’s internal DAC is important, the versatility of the product is an equally strong selling point. With CD sales in decline due to downloading, many listeners want a product that allows access to music in different digital formats.

The DAC 8’s state-of-the-art digital performance is the result of a low-jitter Dual Master Clock which produces superior D/A conversion. But it’s more than a one trick pony, and ARC have taken great care to ensure the DAC

8 does full justice to a wide range of digital source options.

Those of us partnering the DAC 8 with a CD player/transport will probably connect using the conventional S/PDIF interface. But, a USB 2.0 HS input, optimised for six different sampling rates, is also provided. These rates are 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4, and 192kHz, making the DAC 8 compatible with a wide variety of sources.

While S/PDIF remains the input of choice for high quality audio, the DAC 8 promises comparable high-grade performance from USB based digital sources. As a result, Audio Research claims the DAC 8 will provide superior sonic results, regardless of the digital input chosen.

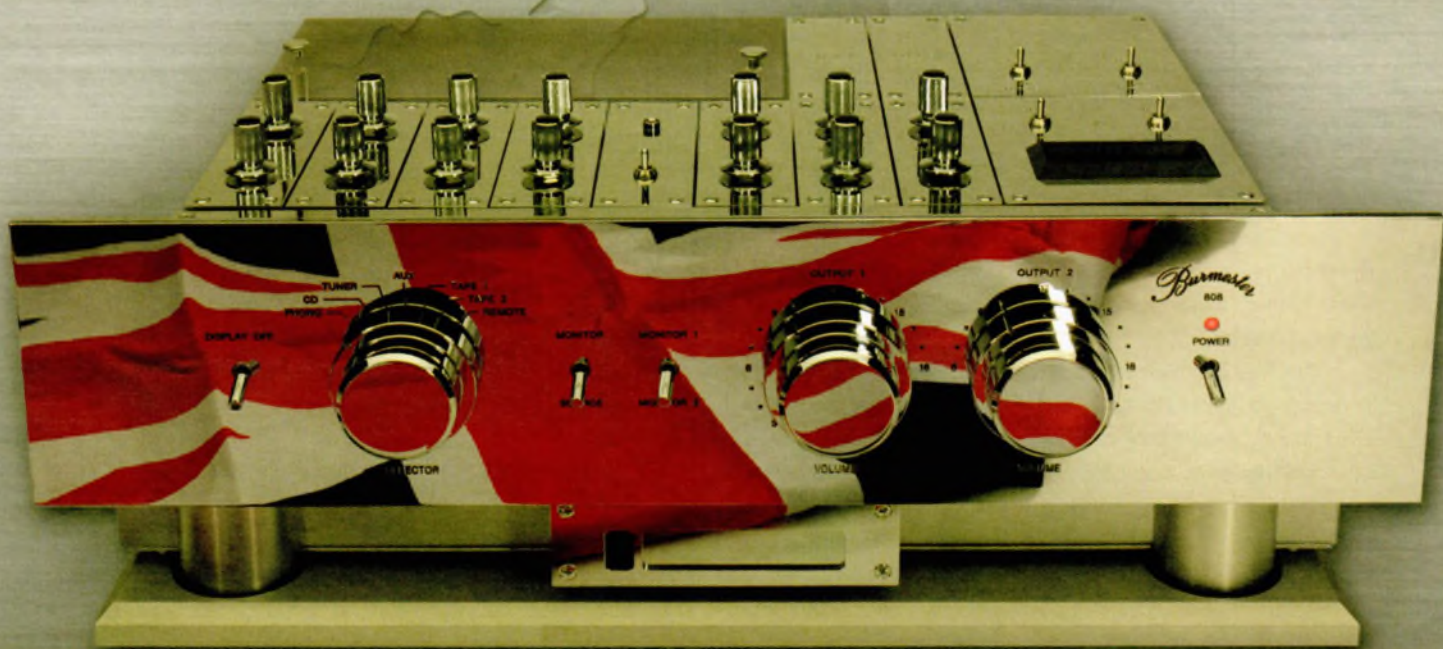
Moreover, unlike ARC’s DAC 7, the DAC 8 lets you listen to digital music at its original sampling rate, ensuring ‘bit-perfect’ low jitter results. Because PC and MAC systems do not properly support sampling rates over 96kHz, ARC’s special ASIO drivers ensure USB sources stay sonically transparent at all sampling frequencies.

Four 24bit digital-to-analogue converters are employed, with each channel having dual converters running in mono mode. ARC claims this lowers the noise floor and increase dynamic range. Two low-jitter master oscillators are used – one for 44.1, 88.2, and 176.4kHz, and the other for 48, 96, and 192kHz sampling rates.

The master oscillator selects the correct sampling frequency automatically, avoiding decoding and quantization errors. All inputs are Galvanically isolated from the source to eliminate noise and jitter entering the DAC 8. The analogue output stage features a true direct-coupled differential amplifier with bandwidth in excess of 90kHz.

The DAC 8 is a fully-balanced, zero feedback, solid-state design, with a direct-coupled FET output stage. The power supply is generously regulated, with separate audio ►

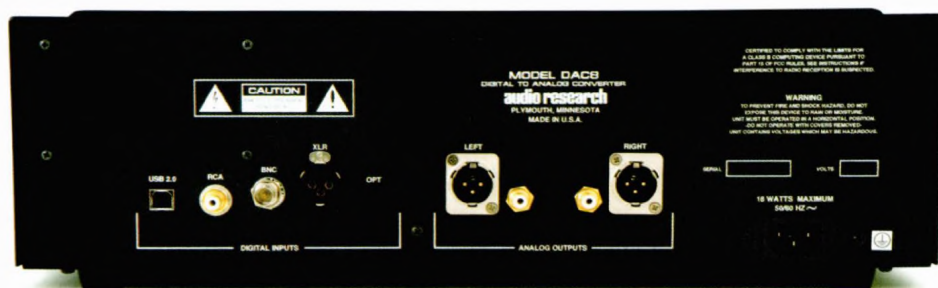




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▶ and digital power transformers, plus seven stages of regulation. Circuit boards are made from the same material used for ARC's Reference products.

Those using the DAC 8 with computer-based sources can set the sampling rate from 44.1 to 192kHz, allowing the inbuilt music server management software to up/down convert digital music source to the selected sampling rate. This helps ensure optimum sound quality, regardless of sampling frequency.

You can also use custom sampling rate conversion algorithms or other file formats provided by third-party suppliers, including Windows Media Player, iTunes, J Rivers Media Centre, Media Monkey, Foobar, and others. Perhaps the only thing missing is a docking station for an iPod, and some sort of USB wireless connection.

The DAC 8's USB driver software provides your computer with special high-speed audio drivers not supplied by MS Windows or Mac OS. Audio Research's USB drivers are specially designed to deliver low jitter 'bit-perfect' data transfer between the server/computer, and the DAC 8, at all sampling rates.

ARC drivers set-up a USB interface that guarantees wide bandwidth, independent of active bulk transfers from the hard drive. Via the ARC icon on your computer, you can set the DAC 8 to any sampling rate from 44.1 to 192kHz. This allows the music server/management software to up/down convert music to the appropriate sampling frequency.

This makes the DAC 8 perfect for those into downloads and computer-based hi-fi, giving it a very broad appeal. But, even when used just as a stand-alone DAC for CD, the DAC 8 delivers excellent results. Best sound quality is obtained via the balanced analogue outputs, but even the standard unbalanced outputs sound great.

The DAC 8's big imposing style of presentation ensures an impressively full, commanding, solid quality of sound. Bass is very weighty and full-bodied for CD, and this helps create a sense of power and presence. The music all but leaps out of the speakers and bounds over to greet you. It's a very tactile vivid sort of presentation.

Those who usually find CD a little reined-in and circumspect should revel in the big, bold, three-dimensional soundstage produced by the DAC 8. It really does bring out the colour and drama in the music, especially when you utilise its balanced analogue XLR outputs. The sound has real depth and dimensionality.

In some ways, the DAC 8 is a mix of opposites. While it delivers a big dimensional sound that's notable for its depth and separation, it's also surprisingly subtle and refined. Massed violins, for example, have excellent attack and plenty of brilliance, while retaining something of that 'woody' mellowness you experience in real life.

In this respect, the DAC 8 sounds very 'analogue'. It's the sort of digital product that would find favour with those who have mixed feelings about

CD, while absolutely delighting those fundamentally happy with silver disc. It sounds very clean, and tonal quality is smooth and natural, with good extension at bass and treble extremes.

Summing up, the DAC 8 is truly an awesome-sounding device. For Red Book CD, this is about as good as it gets - though perhaps ironically, the product comes most fully into its own when used with sources other than Red Book CD. But even if CD is all you play, the DAC 8 can be relied on to deliver impressive class-leading results. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Audio Research DAC 8

Inputs: S/PIDF, (RCA, BNC, XLR), TOSLINK, and USB 2.0 HS.

Outputs: RCA (Unbalanced) XLR (Balanced).

Dimensions: 48cm x 13.4cm x 27cm. Handles add a further 4cm to front/back depth

Weight: 7kg

Price: £4,698.00

Distributor: Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Rd, London, SW20 0IW

Tel: 020 8971 3909

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer: Audio Research

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MC302 Power Amplifier

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Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News, May 2011



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PSI Audio A215-M active loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

We have a skewed view of the pro-audio world. As audiophiles, we've all heard of the likes of Adam, ATC, JBL and PMC. Some of us might have heard of Genelec, but PSI Audio? In fact, this Swiss brand currently is one of the keepers of the great lineage of Studer, and that puts it in the royal box in pro-audio circles.

The A215-M is a tall, thin floorstander, featuring a pair of 150mm mid-bass units and a single 25mm tweeter in a MTM or D'Appolito arrangement. XLR terminated only, the rear panel sports two controls for level and roll-off to match the speaker to its surroundings and inside the cabinet are perhaps the most interesting part of all, a set of Class G amplifiers. That's right... G. Class G basically combines Class AB output stages with multiple power rails at multiple voltages and switches between them, thereby reducing the wasted energy at the output transformers, thereby increasing the efficiency of the Class AB stages, retaining its good sound and doing without big heatsinks or power transformers. This means a 120W bass amp and a 40W treble amp taking up the size of a Class D design, but without the potential for RF nasties. The big advantage of active (from PSI's perspective) is that it allows PSI's own Compensated Phase Response multi-filter system, which markedly improves phase response and – as a result – gives excellent stereo.

There's a couple of obvious points where the pro and the studio world don't mix under any circumstance; finishes, and the way the speakers are rooted into the ground. Finish first, the speakers come in Studio Red (as sort of plum colour) and black. The plum red is rather attractive and goes well with most in-house décor, but a wider range of finishes is likely to add PSI buyers. Also, audiophiles tend to lock speakers in place with spikes, stands and plinths, and it's only recently that anything other than absolute rigidity was considered an absolute no-no by the community absolute. The pro side is more pragmatic about such things, and the PSI speaker bases are four thin outriggers attached to the base of the speaker with four bolts. On a fundamentally practical concern that may not register in the pro world, this makes for a very shaky speaker when mounted on carpet – this may or may not have any direct bearing on sound, but those with young kids or pets might want to find a more rigid support with a lower centre of gravity. ▶

“It also seems to be one of the least room-fussy designs, in part thanks to those two tailoring knobs on the back. Up against a rear wall? No problem. Odd shape room, or odd furnishing anomalies screwing up the centre image? Not with these puppies. You aren’t in the sweet spot and fancy sharing the experience or walking round the room? Not an issue.”

► To me, that would mean ‘buying (or making) some kind of plinth’ rather than ‘look elsewhere’. The speakers have passed IEC ‘tilt tests’, so they aren’t actually likely to fall over with ease, but the domestic concern will still hold. I’m not the first from the domestic world to express this concern (even though the speakers are comparatively new to our world) and hopefully some of the feedback will register. I’d hate to see a good speaker pass unnoticed for something as trivial as a spot of wobble.

The narrow, upturned cheese-wedge shape does bestow some very fine advantages on the A215-M. First, the treble is time-aligned with the bass driver, without some kind of elaborate leaning over back-tilt used in Kharmas and Avalons – the only speaker more markedly back-swept than this was the well-respected Spica TC-50. This, coupled with the active ‘CPR’ filtration system, does mean the A215-M has to be one of the finest soundstage producers in a box. It also seems to be one of the least room-fussy designs, in part thanks to those two tailoring knobs on the back. Up against a rear wall? No problem. Odd shape room, or odd furnishing anomalies screwing up the centre image? Not with these puppies. You aren’t in the sweet spot and fancy sharing the experience or walking round the room? Not an issue.

The thing is, there are the sort of loudspeakers that are clean enough to turn up to the max (well almost; if you go too far the little green front-mounted LEDs start panicking for you) and detailed enough to make you hear what colour socks the backing vocalist was wearing, but never instill that sense of sharp-eared detail-freak fear that you get when listening to the sort of etched sound that sometimes passes for detail.

This has an interesting by-product. I have some frankly dreadful remasters of old classics from the 1960s on CD. Gilded Palace of Sin by The Flying Burrito Brothers never sounded that fierce on record, but can sound thin and tinny through some systems. The lack of care given to the remaster can still be heard clearly through the A215-M, but the overall coherence wins over. And, curiously, that makes it seem less bright and brash. The speaker isn’t rolling off the sound, but it is making the very best of a bad job. This is often the acid test of a good speaker; playing audiophile recordings through systems can result in a very soft landing because the disc goes more than half way to provide a good result. In contrast, playing something gnarled and hard to stomach shows what the system can do in extremis, and it’s here the A215-M shines.

This seems to expose the myth of ‘rock speaker’ or ‘classical loudspeaker’. This speaker performed equally well whatever genre it was being fed. Everything from Monteverdi to Metallica was rolled out here and everything gave a good acquittal of itself through these speakers. Bass was deep and well controlled, with a balance somewhere between the ‘taut’ of a Mordaunt Short Performance or a Revel and the ‘expansive’ of an Audio Note or maybe a Wilson. Midrange was open and honest (perhaps not as crystal-clear as an ATC, but not as brightly lit and brought into focus either) and the treble was clean and expressive in the classic soft dome manner. OK, so they don’t have the powerful, full range force of a big, meaty full-rangers in full bark and they lack the visceral room-coupling ‘you are there’ presence of a pair of big horns (but neither do they have the ‘quack’ that commonly accompanies such designs), but their realistic dynamic range, sensible frequency response and timely, peppy bass makes them hard to resist, whatever you play through them.

So what’s not to love? Finish and feet aside, not a lot, but I suspect the A215-M still faces an intellectual hurdle that has nothing whatsoever to do with sound quality. It’s a perception thing; there are audiophiles who want their expenditure on show. Sorry if this sounds harsh, and does not apply to every audiophile, but there are people who remain wedded to the idea of the big power amplifier simply because it’s a very obvious statement of audiophile intent. ►



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NORDOST
MAKING THE CONNECTION

► To me, the reasons why active loudspeakers are not absurdly popular in the domestic audiophile world seem weak at best. If you are serious about sound quality, the advantages to not having a passive crossover between amp terminals and drive units are so readily apparent and demonstrable that they should be top on the list. The arguments about selecting the best amplifiers for the job fall flat because the right amps for the job are usually the ones inside the speaker itself, and the benefits of having the crossover before the amps usually far outweighs the benefits of tailoring amp to speaker.

In fairness, I guess reviewers might be to blame, albeit possibly by accident. We rarely use active loudspeakers because it would impose limits on the list of products we could review (and many amp brands wouldn't feel happy when the reviewer asks for three power amps instead of one). That low uptake by the audiophile press once set a precedent with readers, I don't think it makes such a difference now and actives are beginning to find their place in audio society. And that's a very good thing.

“If you are serious about sound quality, the advantages to not having a passive crossover between amp terminals and drive units are so readily apparent and demonstrable that they should be top on the list.”



