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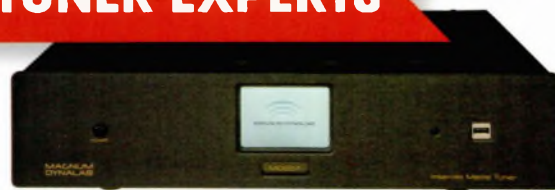


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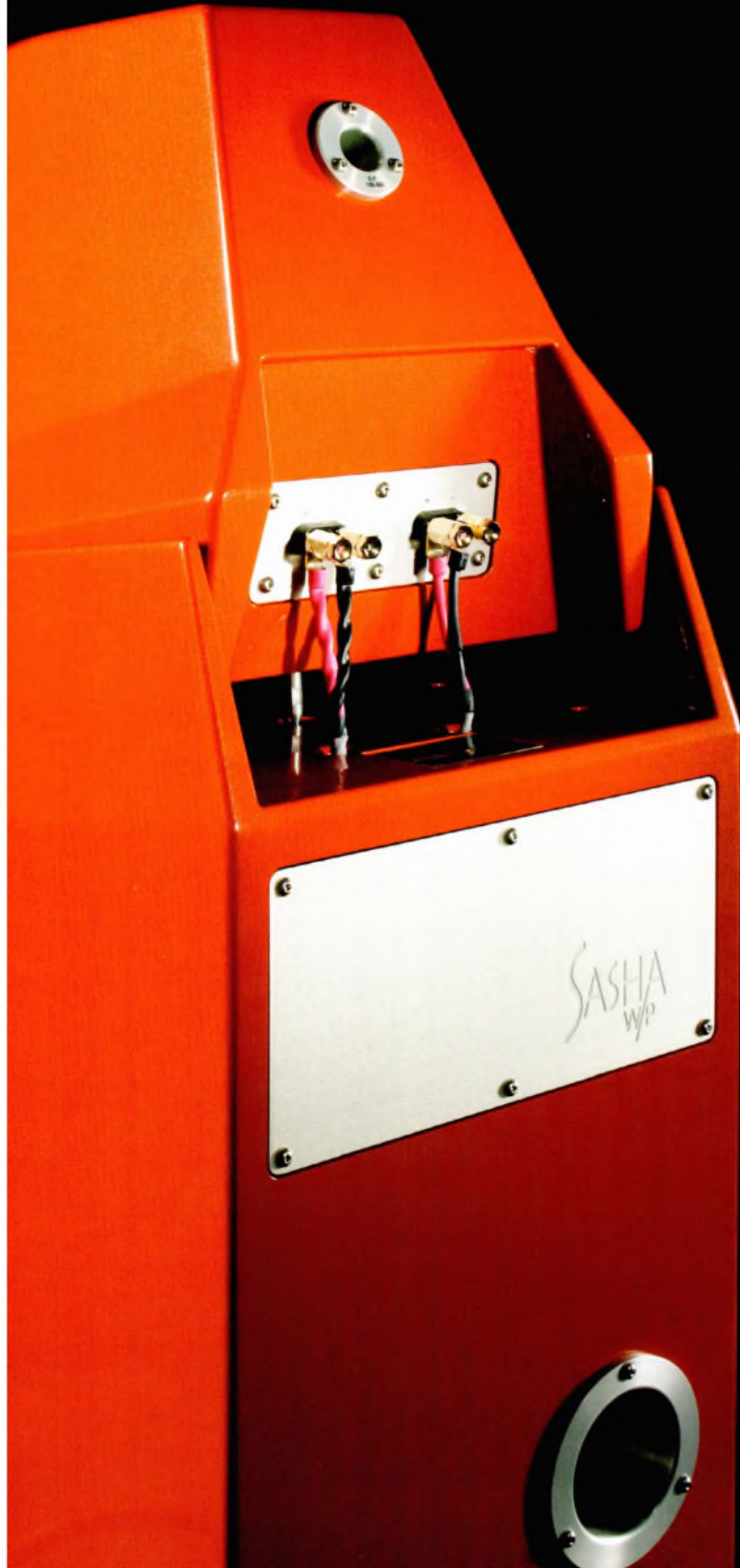
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FEBRUARY 2012

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A LEGEND IS REBORN



There comes a moment in every product sphere when a truly iconic product is created. In the case of high-performance speakers, that product was the original Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy.

Now David A. Wilson has reengineered the speakers that defined audio excellence for a generation. The Sasha W/P boasts the same uncompromising approach to design as its illustrious predecessor but with newly devised innovations such as the resonance minimising material that has been specially created for the cabinets, a revised motor/magnet assembly to bring new dimensions to the bass and a redesigned crossover that dramatically increases midrange clarity.

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Printed By
Advent Print Group
Andover

Hi-Fi Plus is published ten times a year by: Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd

ISSN 1465 5950

editorial

Beneath the calm surface of the audio world, there are dark stirrings. The backlash is beginning. It's starting slow, and starting at the very top of the top-end of hi-fi, but there are people in high-end audio who are comparing CD or SACD with the equivalent computer files, and are consistently preferring the spinning disc.

You see, when you compare the very, very best of what CD and SACD replay has to offer (we're talking Accuphase, dCS, Esoteric, Metronome, Wadia and Zanden-grade disc replay, here) and do the same with the latest and greatest in computer audio in all its guises, CD and SACD often come out on top. At less breathtaking levels of audio expenditure, the differences are not so clear cut. But the fact remains that in many of these tests, CD outperforms its computer audio 'replacement'. It's LP vs. CD all over again.

I have performed such comparisons on several occasions and in a number of different contexts, and I've begun to conclude there is no simple answer. In many cases, the sound of disc and computer audio are on a par with one another. In some cases (and even, with some listeners) computer audio sounds distinctly more natural than CD, and also the reverse is true. But once you breach that top-end barrier, the more people you test, the more you come up with preferences toward the spinning disc... even under blind conditions. In fairness, these differences are fairly subtle, and I still maintain that well-handled computer audio is not 'ruined' next to spinning disc, but the preferences are distinct and consistent.

I guess the next two interlinked questions are 'why?' and 'what can we do about it?' While we could do precisely nothing and hope our resolve will grant

CD the same longevity as LP, I'm more a 'prepare for the worst, hope for the best' kinda guy. I think the 'why' might stem from the computer itself; the better USB converters invariably take great pains to galvanically isolate the computer from the audio-side equipment, and the really outstanding server-based music replay systems have been computers that were broken down into separate subsystems, each one EMI and resonant/acoustically isolated from the next. Swapping out the standard power supply for a linear supply from a lab bench, replacing any form of HDD for a hedgehog of USB memory sticks and endless RAM have also all been touted as a path to computer audio salvation. But such options are impractical, expensive... and are unlikely to receive approval from the computer know-it-alls.

It may be that the high-end is creating something out of nothing, or that we are falling into the trap of comparing a mature format with a nascent one and criticising the new one simply for being new. But the fact remains that CD and SACD still have loyal followers among the audiophile community and that isn't going away, no matter how good computer audio gets.

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: UK 1ST MARCH 2012 ... US 5TH APRIL 2012

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"Potential legends don't come along that often.
The Arabesque Mini might just be 2012's new legend..."
by Alan Sircom, Hifi+ Issue 85



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Our new winter collection

- Stax SR-009 earspeaker, a new reference in electrostatic technology and listening
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- Ayre QA-9 high resolution analogue to digital converter
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incoming!

We've sparked a heated debate about the future and the quality of audio dealers, thanks to an email published in last issue. Rather than comment on any of these individual emails, I think it's best to give them their own breathing space. I have removed specific names and details of current retailers, both for those heaping praise and opprobrium, because I do not wish to invite self-promotion in the former or risk destroying the career of the latter if the nature of the opprobrium proves ill-founded. In other words, the names have been changed to protect the innocent, at least until proven guilty. And my apologies to those who wrote in on other matters, we will return to your emails in the next issue – Ed.

Bricks, not clicks

I read your Incoming letter entitled *Killing me softly* with great interest. A few years ago, my town had its own specialist record shops (one now sells cheap kitchen equipment, the other has been empty for more than a year) a specialist bookshop (now a nail bar) and a hi-fi/TV/electrical goods store (empty). I used to buy my hi-fi system from a good dealer in my nearest city, but that too closed down a few years ago and has changed hands time and time again (I think it's also a nail bar now).

I have bought online, but find the whole process impersonal and I now travel about 80 miles to visit a dealer who I trust implicitly. However, that only happened because the dealer has earned my trust, by providing to have integrity and honesty, and by providing a range of products that isn't just the flavour of the month or (hopefully) the products with the best profit margins. I 'reward' that trust in return by not simply going after the cheapest prices, because I want that dealer's expertise to still be available to me in the future. Perhaps I'm out of step with modern society here, but I think long-term results are more important than short-term savings.

I think buying hi-fi is like buying a suit; the cheaper equipment can be bought off-the-peg, but still needs to be tried out, while the high-end is like buying a suit from a bespoke outfitter and needs to be tailored to the specific needs of the individual. There needs to be trust too, so that you don't rely solely on the dictates of the tailor and end up with something you hate, or that you don't make a pig's breakfast out of the whole exercise by going off in some wild direction. I guess this might not make sense to someone not used to bespoke suits (I recently got remarried and the whole Savile Row experience is fresh in my mind), but I think the analogy fits better than the car or watch ones that people seem so keen to use.

Karl Wilcox, via email

“Using a store as a free demonstration service is unethical, but it doesn't stop me using my local camera shop that way.”

Hand in hand

There are some products I will only buy from a retailer. I want the auditioning, the advice and the installation. There are others I will only buy online. I want the price, the price and the price. Most of all, though, I tend to buy in store because the online delivery services are patchy at best, and a man in a van can be pinned down to a specific time where courier companies are loathe to be pinned down to a single day. And if the product needs repair, at least you have a fighting chance when speaking to a human.

Perhaps what's needed is some greater cooperation between online and in-store retailers, so that you can collect in store for the online price or pay more if you want to use the local dealer as something more than just a warehouse. It would almost mean charging for the dealer's services (either tagged on the price of the product or as a standalone charge), and I don't know how many would do this. I do tend to think using a store as a free demonstration service is unethical, but it doesn't stop me using my local camera shop in exactly that way. If it closed down because of that, I'd guess I'd just do the same at Jessops. Ethics are all very well, but when it comes to paying on average about 35% less for the same thing from Amazon, you've just got to go where the bargains are.

Gregory Morris, via email ▶



hi-fi+ issue 83 – crème de la crème listing 2011

"It's one of those speakers that gets under the listener's skin, and you find yourself unable to listen to anything else."

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VIVACE

The Kawero!® Vivace has grown out of the development programme for the larger Kawero!® Classic loudspeaker that has drawn numerous 'best sound at the show' comments in recent years.

The Vivace is designed to produce, from a compact cabinet, a huge hall-filling sound with lifelike instruments and voices 'present' in the room.

A key feature of these speakers is the way they work with the room's natural ambient response, together with the characteristics of human hearing, to achieve the correct power, scale and tonal balance in the listening room. Extensive acoustics modelling has ensured that the direct and reflected sound-field combine correctly, with all the tonal colours of the sound in perfect harmony.

Soaring, enthralling, involving music is the result.



► To serve and protect

Dealers provide a service that cannot be had online. You cannot listen to the equipment through your computer. Although reviews try to express how something sounds in print (with varying degrees of success), nothing replaces hearing it for yourself, preferably in your own home. We are all in search of a bargain (especially in the current economic climate), but I fear that the future of high-end audio is inextricably linked with the fate of the 'bricks and mortar' dealers. Unless they get the sonic message across to prospective buyers, who's going to buy into an abstract like sound quality in the future?

This is where the bookseller from your last issue got it right, and wrong. A bookseller is protecting his or her interests by not having the publishing industry move online. If it does and the bookstore goes away, there will still be books, even if they are e-books, because the experts will go online. The hi-fi dealer actually protects hi-fi, because if his specialist store goes away, his specialist knowledge does not transfer online. Ultimately, it comes down to all of us who love audio to keep the 'bricks and mortar' dealers in business, because they keep the hi-fi industry in business.

Nigel Wilson, via email

No promotion prospects

Is high-end audio trying to make 'exclusivity' a terminal disease? It's not enough these days to open up a website or hang a sign on the door, you have to promote your business in a very competitive marketplace. If you build it, they will come... but only if you market the hell out of it. If you don't, people won't buy audio from your rivals, they will take their money elsewhere, and audio vanishes below their radar. It's never been easier and cheaper to promote your products and services virally, and yet most audio websites, Facebook pages and Twitter presences are execrable. There are exceptions, but they are from companies who get noticed by people who aren't audio nerds.

Also, why are audio dealers dismissive of the way people listen to music today? A lot of my listening is done through my iPhone now. I regularly spend a lot of money on good earphones because they break or get lost, and I reckon I've spent more on playing music on the move in the last five years than I have on my main audio system in the last 10. And yet, I went to an audio store recently to ask about earphones for my iPhone and was directed (with a shrug) to the nearest Apple store. The guy treated me as if I had leprosy, and when I next replace or upgrade my main system, I'll treat his store with the same respect. Losing business is bad enough, but giving it away is insane. I was going to ask about the Sonos system they had in the store, but I spent my hard-earned dollars with someone who gave a crap.

Joe Bateman, via email

The simple truth?

People stopped caring about dealers when dealers stopped caring about people.

Trevor Kingston, via email

Saving a fortune?

I think forums and the internet have completely taken over the roles of magazines and dealers respectively. Magazines are blatantly dishonest because they only support their advertisers and dealers just rip people off with products you can buy cheaper online, especially if you buy secondhand. I've bought all my equipment through eBay and thanks to the advice of people on forums I've saved thousands of pounds buying products that you never discuss because they don't play your cosy advertising-led game. I've heard some of the alternatives and my system is far better than one made up from Fat Cat names you 'slurpers' promote.

'Disprin Dan', via email

Time gentlemen, Please

A lot of good dealers are going out of business now. Not through business policy, management or even poor service, but simply due to age. It seems to me that many of the good guys are getting too long in the tooth to adapt to the changes in audio and retail and are deciding to let their stores simply run down. My nearest store closed when the proprietor died, because he'd had to shrink staff down to just him. Others are moving away from audio and into home theatre and multiroom. I think the issues affecting audio retailers apply to all bricks and mortar stores, it's just that audio retailers are old to roll with the punches now. Perhaps it's time they stood aside and gave a new generation a chance.

Will Thomas, via email ►

“What do you call an audio store that merges with a home theatre store? A home theatre store!”

► **The good...**

Perhaps my experience with audio dealers is atypical, but I found my local specialist – Derek Whittington of Sound Advice in Loughborough – to have more than lived up to the name of his store. He was kind, courteous, knowledgeable (not just about the gear... his love of music of all kinds inspired me to go down musical pathways I'd have never dreamed of taking) and painstaking. You felt he went the extra mile, not to make a sale, but to do the right thing. I was shocked to see his store close down, but I think this might be down to his being a victim of his own success; the system Derek put together for me is still in use years later, and I feel no burning desire to 'upgrade' even today. I guess when all your customers are satisfied ones, they don't come back too often.

Martin Gilbert, via email

The bad...

I'm sure good dealers provide a fine service, but I've had my fair share of bad service from dealers too. And the bad service is what sticks in my mind. That classic *Not The Nine O'Clock News* 'Gramophone' sketch is still relevant to many dealers, as they try to push whatever the latest profit-making gizmo at me with distain and one eye on the clock, the other on the till. If I want to buy a CD player, I want to buy a CD player, not some kind of computer player. Unfortunately, it seems that too many dealers consider this a challenge to prove why I need to be reeducated instead of simply trying to sell me what I want to buy. I would also like someone who claims to be a dealer in a product to actually have a demonstration model to hand, especially when I book in advance for a demo. Do dealers really expect to survive if they can't provide the one service that they we are supposed to be paying a premium for?

Name and address withheld on request

And the ugly

Are hi-fi stores a rip-off? Absolutely! Hi-fi is already too expensive, why should I pay even more to have a surly audio-snob with poor social skills insult my intelligence for an hour?

If I were paying for experience and expertise, I might consider paying over the odds for hi-fi equipment, but I know more about the subject matter than most store staff anyway, I don't even need the demonstration services, because I use internet traders and their returns policies as a free home demo service. The only thing I miss in dealing with the dealers is watching them squirm as I haggle for the best bargains.

So what if the stores are closing down? You'll never print this because you have a vested interest in keeping your advertisers happy but good riddance to bad rubbish, I say!

Keith Berenson, via email

Price war, not dealer wars

Whether or not the dealers survive is not really just a problem for the retailers. If manufacturers stopped making products that are too expensive for real people to be able to afford, dealers might stand a chance of staying alive. I don't consider myself penny-pinching, but I find the idea of paying tens of thousands of pounds to keep my dog in this fight strikes me as absurd in the extreme. Even before prices started rising because of inflation, the cost of hi-fi soared while everything else with a plug plummeted in price. I paid more for my computer than I did for my CD player in the 1980s. I bet you can't say the same today.

Wally Crint, via email

...and finally!

What do you call an audio store that merges with a home theatre store? A home theatre store! Face it people, audio on its own just isn't the draw it used to be. Perhaps the death of the specialty audio store should mark the end of specialty audio and open the market up to all branches of home entertainment, not simply the narrow micro-climate that is high-end audio.

Wally Crint, via email

The rest is up to you. Normal Incoming service will be resumed as soon as possible, unless you think this line of debate still has some 'legs' to it. In which case, stand by for more dealer-baiting and dealer-praising in the next issue too – Ed. +

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SHOW REPORT

CES 2012

By Alan Sircom

Despite a multitude of different devices from a highly diverse consumer electronics market, the annual early January Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas has become too large it risks falling in upon itself. Despite boasting more acreage than ever before, it quickly becomes a themed show for mainstream press. This year, it's connected, voice or gesture-activated TVs and super-slim ultrabook laptops... virtually anything outside of one of these two categories disappeared below the radar for the mainstream, just as anything that wasn't a tablet PC failed to garner any attention at CES 2011.

The worry is, the same mind-set is hard to escape even in the specialist world. We all want to know what's trending now, skipping over the bigger picture to find the tweet-friendly summation of a diverse event. That being said, there were two distinct trends along the corridors at the top of the Venetian Tower, where the high-end audio section of CES pitches camp. The first was hi-fi manufacturers branching out into new fields. Cardas, Paradigm and Velodyne (better known for cables, speakers and subwoofers respectively) all had in-ear monitor designs on show, while speaker makers Focal (*opposite*) and PSB launched banded headphones (with clever noise cancellation in the case of the PSB). Meanwhile Audioquest – better known for its cables – announced it was to produce a small in-line DAC called the Hummingbird. Each has its strong points (in particular, the lightweight aluminium headband of the Focal Spirit One acting as a pantograph to keep the headphones in the best position irrespective of head shape, and the Audioquest Hummingbird's colour-coded signal). In fairness, these aren't the first crossover products and they won't be the last, but it's a 2012 trend.

A perhaps more troubling trend for the audio industry is the marked increase of price tags so large they can be seen from space. Las Vegas is the perfect venue for this highest of high-end gear, because it's one big high-stakes poker game where everyone ups the ante, and still no-one folds. It's troubling because while some of these products sell in places where economic growth still occurs, they potentially disenfranchise many would-be high-enders who might want to start on the ladder, but (possibly wrongly) think they lack the price of admission.

It's also ultimately damaging for some of the companies that think a price tag north of \$100,000 guarantees sales. There are companies making exceptionally high-end products (often loudspeakers, and often from established names in the audio industry) that go some way toward justifying that sky-high price, but others make you think there is a product that is built, looks and sounds like a \$20,000 product, but costs more than \$100,000.

No single show report could cover all the bases, even just in audio itself. With dozens of rooms spread over the CES convention, the off-piste rooms in other hotels and *The Home Entertainment Show* as a separate entity in its own right, we have to remain editorial. So instead, here's our best of the best in each category:

Analogue: In the race to the top, the cheaper can get overlooked amid the price-busters, and when it comes to vinyl replay, price-busting was all the rage. And whether it was the new titanium bodied Ortofon MC Anna (\$8,500), the equally titanium-infused Titan-busting Lyra Atlas (\$9,500), the \$28,000 Kronos turntable or the \$150,000 Onedof (One Degree Of Freedom), there was a lot of price-busting on display. The latter sounded exceptionally fine through a LAMM/Wilson system.

It wasn't just about soaring price though. Well-Tempered showed its new limited edition Versalex, with a more traditional looking wooden plinth and shiny chrome/brushed aluminium arm for \$4,450, Rega presented its RP6 turntable (UK price £798) and Music Hall was showcasing its range of value-driven turntables, mostly badge-engineered Pro-Jects. But sometimes 'cheap' is relative; Zanden announced a 'lower cost' phono stage, the Model 1300 at \$13,750. Zanden also introduced a new TPM-1 LP mat made from a number of different types of rubber. Don't expect much change from \$1,000!

CD: Reports of CDs death appear greatly exaggerated. Mark Levinson's 40th year in manufacturing saw the launch of the \$8,000 No 519 CD/SACD player. With its 32bit/192kHz resolution, a host of digital inputs, HDMI and balanced and single ended outputs, it looks set at keeping the CD player at the heart of the system as both player and digital hub. The same applies at a far lower price thanks to the \$1,999 Cambridge Audio 851C DAC/up-sampling CD player. And, yes, that's how Cambridge itself classifies the 851C: the company is keen to stress the accent of the device –

it's Cambridge Audio's best DAC, with a CD player along for the ride. Even Esoteric's new \$10,000 one-box K-05 CD/SACD player has provision for USB input, and also up to 32bit/192kHz precision. Esoteric also introduced the P-02 and D-02 CD/SACD transport and DAC combination, priced at a lofty \$23,500 per unit.

Rega, as we saw in Manchester last year, has its new Apollo-R player (£548), but there were new players from PrimaLuna (the Prologue Premium, \$3,999), Oracle's new one-or-two-box Paris player (\$3,500 a piece for player and DAC). But arguably the best sounding new CD launch was the \$9,200 C31 from the new Corona line from MBL. This was put to excellent use through the matching preamp and mono powers and 116F floorstanders for one of the best sounds at the show.

Digital: Perhaps the big news was the announcement of the Audio Research Reference DAC (*p13, top*), complete with on-board audio streaming capabilities. ARC is still very much high-end royalty in the US and by bringing computer audio into its Reference class products, that's a tacit statement of legitimacy in even the most conservative quarters of the audio world. The DAC itself is still in end-stage testing, and is expected to cost around \$14,000-\$15,000. In more conventional DAC territory, the Japanese company Qualia showed off its Indigo-USB DAC. Sporting four ESS Sabre DACs, each driven by its own oversized transformer and cited in a solid billet of aluminum, the Qualia was impressive, as was the \$45,000 price tag.

At more breathable altitudes, Cambridge Audio (as part of its slew of new products) announced two new DACs – the \$399 DACMagic 100 and the \$599 DACMagic Plus – along with a new network streamer – the \$1,149 Stream Magic 6. While Hegel announced its 'better' DAC out of its three-strong range; the \$2,000 HD20 and Wadia introduced its \$1,499 121 Decoding Computer for its small form factor range, and Arcam went for the cheapest option around with its portable \$150 rLink.

A comparatively new sector, both Ayre and HRT showed ADCs this year, ideal for digitizing LP signals or similar, while Meridian introduced an 818 Reference Audio Core Sooloos box for the 800 system (£7,500). This was almost dwarfed by the rush to hear the excellent new £4,500 cylindrical M6 active loudspeakers, one of the digital stars of the show.



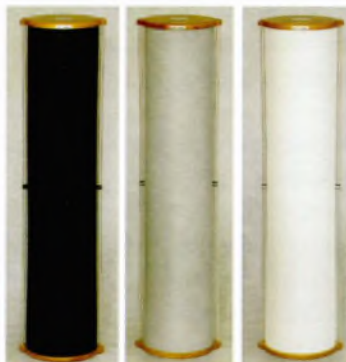
Are you listening to your room or to your audio equipment?

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Are you listening to distortion created by acoustic feedback or to your audio equipment?

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However, top of the digital class was the Burmester Music Server 111 (\$50,000). Still honing the final touches, this refined and detailed sounding device was natural in the extreme.

Amplifiers: For some odd reason, this wasn't the year of big amp launches across the board, but there were some fine models to be had if you scratched the surface. Tube-meisters Conrad-Johnson introduced the \$18,500 ARTsa, a one-box version of the company's dual mono ART power amplifier; so new it didn't have a face plate, but was sounding truly wonderful playing through a pair of Neat Ultimatum XLIs. Meanwhile, Jeff Rowland was going in the other direction, turning the stereo model 625 power amp into the mono model 725s. As ever the most elegant devices in audio. Elsewhere atop the Las Vegas skyline, VTL launched two new power amp designs, the 400w, \$33,500 S400 Series II stereo tower of power (Siegfried Lite, perhaps?) and the \$10,000 S200 200 watter.

Dan D'Agostino audio has a different take on elegance, and his Captain Nemo look mono power amps (*right*) are now joined by an upgradable stereo design (the \$25,000 Momentum stereo) along with a more finalized preamp design (very clever) and a new optional black in place of silver finish. D'Agostino's previous brand Krell released a Phantom III preamp and S550i integrated amplifier (\$5,500 each). TAD finished up the last link in the top line chain with the \$42,000 C-600 preamp. Mark Levinson showed (but did not play) a \$10,000 No 585 integrated amplifier too.

On the lower cost front, Peachtree moved into pre/power systems, with its \$2,999 Grand Pre and \$1,399 220 Class D power amp, while Cambridge Audio announced the \$1,999, 120W Class XD 851A integrated amplifier.

Loudspeakers: Five years ago, a loudspeaker cresting the \$100,000 mark was treated with a sharp intake of breath. Now, whenever you see a tall floorstander, you are pleasantly surprised when the price is in 'only' the \$69,000 mark, such as the excellent sounding Hansen Emperor E being driven by some equally excellent Tenor amplification.

The big story here was the Clash of the Titans; Magico's new Q7 weighed in (literally... the things weigh close to 350kg per side) at \$165,000. They were all high drama and big ticket specifications (Yair Tammam of Magico admitted that there's so much high grade neodymium used to make those custom 12" woofers, each speaker has close to \$2,500 worth of that raw material alone). In a private showing in the across-the-Strip Mirage hotel, Wilson Audio was showing (but not playing) the new \$195,000 Alexandria XLF. I subsequently had an all-too-brief after-show listen at David Wilson's home in Provo, Utah, and I never expected to hear the Smurfs soundtrack on that big a speaker and I never expected to hear 10Hz out of a Smurf. It's unfair to compare a speaker on its first day in a hotel environment to a speaker sitting in its natural home, but although people think XLF means 'eXtended Low Frequency', I think it's short for the 'eXtremely Lucky Fellow' who ends up buying a pair. You'd expect 'awesome' from speakers with this kind of price tag, and it seems both deliver, in very different ways. Both are tweeter-fixated, too; Wilson and its new home-grown soft-dome, Magico and its Beryllium-domed tweeter in line with the listener's ears.

