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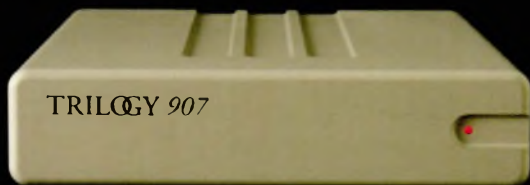


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Welcome to the last issue of 2011, and quite frankly we're pretty pleased to see the back of this year. Let's hope 2012 will be bigger and better all round. In fact, 2011 has been an outstanding year for great products from beginning to end. A number of people in every industry – including the audio industry – are really pulling together to make the best environment for people to buy fine products at a wide range of prices. Now, all we need are those buyers...

The fascinating part of all this is just how much energy is going into driving the audio business today. The best seem to be establishing a framework for the future; one that's very different from how hi-fi has been. Some of these new concepts will fail, of course, but many trying now will redefine the way we listen to music in the future.

We are changing too. We've taken on a new staff member and will be publishing 10 issues in 2012. We have even annexed a larger office, which will include a dedicated listening room that we will be building early next year.

Hi-fi is now a very broad church, covering everything from exciting new

developments in a very old format, to the major changes in post-CD technologies, to the huge rise in sales of headphones. Just since the last issue, we've seen a way to stream SACD-grade data to DACs and the first £1,000 earphone set. More will follow, and although the affairs of the Beats by Dr Dre set probably doesn't immediately impose on your day to day music listening, there has never been a time when people spent so much money on getting the best sound from their headphones. Maybe this is all fashion-led, but maybe some of those people buying £300 headphones today will be interested in home audio tomorrow. Time will tell.

You might notice a complete absence of classical reviews in this issue. Don't worry, we aren't dropping classical music or Richard S Foster, our classical reviewer. However, this year Richard has been particularly unlucky with that great plague of any reviewer; the blocked Eustachian tube. He's well on the road to recovery now, but we are going to wait until he's back to full hearing health before strapping him to his SACD player.

We know how important Richard's reviews are to the magazine, so we'll hope you'll understand and wish him a speedy recovery.

Alan Sircom
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incoming!

The (not so) Fantastic Four

After experimenting with computer audio last year (I settled on a laptop, an Arcam rDAC and a lot of FLAC files... it's good, but I still prefer my old CD player) my interest in audio proper was briefly piqued. I say 'briefly' because there seems to be several things fundamentally wrong with hi-fi that I'm sure weren't there a decade or so ago when last I dragged my wife through a hi-fi store.

I think there are four key problems today. The first is price – I know things in general are more expensive these days, but there's just no such thing as 'cheap' in hi-fi today. I guess this is probably the wrong magazine to discuss such things, given everyone who reads Hi-Fi+ must be a multi-millionaire to keep up, but when I started out, there was affordable equipment and a clear upgrade path to better and more expensive gear and then on to the stuff that costs as much as a car. Occasionally there was the equipment made for the speedboat set, but it was a rare find. Now, it seems the millionaires are more than catered for, but heaven help those of us with real-world salaries trying to buy our next hi-fi component. Did the recession miss the music world?

This brings me to my second point. I might be wrong, but these more expensive devices look less well made than the equipment I bought a quarter of a century ago. If I'm paying more, I want more, not less, and I wonder how many well-respected products of today will still be functioning in 2026? Judging by the crop of hi-fi gear I saw in my brief sojourn, not many.

Of course, you'd never notice this from reviews today. Everything, it seems, is more wonderful than everything else now. I read a number of reviews from several magazines, and went to a hi-fi shop for a demonstration, imagining I'd end up hearing something close to perfection, where in fact it sounded a lot worse than the equipment I have at home. Aside from adding computers to the line-up, have things really improved over the last 10, 20 or even 50 years?

But perhaps the most depressing part of all this was the dealers themselves. Surly, unhelpful staff, tired and dated premises, equipment claimed to be on demonstration that wasn't run in (or even in stock), just an overall lack of care and interest, either in the premises or the customer. The prices have rocketed up enough that they are trying to sell me something that cost as much as my BMW, but when I bought my BMW, I was met by enthusiastic, informative and well-groomed professional sales people who treated me like a valued customer even before I was a customer. The showroom was clean and bright and modern and the demonstrator car was spotless and everything made me want to buy from them and keep doing so. Whereas the hi-fi dealers I visited made me want to buy online. Which is exactly what I did.

Terry Smith, via email

You raise some extremely salient – and I have to admit, uncomfortable – points about the current state of the audio art. Prices have increased considerably in recent years (although many of the companies that made good value equipment in the past still make good value equipment today). Some of this is down to the economies of scale in audio 20 years ago not applying to the same extent today, and some is because whole sections of the audio market have undergone radical change, and not necessarily for the better.

I'm not convinced that products today are less well made than their predecessors. There does seem to be a convergence in the sound of audio today, with the more 'out there' devices being slowly replaced by more mainstream-sounding products, but many of today's designs are exceptionally well made, in many cases with closer tolerances than anyone could muster a few years ago. This poses a slight problem with reviews; if products are converging to a common sound, and increasingly well made, good reviews of products are inevitable. It also means that as products converge to a standard level of 'good', those even slightly better can end up receiving hyperbole in place of reviews. Sadly, some of this comes from a hypercritical reading of reviews on an international stage, where commenting that the feet are the wrong shade of silver can end up killing off an excellent product.

As to the stores, I think you might be tarring many with the same brush. There are professional and dedicated salespeople in audio, working in clean, bright and modern hi-fi retail premises. But, you are also spot-on; there are dealers who need to bring their image into the 21st Century and are failing to do so – Ed.

Room Acoustics – no thanks!

I thoroughly enjoyed your investigation into cables, power and equipment supports (although I felt you were reinventing the wheel – all of this had already been very well covered by your predecessor). However, I am not sure where you are going with your on-again, off-again room acoustics features. What I do know is I won't be going there with you.

Room treatment is fine in commercial studios, where you need to deliver a sound that's suitable for the lowest common denominator, but I've found room acoustics treatment undermines the sound of good quality hi-fi. Audiophiles spend a great deal of time and money making our systems as perfect as possible, and they are designed to work in domestic rooms, not studios. By trying to make our rooms sound like a studio, the differences between mediocre sound and good sound are minimized. It's why the audio nay-sayers often have mid-fi systems with lots of room treatment and don't see why they need anything better.

I've rarely heard a system in a treated room that sounds good.

Al DeMarco, via email

I think you might be being a touch harsh on room treatment. Those who try turning their room into an anechoic chamber can overuse it, but room treatment can be useful in reducing the interactions of the room boundaries on the sound itself. We were natural acousticians, especially when an evening's entertainment consisted of gathering round the piano, but as we learned to 'chuck out that chintz', we also tended to make rooms with lots of hard, reflective surfaces that are terrible environments for trying to replicate the sound of unamplified instruments in a live, acoustic space.

That being said, it can be tough to balance the demands of heavy acoustic treatment with those of people who find such an environment too dead to play music. Some gentle acoustic treatment can transform the sound of your system, if it is in a room that provides too much bass and too many reflections, but too much can squash the life out of the same system. For my own investigations on this, I am struggling to find the balance between good ol' 'book learnin', measurement and what the ear is most comfortable with – Ed.

Do transports still matter?

In the past, it seemed important to concentrate on a high-quality CD transport if you were going to get the best out of a DAC. Now it seems people think the CD transport is almost unimportant. What's changed?

Ari Cohen, via email

What's changed is the DAC... and attitudes toward audio in general. In recent years, developments in technologies like Sample Rate Correction and reclocking the data stream inside the DAC instead of relying on the output of the CD transport has lessened the demands placed on front ends in general. However, a shift to buying blind online, coupled with a downturn in sales of CD systems in general, has tended to downplay the importance of the CD transport. However, those who still make a CD transport (such as dCS, Esoteric and Wadia) tend to make exceptionally good ones, for an appreciative – albeit often well-heeled – market – Ed.

“Audiophiles spend a great deal of time and money making our systems as perfect as possible, and they are designed to work in domestic rooms, not studios.”

Better than iTunes?

I've started down the whole computer audio venture recently, in part because my wife recently bought me a 21.5" iMac as a 50th birthday present. It's running the latest version of OS X and iTunes and I control it through Remote from my iPad (my 49th birthday present... my wife seems determined to turn me into a Mac fanatic) and going into a HRT Streamer II+ with an Audioquest Forest USB cable and Sidewinder interconnects. I rip all my discs into AIFF, using iTunes for everything, and I store all my music on a networked hard drive, which I hope soon to share around the house, as funds – and birthdays – permit.

Two issues arise. First, I'd like to move the computer into another room and use something without a display in the main room, but I'd still like to use my DAC in that system – can I use Apple TV or Airport Express, or do I end up with a MacMini? Second, I'd like to experiment with some of these 'better than' iTunes options, but which one should I go for? I'm thinking Pure Music or Amarra. However, I've also read these programs are nothing more than hot air and marketing hype. Do they really make a difference?

Nicholas McIlvoy, via email

Apple's Airport Express has a USB port designed strictly for printers. Apple TV has a micro-USB port designed for service and diagnostics. It's possible to hack the latest ATV to free up its USB port for other uses,

or use an HDMI-USB connector, but the tried and trusted route here is to use a MacMini, run 'headless' via your iPad's Remote controller.

As to the aftermarket programs, why don't you try them for yourself? Both PM and Amarra have time-limited evaluation versions available, replacement players like Audirvana and Decibel are available either for free, or have evaluation versions that are either time limited or stripped of some options, and there's always BitPerfect, which is a low-cost pay-for app from the Apple App Store. My advice would be to download and try BitPerfect; its interface is minimal so there's not much to mess around with and if you don't like it or can't hear a difference, you've only lost a few quid. On the other hand, if you like it you get to keep it and if you really like what it does, it opens your world to other opportunities. Of the aftermarket packages out there at this time, many currently favour Pure Music, being the best balance of price and performance, but it's worth experimenting at home – **Ed**.

Setting the standards

There needs to be a series of standards in audio, and I find it increasingly unsettling that there are none. Hi-fi should be moving toward increasing high-fidelity and not these crazy side issues where valves and turntables still have a place. The distortions inherent to vinyl and valves should have no place in a hobby geared toward accuracy and fidelity.

Perhaps it's little wonder that people have stopped talking about 'hi-fi' and only talk about 'audio' these days. I find it crazy that someone suggesting the transparent compression of 256kbps AAC (especially with Variable Bit Rate) is dismissed for not sounding good enough, and yet people are more than prepared to put up with the shocking levels of tracking and tracing distortion, the poor signal/noise ratio and high background noise of vinyl. I abandoned LP in the 1980s with no regrets, and got almost 20 years out of CD before I moved everything onto my computer. I haven't bought a disc in years and can't see why anyone would want to do so now.

I used to suspect the lack of standards were due to people listening to amplified instruments, and having no frame of reference to how acoustic instruments really sound, but this doesn't hold water anymore, because even the classical enthusiasts I know still cling to their CDs and SACDs.

My feeling is there is some irresponsible journalism at play, here. Magazines support an 'anything goes' approach to hi-fi, afraid of saying definitively that distortion – even 'nice' distortion – is wrong for fear of upsetting readers and advertisers. Surely integrity comes first!

William Walker, via email

*While I am a great supporter of the move to computer audio, and have suggested a pragmatic approach to buying music today, I know many do not share my enthusiasm. There are also many who would disagree on fundamental grounds that vinyl and/or valves really point away from higher fidelity. I don't necessarily subscribe to an 'anything goes' approach, but I do have to reflect the interests of those who view fidelity as 'being faithful to the measurements', those who think it relates to 'being faithful to the music' or 'being faithful to what came out of the studio' or even 'being faithful to reproducing the sound of live, unamplified instruments in a natural acoustic space'. While these goals should all point to the same elements, in reality they often don't. Which is why vinyl and valves still sell well – **Ed***

Return of the Tweak?

In the late 1980s, I got seriously involved in the whole tweaking movement. I didn't just dabble with PWB Electret foils, I used them extensively. I green panned my CDs and stuck them in the freezer. Gradually though, the interest waned. It didn't seem to make as much of a difference anymore and I couldn't stand the looks I got from family and friends when they looked at my room filled with bits of foil.

Interestingly, I came to an abrupt halt with my hi-fi buying at about the same time. I spent the 1980s building my hi-fi system into something special, and it's hardly changed since. I wonder if others have had the same experience

David Gallagher, via email

*A very interesting question, David. I suspect you might be onto something here. I'm sure many people who get very into tweaking their system but who lose interest at a later date may also lose interest in audio proper. But perhaps the bigger question is did you stop playing as much music too? – **Ed**.*

“Perhaps it's little wonder that people have stopped talking about 'hi-fi' and only talk about 'audio' these days.”

news

This issue, most of the newest and latest products have already been seen at shows around the world. Here are the exceptions...

DSD to DAC via USB, says dCS. OK?

Cambridge digital experts dCS have announced a system whereby Direct Stream Digital files can be sent from a computer to a DAC via USB links. dCS has made the system open standard, so theoretically any DAC capable of accepting 24bit, 176.4kHz sampling rate files can be converted to accept the new datastream. However, the new standard does not convert DSD to PCM.

It works because the DSD data has a sampling rate 16 times smaller, but samples 64 times faster than PCM. As such, the sampling rate is 4x that of CD and akin to 24bit/176.4kHz. This means DSD can be effectively disguised as 24/176.4 PCM (which can be transferred along USB lines) and played back by a suitably modified decoder. The modification essentially allows the DAC to see through the disguised code and thereby preventing system-killing high-level wideband noise normally heard when trying to pass off DSD as PCM. The first such DAC to be converted is the dCS Debussy.

The system requires software that can pack the DSD data in its PCM disguise, and thus far Sonic Studio's Amarra and Channel D's Pure Music have signed up to the format (the two companies were involved at in the development stages) and J.River is reputed to be 'on board'.

We (Chris Thomas, Chris Connaker of the excellent *Computer Audiophile* blog site and Alan Sircom as the non-Chris element) were invited to an exclusive launch of the concept at Rhapsody Sound & Vision in Hilversum, by David Steven and Andy McHarg (below left) of dCS. Played through a MacBook Pro running Pure Music and OS X Snow Leopard into a dCS Debussy and U-Clock via AudioQuest Diamond USB into Spectral's DM-30SS preamp, DMA-260 stereo power amp, Avalon's Transcendent loudspeakers and MIT interconnects and speaker cables, playing a selection of DSD recordings by Bert van der Wolf of Turtle Records. The sound quality of this system was exceptionally good, and shows just what computer audio is capable of.

At the moment, however, the number of DSD recordings available on download is extremely limited, and there is no current provision (outside of the studio, or finding exactly the right version of early PlayStation 3) for someone to rip SACDs to a computer. However, it is hoped that if more audio companies adopt dCS's open standard disguised DSD format, then more record companies will release their SACD files out to internet download sites.

www.dcsLtd.co.uk



AKG K3003 Earphones

AKG's luxurious new £1,000 K3003 earphones are the first true three-way in ear design. It features a main dynamic driver for the bass-mid frequencies, with a mid-treble unit and a high-frequency unit built on an armature just slightly off the acoustic centre of the bass unit. This not only provides useful natural phase and time-alignment, but gives the earphone a frequency range of approximately 20Hz-22kHz with only a fraction of a decibel deviation from ruler flat right across the board. The filter/protection for the driver housing is swappable to give bass or treble 'boosts'.

The ultra high-end stainless-steel earphones are completely handcrafted and each set is a 100% quality control test after final assembly. Each earphone has its own serial number. The box includes the three filters, and a carry case within a case; the billfold-sized leather travel pack magnetically holds the earphones in place, and allows the user to wrap the fabric-coated no-tangle cables around the outside of the case.

The earphones are sensitive enough to cope with the restricted output of European i-Products, although you'll never reach hearing-threatening levels.

We are hoping to get a set of K3003 soon for closer investigation, just as soon as we become fashionable enough. They have a world-class price tag, and could well have a world-class performance too.

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SHOW REPORT

Days Of Future Passed...

NAS 2011, Whittlebury Hall *By Roy Gregory*

This year's National Audio Show struck a distinctly different note. There was an unmistakable air of hiatus, of people pausing to catch their breath. Add to that the absence of major corporate exhibitors (no Linn, no Naim, no Meridian, no B&W and no KEF, to name a few), but perhaps more importantly Absolute Sounds, that last year occupied five large rooms, and represents some 30 high-profile, high-end brands, like Audio Research, Krell, Wilson, Sonus Faber and MartinLogan.

One thing that wasn't different was the number of speakers on the Most Interesting Exhibits list. With the possible exception of turntables, loudspeakers give greater scope for flights of fancy and individual expression than any other product, and there were plenty of examples to pick from here. Pride of place has to go to the Voigt Memory, £28k-£48k modern incarnations of the legendary Voigt corner horn, lovingly crafted from the original plans and fitted with Voxativ field-coil drivers and battery power supplies (of which more later).

Amongst more eccentric offerings from Item Audio (the huge Euclid prototype open baffle) and Origin Live (a horizontal cylinder, hung from a hoop reminiscent of an Achille Castiglioni standard lamp) there were plenty of more conventional offerings too. Ikon Audio were playing the new Audioplan Kantata (£2,995 plus £950 for the matching aluminium stand), a compact two-way replacement for the long-standing Kontrapunkt model. Employing a larger diameter, woven fiber cone and a 19mm soft-dome tweeter, in a heavily constructed cabinet with a resonance cancelling rod coupling the bass-mid motor to the rear baffle. The matching stand is carefully mechanically integrated and uses the company's "anti-spike" technology, the resulting flat interface making this especially easy to accommodate on wooden floors.

Elsewhere, the ProAc Response K6 was sounding well, driven by the limited edition, bright red and chrome Moon 750D CD player and 600i integrated amp. Lively and beautifully integrated, the system managed to cope surprisingly well with its prodigious low-frequency capabilities, even in the small room, suggesting excellent control from both the electronics and speakers. Down the corridor (and round several corners, as anybody familiar with Whittlebury Hall will tell you) Franco Serblin's Ktema Proscenium speaker was sounding sumptuously beautiful – as you'd expect from the man who brought you Sonus Faber. This £25K floorstander was driven by a mix of Audio Research CD 8, Ref 5 line-stage and Krell 402 stereo amp, all wired with Transparent cable, making for a pricey set-up, but one that definitely delivers on its promise. Reversing the signature curves of the Sonus Faber brand to create a concave cabinet certainly produces a different appearance, but the sound harks back to those original Sonus models.

Eminent Technology's LFT-8b made a welcome experience. This innovative planar-magnetic hybrid panel offers exceptional sound, with dynamic shading to match the sheer scale and enthusiasm of its musical presentation. But what was really interesting was the price; at £2.3K this represents an awful lot of music and engineering for your money. Of course, their performance wasn't

hurt by the choice of matching electronics; Acoustic Imagery. These beautifully crafted, half-width, milled aluminium boxes offer a compact, powerful and understated yet elegant electronic solution. The range consists of a two-box phono-stage, line-stage and mono-blocs, the latter offering 400 Watts/channel into a 4 Ohm load. These attractive little boxes are not cheap, (around £4K each for the front-ends components, £2.4K each for the mono-blocs) but they do deliver; based on Hypex Class D circuitry and switch-mode supplies they suffered none of the compressed dynamic range I've heard from Class D amps in the past.



► For a real blast from the past, one had to look no further than the Wilmslow Audio room. Perennial purveyors of kit speakers to tinkerers and the impoverished audiophile alike, they reappeared (in show terms at least) with a flat-pack offering based on the Audio Critic Rhythm King design. If the concept dates from a decade or two back in time, the design is most decidedly modern. Teaming a BMR driver with a large diameter dynamic bass unit, this marks a return to the once established tradition of magazine sponsored speaker projects, with design in this case from the practiced pen of Critic publisher Martin Colloms.

But perhaps the most intriguing debut for any speaker was the formal coming-out for Avalon's latest offspring, the neatly proportioned and easily accommodated IDEA, the smallest speaker in the range to share the trademark faceted cabinet design that makes the brand's products so instantly recognizable. This compact floorstander, which succeeds in looking smaller than it is, thanks to the sloped and shaved styling, is a two-way, three driver system, priced at £7.9K. What made it doubly intriguing in the context of this show was not just how well it was sounding in a small room, but the fact that it was in that small room at all – and on the end of a small and for Audiofreaks, distinctly off-beat system. Basic conrad-johnson electronics (ET3SE line-stage and Classic Sixty SE power amp) were doing the driving, via the expected Cardas cables and sat on finite-elemente Pagode stands, but the source was a Mac lap-top feeding an HRT Music Streamer II+. Thankfully, sonic standards haven't slipped and this was one room that gave the computer audio sceptics serious pause for thought.

In another sign of the high-end recognizing shifting listening priorities, long-time Stax importer Symmetry shared a room with close associates ElectroMod, devoting the entire space to headphones and their associated hardware. With

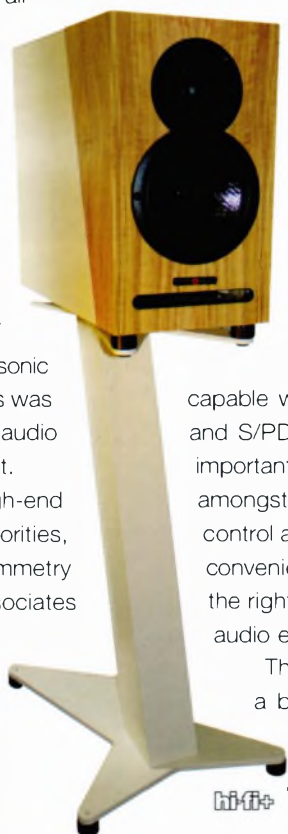
headsets a plenty and an almost baffling array of amplifiers and energisers to drive them, the items that stood out (besides the elegant Omega 'phone stands) were two headphone amplifiers from different ends of the price spectrum. Trilogy showed the 903 remotely controllable unit, a slim-line, pure Class A design with associated substantially, choke input power supply, all sunk into a solid aluminium billet and priced at £1,995. At the opposite end of things, the Schiit range offered three different takes on the headphone amp recipe: solid-state, hybrid and, in the middle, the all-tube, OTL Valhalla, priced at £329, which looks on paper to be the most interesting of all. Bizarre name; astonishingly sensible products. Also on show – a new model from Stax and the full range of HIFIman 'phones.

Reinforcing the general sense of nostalgia, vinyl was everywhere, both as a source and for sale, with more space than ever devoted to the stands selling new and re-issued records and more rooms than ever actually using (rather than just showing) turntables. Amongst the assembled masses, two products/presentations stood out – but for very different reasons. Systemdek's impressive newly machined chassis for the upcoming and 3D Signature version of its Reference deck: Simplified construction, including a slightly less substantial platter driven by an integral motor, but retaining the key components including a composite carbon-fibre/aluminium sub-chassis and the same dust spring, three-point suspension, promises to knock a slab of money off of the retail price of the Reference – as well as a slab off of its massive weight. With a target price of around £12.5K, this is definitely one to look out for. Meanwhile, the flagship model was making confident music with the help of an Audio Origami 12" tonearm and a Transfiguration Orpheus cartridge.

Elsewhere, Analogue Alchemy were showing a vast array of upgradeable, perspex and acrylic turntables which caused more than one double take. Not only are one or two of their models reminiscent of various ClearAudio tables – both visually and conceptually – but their double A logo is also more than a little reminiscent of the German company's brand identity. Pricing is nothing if not aggressive, with the Norah Stage III (each model is available in three ascending levels) offered at £3.5K. But given such malleable materials, a genuine interest in audio performance and access to a CNC shop, wouldn't it be easier (and more sensible) to come up with something a bit more original?