Truth is, it's near-enough impossible to replicate the performance of the PSI Audio A215-M with passive components, let alone passive components for the same price. That directness of sound, the tailoring the lower end to the dynamics of the room, and the sheer fact that you are buying a good set of speakers and matching amps for what is – relatively speaking, in our bent-out-of-shape audiophile world – not an unfeasibly large sum all combine to make these loudspeakers the sort of thing that hi-fi buffs should kill to get hold of. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power RMS: 120+40 W

Program power: 160 W

Continuous Max SPL, 1m: 106 dB (single)

Program Max SPL, 1m: 117 dB (pair)

Response at -6dB: 36Hz – 23kHz

Tolerances: ±2 dB (42Hz - 20kHz)

Phase tolerances: ±45° (270Hz - 20kHz)

Dispersion: (P.N. 4 - 16 kHz) at -6 dB 90° x 60° (H x V)

Crossover frequency: 1.8 kHz

Woofer's dim. Ext. / Diaphragm: 2 x Ø 147 mm / Ø 104 mm

Tweeter's dim. Ext. / Diaphragm: Ø 100 mm / Ø 25 mm

Dimensions cabinet (W x H x D): 16.6 x 111 x 25cm

Net Weight: 15.8 Kg

Finishes: Studio Red or Black

Price: £5,385 per pair

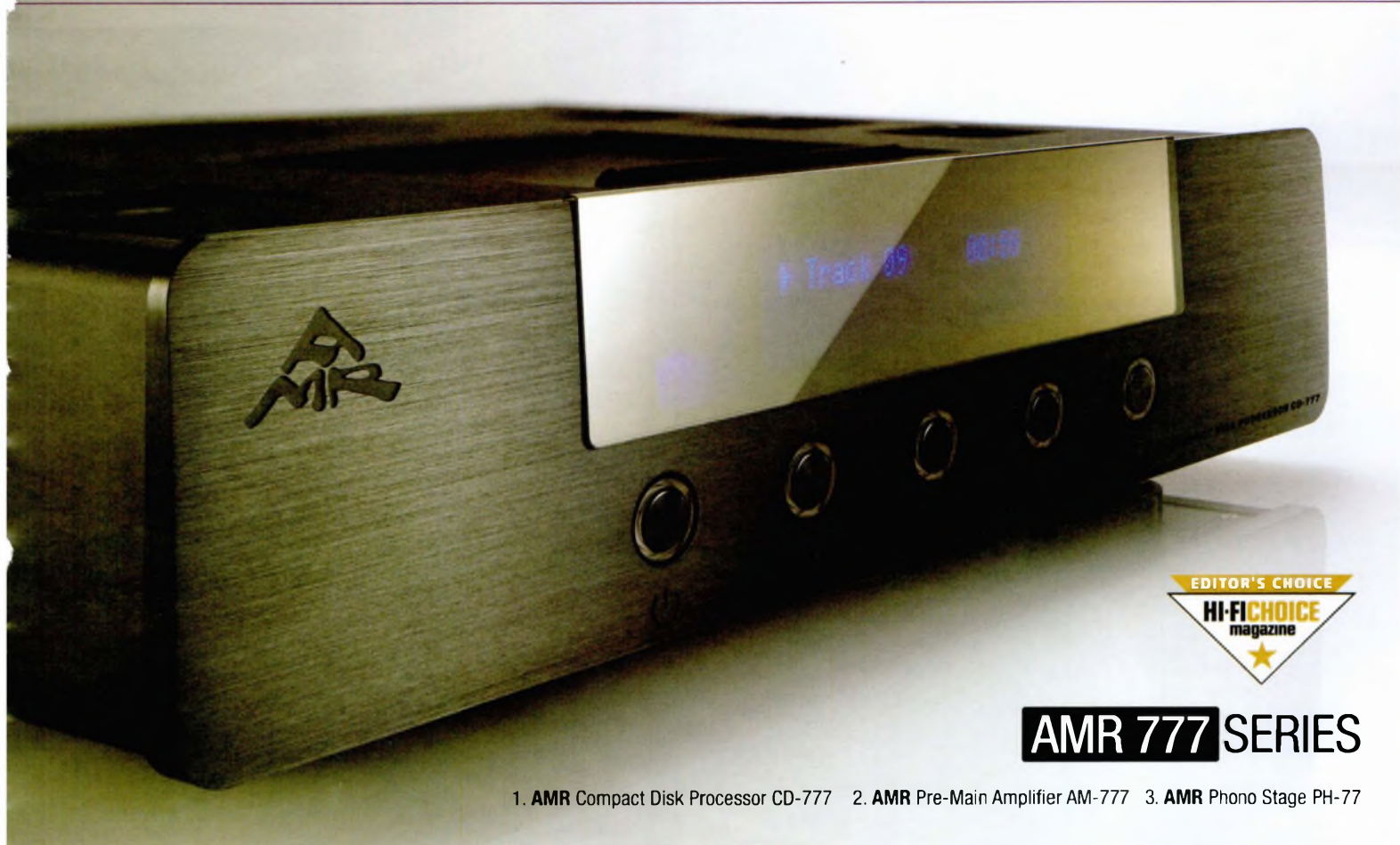
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URL: www.psiaudio.com

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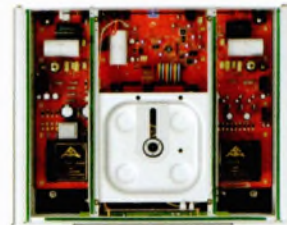


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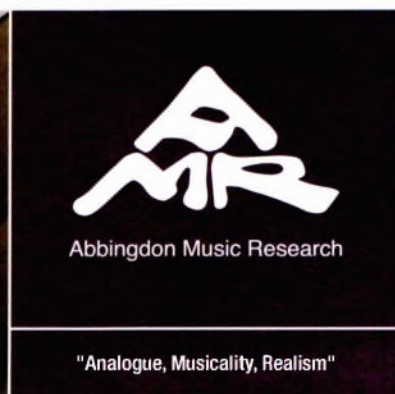
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Cary Audio CD 303t CD/SACD player

By Wayne Garcia



One thing you have to love about our audiophile community is the way we passionately embrace and hold on to technologies that the rest of the planet either views as outmoded or, in some cases, were never even aware of to begin with. Conversely, we are also more than happy to accept new technologies—should they prove to be sonically superior to those that came before. And frequently, these sometimes very different approaches to music playback—tube versus solid-state and analog versus digital are the two most obvious examples—simply coexist for as long as there enough people willing to support them.

When it comes to the current state of digital audio reproduction, it's understandable that many of us are feeling a bit of anxiety on just where things are headed. Standard Red Book CD, whose reproduction quality has become markedly better during recent years, is teetering on the verge of... uh, I'm not really sure what. Although more and more people are downloading music, CDs don't (yet) appear to be disappearing. SACD, which is essentially a non-issue to the mainstream listener, appears to be thriving in the audiophile market, where many vinyl reissue specialists are releasing the same titles on both LP and SACD, and, I'm told, with equal commercial success. At the same time, music servers, and we won't even get into the ubiquitous iPod, are increasingly popular for at least a few obvious reasons: less physical clutter—who, I ask, actually likes CD jewel cases?—higher resolution, as well as easy access to an entire music library. Still, some of us like owning, handling, and interacting with physical media—something that no digital replacement can duplicate, and, hence, one of the LP's undeniable attractions and advantages. Just as e-readers are becoming another way to read books, newspapers, and magazines—for many of us, though not yet, this writer—music servers are becoming another avenue to the enjoyment of music.

“It seems logical for anyone contemplating the purchase of a new digital disc player to pause and ask a simple question: How, for at least the foreseeable future, do I envision using this thing?”

Given that we're standing in the middle of this digital audio crossroads, it seems logical for anyone contemplating the purchase of a new digital disc player to pause and ask a simple question: How, for at least the foreseeable future, do I envision using this thing? If you want maximum flexibility and at least a smidge of a feeling that your new component won't be obsolete before you open the box, then you'll want something like Cary Audio's Classic CD 303T SACD Professional Version SACD player.

Although that cumbersome nomenclature includes the SACD tag, don't be misled—Cary's latest digital disc player is a remarkably complete digital- ▶

▶ audio playback device. Its bag of tricks includes Red Book CD playback with selectable upsampling frequencies of 96, 192, 384, 512, and 768kHz. That's an unusually large range—big enough to keep the tweakers among us busy for eons. But the advantages of upsampling may have its limits, as we'll get into shortly. The player also decodes HDCD-encoded CDs, which, though hardly a new technology, remains one of the most satisfying ways to achieve higher performance from the compact disc. SACD playback is, of course, a given here, both in two-channel and multichannel modes. And unless told to do otherwise, the player automatically selects the SACD portion of multi-layer discs. Moreover, the 303T's internal clock processes DSD at 22.5792MHz, which is double the norm.

But high-quality CD and SACD playback are only part of what the 303T has to offer. It can also be employed as a standalone DAC complete with RCA, TosLink, and 24-bit/192kHz USB inputs. The latter is compatible with Windows (but not with the MAC OS), and Cary includes a CD-ROM to get you set up. Digital outs are available via AES/EBU, TosLink, and coax connections, while analog outputs offer single-ended RCA as well as balanced XLR.

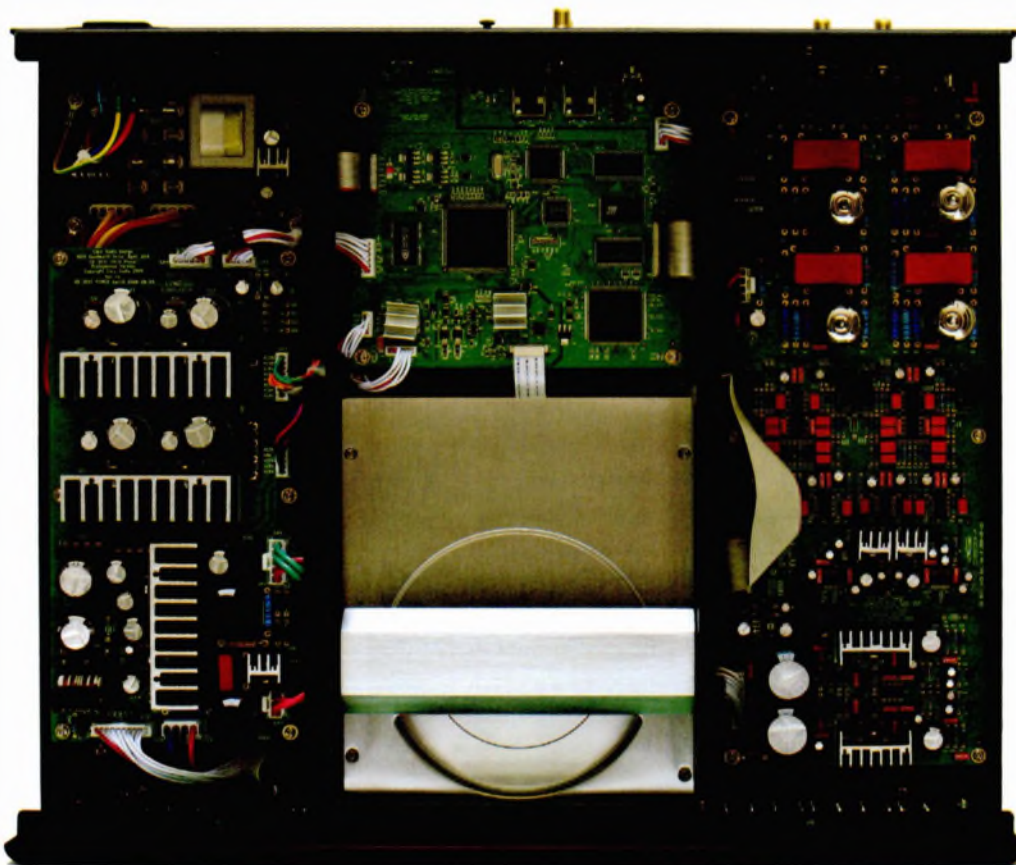
Speaking of analog choices, the 303T's analog output can run in either solid-state or tube mode, and the latter's suite of four 12AU7s can be easily accessed, rolled, or replaced by means of a separately removable tray inserted into the unit's top plate.

As I said, the 303T offers maximum flexibility—as well as ease of use. As you might imagine, all of these playback options require lots of switching. In that regard, both the 303T's front panel and its remote-control wand are busier than those found on most disc players. But the Cary design team has somehow managed to arrange all these buttons in a fashion that, with just a bit of use, quickly becomes familiar. In my opinion this ease of use is crucial to the end user of a device that is, after all, supposed to bring us pleasure, not another dose of aspirin.

At 34 pounds the 303T is solidly built and very nicely finished. The chassis sits on four adjustable conical feet designed to minimize vibrations from whatever rack or shelf the unit resides on.

Finally, the 303T carries a price tag of \$6500. Not exactly pocket change, but also not crazy money in our high-end world, especially given what this machine not only offers in flexibility but also in sonic excellence.

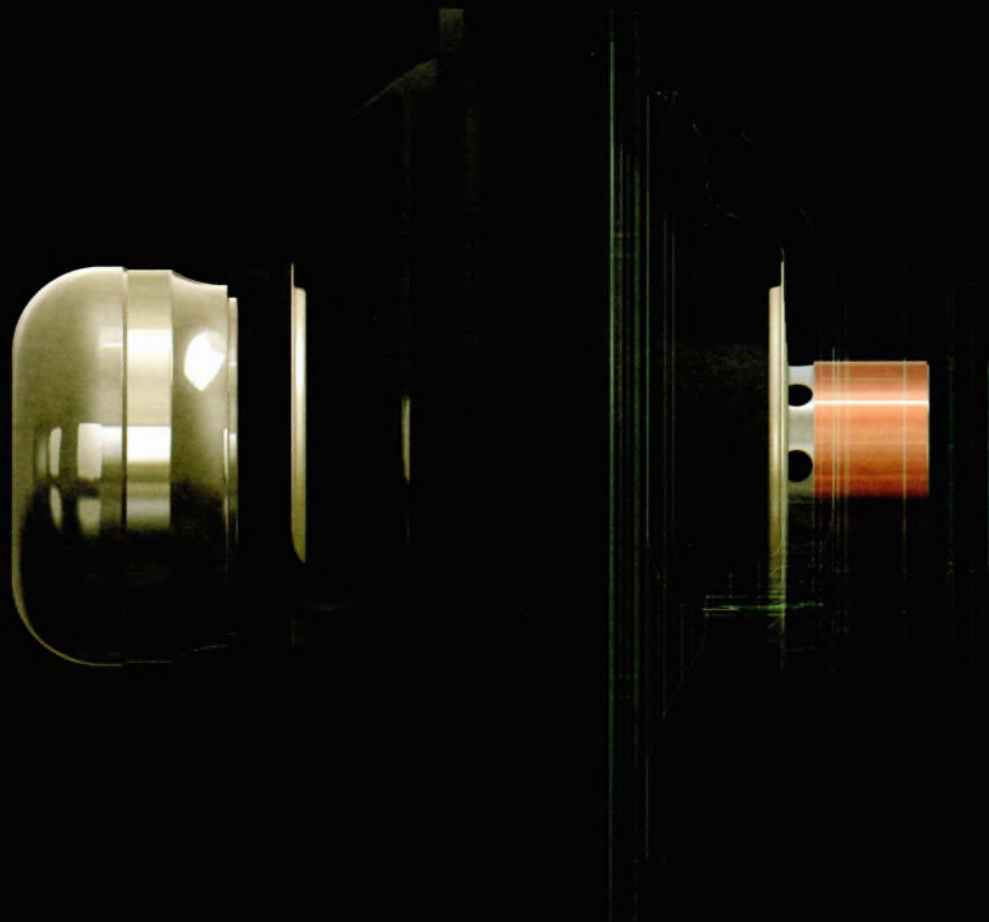
The 303T's basic sonic signature is on the warm side, and that's true in the ▶





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While many digital manufacturers push ever-higher upsampling rates Vertex AQ are making the Aletheia dac-1 with no oversampling, no noise shaping and no filtering. Can it sound any good?

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With increasing energy in the music the errors grew between the signal input and the analogue output, while Vertex products – such as Super Kinabalu platforms that drain away damaging vibrations – made huge error reductions – **AS MUCH AS 50%**!

Have you heard a system that **SOUNDS WORSE AS IT GETS LOUDER?** Have you been puzzled by the poor sound of a system with apparently top quality components? We all have and it's the timing errors that shout at us.

Based on the results of these measurements and with the experience gained over 11 years with their range of mains treatments, cables and platforms Vertex have built the essence of these products inside the dac-1, right in its heart and **RIGHT DOWN TO INDIVIDUAL COMPONENT LEVEL** where they are even more effective.

The test designs and measurements were done to rigorous scientific standards, independently by the MoD's Acuity agency, and the findings are so significant that they will also be used in the field of submarine sonar work.

After all that how does it sound?!

In a nutshell – clean, open and three-dimensional, with all the structure and the harmonics clearly separated. Complex music rises and falls naturally, no blurring or hardness. New detail is revealed in the mix and voices and instruments show their natural character.

Read more on our web site under Digital Sources and follow links to in-depth explanations on the Vertex site.