These were the big names in the big ticket stakes, but they weren't alone. There was the seven-driver, four way \$120,000 Sonus Faber Aida, the \$158,000 Ntt Audio 103s, the \$106,500 Wadax La Pasion, the \$139,000 Venture Ultimate Reference... and these were just the newcomers.

Four important loudspeaker systems stood out for me. First, the aforementioned MBL 116F (\$32,000) are omnidirectional designs that sing a siren's song. Then, almost immediately after hearing the MBLs, we were faced with the new TAD-E1 floorstanders, which are both slimmer and cheaper (at \$29,800) than anything TAD has produced to date. And then there was the outstanding little GoldenEar Aon 3 (\$1,000), a two-way that sounds bigger and better than it has any



► right to for the money. But for me, the real star of the show was the revised Raidho C1.1 bookshelf loudspeaker (\$17,000, *below*). There are subtle changes between this model and its C1.0 predecessor, but it took about a nanosecond to realise you were in the presence of greatness, even given the lofty company and its over-achieving predecessor.

The rest: As discussed, Cardas, Focal, Paradigm, PSB and Velodyne all launched headphones or IEMs. Of these, arguably the new Cardas in-ears (c. \$400) represent the die-hard audiophile choice, while the Focal Spirit Ones (£199) represent the high-tech

choice, and turn in a very fine sound too. Meanwhile headphone *enfant terrible* HiFiMAN has finally managed to mass-produce its planar-magnetic headphones, and the new HE-400s deliver performance extremely close to that of the HE-500, but in a more efficient \$399

package.

When it comes to cables, the big two stories were from Nordost and Audioquest. Hot on the heels of its successful Leif series of entry-level cables, Nordost chose CES to launch its new Norse 2 range of Micro-Mono-Filament (MMF) interconnects, speaker cables and power cords. The intervening five years between Norse and Norse 2 has seen developments in conductor

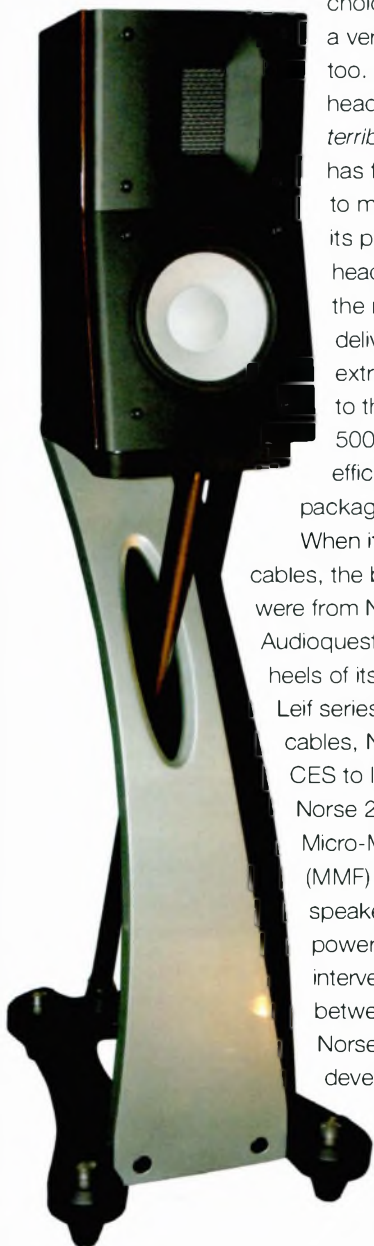
optimization, mechanical tuning and termination, which have brought about significant changes to the design. Meanwhile, Leif has taught Nordost a lesson in building structured families of cables across a range and the new Norse 2 streamlines one of the company's most important lines. The Norse 2 range comprises just three lines – the top Tyr (interconnect and speaker cable only), Frey 2 (as per Tyr but with a tonearm cable and power cord) and Heimdall 2 (as per Frey 2, but adding a 75-ohm and 110 ohm digital cables). Interconnect prices range from \$900 for a 1m set of Heimdall 2 to \$2,400 for the same length of Tyr, while 2m speaker cables in the same families cost \$1,800 and \$6,000 respectively.

Having learned from its Indulgence Series of HDMI and USB cables, Audioquest is radically revising its line of analogue interconnects to match, in what it calls its Bridges & Falls Series. Whatever combination of RCA, 3.5mm and iDevice connector you can think of, the price of the cable remains the same, starting at \$29 per meter for Evergreen and rising to \$1,000 per meter for Angel, with Golden Gate, Big Sur, Sydney, Victoria and Yosemite in between them. Victoria, Yosemite and Angel all include the company's own 72V dielectric-bias system. These replace all existing Audioquest interconnects up to Diamondback. The company has also announced a five-strong range of USB-iPod and a four-strong range of Ethernet cables in the Indulgence series, ranging from \$29 for a 2' 6" Forest up to \$549 for the same length of Diamond.

Then there's Synergistic Research and its Tranquility Base products. To help prevent the kind of RF hash that can be propagated in computers and ruin the sound of a system, Synergistic Research has launched a range of three Tranquility Bases; the *bäsik*, Base and Base XL, to fit on conventional furniture or into dedicated racks (the XL is custom designed to fit the Grand Prix Audio range). The active platforms take a variation on the theme of the EM Cell patented by Synergistic, so that the signals from any component sitting on that Tranquility Base are being conditioned while still in the component itself. Multiple components can be used on each table, and it's easy to demonstrate (just turn the platform off). Prices start at \$995 for the *bäsik* and rise to \$3,000 for the Base XL.

Most of the products cited above were from the CES event at the Venetian, with a few others from off-piste exhibits in expensive rooms at the Mirage Resort on the other side of the Las Vegas Strip. But there was another show, *The Home Entertainment Show*. This was rather like setting your watch back 25 years or so, in both a good and a bad way. The good was the enthusiasm and experimentation of the old days. The bad was the lack of professionalism that comes with that enthusiast-led stance. Where the Venetian folk could perhaps do with less slickness, some of *THE Show* rooms could work on their people skills. The highlight for me though was the NFS (Not For Sale) room, which was just a bunch of guys who pitched up to play some sounds, hang out together and drink prodigiously for a week.

The audio scene in the US has been in the doldrums for some years, but 2012's CES may go down as the start of audio's bounce-back. The rooms weren't as packed as they were five or 10 years ago, but neither did the show give off that 'ghost town' smell of fear you got in recent years. There was even some cautious optimism for the future! +





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Computer Audio for Beginners Part 2

The future of music, at your fingertips By Vincent Luke



Following on from last issue's introduction to Computer Audio, Vince Luke of AMR goes a little deeper this time, delving into the best ways to transfer CD files to computer hard drives, how to optimise your computer for audiophile playback, and more.

Assuming one has chosen the desired front-end hardware the next step is the actual transfer of the complete CD collection from "disk to drive".

This section is focused upon:

- a) **How** - to transfer/access CD music from the physical disk to a Hard Disk Drive
- b) **What** - are the type of audio files and their respective advantages/disadvantages
- c) **Where** - organising the overall music library for ease of access which is the most oft-overlooked aspect due to the sheer number of likely audio files

The Sourcing of Audio Files

There are two approaches to creating a library of music files on the computer:

1. Ripping CDs or DVD-As:

"ripping" is the term to describe the transfer a duplicate of the music file from physical CD (or DVD-A) to a suitable music file. High-quality music ripping programs are abound; J.River Media Center, dB CD Ripper, Exact Audio Copy, (all on Windows) and XLD (OS X) but to name a few. iTunes also works but is more limited as it is aimed at the mass market.

- transfer current CD/DVD-A collection to Hard Disk Drive.
- ripping is a time-consuming exercise but there are services that will carry out this mundane task.
- currently, no way to rip SACD because it is in Direct Stream Digital (DSD) format which is incompatible with the mainstream Pulse Code Modulation (PCM).
- need to decide how to rip the file, as an all-in-one single file or a cue sheet or rip as per individual tracks and place in the folder (the latter is recommended for ease of access, reference and storage).

2. Downloading music files:

iTunes is by far, the most well-known music store through which to purchase and download music. High-Definition music is between 3-5 times larger than a Standard-Definition 16-Bit FLAC music file. Downloads is the future source of Standard-Definition (CD) and High-Definition music (though some HD music websites offer the option to send out a memory stick with the HD music on it).

- convenience of "click and download" is unmatched.
- personal/financial data is required to purchase, but "https:" payment has been shown to be secure (there is also payment by telephone)
- in event of loss of data (if not backed up, need to re-download)

Note: Metadata is the term used to describe the data file that accompanies in this case, the music file and provides the background information such as album listing, type of file, bit rate and rating by users. The most common is a file with the extension ".cue". This is an essential file that is needed for each and every album. Imagine having thousands of albums without the name of the song, the artist, the track length etc.

Compression Type	File Type	File extension	Sound Quality (5=best, 1=worst)	Comment
Uncompressed: Direct 1:1 binary copy of CD/DVD-A	WAV	.wav	5	Waveform Audio Format contains uncompressed Linear Pulse Code Modulation which is the standard audio file format CD .
	AIFF	.aiff	5	Audio Interchange File Format was co-developed by Apple. It audio data is uncompressed PCM.
Lossless Compressed: Doubles the number of tracks for the same HDD, less HDD access, more software action (decoding)	FLAC	.flac	5	Free Lossless Audio Codec employs a lossless data compression algorithm to 50%-60% of the original. Leading industry format for highest quality recordings
	Monkey's Audio	.ape	5	Similar to FLAC but not as popular as FLAC.
	Windows Media Audio 9 (Lossless)	.wma	5	Similar compression to others but limited to 24-Bit/96kHz.
	Apple Lossless	.m4a	4	Similar to FLAC/APE.
Lossy Compression: Around ten times the numbers of tracks compared to direct uncompressed format, but very poor sound quality	Ogg Vorbis	.ogg/ oga	3	Anecdotal tests suggests this is one of the better lossy compression formats.
	AAC	.aac	3	Designed successor to MP3 and at comparable bit rates, is one of better lossy compression programs
	Windows Media audio	.wma	2	Similar sound quality to MP3.
	MPEG	.mp3	2	De facto standard for lossy data compression. Variable rate and compression means varying sound quality

The Different Audio Formats

The table above summarises the different types of music files, their sound quality and comments about their different characteristics. Overall, for high-end computer audio purposes, we commend FLAC - it saves on disk space yet is at the highest quality on a par with the original CD recording (assuming the software and hardware have been fully-optimised).

It is worth noting that between the two highest quality types of music files; Uncompressed versus Lossless Compression, in theory, there is no difference between these two approaches. But in practice, there is the issue of software jitter in the chain to consider that can/may impact either types of formats. The software jitter is case-specific as it is dependent upon the hardware and software configuration.

Keen-eyed observers will note that under the Windows Media Audio format, there are Lossless Compression and Lossy Compression with the identical ".wma" file extension. To determine whether the file is lossless or lossy, the exact Bit-Rate must be identified, found under the properties of the music file itself. A Bit-Rate of 768 kilobits is lossless, anything lower is considered lossy. To ascertain the Bit-Rate of a file, simply move the mouse over the precise music file and the embedded data is displayed.

Further, specific to ".wav" files only, they do not support tagging and as such, is less user-friendly.

Library Management

With a little planning, the consummate ease and long-term satisfaction from a comprehensive and properly-organised music library is beyond words.

With the sources and types of files identified in the previous section, the following is an overview of the work required to best organise the likely thousands of albums in a typical music collection. This is simply one approach preferred by us. However, once you understand what is required, arrange as you so wish.

Tags are a type of metadata that in audio use, is for the storage of information other than the audio itself. The key points to bear in mind are: artist, track, title, album

- embed cover art
- add composer, conductor, orchestra etc.
- Uncompressed formats usually do not support tagging
- Once tagged the tag forms an integral part of the file and moves with music file
- Tags now supported by most playback hardware and software, in fact most playback systems for files now require correct tagging for searching, track identification and cover art



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- ▶ Purchased tracks usually include full correct tagging and cover art
- information from free public databases often inconsistent and omits items like composer for classical
- cover art downloads can still be hit and miss with some software
- Software for correcting wrong tags and cover art exists, can be hard to use, nothing right now works automatic
- mainstream music well supported by rippers build into player software
- For oddball items dB PowerAmp CD-Ripper offers subscription services for better CD-Information and cover art.

If CDs and other sources are just ripped without detailed information (metadata) it is like having all your music on CDRs with nothing written on them...not useful! Note that network access is needed by the ripping program to acquire information from the Internet such as the cover art.

Just as in Windows Explorer with your word processing, family photos and excel spreadsheets, they are typically 'filed' in a certain way for ease of access.

This is no different when it comes to organising music files. A structure is required to ideally store them for ease of reference by you and your computer audio software program. The following are key points to bear in mind.

ii. Folder/Directory Structure – place your music into a logical structure, such as by Genre etc.

- No right or wrong way.
- Typical ripper and playback software allows wide-range. Many need manual setup (applicable for everything).
- Think of your shelves full of CDs and how you arrange these...
- Use common sense, for example Genre > Artist > Albums for artists with a large number of albums or just Genre > Albums for artist with one or few albums.
- Also it is possible to just place everything into one single folder, can make maintenance difficult if there are many albums and artists.

Having covered the background behind music library management, the following example is of the way we at AMR have structured our music library which contains some +2,500 High-Definition and Standard-Definition music albums.

Upon first identifying the internal or external hard disk drive, in Windows Explorer (or OS X: Finder) select the directory which in this case, is on Toshiba External Drive (E:).

'id3v2' metadata (same as in AIFF, ALAC and MP3) can be added though it is not recognised as standard. It is detected and read by some audio playback software such as Audirvana (www.audirvana.com). Also, the broadcasting industry has devised the "Broadcast Wave Format" (also ".wav" which is a different type of wav file that includes metadata: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Broadcast_Wave_Format).

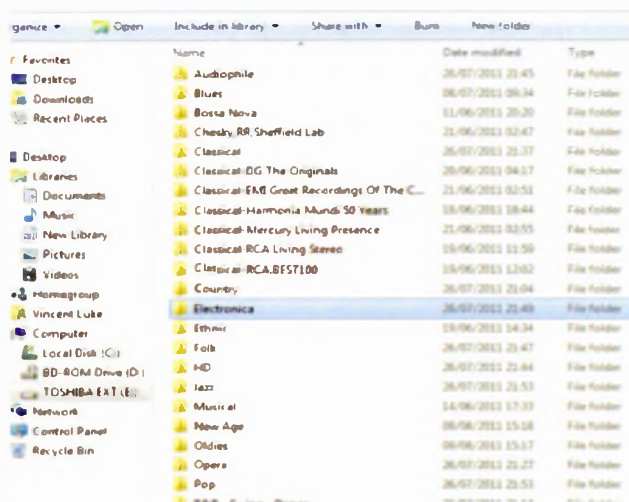
Think of the structure as a 'tree root system'.

At the top-level, in the "Music" folder, we have listed the whole music library by genre; in alphabetical order from "Audiophile" albums downwards...

AMR's HD and SD Music Library (Top-Level: By Genre)

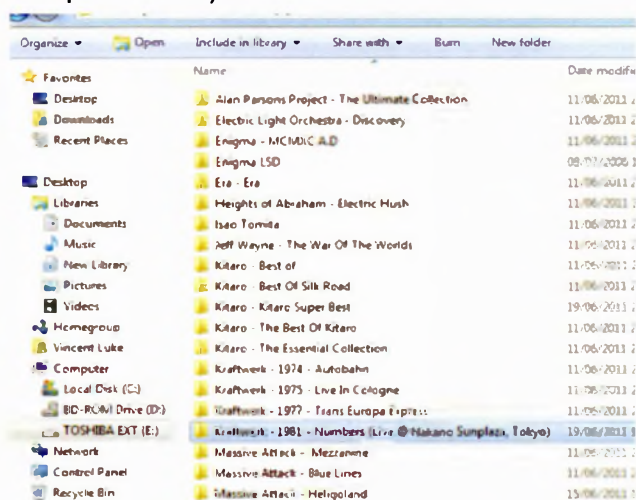
Below, we have highlighted "Electronica" and by double-clicking on this folder, we effectively go down one sub-level to 'Sub-Level 1'.

AMR's HD and SD Music Library (Sub-Level 1: By Group and Album)



Upon examination, 'Sub-Level 1' yields the artists and their albums (in alphabetical order by artist).

AMR's HD and SD Music Library (Sub-Level 1: By Group and Album)

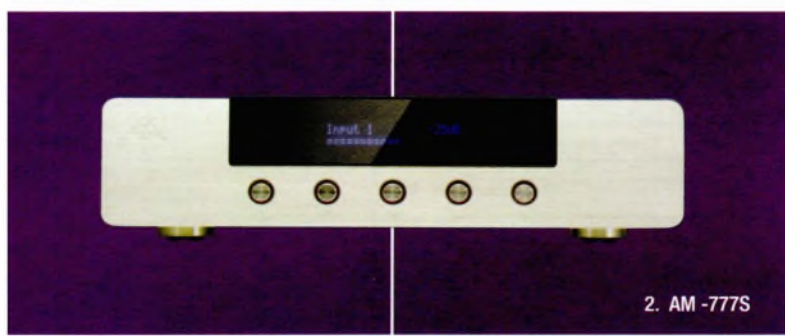


Then we double-click on 'Kraftwerk – Numbers: Live @ Nakano Sunplaza, Tokyo' to go down another level to 'Sub- ▶



AMR 777 SERIES

1. AMR Compact Disk Processor CD-777 2. AMR Pre-Main Amplifier AM-777 3. AMR Phono Stage PH-77



2. AM -777S



3. PH-77



Abbingdon Music Research

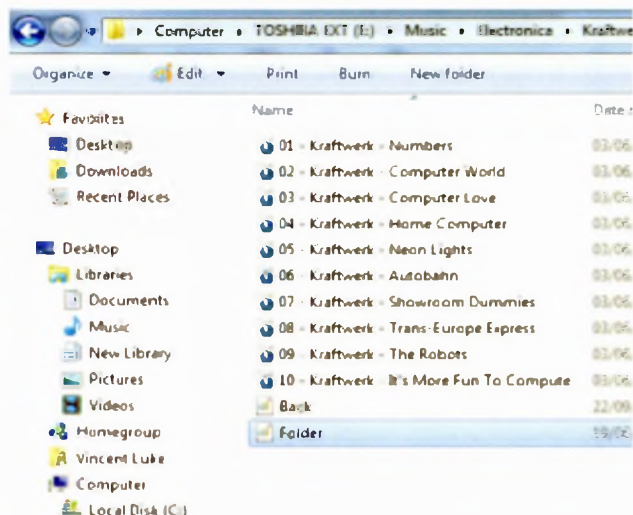
"Analogue, Musicality, Realism"



1. CD-777B

- ▶ Level 2'. This takes us into the folder of the album containing all the audio and non-audio data of this album.

AMR's HD and SD Music Library (Sub-Level 2: Music Tracks and Cover Art)



The audio tracks 1-10 are labelled by the name of the group and then the title of the track e.g. 'Track 06- Kraftwerk – Autobahn'.

With the pre-installed Media Center program, it has identified these as compatible music files for Media Center. This is depicted by the Media Center icon to the left of the track number. Depending upon your preferred audio playback software, that would be listed instead...such as iTunes or CPlay for example.

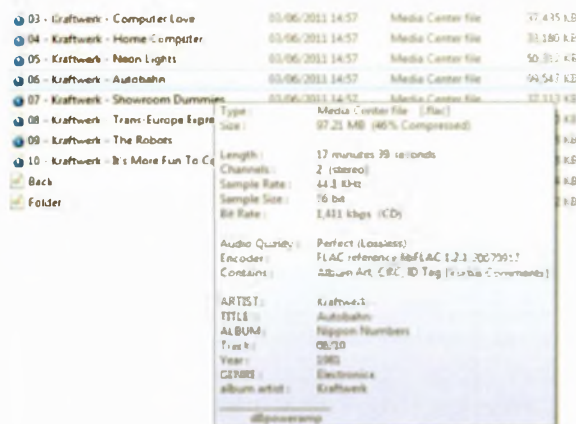
The 'Folder.jpeg' is highlighted and shows the digital front cover picture pertaining to the album. The 'Back.jpeg' obviously is the digital picture of the back of the album. Both of these are used to display the 'cover art' in the music playback software program (where this option is available) e.g. J.River Media Center. These jpeg files can be considered as an example of metadata.

Accessing Specific Embedded Track Data

As outlined in the File data section, each audio file has embedded information. To access this data, simply hover the arrow over a specific file, to call up this data.

For example, Track 06 – Kraftwerk – Autobahn is a lossless compressed FLAC file by 46%. This single track occupies 92MB and is 17 minutes and 39 seconds long. It is a 2-channel stereo 16/44.4 audio file. At the bottom, it is possible to see that it was "ripped" from CD to hard disk drive using dB Power Amp.

AMR's HD and SD Music Library – holding the arrow key over the Selected Track



Computer Audio Contemplations

In the mid 2000s, computer audio was virtually ignored by the audiophile, and our best efforts at extracting quality audio files were unpopular. Today, the quality and user-friendliness of computer audio playback is unsurpassed.

When it comes to optimising the CAS/NAS/PFP, two overriding considerations will always remain:

1. Always Playing Catchup: the pace of computer hardware/software advancements is nothing short of breakneck. As such, what is recommended today, may tomorrow, be superseded by a newer version or something altogether different.
2. Basic computer understanding: optimising the computer on the software side requires at least a basic level of computer knowledge as it is a complex topic. The more one wishes to attain the highest quality of playback, the more one needs to delve into the sub-levels of the computer's workings. This is less relevant to PFP as its setup is more basic as it is an all-in-one system.

While it is possible to adopt a very technical approach to optimising the hardware/software configuration, it is also possible to circumvent this using the NAS approach for example where everything is literally "plug and play".

For outright sonic performance, we do prefer a cutting-edge CAS to maximally play High-Definition (32/24-Bit) and Standard-Definition (16-Bit) music files partnered with any DAC. It stands to reason that the downstream DAC itself must also be of a similar performance level, otherwise all the full benefits of the good work upstream in the computer transport would not shine through.

In the next issue, we will attempt to outline the issues to contend with in striving for the highest level of audio playback quality. +

PMC Twenty24 loudspeakers

By Jason Kennedy

When PMC launched the twenty series back in September last year company co-founder and designer Pete Thomas said that the range aims to maximise musicality through minimising coloration. Which doesn't seem all that revolutionary, but I don't recall hearing it before; engineers often talk about reducing coloration or distortion but not with the aim of improving that elusive quality, musicality. This might be because you can make a 'musical' loudspeaker that is far from evenly balanced or uncoloured, I would go so far as to say that some speakers seem to have greater musicality precisely because they have slightly odd colourations. One of the most extreme examples was Tom Evan's FR1, this had a single Jordan 'full range' driver in a small polystyrene cabinet with a flocked finish. These latter two factors were undoubtedly why it is a pretty rare product to find these days but, largely because single drivers do things that designs with crossovers don't, and possibly because of that lightweight cabinet it was a very fast, engaging and yes musical loudspeaker that had the most wayward of tonal responses. This isn't the only thing that Pete means when he talks about colouration of course, there are plenty of other often more obtrusive shortcomings with loudspeakers. PMC's particular bugbear often seems to be dispersion, they are very keen that what comes out of the speaker and hits the wall before it gets to your ears is consistent with the direct sound. It's something that other designers don't make a song and dance about, preferring to focus on frequency or time domain issues.

Musicality is a highly desirable quality for an audio component but also a rather ethereal one that cannot be produced by a pair of loudspeakers alone, it has to be there

in the signal and the amplifier needs to be able to work with the speaker effectively for it to be audible. Having said that some speakers are clearly more musical than others, and it's long been a quality I associate with PMC designs so it's perhaps merely a decision on Pete's part to emphasize this characteristic. Either way the biggest floorstander in the four strong twenty series range has musicality in spades, it is a very enjoyable and engaging loudspeaker in a rather distinctive cabinet.


The five degree lean or layback is what distinguishes the twenty series, five degrees may not sound like much but it makes for a high speed aesthetic with something of the 'Is it live or is it Memorex' about it. Raked speakers have been done before, most notably by Avalon and Audio Physic, but as it's not the easiest way to build a cabinet they are still a rare breed. Yet it has some obvious technical and aesthetic advantages, for a start you get free time alignment for tweeter and woofer, it also ends up being stiffer although the 'advanced transmission line' system (ATL) that PMC uses means that its boxes are already better braced than most.

It does pose a styling problem however, specifically with the terminal board, do you fit it so that the terminals stick out parallel to the top and bottom of the speaker or do you put them at right angles to the back of the cabinet so that they point downward. PMC went for the former approach which means that the colour coding on the top pair of terminals (for the tweeter) disappears into the box, I quite like the idea of terminals that point downwards as that's where the cables are usually coming from but I can see the logic of their choice.

On more important issues the twenty series has completely new drive units to existing PMC designs. Its pricing overlaps with the i range but there are no common parts, it is more closely related to the fact models that sit above it in the hierarchy, notably in the crossover point which is a low 1.8kHz. This is because the dispersion of even a five inch diaphragm starts to narrow above 2kHz and as previously mentioned evenness of dispersion is a PMC goal.

A 27mm Sonolex soft dome tweeter that PMC co-developed with SEAS has the unenviable task of delivering everything from the crossover point up to a specified 25kHz, a job it seems more than equal to if the listening is anything to go by, although I make no claims to be able to hear 25kHz. The dome is pre-coated for consistency and ferrofluid cooled so that it can take the sort of abuse that this company expects of its drive units. The main driver is a six and a half inch natural fibre cone, mostly paper one assumes, with light doping and a cast alloy frame. Behind it is the mouth of a three metre ATL that vents out of the front rather than the rear of the cabinet as is the case with the i series, a change that is said to improve bass definition.

The twenty24 has a plinth that's offset to the back so that you see a shadow gap under the front of the speaker, it also stabilises what would otherwise be a potentially dangerous piece of furniture. PMC decouples plinth from cabinet with cork and rubber pucks and supplies stainless spikes, lock nuts and a spanner to tighten them up with. A laser cut spanner no less. A lot of expertise and attention to detail has gone into this speaker and it shows ▶

The image shows two black floor-standing speakers. The one on the left is tilted at an angle, while the one on the right is upright. The upright speaker features a silver-colored baffle with two drivers: a tweeter at the top and a larger woofer below it. The PMC logo is visible on the lower part of the upright speaker's cabinet. The background is a plain, light-colored wall with a circular light fixture visible.

“Co-founder and designer Pete Thomas said that the range aims to maximise musicality by minimising coloration. Which doesn't seem all that revolutionary, but I don't recall hearing it before; engineers often talk about reducing coloration or distortion but not with the aim of improving that elusive quality, musicality.”

▶ in the fit and finish and even more so in the sound which is characterised by a wide open midrange that produces soundstages that tower over the speakers themselves. This quality is one that I associate with standmounts whose relatively compact cabinets are easier to control and thus attract less attention. But the quality of dispersion and the lack of cabinet colouration let the twenty24s disappear like EU loans to Greece, close your eyes and all you hear is a soundstage that's as big as the recording and the room allow.