Server or computer sources seemed to be everywhere, with streamers and DACs crowding each other for attention. Perhaps the most interesting option on show was the ProJect Stream Box SE, an affordable (£699) and compact unit, it is 24/192 capable with wireless and Ethernet connectivity options, as well as USB and S/PDIF, so it covers what are fast becoming all the bases. But more importantly in terms of attracting a new audience for this technology from amongst a cautious audiophile community, its combination of remote control and a small but easily read display will quickly ram home the sheer convenience that's available from streamer based systems. It strikes just the right balance between capability and cost to encourage the reluctant audio enthusiast to final dip a toe in those scary computer audio waters.

The preponderance of file-based digital playback left CD players a bit thin on the ground but one unit that did catch the eye was





Raysonic's CD128S, offering a valve output stage, elegant top-loading chassis, a 24/192 DAC and comprehensive digital inputs and outputs as well as single-ended and fully balanced outputs – all for £1,850. With Raysonic's excellent reputation for delivering serious musical bang for (relatively) budget bucks, this looks like a unit that should be well worth investigating if you want to retain a disc replay capability and leave the door open for future file storage options without spending too much of your hard-earned cash.

If you couldn't move without finding yet another (normally Chinese sourced) tube amp under your feet, it was the solid-state amps on offer that were often the most interesting amplifiers on show. Marantz, exhibiting alongside Wilson-Benesch, showed an impressive bi-amped system featuring their SA15 S2 SACD player feeding a pair of PM15 S2 integrated amps. Speakers were W-B's new Vector compact floorstander, underpinned by a Torus sub-woofer. The whole delivered huge scale and genuinely sudden dynamic shifts, once again underlining the sonic potential of SACD, a missed opportunity if ever there was one! Lurking to one side was a pair of more modest electronic boxes, the SA11 S2/PM11 S2 combination, available for the first time in a handsome black finish, apparently the result of public pressure. Looking at these two, I can see why.

Vitus Audio was present in force, with new models and a new distributor. The SCD-010 CD player and SIA-025 integrated amp were driving Focal's Stella loudspeakers, but it was the revised Reference Series that really tweaked my interest. The RI-100 integrated amplifier is a substantial beast; offering 300 Class A/B Watts/channel, internal DAC and phono-stage options and a base price of £9.5K, it looks capable of giving both your speakers and your back a serious work out. More interesting still, lurking to one side were the new RL-101 and RP-101 line and phono-stages, updated and now mains powered versions of the impressive battery powered units reviewed six years ago.

Albarray made a welcome return, complete with flash-back red acrylic faceplates and their familiar, easy-going sound, making the most of Tannoy dual-concentrics in the Audio Works room. The M608 mono-blocs are essentially updated versions of the original M408 current-dumping design, manufactured with modern, precision components and now rated at 60 Watts a side into 8 Ohms. There was also an all-new pre-amp on show. An op-amp based design it features a massive internal power supply and a MM phono-stage as standard, with a standalone MC stage in the works. Prices are at the distinctly approachable end of the hi-fi spectrum (AP11 pre-amp - £1,650, M608 mono-blocs - £2,550/pr) that promises high musical value for monies invested.

Leading Edge is a cooperative venture between German speaker/acoustic treatment manufacturer Kaiser Acoustics, and UK based Vertex AQ. Products on

show included racks and acoustic panels that managed to combine considerable thinking from both companies, along with thoroughly Teutonic standards of fit and finish. Take the disarmingly simple and elegant racks, with their neat, almost '60's styling and immaculate surfaces. Not immediately apparent is that they are modular, allowing users to configure accommodation and spacing as required, as well as expand both as necessary. Each shelf is supported on "stop-chocs" decouplers imported from automotive engineering, can be individually leveled and incorporates both Vertex's acoustic labyrinth technology as well as materials and micro-perforated surface treatment (the latest hip technology in F1 and bicycle aerodynamics) to absorb airborne RFI and microphonic energy. Used in conjunction with Vertex couplers and cones, the oval interface areas on each shelf allow you to drain mechanical energy from within your electronics, isolating them from internal and external interference as never before.

As impressive as the sound in the Leading Edge room was, my own personal vote for Best Sound At The Show goes to the Voxativ system, using Cayin amps and a Music First passive control unit to feed CD into their own Ampeggio speakers. These surprisingly compact single driver, exponential enclosures (400 x 1100 x 300mm, WxHxD) featured the same dual-cone assemblies as employed in the Voigt Memory speakers, but this time with more conventional (and much more affordable) motors driven by permanent magnets. Even more surprising is the -1dB in-room response of 38Hz claimed by the company – a claim I'd take seriously on the evidence of what I heard!

Even a brief conversation with Voxativ CEO Ines Adler showed her to be a frighteningly informed and competent practitioner; this woman clearly knows not just her own stuff but quite a lot of other peoples' too, including a few of audio's genuine genius pioneers. I can't wait to get a pair of these at home and see what they can do in more familiar surroundings. At £18K a pair, they ain't cheap but they is surely good, and quality like this is rare indeed. +

SHOW REPORT

Manchester Sound & Vision Show

By Alan Sircom

The Manchester Show isn't the place for big product launches, but there are always exceptions. And the three big exceptions were important ones, especially at the budget level, and as we nearly burned the place down by accident (apparently cardboard boxes burn when left next to a halogen light), it would have been a shame to miss them.

The big launch was the new KEF R-Series, a key element of KEF's on-going 50th Anniversary celebrations. This was also what I considered the ultimate 'Balls of Steel' demonstration that shows just how much faith the company puts into its new range. KEF first played tracks on the mighty Blade loudspeaker (through Electrocompaniet electronics) to establish a frame of reference, then played the same tracks on a loudspeaker costing about 1/10th the cost of the Blade. This could have gone badly wrong in many ways, the shortcomings of the £2,000 R700 three-way floorstander being magnified in the light of the £20,000 Blade (or worse, the R700 showing up the Blade in some respects), but instead highlighted not only how good the big Blade really is, but how close these R700 speakers get to achieving that sound in a more conventional floorstanding piano gloss box. The demonstration continued with the £1,000 R300 standmount, which was struggling somewhat in a very big room, but still retained the same tonality to the bigger model and the Blade. This in part comes from the redesigned Uni-Q central unit designed specifically for the R-Series, part from the high-

grade magnets in the mid/bass units and in part from the constrained layer damped cabinet. All this – spread across the whole range of three floorstanders, two standmounts, two centres, a surround and a subwoofer – puts the new R-Series into somewhere between 'Reference Jr.' and 'Baby Blade' territory, at prices that start from £600 for the R100 standmount up to £2,750 per pair for the R900 three-way floorstander. We hope to get a pair of R-Series soon.

Next up was Neat. Having just launched the largest speaker in its range at Milan, Neat Acoustics sneaked out its smallest at Manchester, the £650/pr Iota.

Left: ProAc Response D40R

Designed for the next generation of audio (streaming, computer audio, etc), the Iota is a horizontal (wider than it is taller) small two way loudspeaker with a 100mm mid/bass cone coupled to a 50mm vertical ribbon tweeter. With a mild 86dB sensitivity and six-ohm impedance, this is designed to be driven by quality amplification and at the show was driven by a Naim SuperUniti. The tiny 2.6l design stands just 130mm tall, but is 200mm wide and 165mm deep, and it comes in five brightly coloured finishes. The surprising thing about the Iota was just how much sound it was putting out in a typical hotel bedroom. It is a boundary design (it needs wall reinforcement), but the Iota sounded a lot bigger and more powerful than its size suggested, with few downsides from the space-saving process. Neat Acoustics is on something of a roll at the moment, and the Iota looks like it's going to continue unabated.

Meanwhile, ProAc demonstrated its new Response D40R, the replacement to the eight year old and hugely popular D38. The big change – and one that will inevitably permeate through the whole ProAc range – was the move to carbon fibre cones, as first seen in the company's Carbon Pro flagship range. This also marks more of a move to locally-grown materials, as ProAc moves ever closer to all British manufacture across the range. Unlike many of ProAc's demonstrations – usually accompanied by a collection of Audio Research electronics that Stewart Tyler uses to develop the ProAc range – the company deliberately used a Naim CD5i and Nait 5i, to prove that you don't need hulking great expensive amps to drive its loudspeakers.

It wasn't all loudspeakers, but the new Rega Apollo-R CD player was in late prototype form. Finished in the new half-width case seen in recently in the Brio-R, the new top-loader sports a similar Wolfson 8742 DAC chip from Rega's DAC.

Fit and finish of the demo model reflected the prototype nature of the sample of course, but the sound was very promising indeed.

A good show; attendance was up, in spite of a major Manchester United vs City derby on the Sunday afternoon. We look forward to next year, when we'll bring our own fire extinguisher... +



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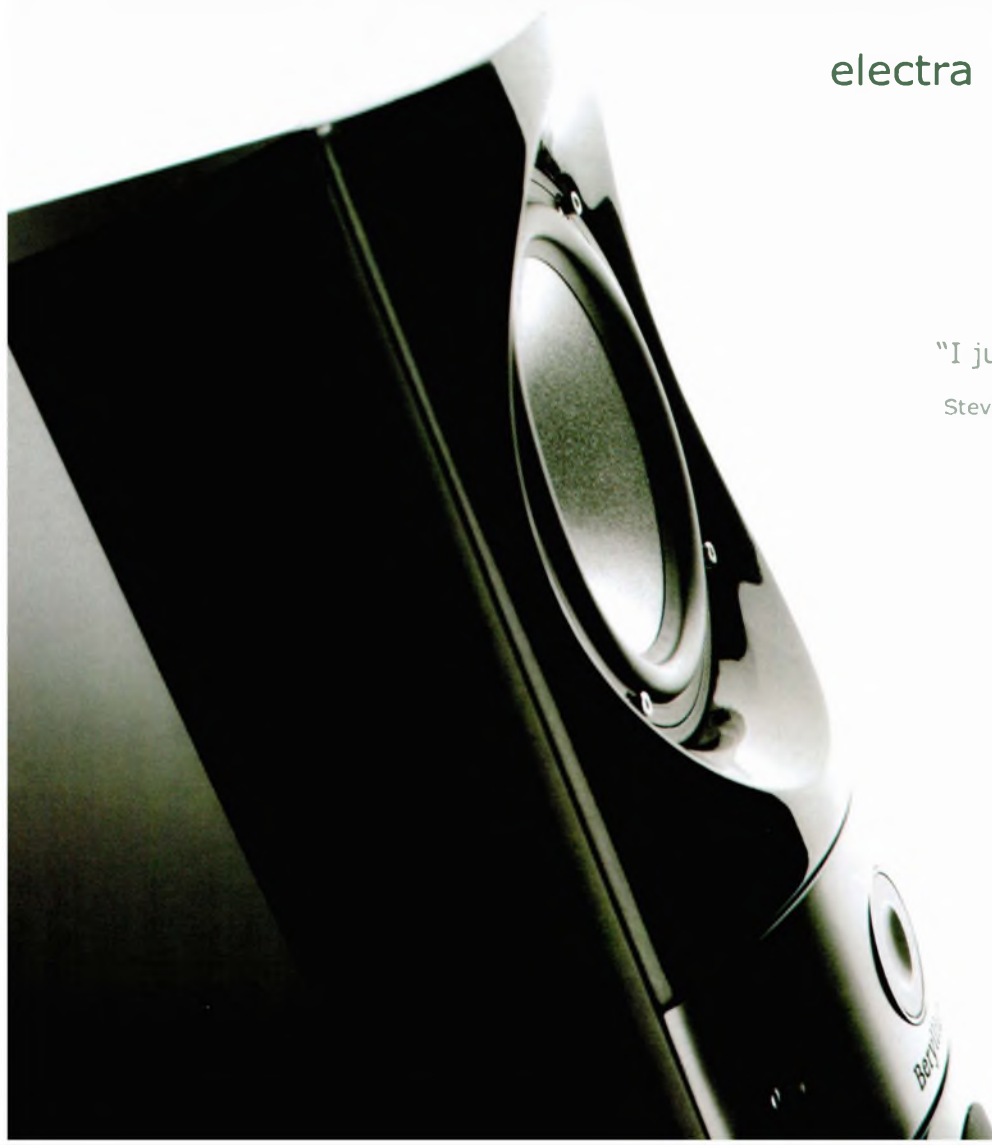
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SHOW REPORT

Top Audio Show Milan 2011

By Alan Sircom

Milan. Home of insane taxi drivers and style fascists, is also the site of one of the busiest audio shows around. Set over a long weekend in September in the Hotel ATA Quark, Top Audio is packed, both with attendees and manufacturers, across more than five floors, and regularly receives more than 20,000 visitors. It shows that – even in the depths of one of the worst economic crises to befall the country – Italy takes its music very seriously.

Scratch the surface though and all is not well in the state of Lombardy. Traditionally, the show is more or less divided into three; more than half the stands are slick and professional, about a quarter are from those aspiring to be slick and professional, and the rest represent The World of the Weird. This year, we were limited to the professionals and the really ga-ga end of the market. While in some respects, this was like setting your watch back 30 years, with a host of small, independent brands clubbing together for a room, it also reminded you why a lot of things from the past deserved to stay there.

The pro rooms were still very professional. There is a whole floor given over to audio-video, which features consistently excellent demonstrations by Epson's projector experts, another featuring a wall of McIntosh and the likes of Denon, Onkyo and Focal sized companies put on presentations that explain why they are big hitters in our little game. But then there were the others. The ones that proved that not everything Italian is style-obsessed; not in a down-to-earth, looks bad, sounds good way – think 'room full of creepy uncles' instead.

There were a few exceptions though. One of the best sounds was from an Anglo-American system comprising SME Model 20/3 turntable into a Pass Labs XP30 and XA100.5 pre/power combo into ProAc Carbon Pro 8 using Kimber cable throughout.

In the room opposite, Naim Audio was showing off its new ND5-XS streamer, bringing 21st Century music processing to Naim's core XS-series line. Played into a Naim 152 preamp, FlatCap XS power supply and 155 XS power amp into Ovator S-400 speakers, the all-Naim system managed to sound both enthralling and entertaining, without the seemingly inherent ponderous sound that plagued many rooms. Naim also has a wealth of useful add-ons to its streaming products coming soon, including 24/192 USB playback, playlisting, Apple AirStream support, richer metadata control and

802.11n wi-fi. Some will be firmware fixes, others will involve open-case surgery.

AudioNatali is Italian high-end royalty, distributing brands such as Audio Research, Krell, Kuzma, Koetsu, VTL and Wilson, alongside newcomers like DarTZeel and Devialet. And it's not hard to see why the Natalis command such an overarching command of the high-end, because their demonstrations are slicker than most. Case in point; the company's excellent Wilson Audio demonstration with ARC amplification was one of the high-end high points. In terms of the best looking room in the show, even this was eclipsed by the Sonus Faber room, which used (naturally) Wadia and Audio Research electronics. The company had built a room within a room, making the whole place look like something from the pages of an interior décor magazine than an audio show. Soft, leather sofas, a wall of bookshelves... this was a model of slick chic, without spending a fortune. Other brands take note... it was the star of the show. ▶

Neat Acoustics's Ultimatum X10 (centre) was impressive, but it wasn't the tallest speaker around. That award goes to the PNOE from Arcadian Audio (right).





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► Top Audio was the first place in the West to see the exciting new Korean Aurender music player as well as a significant grouping of new equipment from Onix, including a XIA-160 integrated amplifier (180W, balanced and single ended and priced at around €3,600 excluding tax). But it was also the place where Italian audio gets its proper airing, and while some of this extends well into the Loony Tunes part of audio, other parts are extremely interesting and deserve more coverage outside of Italy. Products like the Capriccio Continuo AurAleA 309 loudspeakers, for example. These side-wall hugging, heavily toed in loudspeakers featured an air-motion tweeter, a proprietary midbass cone. With a high slope crossover and a 1.8kHz crossover point, an elegant burr gloss finish and a reasonable price sticker of about €3,500 per pair, these had the sort of smoothness of a good panel speaker, but with a BBC-like purpose and vocal clarity.

Then there was the Sicily based Ars Aures Audio Essential loudspeakers. A two way, with a one inch tweeter and two five-and-a-half inch mid woofers, made for company. This sounded very well played through the aforementioned Aurender music player, a SOtM digital converter (also from Korea) and Accuphase amps. Like the Capriccio, these came in at under €3,500 per pair. At the other end of the scale, NAD was showing its new wireless DAC 1, with a UK price of £295 has been bandied about subsequently.

There were new loudspeakers from more than just Italian sources. Neat Acoustics new Ultimatum XL10 flagship was unveiled at Top Audio. This tall, slim floorstander comes from a brand very popular with UK listeners but is new to the US (its first formal outing will be at next year's CES). Replacing the twelve year old MF9, the Neat speaker features eight separate internal chambers, a pair of upward firing EMIT supertweeters, isobaric bass loading for the bass, making a total of nine drive units per side. Despite this, the loudspeakers sounded very tight and ordered when played on CD, even if the Sound of the Valve air-bearing turntable sounded as if everyone playing music had been given a sly dose of Thorazine. Naturally, the amps used in the system were pretty far from solid-state, but vinyl aside, the system sounded fine. Other turntables of note included the new E-Flat turntable from EAT and some good sounds from Avid decks and phono stages in the Bowers & Wilkins room.

Good sound was not impossible to find. Burmester made a very fine sound from its top line products in a surprisingly small room. The system – comprising 089 CD, 088 pre 911 power 948 conditioner and B50 speakers was topped off with a magnificent vinyl front end - a Scheu deck, Koetsu SD7000 mk7 arm and Koetsu Azure Platinum cartridge. In another room, another Burmester and Scheu combination, this time with the remarkable

display of BMC electronics made a good sound too, this time with a price in the thousands, not in the tens of thousands.

Pearl loudspeakers, on display in this case with Norma electronics, perhaps best typified the overall trend. A distinctive, if slightly shouty system, it was perhaps overshadowed by the sound of a carpenter building the flagship speaker in the back room! The open baffle gave a very direct sound, but more a collection of frequencies than a real coherent sound, but still... Interesting when the glue dries. Prices start at €4000 for ballerina 308, three way and go up from there.

And then there was the truly Froot Loop Nutcase Odd-Ball maniac products, in all the right ways. All audio shows have at least one product so unutterably crazy that it flips over into greatness. And that product is the PNOE loudspeaker from Arcadian Audio. A vast damped fibreglass horn, fed by a AER MD3B drive unit. At 100dB efficient and costing around €28,000 it drove the room extremely well. I'm predisposed toward disliking horns on principle, but this one sounded promising.

A close second was the Audiosonica Dragonfly; an interesting €11,500 sub/sat system with a drop-down front baffle to mask and diffuse the bass drivers. Curiously, this worked much better than you might expect it might do.

There were others products I'd like to have seen – like the new Audio Note products, which were held up because some of the equipment promised didn't show. Or the KEF Blades that were being played in a room that looked like a badly organized car boot sale, complete with people haggling over products. Ultimately, what I remember as being one of the healthiest audio shows on the planet has taken a turn for the worse. +



EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Totem Element Metal Loudspeaker

By Alan Sircom

This is Totem's iPod moment. It's a bet-the-farm reprofiling of the top end part of the brand. Everything changes from here, right down to the elegant obelisk shape of the cabinet itself. This is completely separate to the existing range – they still remain, why break something that already works? – but in some respects Element reflects where Totem supremo Vince Brussezze has always wanted Totem to be.

The Element Metal is the current pinnacle of the Totem ranges. The other ranges will continue to exist – products like the Arro are still extremely popular, so why mess with a good thing? In the rest of the Element series, there's a smaller floorstander, a standmount, a centre and a subwoofer. In addition, the drivers are matched with the Tribe series, which use a 100mm version of the woofer.

The key element to the Element (see what I did there? It's called 'English mangling') is the Torrent woofer. No more selecting, phase-matching and reworking off-the-shelf drivers, these are Totem built from scratch, although the tweeter is a modified OEM part. The new Elements is entirely crossoverless – an easy thing to do, you just need to add five years of R&D. Without divulging too many trade secrets, this falls back on a spot of applied physics to create a magnet layout known as the Halbach array; a series of claw-shaped magnets, worked to give the driver the mechanical properties of a full-range unit with frequency response from about 15-16Hz (free air resonance) to 5.5kHz and that tweeter kicks in from there and up to 22kHz, making it not-quite-but-almost a supertweeter. Like all Totem speakers, the company doesn't recommend a toe-in, unless the placement or room demand otherwise.

That this driver manages to deliver full-range could almost be overlooked, because people might confuse it with a dual concentric – in fact, it's a one-way driver (like a Jordan unit, only with the sort of dynamic range of a 177mm unit can deliver). Each one of these drivers takes three hours to manufacture and four hours to assemble, with the kind of watchmaker obsessive-compulsive attention to detail.

Like all Totems, the cabinet is a mitre-locked, braced, hand-built MDF affair, family made in Canada, again with more of a passion for woodworking than you get from a box stamped out on any old machine. And also like all Totems, it uses a borosilicate material painted throughout the interior for damping. The finish is pretty hard-core too; it's a five-layer polymer gelcoat paint job, akin to the automotive industry standard. This is already going the extra mile, but the hand-sanded, hand-polished end result gives this a depth of finish that is a tough act to follow; Totem recently acquired a company that makes spiffy indoor bars for the rich and famous, and the Element benefits from that process. No dappled, rippled orange peel piano gloss here.

All the wiring inside the Element (and all Totem) is a silver-plated copper with a PTFE dielectric. Unlike many speaker designs, different gauges of wire are used where appropriate, rather than use the same gauge throughout. And yes, that comes from listening. This is one of the key parts that perhaps separates Totem from many of its Canadian rivals. Given the population density of the country, Canada has a disproportionate number of top-class audio (and especially loudspeaker) brands. A big part of this comes down to audio being a big part of the country's National Research Council's list of projects. In other words, if you want to do your doctoral thesis in subwoofery or similar, the chances are you'll end up in Canada. This has created a dream team of audio engineers up there in Canuck-ville, but sometimes you do end



“An easy thing to do, you just need to add five years of R&D.”

up with beautifully engineered products that should sound good, but don't. By way of contrast, Totem goes ears-first into product design – the products are still measured thoroughly and engineered extremely well, but the speakers are honed through extensive listening tests. This almost guarantees a certain sub-set of audiophiles will never touch a Totem on dogmatic grounds, but the rest of us will listen and enjoy.

Until recently, Totem was distributed by the energetic Wim, but there's only so many territories one person can be at one time, and given his catchment area was, er, Europe, it was decided that a more local approach with more people across Europe fit the bill. And with Elements, it was high time to put Totem back on the pan-European map. ▶

EQUIPMENT REVIEW / TOTEM ELEMENT METAL LOUDSPEAKER

I've always had a bit of an affinity for Canadian loudspeakers in general and Totem in particular. As stated earlier, Canadian speakers are often designed with a scientific background in mind, but often not so science-led that the music sounds like an experiment, and Totem in particular managed to give both that uniformity and precision of sound the Canadians are good at doing, with the expansiveness of an American design and the precision and entertainment factor of a good British box. And they don't need a room the size of Greater Manchester to sound good. However, I've also found that many Canadian speaker designs have a particular price ceiling; they make extremely good budget boxes (that, sadly, rarely make it to the UK because we have hundreds of local rivals), excellent mid-price and upper-middle price loudspeakers, but past the £5k mark begin to run out of steam. And the Element Metal is two and a half times that figure. Was this going to be a speaker too far?

In most cases, no. The Element didn't disappoint. This sounds like a nebulous concept at best, but I've always found the speakers I like the best are those that seem to work from the middle outward; they get the midband right, then extend that rightness into the upper lower registers. This usually means getting the voices right, and it's here the Element really shines. Rutter's 'Lord Make Me an Instrument of Thy Peace' (RR-57CD) projects the male voices naturally, neither forcing them into the room nor holding back on the stereo image. Voices merely appear in the room, rooted in their physical locations, articulate and natural. In the original mix, I wrote 'natural' six times in the same paragraph, which says quite a lot about my ability to repeat myself, a lot more about the loudspeaker and quite a lot about my ability to repeat myself.

