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**W**e are fast becoming a global market. The parochial and myopic view of audio that we all seem to have shared in the past is ebbing away fast. But there are still hold-outs. There are still people who cannot think past country boundaries, and that they only want to buy local products from local brands. While from a patriotic standing this might make good sense, it's ultimately self-defeating; because if a brand only plays to the home crowd and the home crowd has a bad couple of years, the brand may not survive.

This is why we made the decision to expand this magazine's 'brief' to include products that appear on the global stage but might not yet be sold in the UK. These are products that we feel should be in the UK, but also that our readership outside the UK is just as important to us as our UK residents.

However, it's often still felt in audio circles that if you can break the UK market, you can succeed anywhere. Unfortunately, the UK's audio scene is in one of its self-absorbed phases right now. In part, that's because some domestic companies embraced change faster than foreign rivals and are making excellent new products. It's our aim to both give these new and exciting products some visibility on a world stage and at the same time wake up the home market to the possibility of there being new products made beyond these shores worth investigating.

This is also the reason why we are proud supporters of the New York Audio & AV Show. From April 13th-15th, the prestigious Waldorf-Astoria hotel on Park Avenue will be home to some of the world's finest hi-fi and home cinema products. Some of these names will be old

friends, some of them will be new faces and some of them are old names that should be better known around the world. We'd love to see you there, but for those not flying to NYC in the middle of April, we will also be reporting back on this show in our next issue.

In addition, between now and the next issue, there's a little matter of the Munich High-End show taking place in early May. We will be covering the show at length too, and any preview information we get, we'll publish as soon as we get it at [www.avguide.com](http://www.avguide.com). Check it out!

Errata: In the last issue, we inadvertently printed some incorrect details in the review of the Consonance power amplifiers. The models listed are the Cyber 'S' models, priced at £6,495 per pair. This does not alter our feelings toward the products. Our apologies for any confusion caused.

Alan Sircom  
editor@hifiplus.com

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: UK 7<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2012 ... US 12<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2012

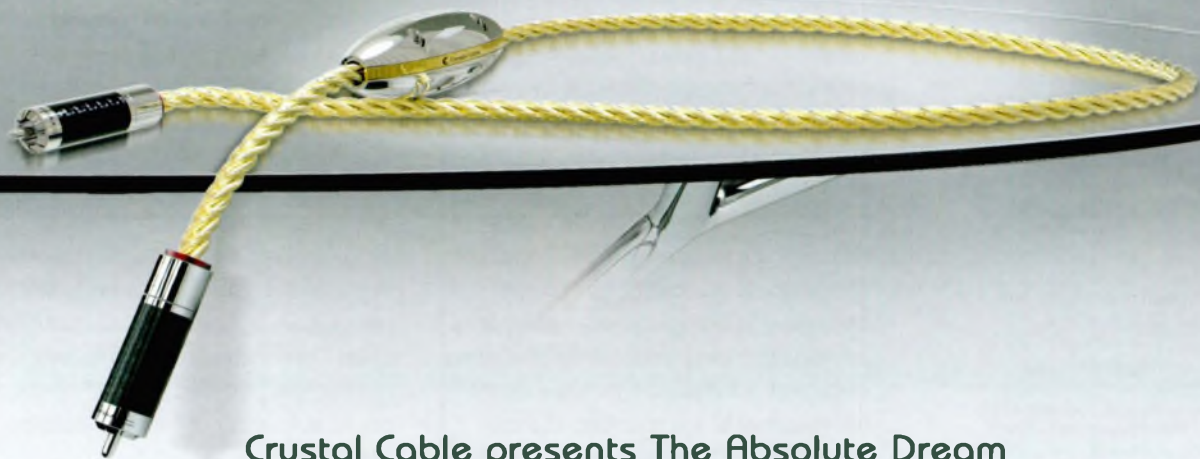
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by



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# incoming!

## Life in the old disc yet

I have just read your editorial in issue 86 and would like to make the point that in reality it is not the top end audiophiles that drive the market. When CD came in I embraced it but I didn't throw out my record collection or my record deck. Now computer audio has arrived I have embraced that but I won't be throwing out my CD's or CD player. I still enjoy listening to CD's, and I still have my record collection and consider my Xerxes 20 to be the best front end, but that doesn't stop me listening to computer files. Just as you can still buy new LP's I'm certain CD's still have a long life ahead. The average Joe can't afford to dump a lifetime of recorded music, in whatever format, to go chasing the latest tech.

**Andy Aldridge, via email**

*I think that's exactly the way the computer audio market will evolve for those of us with big CD collections. We'll rip and keep ripping, but there's likely to be a place for disc spinning devices in our systems for some years to come. I've long advocated the 'just another shelf in the rack' approach to computer audio; whether it takes over from your CD altogether, or whether the two coexist happily is as much down to the individual as it is to market trends and forces. Some can't resist some revolutionary zeal, though, and make a point of using their CDs as coasters, just like the vinyl die-hards used to in the 1980s. Plus ça change... – Ed.*

## Just say 'no'!

In Europe, most countries have a two-pin 'Schuko' plug without a fuse. In the UK, every 13A plug is fused. That means in my system there are at least two pointless fuses (the one leading to the power conditioner and the one from the power conditioner to the component). These must damage the sound because special fuses are available, but why not just use the European plugs instead? That way, you eliminate the fuses altogether. We all use a similar voltage, what's the problem?

**Trevor Passmore, via email**

*Don't do it! Although the voltage is standardised to 230V across Europe (in reality, most EU countries average 220V and the UK averages 240V), the way we are fed our juice is very different. The UK electrical system uses a ring final circuit that relies on fuses in the plugs of the components themselves for protection, where most EU countries adopt individually fused spurs on a radial circuit. The Schuko plug and socket are designed with the assumption that there is a circuit-breaker fuse on that spur. Using Schukos on a UK ring, where the fuse is assumed to be within the plug of the component itself, is removing a level of electrical safety protection. Doing this increases the possibility of death and fire, and death by fire.*

*Yes, there is a high degree of redundancy in the UK system, as it's possible for an individual component to have two or more fuses between three-pin wall socket and IEC terminal block, so it could be argued that as long as there is a fuse in one of the 13A sockets, everything is good. But, then again, we've probably all had instances where all fuses blew (often when the motor of a washing machine grinds to a halt and overheats... one of the greatest causes of domestic fires), and I'd prefer to be cursing a few blown fuses than watching my house burn down.*

*Manufacturers sometimes demonstrate using Schukos in the UK because of the cost in making a special set of cables for UK demonstrations, and because (hopefully) hotel rooms are regularly electrically tested. Also (and I mention this in the interest of fairness), some still insist that the lack of fuses in Schukos make them sound inherently better than UK plugs. To me, however, this is a non-argument; I feel ignoring local safety standards to improve sound quality is a step too far.*

*If you are still suicidal enough to be tempted to experiment with Schuko plugs and sockets in the UK, buy some audiophile-grade fuses instead. If you hear a difference, you raised your game and didn't kill yourself in the process. If you don't hear a difference, you might have spent money for nothing, but you didn't kill yourself in the process. I've repeated the "didn't kill yourself in the process" part deliberately, so hopefully the message gets across. Do NOT mess around with this. Got that? – Ed.*

## Just for the record

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

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- Trilogy 907 phono preamplifier
- Brinkmann 9.6 tonearm and Pi moving coil cartridge
- Esoteric E-03 phono preamplifier
- Grand Prix Audio Monaco direct drive turntable
- Brinkmann Edison fully balanced vacuum tube phono preamplifier
- Sumiko Pearwood Celebration 2 and Palo Santos Presentation moving coil cartridges
- Brinkmann high precision cartridge and tonearm protractor



### ► The Ideal Room

We have corresponded several times through the pages of *Hi-Fi+* (Issues 72, 73 & 78) and I wish to express my appreciation for your advice, which inspired me to take room acoustics seriously. It is a matter I have struggled with for a number of years that was finally resolved to a major degree by demolishing walls. *And the walls came tumbling down* Issue 73.

The little research I have done on the subject just highlights the complexity and the conflicting views that surround the issue. We would indeed be very fortunate to have a room with the dimensions you mention in issue 85, *Music Matters: Room Acoustics V* 26ft x 16ft x 10ft. One night with a little time on my hands I decided to calculate the size of my ideal listening room using calculations I have encountered in my reading.

It seems to me that a distance of three metres between the tweeters would provide a nice sound stage. Using the formula for the Golden Ratio employed by George Cardas mentioned in your feature article *Small Room Big Sound* in issue 72 I calculated the width of the room at 6.71 metres. Using one of the recommended room ratios of 1:1.4:1.9 I established the height of the room at 4.79 metres. It was then easy to determine the length. So we would have a room 9.11 metres long, 6.71 metres wide and 4.79 metres high. A Lottery win required no doubt. The Golden Ratio would place the tweeters 3.00 metres apart, 3.00 metres from the front wall and 1.85 metres from the side walls thereby giving the speakers plenty of room to breathe. Perhaps these dimensions are close to those achieved by Roy Gregory in his dedicated listening room (Issue 65), though he has a pitched ceiling.

A very good friend challenged me recently and asked if I ever just sit down and listen to music. This really did make me realise how obsessed I had become with the whole issue of high-fidelity sound reproduction and was beginning to lose the plot. However, I have enjoyed the journey and am pleased to say I am now enjoying the music.

Research: [www.crutchfieldadvisor.com](http://www.crutchfieldadvisor.com)  
[www.advancedacoustics.co.uk](http://www.advancedacoustics.co.uk)  
[www.acusticaapplicata.com](http://www.acusticaapplicata.com)  
[www.realtraps.com](http://www.realtraps.com)

Technical Bulletin on the Application of Diffusion in Critical Listening Rooms, Peter D'Antonio, Trevor Cox, RPG Diffusor Systems, Inc, Upper Marlboro, MD.

Reference: 1 [www.crutchfieldadvisor.com](http://www.crutchfieldadvisor.com)

**David Bond, via email**

*The remarkable thing about room acoustics is it's an addictive process. The more time and energy you put into research and measurement and treatment of the room, the better your system gets, regardless of what that system is. And you can keep on improving. A slight word of warning here; a lot of room acoustics work deals with the professional space (as in, building studios and control rooms). The demands of a domestic listening environment are somewhat different to the requirements of an engineer at a mixing desk, and the road to good home acoustics is paved with 'dead' and overdamped rooms. We are used to listening in a home environment and it's possible to create an environment that's perfect for music but impossible to live in. Because they spend most of their time designing professional spaces, some acousticians overlook this important aspect of room design. So watch out for 'improving' the room so far it becomes almost uninhabitable – Ed.*

*“A very good friend challenged me recently and asked if I ever just sit down and listen to music. This really did make me realise how obsessed I had become with the whole issue of high-fidelity sound reproduction and was beginning to lose the plot. However, I have enjoyed the journey and am pleased to say I am now enjoying the music.”*

### ► A tale to tell?

My thanks to Mr. K for allowing us into his home and showing us his remarkable system. At the end of this article you ask us if our systems have a tale to tell. Yet where is the story behind Mr. K's system? For example, why the Feastrex Monster Anico speakers? Unique in the UK. What influenced Mr. K's choice? There is clearly a tale to tell, but this was not achieved here. There is no narrative of the philosophical journey, which led Mr. K. to his current system. We don't hear anything of his voice, until we are told of his particular passion and from this some may understand the musical presentation sought. While there are limits to what could be revealed, in the interests of anonymity, more could have been considered. You mainly detail the 'what' of Mr K's system and endeavour to describe its sound, which was achieved. But the rest of the publication does little else.

Here was an opportunity to investigate elements of interest to the whole audiophile community: Why people chose what they do; their likes, dislikes and even prejudices; how they came to be where they are. These are human stories, which reflect family life, personal success, and a passion for music. The steady development of my system over the last 20-some years and how this has influenced and is influenced by my understanding of the process of music reproduction is a fundamental part of the pleasure gained from getting closer to the music. While I only paddle in the shallow end of the audiophile pool and doubt that my system would be of interest to your readers, I look forward to hearing about other readers systems and the ir stories in future editions.

**Giles Morrison, via email**

*In no small part, I agree. However, in this case, Mr. K is an intensely private person – an exceptionally nice person, with an exceptionally good system, but a very private person nonetheless. To delve deeper into his rationale and ethos behind building this system, and the process by which he came to making a system like this would be invasions on that privacy that he was not willing to make and I was not willing to force. That's probably why Hi-Fi+ was not called before the Leveson inquiry. My hope is other people will require a bit less privacy and the means whereby can be discussed on a par with the end result – Ed.*

### Worms. Can. Open.

In an age where having an interest in music that extends further than a computer and iPod is seen as increasingly 'odd', something I spotted in your 'Computer Audio for Beginners (Part 2)' article particularly got under my skin.

I've fully embraced computer audio alongside my CD player and turntable, so I was non-plussed to see that you had actually given a lower sound quality rating to the Apple Lossless ALAC format. Every other lossless format was rated a 5 as per the uncompressed formats, but you had rated ALAC as a 4.

To be blunt, lossless is lossless, end of discussion. ALAC files render a bit-perfect version of any song, as do all lossless formats, so to rate it as sounding worse makes no sense whatsoever. Furthermore you made no comments whatsoever to justify this seemingly odd claim.

I'm hoping this is a misprint, otherwise *Hi-Fi+* has just lost a significant amount of my respect.

**Steve Gascoyne**

*Vince Luke of AMR was touring the planet with his company when this was published, so he wasn't readily available to comment at the time. Subsequently, he has suggested the reason for downgrading Apple Lossless is as follows: "The ALAC Codec (enCOding and DECOding) is truly 100% bitperfect and takes a lot of CPU processing, which adds to software jitter (relatively speaking). So the software jitter affects the sound quality." He also draws attention to an article on software jitter on AMR's website: [http://www.amr-audio.co.uk/html/dp777\\_tech-papers\\_OSX-Integermode.html](http://www.amr-audio.co.uk/html/dp777_tech-papers_OSX-Integermode.html).*

*Hmmm. As this is a new and untested concept to me, I remain somewhat sceptical of the existence and relevance of 'software jitter'. Something for future testing perhaps. I'm kind of wishing this had been a misprint now, and wonder where I left my body armour. – Ed. +*



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# SHOW REPORT

## Bristol Sound & Vision 2012

By Alan Sireom

**N**either wind, nor rain, nor snow can keep the crowds away from Bristol that last weekend in February. Every year for the last quarter-century, the Sound & Vision Show has begun with a queue running round the Marriott City Centre hotel, and 2012 was no exception. Talks of downturns evaporated as the rooms filled with people keen to hear the latest in hi-fi and home cinema. And, as ever with the Bristol Show, it gives many manufacturers a chance to showcase exciting new products for the coming year, and in an environment that is geared toward that crucible of performance; the 'can I buy it now?' show-goer.



Often Bristol is a venue to show what was launched at CES in January. However, this year there were a number of first time launches from British manufacturers. This both reflects how important Bristol has become on the UK hi-fi calendar, and – because it acts as a useful test bed prior to Munich – just how significant European shows have become on the worldwide stage.

Leema has three new ranges of cables under the Linx banner: 1, 2 and 3. Prices range from £120 for a Linx One RCA to £700 for a Linx Three XLR. The new cable ranges is made to Leema's spec by The Chord Company (Chord itself was demonstrating a new USB cable for its top Sarum range elsewhere in the show). Also new from Leema was the first of the Essentials range, an Asynchronous USB DAC (*above*), anticipated to be priced at around £495. It can convert anything from 32kHz-192kHz (Windows driver with product) at 24 bit precision, and features a S/PDIF output, for external A/D conversion, electrically isolated USB, too. The DAC leverages Leema's own USB-M1 module from the Elements family, which Leema plans to OEM. Expect more to follow from the Essentials family soon.