It's more than a wall of sound too, it's a three dimensional scene where the sounds that musicians make take a clearly defined physical space. The sense of presence can be uncanny in its realism, way beyond anything you get with 3D TV and you don't even need to wear glasses, in fact you don't need to open your eyes. This also seems to be the case with a lot more music than usual, pianos are totally solid and grounded in the room while cymbals have air and life. This is an unflinchingly revealing speaker too, which can be a mixed blessing if your vinyl is worn or your system is on the edgy side. I got spectacular results with both my regular Leema Tucana integrated amp and Resolution Audio Cantata CD player/DAC as well as a Naim Uniti. The former has greater refinement and grip but the Naim has a musicality, there's that word again, and groove factor that sucks you in and won't let you go. In other words it worked a treat with the twenty24s which do indeed seem to have better bass definition that I remember with the i series, the bass times extremely well and manages to combine pace with power to highly entertaining effect. This is probably as much to do with the drive units and crossover point as the placement of the ATL vent, but whatever the reason it works.

The midband is dense with detail, some of it less desirable like tape hiss, but most of it adding to the sense of realism and energy. Image depth for instance can be massive with a good recording, one example being the recent 192k remaster of Antonio Forcione's debut *Meet Me in London*. This is one of the best hi-res recordings I've heard, with these speakers it places you in the studio with the musicians to an extent that is very rarely encountered, even with more expensive systems. But even regular 16/44 material is replete with space and an energy that makes for a very real musical experience. Sometimes the mid seems too forthright and explicit but this is not an issue with most recordings, if you listen to a lot of punk or thrash metal it's not perhaps the best speaker for the job but if your tastes are more catholic then you might have to work on the source, amp and cables to find a comfortable balance between energy and smoothness. I found myself noticing small differences between recordings and detail within familiar ones that was fascinating. The twenty24 gives you an awful lot of the fact's transparency and a bit more welly in the bass if not the same degree of revelation. But given the price gap, fact8 is twice the price, this makes the newcomer seem like phenomenal value and there's no doubt that it is.

Replacing the PMCs with a pair of luxurious oriental speakers at a similar price brought a number of things into sharp focus. One is that the twenty24 has a dry balance, the bass has no added juice or lushness to give the impression of body, secondly it is a phenomenally musical speaker that makes everything you play as exciting and engaging as it was the first time you heard it if not more so. You just can't ignore the music, even when the level is low it draws you in and won't let go. Finally it reveals differences between records with a precision and clarity that is rare and yet this does not get in the way of the enjoyment as it can with some speakers. I was wrong to suggest that



it's not a speaker for punk, if you like punk you like harsh, thin, high energy sound and that is what you will get with this speaker. Of course in all likelihood you won't see it like that because it's the sound of the music that you love.

The music I love includes the work of Led Zeppelin in their heyday a live performance of which was captured and released as *How the West Was Won* in a variety of formats including DVD-Audio. I managed to rip the hi-res material from my copy which means it's possible to hear it in full effect thanks to the wonders of computer audio. It's still short of power and weight but this does little to undermine the quality of playing that these PMCs make so clear, you can easily listen past the tonal balance and immerse yourself in the event. What really makes it work I suspect is the speaker's superb sense of timing, it's total lack of overhang means that nothing is smeared. So not only are the finest details preserved but they don't overstay their welcome.

Another old track that the iMac/Cantata combo has recently revived for me is Eminem's contribution to an early Missy

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Freq response: 28Hz – 25kHz

Sensitivity: 90dB 1w 1m

Effective ATL™: 3.0m 9.8ft

Impedance: 8 Ohm

Drive units: LF lightweight doped
6.5"/170mm cone with cast alloy chassis
HF 27mm SONOLEX™ soft dome,
Ferrofluid cooled

Crossover frequency: 1.8kHz

Input connectors: 2 pairs 4mm sockets
(bi-amp or bi-wire)

Dimensions HxWxD: 1028 x 184 x 419mm

Weight: 21kg 46.2lbs

Price: £3,100 per pair

Manufactured by: PMC Ltd

URL: www.pmc-speakers.com

Tel: 0870 4441044

Elliott album called *Busa Rhyme (from Da Real Worlo)*. It's possibly his finest recorded work thanks to the skills of producer Timbaland, and its the layers of sounds that he contributes that are illuminated by the twenty24. The vocal was always fairly clear but you can hear right down into the mix, I'm now certain that he used a broken bass cone to get the 'phat' bass beat on this killer track. It all comes down to the speed of the loudspeaker, what's more you don't need immense power nor state of the art ancillaries to achieve the result, which is a real bonus.

By combining low colouration with musicality PMC has managed to make a loudspeaker that can be everything to all men, well almost. Some will prefer a warmer balance others a heavier bottom end but few other speakers below five grand are as consistently revealing and entertaining as this stylish design. Its dynamic appearance gives a strong clue as to its sound but not its musical potential, it is one of those products that will have you delving through the old favourites so that you can hear them anew in a revealing but not clinical light. Pete Thomas has proved that reducing the right colourations can increase musicality, the gauntlet is well and truly down. +



Icon Audio Stereo 60 MkIII Valve Integrated Amplifier

By Roy Gregory

This is not your normal review. In fact it's a strange sort of hybrid, part think-piece, part product assessment. And the problem with that is keeping those two competing aspects in some sort of balance. On the one hand I'm suggesting a general approach that, if it works, could (should?) deliver a different upgrade path or system architecture – one that offers extremely high returns in terms of musical value. On the other, I'm looking at a product that fits that mold, but also offers exceptional value in and of itself. Would the approach work with other amplifiers? Yes, I believe it would. Does the amp work in a different (more traditional) context? Yes it does – although there's no escaping the benefits you'll gain by treading the path described here. Either way, it's worth keeping both sides of this particular story in mind...

With the veritable tidal wave of Chinese sourced product hitting these shores, it's no surprise that they've got most of the bases covered – all save one. For some (to me completely inexplicable) reason, I can't seem to find a single valve power amplifier that embraces both the "high value" and "high power" tags. You want flea-powered triodes? No problem. You want tubes the size of milk bottles? Likewise, no problem. But if you want a hundred Watts of load-tolerant, push-pull, affordable power – now that's a problem...

With a hi-fi history that includes the considerable commercial success of amplifiers like the ARC D70 and D115, the Beard P100 and any number of conrad-johnsons, you'd think that someone would have recognized the very real world appeal of a valve amp that's actually capable of handling most musical demands on the majority of loudspeakers. Even given the dubious influence of audio fashion, this seems like an oversight of near Nelsonian proportions. No ships? Not so much as a rowing boat. And that despite the clear evidence (in the shape of various integrated amplifiers) that these self same designers and manufacturers are not only aware of the appropriate tubes and circuit topologies, they know very well indeed just what to do with them.

The problem is that budgetary sensibility so often prevents the use of just such a high-value solution with really top-flight (for which read "expensive") speakers, whilst in ultimate terms, the performance will also suffer from the quality of the line-stage built into these products.



All of which got me thinking... Why not take advantage of the opportunity offered by just such an integrated design to see just how much performance might be wrung from it if driven by a serious source and line-stage? Why can't a high-powered, integrated amp act as a sensible stepping-stone to greater things, its basic control stage doing the job until something better can be added? As an exercise, the potential options it opens up when it comes to building higher value systems with greater versatility (and accessibility) more than justifies the effort, whilst who knows, it might just encourage a few of the slightly more adventurous brands to offer either a power-only version of just such an amp – or at the very least, a set of power-in sockets!

Imagine my surprise then, to discover that in fact, just such an animal does exist, even if the manufacturer isn't exactly shouting from the rooftops about the fact – or promoting what might be termed the power-mode of application. Enter the Icon Audio Stereo 60 Mk III, a designed in the UK, built in the Far-East product that actually offers a genuine 'power amp' mode, with a rear panel switch that drops the input sensitivity, so that you can connect the output of a line-stage directly to the tape inputs and wind the Stereo 60's volume pot to max*. Which would be irrelevant if it didn't also promise the requisite sonic excellence, and in this respect the Icon amp is definitely a stand out. Let's survey the high-points:

- Push-pull, ultra-linear output stage which, equipped with Tung Sol KT120 output tubes should be good for 85 Watts of predominantly Class A output.
- Hard-wired circuitry – generally assumed to sound better than PCBs, although that might well be because it encourages manufacturers to keep things simple.
- High quality transformers built on Japanese EI cores.
- Over-engineered, choke-regulated power supply.
- 6SN7/6SL7 driver and phase splitter valves, mounted in ceramic bases.

Which, taken *en masse*, pretty much ticks all the necessary boxes. Less obvious are the inclusion of Teflon insulated silver for all the input wiring, OFC copper for the transformer windings and the very tidy internal construction. The "copper plate" on the chassis is actually anodized aluminium alloy – which doesn't discolour the way pure copper does, while having a similar sonic benefit, bringing a little extra focus and harmonic purity to the sound. Whether that's down to mechanical/damping effects or something else entirely, designer David Shaw is reluctant to guess, but he's not going to ignore the advantage just because he can't explain it – which I for one find refreshing. He goes further to state that pure copper would sound slightly better, but cost and practicality rule it out.

Add to that a passive 'pre-amp' section built around the extremely cost-effective ALPS blue volume pot and you've got a potentially worthwhile starting point in the control stakes, and one that's not eating too much of the budget (or sucking on the power supply). The unit itself follows the traditional tubes front/transformers rear layout and comes with a practical and attractive (well – everything's relative) valve cover. Front panel controls switch the unit on and from standby to full-power, as well as setting level, source and allowing you to run the tubes in triode mode if the fancy takes you. There are three main inputs

and a tape input, as well as a pre-out (which is best used for connecting to a tape deck, or possibly a second power amp in a bi-amped system if Icon ever release such an animal).

In addition, there's also an upgrade (or "Signature") package that adds Jensen paper in oil caps and superior Full Music 6SN7/6SL7 tubes to the circuit – and £330 to the otherwise £2,000 price tag. These modifications were included on the review unit and add to the appeal of the Stereo 60 as an amp to grow with your system. With that scenario in mind, I inserted the Icon Audio unit into the 'second system' at home, positioning it between the EERA CD player and a pair of Spondor SA1 loudspeakers – examples of genuine budget esoterica, products whose performance really can defy their cost and give a glimpse of the stars. Is there a chance of a power only version of the Stereo 60? Again, according to David Shaw, you can special order the amp without the ALPS pot but you gain very little: you still need a 100K resistor in its place, and there's no saving in cost, so why not have the passive switching as insurance against a rainy day? One response might be that the amp would look nicer without the controls, but what price aesthetics?

Initial listening, with the EERA CD player up front, feeding the CD input of the Icon revealed a big, powerful and capable amplifier, with most of the expected attributes coupled to a nice sense of overall musical and rhythmic integrity. It might not have offered the most immediate sound or sense of presence, but everything was in the right place and hung together, making music engaging and enjoyable. In search of greater resolution, I substituted the Wadia 861SE for the EERA, which did improve levels of detail but did nothing to banish the subtle, veiled softness that lay across the performance.

Time to ring the changes, first step being a switch to the low-sensitivity input on the Stereo 60 Mk III, fed from the Wadia's own variable outputs. Normally speaking, I've always preferred to run the signal out of the 861 at full level – but that's when it's connected to a high quality line-stage. In this case the effect was both instant and dramatic. Taking Art Pepper's *Smack Up* as an example, there was far greater immediacy ▶

The distinction between a lower sensitivity and an attenuated input is important when it comes to sound quality. Dropping the input sensitivity actually eliminates the need to attenuate the input level, but also reduces the amount of attenuation applied to set level – a genuine win-win situation. Listeners are often seduced by the "My amp goes really loud without turning the volume control" syndrome, equating volume with power. In fact, the opposite is true and excessive sensitivity just results in excessive attenuation – or, in other words, a whacking great resistor across your input!



ELECTRA 1000 Be II

They say perfection is not of this world...

Don't believe what they say. If music is your passion, you should listen to the Electra 1000 Be II loudspeakers. Universally recognized by reviewers, recording and mastering studios, the world over, the Electra 1000 Be II loudspeakers are coveted by the most demanding audiophiles. One aspect of the design is the unique Focal inverted dome tweeter. This has convinced the most renowned recording and mastering studios across the world. This technology - the unique patented inverted dome High Frequency unit - made from rare, aerospace-grade beryllium - a material which is a hundred times more expensive than gold. The High Frequency dome material weighs just twenty-five thousandths of a gram and its material is seven times more rigid than titanium. These characteristics, combined with the powerful motor system, deliver outstanding acceleration, excellent dispersion and a with uniform frequency response from 2kHz to over 40kHz. Performance achievements that we're proud of, but in the end there's only one true measure of performance: trust your heart. Take a listen.

Photo: Atelier, Sylvain Morelton, St Etienne.

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▶ and presence, the instruments becoming crisper and their lines and phrasing clearer. The tempo took a step forward too, injecting a sense of spring and controlled energy into what had been a slightly lazy step. The double bass started to emerge as an independent influence and the snap of the snare was far quicker and more insistent. But the real difference was just how much tighter the band sounded. There was a greater sense of acoustic space and greater transparency and focus, but there was more musical space too, which is far more important. Now, the undulating, plaintive solos of 'Las Cuevas De Mario' soared above the rock solid rhythm work, carried on the underlying urgency of the stabbed piano phrases and supporting percussion. Fed via its own passive line-stage, the Icon had left you with the feeling that this track in particular could (and should) have been a lot dirtier. Bypassing the volume control delivered stark confirmation of that fact, whilst also demonstrating just how much the power amp's performance is eroded by the presence of the passive control section employed. Shorn of that buffer to musical expression, the system really started to click, in turn allowing the band to find its groove.

Time to introduce a pukka line-stage, in the shape of Pure Sound's transformer coupled L300, one of the most affordable truly top-flight musical performers that I've come across. But the question here is double edged: what can the L300 bring to the system and how effectively can the system (more particularly the Stereo 60) reveal the L300's real qualities. On the first count I needn't have worried. Adding the Pure Sound line-stage to the signal path immediately moved the listener much closer to the performance. A disc like the Philharmonia's live Enigma Variations gained a dramatic sense of presence and atmosphere, both musically and acoustically. The sound of



the instruments and the orchestral perspective were both far more natural, with tonal separation bringing a clarity to the structure and interwoven strands of the playing, underpinned by the improved spatial definition. Put bluntly, it was much easier to hear who was doing what and where and when they were doing it. Which includes the audience – the coughs, rustles and fidgeting between passages took on a far more distinct and identifiable quality, stepping in front of the speakers and placing you right inside that audience, further adding to the dramatic atmosphere of the recording. The result was to bring the concert venue right into the listening room, allowing you to forget the immediate environment and immerse yourself in the performance.

BUT HOW DOES IT ACTUALLY SOUND?

The short answer of course, would be "That depends" – not least on the choice of line-stage, but even driven directly from the Wadia, the Stereo 60's essential qualities still shine through. This is a big, bold, energetic and purposeful performer that projects music with a real sense of substance and presence. In fact, it offers all the attributes I expect from the breed, with musical and dynamic coherence well to the fore. If the amp has a weakness it's in terms of ultimate resolution and headroom – but then 90 or so Watts will only ever be 90 Watts, so expecting limitless power is unrealistic. What you do get is a much greater sense of power than you might expect, down to the combination of enthusiastic dynamics and sheer substance. Bass is deep, solid and capable of surprising shading and texture, providing the foundation on which the amp's unflustered musical clarity rests. Going solid-state at this price will generally offer greater transparency and detail, as well as a more defined or etched presentation, but the secret with the Stereo 60 (just like all its ancestors) is not the amount of information but what it does with it. Actually, there's more real detail than you might at first think, but its very integration makes it less obvious than the high-def competition. The result is music with a natural warmth and dimensionality, impressive impact and long-term listenability. Yes, you can get greater transparency, immediacy and resolution – but not in my experience, at this price; at least not combined with this level of musical communication and satisfaction. The Stereo 60 delivers music to savour, rather than sound to dissect – which is just as well, given its ability to grow with your system.

[sometimes]
technology meets art...





► And what a performance... With the L300 quite calling the tune, the music gained a sense of poise and grace, stability and authority that had been quite missing previously. And the louder it got, the more obvious that became, the system able to transit the most demanding crescendos without strain or cramping. The timp rolls and pizzicato playing in the strings that are such a feature of this piece were brought vividly to life, with real texture to the drum skins, of pluck and release to even the most muted of the string parts. That and the newly apparent acoustic space speak volumes about the increased definition at frequency extremes and the control of bandwidth instilled by the L300; exactly what you'd expect from a decent line-stage. The effortless musical organization and grace under fire are just the most obvious aspects.

There's no doubt that adding the L300 to the mix reveals just how capable the Stereo 60 Mk III's power amplifier really is. Just like putting Lewis Hamilton at the wheel of a Ford Fiesta, it's surprising just how much he can get out of a modestly priced car. But also like Lewis Hamilton in a Fiesta, there's no escaping the fact that he could go even quicker given a higher-performance vehicle – and this system has finally started to outgrow the Stereo 60. In absolute terms, it's now the narrowest gate in the path; you don't quite get the vivid drama and presence that the L300 is capable of in the best systems, the almost unstoppable sense of power and drive. But delivering that is going to cost you way, way more than the price of the Stereo 60 Mk III – an amp that's far from disgraced even in this company.

Repeating the exercise with the EERA and Raidho or Spondor speakers, but this time employing Tom Evans' Vibe in place of the L300, just reinforced the lesson, the superior musical qualities, control, authority and resolution of the Vibe really raising the system's game, whilst also showcasing the amp's ability to get a grip of speakers with more representative electric characteristics and sensitivity. Even the C2s, which place a heavy premium on the quality of partnering equipment, responded with gusto to the energetic attentions of the Vibe/Stereo 60 Mk III combination.

I set out with an agenda and questions to answer and the Icon Audio Stereo 60 Mk III has proved a willing respondent. This exercise has underlined in no uncertain terms the following facts of audio life:

- The one place you can't afford to scrimp in a system is the line-stage (and I'm sorry, but even the best passives or auto-transformer units don't cut it).
- Affordable power amps can perform surprisingly well in even quite exalted company.
- When it comes to power amps, the tube-based 100-Watt push-pull stereo chassis is definitely a price/performance sweet spot.

The Stereo 60 Mk III is a great example of the breed. It combines the

ability to project music with real presence, energy and enthusiasm with surprising levels of subtlety and resolution, once you feed it a good enough signal. In stock form, used as an integrated amp it's a good but not brilliant performer that certainly won't disappoint. But that passive control stage needs to be viewed as a stop gap, one that will get you by until you can afford something better (or get you by when your "something better" misbehaves).

Icon's clever implementation of the power-in facility makes the Stereo 60 Mk III a real wolf in sheep's clothing. As a versatile and affordable unit that will grow with a system it knows few equals and in these value conscious days that makes it a pearl almost beyond price. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Valve Integrated Amplifier

Valve Complement: 2x 6SN7, 2x 6SL7, 4x KT120, 1x OD3

Inputs: 4x line-level single-ended (RCA)

Input Sensitivity: 350mV (line) 1.2V (low sensitivity power input)

Outputs: 1x tape, buffered

Rated Power: 85 Watts/Ch into 8 Ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 440 x 230 x 400mm

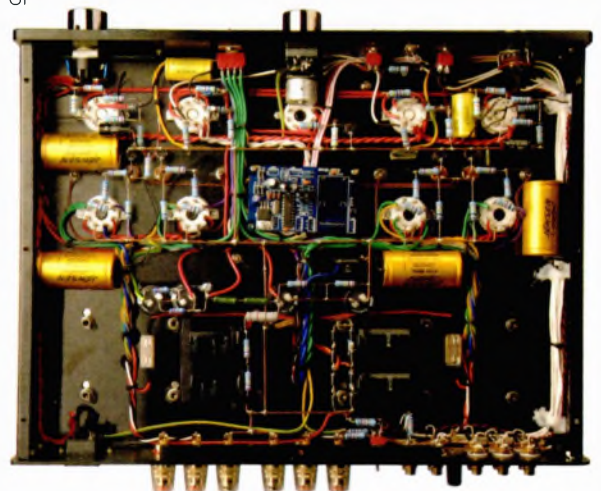
Weight: 33kg

Price: £2,000, £2,330 (Signature Version as reviewed)

Manufacturer: Icon Audio

URL: www.iconaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 1162 440593



Focal Electra 1008 Be loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

Focal's small Electra range (on the hi-fi side, just two floorstanders and a bookshelf) often fails to get the recognition it deserves. It's almost like middle child syndrome; the top Utopia range gets all the credit, the entry-level Chorus series gets the big sales figures. Electra gets left out in the cold. On the basis of the Electra 1008 Be standmounts, that middle child is actually a secret over-achiever.

It's a rear-ported two-way standmounter (Focal makes a dedicated stand too). The 27mm inverted dome tweeter is an all-Focal, all-Beryllium design, and exactly the same product seen in the company's Utopia range. Unlike most tweeters, this extends down to a crossover point of 2.2kHz (Focal uses what it calls Infinite Acoustic Loading to get past resonance issues at lower frequencies). This gives the 165mm 'W composite' mid-bass cone driver less of a job to do in the midrange. This is almost universally considered a good thing (it's partly why midrange units exist), but typically impossible to achieve when coupled to a tweeter that runs out of puff at 3kHz or more. By giving more of the midrange over to the tweeter, the heavier mid-bass cone doesn't slow down the speed of the midrange.

These two drivers sit in a very well constructed and well-finished cabinet. The wooden side-cheeks bolt on to the sides of a very thick tapered cabinet, and from the front you can see mostly the brushed metal curved plate for the tweeter and the piano gloss of the front baffle. It's not a good idea to measure quality by weight and knuckle-rapping tests, but if you do the comparisons between this and a typically thin-walled BBC like cabinet, all you get is tired muscles and sore knuckles here. A single set of high-quality speaker terminals and the bung-able rear port complete the package.

It's notionally not a difficult speaker to drive, with a rated 89dB sensitivity and a nominal eight ohm impedance (3.9 ohm minimum). That may place it outside SET territory, but means no difficulties with 25W valve or low-power Class A designs. 'Easy' does not mean 'undemanding' though; this is about quality, not quantity and the Electra 1008 Be demands an intelligent approach to system design, and rewards care in assembly and install. It also goes through an odd run-in; out



of the box it sounds bad, quickly goes through an all-too-brief good sounding period (like the 'walking ghost' phase of radiation poisoning), then goes through a difficult 'teenage' before becoming the complete, rounded and grounded individual it was destined to become after a couple of months.

There's a hurdle to get across with Focal in the UK. "It's bright" is the knee-jerk reaction to the brand; no matter how the system sounds in the real world, "it's bright" is the default position if there is a pair of Focals on the end of the system. This was robustly demonstrated by our Manchester Sound & Vision room, which featured these loudspeakers on the end of a Wadia CD player, Esoteric pre/power and a lot of Chord Sarum cables. The system had its problems (the small L-shaped room with one wall of glass and the others of cardboard make for a sound that drones like a set of bagpipes below about 150Hz) but brightness wasn't one of them. But people walked in, saw the Focal name and started talking about the brightness of the system. ▶

“This gives the Electra 1008 Be an economy of sound; a rare, enticing stillness at rest that disappears the moment it receives a musical signal.”

This isn't xenophobia, just that many UK listeners are used to hearing either the more 'laid-back' sound of soft-domes or the more 'zingy' sound of metal-domes when it comes to high-frequencies. Tweeters that don't behave in the same manner (diamond, ceramic, beryllium) tend to get pigeonholed into one or other sound. It's a natural happenstance of the maturity of the UK market. But it doesn't necessarily reflect the reality of the situation.

So, sorry but no, this isn't a bright loudspeaker. It's an honest, revealing loudspeaker and if the rest of the system has brightness about it, this will sound bright. If it's dull, it will sound dull. Similarly, if you put on a magnificent recording followed by a highly compressed one, you'll hear the differences easily. Not as much as you will if you raise your game, because the Utopia Diablo lets even more through, but that also places greater demands on the source, the electronics and the room.

The 1008 Be is not a characterless speaker, and unlike many loudspeakers, this one does have its focal point (pun sort of intended) trained on the tweeter. There's a sense of dynamic contrast and shade that is common to the Focal sound, and that comes out in a remarkable, almost uncanny ability to cope with real-world envelopes of notes (the attack, decay, sustain and release of a note), it may sound sharp next to loudspeakers that have a more laid-back approach to the shape of musical notes. This gives the Electra 1008 Be an economy of sound; a rare, enticing stillness at rest that disappears the moment it receives a musical signal. This applies universally; whether it's the baleful Willy Vlautin of Richmond Fontaine banging on about stalking and murder, James Taylor singing happy songs about puppies, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers blowing changes or the almost ethereal DG/Amadeus Quintet version of Schubert's 'Trout', the 1008 Be presents the sound with a directness that never tips over into urgency, and a wide rugby ball of a soundstage.

Limits on the 1008 Be are rare. The mechanical limit of it being a ported two-way loudspeaker means it's never going to plumb the depths and those after 'phat' bass sounds will keep on searching. For a cabinet this size, however, the bass is surprisingly deep and mostly well-controlled, with few artificial

boosts along the way. There are a couple of points where the speaker trades stark neutrality for a touch of thickening, but this seems to act more to reinforce the sense of image solidity than making the speaker seem bigger than it is. It's a fine line, and one that is successfully towed here, as I suspect if the 1008 Be simply rolled off without that added bloom, it wouldn't sound 'neutral', but 'insubstantial'. And, in fairness, given the only options seem to be a bigger speaker in a bigger room, a flat and bass light sound or a mostly flat sound that appears more solid than most, I think Focal made the right choice.

One of the big parts of this review falls out of the hook-up that occurred not long after I first received the loudspeakers. Now that Focal is now 'best buddies' with Naim Audio, how do the products work together? The word on the street is the Utopia range and Naim electronics are not the happiest of bed-fellows, but the Electra series is a fine match. I have a Naim Supernait on loan for this eventuality and the Anglo-French coupling is a fine one. It's not going to be for everyone – the clarity of that tweeter coupled with the character of the Supernait is never going to find favour with those who like their music mellow, but those who find a lot of audio insipid sounding will find the immediacy of the Focal and Naim combo highly attractive. OK, so a more universal tonal balance occurs with different partnerships (Focal and softer sounding electronics, Naim and soft-dome tweeters), but the marriage of Salisbury and St Etienne is not the exercise in running fingernails down a





TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Focal Electra 1008 Be

Type: Two-way bass-reflex bookshelf loudspeaker

Drive units: 27mm pure Beryllium IAL inverted dome tweeter

165mm 'W' composite mid/bass driver

Frequency Response ($\pm 3\text{dB}$): 46Hz-40kHz

Low frequency point: 41Hz

Sensitivity (2.83V/1m): 89dB

Impedance (nominal/minimum): 8 Ohms/3.9 Ohms

Crossover frequency: 2.2kHz

Recommended Amplifier Power: 25-150W

Finishes: Basalt, Champagne, Mahogany, White or Black lacquer

Dimensions (HxWxD): 39x27x35cm (excl. stands)

Weight: 15kg (excl. stands)

Price: £2,899 per pair

Stands £599 (lacquered aluminium); £859 (metallic slate grey) per pair

Manufactured by: Focal & Co

URL: www.focal.com/en

Tel: 0845 660 2860 (UK only)

chalkboard that some would have you think. That being said, Focal and older Naim equipment is really not a good match, because the Naim sound has softened somewhat over the decades and the 'chrome bumper' Naim presentation is going to screech through the 1008 Be.