The getting the midband right is all well and good, but what happens beyond that region? The upper registers are beautifully extended without any sense of harsh or hard edged treble that can sometimes cut through the mix. Lucinda Williams 'Jackson' from *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road* demonstrates this perfectly – her voice is recorded hot (the ubiquitous 13kHz lift performed on many vocals is given full force, but without too much compression in post process) and a spitty tweeter can make that sound nasally and can sound gritty and aggressive on the wrong speaker, but here it makes the sound just seem live and (here it comes again) natural.

The other end of the scale is similarly well-constructed. It doesn't plumb the deepest depths, but unless your music collection comprises endless dub reggae remixes or a lot of organ music, this is probably not a deal breaker. The limit kicks in about in line with the rumble that accompanies a tympani. It gives you an impression of the depth of the bass, without that last half octave or so. At this price, I believe you have a choice between full range sound that sounds OK in the midrange and a sound that gets everything else right and sounds OK with that last octave. How that trade-off sits with you probably depends on your musical tastes – given I spend more time listening to Bon Iver than I spend listening to Berlioz, it's a trade-off that happily falls on the Totem side for me.

I do reckon, however, that this might be the Elements Metal stumbling block. You can get 'more' loudspeaker for the money. I am not convinced that 'more' necessarily relates to 'better', but there will always be those who expect a loudspeaker at this price to deliver deeper more impressive bass, more exaggerated treble and something a little more 'wow'. Some of this comes from using impressive demo discs, which might not necessarily equate to what people really listen to. If such people delved deeper, though, they

might find this has all the 'wow' factor they need, just in a different direction.

Where the Elements Metal really wins is its ability to cope with dynamic, transient energy, how quickly it puts the sound out there, and how quickly it stops putting sound out there when the music stops. This sounds banal, but it's the difference between a beautiful, yet listless, sound and something with some real bite and energy. The acid test for me in this case is Biffy Clyro. The speed of attack of the opening bars of the first track of *Puzzle* ('Living Is a Problem Because Everything Dies') can render turn many

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Frequency Response: 20Hz-22kHz

Impedance: 4ohms

Recommended power: 50W-300W

Sensitivity: 91dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 30x111x38cm

Weight: 26kg per speaker

Finish: Piano black or ice (white)

Price: £12,125 per pair

Manufactured by: Totem Acoustic

URL: www.totemacoustic.com

Distributed by: Joenit BVBA

URL: www.joenit.com

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“The tone of the Totem is a very ‘now’ sound. It’s crisp, upbeat and doesn’t wreck the overall sound if there’s a spot of compression in the mix.”

so-called good loudspeakers flat and slow. It’s all dynamics – not ‘micro-dynamics’, it goes from quiet to having bits of torn drive unit whizzing past your ears and back again in a semiquaver. If it gets things right, it’s like the best rock gig you ever went to; get it wrong and it sounds uninspiring. This is the nearest I get to a ‘Pace Rhythm and Timing’ test, and the Element aced it. Sounds spit from the speakers with the sort of venom needed when the guitar is at full tilt, yet sound just as taut when it just goes back to the quieter rhythm guitar playing fourths in the background.

The tone of the Totem is a very ‘now’ sound. It’s crisp, upbeat and doesn’t wreck the overall sound if there’s a spot of compression in the mix. It can’t save a casualty of the Loudness War, but it will bring out the best from mixes that are essentially unsalvageable when heard through loudspeakers of even a few years ago. And yet, when faced with a more becalmed recording from the 1950s or 1960s it throws out a beguiling and impassioned plea for further listening. It’s here that you hear both the depth and clarity of the image, allowing you to drift from musician to musician as you follow the musical flow. As a bit of an amateur musicologist, I love the ability to hear when the pianist is comping (‘simple’ accompaniment) and when he’s vamping (repeating a phrase) along to Cannonball Adderley. This is usually masked by the other musical elements in the recording, but can easily be heard here. Usually, this comes with a caveat, because products that get this far into the mix often

do so by drawing your attention away from the musical whole. Here, you can sit and let the music wash over you, tapping your foot happily, or zoom in on the bit where Miles Davis cleverly drops out of the Dorian mode half way through his solo. That’s a very rare feature.

We could go on and on endlessly over the same ground, but it’s unnecessary. Between the time the review was completed and the time this issue hits the streets, there have been a number of outings for the Element Metal. Specifically, the Metals appeared at the National Audio Show and Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (see next issue), where the Totem topper got played to the audio buying public. And, feedback suggests it did well everywhere it planted its spiked feet, with listeners praising it for its liquid midband. So, it’s not just me.

The Totem Element Metal loudspeaker is a great speaker. There are loudspeakers that have more extension at the price, but the midrange is so seductive and attractive, unless you are obsessed by getting the last few notes at the bottom end, you’ll find the Metal a magnetic proposition, and the Totem top model comes recommended. +

EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Avalon Idea loudspeaker

By Alan Sircom

Avalon's new loudspeaker has one drawback that we'll get out of the way quickly; the name. Calling a loudspeaker 'Idea' almost gifts every writer, commentator, blogger and forum denizen a healthy succession of puns. It's almost like painting an archery target on one of the drive units. That being said, if the major drawback is the name, you know you are onto something very good indeed. And also, I'd wager that this could be considered Avalon's Big Idea for the future of high-end, so maybe the name's not that bad after all.

This is the cheapest of the back-swept Avalon models. In fact, now that the NP Evolution 2.0 and Symbol loudspeakers are gone, this is the entry-point in the whole Avalon range. Not that £7,900 is 'cheap', but when you start to factor in speakers like Time and Isis, a loudspeaker that costs less than a family car can seem like the nursery slopes for Avalon.

It's a two-way, three driver loudspeaker, with a pair of 177mm Nomex/Kevlar composite cone bass units coupled to a 25mm ceramic dome tweeter with a neodymium magnet. Aside from cabinet volume and weight, this last is the big external difference between this speaker and the more upmarket models; the others use an inverted Tonagen ceramic dome tweeter, while this one is said to be proprietary, but looks very similar to the Eton model found in the NP Evolution 2.0. This meant a completely different approach in the crossover.

It also allowed a significant redesign of the internal architecture of the classic Avalon cabinet. This has meant the loudspeaker can be smaller, thinner and considerably lighter than previous backswept models. And it's here that I find the biggest operational criticism of the Idea kicks in; the speaker uses the usual rest-on spike-cones found in the bigger Avalons. On more weightier models, the sheer mass of the speaker gives that cone a rigid connection to the floor, because there's no way a cone is going anywhere fast with 1/10th ton of speaker resting on its flat base. At a shade over 27kg per speaker, the Idea is light enough to make those cones a little more mobile. I'd prefer long, screw-in spikes in place, although in fairness the Ideas didn't even wobble in use. It has the usual Avalon arrangement of a vent (not a port) pointing into the floor and a rear mounted Cardas terminal block for a single set of spade-lugged loudspeaker cables.

Avalon conservatively rates the Idea at 88dB sensitivity with a nominal four-ohm impedance, and a power rating between 50-300 watts per channel. But that doesn't mean the speaker is a comfortable load with any ol' amplifier. Like the Transcendent before it, I think this loudspeaker is most comfortable being fed from a solid-state amplifier, one with a bit of meat on its bones. Although I've heard the self-same pair of speakers played with c-j tubes at the Whittlebury Hall National Audio Show, for me, the Devialet D-Premier and the Edge G6 power amp really hit the spot; the Karan and Muse electronics distributed by the importer Audiofreaks would work well here too.

I can't help feeling that Audiofreaks almost scored something of an own goal at the National Audio Show. The Idea sounded good, very good in fact for a small room, but the use of a c-j Classic 60 power amp meant the Ideas were running in low gear. With solid-state amps in place, the Ideas seemed to blossom out. In short, if you are judging your findings based on the NAS system, you have no Idea what this speaker is capable of (you see what I mean about the name... it's an almost irresistible temptation).

What the NAS event did show is how well the Ideas work in smaller rooms. With the exception of the now sadly defunct NP Evolution 2.0 (and to a lesser extent the Transcendent), most Avalon floorstanders have struggled to fit snugly into many UK homes, if I'm really honest about such things. While

many of us have listening rooms large enough to accommodate a loudspeaker that works best with at least a metre between it and the nearest wall, and a good 2.5m between the speakers, these requirements can stump many a city-dweller who may have the funds and the interest, but not the living space to accommodate the demands of an Isis. In fairness, recent Avalons have become increasingly less demanding in their need for space, but that didn't prepare me for the Idea.

This might sound insane to our American counterparts (unless they happen to live in places like Manhattan), but I've seen very high-end systems in listening rooms as small as 10'x12' and 12'x16' is not uncommon in the cities. And it's to these rooms that the Idea brings the concept of high-end down to earth. The Idea is one of the most room-friendly loudspeakers made in the high-end today. While it's not a boundary design, it seems to release so little energy to the rear and sides of the cabinet, you can use it very close to the wall without complaint and as long as you keep clear of the corners and their propensity to bass-boom, it will sound fine. It benefits from a precise and logical set-up, but is untroubled enough by such things to rank low in the obsessive-compulsive stakes. The speaker is also light enough to be moved around in experimentation, without recourse to trolleys or piano moving folk.

I'm a half-willing victim of the sound-byte culture. I often find myself trying to pin down the performance of a product in a single-word highlight or two. And, perhaps it's indicative of the mediocrity of many audio components that this process is relatively easy to do, especially as many

“It quickly begins to read like Monty Python’s Spanish Inquisition sketch; the Idea’s chief weapons are imaging, detail, dynamics, coherence, presence, articulation and nice red uniforms.”

▶ of the rejects that never make it to *Hi-Fi+*’s pages can be summed up in the extremely dismissive ‘meh!’. The problem with the Idea from a sound-byte perspective is it quickly begins to read like Monty Python’s *Spanish Inquisition* sketch; the Idea’s chief weapons are imaging, detail, dynamics, coherence, presence, articulation and nice red uniforms.

Imaging is the big hitter and the one that you notice first, especially when used in that smaller than average listening room. Normally in such places, you get a foreshortening of imagery, but with the Idea, everything is right-sized. That means if you play something large scale, it comfortably renders the image large. That includes ambience. The Low Anthem’s ‘Smart Flesh’ album is recorded in an icy, abandoned pasta factory with a lot of ‘found’ instruments to preserve the natural ambience, and through the Idea, that ambience is rendered huge in some tracks, almost claustrophobically small in others. Except for the one wall-of-sound clipped and compressed track, the rest are clearly recorded in different rooms, each to provide suitable natural reverb appropriate to the specific track. This is often slightly lost, as is the rationale for recording in such an atypical space for a studio. With the Idea, the ambience is so well-preserved you can almost feel the paint peeling from the walls and the recording space adds to the richness of the recording.

Some of this comes from the angled front baffle, and it’s in a small room where this well-established Avalon trademark really begins

to show why it’s so clever. It seems to help limit baffle-edge diffraction and in the process side-wall reflection problems. Side wall reflections can undermine performance in small rooms because the side walls are so near the speaker they hit the listener’s ear almost at the same time as the direct sound, blurring stereo. Somehow, this effect is reduced with the Avalon cabinet design, and this is something that isn’t quite so obvious when the speakers have a lot of air between the baffle and the side wall.

The Low Anthem’s use of less-than-perfect instruments also highlights the Idea’s first-rate coherence and articulation. We’re used to the sound of most instruments, so our brains accommodate them and that makes for a very forgiving assessment of loudspeakers, but when confronted by non-standard musical instruments, we can quickly become aware of how well (or ill) the loudspeaker is at producing a cogent reproduction of that sound. In some ways, it’s why some audiophile test discs use recordings of garage doors slamming; not simply to determine any apparent stage height, but to render a sound most of us can equate to in daily life and compare directly. Even the mildest unevenness is quick to spot, and the Idea is exceptionally good at limiting this. Tonally spot on, the overall presentation gives a sense of individual musicians working together, and the voices of those instruments, and the singers hanging together beautifully.

Perhaps the one element in loudspeakers that doesn’t get mentioned much is ‘presence’. This loudspeaker has it, in spade-loads. It’s not presence as in it pushes the image into the room (although it does do this, it mostly presents a big, wide and deep soundstage) and it’s not presence as in making the presence region sound good (although it does make vocals sound particularly sweet). It’s something more. It’s that there’s a physical authority to the sounds emanating from the Idea that makes the speakers so easy to get on with. And that’s the big bonus of the Idea. You sit in front of them enjoying your music. A lot. These speakers are musically analytical and yet, you don’t ever find them musically intrusive. They are clean and dynamic, but you never find yourself being drawn to those elements to give your system a workout. You just enjoy your music through these loudspeakers. It’s a very natural and beguiling sound.

This potentially concerned me, because frequently ‘beguiling’ means ‘coloration’, but that really isn’t the case here. These speakers are tonally accurate and they don’t favour any end of the musical spectrum – I moved from Mozart to Pavement in short order and the Idea brought out the tonal majesty of the former and the gritty energy of the other in equal measure. Which puts the loudspeakers in a class of their own.

This leaves me (more specifically, Avalon itself) with something of a conundrum. Where does the Idea end and the Transcendent begin? The Idea essentially continues the ‘Avalon for the rest of us’ concept started in the Transcendent. Aside from the predilection for solid-state, the Idea places ▶

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“If the Transcendent is the ‘Avalon for the rest of us’, the Idea is ‘the best £20,000 speaker you can buy for £8,000’.”

For the prospective end user, this is a winning situation. If the Transcendent is the ‘Avalon for the rest of us’, the Idea is ‘the best £20,000 speaker you can buy for £8,000’. That it is more room and amp friendly in the process only serves to make it more attractive to a wider audience. And for those who crave a big image in a small room, I can’t think of a better design whatever the cost. The Idea lives up to its slightly odd name, because it’s one of the brightest ideas in high-end loudspeakers this year, and comes extremely highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Two-way floorstanding loudspeaker

Drivers: 1x 25mm ceramic dome tweeter

2x 177mm Nomex/Kevlar composite mid/bass units

Sensitivity: 88dB

Nominal Impedance: four ohms

Recommended power rating: 50-300W

Frequency response: 28Hz-22kHz

Dimensions (WxHxD): 21.9x90.2x25.4cm

Weight: 27.21kg per speaker

Price: £7,900 per pair

Manufactured by: Avalon Acoustics

URL: www.avalonacoustics.com

Distributed by: Audiofreaks

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)208 948 4153

► fewer demands on the electronics it sits with. It is more accommodating of the strictures of smaller rooms and is less bothered by perfect speaker positioning. *Ceteris paribus*, the Transcendent brings more to the table; more extension (especially at the bottom end), a more free sounding top end and more outright volume headroom, which combine to make the speaker more dynamic. And, it must be said, not a great deal more. This isn’t a case of the Transcendent being flawed (it’s an excellent speaker that more than justifies its place and price in the audio hierarchy), just that the Idea is so damn good I can see it being a challenge to its bigger brother at times. Put it this way, if someone with the wherewithal to buy either came to audition the Time and heard the Transcendent first, they would still end up buying the Time without question, but if they came wanting to hear the Transcendent and heard the Idea first... well, things aren’t so clear-cut.

Elac 330 CE Loudspeaker

By Chris Thomas

You may have come across the name Elac before. Their speakers turn up with regularity in high-end in car systems and they manufacture the drive units that Burmester uses for its own loudspeakers. But Elac, the German company, also designs and builds an extensive range of speakers themselves, in five tiers, that contain around thirty different models covering every application from small, modestly priced AV units to large high quality (and cost) monitors. This is my first experience of them as I have recently spent a few months with the 330 Crystal Edition, an economical, no flab, stand-mount speaker with some interestingly different design features.

What Elac has done with the 330 CE is to design and build a completely minimal cabinet from extruded aluminium around two excellent drivers. Nothing particularly new there you may think, but pay attention to the word 'around' then look at the pictures. This tube-like enclosure has been designed to offer absolute minimal baffle projection. Tight around the mid/bass driver and hugging the periphery of the tweeter plate, it is not hard to see where the designers are going with this one. Achieving a virtually baffle-free frontal aspect eliminates, at a stroke, all those early reflections that can muddle the very explicit and liberated, out of the box character that such small speakers should always claim as one of their unique gifts. The 7.5 mm thick enclosure itself is well over a foot deep and being aluminium, extremely rigid. It is internally damped and ported at the rear, but this round vent is located at the top of the cabinet, leaving space for the bi-wire terminals behind the larger driver. This means that the tweeter too is vented and can be viewed through the shaped port that is fabricated with a slide-in plastic moulding, apparently designed in a wind tunnel for smooth unhindered airflow. The drivers are quite unusual and Elac manufacture both of them. The tweeter, designated JET 111 is an adaptation of the well known and highly regarded Air Motion Transformer originally designed by Oskar Heil. In practice this ribbon-like device comprises a folded foil membrane with a thickness of 0.84mm driven by a powerful



and precise magnet of neodymium rods. The devil is in the detail of this unit and its assembly requires extraordinary accuracy. The folding and fixing of the membrane itself is still performed by hand under a microscope while two SCARA robots undertake the general handling and critical gluing process. Elac claims a resonance-free performance of up to 50kHz from this unit. High frequency drivers have, in the past, been the very obvious weakness of so many small monitors and I have lost count of the number of these speakers I have heard that have been let down by totally inadequate tweeters. But, over recent years technological advancements and designers taking their smaller models more seriously have meant that these are now getting the drivers they deserve and the Elac 330 illustrates this perfectly.

The CE suffix stands for Crystal Edition and this name is derived from the interesting 180mm bass/mid driver. The cone is formed from an ultra-lightweight stamped aluminium foil glued to a paper cone and it certainly looks a like a large sparkling crystal. The multi-faceted metal surface stiffens the cone and reduces the internal resonances. It is rather like the way that other manufacturers introduce a broken aspect or series of spiralled details to the surface of their drivers. The voice coil, somewhat unusually, is joined to the paper cone in two places. Elac reckon this expands the frequency handling by almost an octave. Useful when you are not relying on a larger square box wooden cabinet to supplement the speakers perceived low frequency extension. The speakers can be bi-wired and Elac provide a very decent quality pair of jumper cables if single wiring is required that I think are so much better than the nasty stamped solid copper-plated types.

Such a neat and tightly packaged design requires a stand worthy of its attention to detail and Elac can of course supply a steel, single column sand-filled design named the LS 65+. This is a beautifully finished support that matched the review pair in colour and texture. Four adjustable spikes are used on the bottom plate for floor mounting while the smaller plate that supports the speaker offers a few different fixing alternatives. There is a spiked option that sits each point into a small cup on the bottom of the speaker itself. I think that sonically this is the best way to go though, be warned, as the speakers do teeter somewhat precariously and would need little in the way of a sideways blow from a child or clumsy dog to come crashing to the floor and believe me, you wouldn't want that to happen. But they can be fixed in this position by long bolts that pass through the stand into fixings in the bottom of the speakers and this is the best (safest) option although for pure sound quality I would still favour the un-tethered fixing. For those wanting a softer balance to the sound Elac also supplies some soft rubber dimples which can replace the spikes.

There is also a high degree of selective tuning possible with the speakers themselves. As the port is rear facing Elac figure that, in small rooms, the 330CE might be forced into situations too close to a rear wall to be ideal so offer a two part foam bung to inhibit the airflow in a couple of stages. There also is a thin foam ring that can be attached around the tweeter unit to restrict dispersion and this is intended for rooms with little sound absorption to provides a specifically judged touch of damping. I tried all of these treatments in my listening room (that I have purposely left quite un-damped) and still preferred to listen to the speaker in its unadulterated state. These options may be useful to some but I found that it resulted in a general feeling of softening that I really couldn't get on with. In my room the port bungs made the speaker sound quite congested and why would you want to inhibit the flow and

“Such a neat and tightly packaged design requires a stand worth of its attention to detail.”

articulation of that excellent tweeter at all? Not for me I am afraid.

Even with the stand, the 330 CE is a relatively low-impact design which should not require too much furniture shifting to get working, although if you want to hear it in its full-voiced glory I would always suggest allowing it as much breathing space as possible and keep it away from rear walls and corners. Actually the Elacs are able to strut their stuff in the most unlikely positions and just lately I have been using many speakers much farther apart than normal with interesting results, including the Elacs. This is amplifier dependent to a certain extent, but be sure to experiment with distances and toe-in angles. Otherwise the usual rules apply with all speakers that utilise ►

▶ a rear facing port and believe me, this one shifts air like a piston through that particular orifice. Given that the designers went to so much trouble to remove any early reflections from the baffle by removing it altogether it would seem a shame not to play along. At 87.5dB efficiency you could get away with fairly modest amplifiers in a small room, but I would try to avoid anything below a decent 50 watts and certainly amplifiers of distinctly average musical abilities will sound quite horrible.

The 330 CE is quite a surprise when you first hear it. A chunky bass/mid driver in a totally minimal, deep metal cabinet with a ribbon-type tweeter tilted my expectations toward a more immediate, forward and dynamic, sound. What I got was a rather subtler blend of dynamics and textures with less pure bass power than I had imagined but rather more musical cohesion. But it is the presentation that first grabs you and makes you realise why Elac went along this particular route with the cabinet design. With no straight edges internal corners and so little in the way of a baffle, the music appears completely detached from the cabinet. It spreads across the room and hangs in space, hence the positioning recommendations. Get it right and when you close your eyes it is extremely difficult to point to where the bulk of the sound is originating. It is as though you can't hear the speakers and the mid/bass in particular working to project the music at you at all.

Where I was anticipating a punchy and rather full bass from that chunky driver I found the whole thing rather understated and far more linear in response than I was expecting. The bass just glides out of the speaker, although, during my time with them, I do believe that the unit was still loosening up and I wouldn't be at all surprised if it added an extra half an octave in extension over the first several months. What it might have lacked in leading-edge impact it went some way toward making up for with tonality and character. This would not be the first time that the Elacs would surprise me. Through the bass they proved more sophisticated and tonally revealing and as they moved up through the mid-band the 330CE became almost sumptuous, given the right equipment and music.

Integration with that tweeter is excellent and seamless and one of the speaker's real strengths. The JET unit is very ribbon-like in its qualities without any of the HF beaming that, up until recently, has been one of the less desirable aspects of such units. With no hint of leading edge compression or hardness, it never draws attention to itself by sitting on top of the sound but instead is an extremely fine match to the character of that bass/mid driver. The results are always interesting but rarely spectacular with sophistication rather than sonic fireworks being the result.





“They have no noticeable cabinet colorations or extra warmth of presence that some conventional wooden enclosures bring to their performance.”