LeadingEdge launch at Whittlebury Hall

We have the large Copse suite to show off probably our best system yet. The Vertex dac-1 will be playing hi-res files from a MacBook computer through VTL valve equipment – the TL-7.5 preamp and the MB-450 monoblocks that created such a stir at this show last year.

Speakers will be our Kawero Vivaces that were part of the system that drew people back and back again at the Park Inn show in March.

These speakers have been jointly developed between Vertex and the German firm of **KAISER ACOUSTICS** in their superb production facilities.

Under the brand name of LeadingEdge this new alliance is to produce a range of equipment racks, speaker stands and room-friendly treatment panels, all made to **EXQUISITE STANDARDS** of finish.

These new products combine Kaiser's room acoustics experience with Vertex RF and EM technology – results will be extraordinary. More on our web site.

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CD: Accustic Arts, Bel Canto, dCS, Gamut, Resolution Audio, Vertex AQ dac-1, Wadia. Vinyl: Aesthetix, Clearaudio, Graham, Lehmann, Transfiguration.
Tuners: Magnum Dynalab Amplifiers: Accustic Arts, Aesthetics, Bel Canto, CAT, Gamut, Hovland, Sonneteer, Storm Audio, VTL.
Loudspeakers: Audio Physic, Focal, Gamut, Kawero, NEAT, Totem. Cables: Chord Co., DNM, Kubala Sosna, Nordost, Siltech, Tellurium, Vertex AQ.
Mains: Vertex AQ. Supports: Arcici, Black Ravioli, Hi Fi Racks, Stands Unique, Vertex AQ

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► solid-state mode, too, before ever engaging the tube output stage. Yet this player doesn't sound sluggish, just warm in a way that highlights musical expressiveness (as opposed to more angular, detail-oriented designs that may arguably deliver more impressive hi-fi effects). For instance, at the start of Gershwin's "Oh, Lady, Be Good," from Analogue Productions' terrific-sounding edition of Count Basie and the Kansas City 7, we hear Basie's nimble piano work, the trench-digging bass of Ed Jones, and Sonny Payne's silky brushwork. Soon the rest of the ensemble joins in—two tenor saxes, trumpet, and guitar. The 303T swung right along with the music's ebbs and flows, presenting the tune with a matter-of-fact ease, clarity, and balance.

Michael Tilson-Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony's beautiful DSD recording of Mahler's Symphony No. 2 [SFS Media] is a great challenge to individual components as well as to the systems we evaluate them in. It's got air and dynamic range galore, as richly varied a palette of tone colors and textures as you'll find, orchestral scoring with the complexity to drive any system batty, as well, of course, as two female vocal soloists, a large mixed chorus, and a crushing final statement for pipe organ. Again, the 303T showed its inherent warmth, impressive composure, and sweeping musicality. It also delivered a convincingly massive soundstage of well-layered three-dimensionality, with plenty of the ambience. On the other hand, if you're a stickler for wanting every last inner detail, exclamation mark, or tympani stroke to "wow" you, well, that's not what Cary's 303T is about. What it will "wow" you with is a continuity of musical expression that, as noted above, will sweep you away with the musical whole.

After enjoying a large range of SACDs and CDs over the 303T, I chose an old favorite of average sound quality but undeniably great music, Thelonious Himself [OJC/Riverside], to describe what you might expect to hear from this amazing array of playback options. In the standard 44.1kHz setting, Monk's piano was big, clean, and rich, with a healthy percussive strike and good, if somewhat "clangy" harmonic structure. At 96kHz the sound became airier, more focused, transparent, and less brittle up top. The 192kHz setting was richer, and less strident still, but perhaps not as immediate sounding. Moving to 384kHz introduced a noticeably rolled-off top end as well as a veiling effect. And, for these ears, both the 512kHz and 768kHz modes were not only too soft and veiled, but also started to lose the music's structure and continuity of line.

Selecting the tube output setting didn't simply add warmth, or richness, and a touch of romance to the sound; it also added consistently rewarding layers of harmonic complexity, air, and instrumental texture. After sliding back and forth for comparisons sake, I must tell you that I ended up leaving the 303T's tube stage engaged for the remainder of the evaluation period.

You, naturally, may disagree, which is part of what makes our hobby so much fun. But one remarkable thing about Cary's 303T CD/SACD/DAC is that, no matter what digital audio media one might want to play through it, the owner of this design has access to an unusually complete range of media and playback options. And though no device is absolutely "future-proof," the folks at Cary have come up with a terrific-sounding design that at least offers a glimpse of that possibility. +

First published in The Absolute Sound issue 213

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Compatible Discs: SACD, CD, CD-R, CD-RW

Type of outputs: Balanced XLR, single-ended RCA (analog.), AES/EBU, coax, TosLink digital)

Tube complement: Four 12AU7

Dimensions: 5" x 18" x 15"

Weight: 34 lbs.

Price: £5,900

Manufacturer: Cary Audio Design

URL: caryaudio.com

Distributed by: Audiobility

Tel: +(0)1242 506335

URL: www.audiobility.co.uk

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

TW-Acoustic Raven One turntable; Tri-Planar Ultimate VII arm; Benz Gullwing and Transfiguration Phoenix moving-coil cartridges; Simaudio CD-1 compact disc player; Artemis Labs PL-1 phono stage; Cary Audio SLP 05 line stage preamplifier and CAD-211 FE monoblock amplifiers; Magnepan MG 1.7 loudspeakers; Tara Labs Zero interconnects, Omega speaker cables, The One power cords, and BP-10B Power Screen; Finite Elemente Spider equipment racks



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Alan Sircom, HIFI+ magazine

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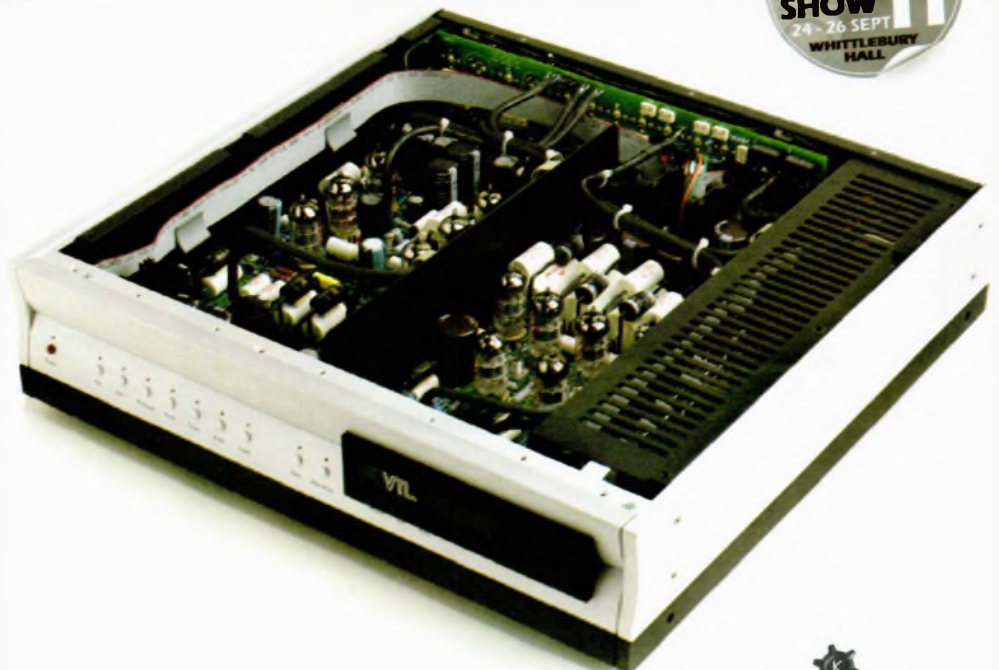
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The new Nagra MSA amplifier

“We salute its profoundly elegant and homogeneous musicality, its compactness... that will appeal as much to audiophiles as to the professionals”.

Laurent Thorin on the new Nagra MSA amplifier – Haute Fidélité, January 2010

The full review can be downloaded as a pdf on our website in the amplifiers section



MSA amplifier – 60wpc/8ohms



300i integrated amplifier - 20wpc



DAC – 192/24 upsampling DAC



CDC CD player



VPS phono stage



PL-L pre-amplifier

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Audiolab 8200CDQ CD player and hub

By Alan Sircom

The Audiolab 8200 is an inherently modular platform, and that hangs on what you want from your audio and possibly where you are on the planet. In territories where CD is still king, the 8200 CD still reigns supreme; where the CD is old news there's an 8200 DQ, and for those who want a complete front-end solution, there's the 8200 CDQ. The differences are straightforward – the CD is a conventional CD player, the DQ forgoes a CD playing side, but includes a full-feature DAC and a preamplifier section, and the 8200CDQ is the full enchilada, combining CD player, DAC and preamp sections of all three devices. The three devices aren't exactly the same and there's no upgrade path between them, but the universal platform does make the design adaptable and efficient.

The whole 8200 platform is the brain-child of two of digital audio's 'sharpest tools in the box', Dominik Peklo and John Westlake. Working for IAG, Peklo and Westlake between them spend a great deal of time in the company's Shenzhen factory. This gives a 'hands on' approach that allows greater connection with the design as it is being produced. Westlake in particular has also spent endless hours on forums discussing almost every aspect of the design as well as listening and reacting to feedback – witness the thousands of posts on the topic over at Pink Fish media or diyAudio.

In basic terms, this is a CD player with five digital inputs (including a galvanically-isolated asynchronous USB and transformer coupled S/PDIF inputs), three analogue inputs, both digital and analogue outputs (these can be fixed – if used as a source – or variable if used as a preamp), has a headphone socket, 12v triggers and a choice of different filter settings, all of which is flash memory upgradable. The analogue section runs in balanced mode, converting single-ended sources to balanced and back again for single-ended output. The implementation is centred around a 32-bit ESS Sabre 9018 DAC chip, because this allows a wide range of custom reconstruction filter settings. This is no simple re-casting of the application notes. The four-layer main board is an engineer's fantasy-land, that took months of re-lays and the rest to get absolutely right. But the result is a jitter-free, very 'right' design that sends digital design engineers into a combined respect and jealousy fit.

By eschewing the use of its own drivers, the USB input is technically limited to 24/96 input, but as Class Two Audio protocols increasingly commonplace in recent computers, 192kHz sampling is possible (PC users might need to use something like the Thesycon USB 2 driver and uninstall any ASIO drivers). Note however that the Audiolab does not control any software on the host computer and any hoops you need to jump through for bit-perfect play still apply. ▶



▶ Perhaps the big issue is the user-selectable filters. It's not the first player to allow users to play at this deep a level, but it's a more commonly found on players with an extra zero at the right-hand end of the price. There are some who favour using the filter settings on a per-disc basis, others who think they should be used to optimise the system. I think both are valid; the sharp rolloff filter is very old-school CD and I didn't like this at all, but admit it might help de-squishy really soft valve-based systems. Then there are the optimal transient filters and I found the DD version best suited my system, while optimal spectrum was just a little too much 'spectrum' and not enough 'transient' for my tastes. However, if I were into CinemaScope like soundstages and prepared to sacrifice some of the system's 'snap', I'd probably go for optimal spectrum. But that should be enough variation to make this player universally popular, even if it makes it relatively hard to review.

Ergonomically, the device itself is too much CD and not enough hub, although the remote handset levels the score. With only the OLED screen and the eight identical button array on the front panel, things like source selection and volume control are not as immediately obvious compared to a regular amplifier section, and this might trouble some. But the fit and finish is excellent, and the device doesn't 'feel cheap'.

The filter options do make the 8200CDQ something of a chimera. If you don't like the sound of the system with the CDQ in place, chances are a different filter will restore order. That makes it difficult to pin down.

Difficult, but not impossible. The overall performance is one of taut and precise detail. The acid test for a system

is Trentemøller's 'Evil Dub' from the 2006 album *The Last Resort*. The electronic beats, pared down to a pitter-patter of ticks and blips, coupled to a gentle ambient bass massage, is a surprisingly tough act to play well, but the 8200CDQ takes it in its stride, whatever the filter. In fact, the 8200CDQ's inherently tidy sound, coupled to a significant ability not to overplay the bass line makes this CD almost made to highlight the benefits of the player.

It's not all about leading edges and metronomic precision, because the Audiolab digs out all the interplay in the 2002 Capitol version of Bill Evans and Jim Hall's *Undercurrent* CD. This is early 1960s jazz stripped bare – just piano and guitar – and sounds close knit, so there's not much in the way of huge stereo soundstaging. But it's all about the musical communication between the two and the 8200CDQ acquires itself perfectly here too.

The same applies to digital files through the USB, which is marginally superior to the sound of another CD transport using the CDQ as a DAC (why would you do that in reality?). A ripped version of Lambchop's *Is A Woman* CD retained all the light, tight detail of the CD transport. I ultimately couldn't detect much of a difference between the CD played through the CD transport and the ripped files parsed through USB, although I did feel USB retained a slight improvement in focus that gave it the edge. The great thing here was the consistency across digital sources.

There is a slight hierarchy here. This is an outstanding CD player and DAC. It's an excellent digital hub and digital preamp. It's a good to good-plus analogue preamp. This stands almost irrespective of price points. You might prefer a more sweetened view of digital audio, but if you like your digits crisp and fresh, this is a hard device to beat both as a CD player and as a DAC. However, this is using the 8200CDQ in fixed output form. Using it as a preamp might get a box ▶



Just for the record

If you love vinyl our newest components will raise your musical enjoyment to a new level.

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- Lyra Delos and Kleos moving coil cartridges
- Trilogy 907 phono preamplifier
- Brinkmann 9.6 tonearm and Pi moving coil cartridge
- Esoteric E-03 phono preamplifier
- Grand Prix Audio Monaco direct drive turntable
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- Sumiko Pearwood Celebration 2 and Palo Santos Presentation moving coil cartridges
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What do you listen to?

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We're often asked this question. At Cool Gales, we're fortunate to be able to audition a huge range of high-end hi-fi gear, from the well-known "usual suspects" to obscure exotics, from components with eye-watering price tags to those that are eminently affordable, from classic vintage gear to the latest cutting edge.

Little wonder, then, that our customers frequently ask us to distil our experience, curious to know what exactly we fire up in the evening when we want to listen to music.

We're spoilt for choice here for turntables, but among our favourites is the Artemis Labs SA-1 coupled with the TA-1 tonearm, both designed by analogue guru Frank Schröder. Frank trained as a watchmaker, and his own hand-made tonearms are treasured by those fortunate enough to afford the price tags and patient enough to endure the two-year waiting list.

The TA-1 tonearm (available separately), although unmistakably a Schröder, is actually made by Artemis Labs engineers in California. Just imagine: it's now possible to have a Schröder-*designed* tonearm at about half the price of a Schröder-*made* tonearm, and within only two or three weeks of order. And a real beaut it is: with a kingwood wand and brass counterweight, and all necessary adjustment controls, minutely tuneable. Sonics are very definitely Schröder, with the finest details apparent, and breathtakingly musical.

The SA-1 turntable is a design of genius, beginning with its bamboo-layered plinth, the grain of each layer running in different directions, resulting in an extremely rigid, yet relatively lightweight, compact base, framed by solid ebony.

Power is provided by a high-torque DC motor sourced from Switzerland, with its own Artemis-designed power supply, driving a loop of magnetic tape. A variable tensioning pulley wraps the tape almost 360° around the platter, thus eliminating any pull on the bearing. The result may well be the best of all drive technologies: the precision of direct drive, the immediacy of idler wheel drive, and the purity of the best pulley drives.

The user manuals, both written by Frank, are an education in themselves in the art of analogue.

We've heard more expensive tonearms and turntables—indeed, some very much more expensive—but none better.



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“My advice? Buy the 8200CDQ and use it as the full package for a year or so, then borrow a decent line pre and see if you can hear the benefits. If you can, you just gave yourself a little better sounding present. If you can't, you just gave your bank balance a reprieve.”



► or two out of the room, but some of those additional boxes sound cleaner. And it's here where the 'almost' qualifier comes into play. I think you would struggle to build a better sounding music hub for the money, but if you invested the price of the 8200CDQ again on a preamp, you'd likely get a better overall sound than using the onboard preamp stage. My advice? Buy the 8200CDQ and use it as the full package for a year or so, then borrow a decent line pre and see if you can hear the benefits. If you can, you just gave yourself a little better sounding present. If you can't, you just gave your bank balance a reprieve.