Among the big launches at the show were the Naim NDS Network Player. The NDS is Naim's new range-topping player, designed to be used specifically with one or more of Naim's own power supplies having no built-in power capabilities. The £6,250 player features extensive use of suspended boards (in a manner first seen in the company's 552 preamp) and is priced to take on Linn's Klimax DS head-to-head when used with a full brace of power supplies.



Alongside its FMJ D33 DAC, Arcam announced a slew of new products that build on the success of the rDAC. These included the new £150 rPAC, a USB-powered DAC/headphone amp and the £199 drDock. Arcam was demonstrating these devices by trying – and often succeeding – to convince people the £150 DAC was a £2,000 DAC... then playing them the £2,000 DAC. Smart.

Another classic British name, this time drawing upon its past, Wharfedale celebrates its 80th birthday by 'reissuing' the Denton loudspeaker. More a re-imagining than a reissue, the 80th Anniversary Denton retains the chipboard cabinet with mahogany veneer and grey cloth grille of designs from the 1970s, but now sports a woven Kevlar bass cone to work alongside the soft dome tweeter. However, Wharfedale designer Peter Comeau did voice them to be musical and slightly warm in the style of the classic Dentons. Expect to pay less than £500 for a pair.

We recently reviewed Heed Audio's two box CD player, and were told that in the near future a less 'agricultural' build quality was on the cards. It arrived for Bristol, with UK re-engineered electronics based on the Obelisk platform. With a black or white Perspex front panel, the range includes integrated amp, pre/power amps, power supplies and the existing CD platforms. We hope to test more of the reborn range soon. Exposure also chose Bristol as the launch-pad for its new entry level 1010 range of CD player (£395) and integrated amplifier (£425).

The star of the show in many respects was the £1,375 PMC Twenty.21 standmount. They were being used in a number of rooms (not just PMC's) and always to great effect. So much so that PMC spent most of the show playing someone else's Twenty.21s, because an extremely keen individual bought the demonstration pair on the spot. PMC was also showing the new Briston BHA-1 balanced headphone amplifier to great effect, through a pair of Sennheiser HD800s, while Sennheiser itself was demonstrating both the new HD700 and the excellent wireless RS220 headphones.

The other big hit for many was the DALI Epicon 6. First shown at CES, this elegant floorstanding flagship used the company's Linear Drive Magnet system in the £7,800 two-and-a-half-way design. It looked wonderful, and sounded consistently wonderful too. Then there were three hit rooms next to one another, all making great sound – according to almost everyone I spoke to. The other universally popular loudspeakers were the first UK outings for the GoldenEar Aon 3 standmount loudspeakers (running from the excellent Primare range of electronics), Amphion's £4,000 Argon 7L towers (being fed by state-of-the-art NuForce electronics) and the outstanding £9,775 Raidho C1.1 standmounts, being used with Moon electronics in the Nordost room to showcase the differences in Norse 2 power cords.

Three other rooms of note were in very close proximity to one another, and two had remarkably similar front ends. Neat Acoustics was showing its excellent quart-from-a-pint-pot £650 Iota on the end of a small Linn/Naim system, Kudos Audio was playing its £3,495 Cardea Super 10 standmount (a pimped up, tricked out 10th anniversary version of the popular Cardea C10, *right*) on the end of a large Linn/Naim system and Eclipse was playing its excellent trio of Time Domain loudspeakers, including a very tasty £1,920 TD510Mk2 on the end of Esoteric equipment. Kudos in particular is

worth singling out for dedication to getting a good sound; although the company makes its own stands, it used Track Audio speaker stands to demonstrate the Super 10s. That takes guts and integrity!

Parallel development is always a sure sign of good things. And it seems that the latest trend in table design is to use bamboo in place of wood. It's a logical material to use; it's cheap, sustainable and has a remarkably high tensile strength. Both Atacama and Quadraspire announced designs using bamboo, although it's still some time before everyone gets their head around the fact it's not 'bamboo wood' or 'bamboo veneer'. Atacama took the biggest jump with its all-bamboo Elite Eco system, while Quadraspire went so far as to demonstrate the differences between wood and bamboo shelves, and first impressions is 'green is good'. Chalk one up for sustainability! Meanwhile, back in the world of tree, Hi-Fi Racks announced its new racks and shelves designed to fit into ▶



▶ a corner and called, wait for it, Akorner! It also launched a headphone stand; basically an up-ended hardwood head-sized T in a variety of finishes.

Audio Note was making an extremely fine sound from its vinyl-based eight-watt powerhouse system. New products in the chain were strictly limited to the new £935 Arm Two Mk II on the new TT Two Deluxe version in gloss black for £2,200 (*Above Right*). This one finally shakes off the last vestiges of Systemdek II styling. Not playing but looking good was the Oto Signature (from £3,995) integrated amplifier; a fairly typical Audio Note update, as it is an Oto with better bits in it! For once though, Audio Note's array of valve amps was eclipsed by Ming Da's new UK operation. The company's room was packed with a bewildering array of magically tubelicious devices, including a five-channel all valve home cinema amplifier. Prices were keen too, although most people tended to ask 'which part of this is playing now?' a lot.

From state-of-the-arc to state-of-the-art now, thanks to Dynaudio's Xeo system, This is a wireless active loudspeaker system that shows a lot of promise. Unfortunately, WiFi and hi-fi shows rarely mix, and the demonstration suffered from there being dozens and dozens of ad hoc wi-fi networks rigged up in almost every room. But Chord Electronics were valiantly switching between Xeo (playing from Chord's new Index music player, and a more conventional two-channel Reference system. As might also be expected in 2012, the number of CD players

*“This year was about quality as well as quantity, and as such many exhibitors were making better sounds than usual.”*



and turntables on show was fairly low and many brands were showing their latest DAC, streamer, or network device. Many of these models – such as the Marantz range of AirPlay-enabled amps and receivers – are redefining the audio industry right now.

Rega has a busy year ahead of itself. The RS10 loudspeaker shown (*below*) for the first time at Bristol is (briefly) the company's flagship design, using side-firing bass drivers and a BMR drive unit supplemented by a conventional tweeter. The new £7,000+ range-topper will shortly be joined by Rega's new top model, while there is also a new über-turntable being talked about in not so hushed tones over in Southend.

There was so much more, too. From Vertere's sophisticated made-for-iPod cables, to REL's dinky little very musical £350 TZero subwoofers, from Cocktail Audio's does-everything X10 box to Chapter Audio's TARDIS like Note range. And at all prices; from the £16,000 Light Harmonic Da Vinci DAC right down the relaunched Sansui range.

This year was about quality as well as quantity, and as such many exhibitors were making better sounds than usual, suggesting more care and attention had been paid to getting the room right. And that attention was met by increased sales, making this the most successful Sound and Vision Show since the downturn first hit. +



# mx SERIES



**▲ FOR**



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June 2011 - MX2



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*"Nothing.."*

- Hi-Fi World June 2011 - MX2



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# Are You Buying Pre-Ruined

## The Music Chain

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

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

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

## Hi-Fi Connoisseurs

So why is the hi-fi connoisseur so important to the music industry? By their nature, audiophiles are generally avid music lovers who enhance their enjoyment through listening to music at its very best

quality level, which means playing great recordings through hi-end hi-fi to achieve the most outstanding results. Without the audiophile, the main driver for quality would probably be removed from the chain. Let's be honest, over recent years the majority of music listeners now settle for MP3 convenience and, therefore, mediocre sound quality, that is 'pre-ruined' music. If the pendulum ever swings so far that all but a few listen to highly compressed formats such as MP3, music producers will not waste their resources on producing high quality recordings because it would be commercially unnecessary, even if their recording engineers wanted to achieve the best they could. After all, an MP3 or AAC file, the iTunes default format, downloaded at 128 kbps (the most popular download speed), is about one-eleventh the size of a full resolution CD track, 1411 kbps, so the quality is inevitably far inferior. Information is irretrievably lost and the full dynamic range is lacking. Using an iPod while jogging does not really raise a quality issue but playing low-resolution tracks through an iPod docking station that feeds into a decent hi-fi system, is a disaster area. It's rubbish quality made louder. Fortunately, there is still significant demand from audiophiles committed to sound quality to sustain the production of high quality recordings, but it would be a tragedy if there weren't. For example, most classical recordings downloaded as an MP3 or AAC file are a complete waste of time because there is so much information missing that they are reduced to just the essence of a tune.

## Specialist Hi-Fi Retailers

Just as essential a link in the chain as the hi-fi connoisseur is the specialist hi-fi retailer and the two are rightly dependent on each other. Without the specialist retailer the hi-end hi-fi manufacturer would have to rely on the internet and hi-fi magazine reviewers to try and assess the relative merits and performance of their products against that of their competitors –

a notoriously unreliable decision making process. Specialist hi-fi retailers are constantly being offered new products for assessment and potential stocking and, as it is also their hobby as well as their livelihood, they are greatly interested in achieving the best performance and seeking out the most outstanding products and combinations. More than that though is their relationship with audiophiles for, if they are to stay in business, they must satisfy the most discerning customers in the industry. The reality is that audiophiles and specialist hi-fi retailers are essential to each other.

## Future of Recorded Music

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



# Music?



The specialist dealers below have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards hi-fi that will give years of musical enjoyment and total satisfaction.

## OUR TOP 20 UK HI-FI DEALERS

### SOUTH

#### Ashford, Kent

SOUNDCRAFT HI-FI  
40 High Street.  
t: 01233 624441  
www.soundcrafthifi.com

#### Chelmsford

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION  
216 Moulsham Street.  
t: 01245 265245  
www.rayleighhifi.com

#### Colchester

NEW TECHNOLOGY UNLIMITED  
33 Sir Isaac's Walk.  
t: 01206 577682  
www.newtechnologyunlimited.com

#### Kingston-upon-Thames

INFIDELITY  
9 High Street,  
Hampton Wick.  
t: 020 8943 3530  
www.infidelity.co.uk

#### Maidenhead

AUDIO VENUE  
36 Queen Street.  
t: 01628 633995  
www.audiovenue.com

#### Rayleigh, Essex

RAYLEIGH HI-FI  
44a High Street.  
t: 01268 779762  
www.rayleighhifi.com

#### Southend-on-Sea

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION  
132/4 London Road.  
t: 01702 435255  
www.rayleighhifi.com

### LONDON

#### Ealing

AUDIO VENUE  
27 Bond Street.  
t: 020 8567 8703  
www.audiovenue.com

#### N1

GRAHAMS HI-FI  
190a New North Road.  
t: 020 7226 5500  
www.grahams.co.uk

#### SW11

ORANGES & LEMONS  
61/63 Webbs Road.  
t: 020 7924 2043  
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

#### SW20

O'BRIEN HI-FI  
60 Durham Road.  
t: 020 8946 1528  
www.obrienhifi.com

### SOUTH WEST

#### Bath

AUDIENCE  
14 Broad Street.  
t: 01225 333310  
www.audience.org.uk

#### Exeter

GULLIFORD HI-FI  
97 Sidwell Street.  
t: 01392 491194  
www.gullifordhifi.co.uk

### MIDLANDS

#### Banbury

OVERTURE  
3 Church Lane.  
t: 01295 272158  
www.overture.co.uk

#### Birmingham

MUSIC MATTERS  
363 Hagley Road, Edgbaston.  
t: 0121 429 2811  
www.musicmatters.co.uk

#### Coventry

FRANK HARVEY  
163 Spon Street.  
t: 024 7652 5200  
www.frankharvey.co.uk

#### Leicester

CYMBIOSIS  
6 Hotel Street.  
t: 0116 262 3754  
www.cymbiosis.com

#### Nottingham

CASTLE SOUND & VISION  
48/50 Maid Marian Way.  
t: 0115 9584404  
www.castlesoundvision.com

### NORTH

#### Cheadle

THE AUDIO WORKS  
14 Stockport Road.  
t: 0161 428 7887  
www.theaudioworks.co.uk

#### Chester

ACOUSTICA  
17 Hoole Road.  
t: 01244 344227  
www.acoustica.co.uk

#### Hull

THE AUDIO ROOM  
2 George Street, Hedon  
t: 01482 891375  
www.theaudiroom.co.uk

#### York

SOUND ORGANISATION  
2 Gillygate.  
t: 01904 627108  
www.soundorg.co.uk

### STAR QUALITIES

VALUE FOR MONEY ..... ★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
SERVICE ..... ★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
FACILITIES ..... ★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
VERDICT ..... ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



# Sonata Hi-Fi Event – Music In Paradise

By Alan Sircom

**P**acking out a pub in London's Kilburn isn't the hardest thing to do. Packing out the top floor of a pub for a whole Sunday, while people sat and listened to hi-fi, bought LPs and chilled out is something very different. But Sonata Hi-Fi – one of the newest and coolest names on the London hi-fi scene – pulled it off in style.

The event – dubbed Music In Paradise – took the top floor of The Paradise, one of the best gastro pubs in London. It's a great venue in its own right, but the upstairs bar played home to a unique and remarkably friendly event.

The stage was given over to a seriously top line system, comprising Rega's finest turntable, CD, amp, phono stage, DAC and (at the time... it was a week before Bristol and the launch of the new top models) loudspeakers. There were some other components in place – such as a Wadia iPod dock – but the floor was given over to mostly Rega, fed by Chord cables and sitting on Quadraspire tables. The purpose of the event was to chillax to music on a Sunday afternoon, playing to a hipster crowd who are discovering the joys of vinyl.

The great part of the event was it managed to combine the passion of record collectors and hi-fi buffs with the more chilled out cool of the hipsters in a manner we seldom see in

hi-fi shows and stores. Part of this was down to it not being an all-bloke event. Wives brought kids and husbands, guys took their girlfriends and vice versa. All free from the kind of stuffy pomposity that often permeates audio events. The sound was good, naturally, but it wasn't the focus of the event. It was just a good chance to sit round and listen to music in a fine pub setting.

There were faces in the crowd we know. Rega Research, Chord Company and Diverse Vinyl all pitched in and were singing Sonata's praises long after the Sunday was over. Danny Wilson was promoting his new album (on Diverse) with an acoustic set, and musos, record collectors and hi-fi enthusiasts alike popped in for a pint, stayed for hours and came home with some vinyl.

Like any chilled out event, the laid back Sunday belies a lot of very hard work on the parts of everyone who chipped in to make it happen. Rob and Yvonne from Sonata might not have been in the hi-fi business long, but they gave it their all to get this event working and working well. And boy did they succeed.

There's a lesson to be learned here, for the hi-fi stores who are reluctant to try something like this. These events get results. This is a perfect example of a 'hearts and minds' exercise to put good sound back on the map for generations who briefly forgot how much enjoyment can be had for putting a needle in a groove. We've had enough of grim times... it's time to put some fun back in our lives. +



# hifisound

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- EAR
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- Funk
- Grado
- Koetsu
- Lyra
- Michell
- Magneplanar
- Naim
- SME
- Stax
- Sugden
- Transfiguration
- & many more





# Arcam FMJ D33 digital converter

By Alan Sircom

**W**hen the press release first arrived, in my own head I got the Arcam FMJ D33 DAC spectacularly wrong. Arcam has a commanding reputation for making things that cost hundreds sound like things that cost thousands. Arcam is the giant killer in digital. So, why would Arcam make a £2,000 DAC? A couple of minutes after powering the D33 up, I got the answer... Arcam is still the digital giant killer. By building a two grand DAC, it is merely setting its sights on bigger giants.

Rumour has it this was one of the easiest DACs to design. All it took was 35 years of Arcam research and development smarts distilled into one does-it-all DAC, mixed in with a wish list of almost all the things you would want from a state of the art converter, then sprinkled over with the sort of power supplies that most digital engineers dismiss as overkill, and served in one of Arcam's RF-busting FMJ boxes. After giving the test gear a swift kicking – "is this thing working? It seems stuck on 'excellent'?" – the D33 was given to the golden ears in the company for a spot of evaluation. You know when the listeners start talking about taking hostages and "cold, dead hands", you are on to a winner.