The more music I played, the more I began to get used to the Elac's unexpectedly smooth and gently liquid ways. In some senses they operate on a fine edge. They have no noticeable cabinet colorations or extra warmth or presence that some conventional wooden enclosures bring to their performance, so if you play a lean or thin sounding piece of music, that is exactly how it will sound. They are also quite volume dependent and I didn't find them particularly interesting at very low levels. But at normal or even higher volumes their spare, lean and nuanced character can become really involving. What is perhaps the most impressive is that they are capable of very interesting shades of tonal resolution and they couple this with a musical top to bottom togetherness that is a constant surprise. Add to this their projection and illustration of soundstage and depth and I think they offer a range of musical attributes which are going to suit some people, systems and rooms perfectly. Ok, at times I felt they were a little lightweight and in need of a decently matched subwoofer and as I mentioned, they are not remotely forgiving of indifferent recordings, but then again no really fine speakers are. They are certainly not for everyone as they break quite a few small speaker traditions. But, I can't help but like them. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 2-way stand mount

Drive units: Bass/mid 180mm AS-XR cone LLD; HF JET 111 (mag. shielded)

Sensitivity: 87.5 dB 2.83V/1m

Crossover point: 2,900 Hz

Impedance: 4 ohms nominal

Freq. response: 40-50,000 Hz

Power handling: 80-120 watts

Dimensions: 274x188x345mm (HxWxD)

Weight: 10.5kg

Finishes: black high gloss, titan shadow, white high gloss

Matching stand: LS 65+ single column, colour matched sand-filled

Price: £3699.99

Stand: £699.99

Manufacturer: Elac

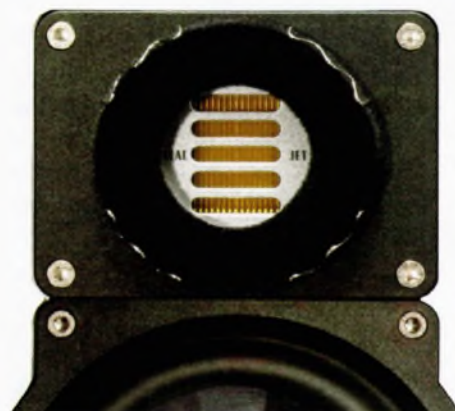
ElectroacousticGmbH

URL: www.elac.com

UK distributor: Atacama Audio, Winston Avenue, Croft, Leicester, LE93GQ

Tel: +44 (1455) 283 251

URL: elac-audio.co.uk



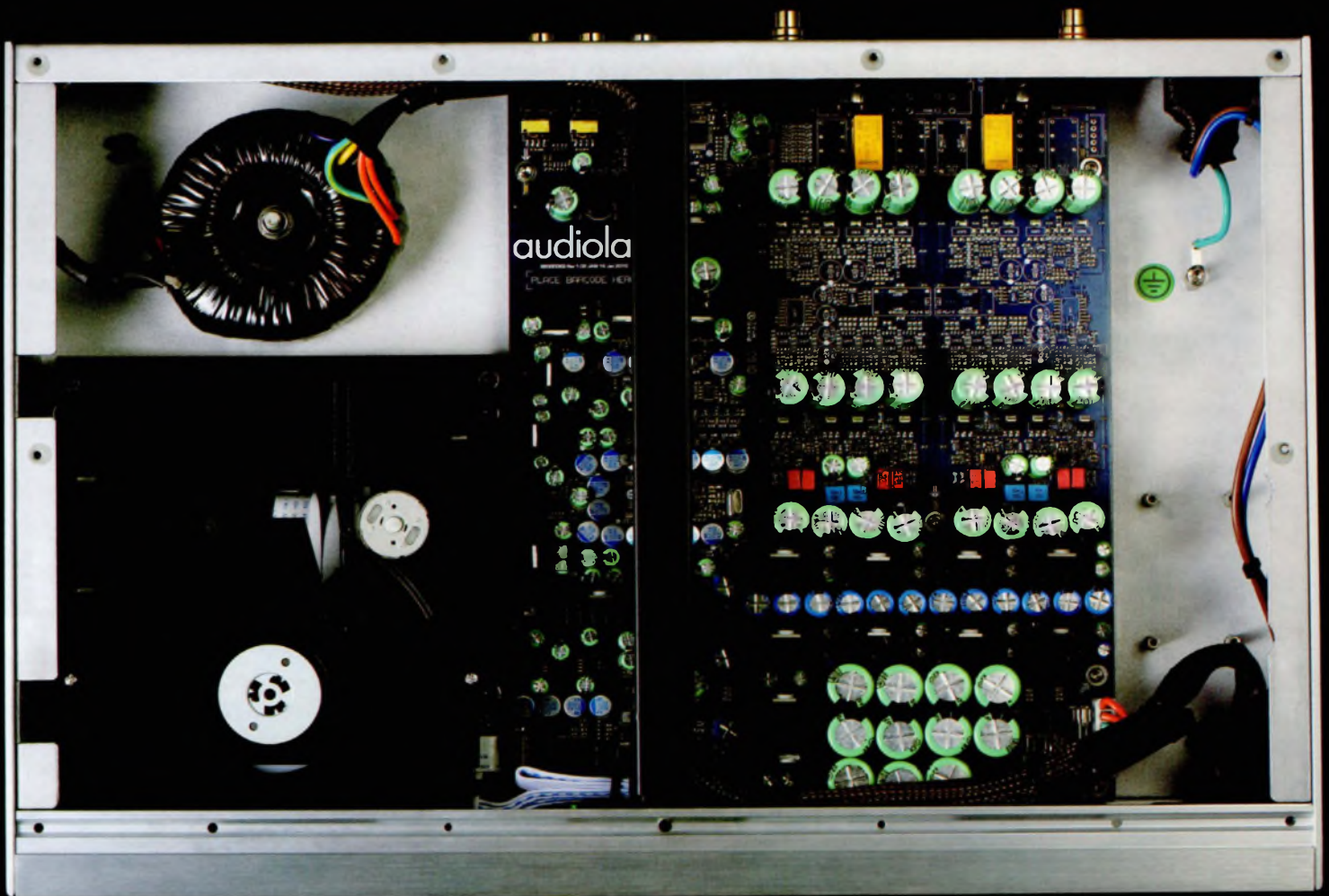
Zingali Zero Otto loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

There are two ways to make a successful loudspeaker. The first is to make a loudspeaker that appeals to the widest possible audience, but in the process making something a little bland for the bleeding edge audiophiles. The other way is to make a loudspeaker that will only ever appeal to a niche, but do it so well that narrow group is drawn to the sound like a moth to a flame. There's nothing wrong with either approach, so long as you get the balance right, and the Italian Zingali speaker company has very definitely got its niche market perfectly sussed.

The problem has been Zingali loudspeakers were always handmade, distinctive designs and – as is the way of all things handmade – not cheap. Take the mighty Client Name 1.15 range-topper for example; brilliant loudspeakers, fashioned out of curved polished wood and looking like a Victorian Dalek designed by Zegato, but not much change out of twenty-six grand. The new Zero range is more in line with modern Italy; elegant, distinctive and distinguished with a hint of extravagance, but the days of Bacchanalian excess are (almost) the stuff of the last decade. They stop just about where the older range started price-wise. Alongside bookshelf monitors, centres and subs, there are three floorstanders in the range; not good, better and best, but big, bigger and biggest. A little Italian is handy when considering the Zeros, because the name denotes the driver size, Sei (Italian for 'six')





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“Italy is a thoroughly metric country these days and hasn’t had anything ‘Imperial’ since Il Duce was hung by his toes from the roof of an Esso garage.”

▶ sports six-inch drive units, Otto (Italian for ‘eight’) uses eight inchers and Dieci (Italian for ‘ten’) features... you guessed it. The use of inches is a bit odd; Italy is a thoroughly metric country these days and hasn’t had anything ‘Imperial’ since Il Duce was hung by his toes from the roof of an Esso garage, and ‘Zero Duecento’ sounds just as good as ‘Zero Otto’ to these English ears.

Aside from driver size (and the size of the attendant Omniray horn), which makes the cabinet larger, the Zero range is very similar. It’s a two-way bass reflex design, with a 25mm compression driver set into a GZ 8 Omniray horn and a pair of 200mm bass units. The design puts the sensitivity into the mid 90s (the Otto pans out at 93dB efficiency) and with a nominal – and reasonably resistive – six ohm impedance, this isn’t the kind of speaker that should be an amp worrier. Given Zingali rates this speaker happily with up to 300W power amps, you know it’s also more than comfortable playing while the system is packing a punch. Zingali also puts a lower frequency figure of 32Hz, which doesn’t sound too ambitious when you play the speakers.

Zingali’s main attraction is the Omniray horn, a large polished solid chunk of yellow Poplar used as tweeter horn, which took Giuseppe Zingali about a decade to perfect. Unlike most tweeter horns (that are either fully circular to beam evenly or more letter-box shaped for maximum dispersion in one plane), the Omniray has a shorter throw than most and has well-calculated zones on the horn ‘responsible’ for the quality of the performance at specific frequencies. The result – claims Zingali – is to keep the frequency response from 500Hz-20kHz within ± 1.5 dB of linearity, without the distortions and colorations inherent to horns.

I’d say they got that mostly right. Certainly the distinctive ‘quack’ coloration of most horn speakers is significantly reduced almost to negligible levels, and instead you get all the fun and room grabbing antics of a good horn with few of the downsides. The quack is still there, but mild enough for many to find it part of the charm of the Zingali sound, and even part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

No one would ever call the Zero Otto anything less than ‘colored’, but it seems to make its own rules here. In most cases, ‘coloration’ could be described as ‘adding its own character’, whereas here it could be considered ‘as opposed to monochrome’. This is music painted bright, and that makes a lot of more notionally accurate speaker designs sound dull and boring by comparison. It really doesn’t matter what you play through these loudspeakers... if there’s a musical spark, the Zero Otto will extract it and in many cases you’ll love it for doing so.

If the speaker sound can be summed up in a sound-byte, it would be ‘Tubby Fun’. This is the kind of speaker that almost inexorably makes one reach for the A-Z parts of your record collection, as in ‘AC/DC’ and ‘ZZ Top’. If

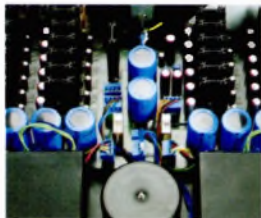
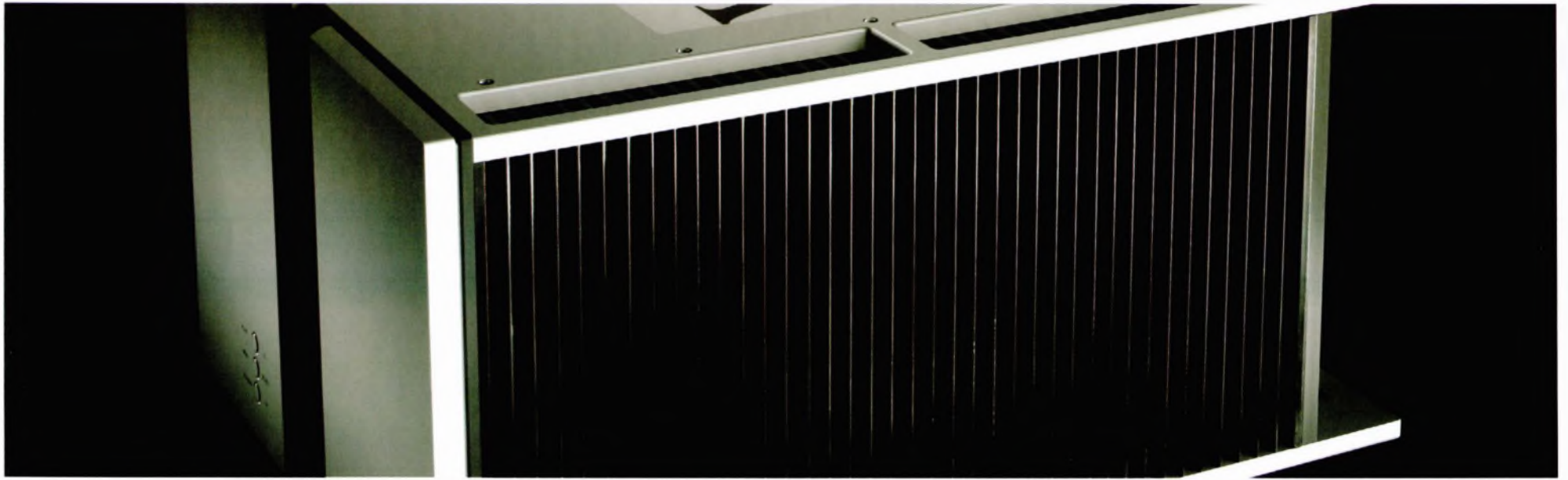
you listen to jazz, revise that by saying you’ll start pulling out those later John Coltrane albums and if classical yanks your chain, you’ll find a lot of Stravinsky gets put into the mix. Relatively soon into the listening process, the Zero Otto engages with the impassioned part of your musical brain and squeezes it hard. And – very likely – you will love it for doing so.

Yes, the mix is rich, adding a thickness to the upper midrange that you can never shake off, but it’s how you relate to that thickness will tell you – and tell you fairly quickly – how you are going to relate to the Zero Ottos. If you think “that’s inaccurate” or “I find that midrange ‘enhancement’ undermines the honesty I demand in my audio system” run, don’t walk, away from the Zingalis. They will do nothing for you. If, on the other hand, you think “well, they’re a bit plump round the middle, but who isn’t these days?” or “so what, they’re fun”, the Zero Ottos have you in their thrall. Enjoy the ride.

Other considerations aren’t exactly secondary, but they don’t flag themselves up quite as strongly as the dynamic and expressive presentation. In fact, I suspect all roads lead back to the dynamic and expressive presentation. There’s a horn-loaded stereo sensibility; imaging isn’t pinpoint sharp and wide like an electrostatic, but it is tightly focused gives a sense of presence and physicality to the sound. You’ll never own a set of Zero Otto because you want to know what thickness reed the first clarinet likes to use, but once again the Zero Ottos excel at the bigger picture. The fascinating part comes with the twin audiophile concepts of microdynamics and inner detail; if you view the subtle changes within the music as the key to audiophile insight, the Zingalis acquit themselves relatively well, but if you view these elements as the path to musical cohesion and ‘in the pocket’ playing, then the Zero Ottos do a masterful job. ▶

E M O T I O N

E N G I N E



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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.



For digital formats, of course, we use Esoteric, so established as the de-facto standard in digital replay that other manufacturers use Esoteric transport mechanisms in their own CD/SACD players. The X-05 is the entry-level model of Esoteric's high-end one-box series, a perfect choice for any audiophile wishing to select a "final" CD/SACD player without spending a fortune. *The Absolute Sound* declared, "There aren't enough superlatives to describe this machine."

But did you know that Esoteric manufactures equally fabulous amplification components? The new E-03 phono stage, with two configurable inputs, a de-mag function, and "magnificent instrumental textures and vocal accuracy, fluidity and rhythm, expansive dynamics on large orchestral surges and tremendous litheness on instrumental flutters, with deep and resolved bass, extended and nuanced treble and imaging and staging to die for" (6moons.com), is certainly one of the finest phono stages on the market.



The C-03 linestage, "as good as I've heard," according to SoundStage.com, and the A-03 dual-mono power amplifier, "sonically superior to all other amplifiers I've had in my system" (SoundStage.com again), both beautifully crafted in sculpted aluminium, would form the bedrock of the highest of high-end systems.

There's even a massive four KT88 valve power amplifier, the A-100, that can also function as an integrated. "Only a handful of amplifiers on this planet are as revealing," raved *The Absolute Sound*.



And for smaller systems, the one-box RZ-1, a 100 W integrated amplifier with CD/SACD player, USB input for computer audio, and even an excellent moving-magnet phono stage, is a compact corker!

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▶ The speakers are not perfect at the frequency extremes. There are more extended, brighter trebles around and the 'tubby' part of the sound gives a fulsome bass, but not a particularly deep one. The speakers do reasonably well in the low bass (40Hz-80Hz) but the lowest note on a bass guitar (41Hz) and below that aren't distinct or particularly powerful. This might work to the Zero Otto's advantage in UK rooms, though.

What you get with the Zero Otto is not Zingali-lite. It retains all the effortless performance, the sheer exuberance for music, all the gusto and the ability to leave you breathless that you get from big Zingalis, with few downsides. OK, you don't get the scale, the depth of bass or the same kind of torrid relationship with music you get with the big ones. But, the Zero Otto retains that peculiar connection people get with all Zingali speakers – owners tend to talk about their speakers like they are happily married to them. They have their disagreements, their flaming rows and their moments of passion (I really don't want to examine this concept too closely), but they always stay together, and not simply for the sake of the satellites. I suspect it's why you so rarely see a pair of Zingalis come up on the second hand market.

Not everyone will want to engage in this kind of passionate affair with their audio equipment and their music. Many will prefer a more cerebral relationship

with their music, while others seem content to run through a secession of quick knee-tremblers with a variety of speakers instead of settling down for the long haul. The Zero Otto is not the speaker for the many, but for those who get it, nothing else will do and the Zero Ottos won't just become your next set of loudspeakers, they will join the family. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

System Type: Tway Bass Reflex

Compression Driver: 25mm, with 25mm voice coil

Woofer: 2x 200mm drivers with 50mm voice coil

Horn: Omniray GZ8

Power RMS: 300W

Nominal Impedance: 6 ohm

Frequency Response: 32Hz-20kHz

Crossover Frequency: 1.2kHz (12dB/oct slope)

Sensitivity: 93dB (1W/1m)

Dispersion: 110° (6dB)

Dimensions (HxWxD): 116x25x38cm

Cabinet: 16mm and 30mm MDF

Finish: matt and hi-gloss lacquer

Weight: 28kg per loudspeaker

Price: £3,990 per pair

Manufactured by: Zingali

URL: www.zingali.it

Distributed by: The Music Room

URL: www.music-room.com

Tel: +44 (0) 141 333 9700

Small Wonder...



Focal XS 2.1 multi Media Speaker System *By Roy Gregory*

Spend any time in the bar at a hi-fi show and sooner or later, the conversation (either the one you are having, or the one next door) will turn to the vexed question of attracting new blood to what is in danger of becoming a dying industry. As levels in the beer and whisky glasses drop the full spectrum of devils incarnate and bêtes noires will put in their expected appearance. Everything from the internet to MP3, X Factor to Simon Cowell, the iPod to the Xbox will be wheeled out and ritually slaughtered while the assembled sages slip slowly under the table. After all, it's not in the spirit of pub philosophy to look too close to home.

There are undoubtedly many things wrong with the hi-fi industry, a number only exceeded by the range of possible solutions, a situation that only encourages the pointing of fingers in any direction as long as it's out of the particular tent you happen to be sitting in. But amidst the fog of blame and recrimination one fact stands like a beacon: make the right product and you'll sell them in droves.

Exhibit one – the Tivoli radio.

Exhibit two – the B&W Zeppelin.

And here's a sobering reality for you – the value of B&W's sales on the Zeppelin exceed their total sales on the 800 series speakers; yep – all of them put together.

Now, before you get all bent out of shape pointing out that neither the Zeppelin nor the Tivoli should be considered hi-fi, it's their lesson I'm interested in, not their performance. What they demonstrate is that, as an industry, rather than trying to sell people the products we make, we should concentrate on making products that they might actually want to buy. Which brings us to the Focal XS 2.1 speaker system...

Open the single, beautifully presented box that the XS arrives in and inside you'll find a pair of tiny but suitably stylish (for which read techy) table-top speakers, complete with integral stands, together with a neat and extremely compact sub-woofer. Nothing particularly startling so far; in fact, you might think it depressingly reminiscent of all those "five in a box", sub-hi-fi surround systems that flooded the

market a few years back. Undoubtedly pretty to look at they were rather less pretty to listen too and yes, you could be forgiven for thinking that the XS 2.1 is nothing more than a sub-standard 5.1 set up shorn of three speakers; forgivable maybe, but still a major mistake.

What sets the XS apart are its connectivity and its performance. Look a little closer at the base of the "master" satellite and you'll see, as well as volume controls and an on/off button, the familiar slot of an iPod dock. Round the back there's a micro USB input and a socket that accepts a 3.5mm stereo jack. Apart from a switch to select between the USB input and iPod dock, that's all you get – and that's really the point. This isn't a hi-fi system with a token iPod or USB input "to include the kids". The XS 2.1 starts from the assumption that it only needs to deal with two kinds of source: an iPod or a computer (whether that's a lap-top, a desk-top some kind of Playstation). And before you get all hot and bothered again just pause to remind yourself that when it comes to hi-fi, source quality is king – and that an iPod is just a portable hard-drive/server, and that as we are all (slowly) starting to acknowledge, file types matter, and that horror of all horrors, if you save music files in the right format and play them back with the appropriate care (that would be the same level of care that we lavish on CD and vinyl replay) they sound pretty darned good!

So what the XS 2.1 actually represents is a serious dollop of Focal's undoubted acoustic expertise, shoe-horned into a package that will work with tomorrow's source components, in a size and at a price to match. And make no mistake about this – the XS is easily capable of real hi-fi performance. Yes, you can get silly about it and start playing hi-res downloads from Pure Music software, but what is really impressive about this little system is that you don't need to go to those lengths. Plain WAV files replayed via iTunes sound great, the speakers' lively, dynamic character bringing welcome life and energy to the music. The sub is easy to position and adjust for decent integration and pretty soon, you simply forget about it – which is exactly how it should be. But the real kicker is that even the much maligned MP3 sounds so much better than you



“JLS will always sound like JLS, but the critical thing is the XS makes them sound way, way better than the headphones on an iPod.”

think it's going to; engaging and interesting, musical with a real sense of depth and weight. Of course, the XS can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear and JLS will always sound like JLS, but the critical thing is that the XS makes them sound way, way better than the headphones on an iPod, or the sort of computer speakers that go for £80 at PC World. And when I say "Way better" you'd better believe it. It's exactly the sort of jaw-dropping difference we all want to demonstrate to "the next generation of customers" – with the major difference that it works with their music, played from the sources they use and it comes in a package that isn't just available, it's one they might actually consider buying! But then you don't need to take my word for it...

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hi-fi+

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MICHAEL FREMER - JUNE 2011 issue

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▶ TESSA'S VIEW

I am currently in my first year at university, living in halls of residence. I grew up in a family that takes its hi-fi very seriously, forever being told off for venturing too close to those enticing holes in the speakers. I have had to sit through many a listening session, trying to hear the difference between these speakers and those speakers, this black box or that one, but I still can't say I understand the first thing about hi-fi systems! The problem now is that I never appreciated how good the hi-fi system was at home until I arrived at university and decided to listen to some music on my favorite new toy, a shiny new laptop. Even I could conclude that the sound quality was atrocious. Half of the music and all of the depth and weight that I should be hearing seemed to be missing: Clearly something needed to be done!

I own an iPod and thought about buying an iPod dock, however I would not be able to use this to deliver sound whilst watching films. I also didn't need the system to be portable. Ideally I needed something that could double up as an iPod dock and speakers for my laptop. I live in a cupboard-sized room so anything I bought would have to be small. I would also be using them constantly, as being a student I spend more time listening to music and watching films than actually studying. Having more or less decided on a trip to PC World for a set of extension speakers, I casually mentioned my listening needs in earshot of "the grown-ups". If only I'd known how easy it was to get their attention! The intense (and intensely boring) discussion of carbon-fibre bicycle frames just stopped and suddenly I was the subject of silent and equally intense scrutiny. After much debate, judgment was passed; apparently, what I needed was a set of Focal XS loudspeakers. Very cool and very French – at least, that's what it said on the internet. They cost more than I wanted to spend but seemed like a good long-term investment (especially as the recommendation was coming from the principal source of funds and with three more years of college, I'll need all the Christmas hand-outs going). And if I'm going over budget I want something that will be reliable and last more than a few terms.

I soon discovered that the speakers are just as stylish and neat as they look on the web, and take up very little space – which is just as well! The subwoofer is larger but still fits easily under a desk. The angled speakers line up perfectly with your ears when sitting at a desk. They also sound amazing. Better than I would have thought possible for something so small! The remote control is magnetic and can be stuck to the speakers so it doesn't get lost. To play music from an iPod you just have to plug it into the dock on the base of the right hand speaker. While plugged in your iPod charges itself, and with the flick of a switch you can sync your iPod with the iTunes library on your laptop. A push button on the back of the control/dock base switches between the iPod and the computer input. The system is very easy to use and the integration between iPod dock and laptop/hi-fi system is seamless. My only complaint is that the buttons that control the volume (also on the base of the right-hand speaker) need to be pushed quite hard. They could be easier and a bit more precise to use.

Most people in my flat of 20 believe that the louder the bass and bigger the speakers, the better the sound is going to be. Everyone was very surprised at how brilliant the Focals actually are. A few people have even asked if they can get some too. The only downside is that I now have to put up with people in my room watching films all the time, as I have the best sound!