It has one last feather in its cap. The headphone socket. This has kind of fallen from grace in some audio devices, which shows perhaps how far removed some aspects of the audiophile world is from reality. A lot of people today now consider headphones to be their prime mode of listening, especially as we live in time and cash poor times so many of us end up listening late at night in ever smaller rooms. The sound of the 8200CDQ through its ¼" socket is first-rate; it's detailed, dynamic, precise and is more than capable of driving relatively difficult headphone loads such as HiFiMAN designs like the HE-500.

This is a very important product, on a number of levels. The 8200CDQ not only covers all the bases in terms of front-end demands today, it does so without a heavy price penalty, in performance or in the pocket of the buyer. This, plus power amps and speakers (or active loudspeakers, or even just a pair of headphones) does make one question the need for more devices in the chain. It's that good. The fact that you get change out of £1,000 puts it in the 'remarkable' camp. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

CD player, DAC, preamp

Digital Inputs: 2x Coax S/PDIF (24/176.4 compatible), 2x Optical S/PDIF (24/96 compatible), Asynchronous USB (24/96 compatible)

Analogue inputs: 3x stereo phono line level

Digital Outputs: Optical and Coaxial S/PDIF (CD digital output only)

Analogue outputs: Balanced XLR, Single-ended phono, 12v trigger, ¼" headphone jack

DAC type: 32bit ESS Sabre

User Selectable filters

Software updatable via USB

Output Level @ 1kHz: RCA: 2.05V RMS, XLR: 4.1V RMS

Frequency Response ref. 1kHz:

20Hz - 20kHz ±0.2dB

Total Harmonic Distortion:

RCA: <0.0025% XLR: <0.008%

Crosstalk @1KHz: RCA: >120dB XLR: >130dB

Dynamic Range 'A' wtd: RCA: >98dB

XLR: >110dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 7.5x44.5x33cm

Weight: 6kg

Price: £950

Manufacturer: Audiolab

URL: www.audiolab.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1480 447700

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Vienna Acoustics Mozart Concert Grand SE

By Neil Gader



Some loudspeakers are simply born to dance. It's part of their bloodline. They reproduce music with a distinctly light, nimble touch in much the same way Fred and Ginger seemed to defy the laws of gravity and float across the ballrooms of the silver screen. Vienna Acoustics loudspeakers evoke this sense of live music's immediacy in ways that leave other loudspeakers chugging to catch up. I heard this when I spent time with the Haydn Grand, noted the same trait with VA's concentric-flat-driver flagship, the Music, and now with the Mozart Concert Grand SE.

The latest version of the Mozart now merits the SE moniker. Typically connoting a signature edition, Vienna Acoustics opts for Symphony Edition. Like the original it's a 2.5-way floorstanding speaker designed in a bass-reflex configuration with twin rear-firing ports. More evolution than revolution, the SE continues the VA tradition of extreme attention to detail at every stage of design and production. Fit and finish are superb—as good as they get in this range. I should add that visitors to my listening room inevitably ran their fingers across the impeccable chassis, admiring every minute detail as if caught in the tug of an extraterrestrial tractor beam.

The narrow 38" tower cabinet employs a thick one-and-a-half-inch front baffle with one-inch sidewalls. VA describes the bracing pattern as "relatively complicated," with the addition of a lot of internal battening material. Vienna Acoustics' cone drivers are noteworthy for their transparency, not just sonically but literally. All designs are in-house. The X3P cone material for the transparent 5" mid/bass driver is a derivation of VA's polypropylene hybrid cone technology and combines TPX, a thermoplastic used in their XPP cones, with three polypropylene based synthetics. The 5" ribbed mid/woofer is in fact the same XPP Spider-Cone used in the up-market Beethoven Concert Grand. The goal, of course, is to match very low mass with high damping and extreme rigidity for control. These transducers also use an inverted rubber surround to reduce cone edge-resonances. Treble duty is the responsibility of a proprietary 1.1" hand-coated, silk dome tweeter delivered from Scan-Speak. It's slightly oversized in diameter and was selected to aid dispersion, an advantage for buyers opting for wide spacing between speakers.

Common to all Vienna Acoustics speakers is the mandate that crossover components hew to tight 1% tolerances—that is except for the inductors, which must meet an even more stringent 0.7% tolerance. Sonic margins are equally rigorous with each production pair frequency-matched to within 0.5dB of the reference pair—the original pair designed by the Peter Gansterer-led team. This achieves a level of consistency that ensures that the final owner is hearing exactly what Gansterer himself hears from his creation rather than a loose approximation. The speaker terminals are also VA-designed and use brass/silver with gold contact points, which are said to achieve a quieter interface. All internal wiring is twisted to reject any crossover-borne



“It’s more finely boned in presentation and conveys a lightness and delicacy that often accompanies smaller driver in narrow columnar enclosures—only this one has genuine mid-thirty Hertz bass and great midrange dynamics.”

noise. Heavy crackle-finished cast-aluminum footers stabilize the narrow towers and are supplied with spikes and dimpled pucks to protect wood floors.

Sonically, the first things that come to mind with the Mozart Grand SE are speed and coherence. Whether it’s the obsession with highly select crossover components or the small quick drivers liberally aided by a clean dynamic tweeter, the result is wide-band frequency response and transparency that create satiny string sections, clean concise winds, and distinct placement cues from deep within the symphony orchestra. The Mozart Grand SE possesses a micro-dynamic resolving power that keenly suits classical and acoustic music. Tonally the speaker is not devoid of character. It’s more finely boned in presentation and conveys a lightness and delicacy that often accompanies smaller driver in narrow columnar enclosures—only this one has genuine mid-thirty Hertz bass and great midrange dynamics. This transparency is underscored by a leaner more sinewy quality that sets limits on the orchestral scale the Mozart can achieve. There’s a small energy dip in the presence range that flatters the dimensional aspects of symphonic music, but it also reduces some of the in-your-face energy and grit from Pat Benatar’s scorching vocal from “Love is a Battlefield.” The brass section from Copland’s *Fanfare* [Reference] takes on a smoother almost glassy quality but for me lacks a bit of attack and urgency. Similarly, on solo piano, my favorite instrumental metric, the Mozart SE communicates a stunning soundboard reverberation, and captures the weight and rush of air in the bottom two octaves. But the relaxed upper mids are almost too pretty, lacking at moments the forward thrust and sound pressure that a well-struck run of notes would have.

Because of its mid- and upper-bass energy, placement options are important. Anticipating room issues, VA provides foam plugs for the ports but I tended to prefer tweaking via repositioning. That said, I came away with mixed feelings regarding bass response. On the one hand I loved having my eyelids pinned back during the final section of Holst’s “Jupiter” from *The Planets*. On the ▶

▶ other, bass response could thicken at times and I felt that the speed often couldn't quite match the unalloyed quickness of the SE's mids, particularly at high volume levels. Which is to say that every speaker has limits and the Mozart Concert Grand SE is not the kind of speaker that a DJ is going to take along to a rave party. This is not a knock—it's only to point out that the Mozart is more of a parlor speaker designed to play at realistic levels in medium and smaller rooms rather than pounding out the chorus to Queen's "We Will Rock You" at a halftime show at Staples.

The Mozart Grand SE playbook is equally impressive at low levels, producing a degree of realism and acoustic space that I associate with real concert-going. It's as if you're not listening softly through electronics, rather that you're in a concert hall and sitting back a few rows to experience the performance from a different but undiminished perspective. It's the rare box enclosure that doesn't leave a sonic imprint on the music. To one degree or another most absorb micro-dynamics and transient speed and momentum like a well-placed speed bump in front of the music. And that's not even considering the colorations that ported designs often bring to the table. However, in the critical midrange VA has minimized these concerns to the point of irrelevance with the Mozart Grand SE. The result is not just that individual images are cleanly and openly represented but that they are also set within a brilliantly dimensional soundstage. When the Mozarts reproduce the Turtle Creek Chorale, during the Rutter *Requiem*, the unbroken continuity of the delicate vocal array spreading across the hall's soundspace is inspiring. It becomes a transparent curtain of energy, corner-to-corner, with a depth and dimensionality that are rewards unto themselves.

The Mozart Grand SE may have a sensitivity of 90dB but that's at a rated 4 ohms nominal impedance, so moderate power is essential. That's the difference between the level of power required to establish a heart beat and what is needed to release the SE's inner athlete. To illustrate this, there's Natalie Merchant's "Peppery Man" from *Leave Your Sleep* [Nonesuch]. I first heard this track at this year's CES in the VTL room. An OMG moment ensued. The M450 Series III monoblocks were driving the TAD Reference One speakers and as soon as Luke and Bea Manley identified the song I knew I'd be ordering it post haste. Among the musical marvels on this track are the Fairfield Four vocalists and a stomping tuba which anchors the track in the way a stand-up bass otherwise might. The point to all of this is that with smaller amplifiers, sub-100 watts, this track could sound a bit bloated and veiled. The typical judgment might be rendered that the speaker has issues like vent noise and overhang or a noisy enclosure. But not so fast, because once I laced up the ARC DSi200 integrated to the Mozart Grand SE the tuba's full character was revealed. It was still full-bodied but much more controlled, and its timbre was more clearly defined, while the rubbery lack of resolution was replaced by superior pitch clarity and more transient detail from the mouthpiece to the bell.

The Mozart Concert Grand SE is a floorstander of many strengths but it has the soul and the moves of a compact. A terrific value, yet so beautifully constructed and appointed it could easily be at home with the black-tie-and-Chanel crowd at an opening night gala at the Vienna Opera House or Musikverein. And if that's not something to dance about, I don't know what is. +

First published in *The Absolute Sound* issue 213

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Vienna Acoustics Mozart Concert Grand SE

Type: 2.5-way bass-reflex tower

Drivers: 1.1" tweeter, 5" X3P mid/bass, 5" XPP Spider-Cone mid/woofer

Frequency response: 30Hz to 22kHz

Sensitivity: 90dB

Nominal impedance: 4 ohms

Dimensions: 38.25" x 8.1" x 13" (including supplied base)

Weight: 116 lbs. pair

Price: £2,700 per pair

Manufacturer: Vienna Acoustics

URL: www.vienna-acoustics.com

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C1.0

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Raidho Acoustics produce hand crafted advanced design and superb sounding speakers which allow the emotion and moment of the music to fill your listening room, your heart, your mind and soul. Built in house, the Raidho Acoustics' ribbon and ceramic drivers ensure the art of speaker design is taken to the next level in speaker performance and musicality. You have to hear them.

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Magneplanar MG1.7 loudspeaker

By Steve Dickinson

It didn't help that my review samples came in '2001, A Space Odyssey' black and that the pair of (wardrobe door sized) panels were installed partly obscuring a north-facing window. In Manchester. In late October. Their ability to reproduce music being matched only by their ability to absorb light, it seems. The Maggies departed just before Christmas, thereby allowing the window to be largely obscured by a decorated tree, instead. Ho-hum. Life is full of compromises.

The speakers are also available in off-white which, while no more transparent to light, would have worked better with the rest of the room. To be fair, the finish is very smart and set-off nicely by aluminium edge caps. If your décor tends to industrial chic, the black Maggies will look sensational when viewed from your Barcelona chair or Eames lounger. Otherwise, the pale option might prove more domestically harmonious.

The MG1.7s are described as a 3-way quasi-ribbon. A thin, lightweight panel is overlaid with a conductive ribbon, sitting within an array of permanent magnets. The signal passes through the ribbon and excites the panel, bringing forth music. As with all panel designs, size matters if bass is required but the MG1.7s conclusively dispel some of the myths about panels in general, and full range ribbons in particular. Myths such as the 'fact' that panels are inefficient, have horribly low impedance, thereby requiring hefty amplifiers, and don't have any worthwhile bass. The Maggies are notionally 86dB efficient with a 4Ohm impedance, a far cry from amp-killers such as Apogeess and their 1Ohm loads. I used my regular 90W Accuphase and seldom felt the need for extra grunt. While deep bass may lack a little solidity and slam compared to the best conventional floorstanders, it never fails to underpin the music. Rather, its reach compares favourably with a decent standmounter. The speakers will make good use of extra power and grip, but they will ruthlessly reveal an amp's shortcomings if it has any. In short, while quantity is good, quality is what counts with these particular loudspeakers.

The way they reproduce music does require a little acclimatisation. The nearest I can get to describing the effect is to say that the Maggies allow the music to flood into the room while, by comparison, a conventional loudspeaker seems to pump music into the room. Music is delivered with a feeling of effortless grace, a lack of artifice which can make conventional designs sound like they are trying a little too hard. It doesn't take too long to be beguiled by the Maggies' presentation, half an hour should easily do it. A quick 5-minute demonstration is unlikely to be enough to let them get properly under your skin, though.

So, they are big, black and unlikely to make a strong first impression. Better hope they're good, then.

It's quite unusual for a piece of hi-fi equipment to make me re-evaluate what I want from my system, rarer still when that happens with something costing less than my usual kit, but that's what happened during my time with the

“As with all panel designs, size matters if bass is required but the MG1.7s conclusively dispel some of the myths about panels in general, and full range ribbons in particular.”

Magneplanars. My regular loudspeaker of choice is a 3-way floorstander costing about £4700 which does, pretty much, everything I want it to. It's a package which is proving hard to beat for the price, and anything better is also likely to be a fair bit bigger – not particularly helpful in my British-standard, semi-detached, listening (and living) room.

But, the MG1.7s got me thinking. Their most obvious lack is in the bass. It's not as deep, or as tuneful, or as tight, as a good conventional floorstander. The cumulative effect can make you think, oddly, that the pitch of the music has been shifted up a little. And the upper treble, while clean and sweet, is unexceptional. And, not being particularly efficient, they don't go particularly loud. But they have a way of communicating the music, without bombast or hyperbole, which makes you wonder whether all that scale and drama stuff isn't, perhaps, just a tiny bit overrated? What they may lack in impact, they more than make up for with insight. Great actors don't need to gurn and shout their way through a performance, they can describe a universe in a gesture, a glance, or the subtlest of inflections, and so it is with the Magneplanars.

What they do is look deep into the music. Yes, it's about detail, but detail for the music's sake. Textures are resolved to a more intimate level, music is structured, layered and nuanced. Choirs lose their amorphousness and become a group of individual voices performing together. I have a magazine-freebie CD: the Rodolfus Choir performing Christmas music. You're probably thinking what I was thinking when I put it on: nice Yuletide background music for doing something Christmassy, like writing cards, or drinking alcohol. You'd be wrong. Not a hint of 'Deck the Halls' in the whole 65 minutes, this collection of old and recent was ethereal, luminous; transcendent. Out of many highlights, Morten Lauridsen's *O Magnum Mysterium*, stands out. Anyway, the Magneplanars brought forth a performance of such spellbinding depth, subtlety and spirituality that I simply forgot about what it ►

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► was I should have been doing and sat there, rapt with admiration for the quality of the choir, the astonishing music, and the system which was bringing it to me. Not only were individual voices discernible, the choir occupied a natural-sized space in a deep, wide and reverberant acoustic (the recording is from St Jude-on-the-Hill, Hampstead). The Maggies effortlessly highlighted a humanity in the performance, sometimes obscured by conventional loudspeakers.

Paradoxically this style of presentation comes into its own in large-scale performances. While the scale and weight of a full-on orchestral tutti is not something the Maggies are best-equipped to deliver, the emotional pleasure in such music comes here from the cerebral, rather than the visceral. You'll notice an instrument entry not only for its own spatial, textural and pitch cues but also appreciate the way it changes the overall form of the music. Given the right circumstances, these are the archetypal disappearing loudspeaker. It was this layering of the component parts, the sense that a greater whole was being formed from the constituents, which overcame my need for deep, tight and tuneful bass and caused me to reassess what I really want from my system.

Perhaps because they don't impress through bombast and grandeur, but via other, subtler qualities, the Maggies are never less than engaging at quieter listening levels. Take Stephen Fearing's *Welfare Wednesday* from 'Out To Sea' (TNMD 0080) for example. In an album replete with emotional content this track stands out. The Maggies show it not only in the vocal, but also through the delicacy of the guitar playing, I've heard it on several impressive systems but none have managed to portray so much, from the subtlest of inflections, in quite the way the Magneplanars do.

The loudspeakers are supplied as mirror-image pairs. The high-frequency part is offset to one side of the panel and whether you have it to the outer or the inner edge will affect the speakers' presentation. Tweeters to the outside gives good hi-fi: an expansive soundstage with great depth and spaciousness, best-suited to orchestral or large-scale music; to the inner edges gives a tighter, more focussed and more intimate staging. Jazz, for example, is more close-knit but retains a sense of freedom, a clear feeling of musicianship in a common-cause, a sense of performance. On balance, I found myself preferring the tweeters to the inboard edges; if large-scale music loses a little expansiveness, it gains rather more in focus and intent. The Magneplanars' slightly more intellectual approach also seems to come into its own with more complex music.