The FMJ D33 'SuperDAC' is in the changeless Arcam FMJ livery. Under the hood is a pair of Burr Brown PCM1792 converters (one per side) working up to 24bit/192kHz

precision, and controlled by Arcam's own JetPLL phase locked loop jitter-busting circuitry its own user-controllable filter, all sitting on a four-layer PCB. Power is delivered by two large toroidal transformers, with masses of power regulation and – perhaps more importantly – a lot of low-noise sub-regulation in key areas. Add to this the usual set of RFI and EMI-busting technologies that come with any FMJ casework and you have a DAC that delivers a set of specs almost at the limits of what you can measure.

Unless you blur the lines between 'DAC' and 'headphone amp', the D33 is a full-feature converter, and even comes with its own remote control. It has a pair each of optical and coaxial S/PDIF inputs, an AES/EBU digital input, two USB Type B inputs and a USB Type A input specifically for Apple products. This last is backed up by an Apple authentication chip, so it can get under the digital skin of your iPhone 4/4S, 4th Gen iPod Touch, iPad or iPad 2 (and beyond). Earlier iDevices do not support digital audio output and are not compatible. Forget any kind of direct-access networked audio solution or volume attenuation though, and it will not control the output of a USB thumb drive.

One of the USB Type B inputs is marked 'Class 1 Isolated', the other 'Class 2 High Speed' with a selector switch between the two. Class 1 is the standard galvanically isolated, up-to-24/96 asynchronous USB connection

between computer and DAC, the second – which is not galvanically isolated – is designed for coping with files up to 192kHz, but this requires device drivers to be loaded on to your computer (this is not an Arcam thing, current Mac and Windows OS don't support Class II USB natively and any devices that wish to do Class II USB currently need to come with a disc o' drivers). Away from the digital domain, the rear panel also sports two single-ended and one set of balanced line outputs, it also has remote and 12V triggers and a RS232 port for custom installers.

Fresh out of the box, the Arcam FMJ D33 is clearly something special, even if it sounds a trifle 'shut in' in the higher frequencies at first flush. Even so, from the moment you give it power, it's never less than captivating, and it makes you want to listen to more digits than ever. A few days in, the 'shut in' sound dissolves, and the performance just gets all the more captivating.

Figuring that a good DAC should never get in the way of any kind of musical genre, I threw half a terabyte of random USB-derived sounds at the D33, and still more through the wealth of old-school digital inputs. The D33 acquitted itself extremely well on all inputs and outputs. I felt AES/EBU (from a Lyngdorf CD-1) had the slight edge, followed by Class I USB and everything else in the pack following extremely close behind. But these are sad-person micro-differences that don't really matter. All the inputs are pretty good and I wasted far too much time listening for input differences to make these comparisons anything apart from academic at best. You'll struggle to hear differences because you'll be listening to the music instead, whatever kind of music you play.

The Arcam sounds like digits with those nasty corners taken off. Don't think this a pejorative, because it makes a lot of digital replay sound hard, angular, and aggressive by comparison. And yet, it's not soft or soggy or saccharine sounding. It's just that the more you listen to the D33, the more you realise that edgy sound commonly associated with a lot of digital audio is not what digital audio should sound like. It should sound more like the D33.

Even as the treble was sorting itself out, what was immediately apparent was a wonderfully lucid midband, which separates instruments out in a vast soundstage. Couple that with the precision of focus and the wonderful articulation of that mid-band which makes voices about as studio as it gets.

This puts the onus on the studio engineer. When they get it right, you hear it, but when they get it wrong (say, a little too much 11k 'zing' to a female voice or a shade too much compression) and you can really hear that too. I have played down my Eminem test recently, but it's a fine indicator

of performance – play any Eminem track and the more of his machine-gun rap you can follow, generally the better the product. The D33 gets right to the heart of the Vicodin. Back in the late 1990s, we'd say the D33 had Mad Skillz. Word.

Back to sanity – sort of. What I found particularly refreshing about the FMJ D33 is its bass performance. It has an organic shape and depth to the bass, the kind of thing that is almost impossible to find on most digital replay systems. It's not analogue-sounding, not trying to replicate the sound of vinyl, but it has a sense of richness and tonal character to the bass that sets the D33 apart from the pack. In a way, this even takes on the excellent Bricasti, and wins. The Bricasti has superb bass, but gives a sense of upper-bass attack whether it's there or not. It's a bit like everything's a Rickenbacker bass. The D33 in contrast just makes bass sound like bass, lots of it and all right too. This is calling up relatively distant memories of product character, and was something that didn't immediately manifest on the Bricasti because its bass was so good in and of itself. Nevertheless, I feel in some ways, the Arcam has a more balanced bass – the Bricasti was unassailable in dealing with rock bass and organ pedal notes, but the Arcam is arguably more balanced when dealing with bass across the board, including from orchestral or jazz sources. Once again, the differences are comparatively minor, but given the price differential, that's astounding.

The filter options are interesting, and I like that they are switched from the front panel. I did some experimentation with chopping and changing systems here. Truth is, I came up with no simplistic answer. Setting 1 is smooth on some discs and systems, smothering on others, while filter 2 rocks out on some cuts and through a few systems, and sounds a

*“Figuring that a good DAC should never get in the way of any kind of musical genre, I threw half a terabyte of random USB-derived sounds at the D33, and still more through the wealth of old-school digital inputs.”*



# One Step Beyond...

## 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 –  
it's much, much better  
than that!**

**NORDOST**  
MAKING THE CONNECTION



▶ bit bass lumpy in others. Between the two, you'll likely find a happy place for most recordings and most systems.

There has to be a downside, but I'm scratching my head to find one here. OK, so the Apple inlet is really demanding; it connected with my iPhone 4S but was 'twitchy' with my first-gen iPad and refused to speak to Nanos and iPod Classics, but this last was clearly described in the manual. However, in terms of wanting a high-technology £5,000 digital converter for £2,000, Arcam has the field virtually to itself. I suspect, for most people, the next step up from this has a dCS logo etched into it. It really is that good.

This is the best DAC Arcam knows how to make; that's saying something, given that Arcam was there at the point when the DAC was first minted and has been at the leading edge of digital design for more than a quarter of a century. Not only is this the best DAC Arcam can make right now, it is among the tiny handful of best DACs ever made. And Arcam's roots are showing, because it undercuts all of the other 'best ever' by a substantial amount. You might be reading this and thinking it hyperbole; from where I sit, I feel like I'm holding back, but this one comes absurdly highly recommended. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Digital to analog conversion:** 2x Burr-Brown 24-bit, 192kHz Advanced Segment Delta Sigma DAC ICs

**Signal-to-noise ratio:** 110dB CCIR

**Harmonic Distortion (1kHz):** 0.0008% (20Hz-20kHz, unweighted)

**Frequency response (+0.1dB, -0.5dB):** 10Hz-20kHz

**Output level (0dB):** 2.2Vrms

**Output impedance:** 47Ω

**Minimum recommended load:** 5kΩ

**Digital interfaces:** USB Class 1 (Type B socket USB 1.1 electrically isolated); USB Class 2 (Type B socket USB 2.0 High Speed – 480Mbps/s); AES/EBU x1; Coaxial S/PDIF x2, Optical S/PDIF x2; Apple USB Type A connector

**Outputs:** Single-ended RCAx2 pair, Balanced XLRx1 pair

**CI connections:** RS232 port, 12V trigger, remote control minijack

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 43.3x11x37cm

**Weight:** 6.2kg

**Finish:** Dark Grey, Silver

**Price:** £2,000

**Manufacturer:** Arcam Ltd

**URL:** [www.arcam.co.uk](http://www.arcam.co.uk)

**Tel:** +44(0)1223 203200







## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Wilson Benesch Vertex loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

**W**hen is a standmount not a standmount? When it's a Vertex. OK, on a scale of one to 10 of jokes, that hardly makes it to a 'one', but the stand of the Wilson Benesch Vertex two-way standmount is integral to the structural integrity of the design. It is part of Wilson Benesch's new four-strong Geometry Series, which includes the floorstanding £8,095 Vector, a new center channel the Fulcrum and a new flagship speaker, the Cardinal which having seen the baffle with my own eyes, I can reliably inform will be vastly larger in size and price relative to the first speakers in this series.

One of the few points of commonality between subjective listeners and their objectively-driven counterparts is the importance good loudspeakers have on the overall sound of hi-fi. Good loudspeakers well set up in the right room is a sure-fire way to good sound. It is also commonly accepted loudspeakers offer the most variation in performance. Many feel that, because of these two fundamental maxims of modern audio, the next great jump forward in sound quality comes from the loudspeaker above all.

When you think about improving the lot of box loudspeakers, there's potentially not a lot left to do. Every variation of cabinet size, port, drive unit complement, crossover network and box shape has been tried. So, if there's any significant changes in box loudspeaker design, it may well come from using new materials.

This is not exactly new. For almost as long as there have been cone and dome loudspeakers, manufacturers have been using something more than paper cones and fabric domes. From the 1960s, brands like KEF and Bowers & Wilkins pioneered the use of new materials in drive unit technology, but arguably no company pushes the envelope of materials science these days quite like Wilson Benesch.

The Sheffield-based company has established useful contacts within the university materials science and engineering scene, both in the city itself and around the country. This harks right back to the company's original turntable and tonearm designs more than 20 years ago, which used carbon fibre long before it was fashionable to do so.

Wilson Benesch describes the Vertex as a "two-way, true phase linear, free space, ported enclosure, stand mounted monitor." I could do the same expressed over several hundred words, but the terse description fits extremely snugly. It's all those things, now let's look at them in detail.

The 'two-way' part is absolutely correct. Except these aren't off-the-shelf drive units. They aren't even hot-rodged versions of off-the-shelf drive units. They are Wilson Benesch's own Semisphere 25mm soft dome tweeter and Tactic II 170mm mid-bass unit. It's easy to dismiss the new Semisphere as just another one-inch soft dome tweeter, but this one took Wilson Benesch a decade of R&D, involving lots of experimentation with new dome materials, (increasingly) rare earth magnet materials and a distillation of the tweeter-maker's art to come up with something special. The result is a tweeter dome material with a mass about a third of its predecessor, set in a side-and-rear venting into a silencing chamber, allowing the system to have a first resonance

point at nearly 6kHz. The tweeter assembly itself comes in at just over a kilogramme.

The Tactic II mid-bass unit is perhaps better known, if only because it was developed from the Tactic 'multi-role' drive unit used in many previous Wilson Benesch designs. Like the Semisphere, this is no ordinary drive unit, and is a product of Wilson Benesch's pioneering work with Sheffield's Hallam University. The driver is the result of extremely advanced electrical and mechanical engineering analysis, way beyond the abilities of the vast majority of loudspeaker makers, to produce a highly optimised motor system. Controlled right down to the lines of flux level, the 8mm thick neodymium magnet has increased flux density across the coil by almost 50% on its predecessor, which allows for a cone mass almost a third lighter while achieving a claimed 3dB increase in driver sensitivity. The net result is lower distortion, higher sensitivity drive units. Bolting them to a front baffle of thick alloy means they sit in a rigid environment, and that helps, too.

Surprisingly, as does the death of the cathode-ray tube. Now that loudspeakers go into a land of plasma, LCD and LED monitors, the need for magnetic shielding has effectively evaporated. And yet, manufacturers still mag-shield their drivers, despite some of the deleterious effects such shielding can have on the magnet's behavior. Wilson Benesch – always the pragmatists – felt there's no need to compromise a drive unit just to keep a defunct 20th Century technology happy, and the result is a more linear driver.

Drivers alone do not a loudspeaker make, and it's in the Advanced Composite Technology monocoque cabinet that Wilson Benesch really shows its mettle. The monocoque is made up of a woven carbon fibre bonded to layers of energy absorbing resins, used to form the rear and sides of the cabinet. This material ends up being about as thick as a typical MDF cabinet and is precisely moulded in an RTM system the geometry of which is designed to maximise stiffness. The result is both a cabinet



material and enclosure structure that has a series of complimentary resonant 'signatures' that cancel one another out in the bass and midrange, while high-frequencies are transferred and damped by the carbon fibre. This gets close to the goal of a box loudspeaker free from cabinet coloration.

The twin reflex ports fire down, which goes some way to explain why the stand is an integral part of the Vertex design. Rather than supply speaker and stand in separate boxes, the Vertex is supplied with stand attached... with high-tensile bolts. Short of taking a baseball bat to the speaker, nothing's going to move it from that stand, and to be honest, you are more likely to break the bat than the speaker. And why are you hitting a loudspeaker with a baseball bat, anyway? The stand also contains a cable management system (rhodium plated bi-wire terminals are at the rear of the base of the stand, the cables are hand-wired, and are sliver-plated copper wires from something hush-hush in the military. If I told you where they came from, you'd be dead before you finish the sentence) and the first order crossover on the tweeter. This last features the usual laundry list of greatness, including selected polyprop capacitors and air-cored inductors. The three point stand does come with useful spikes, which are adjustable from the top of the stand, they also allow adjustment of the speaker's rake angle, which is surprisingly important in the quest for good sound.

The Vertex is all about balance. You need to install them with care, as they aren't easy to dismiss with a 'three feet from the rear and side walls' wave of the hand. Wilson Benesch recommends 'voicing' the speakers in the room, finding the best spot where four carefully chosen pieces (spoken word, full orchestral, something you have a personal emotional connection with and something rhythmic) work well, and taking some not inconsiderable time to find this sweet spot. Listen, move, listen again, move again, and so on until you find your best balance. The company also recommends some 70 hours of run in, but the review samples had already had many more hours on the clock so any changes to performance should have been the stuff of history.

Choice of amplifier is extremely important. The Vertex is a window into the soul of the system, and the right amp can make a huge difference to the performance. Put them on lively sound electronics and they sound completely different to something warm and relaxing. In that respect, the Vertex is more of a chimera. The speakers aren't power hungry, but they come to life on the end of both quantity and quality. The specs (89dB sensitivity, four ohm minimum impedance) belie the Vertex speakers' desire to be well-fed. We found they got what they crave from the Devialet D-Premier (Wilson Benesch have used one in its own demonstrations) and the Burmester system (*ohne* speakers) featured in this issue. With such a system, they simply 'resolved'.

These speakers do this because they are inherently uncoloured. An interesting aside here is that some amp/speaker combinations are designed to even out the idiosyncrasies of the one another. By inserting a speaker that doesn't play that game, you can sometimes expose the true character of the equipment that goes before the Vertex, and sometimes those electronics come up short. I wouldn't blame the loudspeakers here.

I'm not the most jingoistic person on the planet, but it's a fine thing for an Englishman to say that the Vertex shows we are still damn good at making state of the art things, and still know how to make a damn good two-way standmount. Because – even though the stand is integrated – it remains a damn good two-way standmount.

The Vertex does make the reviewer's job easy and difficult in equal measure. Easy because there's lots of technology to talk about; difficult because it does its job so well. Some loudspeakers try to be musical instruments, this tries to be a reproducer of music in its entirety. Highlighting specific examples of this is to try and pigeon-hole a loudspeaker that defies classification. Play Blues and it sounds like the Blues. Play an orchestral piece and it sounds orchestral. Ditto, jazz, rock, world music, dance... what have you. If the music has scale and dynamic range, the Vertex portrays it well. If it's weedy and compressed, it portrays that too. Stereo is simply what it is supposed to sound like, given the recording and the room. It does what speakers are supposed to do, and so few really achieve; it plays what it is given.

That bespeaks maturity in the speaker, the system and the listener alike. Beautifully made, this is no "mug's eyeful"; the Vertex demands a listener who doesn't want fireworks unless the music specifically ordered fireworks. One who is prepared to put in the hours of listening and adjustment to get the best possible sound and who builds systems that are even-handed and well-balanced. If all of this makes you think 'boring!', you aren't ready for the Vertex yet. Come back when shiny things begin to lose their lustre.