In many ways, the 1008 Be is the Focal speaker in the best position for the future of audio in Europe. It's high-end enough to be an incredibly open window on the sound, yet not so open that it makes near impossible demands on the music

and the signal chain. It's small enough to slot comfortably into the postage-stamp sized spaces we laughably call 'rooms', yet not so small it sounds underpowered in more realistic listening spaces. And sonically it presents a very 'now' sound, vivid and insightful. It's the Utopia Diablo for those of us lacking the provision to use them as they should be used – you get 80% of the insight for 20% of the pain of install, system compatibility and so on. If that sounds like a compromise, then it's a compromise many will be happy to make. +



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Magnum Dynalab MD 801 internet media tuner *By Alan Sircom*

Last time we looked at a Magnum Dynalab tuner, FM was still slated for execution. Now, analogue radio has been reprieved, but since that time the audio industry has taken the computer to heart, and internet radio has become a significant force in listening. With both things in mind, it's perhaps unsurprising that the Canadian company best known for tuners should come up with an internet-friendly option, in the shape of the new MD 801.

Of course, internet radio is just one aspect of the Computer Audio revolution, and Magnum Dynalab has been clever enough to make its first generation of media players ('Internet Media Tuner', in M-D speak) capable of hooking up to a music server, shared media on a network or even a USB drive, as well as internet radio, DAB/DAB+ and good ol' FM (this time with RDS). And, being Magnum-Dynalab, it does it with style. The overall look is very businesslike, with everything driven from a central touchscreen (with only a power-on button and a USB port elsewhere on the front panel), and a learning remote is supplied to help finding the best stations. Magnum Dynalab has also thought of its existing customers, by offering the potential for owners of its FM-only tuners the chance to upgrade to the internet radio device. There is even a potential upgrade path for MD 801 users.

The rear panel shows just how simple the MD 801 is, because there's just a Toslink, Ethernet and coaxial S/PDIF outputs on the digital side, a single F-type aerial connector and two single-ended connections on the analogue. Blanking plates cover over provisions for a DAC on/off switch, a rear USB or S/PDIF input port and XLR balanced line outs, for those upgrading the tuner to MD 806 or 807 status.

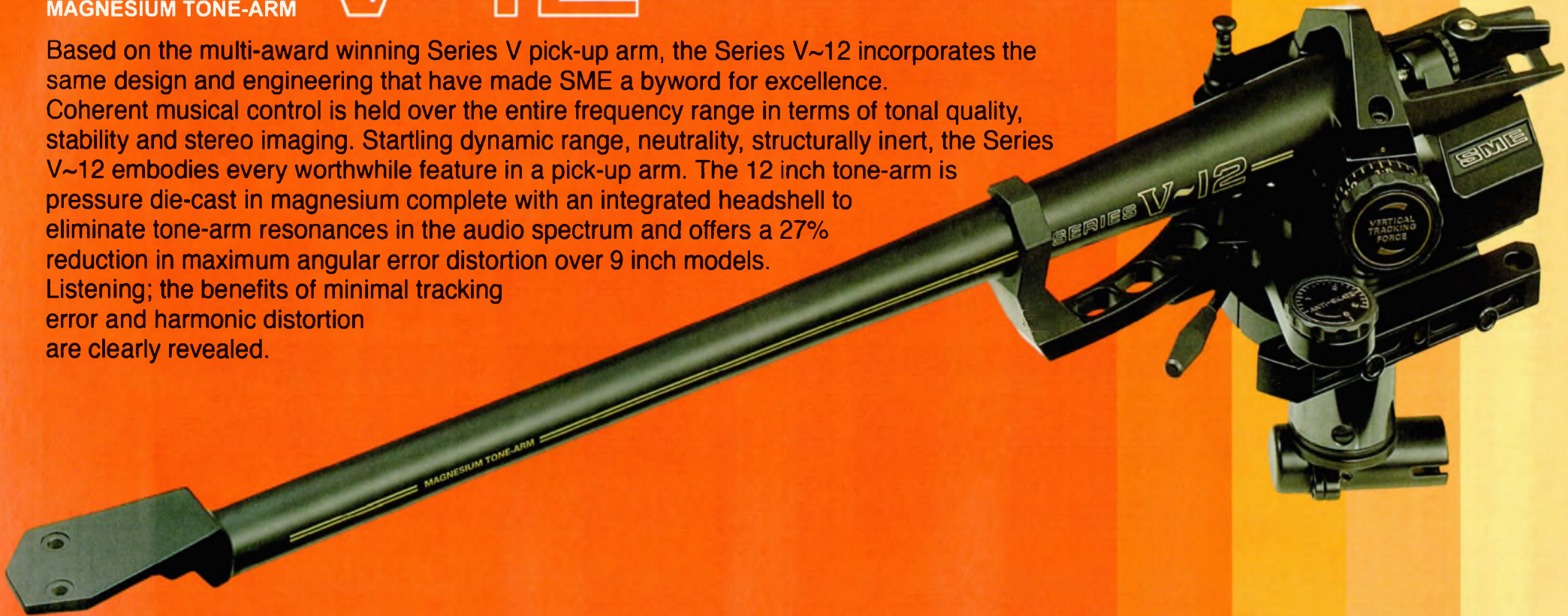
A simple way of thinking of the MD 801 is as a meeting of minds. Magnum Dynalab brings the tuner platform, Frontier Silicon provides the digital platform (very likely the company's Venice 8 module) and Wolfson supplies the DAC part. This is all-over good, and a better option than Magnum Dynalab trying to write its own digital platform, especially when trying to support or keep up to date with the latest changes. Magnum Dynalab provides a stylus pen to navigate the small colour touch-screen buttons.

In terms of formats, the tuner is capable of supporting Real Audio, AAC+, MP3, WMA and FLAC. but not ALAC or OGG as yet. Magnum and Frontier recommend using WMA as a path to music serving (the tuner can support WMA files and playlists), but this is a relatively unpopular server option next to the likes of Asset or Twonky. In fairness though, WMA is a simple (and free) option for PC users and helps keep the manual at 24 ▶

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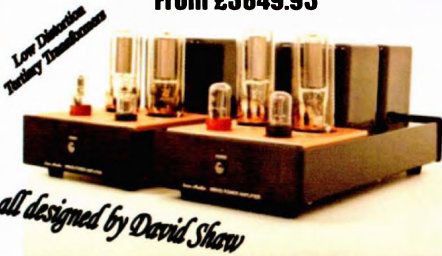
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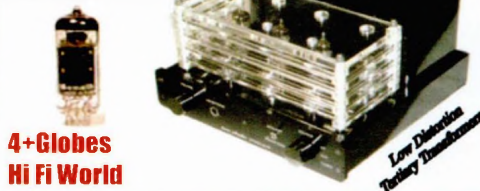
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▶ pages instead of 240 pages of server-side gobbledegook. What this does lack out of the box is any Apple or iTunes support (try Allegro Media Server), but if using Apple Lossless files, you'll also need to convert them to FLAC (try Max).

Musing on the whole Computer Audio thing, it's possible that the tuner is the perfect place for the computer to pitch camp in any audio system. After all, it's the one place where users expect to do more than cue up and play a piece of music; people have an expectation to tune to the correct radio station, maybe looking at some DAB metadata or signal strength meters while they are doing so. And, let's face it, if anyone can crack the problem of receiving a RF signal at the same time as preventing radio frequency interference from ruining that signal, it's going to be a tuner expert.

And that is its biggest strength. It acts as an effective firewall between the RF-creating computer and your RF-hating audio system. Plug it into your internet router (wired or wi-fi) sign up to the Frontier Silicon radio portal on a computer on the same network (to control your favourites) and tens of thousands of stations appear, many of which are truly first rate. It's tested on a Canadian classical music station (no surprises) and defaults to that first time you set your system. If you are new to internet radio, the choice can be daunting (using the portal helps), but there are some remarkable stations from around the world in any genre you can name. DAB and FM needs an aerial (of course), but set-up is remarkably straightforward. And, by keeping the computer at arm's length (even wirelessly completely out of the signal path) it helps keep the potential nasties from a computer at bay.

USB memory sticks can be browsed and used, and if you are determined to isolate a computer from the system, this is a good angle to get computer files into your system. Many (not just M-D) feel this is the best-sounding option for computer music

replay. And the shared media option (from a UPnP media server) is relatively straightforward, as long as your UPnP server isn't configured in some avant-garde manner. It lacks flexibility compared to the Linn DS and Naim Uniti systems, but while that means you cannot set up the system in exactly the way you want it to, it at least means you stand a fighting chance of getting the system working without tears... and professional call-outs. The shared media option isn't the MD 801's strongest suit (it's best to consider this as a does-everything radio that also has streaming options, instead of a digital hub) and there is no provision for accessing the likes of Spotify or Rhapsody.

In addition, periodically it seemed as if something on the network went to sleep and switched the MD 801 into reconnect mode after a few tracks. Whether that's down to my network or the MD 801's interface is unclear, but this kind of dropout is rare on my system. Interestingly, some of what might be considered weaknesses by a younger audience are in fact strengths here. For example, the access time between pressing a soft button on the 3" touch screen and something happening would be slow if you were dialing numbers on a phone, but are perfectly placed when you are crouched over an equipment table hoping your reading glasses don't slip.

If you are using this as an all-in-one radio, the MD 801 gives a superb performance. It is first and foremost an internet radio and as a consequence delivers excellent internet radio performance. It logs on to a wired or wireless router without tears, and quickly populates a long list of useful internet radio stations, which is easy and quick to sort. Best of all though, it makes Internet radio sound exceptionally good.

In particular, there is a richness and depth to the sound that is often sorely lacking in other devices of a similar outlook. As this extends across the board, it may well make DAB sound a lot better than many people have come to expect from the format. As with previous Magnum Dynalab tuners, it's the excellent image depth, detailed yet still engaging overall presentation and vocal articulation that stand out. The MD 801 doesn't have that warm and inviting sound of the FM tuner models (not just the triode-powered ones, they all have a sound that feels like a beacon of goodness and that feeling is not as present here), but once again in context, the MD 801 sounds all Christmas-y and wonderful by comparison to most DAB/FM/Internet models. ▶

“Let's face it, if anyone can crack the problem of receiving a RF signal at the same time as preventing radio frequency interference from ruining that signal, it's going to be a tuner expert.”



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Raidho C1.1 speakers

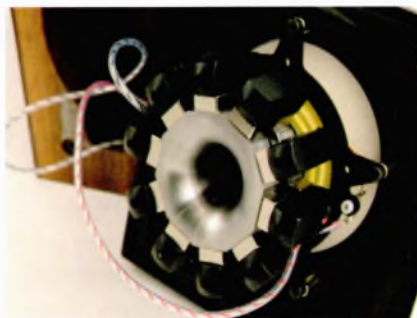


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- *“It’s the reluctant computer audiophile’s way into computer audio. There’s a tendency for audiophile companies to reinvent the wheel, but here Magnum Dynalab makes no bones about using the Frontier Silicone platform, because it is reliable and field-tested.”*



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Internet-connected DAB/FM tuner

Radio formats supported: FM, DAB, DAB+, Internet radio, Internet streaming
Formats supported: Real Audio, AAC+, MP3, WMA and FLAC

Frequency response (± 1 dB): 15Hz-17kHz

Line audio output: 1.0V

Power conception typical/max: 50W/100W

Dimensions (HxWxD): 20.4x79.5x50cm

Weight: 3.1kg

Price: £1,495

Manufactured by: Magnum Dynalab

URL: www.magnumdynalab.com

Distributed by: Audiofreaks

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

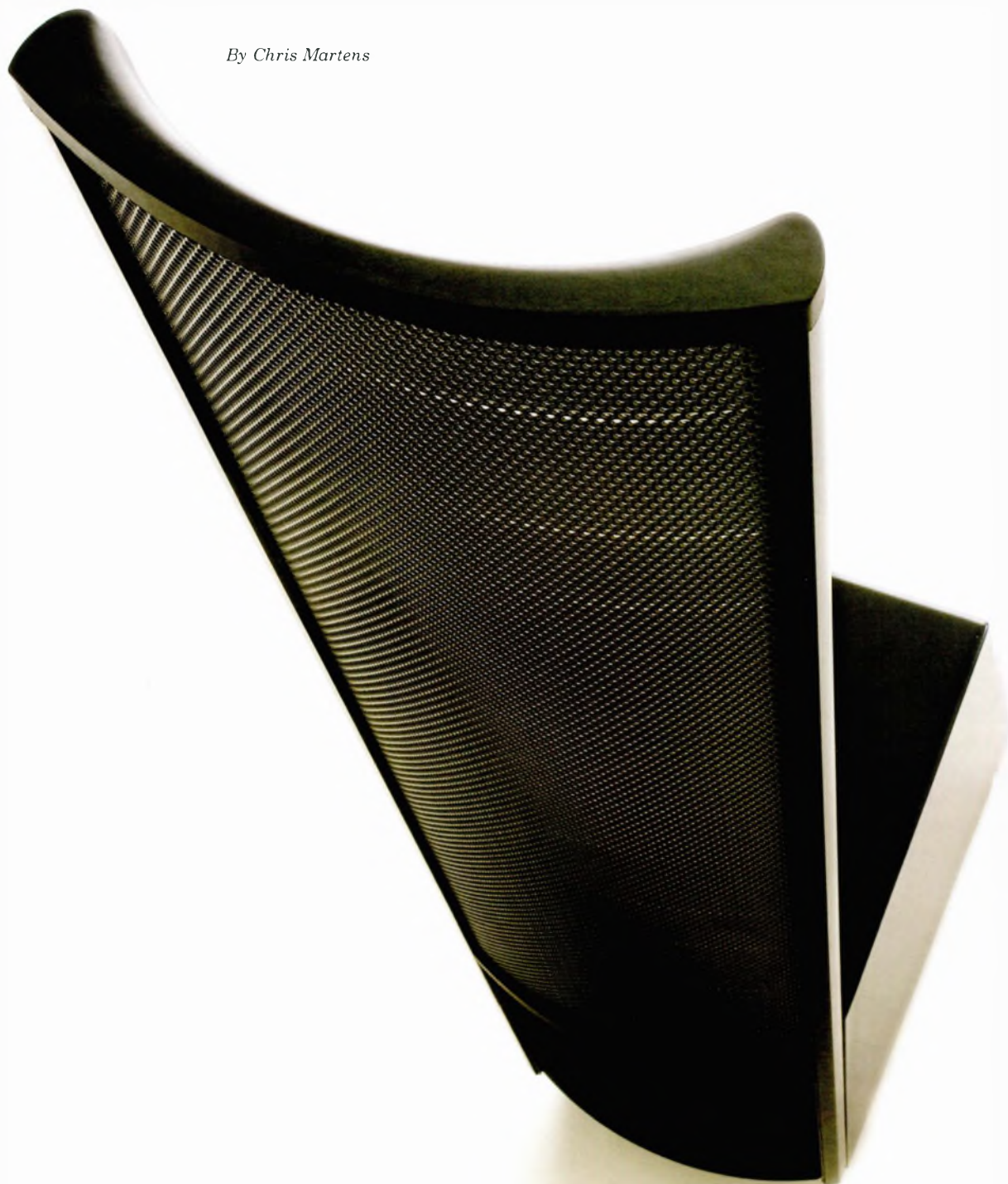
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I find this a particularly interesting device. It’s the reluctant computer audiophile’s way into computer audio. There’s a tendency for audiophile companies to reinvent the wheel, but here Magnum Dynalab makes no bones about using the Frontier Silicon platform, because it is robust and field-tested. I have often suggested that people who dip their toe into computer audio are adding just another shelf to the system, and this is the perfect expression of that. There will always be someone who says that a laptop and a DAC can do all of this and more, but that’s probably far removed from the person who would ever even dream of buying the MD 801. It adds functionality to the existing tuner concept, and even soft-launches the idea of media serving for those who have no intention of turning in their CD players. And it does it while preserving the Magnum Dynalab sound. Overall, the MD 801 is an excellent product for those wanting computer audio but not want it taking over their audio system. +

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

MartinLogan ElectroMotion ESL loudspeakers

By Chris Martens



The name MartinLogan will forever be associated with high performance hybrid electrostatic loudspeakers, since this is the area where the firm has done most of its pioneering development work. Even so, some MartinLogan hybrids seem to work better than others and one of the models I remember most fondly was, oddly enough, a relatively inexpensive one: namely, the late, lamented Aeries i. Though it is a difficult thing to put into words, my sense was always that the electrostatic and traditional dynamic drive units in the Aeries i somehow 'gelled' in an almost magical, musical way, meaning that the speaker sang with one wonderfully coherent voice (a goal to which all hybrid designs aspire, but that few actually achieve).

While the Aeries i is now long gone, the great news is that MartinLogan has recently released a 'successor' model, called the ElectroMotion ESL, which easily surpasses the performance of its well-loved predecessor in every way, yet sells for roughly the same price as the Aeries did so many years ago – £2,499 per pair in standard finish (or £2,998 per pair gloss black). Now that's what I call forward progress.

Veteran high-end audio enthusiasts may view the preceding paragraph with a healthy and I would say perfectly appropriate dose of scepticism, and here's why. The honest truth is that while the concept of using hybrid technologies is appealing (the train of thought being that you would have opportunities to combine the best aspects of multiple driver types), the practical reality often paints a far less rosy picture. The fact is that it is difficult to get disparate types of drivers to work and play well together, and harder still to get them to produce a truly coherent, self-consistent sound. Is the MartinLogan ElectroMotion ESL able to pull off this admittedly challenging feat? For the most I think that it is, as I will explain in a moment. But first, let's take a look at some of the technical highlights that make the ElectroMotion ESL special

The ElectroMotion ESL (or EM-ESL, for short) is, like the Aeries i-model floorstander, a relatively compact, two-way, floorstanding hybrid electrostatic loudspeaker. Up top, the EM-ESL sports a large (86cm high x 22cm wide), curved, thin, see-through electrostatic panel that handles all midrange and high frequencies from about 500Hz to well beyond 22kHz. The panel requires a low-voltage outboard DC power supply (included), which is triggered by a signal-sensing circuit and

that charges up the panel within two seconds of detecting an audio signal. The electrostatic panel incorporates a number of signature technologies the firm has developed over the years:

- **CLS (curvilinear line source) technology:** MartinLogan's answer to the decades-old problem of achieve horizontal dispersion from electrostatic panels has been to develop an ingenious curved panel architecture that provides about 30 degrees of horizontal dispersion—enough to provide a relatively wide listening area, but not so much as to interact in undesirable ways with the sidewalls of rooms.
- **XStat Transducer technology:** a package of technologies (too numerous to list) that allow MartinLogan to use an incredibly thin (just 0.013mm thick) conductive diaphragm that is driven in push-pull fashion between a pair of the firm's signature MicroPerf stators. The driver is said to provide exceptional linearity, wide bandwidth, low distortion, and to play surprisingly loudly without danger of arcing or other damage.
- **MicroPerf stator technology:** Many electrostatic drivers use heavy, bulky, grid-like stators that block part of the sound emanating from the diaphragms within, but MartinLogan electrostats use insulated steel stators with myriad tiny 'microperf' openings spread over their entire surface, allowing more sound from the diaphragm to pass through unimpeded. MartinLogan claims that output from its panels can match the output of competing electrostatic panels twice their size.
- **AirFrame technology:** MartinLogan uses light, compact, yet exceptionally rigid extruded aerospace-grade aluminium frames both to support its electrostatic panels and to attach them to woofer enclosures below, while minimizing unwanted vibration or resonance.

Down below, the EM-ESL uses a 20.3cm, long-throw, high-rigidity, paper cone mid-bass driver housed in a reflex enclosure (with a downward-firing port). Importantly, the woofer enclosure features a non-resonant 'asymmetrical chamber' design, as can plainly be seen when the woofer section of the EM-ESL is viewed from the side. As an appealing and useful detail touch, the EM-ESL comes fitted with beefy floor spikes that are, in turn, equipped with removable rounded floor shields. The concept is that users will leave the floor shields in place until a final position for the speakers is ►



“To come straight to the point, the ElectroMotion ESLs are among the finest speakers I’ve yet heard at the price.”

► found. Then, if the room features carpeted floor surfaces, the shields can be removed to allow the spikes to penetrate the carpet to more firmly anchor the speaker in place.

One final point worth noting is that the EM-ESL speakers come with what I regard as hands down the finest manual I have ever encountered with any loudspeaker (competitors take note). Speakers with dipolar tweeter/midrange panels are not always easy to place properly, but MartinLogan’s manual provides guidance that should make it easy for first-timers to get their ESL’s sounding good from the outset, while also offering extremely detailed suggestions for fine-tuning speaker positioning so as to bring out the last few drops of ultimate performance.

MartinLogan recommends giving the ESL’s a full 72 hours (or more) of break-in at levels of around 90 dB before settling in to do critical listening, and I would second that recommendation. The ElectroMotion ESL speakers sound good (even very good) straight out of their boxes, but they really need that break-in time in order to loosen up and—importantly—to develop the kind of sonic ‘fluidity’ that enables the textures of the drivers to merge and meld in a harmonious way. Once break-in is complete, prepare to be delighted.

To come straight to the point, the EM-ESLs are among the finest speakers I’ve yet heard at their price (although Magnepan’s magnificent 1.7 planar magnetic speakers

offer extremely strong competition). The EM-ESLs offer a really intoxicating set of virtues: open, airy, and beautifully extended highs; almost shockingly transparent, pure, and agile midrange frequencies; and fast, taut, and surprisingly deeply extended bass (granted, the EM-ESL’s don’t offer a lot of output in the very lowest octave, but above that point they sound potent yet beautifully focused). Best of all, the transition between the electrostat panel and the dynamic mid-bass driver is handled so artfully that you have almost no awareness of crossing from one type of driver to the other.

Please note that I used the qualifier ‘almost’ in the preceding sentence, not because I’m bent on being bull-headedly finicky about things, but because I know and respect the sound of MartinLogan’s über-expensive, flagship *full-range* electrostatic CLX speaker, which is one of the most eerily coherent-sounding speakers on the planet. I won’t tell you the EM-ESLs are fully the equals of their magnificent big brothers (that would be untrue), but I will tell you they capture an awful lot of the sonic ‘vibe’ of the big guys for about *one-tenth* the price. In my book, that fact alone makes the EM-ESL’s a marvel of value-oriented engineering. What is more, once fully broken in, the EM-ESL seems to have almost no problems with perceived excess treble brightness or stridency when reproducing hard, sharp treble transient sounds—an area where the larger MartinLogan hybrid electrostats occasionally have been known to exhibit quirks. Imaging, too, is exceptionally good, with superbly delineated soundstaging. My point is that the EM-ESL gives most of the joys of top-tier hybrid electrostats, with essentially none of the potential drawbacks

Let me provide two illustrations that show how the EM-ESL’s sonic qualities play out with real-world music. First, me talk about the way the MartinLogans handled the Chicago Symphony Orchestra brass and percussion sections performance of Silvestre Revueltas’ ‘Sensamoyá’ from *Chicago Symphony Orchestra Brass Live* (CSO-Resound, multichannel SACD). This remarkable modern composition features the orchestra’s brass section (including a solo tuba), clarinet, string bass, and many of the instruments of the percussion section. The theme, according to Philip Huscher’s liner notes from the recording, is to musically recreate the feel of a Cuban poem about “a ritual Afro-Cuban chant performed while killing a snake.”

Accordingly the piece is rhythmic, angular, and very powerful—at times almost dissonantly so, and yet it also has moments of great delicacy. What caught my ear was both the timbral purity and relative ease with which the EM-ESL system navigated the sounds of the lowest pitched brass and percussion instruments right on up to the highest pitched ones. What touched me, really, was the speaker’s ability to faithfully capture the diverse tonalities, textures, and orchestral personalities of the individual instruments, while showing how their distinctive voices became woven together to create ►

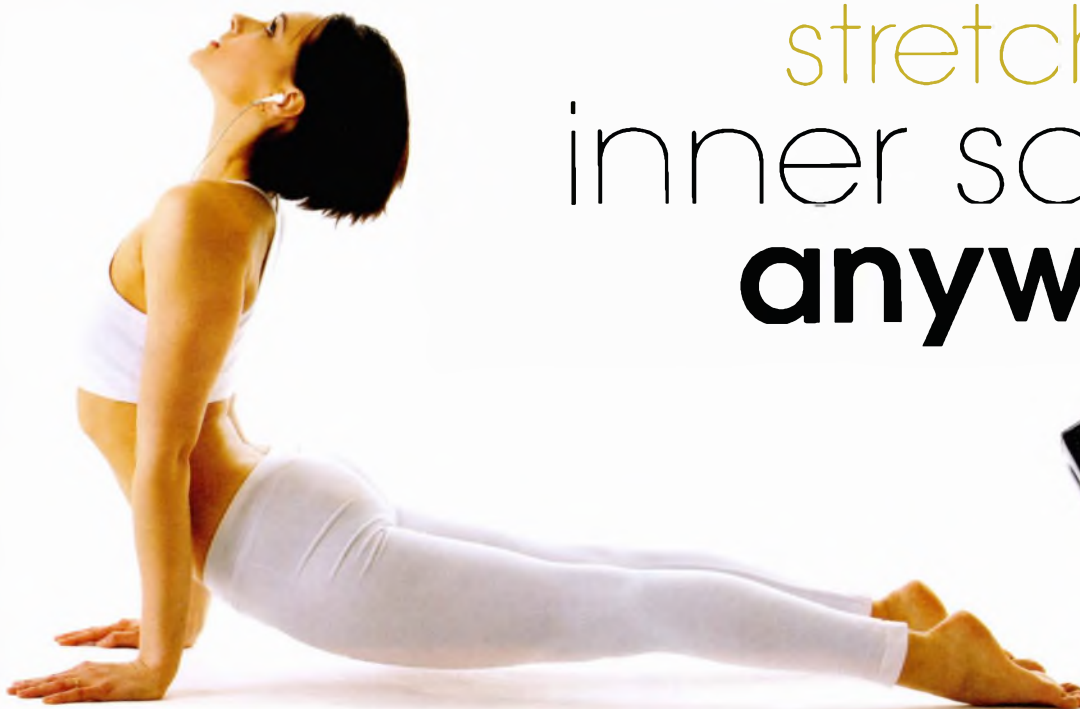
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▶ the sound of the overall orchestral section. You expect high-priced high-end speakers to get subtle timbres and textures right, but it's refreshing to hear a relatively low-cost high-end speaker perform in such an accomplished way.