To be fair to the Maggies, the lack of deep bass and their modest efficiency is not something which is likely to be an issue in real world listening. My 90-watter drove them to very satisfying levels, even in hard-driving rock such as *The Wall*, which had enough impact to make me wonder whether I really needed more. So it is, too, with the bass. Given the wrong circumstances, the MG1.7s can signally fail to deliver any meaningful bottom end. Piano can lose sonority and weight; Leonard Cohen trades some 'chest voice' for 'head voice' and so-on.

But get the setup right: a bit of attention to positioning (they are dipoles, so rearwards radiation needs to be managed), cabling and, vitally, decent mains and support for the source and amplification, and the Magneplanars will reward you with surprising depth and impact. The subtlety of the big panel, its phase-coherence, speed and timing, all seems to work to minimise any impediment to the making of music. So, we've scotched two of the Big Myths

“Given the right circumstances, these are the archetypal disappearing loudspeaker. It was this layering of the component parts, the sense that a greater whole was being formed from the constituents, which overcame my need for deep, tight and tuneful bass and caused me to reassess what I really want from my system.”

about panel loudspeakers, that they don't go deep and they don't go loud. The Maggies may not go very, very deep, and they may not go very, very loud, but, for the great majority of circumstances, they give enough. Wanting more starts to seem a little churlish, especially when the other things they do are so special. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Magneplanar MG1.7 loudspeaker

Type: 3-way quasi-ribbon, full-range panel

Sensitivity: 86dB (at 500Hz)

Impedance: 4 Ohms

Bandwidth: 40Hz – 22kHz ±3dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 65x19x2 inches (1650x480x50mm)

Weight: 20 Kg (approx)

Finishes: Black, grey or off-white fabric, aluminium or cherry trim.

Price: £2500.00 as reviewed, prices start from £2250.00

Distributor: Decent Audio

Tel: 0845 601 9390

URL: www.decentaudio.co.uk

Manufacturer: Magnepan Inc, Minnesota, USA

URL: www.magnepan.com

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Edwards Audio MC3/PSU3 Phono Stage

By Malcolm Steward

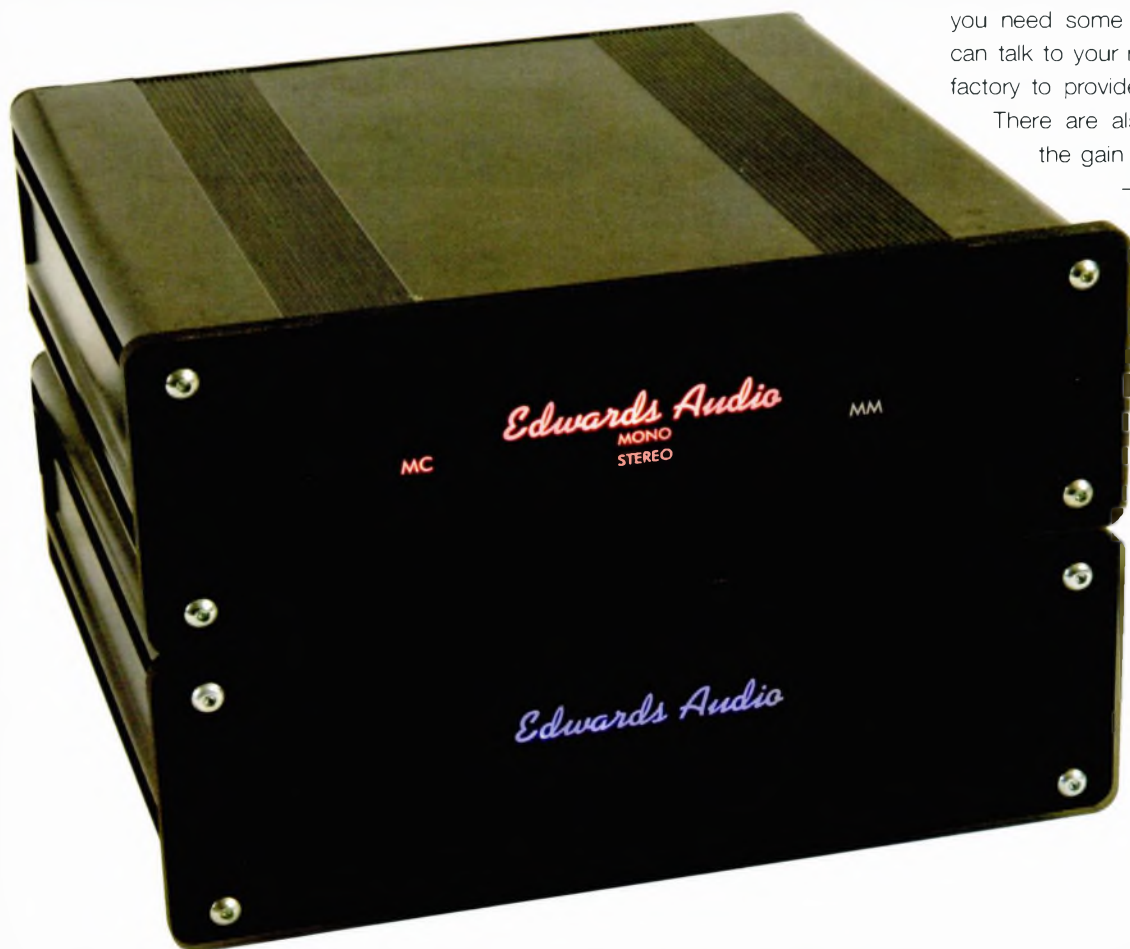
Edwards Audio represents the “more affordable” range of Talk Electronics products. That should not suggest that the latter are in any way over-priced. Indeed, Talk’s designer, Kevin Edwards, harbours serious concerns about, and eschews, typical high-end pricing practices. He genuinely wants to give his buyers exceptional performance at a respectable cost. He is definitely not a member of the gold-plated grab handles and capacitors of the month for added perceived value fraternity. This two-box phono stage even comes with a 10-year guarantee all in its £1499.95 retail price.

Edwards’ designs are bereft of unnecessary clutter and, in my opinion, look all the better for it. Minimalism never did the likes of Naim Audio or Musical Fidelity any harm in their early years, did it? The top-of-the-range MC3 will accommodate moving coil and moving magnet cartridges, and has one set of RCA outputs alongside a push button that will switch between stereo and a true mono output, providing the latter by summing the output of both channels. The only other connections are a turntable ground and a mini-DIN for the obligatory 21V DC power supply. The black Perspex fascia panel

illuminates whenever the device is powered with subtle indicators showing what type of cartridge is connected and whether you are listening in mono (the display illumination turns from blue to red) or stereo. That is none too busy, even for a box that measures only 6 (h) by 18 (w) by 20 (d) centimetres.

Internally there are also sets of jumpers with which you can alter the cartridge loading. The default setting is 100R with 2nF of capacitance, and this should suit most cartridges today. The jumpers will provide the most popular options but should you find you need some peculiar combination you can talk to your retailer and he will ask the factory to provide a bespoke PCB to suit.

There are also jumpers for equalising the gain of the MC3 – in six steps – to match that of other devices, your CD player, say, plugged into your pre-amplifier alongside it. Edwards wisely suggests choosing a setting that is slightly quieter if you are in any doubt to reduce the chance of overloading either the MC3 or the input on your pre-amplifier, especially valve models. The final user-adjustable audio setting on the board is the warp filter, which operates at around 7Hz. I promise here and now that there





will be no jokes about "warp factor five, Mr Sulu!" By default this filter is set to be ON when the unit is shipped from the factory. It targets the more common arm and cartridge resonant frequencies and is there to make life a little easier for your amplifier, which can squander a great deal of valuable output power trying to reproduce those inaudible ultra-low frequencies.

I auditioned the MC3 using my Well Tempered Amadeus GTa and Dynavector XX1 record player, and my regular tri-amped Naim NAP 250 active DBL system, with the record player and electronics on Quadraspire Sunoko Vent supports. Once plugged in and warmed up the MC3 was superbly quiet, even in my system, which is highly sensitive to less than perfect earthing arrangements with turntables. The PSU3, naturally, has an earth-lift switch and it is worth trying both its settings even if you suffer no hum or buzz problems as grounding can influence performance in revealing, sensitive systems.

From the outset, the MC3 displayed a beguiling character, a pleasing, natural musical flow. It was not an immediately impressive sound but one that I grew to appreciate the more it played. It was not, as young folks are wont to say, in your face, although it was demonstrative and informative, but in an even-handed and musically persuasive fashion. That is not a euphemistic way of saying it sounded laid back or lethargic because it did not. It could convey dynamics, vigour and energy with the best of them but without any sense of artifice or stridency.

One acid test of a record player is to crank up the system SPL until it reaches the point where the sound begins to appear artificial: the point at which it starts to sound unmistakably like a record playing rather than a musical performance. The WT Amadeus GTA is one of the least artificial sounding turntables I have used, and will happily play at what I consider to be realistic SPLs: the Edwards Audio MC3 elevates this ability to another level.

That old war-horse, Rickie Lee Jones' 1979 eponymous LP sounded absolutely magnificent in both musical respects and in terms of its hi-fi presentation. Tunefulness and timing aspects were spot on, with Jones' voice swooping and soaring but always landing precisely on the desired note. Instrumental timbre was outstanding with drums and bass guitar enjoying a particularly rich and powerful sonority, along with a stable, solid sound-stage that lent the proceedings a true sense of authority and a grand sense of scale.

The MC3 also proved to be a fine conveyor of emotion with Van Morrison's wonderfully lyrical and evocative album, *Poetic Champions Compose*.

Morrison's voice betrays the contentment he, then 42, admitted to feeling when he penned and performed the album. His satisfaction and that of his band appeared almost tangible. Again, the instrumentation was blessed with vivid – but wholly realistic – timbre: Morrison's saxophone, for example, had a delightful breathy rasp that enhanced its soulful tonality.

Finally I auditioned the 180gm audiophile pressing of Gwynneth Herbert's *All The Ghosts*, in particular tracks such as *Perfect Fit*, *Put Your Mouth Where Your Money Is* and *My Mini and Me*; tracks that the editor and I had seen her perform live only the week before. The MC3 conveyed her idiosyncratic vocal character and stylings with a rare lucidity. It also portrayed her energetic interplay with her band and the effect her intelligent phrasing had on the compositions and their arrangements.

All round the Edwards MC3 is as fine and musically coherent a phono stage as you will find anywhere at this price level. That it also performs well in terms of imagery and timbral accuracy is really a bonus. What is more, its slightly retro appearance makes it a complete winner as far as I am concerned. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Max Input MC: 26mV

Max Input MM: 116mV

Gain: 40dB(MM) 58dB/61dB/64dB/67dB/70dB and 73dB (MC)

MC Input Loading Resistance:

22R/47R/100R/470R/1K/47K

MC Input loading Capacitance

120pF/1n0/2n2/4n7/10nF and 22nF

MM Input Loading(Fixed): 47K/120pF

Output impedance: <10 Ohms

Max output level: 11.5v depending upon input

Dimensions (WxHxD): 17.5x53x16cm

Weight: 4.7kg

Price: £1,500

Manufacturer: Talk Electronics

URL: www.talkelectronics.com/edwardsaudio.html

Tel: +44 (0)8456 123388

AUDIO SMÖRGÅSBORD

HRT Streamer II+ (revised)

By Alan Sircom

Audio companies are not known for hiding big changes from the public, but this one could go unnoticed. A few months ago, the HRT Streamer II+ went from its old blunted Toblerone shape to its new soapbar shape. It gained six frequency lock-lights that were not on earlier examples, and it could have ended there. We assumed the revisions were mostly to the exterior, especially as it didn't become the Streamer II++ or Streamer III+ or even Streamer II+2. So, no big deal on the inside, then?

Wrong!

It's still run in Asynchronous USB mode, still powers off the USB socket and is still capped at 24/96. However, the S/N ratio has gone to 115dB (from 101dB), the distortion on the spec sheet has been reevaluated and the power requirements are now up to 400mA (from 350mA). Jitter specs are now published and the contribution is a vanishingly small 135dB below full scale. In the process it has done two of the rarest of rare things in 2011 – it got cheaper and better!

The changes made a big difference to the sound quality, which – given the original II+ was already an excellent device – makes it something really special. Most of what was already said about the II+ in issue 72 – rooted image, extended frequency response, tight ball of audio rather than a big, expansive and mellifluous soundstage – apply to the remastered edition. But what this new box does is close the gap, both between this and the Streamer Pro (it's been some time since



I've heard the Pro in anger, but I reckon the new II+ is at least it's match), and also between the whole HRT range and the top-flight DACs.

Because this isn't a 'major' change, this isn't a 'comprehensive' review and those who have the earlier model HRT Streamer II+ need not feel short-changed or think about upgrading to the new model as a matter of course. The older design was – is – extremely good in and of itself. But where this one goes is everywhere with its head held high. I can envisage the new Streamer II+ going into a system where everything else costs several orders of magnitude more than the HRT DAC and it still not being out of place.

I'm going to make a couple of additional recommendations. Try to find a set of USB sockets on your computer that aren't being shared by HDDs, keyboards, printers and the rest (both Windows and Mac allow you to delve into what's using what). Also, consider buying a powered USB hub. The maximum power output of a computer's USB ports is 500mA and the extra juice of a powered hub can help matters, and help limit noise from USB's +5v power rail in the process. If you want to go all audiophile about this, buy an AQVOX that sits at the ends of your USB cable and helps feed the Streamer II+ (I've only tried the powered hub). As the first is only involves a bit of time and listening and the second costs a few quid from Maplins, this isn't unobtainium-grade expensive tweaking. But try it, you might be surprised at the improvement!

As it stands, the HRT Streamer II+ has to be the best value piece of true high-end equipment you can buy. Whether it's the best DAC you can buy is a tougher call, because that's one of the fiercest audio battlefields at the moment. For it to be the best, it would have to go toe-to-toe with products like the excellent Bricasti (coming soon) as well as old favourites like the Ayre QB-9 and the dCS Bussby. But the great thing is, it's never outclassed and never outpunched! +

AS TESTED:

Price: £289

Manufacturer: High Resolution

Technologies Net: www.highrestech.com

Distributed by: Audiofreaks Ltd

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David Berning ZOTL Pre-Amplifier and ZH230 Power Amplifier (slight return)

By Steve Dickinson

Given that the ideal amplifier behaves like a piece of wire with gain, the best you can really hope for from your amp is that it doesn't make matters any worse. Being an amplifier designer must be a bit like being an airline pilot: it's only when you do your job badly that anybody notices. So David Berning starts with a disadvantage, which he then compounds by making his products look neat to the point of blandness, and which weigh barely more than the packaging they were shipped in.

The ZOTL and ZH230 pre/power combination, reviewed by CT in issue 80, is pretty self-effacing. The maker's name is subtly and elegantly milled into the top panel, where it is likely to be obscured by your rack, the power amp boasts just an on/off switch and monitor LED and the pre-amp uses doorknob-shaped controls which make the fascia more interesting, but are not a particularly strong aesthetic statement. It, too has a monitor LED, which isn't the same colour as the power amp's. Actually, that's one genuine criticism I have of this combination. The LED on the pre-amp starts off red and goes to green once it's warmed up and ready for use, the power amp also requires a similar warmup time, but its monitor LED stays resolutely red throughout. If you wait for it to go green, you'll be there for quite a while...



The warmup is because this is, essentially, a valve amplifier. But it's an interesting mix of old and new tech, a simplistic analogy being something like a valve-modulated switched-mode power supply. No output transformers (hence the 'OTL' in ZOTL) which helps create the zero-hysteresis design (the 'ZH' in ZH230) leading to the clean, fast, crisp delivery which seems to be part of the David Berning signature. Interestingly, the amps will become significantly more relaxed after about 20 minutes of use – and that means putting a music signal through them, not merely leaving them switched on. Aside from the modest power output – the ZH230 is a 30-Watt per channel stereo chassis – it's difficult to point to any particularly valve-like characteristics in the sound. This is a valve amp for people who think they don't like valve amps.