One thing that is exceptionally clever about this design is that its double reflex port design is one of the least 'porty' sounding loudspeakers around. The speaker has the speed of delivery of a sealed box, and none of that chuffing port sound you get from most ported loudspeakers.

This is the kind of speaker that will never appeal to the 'musicality' brigade. There's no magic, no special pleading for the beat, no power of the pace, just a very natural sounding speaker. Rhythm in the Vertex is a function of the performance and the installation, rather than an intrinsic quality of the loudspeaker or the system. That the can bring out the rhythmic properties of a performance, and that it is demanding enough to make those properties hang on factors such as placement shows just how uncompromisingly honest these loudspeakers are.

With this honesty comes the fact that you cannot bend the laws of physics just to suit loudspeaker sales. This is (effectively) a two-way standmount loudspeaker. It delivers good bass for a loudspeaker of that kind of design, and is ideally suited to work in small rooms of mostly brick; the sort we British pay far too much money for. In a bigger space, or a room that doesn't have the same construction methods, the bass rolls off honestly and accurately. But it rolls off. In truth, I would rather have a loudspeaker like the Vertex that rolls off predictably than a speaker that introduces its own distinct sub-100Hz booms to make the speaker seem bigger than it really is. Especially as those last few bass notes can be underpinned better by Wilson Benesch's own Torus infrasonic generator. However, those who have risen through the small speaker ranks looking for the ultimate small-box design might at first find the honesty of the Vertex almost disconcertingly honest.

That's the thing about the Wilson Benesch Vertex. It couldn't be more truthful if it were sworn in on the courtroom floor. If you want a speaker system that adds 'that certain something' to the sound, this isn't it. But if you are after a mature approach to sound reproduction that doesn't come with the usual baggage of favouritism, a speaker that genuinely reproduces whatever signals its fed honestly, accurately and without prejudice – and especially if you are either seeking these goals in a small room, or accept that the best way to make full-range stereo sound is through a 2.1 or even 2.2 channel system – the Vertex should be very high on the list. +



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Two-way, true linear phase, free space, ported enclosure, stand mounted monitor

**Drive units:** 1x 170mm Wilson Benesch Tactic II mid/bass unit

1x 25mm Wilson Benesch Semisphere soft dome tweeter

**Low frequency loading:** Double reflex port tuning

**Frequency response:** 44Hz-30kHz  $\pm 2$ dB on axis

**Sensitivity:** 89dB SPL @ 1m on axis. 2.83V input

**Impedance:** six ohms nominal, four ohms minimum

**Maximum SPL:** 118dB @ 1m

**Power Handling:** 200W peak

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 23x105x37cm

**Weight:** 23kg including stand

**Finish:** Regal silver, Black and Titanium. 10 wood finish options to order

**Price:** £4,650 per pair (including stands)

**Manufacturer:** Wilson Benesch

**URL:** wilson-benesch.com

**Tel:** +44(0) 1142 852656

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# VTL MB-450 Series III Signature mono amps

By Roy Gregory  
Photography by Simon Marsh

**V**TL's new MB-450 Series III mono power amps make owning valves easier than ever before. Here is a genuinely powerful amplifier that biases itself, monitors itself, protects itself and given half a chance, would probably feed itself too. No meters required; no matched sets of tubes; no special skills or training; no sacrificial components. If an output tube goes bad you simply get a blinking LED. Which LED blinks and how fast tells you what's wrong and what you need to do – which in the worst case scenario is pull the indicated tube and plug in a replacement: Power up, wait while the amp goes through its self check and bias procedure and you'll be ready to go\*.

Of course, there's more to making tubes user-friendly than making them reliable and self-serviceable. A fully enclosed chassis keeps the glassware away from pets and little fingers, while hatches in the top mean that you don't need to dismantle or even move the amps to reach the tubes if or when necessary. Unlike the flagship Seigfried monos (and S400 stereo) the 450s offer a more conventional, flat chassis, but the subtly sculpted fascia, derived from the 'chimney stack' casework of the range-topping designs, gives them a genuinely classy, contemporary appearance. However, they are undeniably heavy, and the lion's share of the weight sits at the back of the chassis.

Any 450 Watt amp should be powerful, but sounding powerful is another thing altogether. The VTLs reproduce music with the sort of substance and solidity that escapes almost all but the very best amplifiers. They also do so with an absolute authority of the kind that leaves you in absolutely no doubt that no matter how large that drum, and how hard it's hit, they'll effortlessly encompass the dynamic demand. The result is a sense of actual presence, of real people and real instruments that's rare indeed. But what's really impressive is that this presence extends well into both frequency extremes and remains consistent regardless of scale. This is what makes them so engaging. How they do it demonstrates exactly what they add to the performance of their less powerful brethren.

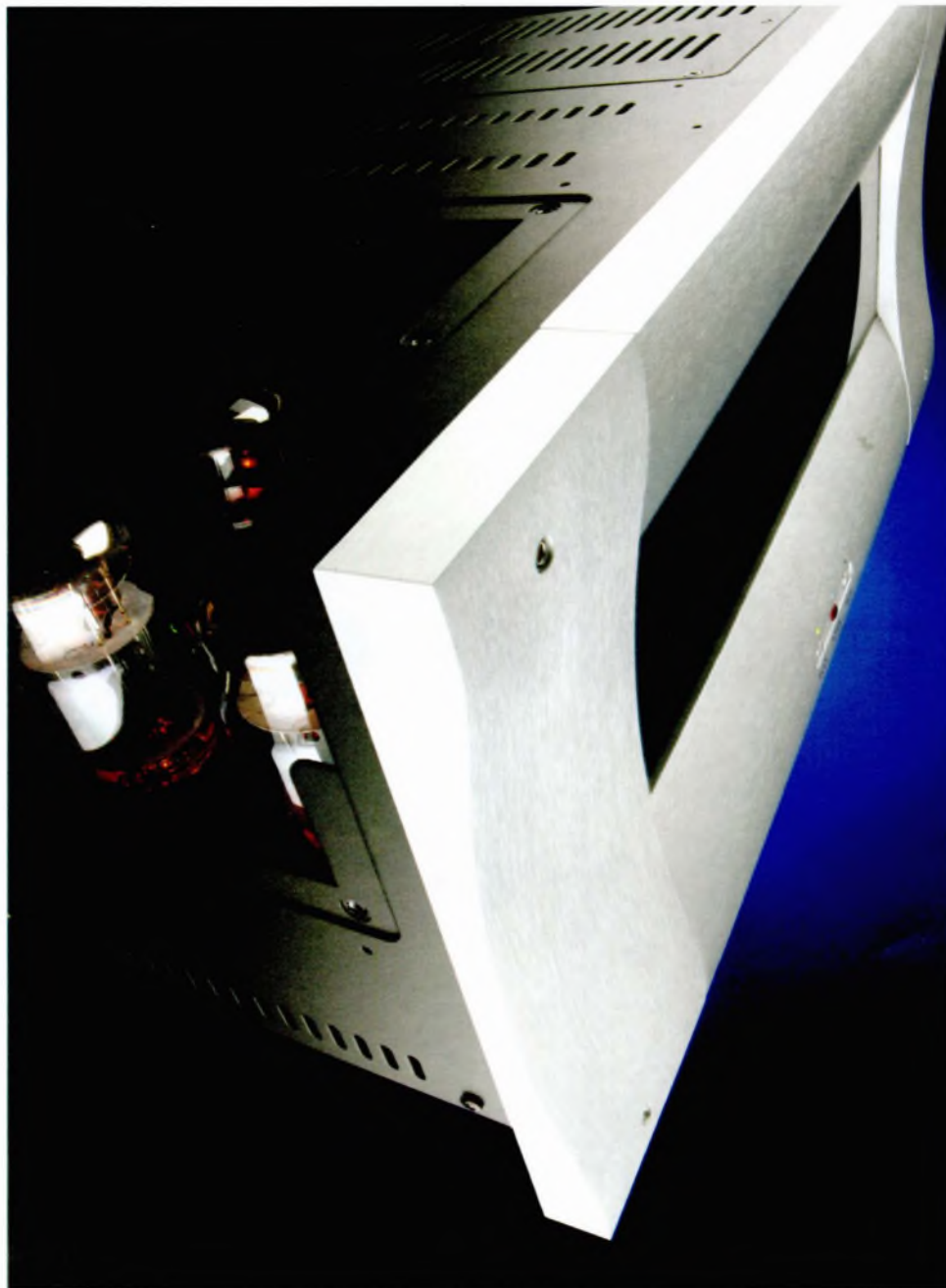
Familiar material, like Neil Young's *Sleeps With Angels* shows just how effectively the 450s set about their task, revealing new insights and new facets to the music. On 'Safeway Cart' Young's voice is front and centre, the rock-solid backing arrayed behind him in a beautifully layered soundstage. The VTLs unravel the multi-tracked nature of the recording, but they do it without dismantling it at the same time. The band is full of presence with an easy, almost loping stride, and Young's vocals are clear, natural and intelligible, and his guitar is just there, larger than life, out front, but subtle and full of shape and detail. The attack on the notes is just so, the sustain perfectly separated and preserved, the duration of each note incredibly clear. It creates a sense of intimacy, almost delicacy, that sets up a stark contrast with that powerful backing, the contrast that makes this song so effective; the fragile against the inevitable. This is a song I've always loved, and what the 450s do is underline its power.

Perhaps the most pertinent example of this was the tube change that occurred half way through the listening period. Swapping the sixteen 6550s that arrived in the amps for a complete set of 12T88s took all of 20 minutes, most of which was spent letting the original valves cool down enough to handle safely. That's power-down all the way to up and running. It's also a job I wouldn't even contemplate on most of the amps I've owned over the years!

Equally impressive is the contrast between this track and the also brilliant but very different 'Trans-Am', with its less obviously structured and more band orientated layout. Shape and phrasing are just as clear, the relationship between the instruments, lead and backing vocals. But here the sense of scale, of small and large, of man and the vastness of America calls for a different presentation. Again, the 450s deliver on cue, with cavernous reverb around Young's superb guitar break.

Given the comments above the next observation might come as a bit of a surprise. In discussing what the 450s don't do, top of the list would be resolution and transparency. They're not bad in either regard, but there are amps out there that do better them. But the reason that this isn't a deal breaker is that the VTLs do so much more with the detail and space they do produce that they are actually more musically effective than many apparently cleaner, crisper and more detailed competitors. Which just goes to prove that it's not what you've got but what you do with it that matters. In the case of the 450s, they'll generate huge space and depth where required (and appropriate), and that space will be both palpable and coherent. They don't define soundstage boundaries as clearly as some, but the space they create makes sense; you can tell what's happening, where and when – and more clearly than you can with many a more explicit amp. If you want realistic perspectives peopled by players making music that actually makes sense, the 450s could be just the ticket.

It's this ability to tie the subtleties of time and texture to the solid substance and sheer power of which they're capable that makes the 450s so special. At the same time as they keep the small and the frankly massive in easy coexistence, they also keep things lucid and articulate. Chamber works, particularly the smaller and more jagged variety wouldn't normally be the natural forte for an amp like this, one with this much



power constantly on tap. Yet, once again, playing the Julian Bream Consort's recording of Britten's 'Courtly Dances' from *Gloriana*, the VTLs surprise and delight. These modern compositions are based on Elizabethan themes and fragments. The 450s don't just bring a real sense of body to these half dozen instruments, giving each a richness of harmonic character, a depth of colour that brings extraordinary presence and vibrance to the performance, they effortlessly decode this musical alloy, separating the authentically Elizabethan elements from the modern

bifilar wound and fully balanced. As before, small soft-touch buttons on the front-panel allow you to switch from stand by to full power, to mute the amp and also to switch from tetrode to triode output mode. The latter delivers 200 Watts into 8 Ohms but to these ears it sacrifices the authority and musical coherence that make the 450s special. (If your system sounds better with these amps switched to triode output, I'm sorry, but you've probably got some work to do elsewhere in the set up.) Last, but by no means least, owners of the Mk II version can have their amps upgraded. Having heard both, I wouldn't hesitate if I were you...

As well as the natural ability to drive pretty much any loudspeaker that goes hand in hand with a 450 Watt output arriving via a decent transformer, the VTLs also offer a variable damping factor (whose operation is described in more detail in the sidebar). Assuming that amps like these are likely to partner large and

finery in which they're dressed. And again, far from detracting from the music, it actually reveals another layer in the structure, another level of sense in the performance.

As well as the highly sophisticated circuitry that sets and monitors the individually bias and screen voltages throughout the amp, the Mk III version of this long-running design adds several other significant features. The input and driver stages are now fully differential. The single-ended inputs get their own, J-fet derived current source, meaning that the audio circuits can run in balanced mode irrespective of the type of input. The revised circuit uses a shorter, faster feedback loop, whilst eliminating global feedback entirely, yet the amp remains unconditionally stable without any form of capacitive compensation. And talking of eliminating capacitors, all those in the signal path are now Mundorf silver-in-oil types, while the reservoir caps have been bypassed with film caps. Last and by no means least, the output transformers have been totally redesigned and are now heavily interleaved,

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## CHANGES AND CHOICES...

As well as VTL's sophisticated auto-bias and tube monitoring circuitry, the Series III Signature incarnation of the 450 also

offers the user a variable damping factor facility. Each

amp offers a pair of toggle switches, mounted beneath the chassis cover, between the valve banks, allowing the selection of four different damping factors, ranging from Low through to Very High. This is all about matching the amp to the speaker and listening environment – once set it should be left well alone. In effect, these switches alter the output impedance of the amplifier (by varying the amount of negative feedback) and the grip it exerts over the speaker. And grip they do. Set the damping to Very High and the 450s exert a vice like hold over the speakers, a level of control that would be the envy of many a solid-state device. The cost, just like so many of those big solid-state amps, is rather more than a hint of dryness. Back off by stages on the damping and the sound blossoms and opens out, becoming freer and more fluid. What the four-position control allows you is the luxury of selecting exactly where you want, or need, to be on that continuum, opening up the possibility to compensate for speakers or rooms that are too dry, rather too loose or bass that gets a bit enthusiastic.

The other big decision facing 450 owners is the choice of output tubes. The amp can be shipped with either Electro Harmonix 6550C or Tungsol Gold Lion KT88 glassware. But while the tubes might be interchangeable, their sound is not and materially affects the sonic character of the amplifier. The 6550C delivers a full, warm, weighty sound with tremendous drive and solidity. They seem to forcibly propel the music into the room, delivering a big, bold sound with tremendous impact and power. In contrast, the KT88s deliver a more delicate, refined and articulate sound, with greater transparency, air and space. They make music and playing more agile, delivering greater texture and a more natural sense of shape.

So, on a track like Shawn Colvin's 'Shotgun Down The Avalanche' the 6550s provide plenty of low-frequency foundation and drive, really driving the track along. Plug in the KT88s and you'll discover two things: one, that you need to advance the volume control a couple of notches to match the apparent power of the 6550s and two, that once you do so the bottom-end takes on its familiar, undulating shape.

Likewise, play Kleiber's Beethoven 7th Symphony, the sublime opening of the second movement, and the contrast between the two tube sets is just as stark.

The differences here are real and significant. If experience suggests that moving the system in either direction might be worthwhile, it's worth serious consideration.

▶ demanding loudspeakers, easily able to stress the listening environment, this offers a welcome and worthwhile degree of additional fine-tuning when it comes to getting control of your system and in particular, its bottom end.

Which brings us to the 450s' other surprising strength, their natural sense of musical flow and articulation. Again, this is not something one normally expects from really powerful amps, the way you don't expect fast feet and delicate handling from front-row forwards. Yet the lucid, unobstructive ease with which the VTLs let music find its own pace, structure and phrasing repeatedly surprises and beguiles, although you'll need to choose your pre-amp with care.