Tonal balance seemed pretty much ideal, with EM-ESL speakers contributing, thanks to their dipolar electrostatic panels, much less in the way of unwanted room interactions than I expected. Thus, it was easy to feel myself transported away from the acoustics of my listening room and into the three-dimensional acoustics of Chicago's Orchestra Hall at Symphony Center, where this recording was made. Importantly, the EM-ESL's created an almost perfectly seamless sound that did a great job of conveying in a three-dimensional way the sound of the ensemble arrayed in an arc upon the stage. What is more, the speaker's ability to resolve low-level details made it easy to hear subtle cues that revealed the acoustics and dimensions of the recording space.

To further explore the MartinLogan's ability to handle sonic details, I put one the Maya trio's superb recording of Robert Paterson's *The Book of Goddesses* [American Music Recordings, CD]. The Maya trio features Sato Moughalian on flutes of various types, Jacqueline Kerrod on harp, and John Hadfield on percussion. The Trio commissioned Paterson to write *The Book of Goddesses*, which is a collection of nine short, highly evocative pieces that each attempts to capture the personality of an historical goddess, with sources drawn from various cultures and story traditions from around the world. My favorite vignette is the third of the pieces in the series, named for the Greek goddess Aphrodite. I like this track in part because it includes all the members of the trio (not all of the pieces include percussion, but this one does), and because it introduces a light, jazzy, propulsive dance rhythm and beautifully reveals the voices of the trio's instruments.

Even if you sit down to listen to 'Aphrodite' in a casual way through the ElectroMotion ESL's, my bet is that it won't be long before you get drawn in and start tapping your toes in time to the music. The sound of the EM-ESL speakers is so clean and taut that they make child's play of capturing subtle variations in rhythm and syncopation. But what is more, they dig down deep to retrieve inner details that capture the very essence of the sound of the harp and flute—so that you have a sense of the speakers always having more than enough transient speed on tap to keep up with the attack, sustain, and decay of sounds from each of the instruments, whether heard in isolation or in combination with the others. No matter how complex or convoluted any passage may become, you have the uncanny sense that the electrostatic panels are consistently able to stay a step ahead of the music—a sensation that, quite frankly, few other types of speakers can convey.



I consider MartinLogan's ElectroMotion ESL to be an overachiever of the first rank. It offers very serious high-end sound quality for only a little more money than some mid-fi speakers cost. For many listeners, then, I suspect the quest for upper-tier sound may begin and end right here, and even jaded audiophiles accustomed to ultra-premium-priced gear will marvel at the sophisticated sound this system delivers. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

MartinLogan ElectroMotion ESL Floorstanding Speaker

Type: two-way, two-driver, hybrid electrostatic/dynamic-driver, bass-reflex floorstanding loudspeaker
Driver complement: one 865x220mm dipolar electrostatic tweeter/midrange panel, one 200mm paper-cone, long-throw mid-bass driver.

Frequency response: 42Hz -22 kHz ± 3dB

Sensitivity: 91 dB

Impedance: 6 Ohms (but "compatible with 4, 6, or 8 ohm-rated amplifiers")

Dimensions (H x W x D): 132.3x22.9x41.4cm

Weight: 16.1 kg/each

Price: £2,499 /pair (£2,998/pair gloss black finish)

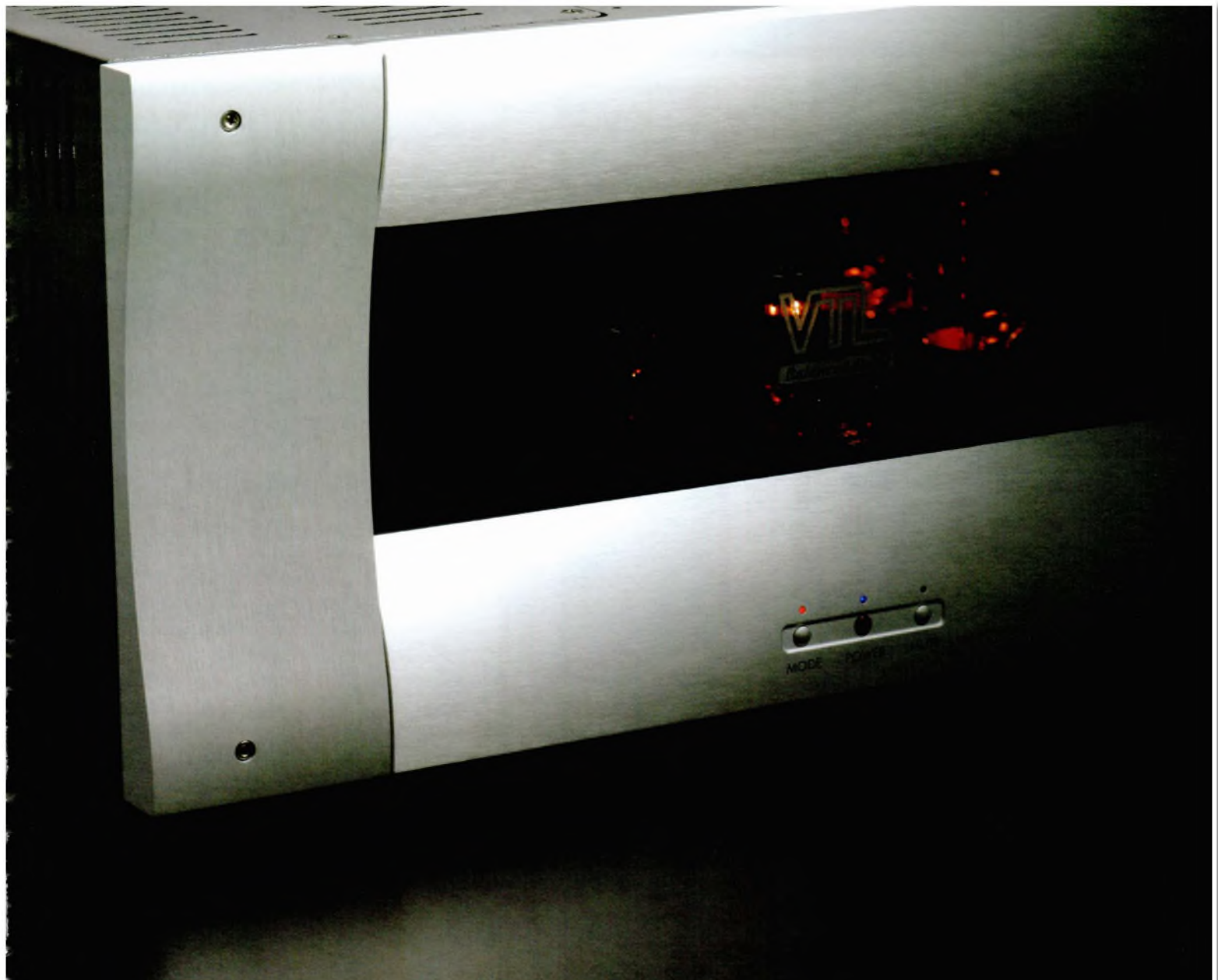
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Spendor A3 loudspeakers



By Alan Sircom

Spendor has carved a name for itself in recent years. Not content with simply being the custodian of BBC designs, it has also delivered a range of loudspeakers that retain much of the original Spendor clarity and definition, but with a look and sound that attracts a modern audience.

The A3 is fairly typical of that approach. It's a short, slim and elegant two-way ported floorstander that owes a lot from previous models like the SA1, as well as bigger fish in the A-series. It's not at all like the wide-baffle, thin-walled sealed box designs of its classic line, but will instantly appeal to people who look at such designs as preserved in 40 year old aspic.

It features Spendor's clever wide-surround 22mm tweeter, coupled with a 150mm ep38 cone woofer. The ep38 material is unique to Spendor, even though it looks like the semi-transparent TPX that was all the rage for mid-bass units a decade and a half ago. This driver is deliberately wide-range and rolls off at a healthy 4.2kHz. Originally foam bungs were supplied for the rear ports, but reacting to market feedback regarding bass-lightness, Spendor recently re-visited the low frequency alignment of the A3. The port length has been changed and the foam damping eliminated. The result, says Philip Swift of Spendor, "is a noticeable increase in low frequency output and articulation with no compromise to the clear and natural mid and treble. Some listeners have even described the latest Spendor A3 as 'more fun'".

The rear panel also features a single set of WBT terminals. Unlike the larger A-Series models, many of which feature a cast metal base that not only houses the port but creates an almost impossibly rigid structure for the spike housings, the rigidity plate baseboard of the A3 is MDF, and the spike housings are small discs designed to hold the spikes

in place. It's effective, but doesn't give the speaker the same sense of a rooted in the ground solidity of the metal bases.

I can't help thinking these loudspeakers do all the right things for the typical UK/European audiophile. They are small enough to fit into our microscopic living rooms, yet not so small they get lost in larger spaces. They don't have so much bass that they can set off our solid brick walls, but not so little that they sound like steroid-enhanced tweeters. They are reactive enough to allow you to hear the difference between good and great amplifiers, but resistive enough to mean you don't have to search out a small power station to drive them. They work comfortably as the most expensive link in the chain, but don't sound out of place bolted to the end of some seriously esoteric stuff. And yet, despite all this, they aren't just a safe pair of hands. They sound exciting, detailed and even fun.

OK, so the loudspeaker doesn't plumb the depths and it doesn't have the sort of dynamic shading that will set the world alight. It's not the perfect partner for extremists; the three-watt club and the kilowatt support group will go looking elsewhere. Those who want metal dome zing or paper cone waffle will not apply, either. Instead, this is the speaker for the most of us. It's the sort of sound you could confidently spend decades with.

There's an interesting potential theoretical limit reached here. This isn't the biggest sounding loudspeaker around, but for the money you trade scale for transparency. A bigger sounding speaker that is just as tonally neutral across the midband exists, but not at this price. And possibly not with anything like the A3's dimensions. There are some excellent loudspeakers at roughly the same price that deliver a bigger sound, but with a bit more oomph to the mids and top, or more warmth across the broad midband or even some additional thickness to the bass.

All of which gives this speaker a sublime sense of 'poise'. It's unfazed by most music – granted, Slipknot might not be its strongest

point – thanks to its ability to get out of the way a lot. Paradoxically, although it gives an excellent stereo presentation with noticeably good soundstage depth, I found myself being unconcerned with albums that highlight good imagery or fine detail and was quite content reaching for re-issues of some really gnarly pre-1910 Charley Patton blues hollers and some classic 1940s Charlie Parker Be-Bop. In other words, music with some real torque behind it and played by a couple of right Charlies. With a speaker that delivers this sort of open midband, it's easy to get right to the heart of the music and not get bogged down in the ephemera of the quality of recording. Bringing the speaker right up to date, it made a fair fist of a couple of over-compressed, over-limited casualties of the Loudness Wars, but was of course far better when fed a steady diet of well-massaged sounds.

It's odd. There are a lot of loudspeakers that don't put a foot wrong, but very few that command such respect from practically everyone in the business. "Oh yeah, they're good speakers" and "they are a bit bass-light" is the closest you get to criticism of the A3, even from archrivals. And the nearest I can get to criticism aside from that is the rear port. Compared to the vent on the bigger models, the port is more noticeable, and means the speaker needs to be used in free space. Even this seems like picking holes in an otherwise flawless performance like some TV talent show judge playing the bad guy for the sake of the ratings. I kept listening to these speakers and thinking them basically a SA1 without the need for a stand.

A sensitivity of 86dB is slightly below average today, but a nominal impedance of eight Ohms coupled to a 6.2 Ohm minimum impedance means it poses absolutely no problems for any modern amplifier design (except low power single-ended triode designs). Like all designs that are even remotely flavoured by the BBC school, the loudspeaker is going to be a benign load to amplifiers feeding it, and not troubled by excessive running in or synergistic compatibility issues. Better electronics sound 'better' here, but the A3 is a great leveler and good systems sound excellent through these speakers. ▶

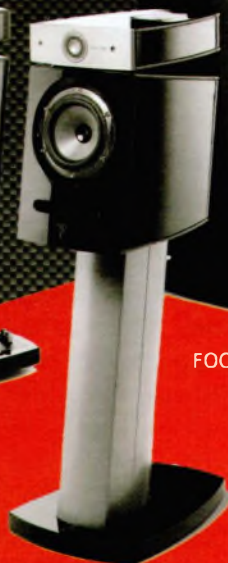


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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, rear ported floor standing loudspeaker

Tweeter: 22mm wide-surround dome with fluid cooling

Woofer: Spendor 150mm ep38 cone

Crossover point: 4.2kHz

Frequency Response: 70Hz-20kHz± 3dB anechoic

Typical in-room response: -6dB at 45Hz anechoic

Sensitivity: 86dB/W/m

Impedance (nominal/minimum): 8 Ohms/6.2 Ohms

Terminal: 4-way binding posts, single wired

Finish: black ash, cherry, light oak, dark walnut

Dimensions (HxWxD): 75x16.5x25cm

Weight: 12.4kg each

Price: £1,295 per pair

Manufactured by: Spendor Audio Systems

URL: www.spendoraudio.com

Tel: +44 (0)1323 843474

For my part, the speaker was such a natural partner with the Sugden A21SE (driven by both an Audiolab 8200CDQ and a Mac with an HRT Streamer II+), I felt no urgent need to chop and change. That said, I tried it out with a Devialet D-Premier and a Naim Supernait (going through its good day/bad day part of its early life), and it sang well with both. And, while I prefer to make such statements based on direct personal experience, I know several people who have used this with the excellent little Rega Brio-R, as the perfect 'shut up' riposte to the any 'soaring price of audio' comments.

It's easy to get a distorted sense of perspective in this game, especially if you spend most of your working life playing with goodies that cost more than most people's kitchen, bathroom and car combined. Making a good loudspeaker is seldom an easy task, but released from the constraints of price or size must make the job less of a struggle. Making a good loudspeaker that falls within the price and size of the A3 is something wonderful.

This is also the kind of speaker that proves the virtue of listening at length. A two-minute burst of music through the A3 will do nothing apart from make for an uninspiring burst of sound. This is because we tend toward the bright, shiny things at first flush. Spend(or) a week and a day with the A3s and you'll be hard pressed to find a bad word to say about them. However, after the same time period, the more immediate sounding "mug's eyeful" loudspeaker will start to grate and wear the listener down.

The best thing I can say about the A3 is that it's a keeper. It might be on the light side of things, bass-wise, but I think as many people will fall for its deft midband. Moreover, it's the kind of keeper that helps you build a wide and catholic interest in music of all stripes (Slipknotwithstanding). They are few and far between, at any price. +

Linn Akurate DS *By Alan Sircom*

This review has been a long time coming. Linn delivered a complete Akurate system to me last Summer, and I slowly peeled it back to find the meaty bits. Then it went back, then time passed, Linn announced the DSM equipment and I ended up wondering if there was still a product to be reviewed.

That's what you get for thinking out of turn. The Akurate DS was revamped at the end of 2010 and stays in the line up. The revamp included a new audio board with claims of lower jitter and a neatly reclocked digital output (a real treat for people who use digital amps like the Devialet D-Premier), alongside the Ethernet, single-ended and XLR balanced outputs and Knekt multiroom connections. It's joined by the Kontrol preamplifier and 2200 power amp, the former a balanced and single-ended preamp again with Ethernet connectivity, the latter a 200w per channel stereo single-ended only amp. All three use Linn's own Brilliant switch mode power supply modules and elegant new matt grey cases, with the DS and Kontrol having identical blue fluoro displays in the centre of the panel and an ultra minimalist few buttons as possible front case.

The Akurate 242 floorstanders come with a multitude of connection options, everything from single-wired to full on

active. I went for the simple single-wire passive option. All up, the system brings little change from twenty big ones.

Perhaps its me, but the nearer I got to the speakers the less I liked the system. I absolutely love the Akurate DS, for what it does, the way it does it and the way it sounds while it does what it does. I seriously like the Akurate preamp, because its Ethernet connection solves the whole 'how do I control the preamp from an iPad' problem in a single stroke. It sounds pretty good too. I like the Akurate power amps for being robust and reliable. And there are a pair of Akurate floorstanders, which are available in lots of finishes. OK, so I didn't dislike any part of the system, and I can see the merit in the tight and tidy sound of the complete package and the dry precision and frequency extension of those loudspeakers. They are beautifully built too. They were simply loudspeakers that I could admire rather than want to own.

The other end of the chain has a very different effect. The DS is a real honey. Like all advanced streaming products, if you chose to do the install, it has a Tourettean learning curve, and there's a lot of colourful language shouted at a screen or a NAS drive panel while you are configuring the system. Once put together, the system behaves itself like a country gent of the old water. It is best controlled from an iPad, using Kinski, ChorusDS



and Songcast. Linn sort of recommends Twonky media for the NAS drive, but many prefer Asset, especially those on the Mac side of the fence. There are recommended NAS drives, network devices (even ones that send Ethernet down the power lines) and the rest on Linn's excellent LinnDocs community, but you can go your own way. And that's perhaps the Linn system's biggest plus, and greatest minus – it's open source. There is no one 'right' way to do the whole Linn DS experience, there are myriad different options open to you.

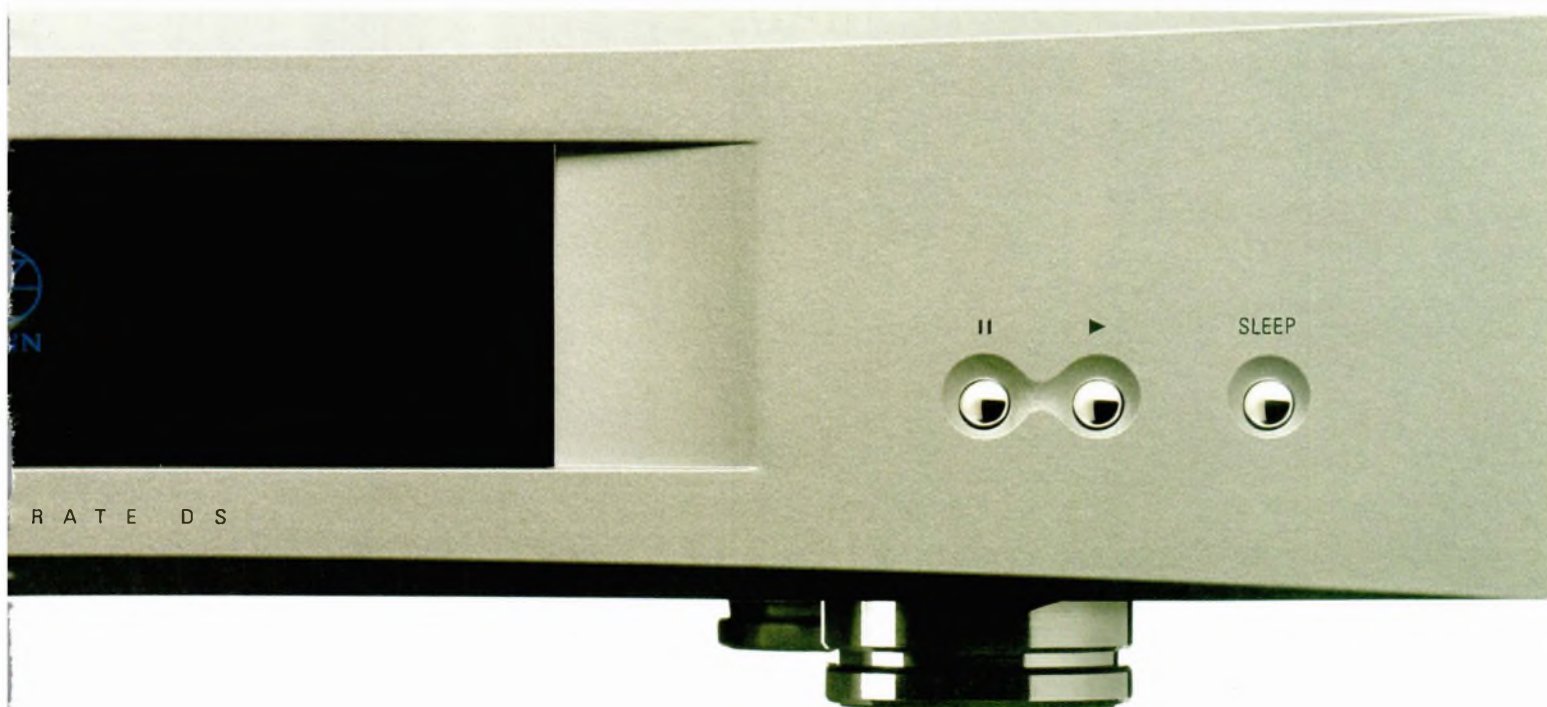
I found it worked perfectly well using a RipNAS as both ripper and NAS drive, with a laptop to do the rare piece of file maintenance (usually finding or fixing a stray cover), and all of the above connected to a cheap wi-fi enabled router running off my internet router. I also tried it running under an Apple ecosystem, through an Airport Extreme, using the Mac as both desktop and server. Linn's one big stipulation – which I think is good, if slightly OTT, working practice – is to have the DS system running off its own router and not have the wired or wireless connection shared with a home computer network. Otherwise pragmatism reigns.

So, why is this also a negative? Because many demand a cookie-cutter approach. And if you go it alone without too

much net-savvy, you might find the sheer open-endedness of the concept bewildering. I'd strongly recommend professional installation by someone willing to take your needs and requirements into account if this is the case. This is no bad thing industry-wise, as it drives much-needed traffic back to the brick and mortar stores, but it flies in the face of what is perceived as 'right' in today's world.

The eagle-eyed among the readers might spot that the Linn's greatest limitation exists entirely outside of the sound quality part of the review. That's not understatement, because the Linn Akurate DS serves up one of the best computer audio sounds around. Just from the raw specs it's up there with the best; it only works when fed packetized data across TCP/IP transmission protocols, so the dread jitter is simply not on the map. It is also at least one or more remove from the PC itself, so less chance of EMI hash bleeding into the signal. Given that it is designed to work on the end of a piece of CAT5 cable, the design would be hard to justify if it were constantly undermined by EM and RF nasties from computer parts, and fortunately Linn builds these players properly.

Sound quality, then, could be considered the icing on the Akurate cake. Except that it's an extremely nice, thick ▶



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► icing. It lives up to the name; accurate and detailed. There's a precision and snap to the sounds served up by the Akurate DS that is hard to ignore. And yet, all this detail and precision does not make it difficult to listen to, even on less-than-perfect radio stations and poor quality downloads. Yes, the jump between these mediocre recordings and the best of the best is clearly audible through the Akurate DS.

Cleverly, the Akurate DS tows the 'lean and clean' path with great care, being mindful neither to spill over into 'bright and dry' (a mild tendency with previous iterations of DS products) or 'warm and soft'. This makes the DS the perfect foil for the majority of systems. There will be those who disregard the DS, often on the grounds of ideology or politics, and some will find it lacks image width; depth, yes, but not much width.

As ever with these things, I stacked it full of music. Some obscure to check its metadata hunting skills (the system passed with flying colours). Some well-known to check its sound quality (ditto). I expected – based on long-past Linn performance – that it would be excellent on anything with a tightly ordered beat and not so hot on more layered orchestral sound. In fact, the Linn was simply great at doing the job. Vocals were clean and articulate, instruments clearly defined in their own solid spaces in the room and – although mostly a function of loudspeaker performance – the Akurate DS scaled well between fey singer-songwriters like Tracy Chapman, heads-down rockers like AC/DC and expansive operatic pieces.

Linn also supplied the DS with a collection of useful high-res files from the Linn catalogue. The Linn system does make a strong case for carefully massaged files put through the mastering process and there were hi-res mixes that sounded far better than their 16-bit peers. Despite this, I remain at only in part convinced by the hi-res argument; good music sounds great and bad music remains poor on the Akurate DS, irrespective of whether it's 16-bit or 24-bit. Playing music at random to people, there seemed to be no direct correlation between 'oh that sounds good' and hi-res files, as they liked what they liked. And they liked a lot on the Linn Akurate DS.

So, what of the DSM, and where does the DS stand in the whole 2012 Linn line up? The DSM is basically the Akurate DS and Control in one stripped for action package. Linn – probably correctly in my opinion – has come to the conclusion that the new digital paradigm can exist without need for a preamplifier

proper. And when you think about it, the DS part of the equation covers all your digital sources and (internet) radio stations in one fell swoop, your need for a separate preamp begins to look a bit tired. Have I heard both to compare? No, but my spies tell me the difference is tissue-paper thin. If you have an existing system, go with the Akurate DS player. If you have need for an extensive preamp solution, go for the Akurate DS and Control. If all you need is the streaming and perhaps a turntable input (this is Linn, after all), go with the DSM as a complete unit. Flexibility reigns.

It's perhaps strange that the companies you might have expected to be the most curmudgeonly are the ones that have best embraced the new technology. I thoroughly loved my time with the Akurate DS and since I reviewed the thing, the software has made it even easier to drive. Don't let the inverted snobs palm you off with a Squeezebox; this offers so much better sound quality. Highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Linn Akurate DS

Type: digital stream player

Supported file types: FLAC, ALAC, WAV, MP3, WMA (except lossless), AIFF, AAC, OGG

Audio sample rates (Hz): 7.35k, 8k, 11.025k, 12k, 14.7k, 16k, 22.05k, 24k, 29.4k, 32k, 44.1k, 48k, 88.2k, 96k, 176.4k, 192k

Word depths: 16–24bits

Control protocol: compatible with uPnP media servers, uPnP aV 1.0 control points

Control interfaces: remote control ir receiver (ir handset supplied), Ethernet 100Base-t RJ45, 6 button front panel keypad 128 x 32 pixel front panel display

Back Panel Connectors: 2xXLR, 2xRCA analog outputs, S/PDIF digital output (BNC), RJ45, 4x RJ11 (RS232)

Power consumption sleep/active: 8W/ 16W

Dimensions (HxWxD): 9.1x38x38cm

Weight: 5.6kg

Finish: Black or Silver

Price: £4,500

Manufactured by: Linn Products Limited

URL: www.linn.co.uk

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Electrocompaniet EMP 1/S, EC4.8 and AW250-R

By Steve Dickinson

Resplendent in a thick acrylic front panel, gold anodized switchery and blue-lit display, the overall effect of this trio of components from Electrocompaniet's covetable Classic Line is rather more pleasing, and rather less 'footballers wives' than you might expect. I suspect this casework is somewhat less expensive to produce than some of the more baroque offerings the high end has championed lately. Certainly the price of this system is, in high end terms, fairly low, so what about its performance?

The preamplifier has been here before, at the heart of the system reviewed by AS in issue 69. It's Electrocompaniet's top of the

range two-channel preamp, here partnered by the AW250-R stereo power amplifier. The source is the EMP1/S CD/SACD player, a stereo-only version of the six-channel audio/video multiplayer EMP-1 (and is convertible into the EMP-1 via a hardware upgrade), but still boasting a pretty respectable logo count on the front panel, including SACD, DVD-audio and DVD-video. This is without doubt a versatile unit; the most valuable logo for 2-channel audio purposes is the SACD one, a facility not available in the EMC-1UP reviewed in issue 69.