And that 30-Watt output is misleading, too. Replacing my regular 90-Watt Accuphase, I never found the Berning amp wanting, despite my habit of driving the Accuphase quite hard, quite a lot of the time. If the Berning clips, as it surely must, it does so in a very benign way. There is none of the obvious stress you hear when an amplifier is under pressure, none of the raggedness, edginess, not even any good old fashioned distortion. There may be, perhaps, a slight hardening of tonality, a hint of thickening to textures, a reduction in ▶



ZOTL pre- and the greatest compliment I can pay it is to say that it continues the good work of the pre amp. Music simply floods from the combination, almost like it can't help itself.

The Tord Gustavsen Trio produce Scandinavian jazz of extraordinary subtlety and delicacy. The opening track *At Home*, from their third album, 'Being There' begins with a simple piano solo. Few indeed are the CD players which fully capture the sense of stillness in these opening phrases, the dCS Puccini does it rather well but, unfortunately, most amplifiers fail to take that and convey much more than an impression. The Berning combination not only gave me that stillness and ethereal quality, but showed me a meditative quality to the stillness which wasn't apparent through other systems. This isn't simply angels dancing on the tip of a stylus, either, it's a real and meaningful evocation of the musical experience.

Roberto Fonseca is a current favourite of mine, his piano playing has a percussive, insistent dynamism which I find hard to resist. But he is also more than capable of producing music of exquisite lyricism, *Lo Que Me Hace Vivir*, from 'Akokan' starts with a gentle and liquid phrase of such prettiness and delicacy, then explodes into a rollicking, headlong dash. To have the one, without the other, would be to miss a great deal. Nothing I've used before, or since, the Berning ZOTL and ZH230 has reached the levels of insight achieved by this unassuming pair. It's not just about filigree detail, or speed, nor is it merely about texture or tonal accuracy, the Berning combination is simply so nimble, it isn't fazed by whatever you ask of it. It's about a product which, to a degree I haven't previously experienced, acts simply as a conduit for the music.

▶ that signature Berning limpidity, but you're only likely to get this on full-throttle orchestral or choral climaxes, or densely textured rock turned up to eleven when, frankly, you're unlikely to notice it overmuch.

This pellucid quality is inherent to both the pre amp and the power amp, but is most noticeable in the pre-, perhaps because so very, very few pre amps actually achieve anything approaching the subtlety and delicacy of the Berning design. The self-effacing nature extends beyond the mere aesthetics, to the way the amp performs; it simply recedes from view and lets the music speak for itself. Don't mistake this for meekness, the amp is far from shy, being more than capable of grabbing, and holding, your attention. Take, for example, Steve Reich's *Six Pianos*, a work of endless subtlety, or never-ending tedium, depending on your point of view. This is a piece in which the dynamics barely vary, there is no melody to speak of, just an ever-changing and complex interplay between the six pianos, chanting phrases which morph subtly into new phrases, almost without the listener being aware. Through the Berning amps, but particularly thanks to the pre-amp, the structure and shape of this most amorphous of pieces is revealed. Now it's a fascinating and hypnotic journey, which leaves you breathless at its precipitous ending, rather than waiting for it to be over; it becomes capable of transporting the listener to another place entirely.

And it was the same story with pretty much any type of music I played. Regardless of the sort of programme material, the Berning combination is particularly adept at showing you the musicianship, the way a skilled performer introduces layers of nuance to a performance which bring it to life; an inflection here, a touch of emphasis there, all adding up to rather more than the sum of the parts. The ZH230 power amp is, obviously, an ideal companion for the



A LETTER FROM TORONTO: BY RICHARD FOSTER

I'm not big on changing equipment in my system very often. I'm pretty careful that the component I purchase will be good for me for quite a while. Take for example my Manley Neo-Classic 300BSE/PP amps. I had them for eight years and was, quite frankly, very happy with what I was hearing. My listening venue is quite small and these amps mated nicely with my Focal Diablo speakers.

I had read, in these pages, glowing reviews by CT and RG for the David Berning Quadrature Z mono amplifiers. These are way out of my price range...but wouldn't it be nice? At the last two CES shows I'd been highly impressed with what I'd heard from the Q Z's. I thought their sound was great and the amplifiers also seemed bulletproof, as they were being driven very hard. I found myself wondering if the more recently released ZH-230, could be as good, but listening opportunities for this 30-watt stereo amplifier had proved impossible. It was in February 2010 that I finally got in touch with the David Berning contact in Canada and asked if I could hear the ZH-230 in my system. And so it was arranged. Now I clearly understood that the QZ and the ZH-230 are very different beasts but, because I was so impressed with the QZ, I had hoped there would be some significant family resemblance.

When the freshly shipped, ice-cold ZH-230 arrived I first let it acclimatize to room temperature and then plugged it in to give it a go. I'd done some listening with my resident amplifier earlier in the evening and had a good sense of how my system was sounding. Even though I KNOW that equipment needs break-in time, I was really not prepared for what I heard-or rather what I didn't hear. I was taken aback by the lack of signature (read: sound of the component). I remember saying to myself it, "It sounds as if nothing is there."

I spent the next 250 hours running the Berning in with various sources. At the end of this period the qualities of the amplifier began to shine through. The ZH-230 comes fitted with Chinese tubes and I decided to do some tube rolling. I inserted two pairs of 12AU7's as both driver and input tubes. Amongst other improvements I could immediately hear a gentle warming to the balance of the sound, which was definitely to my liking. This change was subtle, but just what the doctor ordered.

I was now experiencing a much more expansive soundstage, with greater width, height and depth. My speakers became invisible. On any music I played-and I played a lot, the ZH230 just reproduced what was on



the record or disc. Every recording I listened to took on both a greater presence and the distinct character of the different recording venues. Now, I was used to some of this, but the Berning just gave me more. No doubt the lower noise floor and greater ambient information was a major benefit!

Needless to say, I bought the Berning and moved the Manley's to a friend.

The immediacy and speed of the sound is another quality I am still getting used to. When you play CDs, like 'The Best Of Dire Straits' and in particular 'Sultans of Swing' there is a control over transients I've never experienced. They are lightning fast and the amplifier handles the speed of them beautifully, without any overhang. Listening to the Blu-spec CD of the Dave Brubeck quartet's "Time Out" with special emphasis on track 3, 'Take Five', you can see the musicians placed in proper perspective and with an entirely new and exciting clarity. Playing the SACD from Channel Classics' exceptional release of Vivaldi's La Stravaganza with Rachel Podger and the Arte Dei Suonatori, was a jaw dropping experience. This is music with stunning dynamics and an amplifier, must be in total control in order to maximize the sonic benefit of what has been recorded. Vocal accuracy is very important to me, but when I listened to Mobile Fidelity's outstanding version of Frank Sinatra's Nice 'n Easy album I was at a loss for words. Frank was absolutely in my room! Another favorite test disc of mine is Bob Dylan's 'Nashville Skyline' on Blu-spec. Listening to the first cut, Girl from the North Country, the inflections of Dylan's unmistakable vocals, mixed with the late, great Johnny Cash, gave this wonderful song new meaning.

You may think I'm exaggerating somewhat, but this amplifier has totally charged my batteries and listening to both contemporary music and 'old' favorites has now become so much more musically rewarding.

This is the best amplifier I've ever heard up-close, and for me it does everything right! +



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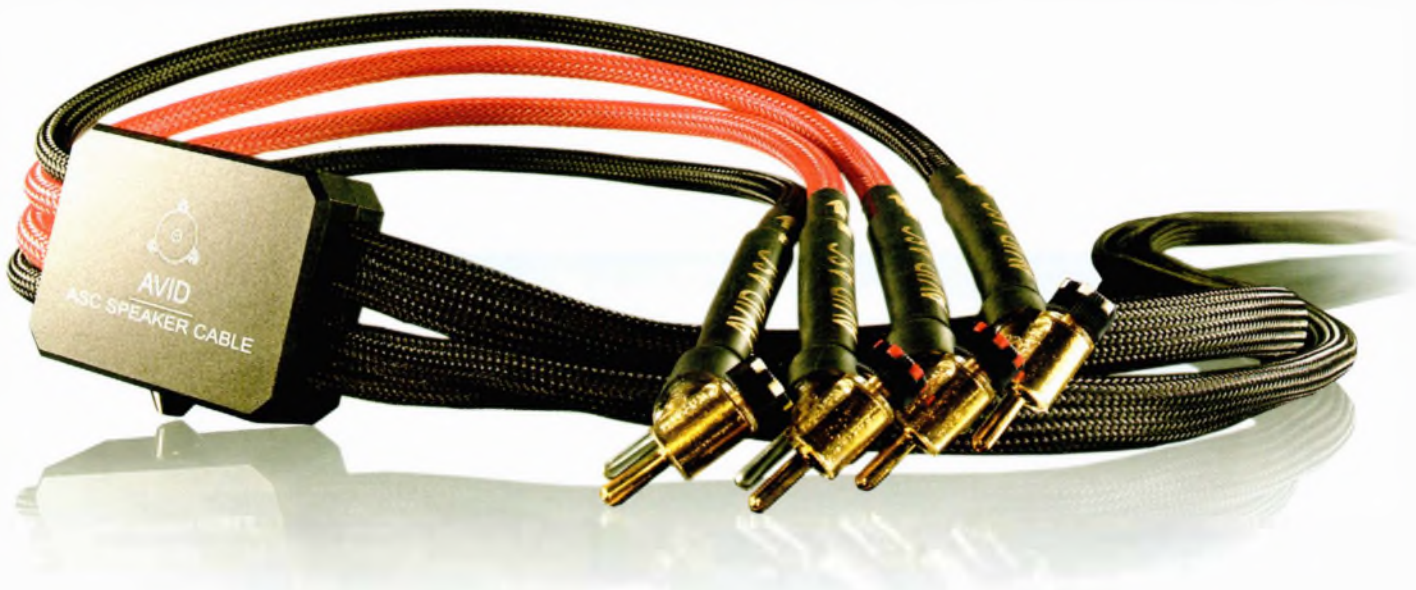
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Avid SCT Black interconnect and ASC reference speaker cable

By Alan Sircom

Avid, as everyone knows is a turntable company, based in a disused atomic bomb shelter somewhere secret in the UK. Except it isn't. It moved out into a perfectly sane industrial park in Huntingdon recently and makes a whole range of products alongside its turntables, such as phono stages, equipment supports, some useful accessories and – of course – cables. And, as befits a company that used to work out of an A-Bomb shelter, the speaker cables have the advantage of being quite, quite mad... in all the good ways. A bit like someone who spent their Wartime years working at Bletchley Park; full of lateral thinking, much of it eminently insensibly.

You see, where most cable companies talk about radiated fields and their potential to futz up the sound of a speaker cable, very few do anything active about it. Yes, there's the active shielding systems used by AudioQuest and Synergistic Research, but that's a very expensive add on to an already expensive speaker cable prospect. Avid's method is more down to earth... literally. The cables have a small box at the amplifier end, which attaches to a wire, which itself attaches to an isolated yellow plug that goes in the wall and allows an independent earth screen to discharge effectively. Many speaker cable designs, especially Litz wire cables such as the kind made by Avid end up with floating or quasi-floating screens; this is the first of its kind (as far as I know) to address the issue. You can also experiment with the earth in place and out of circuit, but the tidier, less grainy midrange and treble and the deeper sounding bass will make the experimentation process relatively short-lived.

How this sounds really depends on what system you use it with. I played around with a number of different amplifiers from the Sugden A21se right up to the c-j ET5 and Edge G6 and the Devialet D-Premier. In the Sugden, the cables highlighted the grace and flow of the sound, in the pre/power it was adept at digging out the dynamic shading and soundstaging and in the D-Premier it was all about power and detail. At each time, the natural sounding extended treble, the grain-free midrange and the full bass shone through. Of the three systems listed, the c-j/Edge system fared the least well, because the big, bold bass coupled with the big, bold bass of the cables tended to make the bass slightly too brightly lit. But the cable is always sounding fast and direct and on the money. ▶



Normally we'd explore interconnects and loudspeaker cables as one. Here, there's no real need to. The two entities are different, even though they speak the same language. The interconnect is single core and

“It’s not extra air or detail or soundstaging or any other of the usual aspects of why a cable might sound good. Instead, it has a lot to do with the space around the notes.”

AS TESTED:

Prices:

SCT Black interconnect £1,200/1m
 ASC Speaker cable. £1,400/3m pair

Distributed by: Avid Hi-Fi

Tel: +44(0)1480 869900

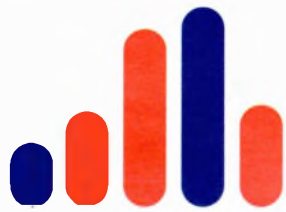
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superconductive (apparently not using either silver or copper but likes to keep us guessing) to the loudspeaker cable's gold-plated copper multistranded outlook. Once again the screen is significant, with a full metal jacket giving almost total RFI rejection. In fact, Avid has gone into extraordinary close-type detail on the design and construction of these cables and how every aspect came under scrutiny. Even in précis, this would stretch longer than the review itself. Let's just leave it at 'expensive cable, expensively built' and hand the rest of the back story over to the Avid website.

I've got to say, I'm something of a convert to the Avid cause. Like the speaker cables, the bass sets itself up as the first key player in the game. But as you go deeper into the mix, you start to find yourself hearing things you would struggle to hear so well on many other cables. It's not extra air or detail or soundstaging or any other of the usual aspects of why a cable might sound good. Instead, it has a lot to do with the space around the notes, the silences and the way music rises out from them.

The curious part of this is it's also chimerical in nature. There are consistent elements (the grain-free performance, the precision to the bass) that apply whatever the system used, but the overall nature is, well it seems like the overall nature of what's hiding in your electronics. The interconnect is less system dependent than its loudspeaker cable brother, but it's still a hard one to pin down, as it holds up a mirror to the best of what your equipment can do.

There are some cables that bring out the best in a system by imposing their own character. There's others that do the same by trying to minimise the amount of character in the cable. There are only a few that do this by being exactly what the doctor ordered for the electronics in many respects. Avid seems to have that nailed. Delightfully eccentric, but for a very good reason. +



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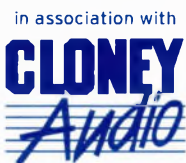
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW Tannoy Definition DC10T

By Alan Howe

I had started down this Tannoy review with high hopes of merely supplementing my stacked-up Klipsch's 5... and expecting to begin my Tannoy DC10T review with something like 'This is a day later, all I'd got is 'If you can hang your head when all about you are losing it down and dreading it on 'You' and 'You I love Tannoy like my own' hardly worth the effort only, but as with Tannoy, you can never take in knowing the green game unfolded for another record.



But the Definition DC10T is worthy of some odd words because they are epic. They have good sound good, are easy to drive, will sound fine in big rooms and small, are practically impossible to blow up (but they follow me and put a huge smile on your face.

These are the largest of a three-model range (the others are a smaller DC8T floorstander and a single tweeter-in-cable DC20 in-wall stander). The Definition range itself represents the superb mid-range and the mighty Kingdom 'Hue'. The DC10T features Tannoy's distinctive 25mm 150-watt Dual Concentric driver - a large, deep paper cone unit with a 25mm 'True Waveguide' horn-shaped titanium cone baffle.

My biggest job as a reviewer of these loudspeakers is not to describe their biggest design. But it's difficult. These are speakers that are hard to sell at all. During their life as being a battle-worn soldier, they have both set up being the nicest in the case of the DC10T, and set up being the best of the rest of the speakers in the range. This is a beautiful line can take a bit of punishment, go out in an empty theatre without anyone and by close a silent line.



The speaker is not that busy and from being the speaker up against the new set.

One of the unique aspects of the new series is that each speaker terminal. It's an exciting big connector for speakers with a single grounding terminal, which is used to generate dynamic range and cut down on the impedance. I may have said 'obvious', but you're probably right: speakers, when they're on the ground that Simon when the review was in progress. Defroid had learned it in some detail, usually being the way that the speaker's been designed in the middle network and great-great high-pitch, upper in the high-end end.

Like most 'entry speakers', the DC10T is 'happy' with 'happy' and 'happy' and it comes to application. It's used as a 'happy' and 'happy' and it comes to application. It's used as a 'happy' and 'happy' and it comes to application. It's used as a 'happy' and 'happy' and it comes to application.

It's used as a 'happy' and 'happy' and it comes to application. It's used as a 'happy' and 'happy' and it comes to application. It's used as a 'happy' and 'happy' and it comes to application. It's used as a 'happy' and 'happy' and it comes to application.

"This size of speaker demands a medium-to-large room, even though the speaker doesn't seem troubled by the room at all!"