I could dissect the performance of the XS speakers; I could subject them to the sort of back-handed critique that snooty hi-fi magazines usually bestow on the latest budget pretender that tries to teach us a thing or two. But that would be to miss the point (the same point we've been missing for a decade or more). The target audience clearly gets it, and somewhat to my surprise, so do I. As I write this, Neil Young's *Prairie Wind* is playing through the XS, stored in the iTunes library of my iMac. The easy, loping rhythm of 'The Painter' is effortlessly infectious, Young's nasal vocal unmistakable and just as affecting as usual. Change pace to the empty hopelessness, the plaintive, layered vocals and fractured phrasing of 'No Wonder' and you are left in no doubt that Young has still got it. Nor would this most critical of artists be displeased with what I'm hearing; there's no missing the message here. To paraphrase the good doctor, "It's hi-fi Jim – just not as you know it!" +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

System Type: Active 2.1 channel sub/sat system, with Burr-Brown USB DAC

Amplification: 2x30W (spkrs), 70W (sub)

Dimensions (HxWxD): 32x9x15cm (spkr) 26x23x37cm (sub)

Weight: 9.4kg

Price: £380

Manufactured by: Focal

URL: www.focal-uk.com

Tel: +44 (0)1420 476767



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Trilogy 907 phono stage

By Jason Kennedy

Trilogy is one of the hidden gems in the British hi-fi business. Founder Nic Poulsen has been working far too many hours for far too long producing superbly built and finished products to deserve the relatively low profile that the company appears to have. His Isol-8 products are possibly better known than the Trilogy electronics that have been around for so much longer.

Nic started off making pure valve amplifiers that were distinctively finished in chrome, his hybrid amps today are even more unusual looking as a result of the lustrous Chameleon paint finishes that the company offers. It's possibly because he goes in for such strong aesthetics and puts them in his advertising that Trilogy has not had the success it deserves. The hi-fi enthusiast in the UK and US is a pretty conservative beast and likes his hardware to look as traditional as possible if the big brands are anything to go by.

As the subject of this review reveals, the default finish on Trilogy electronics is bead

blasted natural aluminium, a pretty safe look one would imagine and possibly the angle that will raise the company's profile. I don't know if there will be space to include a picture of the 907 phono stage's chassis before its filled with electronics, because that alone is enough to inspire confidence in the product. The chassis is milled from solid aluminium billet in much the same style as megabucks products from some of the most fashionable names in the business, yet this is a sub £2k phono stage. It's a beautiful piece of engineering that seems almost excessive given its price point, but solidity confers enough advantages to make its addition to the final cost worthwhile. Fundamentally an incredibly stiff chassis like this will keep resonance to a minimum and acts as a very effective heat sink for what is after all a small amplifier. When you are dealing with the pitifully weak signal that comes out of a moving coil cartridge even small amounts of vibration in the amplifier and EQ stage will have a detrimental effect on the end result. The casework is also machined to provide screening of the incoming DC supply prior to LC filtering (inductor and capacitor).

The power supply design owes a debt to valve technology because it uses shunt regulation rather than the series regulators usually found in solid state supplies. Nic prefers shunt regulators because of their ability to not only source current but to absorb it as well, and when they are heavily biased into class A they have plenty of voltage headroom to deliver this current to the gain ►

“An incredibly stiff chassis like this will keep resonance to a minimum and acts as a very effective heat sink.”



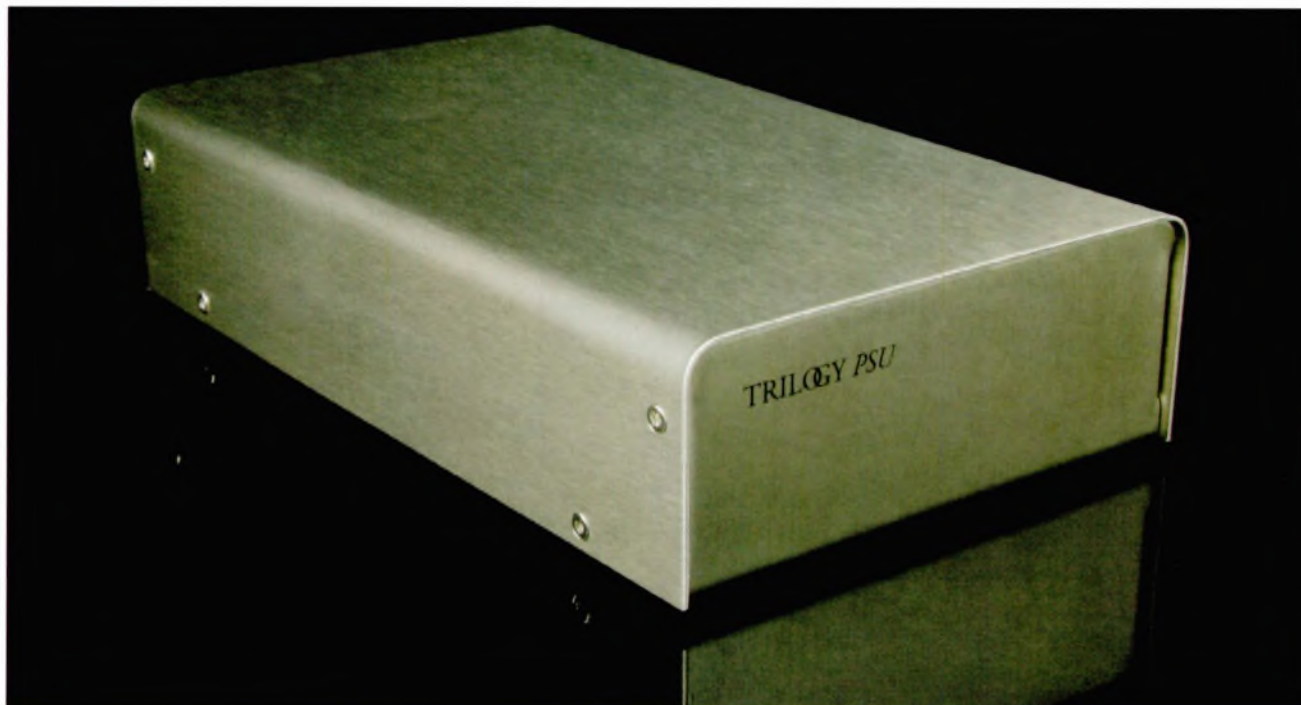
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▶ stages. The relatively noisy part of the power supply is housed in a separate and rather less elaborate stainless steel case in order to keep magnetic fields at bay. Here you can find a custom toroidal mains transformer in a copper faraday screen that feeds a choke input supply for minimal electrical noise. The DC supply cable is fixed at the phono stage end and connects to the PSU with a locking DIN plug. You know the stage is on because a pair of blue lights glows underneath the front in a style reminiscent of custom cars, they are not merely for style however and actually bias the class regulators).

The actual gain and EQ is done by two independent channels in the machined billet case using fully discrete components and precision matched input transistors. It is naturally a class A amplifier with no global feedback and variable gain, impedance and capacitance that can be adjusted with dip switches on the underside of the case. My only complaint here is that you need the manual in order to set impedance and capacitance, gain level is indicated in the graphics but the other settings would be

very difficult to guess at if you lost the manual. But it's very flexible with 12 combinations of impedance/resistance and four of capacitance. You will have guessed from this that the 907 can accommodate both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges.

Installation is unusual because of the parallel nature of the in and output sockets, this reflects the dual mono nature of the gain stages inside and is easily addressed by actually reading the legends on the back.

Nic builds amplification that is geared toward musical engagement first and foremost with resolution of detail being a useful by-product. So his products are not hyper detailed or geared toward making a spectacular first impression, rather you come to appreciate their qualities by degrees and so it was with the 907. First I noticed the quality of bass playing on Ian Dury's *New Boots and Panties*. Chaz Jankel is a very nimble player with a surprisingly funky approach for someone in what was almost a punk band. There is plenty of detail and it's extremely good at pulling out spatial information but you are constantly distracted by the music and the way it's played. Apply yourself however and it's apparent that it achieves this by bringing out the dynamics, the life in the recording and revealing the attack and decay of each note. These qualities allow you to hear the acoustic on Rickie Lee Jones' *Flying Cowboys* without emphasising the slight struggle she has in reaching the high notes. In fact I wonder whether that sense of stress might have been emphasised by other phono stages whereas this one plays it straight.

It's every even handed and capable of delivering a sense of acoustic solidity in both the highs and lows, this gives the image a fantastic sense of perspective. The space around each instrument and voice in a good recording means that the soundstage opens up and each musician's contribution is easier to appreciate. Good stereo recordings are remarkable things, far more convincing than so-called 3D TV where even electronic glasses can't fool you into perceiving real depth the way that closing your eyes and listening with vinyl and a phono stage of this calibre can. ▶

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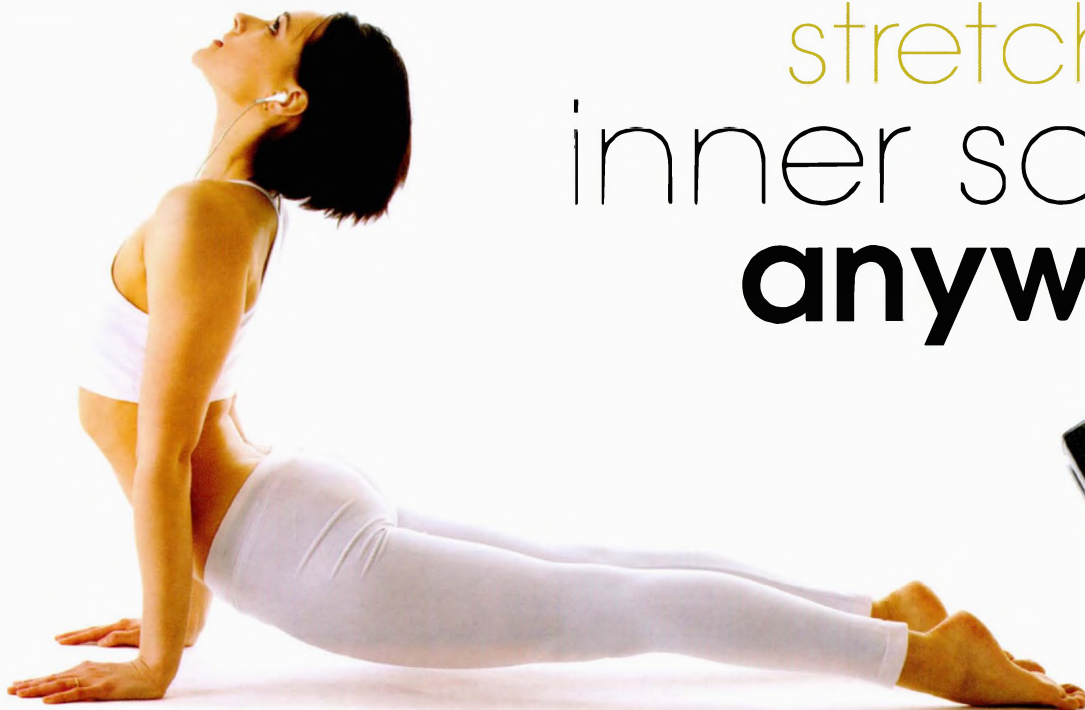
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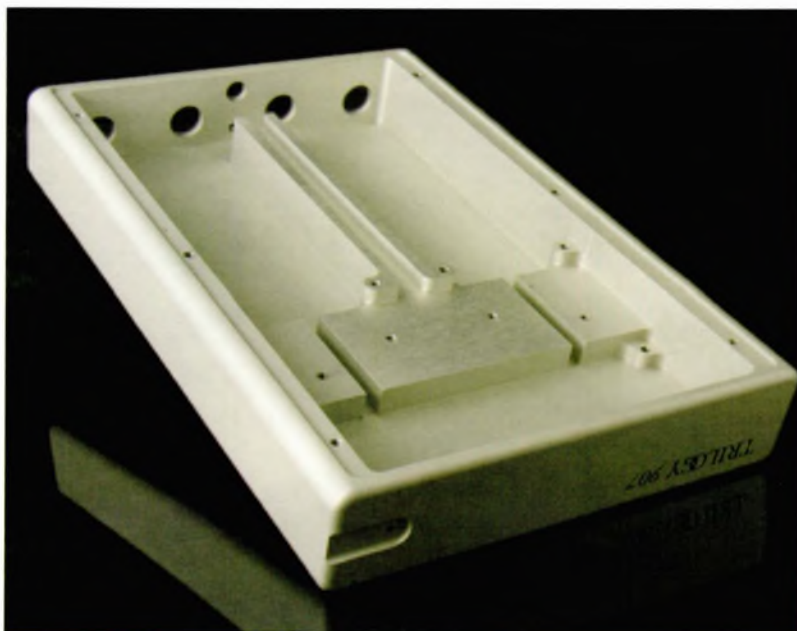
▶ The 907's strength is its dynamics and timing both of which are premium class, this means that there's never any shortage of power in the sound, but it's clean and refined power, directly proportional to what's on the record. It doesn't quite have the transparency of some more expensive alternatives; I had the opportunity to compare it with Leema's rather good Agena stage which is nearly twice the price (£3,495), which has considerably more features and greater subtlety but is no more musical. A recent repressing of the Grateful Dead's *Blues for Allah* on Audio Fidelity offered up truckloads of inner detail when played on the SME 20/3A with a Van den Hul Condor cartridge. Revealing that most laid back of bands to be more than capable of laying down a tight, sinuous groove when it felt the urge. The way that the bass is both muscular, fluent and tight is particularly entertaining when the musicians are this good. Who'd of thought that hippies could be so on the ball!

With the slightly hyped bass on Mofi's pressing of Little Feet's *Waiting for Columbus* the Trilogy manages to avoid letting the sound get bogged down and draws out the dynamics and rich detail across the band. It reveals records like this to be rather better than previous experience had suggested, maybe the Mofi balance isn't so bottom heavy after all. As I had a Brinkmann Bardo

turntable with the 10.5 arm and EMT Ti cartridge at the same time I gave it a spin with the 907, a move which revealed the totally different character of that front end with ease. I'll save the whys and hows for a Bardo review next issue but suffice to say that with this stage there was no danger of confusing these two heavyweight contenders, the 907 may be supremely musical but how musical does of course depend on the signal it's given to work with.

I also tried it with a rather more affordable player in the form of Rega's new RP3 with an Elys 2 MM cartridge on board. Rega has a similar approach to Trilogy in wishing to present the music in front of the sound and this unlikely pairing proved exceptionally entertaining. Not as revealing nor as refined as bigger turntables but thanks to the speed of the RP3 and it's lack of time smear it proved very easy to sit back and enjoy the music, unless that music was lively in which case sitting back was no longer an option.

The combination of build and sound quality in this Trilogy is way above what one usually encounters even at this price point. This is an exceptional phono stage that will do musical justice to the most aspirational of analogue front ends just don't expect audiophile fireworks – it's a whole lot better than that. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Size HxWxD: 907 - 38x150x220mm, PSU - 57x132x225mm

Weight: 907 - 2kg, PSU - 2.85kg

Input impedance: 70 Ohms - 47 kOhms in 8 steps

Input capacitance: 100pF - 420pF in 3 steps

Gain: 50dB, 64dB or 70dB

Output impedance: 150 Ohms

Price: £1,895

Distributor: Symmetry

Tel: 01727 865488

URL: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Manufacturer: Trilogy Audio

URL: www.trilogyaudio.com

Bricasti M1 digital converter

By Alan Sircom

The Apple iPhone is a great device, but as a telephone it can suck at times. So, when the UK agent called and suggested I review the new Bricasti, I heard 'Rick Astley' and I thought I was being Rickrolled (the YouTube phenomenon of setting up a video supposedly on one topic, only to have the hapless viewer end up watching the video of 'Never Gonna Give You Up'). The first minute of that phone call was an exercise in audio surrealism.

In fact, the M1 is the digital audio converter from top-notch pro audio brand Bricasti. The name may be relatively new to our side of the fence (it's a part-portmanteau; 'Bri' from Brian Zolner – a 20 year veteran of Lexicon – and 'Cas' from digital engineer Casey Dowdell), but to studio engineers Bricasti makes the M7, the Holy Grail of digital reverb units. So the M1 commands some serious respect around high-end console circles. It's also the company's crossover product; a more consumer-oriented affair, but still a DAC commanding heavy-grade kudos in pro settings.

The pro heritage extends to the build, both inside and out. It's built to take the sort of punishment no audiophile would ever put their equipment through – thick black anodised aluminium chassis with laser etched markings and a thick front and rear panel, PCBs made of ceramic-filled Teflon over fiberglass, dual mono right down to separate power supplies (each with its own toroidal transformer) for each channel and so on. It does radiate some heat and this is kept at bay by some larger than usual vents in the top cover, but this is a less finger-shredding option than fat heatsinks on either side. Whatever, it's all business.

That 'all business' approach is pivotal to the whole Bricasti M1 design. Each side has its own Analog Devices AD1955 Delta Sigma converter in mono, eschewing any volume, sample-rate converters and off-the-shelf filtration options, preferring instead Direct Digital Synthesis clocking and Bricasti's own filters, run from an Analog Devices Sharc DSP chip. The six-button, dial and display front panel allows the user to scroll through options, including the range of digital inputs and picking one of seven filter options. 'Input' racks through the transformer-isolated AES/EBU, coaxial and optical S/PDIF, while there is a second BNC 'S/PDIF' marked 'Aux' that can also double-up as a word clock input for anyone wanting even more accuracy than the Bricasti delivers. It outputs to single-ended phono and balanced XLR alike.

The elephant in the room today is the absence of computer audio inputs. This is a deliberate measure on Bricasti's behalf as it thinks the current state of the USB and FireWire art simply isn't good enough from a musical aspect to pass muster. The reason is simple; USB hasn't been that reliable at anything in excess of 96kHz sampling rates, and the Bricasti supports 192kHz

sampling from all its inputs. It's not alone in its dismissal of USB and its ilk – Devialet also sports no computer-side inputs either – but for a 2011 DAC in the domestic market, this might be one omission too far. That said, the use of an aftermarket converter (the logical one being the Weiss INT202 FireWire-AES/EBU or coax break-out box) is not beyond the bounds of possibility. Rumours abound of a USB-type input soon anyway. I used the coaxial, toslink and AES/EBU output of the perfectly serviceable (although now discontinued) Lyngdorf CD-1 to feed the Bricasti.



EQUIPMENT REVIEW / BRICASTI M1 DIGITAL CONVERTER

This is not a fussy, audiophile-chummy DAC with all the attendant hoo-hah that brings. Turn it on, play music, turn it off again. No break-in time, perhaps a few minutes between power up and sounding at its best (think warmth; when the top plate is warmer than your hand, it's either ready to play, or it's switched off and you have hypothermia).

The filter options are fascinating. There are seven of them, which depending on your level of OCD can either be used ad-hoc for every disc you play, adjusted different resolutions and sampling rates, or 'set & forget'. Filters '0' and '5' are halfband filters with 6dB of attenuation at Nyquist frequency, Filters 1-3 are 20kHz bandwidth with stop-band at Nyquist frequency, with respectively a standard slope, a gentler and a steeper slope, and '4' and '6' being low delay and full attenuation at Nyquist, with the final filter kicking in at 18kHz. Put simply, leave '0' and '5' out of the game, '1' seems best for general use, '2' works well to compensate for too much Rick Rubin when he's recording metal-heads and for systems that can tend toward brightness, while '3' is best used to add some energy to listless systems and too much Rick Rubin when he's recording geriatrics. I could never quite get my head around '4' and '6', and in fairness, I set it mostly to '1', which worked well in context.

Given that initial mix-up, I was so tempted to kick off with some Rick Astley. Fortunately, I don't have any Rick Astley CDs, I don't know anyone who owns any Rick Astley CDs and I would make it a priority to 'defriend' anyone who

confessed to owning a Rick Astley CD, both on Facebook and in real life (I really don't have it in for Ricks, and I'm sure Messrs Astley and Rubin are fine, upstanding citizens in the flesh). So, instead I ploughed through the usual suspects. And quickly stopped.

You see, this much detail doesn't come along all that often, and can be unnerving. The level of clarity that came off disc was at times frightening. Forget the Rick Astley discs, try Mahler's Eighth, the classic Solti version on Decca. This is something of a torture test, because the opening bars are unutterably dynamic, and require a system that can also show up any potential shortcomings in the detail, because a really good DAC can give the orchestra a sense of layering and delineation ▶



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▶ between the orchestral sections, while anything less presents you with a series of musical 'blocks'. Here, that sense of layering was perfectly conveyed, as if there really was an orchestra shoe-horned into a living room in London. And that it did that without any sense of dynamic shortcoming marks the Bricasti out as something exceptional, even in a very DAC-oriented world. The dynamic presentation is uncanny, as it makes your system sound that bit more powerful, and no DAC is supposed to do that.

Another thing a DAC is never supposed to do is make your system sound faster, unless it's faking the depth of bass on offer. And this one's not faking; those opening pedal notes were a clear and present danger to trouser legs everywhere. But it's still fast sounding. Fast and full of boundless energy. I'm not one for audiophile recordings, but play something really well recorded (like The Joni Letters by Herbie Hancock on Verve) and you and you hear more than just bland musicianship in a nice space, you get the energy behind the project, and the reason why the individual singers selected the tracks they settled upon. The more you listen to the Bricasti M1, the more you realise it's not fast sounding; it's that most other DACs sound slow by comparison. It's about that time that you also realise that digital really doesn't get much better than this. The M1 hit the ground running, and it's up to many of the existing big names in our digital business to keep up.

The thing about the Bricasti M1 is what it features is so good, you can't help be drawn into the sound, and what it misses you start to feel is unimportant. It's a DAC, not a headphone amp, so why should it come with a headphone amp. Ditto, remote, preamp stage, phase inversion button. All of these things omitted from lesser DACs would be potential deal-breakers (OK, probably not phase inversion) but here they are shrugged off with a 'Meh!' because the basic sound quality is so exceptionally good.

The Bricasti M1 enters one of audio's most hotly contended markets, facing competition better known within the hi-fi industry from above and especially below. Nevertheless, the precision and sheer detail of the sound it delivers puts it right at the top table of high-end DACs. Don't expect magic, but you do get fireworks. This is a DAC that places honesty and directness above all other attributes. It deserves a high commendation. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Digital Inputs: XLR: AES/EBU 24 bit Single Wire

BNC: S/PDIF/Clock

RCA: S/PDIF

Sample Rates AES, SPDIF, AUX in: 44.1 kHz, 48 kHz, 88.2 kHz, 96 kHz, 176.4 kHz, 192 kHz

Jitter: 8 psec @ 48k / 6psec @ 96k

Balanced Analogue Outputs: XLR balanced (pin 2 hot)

Impedance: 40 ohm

Max output level: +22dBm

Min output level: +8dBm

Single-ended Analogue Outputs: RCA, Output Level: 2V RMS

D/A Conversion: 24 bit delta sigma 8x oversampling

Dimensions (WxDxH): 43x30.5x6.4cm

Weight: 5.4kg

Price: £5,995

Manufactured by: Bricasti

URL: www.bricasti.com


Distributed by: SCV London

URL: www.scvlondon.co.uk

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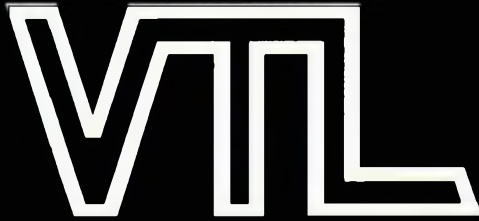




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NEAT XL6 LOUDSPEAKERS

By Malcolm Steward

For the past few weeks I have been living with the NEAT XL6, a particularly handsome looking floor-standing loudspeaker from the company's prestigious Ultimatum range. It has impressed me greatly and has more than lived up to the claim in the press release that accompanied it, which told me that it had been designed to offer "absolute technical, mechanical and musical integrity."