The EMP1/S has the opulent presentation which seems to be a characteristic of the Electrocompaniet brand; not unlike many valve-based systems, the kit will appeal to those who like to luxuriate in their music. This can also be perceived as a shortcoming in that it sometimes manages to sound a little laid-back, somewhat lacking in attack. It's certainly something of a mixed blessing, more apparent on CD replay than SACD but, to be fair, it's still among the better-sounding CD players I've come across at its price. But if it's life and passion you're after, rather than warmth and colour, this mightn't be an obvious first choice. On the Abdullah Ibrahim track 'For Monk', for example, ▶





“Time and again, the SACD playback completely redeemed the EMP1/S. Eric Bibb’s ‘Wrapped Up in Her Arms’ had a better sense of balance, more measured pace and flow.”

▶ the piano had a bewitching sonority, but lost some sense of attack and a degree of the ‘Monkishness’ of the piece, the sense of sprightliness yet always on the point of imbalance, was simply glossed-over. The Tord Gustavsen Trio piece ‘At Home’ failed to capture the sense of stillness in the music, despite there being no shortage of lushness to the piano.

You might think of the player as majoring on the sustain and decay parts of each note, rather than the attack. This makes it less definitive in its timing, lacking impetus and poise compared to players such as Cairn’s, notably cheaper, Fog 3 which I preferred for CD playback, largely due to its ‘danceability’ and fun. In Saint Saëns’ Symphony no.3, for example, the grandeur of the organ was not in question, but the strings were sometimes a little wayward, while paradoxically the brass felt a little held-back. The Cairn, in contrast, sounded almost raucous (it isn’t, which may tell you something about the Electro’s somewhat Jeevesian manners), but at the same time the cheaper player showed the strings and brass to be more intensely and skilfully played, with a better sense of the give and take between the various parts, albeit the organ failed to generate quite the same sense of awe. The Electrocompaniet gave the bigger vista, more expansive and, superficially at least, was the more impressive. For me, the Cairn’s better sense of music-making won the day, and even if the strings were a little more shrill, it made more sense of the orchestration; this was a trade off I’d willingly make.

However, this is only part of the story; the Electrocompaniet also offers SACD playback where it excels with a confident, measured performance. Even though I consistently preferred the Cairn player for CD playback,

Hugh Masekela’s ‘Stimela (Coal Train)’ on dual-layer CD/SACD was informative; the Electrocompaniet revealing that the SACD gives vocals more convincing depth and subtlety of inflection, so that the overall performance is significantly more affecting. The CD, by contrast, fails to convey quite the same degree of anger in the vocals and percussion.

Time and again, the SACD playback completely redeemed the EMP1/S. Eric Bibb’s ‘Wrapped Up in Her Arms’ had a better sense of balance, more measured pace and flow; the CD layer lost a degree of the stride in the rhythm. You could be forgiven for wondering, with some SACD players, what all the fuss was about. The EMP1/S is not one of those, its SACD playback is unequivocally superior to CD.

There are niggles: response to ‘open/close’ and ‘play’ commands takes rather ▶

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What do you listen to?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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▶ more than a moment or two and working from the remote control was even worse: for the first six weeks I thought they'd sent me the wrong handset.

Turning to the AW250-R stereo power amplifier, which is essentially a pair of the company's AW180 monoblocs in a stereo chassis, uprated to 250W per channel. The AW180, and AW400, are themselves less powerful derivatives of the awesome AW600 Nemo monoblocs seen in issue 69, so there's a great deal of Nemo DNA in the AW250-R. This is immediately obvious, from the moment you set this system off. It has a solid and expansive way of going about its business. There is a feeling of unlimited resource, a bombproof, unflappable capability, certainly when

driving normal loudspeakers at even quite antisocial levels, so this is definitely an amplifier you might want to consider for your team if your loudspeakers are difficult to drive.

The pre-amp only offers balanced outputs, so I mostly used the pre-power combination together, as intended. The combination is as sumptuous as its appearance suggests. Voluptuous and seductive, and yet, like the EMP1/S, it never really fired my enthusiasm. Some systems have a quality that makes you just want to listen to music, so the first thing you do when you get home is put something on. The Electrocompaniets never quite managed to take me to that place. Some of the shortcomings were noticeably improved by the simple expedient of taking the lids off (don't try this at home, etc...). Used topless in this fashion, the system was considerably more willing to party. Many manufacturers use non-magnetic casework and I can't help but wonder whether a move away from mild steel might similarly elevate the Electrocompaniets' performance. ▶

▶ Messing around with the setup also helped, a move from the supplied balanced interconnects to Nordost Blue Heaven improved things markedly, particularly in the context of my all-Nordost loom, but try as I might, and despite the amp's gutsiness, the system lacked tension and consequently, sometimes failed to hold my interest. Moral: don't mistake scale for drama. This pairing is expansive, fast and detailed, but on my sort of music, it didn't dig deeply enough into the musicianship and levels of performance that I know to be there. Joanna MacGregor's account of György Ligeti's *Autumn in Warsaw* had oodles of grandeur, but it should be almost apocalyptic, and wasn't.

It's a mixed message: along with the confidence-inspiring, and prodigious, power comes more than a hint of vagueness. There is plenty of detail, tonal colour is luxuriant, and, while we're talking in hi-fi terms, a strong and solid bass underpins the ensemble very effectively, but overall focus and substance is diminished: instruments lack a little structure and form. Imaging is fine, but a little broad-brush. Orchestras are, again, opulent and lush, but somewhat blurred in the boundaries, more of an impressionistic than an explicit rendition. I put some of this down to the preamp, and using a dCS Puccini's variable output directly into the power amp did gain a fair degree of vibrancy and immediacy, by comparison. While the finger of suspicion does point towards the EC4.8, a change to a much-admired preamp still lacked some focus, tension and drama. I find myself suspecting that the power amp is a wee bit more Schwarzenegger than Schwarzkopf (Dame Elisabeth, not Norman, in case you were wondering).

As it is, I have to conclude that I wanted to like this system rather more than I ended up doing. It isn't actually bad at anything, and in many respects it is very good indeed: the SACD playback is as good as any I've heard at the price, the power amplifier is confidence-inspiring and unflappable, and the presentation would put a glow in the cheeks of your typical valve aficionado. And yet, it never quite made that unmistakable musical connection. The sense of performance and musicianship which I know to be in my CD collection didn't quite get through. I think the pre-amp might just be the limiting factor, heaven knows there are precious few excellent pre-amps out there and the EC4.8 is no worse than most of its peers and, actually, offers decent performance for the price. It is perhaps unfortunate that the Electro' system arrived as the David Berning amps were leaving, and just before an Albarry turned up. Set between two such gems, it failed to shine. I'm left with the feeling that this system is nearly great but not yet quite there. If you want opulence and beauty, you'll find plenty here, there is also no shortage of scale and grandeur, and authority by the bucketload, but that toe-tapping sense of fun and joy is elusive. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Electrocompaniet EMP-1/S CD/SACD/DVD player

Type: Two-channel upsampling CD/SACD/DVD player

DAC: Cirrus Logic

Outputs: 1 pair XLR balanced analogue

1 SPDIF 75 Ohm RCA

Output Level: 4.5V RMS (balanced)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 483 x 75 x 410mm

Weight: 1.5kg

Available finishes: Black

Remote control: Yes, system remote

Price: £4,650

Electrocompaniet EC4.8

Type: balanced, dual-mono pre-amplifier

Inputs: 2 x balanced using XLR connectors

3 x single-ended RCA

1 x USB data port

Output types: 1 x balanced output

1 x line (recording) output

3 x SPAC (eg system control)

Input Impedance: 47 kOhm (balanced or single-ended)

Output impedance: 100 Ohm (balanced or single-ended)

Gain: -111 dB (min) to 6 dB (max)

Dimensions (W x H x D): 483 x 76 x 368mm

Weight: 9 kg

Available finishes: Black

Remote Control: Yes, system remote

Price: £2,750

Electrocompaniet AW250R

Type: balanced, dual-mono power amplifier

Power Output: 250 watts per channel,

8 Ohms (measured at 0.2% THD)

440 watts per channel, 4 Ohms

625 watts per channel, 2 Ohms

Maximum peak current: >120A

Input level for rated output: 1V rms

Output types: 2 pairs of loudspeaker binding posts

Dimensions (W x H x D): 483 x 210 x 450mm

Weight: 39 kg

Available finishes: Black

Price: £4,550

Manufactured by: Electrocompaniet AS, Stavanger, Norway

URL: www.electrocompaniet.no

Distributed by: EC distribution Ltd.

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A black Musical Fidelity M1 DAC/HPA headphoone system. The device features a large silver volume knob in the center, a power/stby button on the left, and two headphone jacks on the right. The front panel is labeled 'HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER | M1 HPA | by MUSICAL FIDELITY'.

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER | M1 HPA | by MUSICAL FIDELITY

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Musical Fidelity M1 DAC/HPA headphoone system

By Alan Sircom

Having bit the bullet with the outstanding HiFiMAN HE-500 headphones, I need to find a headphone amplifier with the sort of clout needed to drive the things well. The latest HiFiMAN designs are not headphone socket-crushing monsters (at least compared to the flagship), but they are relatively hard to drive properly. They need both quality AND quantity, a sound that is refined and dynamic enough to show off what the HE-500 can do, and powerful enough to let them do just that. It's time to cast the net.

Musical Fidelity's M1 Series is a fine prospect for finding the answer to the headphone quest. The pure Class A M1 HPA headphone amp comes with its own USB digital converter (practically everything Musical Fidelity comes with a USB DAC these days, because it's a simple way of getting people on the first rung of the computer ladder) and can drive tough loads. It has two headphone sockets, a whopping great volume dial and a tiny toggle switch to select between its USB or a line input. In theory at least, the HPA could be used as a preamp – and actually a

very good one at that – but most people will use it as a headphone amp. But with less than one Ohm impedance and the provision for driving a 32 Ohm headphone with as much as 1.1V this is a real 'drive anything' device.

It's matched by the M1DAC, a similarly-sized converter that can upsample to 192kHz at full 24-bit precision. Musical Fidelity – alongside Arcam, Cambridge Audio, PS Audio and Theta – lays claim to being the first company to make a DAC (common consent gives this laurel to PS Audio, although Cambridge Audio and Theta made the first CD players split into component parts and Arcam and Musical Fidelity got the first DACs out on the UK and worldwide stages respectively). Regardless, in 1989, Musical Fidelity made the Digilog, one of the first DACs on the market. This means the company has a significant amount of experience in manufacturing DACs (although, like many companies, it took more than a decade off from making DACs when the devices fell from grace). It features the Burr Brown DSD1796 DAC chip, and the version I have runs in isochronous USB mode (a recent revision upgrades that to Async USB, but for that I have a V Link, a £99 Asynchronous USB to Toslink/Coaxial converter, which limits the player to 24bit, 96kHz). I've been reliably informed what goes into the V-Link goes into the latest versions of the M1DAC, so differences should be slight.

In a way, the system is in near perfect dynamic balance. If you exclude the V-Link, the source component (a late-2010 MacBook Air) the electronics and the Hi-FiMAN all cost roughly the same as one another. I tried some exotic cables, and I tried bog-standard cables and to be perfectly honest there was almost no difference between the two, despite the hundred-fold price differential. This tallies with Grand Wazoo of Musical Fidelity Antony Michaelson's comparatively low opinion of exotic cables. I'd like to investigate this further, to see if it's a headphone thing, or a Musical Fidelity thing. ▶



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Norse Series 2 – one giant leap for audio kind!

First was the Space Shuttle and ribbon topology SPM. Next came Valhalla and Micro Mono-Filament construction. Together they created near perfect conditions for optimized signal transfer. Then the Norse series brought those technologies to cables with more down to earth, real world pricing. Now, Norse Series 2 delivers the next step.

By refining the dimensions, spacing, number and arrangement of the conductors, we have created a range of cables that are finally as mechanically sophisticated as they are electrically elegant. Superior materials, signal transfer and now physical behavior, elevate the musical performance to levels that you might have thought were out of this world. You'll get all the resolution, transparency, speed and musical coherence that you expect from Nordost – but you'll also get real-life dynamic range, greater weight, more drive and a natural sense of presence and energy. Making great music is all about delivering a great performance – and that's exactly what these

cables do. They can't make a bad system into a good one – or a bad musician into a better one. But they sound like they can, simply by getting out of the way and finally revealing what your equipment is really capable of. Like so many things in hi-fi, when it comes to cables, hearing less really is more.

**It's not rocket science –
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than that!**

NORDOST
MAKING THE CONNECTION

The New Angle on LP Reproduction, Level 2: Introducing the Lyra Kleos MC Phono Cartridge

Although many MC cartridges have good performance, their sound is held back by how they are designed. The problem is, the signal coils should have the same angle as the magnetic circuit during playback, but MC cartridges are typically designed so that the opposite happens - applying normal tracking force pushes the coils out of alignment. This impairs coil sensitivity and linearity, and reduces sound quality.

Lyra's "New Angle" technology solves this fundamental problem by compensating for how the signal coils are affected by vertical tracking forces, and optimally aligning the coils when it matters most - during playback. Introduced on our entry-level Delos, the New Angle technology enables the Delos to perform well above its pricepoint.

But being audiophiles, we wanted to achieve the next higher level - which is the new Kleos. Building on New Angle technology, the Kleos innovates with a stronger chassis machined from aircraft-grade alloys, narrowed mounting area to improve energy transfer, and pre-stressed construction combining multiple materials with non-parallel surfaces to inhibit internal body resonances. The fully hand-made Kleos also has a Lyra-designed line contact stylus and platinum-plated output pins, achieving an exceptionally quiet noise-floor with superior immediacy, resolution and tracking, wide dynamic range and explosive transients, plus a warmer and natural tonal balance. The Kleos is a high-value cartridge that surpasses the sound quality of substantially more expensive cartridges.

Let the Lyra Kleos show you how good a New Angle on LP reproduction - Level 2 - can sound.

Jonathan Carr, Lyra Designer



Hi-Fi+ awards for Lyra:

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



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

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW / MUSICAL FIDELITY M1DAC/HPA HEADPHONE SYSTEM

▶ There are two sides to this. First the Musical Fidelity combo can drive the HE-500s, but you are looking at about 11 o'clock on the dial to get any really significant gain out of the headphones. However, that's pretty much to be expected... the HE-500s really are a beast to drive.

The bigger point is just how nice the Musical Fidelity combo sounds while it's playing. Because the HE-500 are planar magnetics, they are especially revealing of midrange, and any grain in the system is quickly disclosed. And yet, through the Musical Fidelity duo here they just sound lovely, completely open and insightful as you might expect. From top to toe, the sound is ordered, detailed and just factual. Not some enhanced sense of rhythm and definitely no excessive soundstaging (it's headphones, remember, and images are often in the head; the last thing you want is Kurt Cobain screaming into your pineal gland).

We in the UK are somewhat obsessed with the rhythmic properties of a component, often for good reasons, because if the tempo falls down, the whole sound begins to fail on some very fundamental levels. But that obsession with one aspect of the sound often fails to recognize there are other aspects to contend with. The Musical Fidelity combo is rhythm-neutral, in that it neither enforces nor holds back on the beat. It merely plays whatever was presented to it. What it does instead is deliver controlled power. Not power in the sense of raw energy, power in the guise of control over the headphones. The headphones have a good bass and extended treble, but these can sound respectively loose and harsh if not well controlled, the HPA made the HE-500 sound taut at one end and open at the other and in-between was insightful. As a desktop system, I found myself listening to both my iTunes collection a lot and was all too readily distracted by everything YouTube, because it was so easy to hear what was going on. It could just do with some more volume.

This is not high-end for low-money though. It's a different presentation to how high-end audio sounds today. It lacks what audiophiles might call 'air' or 'shimmer', a sort of floaty quality to sound that is perhaps over-separated and lacking in musical cohesion. While you can listen into the mix (for this, I changed over to a pair of the closed back, folding, curly-cabled de-facto broadcast standard Sony MDR-7506 headphones that are easy to drive, ruthlessly detailed, and not the sort of thing for relaxed listening), I seldom found myself focusing on the instrument lines or the mix itself, and the music retained its cohesion and synergy. If you've spent years listening to the expansive and effusive sound of a lot of modern high-end, the M1 combo might lack some of that faux silken sheen you have become used to. On the other hand, if you like your music sounding like, well, music, this could be the headphone amp to go for. For now, it's a good first choice. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

M1DAC

DAC: 24-bit Delta-Sigma (bit-stream) dual differential, 8x oversampling to 192kHz

Jitter: <12ps peak-to-peak

Linearity: <0.1dB down to -96dB

Frequency Response: 10Hz-20kHz -0.1dB max

Channel Separation: >105dB 20Hz-20kHz

Signal to noise: >119dB 'A' wtd

THD: <0.0025% 10Hz-20kHz

Inputs: 1x AES/EBU, 1x S/PDIF phono, 1x Toslink, 1x USB

Outputs: 1x RCA phono pair, 1x XLR pair

M1HPA

Output Power: 1.1W into 32Ω

Output impedance: less than 1Ω

Output level: 6.2V max

Frequency Response: 10Hz-75kHz -3dB max

Signal to noise: >109dB 'A' wtd

THD: <0.008% 10Hz-20kHz

Inputs: 1x RCA pair (analogue), 1x USB (digital)

Outputs: 1x RCA pair line output, 1x RCA pair pre output, 2x ¼" headphone jacks (front)

Both Products

Dimensions (WxHxD): 22x10x30cm

Weight: 3.4kg

Prices: £399 (M1DAC), £499 (M1HPA)

Manufactured by: Musical Fidelity

URL: www.musicalfidelity.com

Tel: +44(0)20 8900 2866



Phonak Audéo PFE 232 In-Ear Headphone/Headset

By Chris Martens

The Swiss firm Phonak is widely recognized as one of the world's largest and most respected developers of hearing improvement technologies and devices, with decades of experience in the field. Lately, however, the firm's strategic thinkers have reasoned that there are many possible roads to "hearing improvement" and that one of them involves expanding beyond building remedial hearing products to instead create extremely high-quality music-oriented earphones. Hence, the advent of Phonak's rapidly-evolving family of Audéo Perfect Fit Earphones, which are now being offered in three different price classes: Silver, Gold and Platinum. The ambitious £400 flagship Audéo PFE 232 (£400) is the only model in that Platinum class.

The PFE 232 is a two-way design featuring dual balanced armature-type drivers, which are said to help improve overall sonic resolution, balance, nuance and detail. Phonak understands that wearer comfort and ease of use are essential ingredients in any successful earphone design. Years of experience in hearing aid design (and its extensive database on human ear sizes and shapes) have helped create a light, compact and uncannily "right-sized" earpiece design that many listeners should find easy to handle and to wear. Phonak has paid careful attention to details, offering the following features:

- Light and compact earpiece body that is designed to fit an extremely wide range of ear sizes and shapes. By design, the earpiece body provides a just-right amount of offset between the sound outlet tube (the tube that directs

sound into the wearer's ear canals) and the outer housing of the earpiece. The earpiece housing rests close to the folds of the outer ear, but typically does not chafe against them. Further, the shape of the earpiece is thin, curved, and easy to grasp, making it easy to insert the earphones or to adjust them on-the-fly.

- The earpiece housing provides click-fit sockets for the earphone's detachable, user-replaceable signal cables.
- The PFE 232 comes with small, medium and large versions of two distinctly different types of ear tips: bell-shaped silicone designs and dome-shaped Comply-brand compressible foam models. Phonak points out that the silicone tips "are washable and better for use during exercise," while the Comply tips "are better at filtering out ambient noise, making them the best choice for travel or use in noisy environments."
- The PFE 232 also ships with a set of silicone ear guides that route the earphone's signal cables up and over the wearer's ears, and are said to ensure a "perfect fit and reduced cable noise."

The influence of Phonak's long experience in the hearing-aid field can be seen in one very interesting design detail: namely, the use of passive audio filters that help shape the earphone's response curves to match user's ear characteristics and also listening tastes.

Skeptics might at first think the filters are little more than sonic gimmicks, but that isn't the case at all. The design thinking that has gone into the filter is much more serious and sophisticated than that. Since each person has a different ear, the compensation curves should be different from one person to the other. Standard earphones do not take these factors into account.

Accordingly, Phonak offers three color-coded types of passive audio filters:

- Black filters, which are said to "provide stronger bass and treble" (and that, on paper, offer what may be the most

“This Amplifier is faithful
to the original recording”



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10:08

**The New Angle on LP Reproduction, Level 2:
Introducing the Lyra Kleos MC Phono Cartridge**

Although many MC cartridges have good performance, their sound is held back by how they are designed. The problem is, the signal coils should have the same angle as the magnetic circuit during playback, but MC cartridges are typically designed so that the opposite happens - applying normal tracking force pushes the coils out of alignment. This impairs coil sensitivity and linearity, and reduces sound quality.

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But being audiophiles, we wanted to achieve the next higher level - which is the new Kleos. Building on New Angle technology, the Kleos innovates with a stronger chassis machined from aircraft-grade alloys, narrowed mounting area to improve energy transfer, and pre-stressed construction combining multiple materials with non-parallel surfaces to inhibit internal body resonances. The fully hand-made Kleos also has a Lyra-designed line contact stylus and platinum-plated output pins, achieving an exceptionally quiet noise-floor with superior immediacy, resolution and tracking, wide dynamic range and explosive transients, plus a warmer and natural tonal balance. The Kleos is a high-value cartridge that surpasses the sound quality of substantially more expensive cartridges.

Let the Lyra Kleos show you how good a New Angle on LP reproduction - Level 2 - can sound.

Jonathan Carr, Lyra Designer



Hi-Fi+ awards for Lyra:

- Lyra Helikon MC Cartridge**
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GAMUT CD3
Hi-Fi Choice Editor's Choice: January 2007
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HIGHLY COMMENDED

- ▶ accurate tonal balance overall).
- Gray filters, which are said to “provide stronger middle tones” (and vie with the Black filters for most accurate sound).
- Green filters, which are said to “provide stronger bass while still maintaining high-quality midrange.”

The theme of flexibility also carries over into more functional and practical day-to-day aspects of the earphone. The PFE 232 can be configured as an earphone/headset, complete with an included iPhone-compatible three-button mic/remote. However, with the needs and interests of sonic purists in mind, the PFE 232 can also be set up as a pure earphone (*sans* the inline mic/remote module) via an included straight-line signal cable. It arrives in a cleverly designed two-chamber, zipper-closure carrying pouch with one section for accessories and a separate section for the earphones themselves.

The PFE 232 is similar in sonic character to already very good PFE 122, but not identical, as we’ll discuss below. I found that the PFE 232 responds to the various Phonak filter types in much the same way the PFE 122 did, though the 232’s underlying “core sound” is just enough different from the 122’s that it is worth doing a re-evaluation:

Black filters: I found these yielded an extremely clear, revealing sound that placed emphasis on extended response at both the high and low frequency ends of the audio spectrum. On well-recorded material, I felt the Black filters enabled the PFE 232’s to achieve not only the most accurate, but also the most dramatic presentation possible.

My perception is that the PFE 232 offers more powerful and richly textured bass than the PFE 122, and that it also provide more delicate, expressive, and detailed upper mids and highs—facts that the black filters really help make clear. But with that said, let me add that the black filters can, when installed on the very revealing PFE 232s, become a double-edged sonic sword capable of making some records sound overly bright and perhaps slightly bass-heavy.

Gray filters: The optional gray filters provide a broad and relatively restrained touch of midrange and upper midrange emphasis. When used on the PFE 122, I found this filter could sound a little too “midrange forward” for its own good, but with the PFE 232, which offers stronger bass and highs than the 122 can deliver, the gray filters give a more natural-sounding and pleasing result.

I found the gray filters seemed somewhat more forgiving than the black filter on less than ideal recordings, partly because they create the illusion of the PFE 232’s highs being rolled back just a touch (at least relative to midrange frequencies), which helps tame any overly sharp edges or excess brightness that might be present in the material being played, which can be beneficial.

The tradeoff, though, is that the gray filters can—at least to my ears—make the frequency response of the PFE 232 sound less fully extended than it actually is, especially in the treble region where the top-end can sound dulled. I preferred the sound of the PFE 232 with the black filters installed on the whole.

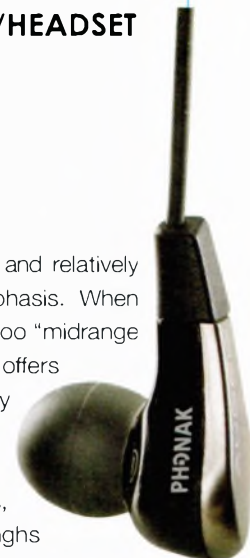
Green filters: Phonak’s Green filters are billed as offering “stronger bass,” but what I really think happens is they roll off the mids and highs. Most accuracy-minded listeners will find either Phonak’s black or gray filters to be a better all-around choice.

The “Core Sound” of the PFE 232: As I mentioned above, the core sound of the PFE 232 is similar to that of the PFE 122, though both deep bass and treble response are a bit stronger. But the bigger differences between the two earphones involve overall resolution and refinement—areas where the PFE 232 enjoys a clear-cut edge over its less expensive sibling. The PFE 232 offers an open and transparent sound that is well focused and finely resolved, with excellent transient speed and delicacy. But what sets the PFE 232 apart—especially on really great recordings—is its ability to dig *much* deeper into the inner details of music, and to capture considerably finer shadings of sonic nuance and expression.

It isn’t a matter of the PFE 122s being somehow “not good enough,” because they are exceptionally good for their price. It’s just that on great material the PFE 232 can do even more, so that listeners are able to connect in a direct and immediate way with recordings, with nothing (or almost nothing) to stand between them and their music. Personally, I find this kind of “direct connection” is worth a lot, though I think the PFE 232’s deep resolution and refinement might register mores strongly with some listeners than others.

One important note I should also offer is that I found I needed to use a really first rate portable amplifier with the PFE 232 in order to fully appreciate what the earphones could do (for our tests we used the ALO Rx Mk2 amplifier and the Ray Samuels SR-71B Blackbird amps, both of which are excellent). If you listen straight from an iPod, you could potentially miss some of the sonic subtleties the PFE 232 brings to the party.

On the Jack Johnson track “The Horizon Has Been Defeated”, for example, listen to the song’s loping, syncopated reggae-influenced bass line and note that—in keeping with the best reggae traditions—the bass sound deep, rich, and warm, but with a slightly softly focused character. At the same time and on the same track, note that the sounds of cymbals in general and of the high hats in particular, sound almost shockingly clear and pure, with ▶





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▶ high-frequency overtones that shimmer and linger on the air long after most competing earphones would have faded back to silence. Drawing a different example from the same album, check out the track “Taylor” and note the fact that Johnson’s voice is mic’d just a bit differently than on some of the other songs, conferring an especially up close, immediate, and even intimate quality that gives the lyrics extra impact.

My point is that the PFE 232 invites you to listen back through the chain of playback (and recording) equipment to understand more clearly how the record was made, and why—almost as if you were looking over the shoulders of the mastering engineer or record producer to take notes on the decisions being made. With many earphones, even some pretty good ones, you may find you eventually run into a “glass ceiling” of sorts in terms of performance potential, where the transducer eventually come to a point where it sounds as good as it is ever going to, and that’s that. But with the PFE 232 in play, my sense was always that recordings themselves were the limiting factor, so that as put on better and better recordings the Phonaks just kept on revealing more and more potential.