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Fono Acustica Armonico cables

By Alan Sircom

Let's face it, some cables are part of the luxury end of the hi-fi scene. And of those luxury cables, some have a halo effect, bestowing their

luxuriant performance on all they touch and in the process potentially showing just what is possible from good but not expensive audio components. Others are luxury products that demand other high-grade audio components to give of their best. The Fono Acustica cables fall distinctly into the latter camp.

These Spanish cables do not suffer fools gladly, they do not compromise in the face of compromise, they do not make a silk purse out of a sow's ear and they do not react well to cliché. This is perhaps why there is not a bewildering range of cables in the Fono Acustica range; just the Armonico cable in digital, line interconnect, turntable, speaker and power cord (although right now, this is not available in UK three-pin configuration). There are also a resonance tuning device called Compas and a power distributor, but these are not a part of this test; we're focusing on the interconnect and speaker cable.

Both cables have a consistent design. They follow Felix Avalos' proprietary mix of precious metals for the conductors and a combination of Teflon and air dielectric laid in a geometry that can only be made by hand. The cable is finished in a vibration-isolating braided sheath, terminated with silver Oyaide connectors using a solder that is virtually pure silver. Additionally, the cables sport an external anti-resonant hardwood block, claimed to reduce vibration and the ends of the cables are further shielded to help block RFI. Finally each cable is given a thorough conditioning period following the 20 hour construction time. And there's no sharing of sheathing on the speaker cables; the send and return is its own separate cable. Andalusia has a reputation for metalworking that dates back to the Moorish era. So perhaps it's little wonder that Felix and Fono Acustica take full advantage of the local skill set.

As suggested earlier, don't bother with the Armonico cables unless your system is up to the challenge. It will not damage cheaper systems, but it's unlikely you'll hear what these cables are up to and you'll probably dismiss them as just another rich and slightly 'soft' sounding cable. Up the equipment ante by several notches and what sounded 'rich' is now 'harmonically coherent', what was 'soft' is now 'refined' and 'alluring'.

There's something about the cables that reacts to and enhances soundstage solidity. If good bass underpins your system and instruments appear rooted in space, they sound that bit more 'real' through the Armonico cables. They work best as a pair under these circumstances, the focus of the Armonico interconnects blending well with the potentially rich-sounding loudspeaker cables. There's a sense of performers being more in the room with the listener, and this seemed especially powerful in chamber music. That most intimate of musical performances seemed a little more intimate here. It also gave a wonderful rendition of musical flow as if being bathed in the music rather than just have it playing in a corner.



Where the cable has its limits is it's not one for people looking for a cable with 'bite' or 'snap'; it's a cable that emphasises the harmonic structure of music, rather than its leading or trailing edges.

This aspect above all others of the Armonico cable perhaps best defines its use. Used with too like-minded components could lead to a beautiful but almost ponderous sound; used with products antagonistic to the Armonico sound and the polished edges could smooth off the reasons you chose the equipment in the first place. The Goldilocks position places everything in dynamic balance and the system just sings a siren's song. I'm thinking Audio Research Reference products in particular would likely do wonders with the Fono Acustica designs.

If your system is in balance, is good enough, is broadly in line with the aims of Armonico and is in need of a spot of harmonic order, the Fono Acustica is a worthy addition to the cable collection. +

AS TESTED:

Prices:

Fono Acustica Armonico phono-phono interconnect €5,000/1m pair
Additional 0.5m €950 each
Fono Acustica Armonico Speaker Cables €13,500/2m quartet
Additional 0.5m €3500 each

Manufacturer: Fono Acustica

URL: www.fono-acustica.com

Email: info@fono-acustica.com

UK distributor to be announced

music matters

By Alan Sircom

In returning to the topic in hand, I think it's time to restate the aims of this investigation. Audio reviewers can be considered high-end enablers, flitting from great product to great product. And audiophiles are often imbued with remarkable optimism; who cares that the last 11 upgrades to your system didn't really improve the system that much, the twelfth will hit the spot. Or maybe 13 is really a lucky number. It's tempting then to think that the next purchase or technological innovation can extract our system from bad sound.

Trouble is, most times... it won't.

So let's restate those aims. Your system is very likely good enough to deliver an excellent performance. By ensuring the equipment interacts with the room properly, rather than change components in the system, you stand a better chance to realise that performance. If you want to upgrade components, go for it, but make sure you discover just how good those existing components really are first. This has a two-fold benefit; it will make your system sound good enough to allow you to step off the endless cycle of buyer's remorse box swapping, and the tools used to make your system sound good apply to this system, and the next, and the next.

“Audiophiles are often imbued with remarkable optimism; who cares that the last 11 upgrades to your system didn't really improve the system that much, the twelfth will hit the spot. Or maybe 13 is really a lucky number”

There are two equally important sides to this, in my opinion. The first is dealing with the room acoustics, ensuring that the room provides a neutral platform for playing your music. There is an objective side to this (attempting to create a room that delivers the best possible measured response) and a subjective side (creating a room that might be more 'live' than the optimum, but also more comfortable to the listener), although people trying to recreate a studio in the home often overlook the subjective side. On the other hand, ad hoc room 'treatment' (such as bookshelves as diffraction or rugs for diffusion) found in purely subjective installations is often next to pointless. Some balance is in order.

The other side is installation. It's easy to underplay the importance of the install, especially when it comes to

loudspeakers and the user manual. The manual often gives recommendations as to placement of the loudspeakers. While this is a good starting place, it is just the start. Minute adjustment of the loudspeakers, sympathetic to the room, known reference musical benchmarks and the position of the listener can make a big difference to the sound.

Two events conspired to show just how vital is this relatively neglected side of the process. First was a visit by John Hunter of Sumiko on a whistle-stop tour of the UK and to deliver a REL sub or two for upcoming reviews. This led to a stripped-down version of Sumiko's 'Master Set' installation methodology. Master Set works to 'fix' the sound of one speaker in the room, then adjust the other loudspeaker to ensure equal sound pressure in both sides of the room. In my room, this included a back-tilt to the speakers to make them more time-aligned. The improvement – having spent the better part of half a working day minutely adjusting the system – was quite remarkable. It wasn't like making a system sound more expensive, it was about making it sound better, especially when it comes to stereo and perfectly centred vocals.

The next was taking delivery of Jim Smith's three-DVD Get Better Sound set, the accompanying video of the book. The process is very different (think a tight grid and voicing the room) and will be the subject of a later review, but the goal is the same – a better sound from the same system (Smith also makes the very smart idea of creating your own road map to building a better system, rather than grasping randomly in the hope of stumbling upon something better, but more on that later).

Of course, the combination of good room acoustic treatment and good installation is the gold standard. But, thanks to that Master Set, it made me discover there's more to be had from a system than even I expected! +

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record reviews

How To Read Them

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

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:

- DD** – Dennis D Davis
- ML** – Mark Lehman
- MP** – Mark Prendergast
- AQ** – Andrew Quint

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Cassandra Wilson

Blue Light 'Til Dawn

Pure Pleasure/Blue Note BST81357

This is Wilson's 1993 debut on the Blue Note label and it was her leap out of the New York progressive jazz scene into cross-over territory, mixing in jazz, blues and pop standards backed by a 15 piece top notch band. Wilson is the heir to Abbey Lincoln and Betty Carter and those qualities show through, but here she blends in a more contemporary pop sensitivity remarkably well, to create an outstanding record that can stand beside anything she has done since. Her two Robert Johnson covers are outstanding and the tune Blue Light became a deserved hit. Her Van Morrison cover is as sweet as Tupelo Honey. Like Lincoln and Carter, Wilson is willing to go out on a ledge in a way few jazz singers can or will but is blessed with a remarkable vocal gift that is just as distinctive as her forbears but at the same time perhaps more refined. She deserves as much attention as any jazz vocalist performing today, and this LP should introduce her to a new audiophile oriented market. Ron McMaster at Capitol Studios remastered the LP in house. This is one of the best McMaster remasters I have heard. His initials are in the deadwax of much EMI owned product remastered in the past couple decades, such as the Mosaic Blue Note reissues, but this effort stands out. This is an exceptional sounding LP and highly recommended. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Ella Fitzgerald & Louis Armstrong

Ella And Louis

Analogue Productions/Verve MGV-4003

Louis and Ella team up here to sing duets backed by Oscar Peterson, Herb Ellis, Ray Brown and Buddy Rich. There are certainly better Armstrong albums, and better Ella albums. The 1956 studio recording teams the superstars up to perform slow and tastefully performed ballads. No barns are burned down--no fires are ignited. But no matter how many times you listen to this music, it's hard to imagine tiring of the amazing performances turned in by these 7 superstars. Ella and Louis teamed up for two later albums (Again, and Porgy and Bess). It's a testament to the enduring effect this music has that to count the number of times it has been reissued. One of the reasons that this music endures so well is that the sessions were recorded with amazing fidelity. The original Verve LP has long been sought after as an audiophile treat, presenting Ella and Louis live in the listening room of music lovers with even modest playback systems, yet rewarding each improvement with better sound. This new reissue by Analogue Productions was mastered at Sterling Sound and pressed on two slabs of 45-RPM vinyl at the new Quality Records pressing plant. It is superb in every way. Do not miss out on this blockbuster of a "charming" and "tasteful" record! **DD**

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Joe Lovano

Folk Art

Pure Pleasure/Blue Note BST91528

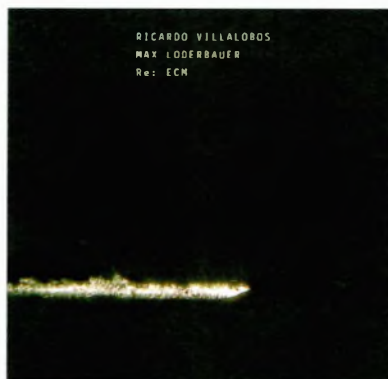


Joe Lovano has one of the most celebrated tenor players of the last couple decades, winning Grammy's and jazz polls year after year. So it came as a delightful surprise to see his outstanding 2009 Blue Note release getting the audiophile vinyl treatment. Lovano plays here with his group Us Five, consisting of hot bassist Esperanza Spaulding, pianist James Weidman (who earned his chops playing with Abbey Lincoln) and the two drummers Otis Brown III and Francisco Mela. This is restless, progressive music and the musicians play at a remarkable level. In other words, contemporary jazz doesn't really get much better than this. I've always hoped that one day Lovano's releases would be see the light of vinyl, as his high pitched tone plays into the worst of digital sound at times. And to make things better, the tapes for this session are all analogue. Sean Magee remastered the tapes for LP at Abbey Road Studios and they are a vast improvement over the CD original. The CD sound leaves much to be desired, with a somewhat two dimensional perspective, and the horn tone a bit harsh. With the LP the tone and stage depth are vastly improved. This is aided in part by the two-disc treatment, which uses side four to toss in an unreleased cut. **Bravo! DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



**Ricardo Villalobos/
Max Loderbauer**

Re:ECM

ECM 2211/12



We've all grown up with ECM, our Pat Metheny, Keith Jarrett and Jan Garbarek albums are sacred tabulae that prove beyond doubt that perfect sound is achievable. I put on these CD's with apprehension and was wonderfully surprised.

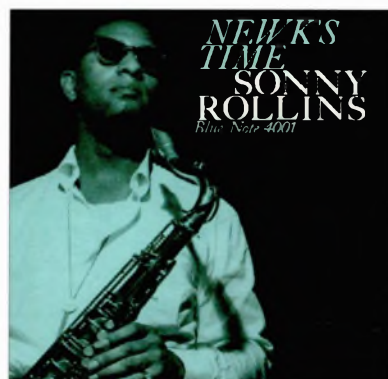
The sounds of such ECM giants as Miroslav Vitous, Paul Motian, John Abercrombie, Arvo Part and Paul Giger are looped, sampled, remixed and recycled. In case of heresy Manfred Eicher himself supervised the mastering in Munich in order to make "the optimum sound experience that made no compromises where sound is concerned!"

The beauty of this is where the duo isolate voices, choirs and instruments. A single harp, female voice, bell or drum can haunt you for ten minutes or more. Villalobos used to make long DJ sets with Arvo Part records in Berlin but this is no mere sampling or a chunk dropped into a drum mix. Its entire two discs were live mixed using a mixing board and a modular synthesizer which generated sound loops which generated electronic improvisation. It's an absolute triumph and deserves wide recognition. **Superb. MP**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Sonny Rollins

Newk's Time

Music Matters/Blue Note 84001



Sandwiched between the eponymous volumes 1 and 2 and the Village Vanguard live recordings, Newk's Time is a solid bop/blowing session, with backing by Wynton Kelly, Doug Watkins and Philly Joe Jones. This studio session was cut in 1957, the same year as the Vanguard live sessions (and Way Out West on Contemporary) and only a year after Tenor Madness and Saxophone Colossus. So this is Sonny at the peak of his powers, and while this Newk's Time may not quite reach the peak of some of these masterpieces it is prime Sonny Rollins and a welcome addition to the reissue program. If there is any question about how good this record is, listen to side 3, all of which is devoted to Sonny's duet with Jones on Surrey With The Fringe On Top—it's worth the price of admission on its own. Once again, Kevin Gray and Steve Hoffman have taken Rudy Van Gelder's recording and freshened it up, making it sound better than ever. Before these 45 RPM releases, the only way you could understand the sound of Sonny's horn was at a live concert. No more! And just listen to the bass on Blues For Philly! As always, Music Matters packages these two slabs of fabulous vinyl in a foldout jacket filled inside with Francis Wolff photo sessions. A very welcome addition to the Music Matters collection. **DD**

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Sandström: Nordic Sounds.

Swedish Radio Choir,
Peter Dijkstra

Channel Classics SA

Born in 1942, Swedish composer Sven-David Sandström first came to attention for his complex orchestral works. For 20 years, however, Sandström was a member of the Hågersten Motet Choir, near Stockholm. In that nurturing environment, the liner notes for this Channel Classics' SACD explain, he could "study the choral instrument and repertoire from the inside," and began a prolific production of choral music. A breakthrough composition was Agnus Dei, for 16-part choir, included on this recital of eight sacred a cappella works. After the first performance in 1981, audience members rushed the stage and grabbed the music from the stunned singers, so ecstatic was their reception of the piece.

Sandström is obviously a believer. Unlike Olivier Messiaen, however, his music is less an abstract consideration of the Holy Trinity's wonders than a joyous act of creative expression, a spiritual elevation of the performers and audience. Sandström, we are told, is "convinced that musical renewal is central for the survival of the Church." Sandström's musical syntax is richly varied, at once highly innovative and immediately engaging. It's tonally based but there are

frequent excursions into harmonically ambiguous territory. References to earlier choral music abound, both implied and explicit. (Sandström has written his own version of Messiah, setting the same libretto as Handel used more than 275 years previously, and his allegiance to the spirit of J.S. Bach pervades his output.) Hear my prayer, O Lord begins with Henry Purcell's unfinished work for eight-part chorus and continues seamlessly into Sandström's own material, maintaining the exact mood of the earlier composition, then progressing to a dissonant climax before receding to a quiet C major chord. Likewise, Es ist genug uses a text from a Buxtehude cantata, and quotes the music of that Baroque composer. Sandström employs minimalist techniques as well—the delightful Lobet den Herrn sounds at first as if the disc is skipping—and "non-language sounds" appear in Laudamus Te. The latter piece also manifests another distinctive feature of the composer's style, the subtle modulation of tempo and dynamics over long time-frames.

The Swedish Radio Choir is a 32-person professional ensemble whose identification with the music never flags. This is very demanding

music and the level of vocal virtuosity that Peter Dijkstra elicits from the singers, collectively, is breathtaking. The conductor identifies a unique choral sonority which "thanks to enormous exactness in the intonation, is highly transparent and sonorous"—this is the "Nordic Sound" of the disc's title.

The recording, engineered by the redoubtable Jared Sacks with producer Hein Dekker, captures all the subtlety and affective power of Sandström's music. Thirty-two choristers singing full-out can be loud, and too many choral recordings seem to saturate the medium, even high-resolution ones, homogenising the ensemble sonority into something not recognisable as a collection of unique human voices. Here, cogency is maintained at all dynamic levels. Sibilants are not distracting, a tribute to both vocal and recording technique. The singers are tangibly present, yet they exist in a relaxed and expansive acoustic (actually a Stockholm radio studio). **AQ**

Further Listening:

Lauridsen: Lux Aeterna (SACD);
Pärt: Triodion (SACD)

RECORDING

MUSIC





Brahms: Piano works

Murray Perahia

Sony



Murray Perahia is associated with lucid, penetrating performances of Bach and Mozart. He brings the same clarity and intelligence to Brahms. The disc opens with the Handel Variations, Op.34, among the finest of the composer's half-dozen theme-and-variation works. Perahia understands that Brahms isn't merely out to cleverly decorate a melody, à la Carnival of Venice, but rather to reveal the expressive potential of his source theme through a process of organic development. The final fugue is especially impressive. Next up are fluent but carefully considered readings of the Two Rhapsodies, Op.79. Here, as throughout the program, Perahia's playing is never ponderous: his touch is exactly right—weightier than ideal for Schumann, less so than would be appropriate for Rachmaninoff. Perahia concludes with deeply moving renderings of autumnal Brahms, the ten pieces that make up Opp. 118 and 119.