Those last two words in the sentence above have a special relevance here and explain why I have been a devoted fan of NEAT Acoustics' designs for a couple of decades: NEAT speakers have a rare and consistent musical empathy and 'rightness' about their presentation that can be absolutely spell-binding. This goes beyond what one magazine said in its highly positive review of the NEAT Petite SX, my favourite, compact, two-way, stand-mount and the direct descendant of the first NEAT loudspeaker, the pitch black Petite of 1989. The magazine opined that the SX "continued the trend of putting timing and dynamics ahead of all else." That, to me, suggests an imbalance in the performance, which is certainly not the case: NEATs blend all the vital attributes necessary to present music in the most plausible and engaging manner one can imagine.

"NEAT speakers have a rare and consistent musical empathy and 'rightness' about their presentation that can be absolutely spell-binding."

For many years I have lived with active speakers and there are precious few passive loudspeakers that I can tolerate for any length of time: NEATs are one exception to that rule, especially when they are bi- or multi-amplified with grippy and musically sympathetic power amplifiers; in my case, Naim NAP250s. That does not imply that the XL6 is a difficult-to-drive or particularly demanding loudspeaker: it performed quite contentedly driven by a single-wired SUPERNAIT/Hi-Cap or Creek 5350 integrated.

Everything about the construction of the XL6 positively shouts "class" and "quality" at you, right down the wooden packing crates in which these heavyweights (45 Kilos each) are delivered. By the time I had unpacked them, fitted their spiked support plinths, and put the empty cases in the garage I was ready for a shower and a beer – or, better still, a shower in beer! They are not especially large enclosures but they are heavy and not the easiest to manhandle: do not try taking them out of their crates or bolting on their plinths in a confined space: make sure you have plenty of room and preferably get someone to assist you.

The cabinet of the metre-high XL6 is not the usual MDF box that the majority of contemporary floor-standers employ: the main structure uses damped, 18mm, slow-growing, Birch plywood while the drive unit baffles are a substantial (45mm thick) sandwich of Birch ply, Polyethylene and fibreboard, which – being rigid and

non-resonant – the designer considers ideal for extracting the optimum performance from the drivers, of which four are visible while the two, isobarically-loaded, 168mm, floor-facing bass units are mounted within two discrete chambers occupying the lower portions of the main enclosure. The uppermost of these chambers is vented at the rear to fine tune the driver response.

Above these are the forward-facing visible units: the 168mm bass/midrange driver with its Aluminium phase plug, and the 26mm, modified, SEAS Excel, Sonomex, domed, high frequency unit. Each of these vents into its own, discreet, internal chamber, the mid-range section being rear-ported for optimal tuning. Completing the driver line-up is a pair of upward-facing, 25mm, EMIT planar/ribbon, super high frequency units both of which share a further, isolating internal chamber.

All six units integrate through a minimalist four major-element type crossover network (that is four elements along with damping and attenuating resistors). This network includes precise tolerance, low-loss, air-cored inductors and newly-developed Polypropylene film and foil capacitors. The design uses predominantly first-order slopes and mechanical roll-offs designed to deliver what NEAT describes as a "natural and uninhibited" performance.

Finally, these substantial cabinets are supported by steel 'outriggers' that usefully extend the footprint of the enclosure, and add some weight, to provide the speakers with a secure, stable footing and, in order to assist with convenient set-up, easy access to the spikes for accurate adjustment.

To achieve that "natural and uninhibited" sound the XL6 needs a thorough run-in, partly I would imagine, to free off the suspensions in all those drive units. NEAT suggests 200 hours or more, and expresses the opinion that the performance will continue to improve thereafter, so I left the review pair

running continuously for 10 days or so at a moderate volume setting with the uninterrupted feed from an internet radio station.

In order to sound truly "natural and uninhibited", I consider that a speaker needs to be able to produce significant low frequency output, not in order simply to reproduce notes from a bass guitar or piano but so that it can convey the near inaudible presence of a mass of air moving, even slightly. For example, if you were to walk into a church blindfolded you could instantly visualize how large the interior was because of the presence of that mass of air and the effect it had on any sounds. The voice of a soprano, for instance, would appear totally different in that space compared to the character it would present singing in your living room. Without waffling like an AV subwoofer, which is as far as a speaker can get from "natural and uninhibited", the XL6 with its isobaric bass driver arrangement delivers those low frequencies and sense of 'air' convincingly.

While on the subject of 'air', another immediately striking function of the XL6 is its ability to cast a wide, deep, tall and open soundstage that refuses to be constrained by the enclosures. The speaker exhibited a keen spatial awareness, and placed instruments and voices precisely in their locations. Similarly, it was wonderfully adept at recreating the timbre and texture of instruments. It demonstrated both facilities acutely with the twenty-one percussion instruments featured in the Maurice Abravanel and Utah Symphony Orchestra recording of *Varèse Amériques*. This challenging composition subjugates melody and harmony and instead uses dramatic rhythms as contrasting elements rather than shifts of pitch. It takes an

exceptional loudspeaker to convey the power, dynamic contrasts and genuine musicality and merit of this magnificent work: the XL6 conveyed its majesty with remarkable ease and appeared to relish the diverse palette of tonal colour made available to it. I have heard very few other loudspeakers do justice to this music let alone render it with such inspiring authority. ▶



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HiFi+ - issue 69



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▶ Instrumental bass demonstrated power but resisted the temptation to hang around too long trying to make its presence felt. As with the rest of the frequency spectrum, the XL6 bass demonstrated commendable agility: it arrived, delivered its message, then receded quickly into inaudibility: there was no boom or overhang, and absolutely no sloppiness. The bass guitar and drums on Albert Lee & Hogan's Heroes' album *Like This* emphasized just how tight and controlled this speaker was at the low end.

Further up the spectrum, there never appeared to be any shortfall in the amount of detail the XL6 could convey: for example, it delivered a wholly accurate account of the effects on Albert Lee's Music Man guitar on "Runaway Train", conveying the character and tonality of the instrument with great fluency. This speaker has truly refreshing transparency and honesty that brings recordings such as this to life in a charmingly natural and artifice-free manner.

The latter quality is enhanced because the XL6 demonstrates remarkable speed: the way notes started and stopped was extraordinarily well defined and there was none of the time-smear one normally associates with a passive loudspeaker. This temporal clarity was not solely a function of the über-grippy Naim NAP250s: it was as equally noticeable when the speakers were being powered by a SUPERNAIT/Hi-Cap or Creek 5350 integrated through the scrupulous and revealing TelleriumQ Ultra Black speaker cables.

Vocal precision was astounding: Albert Lee sounded exactly as he had in concert. The harmonies on "Cryin' in the Rain" (on the *Like This* album) were brilliantly portrayed with the accompanying drummer's voice and phrasing as painstakingly etched as Lee's.

The XL6 exerted strict control without ever beginning to sound sterile or cold: even the cavernous, dub bass on Gov't Mule's "I'm a Ram" from the album *Mighty High* was as tight as a nut, and was complemented for impact by Matt Abts' wonderfully recorded drum kit. The sheer attack of his snare and crash cymbals was parting the hair of people walking by in the street. This was not a result of any 'loudness war' style mix, but just what happens when an engineer mikes up a kit perfectly for recording and the producer does not cringe and turn down the gain when the drummer lets rip and exploits the true dynamic range of his instrument.

However, while these elements are all admirable, the biggest strength of the NEAT XL6 was the way it stitched them together to create a cogent, meaningful, emotionally persuasive, musical performance that was never less than compelling. If the music itself did not impress you, the demonstration of how it was assembled, played, arranged, mixed and presented would. Having said that, I struggled to find music and recordings that I could not appreciate and find satisfying through the XL6. It is such a musically well balanced design that it draws listeners into performances and allows them to hear facets they might previously have missed: nothing so extreme as instruments that "weren't there before" but subtleties and nuances that affect the way a performance communicates. For instance it revealed that John Cale's *Fragments of a Rainy Season* was not just an "Art Rock" album so much as a collection of thoughtful, intelligent tunes with acoustic guitar or piano accompaniments that sometimes finished with an "experimental" flourish. The major appeal, though, were the lyrics and Cale's inimitable, impassioned delivery along with his sensitive accompaniments. The XL6 is one of those rare loudspeakers that seems able to 'read between the lines' and extract the maximum emotional impact from a song or performance. It transcends merely playing the tune

correctly and rewards the listener with much more; a far deeper, more profound insight into the music.

The technical prowess of the XL6 certainly delivers musical performances that are utterly captivating and enchanting: I frequently started out intending to audition a couple of tracks and wound up discarding my laptop and listening to the entire album instead. Reviewing hi-fi with these communicative abilities can be a very drawn-out process, not that I feel at all inclined to complain. As audiophiles, we buy hi-fi, I hope, to enjoy music and to be moved and inspired by composers and lyricists. So little hi-fi, regardless of who makes it or what it costs, truly achieves that aim. NEAT loudspeakers get far closer to that goal than the majority of their competitors. The NEAT XL6, in particular, when driven by an empathetic source and amplifier(s), moves the listener closer to the performance than virtually any other loudspeaker I have experienced to date. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Enclosure: 2.5-way, isobaric/reflex

Driver array: 168mm bass-midrange

168mm sub-bass [x 2]

25mm high frequency

Emit Ribbon super high frequency [x 2]

Sensitivity: 87/dB/1 Watt

Impedance: 6 Ohms

Recommended amplifier: 25-200 Watts

Dimensions (HxWxD) in cm: 100 x 22 x 37

Weight in Kilos: 45

Prices: £7,895/pr (standard finish)

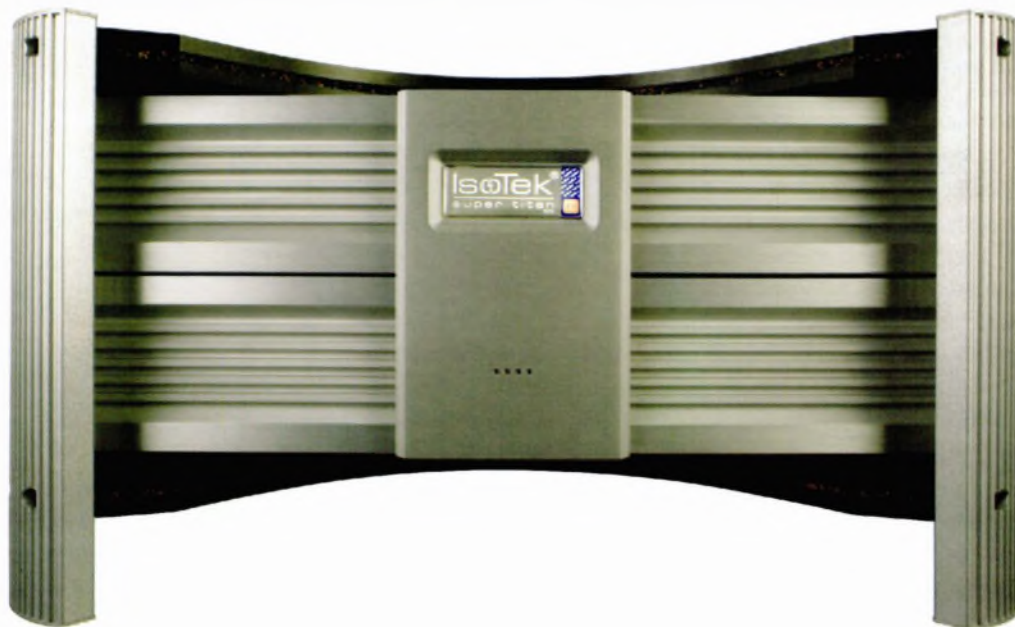
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



IsoTek EVO3 SuperTitan *By Alan Sircom*

The IsoTek SuperTitan is the Big Daddy of power conditioners. It's the size of a hefty power amp (a 30cm high, 50cm square of floorplan, weighing a healthy 30kg), needs to be fed from two 13A plugs, lays claim to delivering prodigious power and current. And it feeds just four outlets, with Neutrik 32A sockets. It even sits in its own isolation stand system, designed with help from Kurt Olbert of Clearlight Audio fame. It effectively doubles up the output and filtering of the previous Titan range topper and is the first product in IsoTek's new Ultra Reference Series of power products.

So it's a quartet of seven-stage filters, with a patented KERF symmetrical signal path, a Polaris-X crosstalk reducing network and a lot of protection. And it's designed to keep a lot of differential and common mode noise at bay. Principally, this is the kind of device that could smooth out the mains if you were sited next to Jodrell Bank and everyone else in your house liked to restore old ham radio sets and misfiring microwaves, even if your power amp was the size of an old Ford Hemi.

What it does is clean away a huge amount of hash, especially from the top end of the signal. It makes things cleaner and clearer. When you need it, it will make it a lot clearer, but it does so without impeding the dynamics of the sound one iota. This is in part what the Aquarius does for a lot less, but the SuperTitan does it a lot better and for a lot bigger amps.

An interesting experiment comes when you take a system with an existing Aquarius and drive that from the SuperTitan. In essence, this time you are conditioning the conditioner too. The best way to do this is to let the sources be fed by the Aquarius+SuperTitan and give the power amp to the SuperTitan on its own. You can rest the Aquarius on the SuperTitan if you have a set of RDC cones and feet, although this does slip and slide a bit. You've now got a monumental amount of conditioning and power reserve between source component and wall... and it works brilliantly. The clarity of the mids and treble make the system sound a lot better than you thought it did, even in places where the power feed is clean. It's like upgrading the whole system.

OK, at £5,995 for the SuperTitan, this is for the people with excellent systems they are already more than happy with but who would like to extract a whole lot more. It doesn't change the tonality of the sound or undermine the dynamics – so what you already own just gets better. **+**

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power Outlets: 4x silver-plated 32A sockets

Power Output: 7,360W continuous power, 35,500W transient power

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MAKING THE CONNECTION

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

EAT FORTE-S Turntable; Ikeda Tonearm; Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue cartridge

By Jimmy Hughes

Whatever you do, please take care if you have to lift a fully assembled EAT-Forte-S. It weighs in at a hernia-inducing 35kgs, and 15kgs of that is the massive 36cm diameter platter with vinyl mat. It's so *heavy*, you half wonder if it's stuck to whatever it's sitting on. Flimsy support stands? Forget it!

EAT stands for Euro Audio Team, and the company are based in the beautiful city of Prague. The Forte-S is the 'smaller' of two turntables they make, and S actually stands for, er, small. Do we detect a touch of irony here? Fact is, there's nothing 'small' about the Forte S. It's a *Monster* by any standards.

As previously mentioned, the platter weighs in at 15kg, and measures 36cm diameter. It's 6.5cm deep, and is made from alloy with Sorbothane damping. Given such

a heavy load, the centre bearing has to be pretty massive, and so it is – an inverted shaft, 2cm diameter, topped by a ceramic ball.

Due to the weight of the platter, premature bearing wear is a potential problem, as is rumble. To reduce both, the platter of the EAT Forte-S is partly supported on a 'cushion' provided by two powerful neodymium magnets. The massive plinth is damped with metal and sand, and supported by four adjustable magnetic feet.

Two AC synchronous motors are employed, each driving the platter via a silicon-rubber belt. Given the mass of the platter, you'd expect the motors to be hugely powerful high-torque designs. But, surprisingly they're not. Instead, EAT has deliberately plumped for a low-torque drive in order to reduce transmitted vibration.

Indeed, motor power is actually *reduced* once the platter reaches speed. The aim is for the huge mass of the platter to maintain momentum (in the manner of Nottingham Analogue); the motors simply keep it turning at the right speed. The intention is to achieve a smoother drive, reducing the 'cogging' effect one tends to get with AC synchronous motors.



▶ It certainly seems to work. The Forte-S sounds deliciously relaxed and effortless. Focus and detail are excellent; the overall impression is one of rock-like solidity and silky-smoothness. And we noticed something else – an *unforced smoothness* and *ease* perhaps sums it up best.

The music sounds graceful and natural. There's no sense of struggle or strain; the reproduction has a smooth flowing quality that is both effortless and beguiling. Now don't take that to mean the music lacks impact or presence – it's taut and immediate. Rather, there's an absence of equipment-added struggle and strain.

It's an almost impossible quality to describe. Only by auditioning the Forte S yourself will you understand and appreciate the point we're trying to make here. All we can say is - the music 'materialises' between the speakers; the physical mechanics of reproduction hardly seem apparent.

Our Forte-S came with the superb Ikeda 12in tonearm – a beautifully-crafted, well-engineered item costing around £6,500. This obviously played an important part in creating the smooth effortless sound delivered by the Forte-S. Even so, we'd say the turntable was the dominant factor here.

Hand-made in Japan, the Ikeda tonearm represents a luxury option for those wanting the best, and able to pay. It's a 12in design finished in bright beautiful chrome, with silky smooth bearings and a detachable headshell. While most Forte-S decks will ship with the cheaper Pro-Jekt Evo 12in arm (see main photo on page 63), the Ikeda is a gorgeous alternative.

The Forte-S is available in a choice of two high-gloss finishes; piano black, or a natural ebony wood finish called Makassar. There's a slight price premium for the latter; the piano black version costing £4,545 compared to £5,000 for Makassar. While the former looks deliciously cool and understated, the latter is more eye-catching.

Our cartridge was the superb Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue. Partnered with the superb Audio Research PH-8 phono stage and LS-27 line preamp, we heard a beautifully



smooth yet tactile sound – focused and highly detailed. Yet, despite delivering amazing detail, the overall impression was one of graceful ease.

This doesn't mean the music sounded soft-centred or lazy. On the contrary; it's taut, crisp and detailed. At the same time, there's an ease of delivery that so relaxed it's almost effortless. Voices and instruments exude a tangible 'real' quality that has the presence of a good live performance.

Pitch stability is absolutely rock-steady. Given a well-centred LP pressing even the most critical listeners will find the Forte-S hard to fault. Difficult instruments, like piano or guitar, showed no hint of pitch-wobble or wow. Listening, we were reminded of master-tapes or a good SACD.

However, we've yet to hear a digital source that combines incisive clarity and fine detail with such relaxed effortless precision. It's a difficult quality to express in words – partly because it's a slightly unreal mix of opposites. Like an exotic cocktail, ultimately, you have to experience it to appreciate what's being delivered. ▶



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▶ Surface noise is vanishingly low, and rumble completely non-existent. Four adjustable suspension feet pit opposing magnetic forces against each-other to suspend the heavy plinth from the surface that supports it. Being heavy and damped, the plinth transmits almost no vibration to the stylus, even when you tap it.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

EAT FORTE-S Turntable; £4,545 (£5,000 in Makassar)

Ikeda Tonearm; £6,500

Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue cartridge; £4,185.

Manufactured by Euro Audio Team

URL: www.euroaudioteam.com

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URL: www.absolutesounds.com

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Because power to the motor is reduced after 10 or 15 seconds, the platter may not reach its proper operating speed from a standing start. We therefore found it helpful to give the platter a quick spin by hand. Once up to speed, the platter rotates with near-perfect precision, delivering a smooth ultra-stable result.

Really good turntable/arm/cartridge combinations always seem to produce results greater than the sum of the parts, and the EAT Forte-S is no exception. It delivers the focus and precision one associates with digital sources, while giving the relaxed ease and openness only obtainable from good analogue.

It's capable of producing holographic 'out of the speaker boxes' soundstaging that projects with impressive immediacy. The sound has impressive fine detail and clarity, yet – like a gifted gymnast going through a difficult routine – it has the knack of making everything seem easy and effortless.

The EAT Forte-S offers genuine 'high-end' turntable performance at a surprisingly affordable price. It's built like the proverbial battleship, and should last a lifetime. While partnering it with items like the Ikeda arm and a Koetsu raises the total price, it could of course be paired with less-expensive alternatives.

Inevitably, absolute standards of performance would diminish, but overall the smooth 'effortless' sense of ease we've mentioned should still be apparent. Such qualities are down to the turntable; the rock-solid foundation provided by the Forte-S gives any arm and cartridge a near perfect platform. +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Organic Audio cables *By Alan Sircom*

Even for a magazine with no upper limits to the price of products we review, Argento Audio cables do hit the 'sharp intake of breath' regions. The all silver, profoundly high-end cables are beautifully made and presented, but at nearly £5,000 for a single metre of Flow Master Reference, they aren't an everyday purchase for most folk. Even the 'entry-level' Serenity cables are in practice beyond many audiophiles, especially in today's market.

Ulrik Madsen from Argento clearly recognised this, because he recently founded the Organic Audio cable brand, which is claimed to bring much of the performance of Argento's Serenity range of cables but at roughly half the price. It does this by using pure copper in place of pure silver, and by using Serenity's cryo-treated, hyper-elliptic edgeless quasi-ribbon conductor design. Serenity costs less than Flow because it uses a less complex geometry, less silver and takes less time to make; however, liberated from the sheer cost of wrangling silver, the Organic Audio designs can sport the same custom made plugs, this time with silver-plated pure copper contacts (as befits the design). Both RCA and XLR connectors are designed and made by Argento Audio and incorporates a patented method for increasing contact pressure. All parts of the connectors are machined in high precision Swiss CNC-laths. The exterior of the plug is coated, so hopefully there's no chance of ending up with verdigris terminals in the future. We spent 10 months exposing the Organic Audio cables to the atmosphere to investigate their tarnishing properties, and have no tarnishing to report.

Organic Audio claims these to have somewhere between 4-8x lower resistance than the bronze or brass parts used in lesser plugs. They are also a tight fit – deliberately so, to lower contact resistance – getting close to an almost locked tight WBT plug. They also look cool, too! The legends are a bit

tough to read, because 'L', 'R', the little broken 'o' logo and the directionality arrow are all simply engraved on the copper of the plug itself, but that only adds to the minimalist charm. Possibly.

The cables are wrapped in a gunmetal grey fibre weave. Inside, porous and low weight are used, which means air is the primary dielectric but at same time the cable is also very well dampened unlike your typical air-dielectric cable. The net result is reduced microphony and very low dielectric absorption. Should you feel inclined to wash your cable the thin layer of polymer between the outer sleeve and the interior fibres will prevent the cable from getting seriously wet (more relevantly this layer also prevents moist air getting absorbed into the cable). The cables are exquisitely made, and relatively flexible for a little-finger thick design, and come packaged in soft circular zip-up bags, akin to the kind of things in which drummers keep their cymbals.

From my limited exposure to Argento cables, they are silver cables that don't sound like silver cables. Funnily enough, Organic Audio cables are copper designs that don't sound like copper designs. They just sound like music. We had a complete set from mains plug to speaker socket (although the two-pin Euro plugs prevented too much review expended on the power cords).

There seem to be two kinds of cable in high-end. The first forms part of a synergistic, systematic approach that spells a gradual migration to one brand of cables in order to gain something more than offered by the sum of the parts. Organic Audio cables don't work that way. They simply sound good in and of themselves. Yes, they sound good enough that you may well migrate to all Organic Audio in order to get the same 'good' apply throughout, but the drive is 'this is a bloody good cable' on its own, instead of 'consider this cable the start of a beautiful friendship'.

- ▶ But what kind of 'bloody good' exactly? It's all about music and detail. In particular, they are adept and separating out the individual instruments in the band, whether that band be a rock power trio, a jazz quartet or the whole Hallé throwing itself at the Dream of Gerontius. This should suggest excellent stereo separation, but it's more than that; the instruments are physically and temporally separated from one another, not simply layered. Strangely, it's often not the instruments or even the ambience that highlight this. Instead, it's the little things, the polite applause from the audience, that dropped manuscript that falls to the floor on bar six, the shuffling of feet and the tube-trains running under the hall. Your attention

PRICES

Organic Audio phono-phono: £495/1m pair

Organic Audio XLR-XLR: £535/1m pair

Additional length XLR or phono: £75/0.5m pair

Loudspeaker cables (spade lugs): £710/1m stereo pair

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Manufactured by: Organic Audio, Allingvej 55 8600

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is not drawn to them, but your attention is enhanced by their heightened presence thanks to all that detail. It's almost like your flight-or-fight mechanism kicks in, but in the 'you are there' way rather than a 'here comes a predator' response.