Yet another well-made recording that showcases the PFE 232’s strengths is the jazz group Floratone’s eponymous album (Blue Note), featuring Bill Frisell and Matt Chamberlain. Several things are noteworthy about the overall presentation. First, the eclectic Floratone ensemble uses unexpected and unorthodox combinations of acoustic instruments, electric instruments, with selectively applied touches of electronic processing adding extra sonic flavors. What the PFE 232s make crystal clear is which instruments are captured in an unprocessed way, which have had electronic embellishments applied, and which ones were captured in natural acoustic environments. The PFE 232s disentangle and make plain the multiple, dense layers of instrumentation, so that you are free to follow individual musical threads or to drink in the musical whole, just as you please. The listening experience through the Phonak ‘phones is not cold or artificially “analytical” by any means, but they place so much musical information before you that—if you happen to be in an analytical or deeply contemplative mood—they’ll keep you engrossed for hours on end.

Perhaps the strongest indicator of the PFE 232’s worth comes when take them off and substitute lesser earphones. In most cases, you can’t help but feel an almost involuntary sense of disappointment, because you realize—even if only in a subliminal way—that the sheer density of information you were enjoying only seconds ago has faded once you set the Phonaks aside. In short, taking off the PFE 232s in the middle of a listening session proves the truth of Joni Mitchell’s classic line: “...you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone.”

Phonak’s PFE 232 is one of the finest universal fit earphones we’ve tried, and one of the very few to seriously rival the performance of today’s best custom-fit in-ear monitors. While the £400 price of entry is sobering, these ‘phones offer Swiss-influenced precision and a sound that is both revealing and thrilling. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Phonak Audéo PFE 232 In-Ear Headphone/Headset



Accessories: Three pairs of silicone ear tips (S, M, L), three pairs of Comply foam ear tips (S, M, L), one pair of silicone over-the-ear cable guides, filter changing tool and storage box containing one pair of black filters and one pair of green filters, bearing in mind that the PFE 232 come fitted as standard with a pair of gray filters), cleaning tool, carrying pouch, one detachable signal cable with iPhone-compatible three-button mic/remote module, one purist-oriented straight-line signal cable.

Drivers: dual balanced armature-type drivers

Frequency response: 5Hz – 17kHz

Weight: 16 grams

Sensitivity: 109 dB SP/1 mW, gray filters installed. 107 dB Sp/1 mW, black or green filters installed

Impedance: 47 ohms

Warranty: 2 years, part and labor

Price: £400

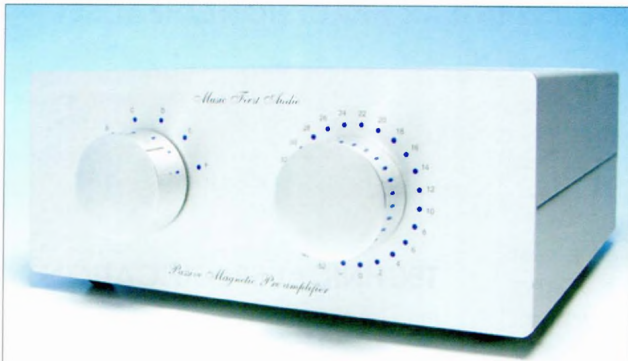
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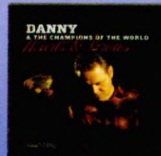
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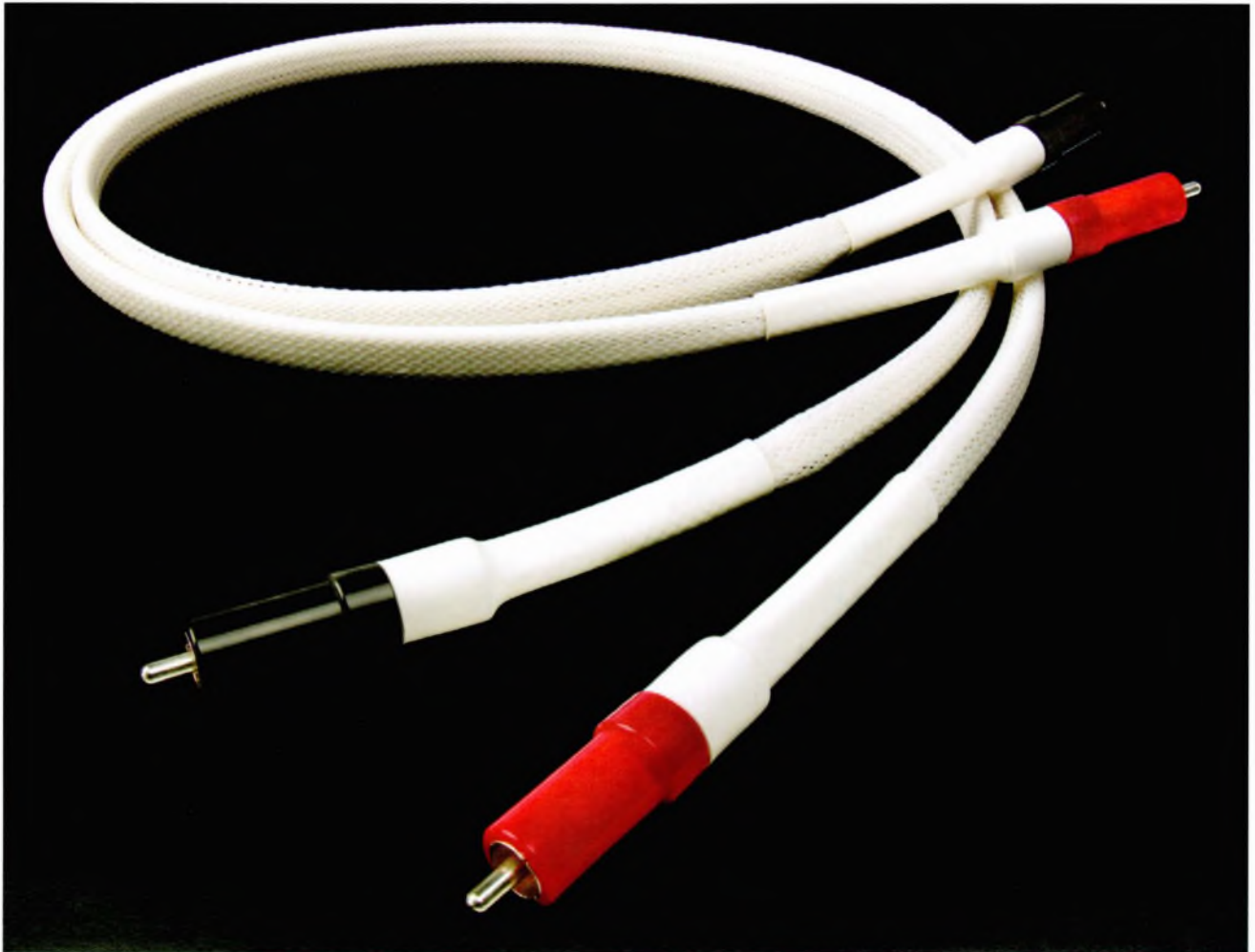
Chord Company Sarum interconnect cables

By Alan Sircom

There's a great dismissal of good cables by some. "Oh, it's all just off the reel", they say with a (often virtual) handwaving gesture. The implication being interconnect cables are simply standard issue wires from a cable catalogue, with some fancy plugs bolted on either end.

Say that to someone who sells Chord Sarum, and they'll laugh in your face (unless you are bigger than them, then they'll have a good laugh behind your back). You see, the Chord Company doesn't just let any old Joe sell its top cables; you have to visit the factory to be trained first. That might sound faintly odd, until you realise that the passing out exam for these cables is to build a set. I've known solder jockeys with flux in their veins swear and curse during that one; it's not that cable is made up of 10,000 fiddly parts, it's just assembling the thing is like trying to simultaneously juggle, dice an onion with a spoon, tap dance and recite *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* backwards, translating it into Klingon. On a surf board. In the dark. While wearing boxing gloves. You get the picture.

Inside that distinctive snow-white braided sheath, the cable uses Chord's one there/two back conductor arrangement in the signal path that was first used in its Indigo Plus range. These individual silver-plated, multi-stranded copper conductors sport foamed PTFE insulation and some extremely complex shielding that basically combines a heavy-gauge silver-plated foil with a more conventional silver-plated braid. This is effectively shielded shielding, and that thick foil is one of the reasons why constructing the cables from constituent parts is a real pig. Chord terminates the cables with silver-plated conductors, while the body of the



▶ phono plug is made from a part-pearlescent acrylic. Anyone who attended the *Bristol Sound & Vision* show in 2010 will know just how passionate Chord is about its acrylic plugs, performing A-B demonstrations with a high 'huh?' factor between a metal plug and its acrylic counterpart.

The Sarum interconnect is just one facet of the Sarum range, but such is Chord's foundation of full-contact listening, that the Sarum formula is tweaked subtly depending on whether the cable ends up a power, interconnect or speaker cable. They are subtle variations on the same theme (the speaker cable uses air-spaced PTFE in place of the foamed PTFE in the interconnects and power cords for example), but designed to give the cables consistency across the board. Chord also recognizes that someone already using Chord cables wouldn't take too kindly in having to shell out thousands at a single stretch to change the cables from stem to stern, so it points out that the cable is sonically compatible to Chord Signature speaker cables, whether as an interim measure or an end-point in its own right.

We are sort of used to remarkables at *Hi-Fi+*. Interconnects that cost as much as a small car don't scare us. And many work exceptionally well. But this is one of those cables that de-skeptics the skeptics, or at least separates the skeptics (who honestly question the whole issue of cable performance) from the cynics (who would

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Conductors: Precision polished, heavily silver-plated, multi-strand copper, one send, two return per cable

Shielding: High density heavy gauge foil dual system

Dielectric: Internal foamed PTFE
Ultra-lightweight contact acrylic
damped RCA plugs

Price: £1,599 (2x1m)

Manufactured by: The Chord Company

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“This is the easiest and hardest cable to pin down sonically. The easy part is that it sounds like your equipment, only better. The hard part is finding out ‘why’.”

simply reject the notion even if they heard a difference). If you are the type of person with good equipment but relatively prosaic cables, you are Sarum's target market.

This is the easiest and hardest cable to pin down sonically. The easy part is that it sounds like your equipment, only better. The hard part is finding out 'why'. There is definitely a sense of more space round the individual notes in a piece of music, more of a sense of musicians plying their trade rather than a drab soundscape of muzak, and there is very definitely a sense of freedom and extension to the sound, especially at the top end. But you could say these things about a dozen other cables. What Sarum does is make this sound effortless. It's like listening to Louis Armstrong playing 'West End Blues'; the sound is vibrant and alive, but you don't realise precisely what it's doing and why that is so good until you compare notes, and then discover just how rare that kind of effortless really is.

It's funny. Every time I try to think of Sarum in audio descriptive terms, I find myself being drawn back to the music and the musicians playing it. So it's Artie Shaw smooth, John Bohnam dynamic, images like the Vienna Phil and times like Freddie Green.

There is one strange discontinuity in the whole wonderfulness of Sarum, though. There is some kind of minor culture clash between the high-frequency performance of Sarum and Focal's Beryllium tweeter that doesn't sit right. It's not the kind of thing that leaps out at the listener, it takes time to tease out this sense of urgency and graininess to the high frequencies in the combination, but when you get there, it's difficult not to notice. In all other circumstances, the Sarum performed magnificently, and even here it managed to do that 'draw you into the music' thing it does so well. It was just that it wasn't the sound you might have wanted or expected from the combination. Interestingly, others have experienced a similar performance and argue that it doesn't extend to Signature cables, which work very well with the Focals.

Some who've heard what Sarum can do have likened it to spending an equivalent amount on upgrading a component. This is the wrong way of thinking about Sarum. It's like bringing the best out of your whole system, without changing the goals and direction of that system. It's perhaps for this reason that Naim users are so taken with Sarum; the Naim sound is a distinctive, impassioned sound and anything that potentially changes it, potentially ruins it. Sarum doesn't; instead it just brings out the Naiminess of Naim, just as it brings out the Sugdenness of Sugden or the Devialetocity of Devialet. And for that reason comes highly recommended. +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Tannoy Definition DC10T

By Alex Skirrow

I had started down this Tannoy review with high hopes of literary superstardom. I'd lapped up Kipling's 'M' and expected to sign my Definition DC10T review with something like 'I have a dream, all I've got is 'M' you can bring your head when all about you are sinking it down and claiming it on 'fool?' and 'You're a Tannoy Man, my son!' Hardly worth the effort really, but at least Kipling fans can sleep safe in knowing the poem goes untroubled for another month.

But the Definition DC10Ts are worthy of some epic words. Because they are epic. They look good, sound good, are easy to drive, will sound fine in big rooms and small, are practically impossible to blow as you're to believe me and put a huge smile on your face.

These are the largest of a three-model range the others are a smaller DC8T floorstander and a single two-way driver DC8 standmount. The Definition range starts representing the super-midsize Tannoy line - above the come the Dimension and Heritage ranges and the mighty K4 room Hoys. The DC10T features Tannoy's distinctive 255mm (10-inch) Dual Concentric driver - a large, double polar drive unit with a 25mm 'Tubo Waveguide' horn-loaded titanium dome tweeter built into the acoustic centre of the drive unit. The tweeter has the same of Tannoy's 'Midband' designs, extending up into the super-tweeter range. A matching treated pulp 255mm bass driver (only without the tweeter) sits below the dual concentric unit.

Tannoy's love of the super-tweeter (this one reaches to 25kHz) is based in part on the idea that instruments have extended ranges beyond the audible and the Chocoma experiments that show human brain states are more in line with the original unamplified music when listeners are played recorded music that extends the frequency range. Controversy still rages over the relevance of this - real world listening, but regardless real music sometimes that extend far outside of conventional hearing and routinely, less prone to ringing effects in our audible range.

The cabinet is a thing of beauty. It's a high gloss curved cabinet with two rear firing ports above the top and elegant tower with two rear firing ports above the top wire panel and a chrome curve along the bottom edge to match the cone surrounds, which looks fantastic in the right room. It's a bottom heavy loudspeaker, which means the loudspeaker's mass can't be broken up with a large grille, it's also not broken up by vents for the speaker grilles as they are affixed magnetically. Physically, this sort of speaker demands a medium-to-large room, even though the speaker doesn't seem troubled by the room itself. The speaker is best a couple of feet from the rear and side walls, but once again



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the speaker is not that busy and from being can help out the speaker in regard to the rear wall.

One of the unique aspects of the rear panel is that each speaker terminal is an earthing link connected to another with a similar grounding terminal, which is said to enhance dynamic range and cut down on RF interference. I say said to because usually grounding study amplifiers were 'on' on the ground strap between when the review was in progress. Behind that terminal is some clearly heavy technology, though with leaded components in the passive network and drive classed high purity copper in the high voltage line.

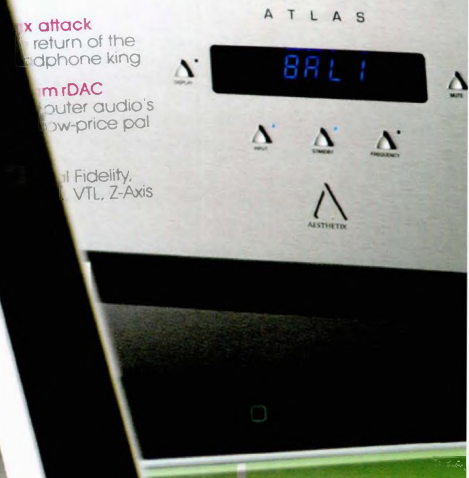
Like most Tannoy speakers, the DC10T is made with quality over quantity when it comes to amplification. It's not as a DC8T where, right on impedance impedance, but through the means on paper it first seems to, was happy with more power like the Musical Fidelity M6 power amp, noted in this issue, and with the Dusted D-Tuner Jazzy bass issue then it was with those power amps. However, a good low powered amplifier would well do, and the Sugden A21SE offered a fine performance.

"This is a large speaker, but not a large room, even though the speaker does not seem troubled by the room itself"

My biggest job as a reviewer of these loudspeakers is not to overstate their biggest strength. But it's difficult, these are possibly the most fun you'll have with a bit of bass. They're like a ball being a ball, because once you take the ball and do bring the ball to a halt, in the case of the DC10T, you'll find up being that Funk and Dash Cycle 'ball about... and you'll find it's because they can have a bit of a problem, go out an amplify message without coming and my does a whole ball line.



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CHORD COMPANY unveiling the latest additions to the Sarum range
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QUADRASPIRE launching the full Bamboo Evolution range
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Get Better Sound DVD

By Alan Sircom

Get Better Sound' began life as a distillation of Jim Smith's decades of experience as an audiophile distributor and enthusiast, in book form. It's a mostly useful tome; part set-up guide, part OCD-creation scheme, part autobiography through music. But these days, attention spans are short and a few hundred pages of tips are long enough for plenty to wait for the movie. Which is kind of how we get to Get Better Sound, the DVD edition. Why 'kind of'? Because the discs also act as an introduction to Jim's bespoke RoomPlay service, where Jim and his box of tricks turn up and make your system come alive. Three discs, totaling five and a half hours of footage covering many of the key aspects into buying and getting the best from two-channel and multichannel sound systems.

The die-hard two-channel nut will probably feel like skipping most of the first disc, which concentrates on setting up multichannel. Don't, because many of the home theatre tips apply universally.

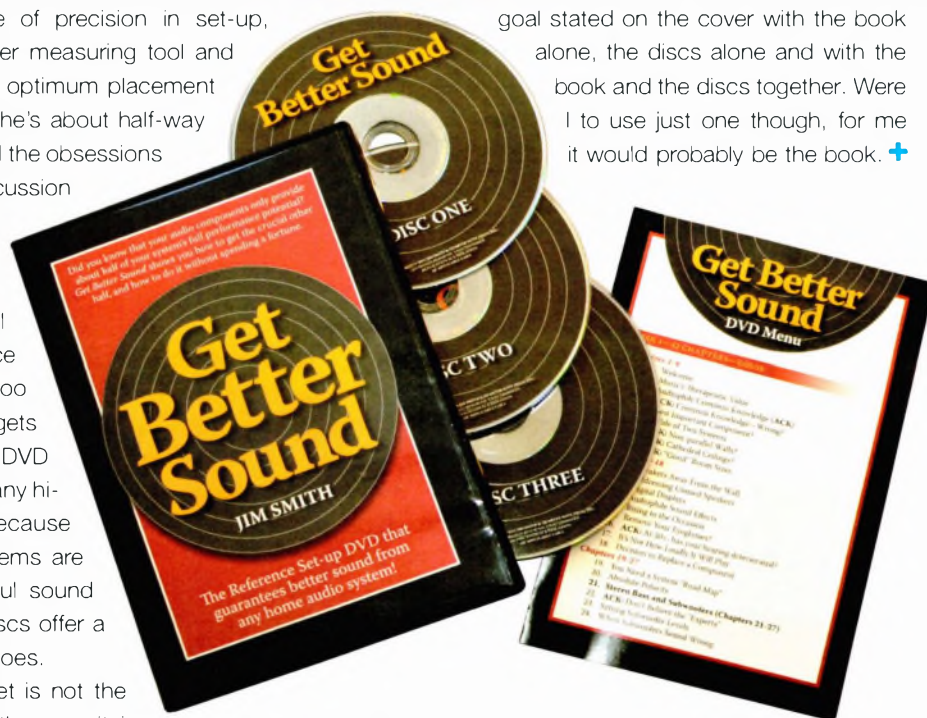
Jim is very much an advocate of precision in set-up, recommending people invest in a laser measuring tool and create their own floor grid to find the optimum placement of loudspeakers in the room. In this, he's about half-way between the rigour of acousticians and the obsessions of enthusiasts, in that there is some discussion of room treatment and loudspeaker positioning. OK, acoustics hard-liners might criticise his approach for being something close to the tail wagging the dog and those who voice by ear alone will find his concepts too rigid, but I think – like the book – he gets more right than wrong and overall the DVD set should be on the shopping list for any hi-fi or home cinema enthusiast. Why? Because it may save you money – many systems are perfectly serviceable but turn in awful sound because of poor set-up, and Jim's discs offer a way out of that morass. As his book does.

The big problem with the box set is not the information it contains, though. It's the way it is presented. Jim spends much of the time talking to camera against a white background. Occasionally, the camera pulls back and he writes something semi-legible on a whiteboard, or he points to some props on a table. What could be a fascinating series of insights into audio installation quickly descends into a fine cure for insomnia. Mercifully, a few chapters are relocated to a cinema room and a dedicated two-channel man-cave.

While I'm no lover of Powerpoint-like slides introduced into DVDs, and really cannot stand the over-used FX wipes and cuts that make many such

videos look like something from the early days of Quantel, my fear is this information will go unheeded because people will not sit through so basic a presentation. It doesn't need to be directed by Spielberg, but it needs to be directed. On the other hand, simple production values mean relatively low cost; the discs are slightly cheaper than the softback book, and comes with eight Quarternotes newsletters as a part of the deal. Making this excellent value for money.

A call for better production values aside, the discs both reiterate some of the key aspects of the GBS book, and branch out on their own. Yes, you will achieve the goal stated on the cover with the book alone, the discs alone and with the book and the discs together. Were I to use just one though, for me it would probably be the book. +



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Blind testing USB cables!

music matters

By Alan Sircom

Many think audio cables are a waste of money, and USB digital cables in particular a waste of money squared. But are they? At the end of last year, Roy Gregory, a pair of Chris's (Thomas and Binns), two members of a US-based forum who prefer to remain anonymous and I assembled one Saturday at Roy Gregory's listening room to put this very question to the (blind) test.

The test was performed in a very high-resolution system, comprising a top-of-the-line late 2010 MacBook Air (running the latest version of OSX Lion, Pure Music, 4GB RAM and 256GB SSD) with a USB-powered Lacie 1TB external HDD running off one bus for the music files and the other connected via USB to a number of DACs (HRT Streamer II+, Ayre QB-9, Bryston BDA-1 and the ARC DAC 8) into a VTL TL-7.5 line preamp and MB-450 Series III mono power amps into Coincident Pure Reference Extreme loudspeakers, with all the cables that weren't USB from the Nordost Odin range.

While we didn't test AIFF to ALAC (I'm not convinced there's a difference to be had here, although the last time I tested this was in 2009) and while we did not experiment with hi-res on that day (*mea culpa* - time constraints and an awareness of the ability for such tests to erode the listener's interest and acuity put limits on the number of possible tests), we did compare the iTunes-purchased 256kbps (VBR) AAC version of a recent album (The Avett Brothers' 'I And Love And You') with the ripped CD version in ALAC, then the same converted to 256kbps (VBR) AAC. Despite a lot of claims to transparency between uncompressed and high-quality lossy compression, the differences were noticeable, albeit not enormous. Citing specific characteristics, the differences were notable largely in the precision of leading and trailing edges of bass lines and a blurring of fast percussion (not the phasey effect of low-rate MP3 compression; more of a 'purr' when there should be a 'rat-a-tat-tat'). In order of preference (but not in order of play) the listeners unanimously preferred the ALAC version over the iTunes-purchased version, and consistently chose the iTunes-purchased AAC file over the iTunes-transcoded AAC file. The album choice was deliberate on two counts; it's recent enough not to be listening to two wildly different remasters between CD and iTunes purchase, and it's indicative of recent 'hot' masters without being cut so loud that it suffers from heavy-handed dynamic signal compression or digital clipping. Also, when we compared the best an ALAC file could produce against the CD played through a Wadia 861se, everyone - including those already migrated onto computer audio - preferred the sound of CD. Some major head-scratching ensued.

The cables we tested (in order of price) were a giveaway grey cable from an HP printer, Cardas Clear USB, Nordost Blue Heaven USB, AudioQuest Diamond and one of Crystal Cable's Dreamline USB range. This gave a spread of prices from essentially free to about £2,000. I ensured the test was run blind and not in price order. As test admin, my

opinions and findings do not form part of the test, because I was the one person who knew what was playing at any given time. In rough order of preference two of the five listeners preferred the AudioQuest, while the other three preferred the Crystal Cable. Interestingly, those who liked the AudioQuest ranked the Crystal Cable as their second choice, followed by Nordost, Cardas and then the giveaway, while those who preferred the Crystal Cable, ranked Nordost second, followed closely by Cardas, then AudioQuest a distant third and the giveaway trailing in the rear. All five listeners immediately identified the giveaway cable as 'cheap and nasty' and one managed to recognise the AudioQuest cable because he felt it sounded 'too hi-fi', but the likes and dislikes were remarkably consistent.

The question this raises is 'why?' The USB 2.0 spec is incredibly well defined; four 28 AWG conductors (a Data+ and Data-twisted pair, referenced against a ground wire and a +5v Vbus for powering devices like the HRT Streamer) in individual dielectrics, with a aluminium foil tape, a braided shield and wrapped in PVC. So, the result of the whole test should be one of those 'bits is bits' moments, especially as the blind test element takes away the chance for someone to express their pet preferences based on brand names alone. And yet, not only were there differences between the cables, but the differences were identifiable enough for someone to pick out brands under conditions designed to eliminate such things. I don't discount the possibility of my own biases leading the listeners, but I've heard most of this group under my own steam in listening tests, and would have ranked the cables in the test very differently from anyone in the group. Also, their conclusions suggested they hear bigger differences than I have in the past. So if it's administrator bias, it's working contrary to the biases of the administrator.

So, as I said... why? +



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CLASSIC ALBUM LIVING ROOM AT VINTAGE



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW
Kaiser Kawero! Vivace loudspeaker



Kaiser Kawero! Vivace loudspeaker... This speaker is a high-quality... It offers excellent sound reproduction...

THE VINTAGE STORES AT VINTAGE



The Vintage Stores at Vintage... These stores offer a wide range of vintage records and equipment... They are a treasure trove for music lovers...

EQUIPMENT REVIEW
ASR Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier



ASR Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier... This amplifier is a high-quality... It offers excellent sound reproduction...

ASR Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier

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record reviews

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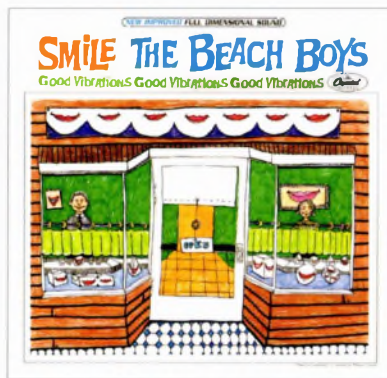
The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and – where possible – serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

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

This issue's featured reviewers are:

- DD** – Dennis D Davis
- SE** – Steven Estep
- MP** – Mark Prendergast
- AQ** – Andrew Quint

	CD		120g LP
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	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
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The Beach Boys

Smile Sessions

Capitol T 27664/5



It's nearly 45 years and at last it's here, the most sought-after album never released! After 2004's *Brian Wilson Presents Smile*, producer Mark Linnett coaxed the broken genius of the Beach Boys to have a go assembling the 67 sessions and 65 reels of tape spread over four L.A. studios from the Spring of 1966 to Summer 1967.