Get it right and the amps will simply step away from the system, leaving the music just as fleet of foot as it needs to be. So Britten's angular rhythmic jolts present no challenge, in the same way that Vivaldi's Concerto For Lute And Strings is all crisp precision and perfectly pitched phrases. The quick articulate playing of the lute is perfectly placed against the longer notes of the Bass Viol, its delicacy in the largo a perfectly plucked counterpoint to the bowed notes of the larger instrument. Move up in scale and the amps are just as comfortable, so perhaps it's time to surrender to the inevitable and, finally, big it up...

Berglund's Sibelius symphonic cycle on EMI is one of the great recordings from this massive catalogue. Selecting the Second Symphony, a master class in contained musical power and its measured release, it was time to let the VTLs loose on what could be considered their favoured terrain.



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▶ The subtle, swelling of the opening bars reveals a broad and deep acoustic space. The instrumental groupings of the Bournemouth Symphony are nicely placed with a natural perspective and no exaggeration of height. Depth is good, with a discernable rear wall; width and overall height are less clearly delineated. But what really strikes you is the effortless sense of power, allied to a clear sense of musical direction. Berglund gives us

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Tetrode-coupled valve mono-bloc

**Valve Complement (each):** 1x 12AT7; 1x 12BH7; 8x 6550C or KT88

**Inputs:** 1x XLR; 1x RCA

**Input Sensitivity:** 2.0V for full output

**Input Impedance:** 42 kOhms

**Outputs:** 1pr 5-way binding posts

**Optimum Load Range:** 4 – 8 Ohms

**Rated Output:** 425 Watts (Tetrode); 200 Watts (Triode)

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 480 x 230 x 460mm

**Weight:** 42kg ea.

**Finishes:** Black or silver front panel; Black chassis

**Price:** £17,500 per pair

**Manufactured by:** VTL Amplifiers Inc.

**URL:** [www.vtl.com](http://www.vtl.com)

**Manufactured by:** Kog Audio

**Net:** [www.kogaudio.com](http://www.kogaudio.com)

**Tel:** +44(0)24 7722 0650

## PERFECT PARTNERS...

For some, though sadly not all, of the review period, I also had the latest version of the VTL 6.5 pre-amp on hand. This one-box sibling of the established and highly-respected 7.5 looks on paper to be the 450s' natural partner, and so it proved in practice. Used in tandem, the VTL combination simply seemed to let the amps do their thing. Together they possess such an uninhibited sense of form and flow that whether it's the line-stage feeding the amps what they want or simply getting out of the way and acceding to their demands quickly ceases to matter. Once again we have evidence that – in terms of the price/performance equation at any rate – that the virtues of the pairing are significantly greater than the sum of the parts. I'll revisit the 6.5 at a later date, but for now let's just say that anybody listening to the 450s should make the effort to also hear them fed by the 6.5. This versatile and capable performer provides all the facilities and sophistication that we've come to expect in these days of multi-room, multi-source installations. It also offers exceptionally engaging musical results in a user friendly, single-box design. That makes it nearly as unusual as the 450s it partners so enthusiastically!

a reading with a real sense of purpose and that's just what the 450s deliver; there's never any doubt where this performance is going. The VTLs keep everything pointing the same way, binding all the threads together, building and building them as Berglund demonstrates his mastery over both the score and the forces beneath his baton. Just when you think that the music can't get any more intense, he releases the pressure in a long, long slide before ramping it up once again into one of the great orchestral climaxes.

What's so impressive here is not just the easy way in which the 450s scale the dynamic demands of this powerful performance, but the absolute stability within the soundstage. Throughout, the drums are planted, clearly defined both in terms of weight and also texture, the brass never climbs forward even in the most enthusiastic tutti. It's an oft overlooked quality in a system, but one that's central to maintaining the illusion of a live performance. Playing Berglund's Sibelius Two on the VTLs is a musical tour de force.

Most of the really memorable audio products that have passed through my hands have at least one quality that sets them apart, and VTL's 450 mono-blocs are no different in that respect. In this case it's the way they fasten on and reveal the nature of the music and the recording. Not what's being played, or even how – but why.

In an ideal world I'd want more detail, I'd want more micro-dynamic definition and greater clarity of the spaces around and between the instruments and players. But this isn't an ideal world and the question is, just what would you be prepared to sacrifice in order to achieve those gains? In the case of the VTL 450s that's a hard one to answer and after considerable thought I'd take them just the way they are. Here is the pot of gold at the end of this particular rainbow – the high-powered valve amp that you can live with AND love. So much music, so few flaws and none of them intrusive, this is an amp that's finally come of age: More than that, it's one for the ages. +



# Monitor Audio Gold Series GX300 loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

**M**onitor Audio has been consistently successful for years by following a simple maxim – give the people what they want, not what it thinks is good for them. It also makes clearly defined ranges of loudspeakers; Platinum for the cost-no-object high enders, Gold for the high-enders, Silver for the rank-and-file music lovers and Bronze for the budget-conscious. There is a lot of DNA shared between all four ranges, with trickle-up and trickle-down technology from previous designs built into the latest range developed. Gold is the most recently refreshed range, and it shows in speakers like the GX300.

It's a three-way slimline tower speaker, absolutely bristling with acronyms because almost everything in the speaker is proprietary. The drive units all sport Monitor Audio's C-CAM composite aluminium material, now with RST for the midrange and bass units. RST is essentially a ribbed cone profile, designed to increase rigidity without increasing the low mass advantage of

C-CAM drive units. These units sit in cast alloy chassis, which have an additional bolt to the rear of the loudspeaker drive unit. This single-handedly braces the cabinet, adds rigidity and decouples the driver from the front baffle. In the GX300, the cabinet holds a pair of 165mm bass units and a single 100mm midrange cone drivers.

The C-CAM material has now been used to make a ribbon tweeter, first seen in the Platinum series. This tweeter is said to work to 60kHz, so the problem of metal dome tweeters breaking up just out of band and creating a spitty treble is solved, as is the demands for a loudspeaker that can cope with the ultrasonic response of high-res files. As with many good designs, the components in the crossover and the cables used internally are of the highest quality. Monitor Audio chose to use both air and steel core inductors, because their properties suit different frequencies better. The GX300 is bi-wired, and sits on two outrigger plinth halves, and come with the option of removable spikes if you would like your hard floor unscratched.

The cabinets of Monitor Audio speakers have always been a strong point, and the GX300 is no exception. Our sample came in a dark walnut veneer that was fabulously rich and deep, and the piano finish examples don't exactly disappoint either. It's best to remove those magnetically-held grilles, not only for sonic properties, but to take in the quality of the finish itself. When the light hits the loudspeakers in the right way, they have the sort of 'oohhh' appeal normally reserved for really good furniture.

The GX300 need power and some run-in. They are rated for use with amplifiers of 100-200 watt power output, and have a rated 200W power handling, so they perhaps aren't the first choice for a three-watt triode design or a kilowatt powerhouse. They are distinctly more comfortable with something



in the 150-180W per channel power delivery stakes in tow. Similarly, the GX300 sound a lot better with a few hours under their belt. Once again, in giving the customer what they want, this is not the kind of speaker that takes nine months of hours of daily loud playing to hit its comfort zone, but you will notice that over the course of the GX300's first weekend, it will sound a bit freer across the board.

Similarly pragmatic, these are some of the least fussy loudspeakers around in terms of positioning. Roughly three feet from the rear and side walls, with anything from 1.8m to about 3m apart hits the spot. Some toe-in would be advisable too. Too little bass, move them closer to the wall, but if you get closer than half a metre from the rear wall, use the bungs supplied to fill in the ports. And of course... experiment with positioning. But principally, so long as you get the GX300 positioning 'sort of' right, they work well. Yes, you can fine tune the speaker placement and hone the sound still further, but there are loudspeakers that seem to be always a couple of centimetres away from perfection, and never sound good as a consequence. These, on the other hand, always sound good and fine tuning makes them slightly better.

This no-nonsense stance makes the GX300 refreshingly 'un-audiophile' in approach. There's no need to get wound up in finding the perfect amplifier, just any decent 100-200W device will do. The speaker is resolving enough to highlight the differences between sources, but not so punishingly resolving that it insists on the best of the best. And the pin-point installation, the never-ending search for the best speaker cable, the right spikes and the best room treatment all becomes a bit academic. These are good, unfussy loudspeakers that don't force the listener into a bout of audiophilia nervosa. Buy 'em, keep 'em, love 'em!



Perhaps some of this comes from the performance, which is both precisely what real people like in a good speaker and often what those who long since stopped buying hi-fi never look for in their systems. It delivers, clean, clear and vibrant high-frequencies and tidy, deep and powerful lows. Treble instruments and voices soar away into that region cats, bats and dogs love so much; we humans just hear an extended, detailed – and yet not bright, 'tizzy' or accented – treble. The closer you get to naturally recorded, untreated a capella voices, the more important this becomes; The Tallis Scholars polyphony when singing Tallis' 'Spem in Alium' (Gimell) stands or falls on the purity of voice, especially in the upper registers. The GX300 sailed through this test as if the designer had been listening to renaissance music when putting the GX series through its paces.

The other end is fabulously well-upholstered for so small a speaker, too. Massive Attack, Dr. Dre, Trentemøller... all recordings with both a lot of bass and a lot going on in the bass. They all highlighted how good the GX300 were with bottom end notes. The pace of Trentemøller's fast-pitched electronic drums in particular is something of an acid test for a loudspeaker. Many a good speaker has fallen here, either by making a sound so overblown that leading edges blur together, or by simply failing to reach into the bottom octave and making a sound like ripping paper instead of drums a pace. Here, the GX300 gets the balance perfectly right – you could spend 10x as much and not get the same result.

Midrange is similarly well-crafted, although because this is the region that so many speakers concentrate upon, it's not as directly noticeable. Many small boxes get the midrange right, it's the top and bottom that's found wanting. Here, the vocal articulation is excellent, and the midrange clear and true. It does very slightly seem to turn an acoustic guitar into an electro-acoustic, which is something mildly to do with the midrange's slightly dry presentation. But, like many things in audio, you have to really go looking for this.

Ultimately, the Monitor Audio sound is one that is big and impressive. It casts ▶



▶ a wide soundstage, with full-sized, solid instruments in their own sense of space within that soundstage. It goes loud too. All this, combined with the extension of top and bottom, gives you a sense of immediate impressiveness. It's not some magic transponder that beams you into the time and space of the recording, and those wanting filigree detail of the acoustic space will find their goals fulfilled in other speaker designs, but few speakers at this price can deliver something this impressive sounding, and even fewer will deliver that while making sure you keep a satisfied smile firmly in place.

I can't help but think Wilson Audio here. The GX300 are more than training wheels for a pair of Wilson Sashas, but there is a strong similarity in character. Both create a big sound, with lots of extension at either ends of the scale. Both have plenty of detail delivery and both have that ability to excite and stun in equal measure. Where the Wilsons win over the Monitor Audios is they have even more insight, detail, dynamic range and shade, and even more extension. Where the Monitor Audios win over the Wilsons is their ease in installation and equipment partnering... and that you can buy a wall of GX300s for the price of a pair of Sashas.

It's not hard to see why Monitor Audio is such a success story. The GX300 gives you a lot of what real people want to hear. It doesn't need you to spend every waking hour obsessing over minutiae, in the hope to raise the performance a fraction; it just gives you the sound you like in a fuss-free package. What could be better? +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Monitor Audio Gold GX300

#### Three-way, bass-reflex floorstanding loudspeaker

##### Drive Unit Compliment:

1x C-CAM ribbon tweeter  
1x 100mm RST midrange cone driver  
2x 165mm RST bass cone driver

**Frequency Response:** 30Hz-60kHz

**Sensitivity:** 90dB/1w/1m

**Nominal impedance:** eight ohms

**Max SPL:** 116.8dB

**Recommended amplifier power:**

100-200W

**Power Handling:** 200W RMS

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 32x111x37cm

**Weight:** 27.2kg

**Finish:** Bubinga, Dark Walnut, Natural Oak real wood veneers, white and black piano gloss

**Price:** £3,000 per pair

**Manufactured by:** Monitor Audio Ltd

**URL:** [www.monitoraudio.co.uk](http://www.monitoraudio.co.uk)

**Tel:** +44(0) 1268 740580

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Rogue Audio Medusa power amplifier

By Alan Sircom

One of the biggest joys of modern audio is things are changing. The biggest problem is they might not be changing for the better.

So it is with Class D amplification. Class D is a great thing in theory; oodles of power from a matchbox-sized amplifier circuit but, if you were weaned on valve power amps, you'll probably struggle to like the sound they make. Strangely, no-one thought of putting the two together in the same power amp. Until Rogue Audio came along.

Rogue Audio is perhaps best known for its high-value, US made valve amplifiers, but recently many valve amplifiers have begun to feel the enviro-squeeze. Big multi-hundred watt valve amplifiers are not the most ecologically-chummy devices out there, and the quest for a greener source of good sound is constantly being sought. Class D is an obvious choice, with quiescent and full power consumption an order of magnitude lower than a fully 'hollow-state' alternative. Audio Research was one of the first to market with a greener range of products. Rather

than simply make a 'me-too' clone, Rogue mapped out an amplifier concept that delivered the sort of high-performance sound agreeable to Rogue's existing customer base, without the power consumption, tube biasing and maintenance requirements of valve amplifiers. In the process, Rogue hoped to combine the high damping factor and drive capabilities of solid-state with the smooth and natural sound of valves.

The Medusa is the beefier of a two-strong hybrid Class D amplifier range; the other being the 100W Hydra. Medusa delivers 200W per channel into eight ohms, doubling perfectly to 400W into four-ohm loads. It uses a pair of 12AU7s in the input stage, and runs balanced and single-ended. There are two good multi-way binding posts at the rear of the amplifier, but no provision for running in bridged mono mode.

The meaty part of the Medusa is a Class D MOSFET output stage, in this case a pair of the popular Hypex UCD-400 modules. Contrary to some suggestions, Class D is not a 'digital' amplifier, but instead its output devices (commonly MOSFET) are used as very high speed, high power switches. It should also not be confused with a switch-mode power supply, even though the Class D circuit functions in a manner akin to an unregulated SMPS, albeit delivering a changing voltage into a fixed load. It's easy to confuse Class D (switching amplifier) with a switch-mode power supply, because the two are commonly seen in the same case.

Not this time, though. Rogue has used every aspect of the skills it has used to make good valve amplifiers. Rather than seeing Class D as the jumping off point for a root-and-branch move to new technology, it views the Hypex modules as simply the earth-moving end of the amplifier. The rest – high-quality analogue power supply using a toroidal transformer, excellent supply regulation and a first-rate input stage – all belongs to classic amplifier research and development. ▶



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*“The Medusa puts you right in with the audience to such an extent, you might need a nicotine patch after listening.”*

► This blending of old and new shouldn't in theory be anything new, but many companies got so wound up in the novelty of Class D output that they adopted a raft of changes to their power amp circuits; some good, some very bad. As a result, Class D has developed something of a poor reputation among some audiophiles and audio reviewers. As the Medusa shows, this reputation is undeserved.

Let's make one thing clear, though; it's 'green', but not 'light green'. SMPS/Class D amps might be the kind of things that weigh less than a cup of coffee, but that traditional input stage and power supply – coupled to a well-made equipment case – means few economies when it comes to dead-lifting. Controls in this case are strictly limited to a single, large push button on the front panel, with a master power rocker switch by the IEC power inlet. The front panel button is inset from the thick aluminium panel and is flanked by three coloured LEDs, with Rogue Audio laser cut into the fascia and the name Medusa screen printed below the power button in slightly too large and garish letters. When connected, but in standby, the left hand yellow LED glows, 10 seconds after power up, when it's running the topmost blue LED takes over, and if anything goes wrong, the right hand red LED glows, and typically does so in the presence of a short at the speaker terminals or an overcurrent problem. Realistically, it's all you need on a power amplifier.