The detail here never once gets in the way. In truth, in many cases if the choice comes down to a cable that is so detailed that you lose sight of the music, or one that lacks fine detail, but is wonderfully musically communicative, I'd choose the latter. The great bonus to the Organic Audio cables is they join the select group that gives you both in equal helpings.

If I'd have to sum this cable up in one word, it would be 'chimeric'. You put it in one system, it brings that detail and musical insight out of that system, without altering the tonality of that system. Change it for another system, and the Organic Audio does the same, once again without any kind of tonal shift. It has taken some time to find a character that applies universally, but the nearest it gets is a touch of hardness in that ordered and controlled bass, while the top end isn't as clean and extended as some of the really top-flight cables (including Argento's own, I believe). But this seems like nit-picking, because what it does so well is that it doesn't purport to raise the performance of the equipment it is hooked to by imposing its own sense of tonality, just tease out the best in the devices in use.

While that holds universally across the range, I found myself most strongly drawn to the improvements brought about by the interconnect cables. The speaker wire made a similarly significant improvement, but the effect was not so marked as with the interconnects. The power cords are interesting, in that they potentially offer a similar grade of change as the speaker cables, but the lack of three-pin UK plugs in these early samples did hold extended listening back.

Like any good audio component, Organic Audio cables are handmaiden to the music. They are effectively invisible, just bringing out the reason why you started buying good audio in the first place... the music. +

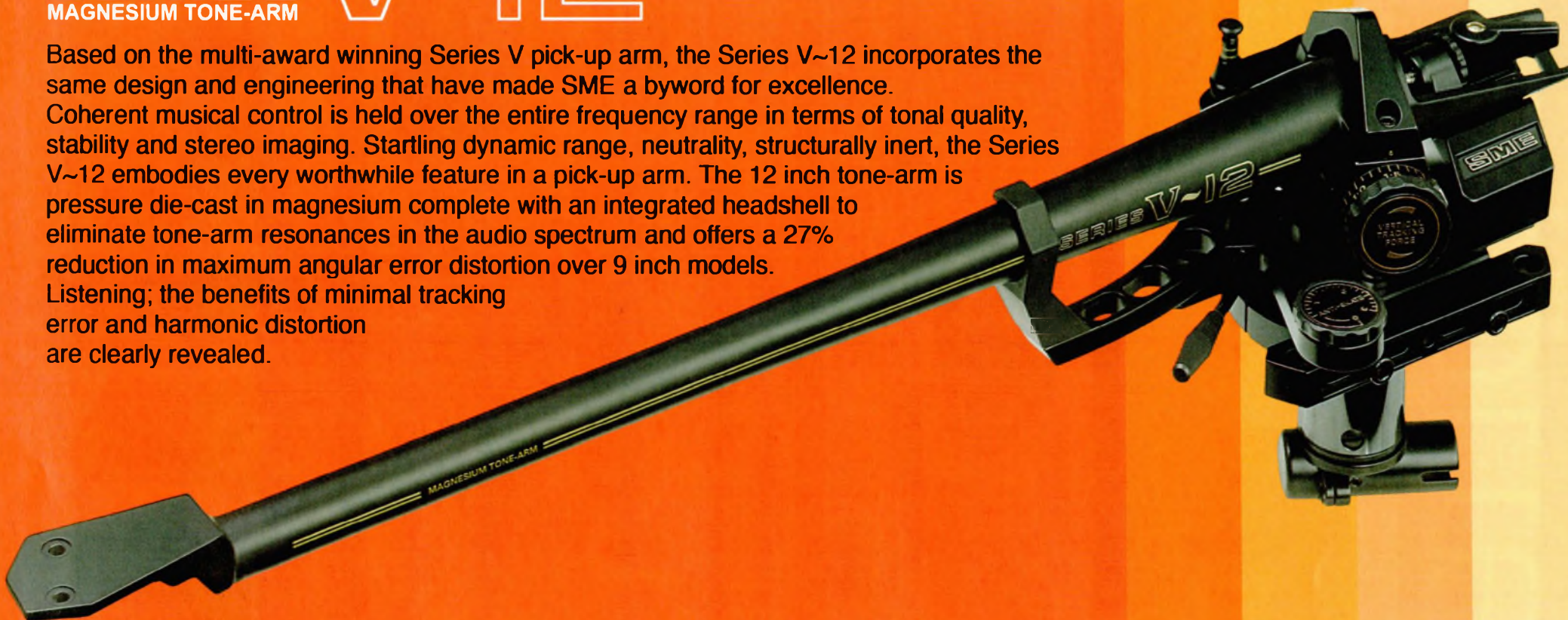
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Funk FXR II Tonearm

By Alan Sircom

The prefix 'tone' in the word 'tonearm' should be redundant, but almost never quite achieves that goal. It should be a 'no-tone-arm', because the last thing you want a pick-up arm to do is pick up some of its own tone. Trouble is, they all do; some ring, some sizzle, some clang, some go 'boing', some go 'sproingggg'; to a lesser or greater extent (fortunately, usually 'lesser') they all add tone to the sound of the vinyl replay process.

Meet the exception.

The Funk Firm FXR II is the least 'tone' tonearm out there. OK, those who think the key to better vinyl sound quality is a parallel tracking arm or a 12" arm might argue that they too have inherent lower distortion than any conventional 9" arm, but there's distortion... and distortion. Funk goes after the elimination of distortion in the shape of the resonance of the arm itself. Existing designs, no matter how light, or how inflexible they are end up putting resonant spikes into the sound, often smack bang in the all important midband. The FX design Funk developed is absurdly simple – imagine an aluminium straw with a carbon fibre X-shaped cross-bracing running along its length – but extremely effective. You end up with an low effective mass arm (just add weights to the headblock if you need it for higher mass MCs) with unheard of stiffness (think of what the cross-bracing does to your loudspeaker) and – as a consequence – lower resonance and arm flexure. The loudest part of the arm design is the sound of a dozen rival tonearm makers kicking themselves and saying, "why didn't we think of that?"

In the FXR II, Funk takes a standard Rega 301 and disassembles it, removes the arm tube, the plastic pillar is replaced with a machined one (itself a difficult job, because the pillar is moulded around the bearing assembly, everything is rebuilt, checked, with the new ABEC7 ball race pre-loaded, rechecked and the arm 'beam' (not tube)

is offered up, the casting machined to size, jigged and fixed in place, checked, cabled up, checked and checked again. No easy task. But it is easy to set up. The arm allows for VTA adjustment via a new collar and most cartridges only need overhang and the usual tracking force adjustment to get rolling.

There are several ways of looking at the FXR II, many of them dead wrong, in my opinion. There's the "it's just a heavily-modified Rega" way of thinking, which focuses on the vestigial Rega bits in the same way people are prone to classifying cars as identical if they use the same brand of brake pads. There's the "it's not built like a tank" way of thinking, which does have its place if you plan on using the arm for a spot of close quarter combat and there's the one that translates to "it doesn't sound like my old arm", which is just plain bonkers if you think it through.

The last exposes the problem Funk faces with the FXR II; the neutrality of 'neutral' can be a tough place for someone not really used to it. It often means that cartridge that you liked because it's warm and comfortable ends up sounding soggy and spongy, and you might end up with something far less ostentatious but far more honest that you would hitherto have laughed at. Sometimes, they make more sense than the top-table cartridge. That said, when you get a real beast of a moving coil (in all the right ways), you have one of those moments that makes you think that we were sold a digital pup many years ago. ▶



"The neutrality of 'neutral' can be a tough place for someone not used to it."



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“If you imagine how your cartridge might sound if the only thing holding it in place were the tonearm cables, that’s what the FXR II goes for and gets closer than everything I’ve heard to date.”



▶ If the initial neutrality can be daunting, give it time and you are justly rewarded for your endeavours. And the time is generally less than about five seconds. In that time, you’ll discover whether you like the sound of tonearms, or prefer the sound of vinyl. If it’s tonearm sound you are after, the FXR II will probably do absolutely nothing for you. If not, you’ll have one of those epiphany moments and wonder how you are going to find time to listen to all your records anew. Because that’s what it does. It makes your vinyl sound like you always expected it to sound. The curious thing is that it’s almost pointless for a reviewer to highlight aspects of records that show what the FXR II can do, because it’s more what it doesn’t do. Which is get in the way of the music; so no glare, no blare, no ringing, no singing and surprisingly little surface noise.

I’ve not heard every arm in Christendom and beyond. But I have heard a lot of them, some in review and some in private listening, often in the company of some exceptionally fine decks, cartridges and phono stages. And the short-form version of this is the FXR II takes every one of them outside and gives them a swift kick in the bearings. It’s in another league. It’s rare to be able to say a definitive ‘it sounds better’ in audio (usually we have to put up with some hefty qualification), but this does sound better. I’ve not heard an arm that puts up anything close to a challenge against this in neutrality terms. If you imagine how your cartridge might sound if the only thing keeping it in place were the tonearm cables, that’s what the FXR II goes for and gets closer than everything I’ve heard to date. The nearest I’ve heard to this level of un-arm sounding pickup arm was a Well-Tempered... and a curious bodge thing built out of used tongue depressors, cocktail sticks and monofilament fishing wire. That gets discounted on the grounds of the ‘used’ bit being a bit weird, but it sounded great!

The limits to it are few, given the attitudinal caveats mentioned above. I’d love to hear what the whole FX concept would sound like extended beyond the arm tube. Is the arm constrained by the Rega bits or are they all it needs? In so raising the game, would the return on investment really be good enough? In other words, is there something less to be had for more?

For the moment though, I can’t get enough of this Funky stuff and I can’t recommend this arm highly enough either. It’s a true ‘pick-up’ arm in a land of ‘tonearms’. If you can handle the truth, the FXR II is where you start to hear it. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Funk Firm FXR-II pick-up arm

Price: £1,200

Manufactured by: The Funk Firm

URL: www.thefunkfirm.co.uk

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music matters

By Alan Sircom

In a way, where you sit in the room defines as much about the sound quality as the room or the system itself. Your seat in the wrong place can end up with hearing too much or too little bass thanks to the nature of the room's axial modes, especially along the x-axis (length).

A few years ago, acoustics expert Les Wachot developed a nifty rule of thumb to place the listener in the position where x-axis modal disturbance is minimised. By sitting precisely 38% from the front or back wall in a room, you will manage to miss out on sitting in one of the peaks or dips from early order room modes. This has been adopted as a brute fact by many in the studio world, and suggesting anything solutions other than the '38% rule' is close to heretical thinking to many now.

There's good reason for this becoming part of studio acoustics dogma. It works. In most cases, the 38% rule does help eliminate the room's own modal peaks and troughs. It's not a panacea, and shouldn't be considered a commandment in the sort of tablet of stone way some studio builders consider the rule, but it is a successful, repeatable and working guideline to get the best possible sound in a room.

Several observations spring to mind. First, this applies irrespective of whether the loudspeakers are free-space, boundary or soffit (in-wall). It also applies whether you are sitting in the near-field (where the speakers are directly in front of you, and you sitting almost touching the drive units) or when the speakers are more than half a room away. In other words, it doesn't matter whether you are 38% from the front or back wall. Speaking of things behind you, it's best not to use a high-sided chair or sit very close to the rear wall, in order to prevent chaotic sound reflections known as comb filtering. Finally, this applies most directly to stereo loudspeaker set-ups; surround sound tends to change the sweet spot, because you have more y-axis (width) and even z-axis (height) modes to contend with.

While it might be heresy to some, my take on the 38% room is it's an excellent starting place, but be prepared to experiment. The experiment involves playing several pieces

“While it might be heresy to some, my take on the 38% rule is it's an excellent starting place, but be prepared to experiment.”

of music with strong, but acoustic bass and moving your chair experimentally forwards and back along the length of the room until the sound begins to come into some sort of balance. The amount moved should be no more than a couple of inches at a time and you should try to view how the balance and tonality of the music shifts with each movement of the chair. Keep coming back to the 38% point as a frame of reference. Eventually, you'll find a spot where the sound seems more 'integrated' and plant yourself there (the hi-fi industry's love of masking tape may begin to take hold here, marking the best spot for your listening chair with a few masking tape anchor points). If you find yourself moving farther and farther from the 38% point, make sure you aren't over-compensating by returning to that benchmark position for a day or three.

The controversial part of this is I think it's best to do this first, with almost nothing in the room apart from you, the chair and the audio equipment. That way, whenever you come to add bass traps and diffusers, you are doing it from the best seat in the house. It's easy to overdo room treatment and if you are working in nearly the right spot, you may find yourself making the room response too dead. Others disagree, feeling that you should get the room treatment right before you start listening to how that room sounds. Each to their own. +

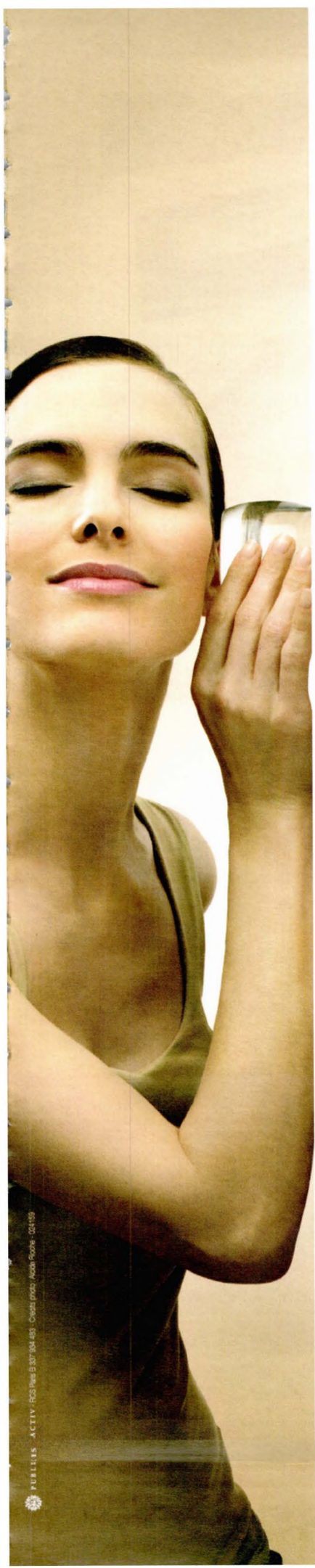


Soul Rebels Brass Band

By Jason Kennedy

Soul Rebels is a brass band with a difference. It has broken free of the stylistic bonds that usually typify such bands and forged its own distinct identity. An eight piece band featuring brass and drums is was formed in the early nineties as the Young Olympia Brass Band but changed its name and transformed its fortunes when Cyril Neville suggested the new name because of the way their music strives for change within the context of its heritage. That heritage is the New Orleans marching band, the members of Soul Rebels hail from that jazz soaked, hurricane beaten city and as founding member Lumar LeBlanc points out in our interview they achieved the prominence that they have because of the biggest natural disaster in recent US history. Their live shows naturally don't involve a great deal of marching but they can play that way as some of the footage online reveals.

Unlock Your Mind is the band's new album and features guest appearances from Cyril Neville, Trombone Shorty – two trombones are clearly not enough – and guitarist Leo Nocentelli from the Meters. What makes the Soul Rebels music different is the integration of hip hop elements including rap as well as songs, the new album features a variety of original pieces many of which are song based. In fact the only tunes that aren't are the cover versions of tunes including 'Sweet Dreams Are Made of This' and 'Living For the City'. ►



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► The vibe is upbeat and positive and it's not hard to hear why they make a great impression live and average 250 shows per year across the world. Last July the Soul Rebels played in the London Jazz Festival and I talked to Lumar LeBlanc about their music.

JK: Who are the Soul Rebels

LL: Soul Rebels is an eight piece band from New Orleans, Louisiana. I play the snare drum, you have Derrick Moss on bass drum and percussion, Marcus Hubbard on trumpet, you have Julian Gosin on trumpet and Erion Williams on tenor saxophone, Paul Robertson on trombone, Cory Peyt on trombone and you have Edward Lee on sousaphone.

JK: What do you play?

LL: Soul Rebels is a jazz, hip hop, funk band. We try to bring the brass band style from New Orleans to mainstream level. By experimenting with other forms of music apart from jazz and incorporating such an energetic way of displaying the music. Having a good stage show, good sound presence.

JK: How long have you been together?

LL: The band's been together since 1991, I'm an original member myself as is Derrick. Over the years we've had people come and go and more recently we've had young guys join the band. But from day one we've been trying to revolutionise brass band music and jazz music and just been accomplishing that goal ever since. The new record deal with Rounder Universal records is coming along real well.

JK: Is this your first international tour?

LL: No we've been travelling internationally since we started the group, fortunately. We started out as the Young Olympia Brass Band which was the junior band to Dejean's Olympia Brass Band. So we were fortunate enough to be doing European tours and jazz fests but over the years its grown.

“We had learned traditional jazz and continued to play it, we were also hearing this other music; hip hop, RnB and reggae.”

JK: Whose idea was it to incorporate hip hop?

LL: It was basically the membership at the time, we wanted to incorporate music that was reflective of our generation and so when we started in the early nineties as you know hip hop had become a major force in the music industry. Even though we had learned traditional jazz and continued to play it ,we also were hearing this other music; hip hop, RnB and reggae, we wanted to incorporate it. The band has always fostered innovation and a variety of styles.

JK: You have two MCs on the track *My Time*, who are they?

LL: That's Corey Peyt and Julian.

JK: What sort of audiences do you get?

LL: Fortunately we cover all age ranges, we get young boys and girls and we also get your traditional jazz generation, so we get from young to old. That's the good thing about it being all acoustic, real horns and drums.

JK: It must be a shock for the sampling generation to hear real instruments?

LL: We always have to show them that we know all types of music and we incorporate it and it gets the whole audience involved.

JK: I love your version of *Living for the City*, who arranges your work?

LL: The band members, different members. That was an arrangement we played from when we started the group, like everyone else we were familiar with Stevie Wonder and all of us had been in high school and college marching bands so we put the piece together from that mentality. By being jazz players we also have the solos in it to show the dexterity in jazz.

JK: I was surprised to hear *Sweet Dreams Are Made of This*.

LL: We definitely love her work, Annie Lennox and the Eurythmics.

JK: You've supported a lot of well known artists, have any made a particularly strong impression?

LL: Oh definitely, Branford Marsalis, I was highly impressed with him. Robert Plant, The Counting Crows, Bootsy Collins, so many we've been fortunate to share the stage with, those people definitely influenced my life.

My personal taste, I like the Doors, obviously Louis Armstrong and Marvin Gaye but the band members have different tastes. ►

MUSIC INTERVIEW / SOUL REBELS BRASS BAND

The Soul Rebels Brass Band release *Unlock Your Mind* on October 10th.

They are to perform a one-off show at the Queen Elizabeth Hall as part of the London Jazz Festival on November 16th.

► **JK: What effect did hurricane Katrina have on the band?**

LL: It was a big effect, I would have to say that it was the turning point for us. Unfortunately it was a horrible incident that changed all our lives, all the band members lost our homes, everything. But through us being musicians and music being one of the main cultural idioms from New Orleans we gained so much press because they were covering so much of the music scene when Katrina hit, we were able to get on that momentum and it just took off for us. We were touring right before the storm hit so once it happened we became wanted all over the country.

It had somewhat of an upside, it's unfortunate that it had to happen on the back side of such a tragic event but that's how it happened.

JK: You spend most of your time on the road?

LL: We play and tour a whole lot. We just love it, we love meeting the people and giving them that new experience. It's a blessing.

JK: How do you think that downloading and MP3s have effected the way people listen to music?

LL: I'm so into the live performance that I don't really try to get into the politics of it. But from what I hear it's affected the CD sales of music, but everywhere I go we do so many live performances that people always want to buy the CD right there. That's why I say that I'm spoiled in that realm, most people buy the CD once they see the show.

JK: Are you into sound, do you have a good system at home?

LL: I'm kind of an old school cat, I still have cassette players, I still have CD and old record players. I listen to it all. On the road obviously the iPod is convenient because it's small but when I'm in the comfort of my own home I always have a record, I kind of like the feel of opening a package and feeling the record in my hand and looking at the liner notes and everything, so I still like vinyl. They say they're going to put our new album on vinyl too so I'm real happy.

JK: What's your goal?

LL: Soul rebels is one of the last saviours of the music race. We still use the original horns and drums but with a modern swing, we can communicate to all audiences to get them to know that real music still can touch your life. +



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Kaiser Kawero Vivace loudspeaker



The Kaiser Kawero Vivace loudspeaker is a high-quality speaker that offers excellent sound reproduction. It features a large driver and a tweeter, providing a wide frequency response and high detail. The speaker is designed to be aesthetically pleasing as well as functional.

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This issue's featured reviewers are:

DD – Dennis D Davis

JK – Jason Kennedy

MP – Mark Prendergast

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Bob Brookmeyer

Kansas City Revisited

Pure Pleasure/United Artists UAL 4008

Bob Brookmeyer has always been a personal favorite for jazz trombone, and reason enough to add a new LP acquisition to my collection. But there's plenty more here to seal the deal, with veterans Al Cohn, Paul Quinichette and Jim Hall (among others) joining the fun. This is Kansas City blues, played at a brisk, swinging pace. It's also one of the most underrated records of KC blues. With Basie classics like *Jumping At The Woodside*, the beat never lets up, and unlike most any record produced today, this sounds like these guys have played a lot together. Blues singer Big Miller adds vocals on two tunes. Recording engineer Dick Olmstead, working at his independent studio, recorded the session in a single session in New York City in October of 1958. It was released in both stereo and mono by United Artists and Ron McMaster, the in house mastering engineer for capitol Studios (which owns United Artist tapes) selected the mono tapes as the best sounding of the two for reissue. McMaster, whose LP remaster work is best known through his many Mosaic issues, has done a fine job here. The original stereo LP presented a nice image, which the mono reissue replicates with the front line pushed a little forward in the mix, with the rhythm section splayed nicely across a wide mono background. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Freddie Hubbard

Goin' Up

Music Matters/Blue Note

Who would have imagined 10 years ago that a complete collection of Freddie Hubbard Blue Note LPs in first-rate masterings would be within the grasp of the average collector without the means to part with serious amounts of money? *Goin' Up* brings us, with the exception of *Ready For Freddie*, up current through 1962, and *Ready* will be ready for release by Music Matters soon. Here, Hubbard is matched with Blue Note veterans Mobley, Tyner, Chambers and Philly Joe Jones, and together they turn in a hard blowing session, mixed in with a few ballads, appropriate to showing off Hubbard's technical brilliance. The title refers to Hubbard's career direction, and on this, his second release as a leader in 1960, Hubbard at the age of 22 appears fully formed both as a technical wizard but also as a deep well of fresh ideas. As good as his hard blowing numbers are, his gorgeous sound on the ballad *I Wished I Knew* is one of Hubbard's finest moments, and the *I've never heard it sound as luscious as on this fabulous new issue* by Music Matters. And when he hits the high notes in *Blues for Brenda* the tone is pure and distortion free. This stereo recording validates the Music Matters' team's choice to release the stereo tape, as it's from the sweet spot of Van Gelder's output. Perfect! **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Goran Kajfes

X/Y

Headspin Recordings



Is it just me or is a plethora of young trumpet players on the jazz scene today? If my mailbag is anything to go by we're in the midst of the second Davis school right now. Goran Kajfes is a Swedish raised Croatian with a good reputation in those parts if his accompaniment of Lester Bowie, José Gonzalez and Stina Nordenstam are any indication. He also produce Clint by Oddjob last year which would have earned him my attention even if this double album weren't presented in a beautiful cloth bound book containing artwork and photographs.

X and Y represent the two sides of Kajfes' musical inclinations, X is an ensemble production with his Subtropic Arkestra which features a tabla player, flautist, gnawa singer and a variety of brass players in its number. The name suggests a connection with Sun Ra and he may well have been an influence but there are many at work and only on one which turns out to be a Don Cherry composition is it possible to see a direct link.