Producer Andreas Neubronner oversees a beautiful piano recording originating from the Funkhaus Berlin. It's close-up and impactful, revealing of all the nuances of Perahia's musicianship, but there's air and an excellent sense of the mass of the artist's Steinway. **AQ**
Further Listening: Bach: Partitas (Perahia); Brahms: Piano Works (Katchen)

RECORDING
MUSIC



Beethoven: Piano Concertos 4 and 5

Yevgeny Sudbin, piano; Minnesota Orchestra, Osmo Vanska

BIS



Yevgeny Sudbin has graced us with thoughtful, sunny readings of the popular Emperor Concerto and the less-often-heard Fourth. He has a pleasant tone, and a transparent, refined approach with more charm and fleetness than force or fire. The orchestra matches him throughout—textures are never dense or overbearing, and phrases are clean and precise. The Fourth's brooding slow movement should begin more threateningly, and its slack shaping barely drags itself into the rondo finale, though that's full of delightful interplay. The whole orchestra seems caught up in the joy of the Fifth; even the lower strings sound excited playing the mundane accompaniment. And somehow, Sudbin's trills sound like two aspects of the same note rather than two alternating notes. The gaiety of the piece is contagious; the scales are brilliant, without a hint of pedantry. Our pianist's phrasing isn't the most searching, his tone the most colorful, or his technique thunderous, but his many strengths make up for it. The SACD sound is clear and vibrant, and the disc sounds good on standard CD players also. **SE**

Further Listening: Tchaikovsky and Medtner: First Piano Concertos (Sudbin/BIS)

RECORDING
MUSIC



España

London Symphony, Argenta

ORG

Falla: Three Cornered Hat

Suisse Romande, Ansermet

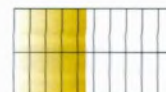
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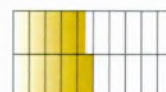
Two famous early stereos of "Spanish" showpieces get the deluxe two-disc, 45rpm treatment from ORG. The performances are thrilling, and the pieces full of grand tunes, catchy dance rhythms, and rousing orchestral display. Comparison of the ORG reissues with the original Londons reveals the advantages of careful re-mastering and 45rpm encoding on dead-quiet surfaces. ORG's España has more transparency and nuances (as on the liquid harp arpeggios, sharply articulated percussion, and resounding string pizzicatos in the Chabrier), greater dynamic contrasts, and a wider, airier soundstage. Intense climactic passages are more cleanly resolved, too. Improvements are more subtle in The Three Cornered Hat (here complete) because this is such a fabulous recording to begin with. Orchestra, chorus, and soloist are spread out across a wide arc before the listener. ORG offers a tad more spaciousness and bloom, and details are sharper against the jet-black background of its superior vinyl. **ML**

Further Listening: Gladiator (ORG); Suite Española (ORG)

RECORDING
MUSIC



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Dadavistic Orchestra 150g

Dokument .02

Dust Science Recordings DUSTV026

Ever since the early 1990s there has been a school of Ambient music which intertwines environmental sound with the urban texture of electronic and acoustic instruments.

Ambient House and its derivatives may have hi-jacked the concept but in serious Art terms the birth of Sound Art as a viable medium and the installations of artists like Agostino De Scipio and Michael J. Schumacher have given the genre a tremendous boost internationally. Products of Ambient Techno, The Black Dog and The Psychick Warriors of Gaia are two English collectives who work under the banner of Dadavistic Orchestra and take the idea to new limits.

The Black Dog's Music For Real Airports of 2010 was a stunning new beginning for 'sound music' but here is the real meat; six tracks whose titles like 'Deep Old Mu' and 'Petrichore' seem to hark back to the melting music days of 1970s Tangerine Dream. But for the most part these lengthy excursions land you in an industrial landscape of discreet sounds and vibrations. In fact so extreme are the frequency modulations from very high to lowly rumbling that you will need the best of systems to appreciate of breadth of sound on display. Also available on triple red vinyl if you so prefer. **MP**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Donovan

Sunshine Superman

EMI Special 50999-029095-2-3

Because Donovan's record deals were split between Pye in the UK and Epic in the US 'Sunshine Superman' was released in the US in July 1966 but only released in the UK a year later in an entirely different version. At last EMI have rectified the situation by giving us a fabulous fold-out extravaganza with both original US Stereo version and UK Mono version presented separately. Moreover the compilers have added successive CD updates from both sides of the Atlantic to make a definitive package.

Musically the release celebrates the richness of music circa 1965/1966 as Donovan embraces the full effects of psychedelia. Finishing the album in Columbia's Hollywood studio in April 1966 with Shawn Phillips on sitar songs like 'Season Of The Witch', 'Celeste' and 'Guinevere' just reek of incense. Elsewhere Donovan combines Celtic and British mythology, jazz, classical, Eastern and other nuances into a truly original sound. No wonder the Beatles and Dylan were in awe of his talents whilst he was literally light years ahead of The Rolling Stones. Whatever fans may think the UK Mono version of the album is a superior beast sonically, the songs punchier in delivery, the sonic image more precise in reproduction.

MP

RECORDING
MUSIC



The Jimi Hendrix Experience

Hendrix In The West

Sony Legacy

Hendrix In The West has always been the fan's favourite Jimi Hendrix Experience live album. Out of print in the USA since 1974 and deleted in Europe for over twenty years its return to the record racks is simply due to overwhelming customer demand.

Though a Top 10 UK album at the time, many critics felt it was just another cash-in job. Yet the true Hendrix aficionado has always held it dear to his or her bosom. Why? Because the reception and sound on 'Little Wing' is just sublime, expanding the feel achieved on Axis: Bold As Love by light years.

And then there's the truly Hi-Fidelity version of 'Red House', the San Diego Sports Arena collectively dropping their jaws and falling out of their seats as Hendrix, the magician from Jupiter plays the fattest, the most majestic and heaviest guitar riff ever heard half way through a Fender maelstrom of awesome blues power and majesty. So definitive are these 13 minutes that the hairs will stand up proud on the back of your neck. And as Mitch Mitchell and Hendrix jazz the number to a close you really know you are in the presence of genius. Incredible. **MP**

RECORDING
MUSIC





Sandy Denny
**The North Star Grassman
 And The Ravens**
 Universal/Island

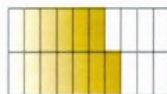


Though she had soared to fame with Fairport Convention, Sandy Denny's talent went way beyond folk-rock. It was not for nothing that Robert Plant and Jimmy Page had her on 1971's Led Zeppelin IV and it was proof of her pedigree that she was constantly voted Britain's best female vocalist.

After experimenting with her own band Fotheringay, Denny settled down in Sound Techniques with producer Richard Thompson and engineer John Wood. Not for Sandy was the clod-hopping four/four sound of Steeleye Span but a more sophisticated arrangement where words and music undulated and flowed. Harry Robinson's strings are wonderful here especially on the majestic 'Next Time Around', the album's stand-out track.

Whilst the Irish ballad (and Jimmy Page favourite) 'Blackwaterside' is given a hearty Denny/Fairport treatment this 2CD edition allows us to hear Denny acapella and acoustic. On the second disc she sings the same song like an Irish colleen and delivers a fascinating traditional version of another Irish song 'The Lowlands Of Holland'. Though Thompson's production can be a bit boxy here and there such epics as 'The Sea Captain' allow Denny to stretch out and be at her most effective. **MP**

RECORDING
 MUSIC



A King Crimson ProjekT 2009
Jakszyk, Fripp & Collins
A Scarcity Of Miracles
 DGM/Panegyric KCLP21

For those who feel that Robert Fripp's excursions into the avant-garde have left many behind, this beautiful new Crimson ProjekT is mindful of 1986's *Gone To Earth* where David Sylvian literally pulled Fripp into late 20th Century jazz.

Anyone interested in cool mellifluous music will be no stranger to Jakko Jakszyk, a songwriter who has worked with artists as diverse as Van Der Graaf Generator, Whitney Houston, Danny Thompson and Frank Zappa. Those of you who favour the jazzy soft grooves of *In The Wake Of Poseidon* over the grind of *Larks Tongues In Aspic* will also be warmed by the soprano sax and flute of Crimso Mel Collins.

Scarcity presents itself as a song project with wonderful instrumentalities. Fripp's playing is incredible, restrained but with a wonderful crystalline quality. Tony Levin doesn't disappoint either on bass and chapman stick. The gatefold sleeved album (with stunning P.J. Crook artwork) is an audiophile's dream, a veritable cinerama of sound. As a label Panegyric have constantly punched above their weight as in this production which is simultaneously available as CD/DVD-A with a 5.1 surround sound mix and high definition 24/96 stereo. **MP**

RECORDING
 MUSIC



The Durutti Column
Vini Reilly
 Kooky/Kookydisc 30/1 & 2



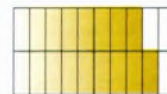
Having acquired an Akai sampler, Vini Reilly finished his 14th *Factory* album in just 20 days in the Summer of 1988. Not only did it re-establish The Durutti Column legend it led to international recognition as the majestic 'Requiem Again' was used by Tom Cruise to soundtrack his feature *Jerry Maguire* and 'Otis' became the theme for a famous American Pacific Bell advert.

Outside this extraordinary approach to vocalization the album showcased Reilly's highly accomplished guitar technique. All his favourite instruments are to the fore here - his vintage Les Paul cranking out the riffs, beautiful filigree work courtesy his black Fender Stratocaster and on 'Homage To Catalonea' he plays a Spanish guitar, a real Cordoban antique originally made for Segovia. A definitive 1989 statement here Reilly travels from

Ambient texture all the way to out and out rock and roll on the valedictory finale, 'My Country'.

Ably abetted by drummer Bruce Mitchell, John Metcalfe on viola and keyboardist Andy Connell the soundscreen is highly textured with much variety both in tone and colour. This new remastered version comes with a nine-track bonus disc of studio out-takes (all unheard up until now). Thoroughly worth investigating. **MP**

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 MUSIC



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Pink Floyd – The Dark Side Of The Moon

every home should have one

By Mark Prendergast

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FORTY-FIVE YEARS PINK FLOYD HAVE OPENED THEIR VAULTS TO REVEAL THE ACTUAL WORK THAT WENT INTO RECORDING WHAT HAS BECOME THE DEFINING ALBUM OF THE ROCK ERA.

The Dark Side Of The Moon. Released on the 27th March 1973 the album went on to become the bible of the Progressive Rock generation. Initially critics were not too impressed by an album chock full of sound effects and doom-laden lyrics. Yet most couldn't be less than impressed by the sheer skill of the musicianship and the completeness of the conception. To date, it has sold 45 million copies worldwide.

Compared to the effect of the record on the public consciousness, its recording in 1972 couldn't have been more down to earth. Dark Side was recorded over 38 days at Abbey Road around European, Japanese and American tours. Two 16-track decks were used, one for basic tracks the other for effects. The star of the show was the EMS Synthi aka the VCS 3 Synthesizer, a classic English device which featured on BBC's Dr. Who soundtrack. Its burbling sequencer defined the most outrageous track on the album 'On The Run' (a eulogy to death by plane crash praised by Philip Glass for its Minimalist quality). Gilmour's guitar is double-tracked throughout and swathed in distortion and phasing. On 'Any Colour You Like' he gets his Strat to sound like Jimi Hendrix circa Rainbow Bridge because of the use of a Uni-Vibe pedal. The spaced-out ethereal sound often heard on the record is because Gilmour's guitar is also going through the revolving speaker cone of Wright's Hammond Organ. For added shimmer Wright played all his organs and keyboards with the reverb and treble settings on full. Tape-loops abound on the album, the running steps, clocks and cash registers all recorded by engineer Alan Parsons. Also vari-speed tape dominates 'Us & Them'.

James Guthrie, who oversaw the entire SACD/DSD process in Lake Tahoe for the stellar 2003 'stained glass window' edition has worked on the entire catalogue to bring it up to 21st Century standards using both analogue equipment and new advanced digital remastering techniques. So EMI are making the entire catalogue of 14 remastered albums in what they term a Discovery boxed set and then individually. The Experience series kicks off with Dark Side and what an impressive fold-out digipak it is. Alongside a new Storm Thorgerson 16-page booklet, the newly remastered Dark Side comes with a live rendition of the album from Wembley's Empire Pool in Nov 1974. Much more vivid than any bootleg I've



heard the rendition brings out a bluesier vein to Gilmour's guitar and is unapologetic in its jazz improvisations especially around Rick Wright's piano and keyboards. I would go so far to say that Live Dark Side is a completely different beast than its studio predecessor.

And now we get to Immersion an expensive big box full of stuff you don't need but the meat of the box is Parsons' 1972 mix which has no 'Speak To Me' and contains a 'Brain Damage' so fundamentally scary that you wonder what was going through the band's collective mind as they recorded it. Still Immersion costs a lot of money and is only for the hard core fan. For me Dark Side Of The Moon-The Experience Edition is the one to keep. +

THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON (Discovery/Experience/Immersion CD/2CD/BOX)

PINK FLOYD

Recorded: June 1972-January 1973

Released: March 1973

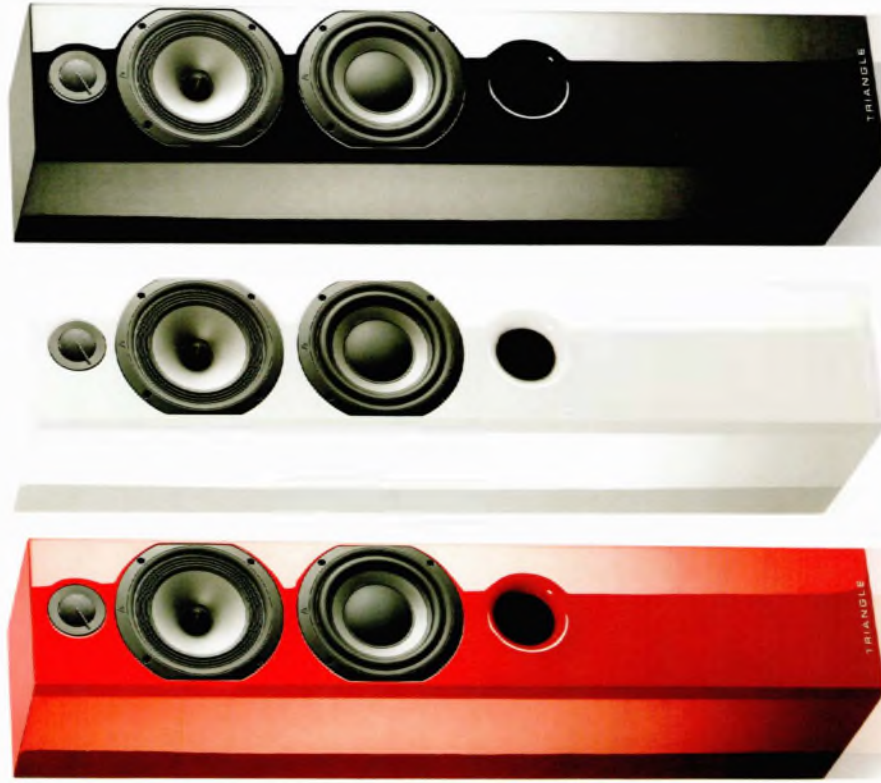
Recorded at: Abbey Road Studios

Producer: Pink Floyd

Track listing

1. Speak To Me (Mason) 1:30
2. Breathe (Waters, Gilmour, Wright) 2:43
3. On The Run (Gilmour, Waters) 3:30
4. Time (Mason, Waters, Wright, Gilmour) 6:53
5. The Great Gig In The Sky (Wright, Torry) 4:15
6. Money (Waters) 6:30
7. Us And Them (Waters, Wright) 7:51
8. Any Colour You Like (Gilmour, Mason, Wright) 3:24
9. Brain Damage (Waters) 3:50
10. Eclipse (Waters) 1:45

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