The Medusa is rare in not needing any run in at all. It worked fine right out the box and stayed that way. OK so it took about a half hour to come on song and did sound slightly better over the course of the test, but it didn't materially change performance from the moment I first pressed the 'go' button. In use, it behaved itself perfectly. It's quiet for a hybrid amplifier; that doesn't mean music arises out of a dark background, but that the noise floor – both in terms of amplifier hum and hissing, rushing sounds through the loudspeakers, is very low indeed. It also runs cool for a valve amp, although not cold to the touch.

I have to admit, I struggled at first with this amplifier. However, the struggle was more down to trying to pin the sound down than the actual nature of its performance. You see, it's easy to pin down a Class D sound

from a Hypex module; it has excellent bass depth and tonality, it has treble with a razor-sharp precision that can so easily tip over to 'stinging' and not much of a midband. Who needs to listen?

Of course, if you do the whole due diligence thing and actually connect the Medusa to a pair of speakers, you'll begin to understand why the valve input stage and the traditional analogue thinking about the power supply is so important. The sharp treble is gone, replaced instead with a top end that is clean and extended and harmonically rich. But most of all, the midband comes back on song. Play some good vocal jazz – the legendary *Sarah Vaughan at Mr. Kelly's* album for example – and anything less than a perfect midrange is the musical equivalent of sacrilegious. On most Class D amps, you simply wouldn't play the album, possibly out of respect to Sarah Vaughan's late, lamented vocal cords. The Medusa puts you right in with the audience to such an extent, you might need a nicotine patch after listening.

And yet, the overall sound remains Class D clean. This means a lot of detail and energy in the top end. This gives the sound a curious – but nonetheless attractive – warmly cool sound that reads like an oxymoron, but explains itself easily when hearing the Medusa in action. The warmth isn't 'triode lushness', but it gives the Medusa a texture and sense of body. The cool isn't Class D sterility, but it gives the Medusa a high degree of insight into the music. It's an excellent combination.

The amp's imaging properties are excellent too, but not in the conventional ►

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► sense. It's rather like the sound real music makes in a live space, not the hi-fi simulacra. In a concert hall, you will often be unable to differentiate instruments from one another in strict imaging terms alone. And yet, they are in precise and sharp focus, so you know exactly where the musician is in the room. Normally, hi-fi electronics sacrifices the real to create the simulation, but this seems closer to the real. Whether it's the tube input stage or the more traditional power supply is immaterial, but the Medusa fills out the soundstage nicely. The Medusa also removes some of the 'digital hash' sound of the upper registers that so many Class D dislikers find hard to stomach.

It's particularly good on vocal music, giving the sonorous nature of The Tallis Scholars the chance to soar with Byrd's Mass for four voices, but also good with the more slurred vocals of Lucinda Williams singing Jackson on *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*. Vocals are not projected strongly front and centre, but they are articulate and defined. It's a 'diffuse-focused' sound that gives a strong impression of there being a real vocalist in the room. Not in the sense that some imaging hounds crave, but with a solidity and 'thereness' which is really rather like the real thing.

This is an important power amplifier. It represents yet another audiophile acceptance speech for Class D, but this time brings more of the traditional power amplifier sound to the mix. By trying to use Class D as an amplifier component instead of building a new design around the Class D amplifier modules has created a design that balances out future demands without forcing radical changes in sound quality. That sort of balance doesn't come along too often. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Stereo power amplifier**

**Hybrid Class D design**

**Inputs:** 2x phono, 2x XLR

**Valve compliment:** 12AU7 x2

**Outputs:** five-way loudspeaker terminals (x2)

Output power 200W per channel

**Frequency response:** 5Hz-30kHz  $\pm$ 1dB

**THD:** <0.1% typ (<1% at rated power)

Input Sensitivity 1.0V RMS

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 46x38x14cm

**Weight:** 25kg

**Price:** £3,995

**Manufactured by:** Rogue Audio

**URL:** [www.rogueaudio.com](http://www.rogueaudio.com)

**Distributed by:** Audiofreaks

**URL:** [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)

**Tel:** +44(0)208 948 4153

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Burmester 089, 036, 948, B25

By Alan Sircom

**B**urmester is one of those brands that sells complete systems. You don't necessarily buy a piece of Burmester, you buy into the Burmester idea. Every single component, from mains plug to loudspeaker, can have a Burmester logo on it, and in most cases there seems to be no overarching reason to break rank.

It thinks of systems even down to the product number. And it's those product numbers that show just how long-term Burmester thinks. To decode a Burmester product, those first two digits represent the year the product was launched. So, the £13,783 089 CD player released in 2008, the £6,198 036 power amp was launched in 2003, the £5,273 948 was unveiled in 1994 and the £6,735 B25 loudspeaker was released in the hexadecimal year 20B2. OK, the nomenclature doesn't quite work with loudspeakers, but given there's an 808 preamp (admittedly a Mk 5 version) and several other products 20+ years old still on the Burmester books, the company isn't likely to release a duff product, because it knows it goes on the company's roll call for decades.

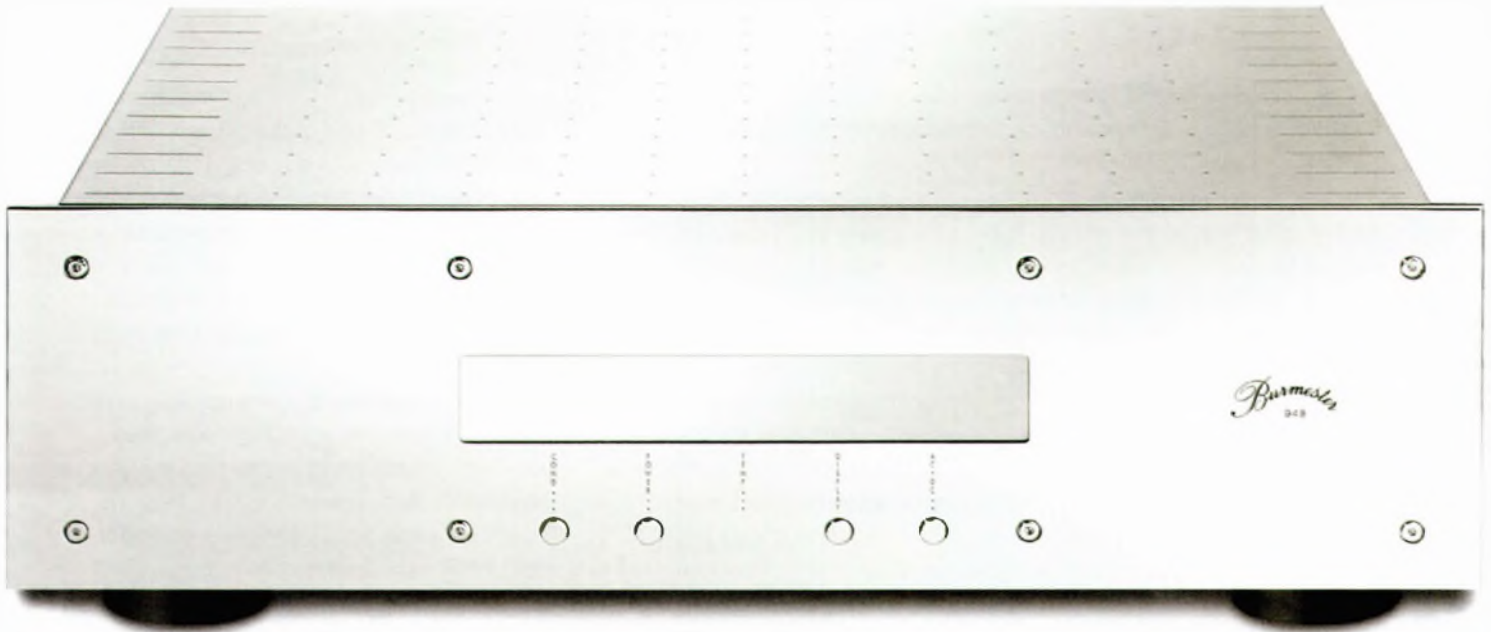
The system here takes the CD player from Burmester's Top Line (there's a 069 Reference Line above this and a 061 Classic Line below) and uses it as both CD and preamp into the Classic Line 036 power amplifier. This is joined by a 948 power conditioner and B25 three-way floorstanding loudspeaker, which sort of stands outside Burmester's traditional lines. Burmester also specs its own mains, interconnect and speaker cables (sharing much with the internal wiring of the products) and even has a range of equipment stands that provide a visual match for the products.

We don't need to say too much about the 089... it's an old friend. We reviewed it back in issue 78 last year and what holds then holds now. The belt-drive, top-loader CD player upsamples up to 24/192, can act as a preamp as well as a CD player and any software upgrades through RS232 or USB (USB here is not an audio input). The volume attenuation is not performed by bit truncation; it's a proper line preamp in its own right. No, it's not going to be as good as slotting a good line preamp in the circuit, but this is almost a jumping off point for building a thorough system step-by-step.

So, in the absence of preamp, the 089 goes straight into the 036 stereo power amp, via balanced cables. It's a slimline 171W stereo chassis, which can be driven as 300W bridged monos (both figures rated at 4 ohms). Burmester's power amp designs all have no capacitors in the signal path. It is fully balanced and completely DC coupled. The input stage and output stage transistors are on their own separate heatsinks, with the side external heatsinking deals with the massive output. This helps keep the temperature fluctuations from individual sections of the amp from influencing the others. The circuit is also extremely well monitored, akin to the engine-management system of a car. The amp is monitored for overdrive, overheat and DC offset. This circuit design is similar to the company's bigger 911 and 956 power amplifiers.

The electronics should all be fed into the 948 power conditioner. Now this is a controversial choice – picking a power conditioner before a preamp in the hierarchy of things. Nevertheless, it does actually work in this context. It is essentially a high-pass power line DC offset compensator (rather than a simple blocker), coupled to a low-pass AC line filter. The DC offset compensation works in parallel to the AC supply, so it doesn't strip out dynamic range, while the





## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### BURMESTER 089

**Type:** Single-box CD player/preamp

**Transport:** Phillips with belt drive

**Sampling rates:** 96kHz/24 bit – 192kHz/24 bit

**Digital Inputs:** 1 x optical (TOSLINK); 1 x RCA

**Digital Outputs:** 1 x optical (TOSLINK);

1 x RCA

**Analog Inputs:** 1 x XLR

**Analog Outputs:** 1 x XLR (balanced)

1 x RCA (Unbalanced); 1 x RCA (TAPE)

(Unbalanced) with preset volume

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 48.3 x 11.4 x 33.5 cm

**Weight:** 13 kg

**Price:** £13,783

### BURMESTER 036

**Type:** Stereo power amplifier

**Power Output:** 170W into four ohms  
stereo (350W bridged mono)

**Signal/Noise Ratio:** >103dB

**Damping factor:** 1000

**THD+N:** <0.005%

**Gain:** 31/21dB

**Input:** 2x Balanced XLR (phono  
adapters supplied for single-ended  
connection)

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 48.2 x 10.5 x 46.2cm

**Weight:** 18kg

**Price:** £6,198

two AC filters can be assigned to separate outputs for individual custom filtration. Eighteen years after its launch, it's still the power conditioner to beat.

Then there's the B25 loudspeakers. Slim, elegant floorstanders, these three-ways feature an oval side-firing bass driver. Best used with these firing inwards unless there's some furniture (or a system) in between the speakers, the B25s feature a 130mm Kevlar midrange and an 30x40mm AMT ribbon tweeter in a deep horn to the front baffle. They are bi-wired, have a huge rear port that can be bunged (at the expense of deep bass energy) and come in three finishes. They are the ideal British room loudspeaker because they can be used just a few inches from the rear wall.

Checking out this system involves a process of building and rebuilding. Start by reducing everything to its component parts, find out what's good and what's not so good, then rebuild piece by piece to see what fits snugly and what could be extracted and replaced with something better performing or better value. Often, this process unveils some hidden gems and some hidden howlers. This time it was gems all the way down.

The sound is the pinnacle of refinement and elegance. There's a real sense of beauty to the sound, too, but it isn't so refined and graceful that it loses any sense of real-world dynamics and grip. The CD player is the star of the show, of course. It creates a sense of musical structure and refinement that you will struggle to find from any digital player, regardless of price. There's an inner detail and tonality that really picks up the interplay of musicians in 'I've Been To Memphis' from *Joshua Judges Ruth* by Lyle Lovett and makes the almost ambient Anouar Brahem album *The Astounding Eyes of Fita* truly hypnotic in approach. What Chris Thomas said in issue 78 still holds today. It's a captivating CD player, one that helps redefine what the medium is capable of, and the kind of player that has few rivals. Put simply, it draws you in and keeps you there.

The 089 is good enough to sound good on an old plank of wood, but the better the support, the better the playback. It's not 'fussy' in that sense, but think of it as a high performance device, one that demands a similarly high performance from all it works with; just as you probably wouldn't put remoulds

▶ on a Ferrari, you wouldn't want to put a player this good on any ol' support. While Burmester makes its own rack, at this level, you should be considering Stillpoints or similar.

What's surprising though is not the 089. It's a known benchmark. It's the 948 that goes with it, and what it does to the sound that's really exciting. It helps reinforce that refinement of the 089. It also does the same to practically anything it plugs to; it 'Burmestered' a good Primare all-in-one, making the sound smoother but no less dynamic and more captivating. When inserted into the Burmester system, it gave everything an additional layer of insight and involvement. With the Primare, the improvement was somewhat fundamental, although with the Burmester it was more like the final coat on an already glossy finish.

The amplifier sealed the deal. It did more than just hired muscle, but it helped balance the refined refinement of the 089+948 combination. This was every inch the big-small power amp everyone wishes they could own; an amplifier that thinks it's a 30 watter when it comes to transient speed and dynamic shading, but knows it's got a few hundred watts in reserve when it needs to move air, tough speaker loads, for bottom end grunt and dynamic range. The net result is a deft touch; a goldilocks amp that's not too big, not too small. It's also a clean detail resolver of exceptional quality. I've had relatively limited exposure to the bigger Burmester amps, but from what I've heard, this amp has exactly the same tonal character to bigger designs in the range, just faster, a lot less power and a smidgen less bass.