Capitol has done an incredible job. There is a single disc of highlights, a detailed 2CD or two LP and an obsessive 5CD where entire discs are devoted to every listenable session for 'Vibrations' and 'Heroes'. But the core of the entire exercise is beautifully anthologized in this two HDCD Box. The first 19 songs are the best sonic version of the album I've ever heard.

There is a softness and dexterity to the instrumentals never heard before and while various versions of 'Heroes & Villains' can irritate the spiritual content of 'Prayer', 'Wind Chimes' and 'Surf's Up' is unparalleled in any other 1960s pop. In fact the take of Wilson at the piano performing 'Surf's Up' solo to the rest of the band is possibly one of the finest recorded moments in creation, so beautiful and right is every keynote, every vocal enunciation. At last we can all hear what all the fuss was about. **MP**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Can

Tago Mago

(40th Anniversary Deluxe)

Mute/Spoon



Can formed as a revolutionary music machine in Köln in 1968 and quickly established their awesome reputation as a live band. *Tago Mago* from 1971 was their second studio album. It featured new vocalist Damo Suzuki and would define their career.

Tago Mago was an ambitious double. 'Paperhouse' opens with that juggernaut of a drum sound set to an almost silken, swimming backdrop, Karoli ever up at the 16th fret, playing his Fender with the treble on full. 'Mushroom' sounds like something made in a car wrecking plant at night. Domo intones and after four minutes your system will jump out of its skin. This makes way for 'Oh Yeah', where Can come as close as they dare to the extended blues rock workouts of *Stick Fingers*-era Rolling Stones. Side two features 'Hallelujah', an hallucinogenic exercise in circular drumming, a veritable homage by Jaki to his enormous powers. Both 'Aumgn' and 'Peking O' are lengthy experiments in ambience and tape manipulation and comprise the most difficult music here. The album ends with the sublime ballad 'Bring Me Coffee Or Tea'. This new edition includes 50 minutes of live *Tago Mago* music from 1972. All in all a fitting tribute and a handy taster for 2012's 14 strong Can Vinyl Box Set. **MP**

RECORDING



MUSIC

**Love****Black Beauty**

High Moon Records



The finding of a lost album by Love is something to celebrate. Arthur Lee's quintessential baroque, string and horn laden music, which reached it's first zenith on the 1967 Love masterpiece *Forever Changes*, was too advanced for an audience which thrived on simple clear statements. The burgeoning hippie middle class of America could understand 'Light My Fire' or 'White Rabbit' but had problems with 'Alone Again Or'. Hence Love became a cult and as Lee kept reforming the group around different emphases. Then in 1973, Lee formed his first all-black band and went into the studio and cut this very album. But all the tapes got lost in Buffalo Records' receivership hell.

Though some of these songs have circulated in bootleg form, this is definitely the first Love album since 1968's *Four Sail* which has a unified character, feeling and playing style. Supported by Melvan Whittington (guitar), Robert Rozelle (bass) and Joe Blocker (drums) Lee again hits heights of social observation, insight, playfulness great musicianship of old. Rock instrumentation is used as much for texture as effect and on 'Skid' and 'Can't Find It' he even finds the plaintive empathy of his younger self. Definitely a grower and after thirty eight years, worth the wait. **MP**

RECORDING
MUSIC


**Carlos Santana/
Mahavishnu John
McLaughlin**
Love Devotion Surrender

Mobile Fidelity Soundlab CMOB2080



By Summer 1972, The Mahavishnu Orchestra was so fraught with ego-battles that guitar legend John McLaughlin sought solace in spirituality, namely the teachings of Sri Chinmoy and a new friendship with Carlos Santana.

The press hated it but the public lapped it up, quickly making *Love Devotion Surrender* a Gold seller and a Top 20 album in both the US and UK. McLaughlin's style is tight, releasing all his energy in ferocious staccato bombs of notes, while Santana favours sustain, bending notes for up to half a minute at a time.

A neglected album on poorly pressed vinyl, it only got a mediocre CD imprint before 2001 when Bill Laswell wrestled the master tapes from Columbia and did a fascinating 'reconstruction and mix translation' opening up both space and dynamics in the music. This forced an embarrassed Columbia to remaster and expand the album to disc in 2003 but none of them are on this level.

Once again Mobile Fidelity manages to reveal oceans of detail and dynamic thought lost. And with this re-issue critics are finally warming to the album, nearly 40 years after its inception. **MP**

RECORDING
MUSIC

**Throbbing Gristle****20 Jazz Funk Greats/Greatest Hits**

Industrial Records



What's so easy to forget about punk is that after the fast-burning short fuse of 1976/1977 a space was opened up to literally start all over again.

Throbbing Gristle were cultural terrorists from Kingston in London, one of their first concerts as COUM Transmissions at the ICA London in 1976 was so extreme that Tory MPs wanted them imprisoned, the ICA closed and the Arts Council disbanded! Industrial Records now celebrates TG's golden age, 1977-1981, with beautiful re-issues of their core catalogue.

The cover of *Greatest Hits* shows Cosey Fanni Tutti, the band's guitarist as an image of seduction not subversion. The group displayed across the chalk and green of Beachy Head on *20 Jazz Funk Greats* look like a family out for a spot of Sunday picnic. The contents belie the covers. Using bass, violin, vibes, cornet, synths, tapes and found-sounds the quartet of Chris Carter, Peter Christopherson, vocalist Genesis P.Orridge and Tutti herself made the best post-punk noises of the lot. The quartet have done wonders with the remastering and the vinyl slabs (including their beautiful full-colour 12" booklets) are perfect artefacts from a lost but not forgotten era. Thrilling. **MP**

RECORDING
MUSIC





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Crosby, Stills & Nash

Gold CD

Atlantic/Audio Fidelity AFZ 131



Is there anyone on this planet who has not owned a copy of this classic album?. While there were some who complained that the album was soft because of its lack of a social agenda (probably from the same people who complained of Dylan's Nashville Skyline), the album became embedded in the consciousness of a generation. Who can hear Long Time Gone and not be transported back to Woodstock? Yet the album stands the test of time. The LP was not an audiophile grade recording, and could be a bit screechy at the top end and mushy at the other extreme.

By today's compressed digital standards, however, it was an exceptionally good sounding recording. Steve Hoffman, working from master tapes safeguarded by Steven Stills, brings out the best in the tapes. The result shows much more inner detail than I've heard in any vinyl or CD version, while at the same time taming the high end and firming up the bass. While it may lose a bit of the three-dimensional quality of my early vinyl copy, the improvements far outweigh this one shortcoming. And let's face it; this is perfect music for listening to while driving. In short, an indispensable release. That's not to say I would complain if a vinyl version would be forthcoming. **DD**

RECORDING

MUSIC



Dusty Springfield

Dusty In Memphis

Atlantic/Analogue Productions SD 8214



This is one of the most accomplished rock records of the classic rock era. In a bid to keep up with the rapidly changing rock scene of the late 1960's Dusty (real name Mary O'Brien) signed with Atlantic and went into the studio in 1969 to do her first all R & B album. Backed by the Memphis Cats, recorded by Tom Dowd and singing songs from the cream of pop music's songwriter elite, Dusty micro-managed Jerry Wexler into producing one of rock's great albums. While there are no low points, 'Son Of A Preacher Man' was the standout, released as single and charting well on both sides of the Atlantic, and resurrecting Dusty in 1994 when it figured prominently in the movie *Pulp Fiction*.

The sound of the original is pure Atlantic—fat integrated pop sound. Compare the sound of Dusty's audiophile Look of Love on Casino Royale of a couple years earlier. In addition to the much more sophisticated instrumentation on the later recording, the Memphis sound is much more lush. Kevin Gray turned in a sparkling re-mastering and the 45-RPM pressing from Chad Kassem's Quality Records could hardly be better. The Windmills Of Your Mind throws a huge soundstage and Dusty on Vinyl sets a high barrier for high def digital to aim for. **DD**

RECORDING

MUSIC



Taj Mahal

Recycling The Blues & Other Related Stuff

Columbia/ORG KC 31605/ORG 112



By 1972, the year of this release, Taj Mahal had been recycling the blues on Columbia Records for several years and was well on his way to incorporating world music fusion concepts before that term had become widely circulated. Half of the album is Taj performing solo before an appreciative audience, playing steel guitar, banjo, Kalimba and bass. A little over half the album is a studio recording with The Pointer Sisters joining Taj on Sweet Home Chicago and Howard Johnson playing tuba on Cakewalk Into Town. Side D of this two LP set is devoted to the extended (eight and a half minutes) Gitano Negro—just Taj Mahal playing flamenco infused solo guitar. Cakewalk is an absolute gem and worth the cost of the album on its own. I'm a huge fan of tuba players Johnson and Ray Draper who appear on a handful of jazz records. If there is a better tuba duet, I've yet to find it.

Bernie Grundman remastered this 45-RPM set for ORG, which has packaged the two LPs in a gorgeous foldout cover. This was probably Taj Mahal's best sounding LP and was released on gold CD by Mobile Fidelity many years ago, which is long out of circulation. This new mastering is of reference quality and the RTI pressed vinyl puts the flimsy 1972 vinyl original to shame. **DD**

RECORDING

MUSIC





Various Artists

180g

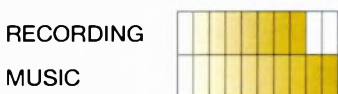
Chicago/The Blues/Today!

Vanguard/PurePleasure VSD
79216/7/8

In December of 1965, blues historian Sam Charters brought nine of Chicago's finest blues musicians, and their groups, into Chicago's RCA Studios and had them lay down a handful of tracks each, which were released as three separate LPs on Vanguard. Charters was one of a handful of informed scholars responsible for bringing the blues to the attention of a wider audience.

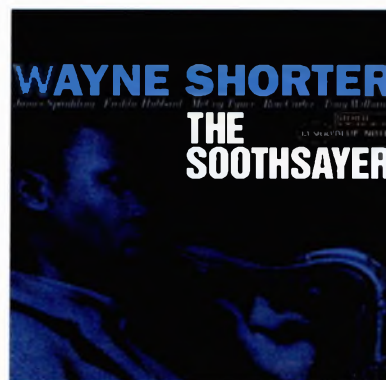
The artists he assembled that month—Junior Wells, J. B. Hutto, Otis Spann, Otis Rush, Jimmy Cotton, Homesick James, Johnny Shines, Johnny Young and Big Walter Horton—were the cream of the crop of the Chicago blues scene at the height of its creativity. Yet these blues titans still struggled for recognition despite the intense interest shown by British rock musicians. Charters' three albums went on to change all this.

The three albums have never been out of print and form the bedrock of any blues fan's record collection. The LPs were acquired, played, replayed, imitated and incorporated by a new generation of rock musicians. Jimmy Hendrix and Led Zepplin, to name just two obvious examples learned their craft in part from copies of these LPs.



One of the secrets of the success of these sessions was the very fact that they were all done in a month. There is no sign of premeditation, no sign of studio slickness. Each group plays music much like you would have heard them play in a Chicago nightclub. That sense of authenticity carries over to the recorded sound. It's a bit raw and in your face, as befits the music. Did these artists know that they were creating an historical document that would be cherished by record collectors for decades to come? Probably not, but they all seemed to be at the top of their form for their half dozen or so numbers. Pure Pleasure has released the three LPs, originally sold as three individual LPs, as a box set. The LPs are duplicated exactly as released—there are no extras because none exist. The LPs were re-mastered by Ray Staff at Air Mastering, Lyndhurst Hall, London. Ray has been mastering rock LPs since at least 1970 and his studio has built a reputation for producing audiophile re-masterings. His skills have not failed him—he has preserved the sound of the originals.

Combined with the dead quiet Pallas vinyl surfaces, the music has never sounded better. I must admit that I was skeptical of an expensive box set of LPs that are not that hard to assemble second hand, but once I handled the fabric box my lack of faith began to melt. Once I opened the box and found the 24 page full size booklet I knew that Tony Hickmott at Pure Pleasure had added enough value to make owners of mint originals need this box set. The booklet includes updated historical articles and is filled with fabulous photographs, my favorites of which are Jimi Hendrix posing with his copy of Volume 3 (as well as an Elmore James LP) and the front of Pepper's Lounge, advertising Muddy Waters "every Wed-Fri-Sat-Sun". Wow!. **DD**



Wayne Shorter

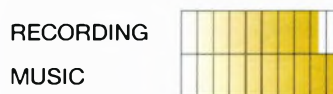
180g

The Soothsayer

Blue Note/Music Matters LT 988

This album was not released by Blue Note until after the company was sold to United Artists. In 1979, this 1965 session was first released on Blue Note's "Classic" reissue series. Everything about the production of that series was second rate, from the "updated" album cover design to the pressings. Yet the music is of the first rank with super-stars Freddie Hubbard, McCoy Tyner, James Spaulding, Ron Carter and Tony Williams backing Shorter.

It stands comparison with any of Shorter's other masterpieces released across the last half of the 1960s. One can only assume that Shorter's fertility during this period, creating about two records a year, while at the same time working with the Miles Davis band, prevented the label from keeping up with the artist. That loss is our gain, because only in late 2011 can Shorter fans enjoy the album as it deserves to be heard. Music Matters have created a record cover in the style of the period and it's a beauty. Couple that with the usual foldout cover of artwork and the thick RTI pressed vinyl and this becomes a must have LP for any collector. The sound is far superior to the abysmal United Artists pressing. No one who loves jazz from the mid-1960s should miss this re-issue. **DD**



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FORTHCOMING EVENTS

FEB 2012
4TH - 5TH

HIGH END ON TOUR
CONGRESS CENTER, DARMSTADT, GERMANY

FEB 2012
24TH - 26TH

SOUND & VISION
THE BRISTOL SHOW MARRIOTT CITY CENTRE HOTEL, BRISTOL

MAR 2012
24TH - 25TH

AUDIO WORLD
OATLANDS PARK HOTEL, SURREY, UK

APR 2012
13TH - 15TH

NEW YORK
AUDIO AND AV SHOW 2012 - WALDORF ASTORIA

MAY 2012
3RD - 6TH

HIGH END
M,O,C,- MUNICH, GERMANY

SEPT 2012
29TH - 30TH

NATIONAL AUDIO SHOW
WHITLEBURY HALL HOTEL, NORTHANTS

OCT 2012
12TH, 13TH & 14TH

ROCKY MOUNTAIN
AUDIO FEST

OCT 2012
19TH - 21ST

AUSTRALIAN
AUDIO & AV SHOW 2012

OCT 2012
19TH - 21ST

HIGH END SWISS
HOTEL MÖVENPICK, ZÜRICH, SWITZERLAND

OCT 2012
20TH - 21ST

HOME ENTERTAINMENT
THE MANCHESTER SHOW RENAISSANCE HOTEL, MANCHESTER

NOV 2012
17TH - 18TH

HIGH END ON TOUR
CONGRESS HOTEL, HAMBURG, GERMANY



Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Brass Live

CSO Resound

SA

When I was an undergraduate trombone major in the early 1970s, I could name every member of the Chicago Symphony's brass section. These musicians are the royalty of orchestral brass players. There's a unique density to their sound combined with unanimity of attack and release, breath support, and a half dozen other parameters that bespeaks limitless power in reserve.

On this new release the CSO brass play sensational arrangements of familiar music by six composers. We hear three pieces by Giovanni Gabrieli as well as an exciting adaptation of Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor. There's a rousing performance of Walton's Crown Imperial March, the brass players joined here, as for most of the program, by several percussionists. Also programmed are a transcription of Percy Grainger's Lincolnshire Posy, Sensemayà by Silvestre Revueeltas, and three movements of Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet, culminating in an overwhelming realization of "The Death of Tybalt." CSO Resound's recording from Symphony Hall is dynamic and tonally vibrant. The multichannel version is conservatively executed, adding just a bit more dimensionality. **AQ**

RECORDING

MUSIC



Bernstein, Smetana, Shostakovich

Piano Trios. Morgenstern Trio

Azica

CD

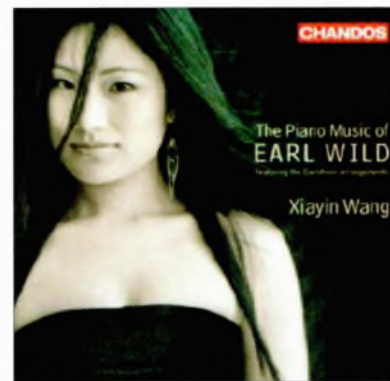
This is a refreshing disc of rarely heard pieces; the musicians are thoughtful, and their playing very detailed. The violinist plays passages eloquently that would be rough-hewn in others' hands. In the climax of the Smetana Trio's third movement, the pianist takes you to the top of the keyboard with a blistering arpeggio, leaving you perched precariously on an unresolved scale before conjuring up a hushed new chord.

Shostakovich wrote his winsome Trio No. 1 as a teenager (as Bernstein wrote his Trio). It has plenty of romance and charm; the artists approach the piece almost reverently, letting it speak for itself rather than spoon-feeding you all the emotions you "should" feel.

The first movement of the Bernstein is full of counterpoint, and the melodies are almost austere; the development is logical and axiomatic. All this is tempered by a quiet ending. Jazziness and general humor poke their heads up in the second movement, and the players know just what this sometimes-hodge-podge music needs, whether lightness or force and vigor. Even the emphatic parts have nuanced internal phrasing. The sound is clean and balanced, except for a touch of distortion in the loudest passages. **SE**

RECORDING

MUSIC



Piano Music of Earl Wild

Xiayin Wang

Chandos

CD

The late Earl Wild, one of America's greatest pianists, wrote three major pieces based on Gershwin's music: Grand Fantasy on Porgy and Bess, Improvisation on Someone to Watch over Me, and Seven Virtuoso Etudes. They are of respectable length—and depth. Wild was a virtuoso, and there is plenty of flash, but after a few hearings you begin to notice the thoughtful writing that puts it in context. There are no empty arpeggios here. The Grand Fantasy is a half hour spent with dear but enviably witty and gorgeous friends. The Improvisation has a part where the right hand's repeated notes sound much like a mandolin.

Wild's own Sonata, from 2000, is substantial. There's a bit of Prokofiev in the polished spikiness, and a little jazz—honest, not facile. The lovely Adagio has a relaxed humor to it. The last movement, "Toccata a la Ricky Martin," is a knucklebuster with a melody that Wang plays quite sensuously. Somehow, Wild can combine all these influences without once sounding tacky. It's a tribute to his compositional skill that another pianist has recorded his works (and Wang's playing is rich, colorful, and completely idiomatic). The sonics top nearly any other piano recording I've got. **SE**

RECORDING

MUSIC



Secret Voices

Anonymous 4.
Harmonia Mundi



Sing Freedom!

Conspirare.
Harmonia Mundi



Two new choral SACDs from Harmonia Mundi, splendidly performed and recorded, remind us how music can bring meaning to lives burdened by isolation or oppression.

The Las Huelgas Codex is a collection of sacred and secular music copied out at the beginning of the 1300s. It was created at the Cistercian convent in Burgos, Spain, and contains both monophonic (single voice) and polyphonic pieces. These are the “secret voices” of Anonymous 4’s new release; the group brings this distant era alive, assembling from the Codex a musical representation of the sisters’ monastic day. Not all the music is devotional in tone. The ten-movement mass that forms the center of A4’s program features a sunny, lilting motet “Salve virgo regia/Ave gloriosa mater,” and later on we’re given the rollicking, round-like “Benedicamus domino à 3”. Despite the passage of time, with only a single change in personnel in their 20-year recording history, the quartet sounds as fresh as ever. The unison chant is ravishing and the complex polyphony is rendered with admirable transparency.

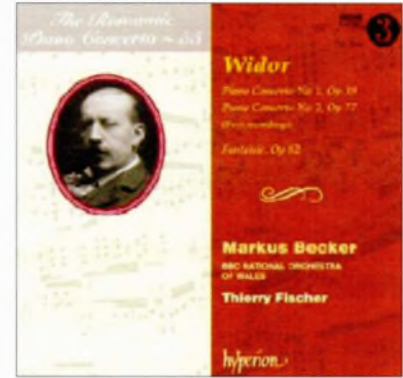
Craig Hella Johnson, Conspirare’s founder and conductor, points out in his liner note for *Sing Freedom!* that the spiritual “has become the largest single body of folk song arrangements in the western choral art repertoire.” He also gently observes that this profoundly serious music is often condescended to, appearing at the end of a choir recital as a “rousing conclusion” or offered only as a “contrasting emotional moment in a concert lineup.” For *Sing Freedom!* Johnson has programmed traditional arrangements along with some newer ones, including three of his own. Also included are a fragmentary,

impressionistic take on “Oh Graveyard” by David Lang and a modern spiritual by the contemporary American composer Richard Kyr (“Freedom Song”) that derives from African musical traditions. The selections follow a trajectory from dark isolation (“Motherless Child”) to upbeat hopefulness (“Plenty Good Room on the Glory Train”), finishing with a version of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” by the Irish composer Tarik O’Regan unlike any you’ve ever heard. The arrangements are all carefully crafted but the many capable soloists are given plenty of leeway to embellish the melodies.

Technical supervision on both releases is courtesy of the team of producer Robina G. Young and engineer Brad Michel. The Conspirare program and about a third of *Secret Voices* were recorded in the Sauder Concert Hall at Goshen College in Indiana, with the remainder of A4’s program originating from Skywalker Sound. There’s a pleasant penumbra of air around the singers in *Secret Voices* but not much decay; the women are clearly going more for immediacy and intimacy than “atmosphere.” On *Sing Freedom!* the sonics are full-throated but occasionally a bit oversaturated. On both discs the difference in spatiality between the stereo and 5.0 multichannel versions is minimal. **AQ**

RECORDING	
MUSIC	

RECORDING	
MUSIC	



Widor: Piano Concertos, Fantaisie.

Markus Becker; BBC Wales Orchestra.
Hyperion

As with many another in Hyperion’s long-running series of “Romantic Piano Concertos,” this is the first time the two (1876 and 1905) by French composer Charles-Marie Widor have been recorded. Widor’s First takes a while to get off the ground—the opening is almost a compendium of ways to begin a piano concerto, and the opening Allegro is more theme and gesture than melody and development. A charming Andante follows, then a scherzo-like finale that sounds as Russian as it does Gallic. The Fantaisie (1889) is rich in ideas and most compelling in architecture.

The first several minutes are in a moderate tempo and lead to a dramatic middle section; the climax presents the main theme at a fortissimo as a reward for its labours. Concerto No. 2 is more chromatic, but also more settled in demeanor; the luxurious Adagio has a ravishing violin solo. This is one of the best-sounding Hyperion CDs I’ve heard overall (the winds are sometimes a little buried, hardly a deal-breaker), and Markus Becker is perfect—he’s got chops, tasteful emotion, and great clarity. The orchestra is excellent throughout. **SE**

RECORDING	
MUSIC	

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Richmond Fontaine – The High Country

every home should have one

By Alan Sircom

Who says classic albums have to be old? Richmond Fontaine's latest came out in September last year, and anyone who doesn't think it's a classic after giving it a few listens needs psychological help. And, for a band you might not have heard of until recently, the discography is lengthy and worth investigating.

At its core, Richmond Fontaine is the partnership of songwriter/vocalist Willy Vlautin and bassist Dave Harding. The band formed when the two started comparing musical notes between events at the Portland Meadows racetrack in 1994. The Oregon pair quickly found they had a mutual love of bands like Hüsker Dü (always a good sign), Willie Nelson, X and The Replacements, and soon began working together on musical projects.

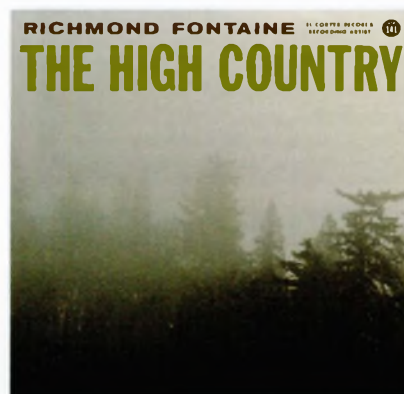
Vlautin is a storyteller rather than just a songwriter (he's a successful author in his own right) and the band's output strongly reflect that. Middle-period albums like *Winnemucca* (2002), *Post to Wire* (2004) and *The Fitzgerald* (2005) in particular are introspective, acoustic works of genius.

The death of Vlautin's mother gave Vlautin pause to concentrate on his novel-writing work, but a short sabbatical saw Richmond Fontaine come back with *We Used to Think the Freeway Sounded Like a River* (2009). Always introspective, the band suddenly turned very personal. Not a cheery album (it's perhaps understandably an autobiographical work of loss, love, regret and pain), it must represent one of the most atmospheric and moody albums of the year and is a must-have, if you are ready to embrace your depressed side. However, this album can sound a little disjointed and is perhaps not the best introduction to the band.

Which is where *The High Country* comes in. It's essentially a song-novel, like a Raymond Carver book set to music. As such, it's not an album to dip in and out of, nor does it have a killer track that you might play over and over again. *The High Country* is the story of a young mechanic and the girl from the auto parts store as they try to escape small town logging life, and the freakshow they encounter along the way. It's atmospheric, mostly acoustic (with a couple of more grungy tracks and some found radio station edits thrown in) and you can almost hear the oily John Deere baseball caps and worn-down waitresses serving long-brewed coffee in the background. And yet, it's no cliché, and not simply a lengthy, acoustic version of *Born to Run*. In fact, what will likely happen is you'll listen to it two or three times in quick succession, then order at least half the back catalogue. That's what I did.

The High Country is also an excellent recording, and available on almost every format you can think of, except hi-res FLAC. I'm particularly fond of the 180g LP version (cut on this side of the pond, it seems), even though this is one album where flipping the disc over seems like an abrupt cliffhanger.

The band is sort of a four-piece, with regulars Sean Oldham on drums and Paul Brainard on pedal steel, although recent albums have seen Dan Eccles on guitars as well. That the roll-call of musicians on the albums is ever increasing (and includes some big names in the Americana business, such as Joey Burns from Calexico) is a sign of just how significant Richmond Fontaine is becoming. +



RICHMOND FONTAINE – THE HIGH COUNTRY

Recorded at: Type Foundry and Scenic, Burrows, Portland, Oregon

Produced by: John Askew

Mastered by: Jeff Stuart Saltzman

Released: 05 September 2011

El Cortez Records (LP on Diverse Records DIV031 LP)

Track listing

The Girl on the Logging Road (1:46)
The Chainsaw Sea (4:23)
Let Me Dream of the High Country (2:13)
The Mechanic Falls in Love with the Girl (1:35)
The Mechanic's Life (3:16)
Angus King Tries to Leave the House (3:16)
The Meeting on the Logging Road (1:44)
Claude Murray's Breakdown (3:22)
The Eagle's Lodge (3:13)
Driving Back to the Chainsaw Sea (1:22)
Lost in the Trees (3:36)
On a Spree (2:40)
I Can See a Room (2:48)
Deciding to Run (2:33)
The Escape (3:30)
Leaving (4:29)



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