Y on the other hand is a soundscape produced by Kajfes and David Österberg on all manner of electronica, they create a full immersion experience that is less tonally rich than the Arkestra and redolent of Miles' *In A Silent Way* at times and Arvo Pärt at others. Diversity, it's the name of the game. **JK**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Grateful Dead

Blues for Allah

Audio Fidelity



This 1975 foray by arguably the greatest hippy band to ever play the pyramids was the closest they ever came to jazz rock. Inevitably it's not that close but there are quite a few instrumental pieces among its dozen tracks and some pretty sharp playing. There aren't any saxophones either but a flute takes the lead on one tune. So maybe jazz rock isn't quite right jazz blues better sums it up. Either way it's a stonking album that really comes to life on this Audio Fidelity remaster, I've not got the standard vinyl but have tried to get into the CD many a time and given up, with this pressing it was effortless.

It's pretty noodly for the Dead and it sounds like there are far fewer tracks than are listed because they usually segue and have a modal theme that recurs across each side. The appeal lies in the quality of playing which is quite superb, tight but supple and immensely fluid it's enough to make you reassess the band. The tone on this pressing is gorgeous, the sort of sound that bands today would kill for but due to the presence of the computer in the production process are unlikely to really find. Nor will many be afforded the heavyweight gatefold sleeve that enhances this superb pressing. **JK**

RECORDING
MUSIC



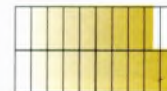
Herb Ellis

Nothing But The Blues

Speakers Corner/Verve MG V-8252

Herb Ellis is probably best represented in record collections by his numerous excellent LPs cut for Concord Jazz during the 70a and 80s and as a part of the Oscar Peterson trio during the 1950's. My personal favorites include his teamwork with Ray Brown on *Soft Shoe* issued by Concord Jazz. But just as good those two is this fabulous swinging session with Stan Getz, Roy Eldridge, Ray Brown and Stan Levey recorded in 1957. Ellis' slightly tangy guitar sound is as good as anything he recorded, and what more could you ask for than this stellar band. If all the Herb Ellis you've heard is his later work with Great Guitars on Concord, this record should come as an eye and ear opener. It was made at a time that guitar players seldom moved up to the position of bandleader. Grant Green's first Blue Note was a few years off, and Wes Montgomery was just gearing up for his string of early 1960's LPs. Aided by the amazing front line of Eldridge and Getz, Ellis' LP stands up to comparison with the best of Green or Montgomery. Speakers Corner has now ended the relative obscurity of this LP with this excellent reissue. The session is well recorded, with each instrument placed in a realistic soundstage, and the new mastering preserves that quality with excellent instrumental tone. Very highly recommended.. **DD**

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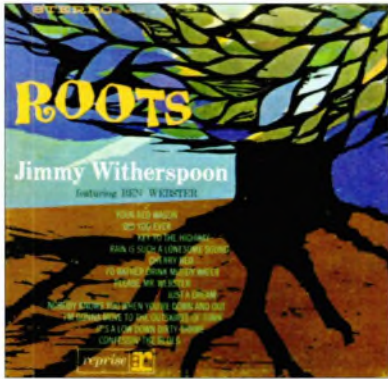
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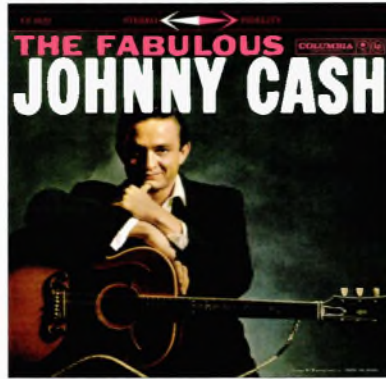




Jimmy Witherspoon 200_g
Roots
 Analogue Productions/Reprise APP 6057

This LP was sub-titled "Jimmy Witherspoon featuring Ben Webster". But this is really a Witherspoon album with the unmistakable sound of Webster adding support along with a session rhythm section and trumpet player. It's Jimmy's wonderful singing, reminiscent of Bobby "Blue" Bland, that captivates. I can imagine a stage surrounded by women hanging on every word of Jimmy, melting and falling in love. And falling in love is just what you'll do when you cue up this LP and hear the team of Witherspoon and Webster. Most jazz fans are familiar with how Ben Webster's horn, when recorded well, can sound like ripe fruit ready to fall from the vine, and Witherspoon's voice is a perfect match for Ben Webster's horn. The pace of the session is laid back, but in a way that keeps you on the edge of your seat. Kudos to blues lover Chad Kassem for recognizing the sonic pearl hiding behind a good but not stellar original recording. Kevin Gray at Cohearant Audio has proven yet again why vinyl rules the audiophile universe. Compared to a white label promo original, this issue is a quantum leap improvement, with three-dimensional images and a big fat sound to die for. Anyone with a passing interest in the blues needs this LP. Highest recommendation. **DD**

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Johnny Cash 180_g
The Fabulous Johnny Cash
 Impex/Columbia CS 8122

In 1958 Johnny Cash jumped ship from Sun Records where he had been producing hit singles since 1955 after Sun's Sam Phillips refused Cash's request for an increase in royalties and his desire to release a gospel album. The Fabulous Johnny Cash was his first LP released by Columbia (the gospel album came later) and it included Cash's second hit single for Columbia "Don't Take Your Guns To Town". While Cash was always a rebel in all walks of life, this early LP does not play that angle up to the extent found in some of the later albums, yet there is no mistaking that this is the great Johnny Cash and this is one of his best albums. While some traditionalists pine for the Sun releases, this LP was simply an extension of his Sun period, as he stored up his best material while in transition from one label to the next, and at the same time was able to present it with a bit more polish because of the greater resources of a large record company. The sound on this album was typical of Columbia's sound of the day—outstanding in every way. However, Impex has taken it up a few pegs with Kevin Gray's mastering magic. Cash has recorded some fine sounding albums but I've never heard his instrument, or his backing group, sound so life like. Impex has produced in a gorgeously finished record cover. Highest recommendation.. **DD**

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Jon Hassell 180_g
Last night the moon came dropping its clothes in the street
 ECM

Jon Hassell is a prolific even profound musician yet this is only his second album for ECM since 1984's Power Spot, but he has made a stack of records under his own name as well as contributing to music by Bjork, Baaba Maal, Talking Heads, Peter Gabriel and Ry Cooder among others. You are just as likely to have heard him on the soundtracks to films and The moon came dropping... would lend itself rather easily to the widescreen. It's full scale, full depth low key material that builds up subtle but strangely positive ambiances. Brian Eno has described Hassell as "an inventor of new forms of music" and there is clearly something going on here that's different in the shifting textures and ethereal trumpet. Hassell combines this instrument with keyboard and works with a collection of musicians most of whom use some form of electronica to create the layers of sound that build up to produce an analogue ambiance. The pieces on the three sides here could be dismissed as more ambient gubbins if you didn't listen to them, there are often slow heavy bass in the mix that could be from the world of dub but the combinations are quite unworldly. In many ways this is In A Silent Way for the 21st Century, I hope it's equally influential. **JK**

RECORDING
 MUSIC





Jonathan Wilson



Gentle Spirit

Bella Union

Jonathan Wilson is a musician and producer who has steeped himself in the west coast sound, as a result he has been compared with Neil Young at his late sixties peak which can't be a bad start. But this isn't Wilson's start, he has worked with Elvis Costello and Jackson Brown among others so his credentials are strong. The similarity to Young is clearest in his voice which is gentle and dusty but not quite as frail, it's back by fine guitar work that's enriched by his ability play all manner of strummable instruments, the bass guitar is particularly rich.

Wilson is also very good at tone, his sensitivity on this front must have been a factor in choosing to record to analogue tape which he says "simply captures things better and it takes the edges off. It creates a beauty much like film". He also appreciates the ultimate format: "I would say vinyl is the only real tangible format that contains meaningful value."

The stand out track is Natural Rhapsody which is strongly reminiscent of Radiohead at their OK Computer peak with a big of Beck mixed in to keep it interesting. The mix has a vintage feel because drums are kept fairly deep in the mix with guitar and voice to the fore, but nothing really leaps out. This is a mature, skilfully honed album that feels like it's going to keep on getting better. **JK**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Keith Jarrett



Rio

ECM 277 6645

To celebrate 40 years on the label both Jarrett and ECM have returned to the format that made both rich and famous - the double album live in concert solo improvised piano set.

In his huge career Jarrett has touched upon every kind of music - ensemble, band, high classical (Bach,Handel,Mozart etc). But the solo piano sets are the holy work. The sheer intensity of going out in front of a packed house and over two hours or more create music on the spot that is consistently brilliant has to be the very essence of genius.

But few sets have as much energy nor all-round enthusiasm as this masterpiece from Teatro Municipal Rio De Jenairo on April 11th 2011. There are 15 compositions over two discs, 40' one, 50' the other. He begins in difficult tonally ambiguous territory before moving over to Andalusian strains and the rippling rivers of old. Some of the energy here is jaw-dropping. There are shades of Gerswhin and Rodgers & Hart as he progresses to a medium-tempo walking meditation to close Disc 1. On Disc 2 he merges classical and jazz piano so deftly that you could be listening to Debussy one minute, Duke Ellington the next. A restive blues in Pt 11 no way prepares one for the astonishing finale. Calligraphic in quality, the maestro is back! **MP**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Pink Floyd



Wish You Were Here (Experience Edition)

EMI 0294502

After 36 years, we finally can hear the legendary Stephane Grappelli version of Pink Floyd's title track and it's glorious. The French violinist gives the track a lyrical lift towards the gypsyesque Hot Club music of his youth. The take also boasts better Gilmour guitars, 12- & 6- strings given a channel each, the lead acoustic part swathed in reverb.

Anyway it's not a surprise that 'Shine On', the heart of the album, has had a superb remaster. We can really hear those tinkling glasses at the beginning. Overall the sound is more tactile, less dry than on the original LP. Mason's drums are tighter in the sound field with an edgier delivery. .

The tracks 'Raving & Drooling' and 'You Gotta Be Crazy' were the sort of vamping and extended live experiments which easily filled up an hour of stage time, but were deemed by Waters to be out of character with the rest of the music and its common theme of alienation and withdrawal. These tracks (long available on bootleg) are included here for reference. As most fans know they would eventually form the core of the band's 1977 album *Animals*. A fine re-issue. Fantastic sound and worth the price alone for the Stephane Grappelli track. **MP**

RECORDING



MUSIC

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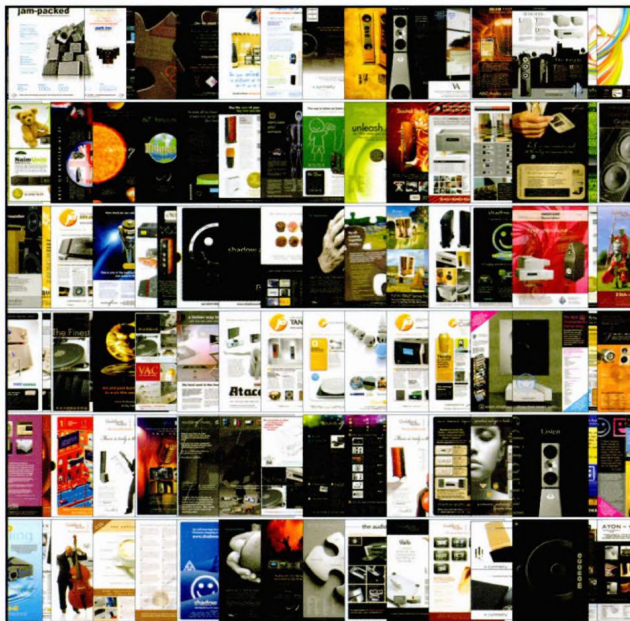
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The Rolling Stones

Some Girls (Deluxe Edition)

A&M/Universal



For their 15th album, The Rolling Stones retired to Pathe Marconi Studios in Paris on October 1977 to begin lengthy sessions with engineer Chris Kimsey who introduced them to new amplifiers and honed a brighter, more direct, sound. The sessions went on until early March of 1978.

The resultant album *Some Girls* was released in June 1978. It took the dance craze of New York's Studio 54 and the 'punk' wars waging in Britain and honed them into a precision-tooled set of blues, raunch and balls-out rock and roll. If songs like 'When The Whip Comes Down', 'Respectable' and 'Beast Of Burden' have passed into legend wait until you hear the bonus album of 12 out-takes.

The Stones are releasing all the bonus tracks on the re-issued remastered CD as well as in the Super Deluxe Boxed set and Deluxe Download editions. That means everybody can hear these magnificent tracks. Also, the Stones always worked better on solid ground and their cover of the vintage rock standard, Fred Cannon's 'Tallahassee Lassie' sees the band firing on all cylinders, Richards's Chuck Berry riffs especially memorable. In short you'll be listening to this for years to come. The best Stones re-issue ever! **MP**

RECORDING

MUSIC



Sounds & Silence

Music For The Film

ECM 2250 2770080



The film *Sounds & Silence* (a work by Swiss directors Wiedmar and Guyer filmed over five years in Estonia, Tunisia, Germany, France, Denmark, Greece and Argentina) opens with Manfred Eicher labouring long and hard in a church in Estonia as he records another spiritual bombshell from Arvo Part, strings rising and rising into a huge silence overhead. Microphones are positioned and re-positioned, Eicher stands at the back of the church, watching and listening as if he can actually see the music not only hear it. Much of the film shows Eicher (a former jazz bassist) sitting alone in intense concentration, head in hand. Then he picks up a pen, a phone or a piece of paper and does something. A line on a musical score is something that Eicher will think long and hard about!

The album is not really a soundtrack but is the most complete soundtrack in that the film contains complete pieces. Keith Jarrett appears twice on the CD, playing lengthy pieces of Gurdjieff piano but is nowhere to be seen in the film. Alongside famous names like Jan Garbarek (his breathy saxophone a highlight), Part, Dino Saluzzi are less well-known but striking artists like the Oud specialist Anouar Brahem and violincellist Anja Lecher. One of the best-sounding ECM recordings ever. **MP**

RECORDING

MUSIC



Steve Reich

**Different Trains/Triple Quartet/
Piano Counterpoint**

EMI 50999 08731920



Steve Reich has always been a great synthesist whether it be of African, Yemeni, Balinese or Hebrew musics so that his work is full of ingredients – jazz, classical, romantic, rap, electronic and acoustic.

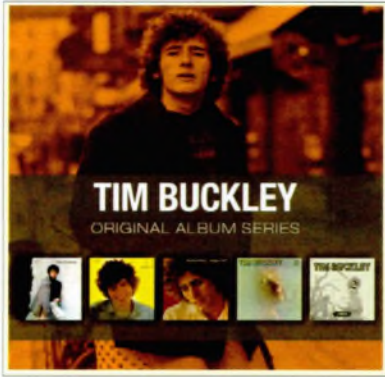
In 1988 Reich invented a new documentary music with the 27 minute 'Different Trains' a work which evoked his childhood trans-American trips between his divorced parents. Sampling interviews with his old governess, a pullman operator, Holocaust victims and archive train recordings, 'Different Trains' was performed by The Kronos Quartet, earning Reich a Grammy in the process. Though worthy, it sounds a touch irritating, those strange voices crashing in all the time on the music.

More successful is the 'Triple Quartet' from 1998. Dissonant and expressionistic, this work is Steve Reich finally coming to terms with Bartok. There's a wonderful restlessness here over three movements and an openness to the Swiss recording location which lends itself to Reich's rigorous cyclical style. The twelve pre-recorded tracks are braced against Corver's lead piano in an intense and exhilarating 12 minute canonical ride. **MP**

RECORDING

MUSIC





Tim Buckley

Original Album Series

Rhino/Warners 8122797538



The legendary Tim Buckley, he of the diminutive stature, five and a half octave voice and 12-string guitar finally gets the Boxed set treatment and what an introduction it is. Buckley began his career on the East Coast as a country singer before doing the hippie thing and migrating to the West Coast in his teens. His first album *Tim Buckley* was recorded in three days and came out in 1966.

By 1967 Buckley was in New York and stretching himself musically. Admired by the Beatles he made the folk-baroque *Hello & Goodbye* (with its arresting Coke-Top cover). Buckley preferred the smoky jazz club to the studio, which would reach a zenith on the jazz-inflected masterpiece *Happy/Sad* released 1969. *Blue Afternoon* continues the jazz vibe but has shorter songs with more exuberance. *Lorca* begins in 1969 the hard-core experiments where Buckley began to see what his incredible voice was capable of, composing not only songs but works for voice and various instrumentation that would reach their zenith on 1970's *Starsailor* (an album still criminally deleted.) His premature and accidental death after a short tour adds poignancy to the story. But to get his first five albums in a box for under £12 seems insane. But here it is, snap it up whilst you can. **MP**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Weather Report

Heavy Weather

ORG/Columbia ORG 113



I can remember what seemed like a very long stretch of time in the late 1970s when my *Heavy Weather* cassette tape seemed never left the tape deck of my car. This was the new crossover jazz incorporating the outstanding pop-infused and energetic compositions of the band members, and what a band! The heart of (this version of) the group was Joe Zawinul, Wayne Shorter and Jaco Pastorius and I wouldn't be surprised if this album was responsible for converting a whole new generation of music lovers to jazz who might not otherwise have given it a chance.

The appeal of this album that after 30 years still sounds completely fresh. The obvious question that arises when considering purchase of an expensive 45 RPM package of a record that can be picked up for spare change in most record shops is whether its worth the premium. I put this new issue up against my white label promo original pressing (the cassette copy expired long ago!) and can safely report that this new version is the only way to fly. Bernie Grundman's new high speed remaster makes the original sound compressed. This is the kind of music with a lot happening, and on the original much of the detail, now apparent, was lost in the pressing. This kind of dynamic electric music is hard to capture on vinyl, but ORG has done a fabulous job. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Wizz Jones

Right Now

Speakers Corner



This great sounding LP was made back in 1972 under the auspices of John Renbourn who clearly knew a thing or two about getting voice and guitar onto tape. Jones was and still is a contemporary of Renbourn and Jansch and is easily as skilled a guitar player as either if the playing on this his third album are any indication. He is also a skilled composer capable of re-working traditional melodies and producing strong original work and his relative obscurity is hard to understand. Jones has been recording since 1957 and continues to play live and tour in Germany where he has a big following, he even puts on gigs in his Surrey home.

This album finds Jones accompanied to a small extent by Renbourn on Sitar but is largely one voice and one or two guitar parts, and while the voice isn't the strongest the songs themselves are often proper tales in the true folk style. Some tunes tend toward tweeness but more than half avoid that tendency, owing more to his heroes Woody Guthrie and Kerouac.

It's not hard to hear why Speakers Corner decided to reissue Right Now, it's a very classy bit of analogue recording, luxurious yet revealing with glorious tone. "Take me home to Balham" indeed! **JK**

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Box Set Go

every home should have one

By Alan Sircom.

Rather than a specific recording, this time we are focusing on a trend. With the changes in the way audio is sold and delivered that have dominated the first years of the 21st Century, the music biz has fought what some might call a losing battle to keep people buying albums, and has specifically targeted the audience most likely to keep buying CDs... us!

The box set is not a 21st Century phenomenon; in fact, the first 'albums' were a boxed collection of classical or jazz 78s in something akin to a photo album (remember them?). But the new form of box set is distinctly CD-based and specifically targeted at the rock end of the catalogue.

The first of this new generation of box sets were focused on a specific classic album, usually accompanied with supplementary out-take CDs, DVDs of the album tour, reproduced promotional material, photos and miscellaneous ephemera. Hardback book (remember them?) sized boxes of albums like *Born To Run*, *Pet Sounds* and *VU & Nico* were all hugely popular limited editions, and still exist to this day in the shape of the latest Pink Floyd releases and two-disc special editions of Nirvana's *Nevermind*.

Next, the 'artist retrospective' box set; usually a four or six disc compilation on the hard covers of an accompany high-gloss booklet. Unlike the album-locked box, these focus on the artist, not the individual albums, so these collections are often overlooked by album collectors.

Recently, the 'remastered collection' has come to dominate this market. These can be complete (or near-complete) collections of an artist's albums, key times from an artist's career (the fine mono remasters of the first eight Bob Dylan albums) or simply the five best albums from an artist's purple patch (Warner boxes of practically all its back catalog, including Little Feat, Rickie

Lee Jones, The Byrds and Tim Buckley... see this issue). The remastered quality can be variable (some are 'hot' remasters to accommodate people more used to clipped and compressed modern sounds), but generally these collections are divided into the 'cheap' (I've paid the equivalent of £2 per album for one five-disc set) and the 'good' (such as the £80 I paid for the Kraftwerk box). And there's invariably a sense of rebuying the same music at least twice in some cases. But, whether you are a completist collector or simply want to find a way to put whole swathes of music on to a computer that's cheaper than iTunes and more legal than bit torrent file sharing, these are an excellent option.

There is an element of 'buyer beware' though. In many countries, recordings made over 50 years ago are out of artist copyright, but that doesn't necessarily apply to the recording process itself, which can be in copyright for a lot longer. It's possible to end up finding yourself with a very cheap collection of discs that have truly dreadful mixes, simply to avoid this particular copyright trap. While the recordings might cost pennies per track to own, sadly often you do get what you pay for. Unless you are struggling to find that rare jazz mix that is only available on a very specific discount CD, you might often be best giving the bargain box sets a wide berth. Stick with the recordings from the original labels, rather than compilations from CD shifting organisations, and you should be fine, although remaster has become a dirty word of late, thanks to 'hot' mixes.

What's unclear is whether this is a short-term measure or a long-term plan to get people to buy the complete output of a particular recording artist. In many respects, it doesn't matter. For the obsessive filling in the blanks in their Jesus & Mary Chain albums, we are living in a golden age. Buy 'em up, because it may not last forever. +



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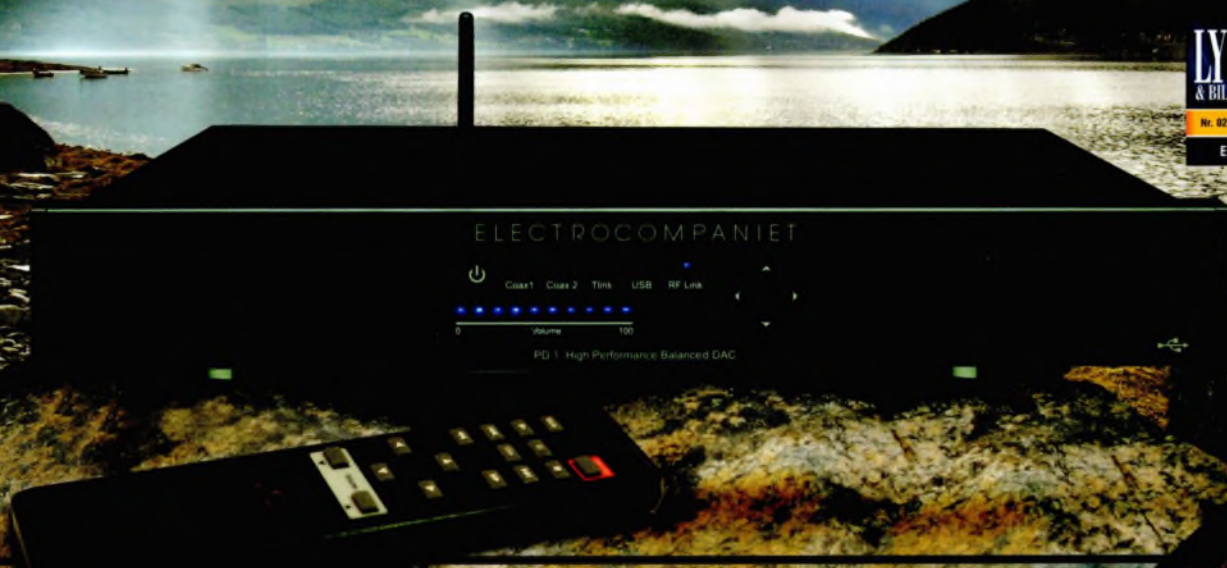
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