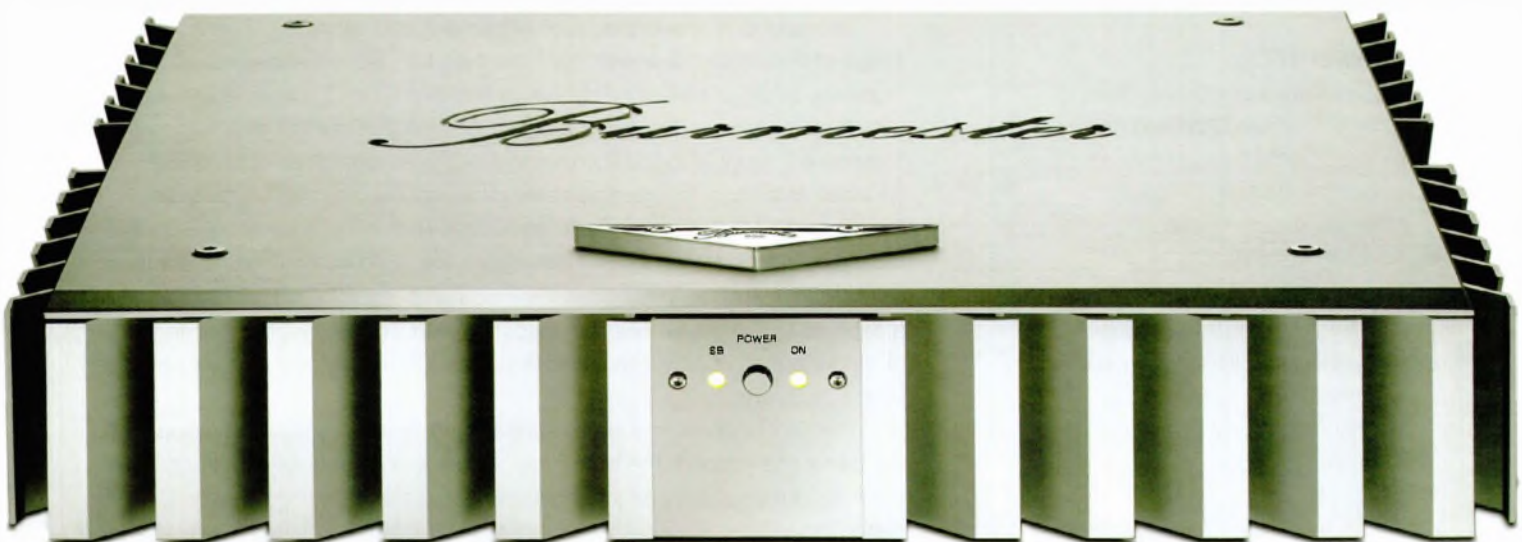
If that gives the perception that this Burmester package sounds bass shy, I want to put this one to rest fast. The system isn't bass light. It's fast and can go surprisingly deep. It grips the loudspeakers tight, if perhaps not to the steel jaw levels of its bigger brothers. But here's the thing; take the Burmester system to a pair of loudspeakers you know well and see if you can find the brightness or bass lightness. It just isn't there.

Burmester creates an effective complete system, but it also makes for an excellent 'complete system... just add loudspeakers' package. That said, Burmester frequently gets overlooked in this manner because the company demonstrates all-Burmester systems in shows. The B25 is an excellent loudspeaker in its own right, but unlike the rest of the Burmester equipment,

it isn't as universal. I can see this system forming from any one of the components in the system. I can imagine inserting CD, power amp or power conditioner in a previous mix, and it's just a matter of time before the other aspects of that power trio appear too. The loudspeakers, on the other hand, are the last link in the chain for the Burmester user, not a starting place.

This is surprising because they are fundamentally honest sounding loudspeakers, with an exceptionally open treble and possessed of excellent imagery. They do, however, create a very narrow sweet spot, both in the horizontal and vertical axes, and there is some over-emphasis to bass guitar – perhaps that is hardly surprising; Dieter Burmester is a keen bass player, after all.

Finally, I want to kill off this crazy concept that permeates the UK in particular; the idea of the 'German Sound'. It's xenophobia, dressed up in audiophile garb. There is nothing about this system that restricts it to playing 'Ooom-pah' music, it isn't 'ruthlessly efficient'. It doesn't 'sweep majestically eastward' and doesn't put its towel on the sun-lounger at 4am. What it does is make good sound. It makes it well, and it makes it with the sort of build quality that means you'll be listening to Burmester equipment 25 years after almost anything else this side of an SME turntable gave up the ghost. That part of the German myth – the one that says everything is built to last – is at least true; last year, a ▶



"Ultimately, the Monitor Audio sound is one that is big and impressive. It casts a wide soundstage, with full-sized, solid instruments in their own sense of space within that soundstage. It goes loud too. All this, combined with the extension of top and bottom, gives you a sense of immediate impressiveness."

GX300- HiFi+ April 2012

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the brand is Burmester. In most audiophile's books, that's Rolls-Royce money well spent, because you are spending it on one of audio's Rolls-Royce brands. Given the number of times the average Burmester owner changes his or her system, and given the life expectancy of each product, you are talking an investment of about £1,000 per year on your audio equipment. Seriously – this is the kind of audio system you buy once per lifetime, and this is the kind of system you could confidently use to see you through the rest of the 21st Century. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### BURMESTER 948

Type: Power conditioner

Active power amplification: 500W

Power outputs: Eight, 13A

Dimensions (WxHxD): 46.2x15.5x36.5cm

Weight: 17kg

Price: £5,273

### BURMESTER B25

Type: Floorstanding loudspeaker

Driver Complement: 1x 30x40mm AMT ribbon tweeter, 1x 130mm woven Kevlar midrange, 232x165 oval doped paper bass unit (side-firing)

Frequency response: 35Hz-45kHz

Sensitivity: 88dB

Impedance: four ohms

Dimensions (WxDxH): 20x98.2x35cm

Weight: 40kg

Finish: macassar gloss, Elsberry, silver laminate

Price: £6,735 per pair

Total System Cost: £31,989

Manufacturer: Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH

URL: [www.burmester.de](http://www.burmester.de)

Tel: +49 (0)30 78 79 68-0

► bunch of audio journalists from the UK visited Burmester's Berlin factory. There's a room there with endless parts and almost no products, called the 'repairs department'. We saw a few CD players there, mostly for updating. They looked new. They were all more than 20 years old. Burmester even fabricates parts that no-one else can get to service its long-legacy customers. So, the products are expensive, but you get what you pay for.

And that's the big thing with Burmester. It plays a long game. Buying a Burmester system is an investment for the future. That chrome front panel will not have lost its lustre decades from now... and the product behind the panel will still sound remarkable too. In some respects, however, the common chrome front is Burmester's biggest shortcoming, because it prevents those who like to think of their system as a Best Product Ever collection of components from buying into the brand. The thing is though, you could spend years trying to find the Best Product Ever, going from product to product to product, and still end back with all Burmester. So, perhaps the best thing to do is not fight it. Give in to the Shiny Side.

The total price of the system comes to a healthy – frisky even – £31,989. Which seems like a lot to pay for a one-source system from one brand. But



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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Simaudio Moon 100D USB digital converter

By Neil Gader

**A**ny conversation about computers reminds me of my son-in-law, Dan. Classic Gen Y profile. Thirty-two years old, just married, a professional with an advanced degree. Dan, like much of his generation, is a savvy computer guy (Apple, of course) and music junkie. Dan loves the indie scene, respects the classics—classic rock anyhow. In most ways he embodies the audio ethic of his generation, meaning he's a fervent music-downloader and disc-ripper. Dan pays very little out of pocket for his musical fix. Until recently his 'system' was almost entirely iTunes/iPod-based, but after discovering his dad's vinyl collection, he sprung for a budget turntable and speakers and began assembling an entry-level system. High end was the last thing on his mind. But that was then. He's discovered that sharing a life and paying a mortgage leaves little room for earbud listening in the man-cave. Yet, with thousands of tracks on a hard drive that he wants to access through his growing two-channel rig, what to do? The short answer might be something along the lines of the Simaudio Moon 100D.

The Moon100D is a stoutly built and elegantly finished component, whose looks are consistent with the extensive Simaudio lineup. Its front-panel layout includes LED indicators for sample rate and pushbuttons for power and input selection. The Moon 100D is based on the Burr Brown PCM1793 high resolution 24-bit/192kHz D/A with an 8x oversampling digital filter. An asynchronous sample-rate converter upconverts all input signals to 24-bit/192kHz. As is Simaudio's practice, a highly accurate digital clocking system maintains the DAC's extremely low jitter levels. Three stages of DC voltage regulation are incorporated into the 100D power supply, as well as traditional Simaudio touches like pure-copper circuit board traces and a symmetrical circuit design.

Taking centerstage is the USB input which accepts a digital audio signal of up to 16-bit/48kHz. Like a favourite pair of slippers, USB has become a mainstay of the computer world for its convenience—and this is in spite of the audio limitations

that frequently draw fire in many high-end circles. Simaudio is refreshingly candid about the fact that due to jitter, phase errors, and other latency issues USB was never intended to appeal to audiophiles — it was meant for mundane data transfer only, not time-domain oriented audio signals. In Simaudio's words, "We opted to provide the best possible power supply, D/A converter, and analog stage in the Moon 100D at this price level."

Simaudio, however, is an old hand at high-end digital, so it's armed the 100D with both optical and S/PDIF inputs to make the most of its 24-bit high-resolution DAC when used in conjunction with a CD transport's digital output or a computer equipped with an S/PDIF high-resolution soundcard. However, if your computer doesn't have one of these outputs, don't despair. There's an easy work-around via a USB-to-S/PDIF interface. There are quite a few available, reasonably priced, and many will work with USB datastreams up to 24-bit and sampling rates up to 192kHz. For example, near the top of the rung is state-of-the-art models like the Berkeley Audio Design Alpha USB, but there are also more down-to-earth models like the Musical Fidelity V-Link, a modestly priced 24-bit/96kHz asynchronous USB interface. While wildly different in price, both take advantage of the superior continuous bitstream of S/PDIF.

Moon's setup is a snap. Using my MacBook equipped with Pure Music software from Channel D, I clicked on the Sound icon of System Preferences, which identified the DAC instantly. Just double-check that you've selected the USB for output, and you'll be off and running.



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▶ For those of you accustomed to the run-of-the-mill iTunes experience, straight-line performance through the 100D USB will be a revelation. A laundry list of deleterious artifacts, from indistinct imaging to tonal hardness to treble etch, will begin to fade away. Bass pitches and harmonics will tighten up and lighten up considerably. The overall sound becomes more robust and limber. There will be an expanded sense of musicians occupying physical space, rather than flat-footed images on a tent-card. Dynamics will be livelier, low-level resolution higher. In general, music via the USB provides an easy listening experience, while manifesting a character that is a bit darker on top and a bit truncated in bass decay. In retrospect, this signature is paradoxically the near polar opposite of early compact disc sound. Back then, CD was noted for its powerful bass punch and icy, often brittle treble. Here the 100D USB input softens and shades the sound somewhat, and transients don't quite have the urgent call-to-arms response of live music. It's for this reason alone that I praise Simaudio for offering the S/PDIF option. Adding the V-Link USB-to-S/PDIF interface allowed Jen Chapin's cover of 'Renewable' to develop a greater degree of openness and bloom across the tonal spectrum. As micro-dynamics fully ignite, it's simply easier to trace individual notes in space, whether they be delicate piano motifs or the nylon-stringed guitar riffs from Ana Caram's cover of 'Fly Me To The Moon' [Chesky]. And on a 24-bit/88.2kHz recording like Malcolm Arnold's *A Sussex Overture* [Lyrita], the orchestra seems to come alive in three dimensions— the once papery and pita-flat soundstage replaced with complex acoustic textures, the venue seemingly inhaling and exhaling with ambience and presence. But the improvement doesn't just apply to high-res; the benefits are easily appreciated on stock 16-bit/44.1kHz.

So how does the 100D compare to the prevailing digital standard of the last thirty years, namely CD? Close and growing closer, but ultimately falling short. Something like the outstanding Audio Research CD5 renders timbral and textural detail with more sophistication. When, for example, the melodies of singer Jen Chapin and the baritone sax begin to parallel each other, the CD5 maintains a warmer midrange, and breathes a bit more upper-frequency air and buoyancy into the performance. The CD5, to borrow an analog term, just seems to track a bit more cleanly, thereby allowing images a stronger sense of spread across the stage and a fuller, more complete sonic presentation. And while the sonic backgrounds that underlay a venue's acoustic are very quiet through USB, they are midnight black with the ARC. In imaging and three dimensional soundstaging, the S/PDIF input hews closer to the ARC with only minor subtractions in image focus.

The 100D is a flexible and forward-thinking solution for addressing the diversity of computer-based audio. It's a glitch-free device with an all-important upgrade path for those inspired to stay ahead of the curve. And to the extent that it allows a family member like Dan to have a few thousand tunes at the touch of a finger and



to bypass the CD format entirely, its potential impact cannot be underestimated. When it comes to the brave new world of digital music there is seemingly no end in sight. But Simaudio offers an ideal place to begin.+

*First published in The Absolute Sound issue 215*

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Inputs:** S/PDIF, USB, TosLink

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 12.7 x 7.3 x 16.5cm

**Weight:** 1.8kg

**Price:** £549

**Manufactured by:** Sim Audio

**URL:** [www.somaudio.com](http://www.somaudio.com)

**Distributed by:** Renaissance Audio

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# EQUIPMENT REVIEW



## Audio Research PH8 Phono stage

By Jimmy Hughes

**W**ith so many reasonably-priced phono stages reaching a pretty high standard, is it really necessary to spend this much on Audio Research's PH8? Sadly, the answer is – yes...

I don't know about you, but if I was stumping up this sort of dosh for a phono stage I'd want (nay, demand) something downright amazing with absolutely knock-out orgasmic sonics from the first moment you hear it.

I'd want to be blown-away by a sound that is clearly superior to what I already have. The improvement would have to be blindingly obvious; not something you have to listen carefully for, but an obvious immediate gain in performance.

But is that a realistic expectation – even given the massive price tag of the PH8? Sure, the PH8 is bound to be good; it's from ARC – 'nuff said. But doesn't the law of diminishing returns apply with a vengeance to products like this?

Maybe all one should expect is a subtle improvement over a good but more realistically-priced phono stage. Yeah – right! Such were the thoughts that ran through my head as I got the PH8 ready to roll, removing the top to fit the tubes.

### Affordable? Well, sort of

Actually, to keep things in perspective, it needs to be said that the PH8 is not the best phono stage Audio Research make. That honour goes to ARC's Reference 2. The PH8 is intended as a more affordable version of the latter.

Of course, the term 'affordable' is used here in its relative and comparative sense. The PH8 remains an extremely costly piece of kit, and will probably be beyond reach for many enthusiasts. But, it's still an exciting and interesting product!

It borrows some of the Reference 2's technology, but features solid-state J-Fet input devices rather than the four 6922 tubes used in the Reference. Coupling cap types and circuit board material are common to both products.

Straight from the box, Audio Research warn that a long burn-in period is required before new equipment sounds at its best. Our review PH8 already had

a few miles on the clock, and proved to be immediately impressive.

In typical ARC style, the PH8 produces a big, rich, deep sound that has massive scale and depth. It's a very solid tactile sort of presentation – there's nothing 'small' or effete about the sound. The music sounds focused and very 'present'.

The PH8 has a fixed gain of 58dB. Overload point is a massive 70mV at 1kHz, making it suitable for virtually any pickup on the market - fixed or moving coil. We used a Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue; a medium/high output MC pickup.

There was plenty of level, and background noise was very low. Those with ARC preamps (like the LS-27) would be able to vary the gain of the line input stage to create a comfortable listening volume.

In order to tailor the phono stage to your cartridge, the PH8 offers variable input impedance. When using fixed-coil (MM) cartridges, you'd need to set the impedance to 47k Ohms. But MC cartridges can be used at any impedance.

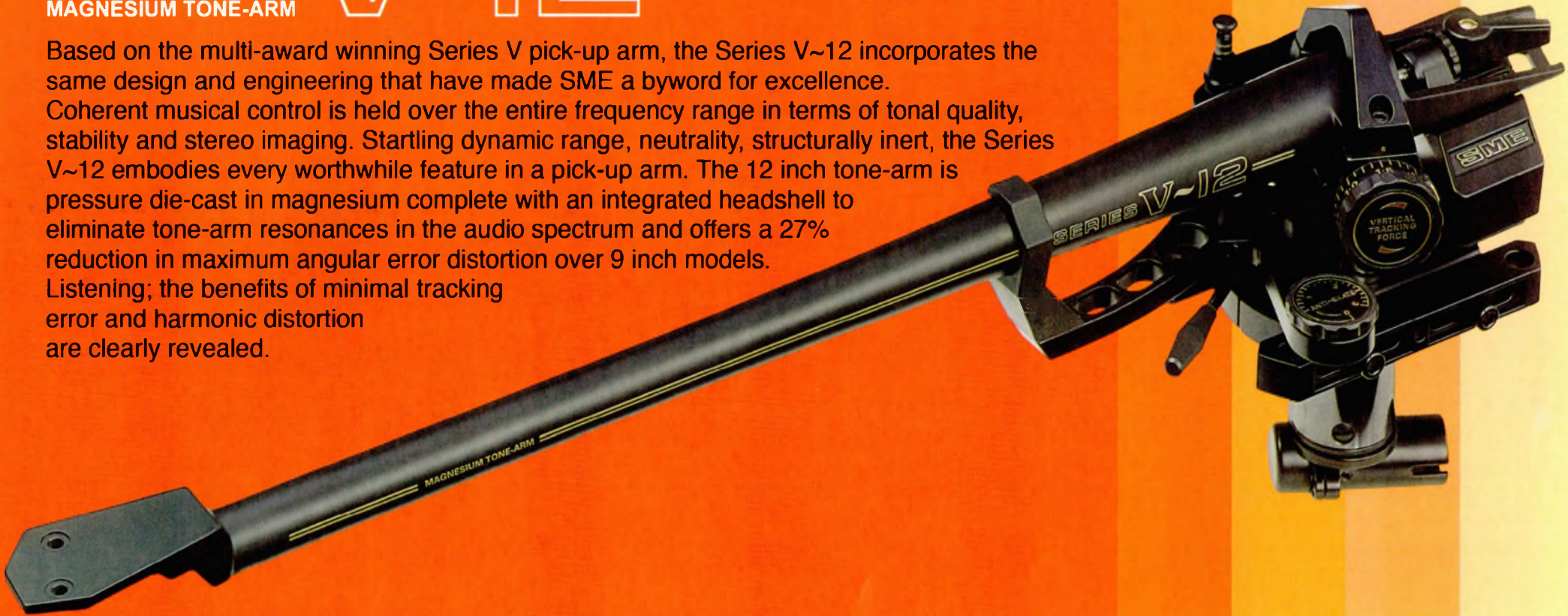
### Frisky

The 47k Ohms setting should deliver the brightest liveliest sound, but if the top-end is ▶

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# SME

*“The best pick-up arm in the world”*



▶ a bit too frisky selecting a lower impedance should help, meaning you can fine-tune things to get the best results from your chosen pickup.

A stereo/mono switch is provided – very important for those who play old mono LPs. Switching to mono cancels output caused by vertical motion of the stylus, and has the effect of significantly reducing pressing rumble and noise.

The PH8 is very revealing, yet not in a destructive manner. It always makes the most of whatever signal you feed it with, so you hear what's right with your recordings, rather than having the bad things emphasised. Here's an example...

While comparing a couple of high-end turntables using another phono stage, we noticed that one of the decks clearly revealed that two guitars were playing at a certain point in a track. With the other (lesser) turntable, this detail wasn't quite so obvious.

However, with the PH8 in the driving seat, you could clearly hear two guitars being used with both turntables. In a sense, the PH8 almost reduced the difference between the two decks, making both sound utterly fabulous.

For years now, we've had it drummed into us that the source component is dominant, holding the key to superior sound quality. Yet the extra 'something' delivered by the PH8 almost made the absolute quality of the turntable seem less crucial.

### Turntables? Who needs 'em!

This represents something of a paradox. I'm not saying you can use any old turntable with the PH8; a chain is only as good as its weakest link. But the need for the front-end to shoulder the full burden of responsibility is much reduced.

Tonally, the PH8 delivers a fairly rich warm sort of sound; full-bodied and weighty. Detail is amazing, but never in the sense of it seeming 'etched' or forced. Things sound smooth, natural, and impressively holographic.

Bass is solid and powerful; the mid-band open and liquid; the highs brilliant and incisive, but sweet. Best of all, there's an impressive three-dimensional 'out of the boxes' soundstage that suggests real depth and space.

Bandwidth is unusually wide, with -3dB points below 3Hz and above 400kHz. On paper, this makes the PH8 potentially sensitive to sub-sonic

noise and rumble. However, in practise there should be no issues given a good turntable.

Distortion levels are extremely low, and gain is a useful 58 dB, making the PH8 is sufficiently sensitive for use with low output moving coil cartridges. You could even use an MC step-up transformer without risk of overload.

### Bring on the Billington

I had a Billington MC transformer to hand, and tried it with impressive results. With most MC phono stages, you would not be able to use a step-up transformer due to problems with impedance and overload. But, with the PH8, it worked well.

We got a much bigger soundstage, with greater 'scale' and wider dynamic contrasts. The sound had enhanced depth, and much-increased presence. Even at a low setting of the volume control, the sound effortlessly filled the room.

The inputs and outputs on the PH8 are single-ended, with variable impedance loading (47K, 1K, 500, 200, 100 ohms), plus Stereo/Mono, and Mute buttons. A choice of silver or black front panels is offered.

The vacuum-fluorescent display offers eight selectable brightness levels. The display can be switched off, but nine small pixels remain dimly lit so you know your PH8 is still powered-up. ▶



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Usefully, all these functions are accessible via the supplied remote control, so changes can be made from your listening chair. There's even a tube meter, so you know how long the valves have been in service.

While the Reference 2 might deliver even better sound quality, the PH8 gets quite close to its more expensive sibling. Near enough, perhaps, for many to consider the difference in price to be too high to justify in terms of the improvement offered.

Certainly, when coupled with a good turntable/arm/cartridge, the PH8 makes listening to vinyl hugely rewarding. No matter how good your digital source (CD, SACD, or hard-drive) might be, LPs still offer a certain extra 'something'.

### EAT to the Beat

Using the impressive EAT Forte-S as our front-end, the PH8 created a big solid richly-detailed sound that was notable for its spacious dimensionality and tonal opulence. Dynamic range was wide, and the music emerged from an inky-black silence.

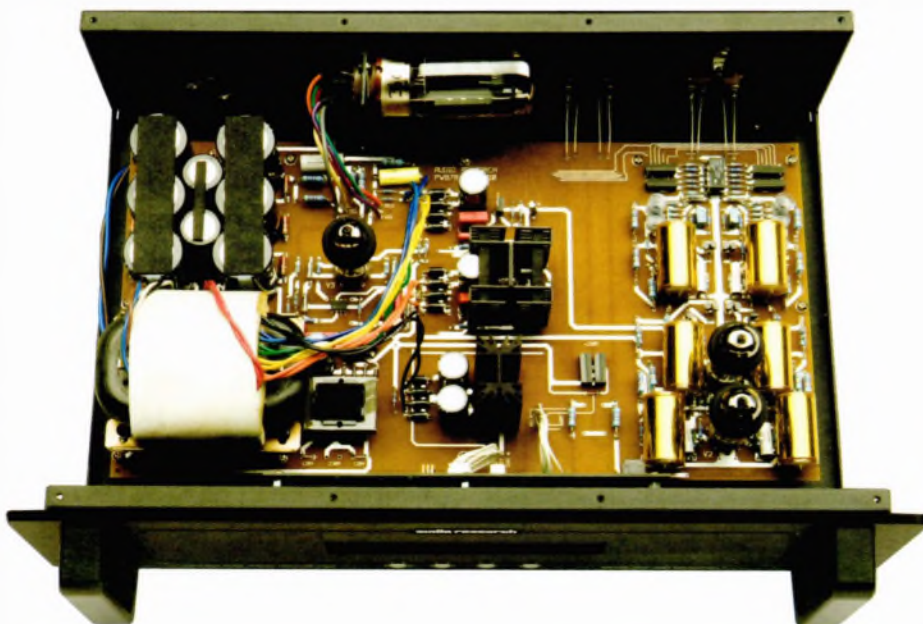
It was akin to listen to CD, in so far as there was no audible surface noise or background hiss. At the same time, the music sounded freer and more natural than CD, with a wider range of tone colours and greater subtlety.

Timing seemed better too, so that rhythms were more tightly sprung with greater forward momentum. Put simply, the music (and performance) sounded truer and more real – as though you were listening to real people playing live.

The PH8 is a fabulous phono stage in every sense; incredibly good sonically, and hugely aspirational. It's such a pity the cost is so high, since it means only a lucky few will ever get to own such an amazing price of kit. Life is so unfair.

But, if you can afford the asking price, definitely go and audition a PH8. We think it will significantly improve on your existing phono stage, almost irrespective of what it is and what it costs, and (probably) leave you amazed and impressed.

The way it brings your vinyl to life is incredible. You'll go through your collection hearing old favourites as never before, which is great. Only trouble is, you may not fancy listening to CD afterwards! There had to be a downside... +



### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Tube/Transistor phono stage for MM/MC pickups

**Origin:** US designed and made.

**Features:** One set of unbalanced inputs. One set of unbalanced outputs. Stereo/mono switch. Variable cartridge loading. Mute button

**Frequency response:**  $\pm$  .2dB of RIAA, 10Hz to 60kHz; 3dB points below 0.3Hz and above 400kHz.

**Distortion:** Less than .005% at .50V RMS 1kHz output. GAIN: 58dB at 1kHz (MC & MM compatible).

**Push buttons:** Power, Mono, Load, Mute.

**Input impedance:** Selectable 47K, 1000, 500, 200, or 100 ohms with 200pF Unbalanced.

**Output impedance:** 200 ohms Unbalanced. Recommended load 50K-100K ohms and 100pF. (10K ohms minimum and 2000pF maximum.)

**Output polarity:** Non-Inverting.

**Maximum inputs:** 70mV RMS at 1kHz (180mV RMS at 10kHz).

**Rated outputs:** .50V RMS 10Hz to 60kHz, 100K ohm load (output capability is 50V RMS output at 1/2% THD at 1kHz).

**Power supplies:** Electronically-regulated low and high voltage supplies. Line regulation better than .01%.

**Noise:** 0.2uV equivalent input noise, IHF weighted, shorted input (74 dB below 1mV 1kHz input).

**Tube complement:** (2) 6H30 dual triodes with JFET input. 6550 and 6H30 as HV regulators.

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 47x13.2x30.5 cm D. Rear chassis fittings extend 1.5 cm.

**Weight:** 6.8 kg Net; 10.5 kg Shipping.

**Price:** £6,299

**Manufactured by:** Audio Research Corporation

**URL:** [www.audioresearch.com](http://www.audioresearch.com)

**Distributed by:** Absolute Sounds

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*Alan Sircom's CES 2012 Show report issue 86 Hi-fi Plus*

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*Audio Beat Jan 09 2012 an article by Roy Gregory*

*"the C1.1's were simply sensational" .."had these two-way stand-mount speakers fallen within my purview, I would have nominated them for Best Sound of Show" Jonathan Valin CES 2012*

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# Antelope Audio Zodiac Gold DAC/Pre/Headphone amp

By Tom Martin

**A**ntelope Audio is one of the increasing numbers of audio companies with roots in the professional audio market, but that also offers some of its products for audiophiles and other sound quality-conscious consumers. This two-market approach particularly makes sense in digital audio, where R&D costs can be high, and thus it is beneficial to spread them over several markets. In addition, in the digital audio realm, the needs of the two markets overlap when it comes to DACs: both need low distortion digital-to-analog conversion.

So when Igor Levin launched Antelope Audio in 2005, he already had 15 years of precision clocking under his belt, from his pro brand, AardSync. The result involved two related technologies, which Antelope describes as “proprietary 64-bit Acoustically Focused Clocking (AFC)” complete with “Oven Controlled Clock”—technologies incorporated in Antelope’s Isochrone-series (where “Iso” = constant, and “chrone” = time) master clocks.

More recently, Antelope has decided to release a series of three versatile Zodiac DAC/preamp/headphone amps, which—significantly—each incorporate Antelope Audio’s clocking technologies as used in the Isochrone clocks. The range includes the entry-level Zodiac 192kHz/24-bit DAC that promises “excellent pro sound quality at a reasonable price,” the mid-tier Zodiac+ with expanded features and that is billed as a “Mastering DAC”, and the top-of-the-line Zodiac Gold, which comes with a remote control and has an optional Voltikus power supply. We tested the full monte.

The Zodiac Gold DAC can process up to 24-bit, 384kHz digital audio files, which should allow a good measure of future proofing. However, Antelope says very little about the DAC circuitry itself, other than that there is no upsampling involved. It incorporates the firm’s signature “Antelope Oven Controlled Clock”; Antelope’s web site shows an illustration that demonstrates how holding the clock at a constant temperature can reduce timing errors from 10 parts per million (ppm) down to about 0.1ppm. On the Zodiac Gold, this means two de-jittered/re-clocked digital audio outputs from a total of six digital audio inputs: one AES/EBU, two coaxial S/PDIF, two Toslink, and one USB. The USB input supports a maximum data transfer rate of 480Mbits/sec, thus supporting up to 384kHz/24-bit data files (and no, that’s not a typo). The Gold also provides a separate BNC clock input for those who might own one of Antelope’s upper end Isochrone-series master clocks.

The preamp section of the Zodiac Gold provides two stereo analog inputs (one balanced via TRS jacks, the other single-ended via RCA jacks) and two sets of stereo analog outputs (one set balanced via XLR connectors with precision trim-able output levels, and one set unbalanced via RCA jacks), ▶

▶ while the headphone amp section of the Zodiac Gold provides two ¼-inch TRS (phone jack) outputs. The preamp uses an analog volume control to avoid any loss of resolution (digital volume controls necessarily throw away data to do their job). This is a gold stepped relay attenuator, for precise channel-to-channel tracking that is accurate to within 0.05dB.

The Zodiac Gold headphone amp stage is taken just as seriously as the preamp section. It features a separate volume control that functions independently from the preamp volume control, indicating that the preamp and headphone amps do not share circuitry. Antelope describes the headphone amp circuit as an “ultra linear, dual-stage” design and it provides switching to optimise the amp for low impedance or high impedance headphones.



The optional Voltikus power supply is a low noise, regulated design. The idea is to further ensure a clean electrical environment for all the delicate signal handling and timing going on inside the Zodiac Gold. A simple yet flexible ‘aluminium unibody’ remote control is included.

The DAC is arguably the most distinctive element here, both technically and sonically. Extensive listening to the Zodiac Gold, and comparison to other DACs over long periods of time reveals that the Antelope has a distinctive way of dealing with some transients. In particular, the Zodiac Gold delivers a cleaner leading edge to treble transients than many DACs. This is true, even when the comparison is with DACs I would rate as very good to excellent. Another way of saying this is that there are DACs that plainly distort the leading edge of, say, notes from cymbals or snare drums, or that can be heard in the upper ranges of pianos or guitars. But even when we go to many DACs whose behaviour in isolation seems exemplary on these kinds of transient sounds, I would say the Zodiac Gold often manages to sound cleaner, and thus more three-dimensional.

By “cleaner,” here, I mean that the rising edges of transient sounds as rendered by the Zodiac Gold. It seems that the initial transient sound as reproduced by the Zodiac Gold exhibits noticeably less overshoot than would be the case with many other excellent DACs. An important and musically significant result of the Zodiac Gold’s clean transient performance is that the rest of the note—that is, the note’s body and decay sounds—don’t get masked by overshoot and other transient problems. Thus you get, overall, a better sense of note-by-note decay and can hear the small signals (for example, subliminal echoes and reverberations) that reveal the space in which the recording was made. This spaciousness is an aspect of the best DACs.

The Zodiac Gold is also well and truly detailed, by which I mean that it is revealing of the kinds of natural low-level information that I referenced above. Frankly, some equipment gets called “detailed,” when in fact it has problems with transient overshoot that create the false illusion of a “better defined” sound.

The other aspect of the Zodiac Gold DAC that I found to be distinctive is its bass performance. My view is that the weighting of the Zodiac Gold’s bass, as measured by amplitude, is quite accurate and normal. And yet, some bass transients via the Zodiac Gold seem to lack the last bit of punch that they have in reality and via other good DACs. In this regard the Zodiac Gold is not alone, in that it reminds me of what I consider the best current DAC available, the Meridian 808.3. Both these superb DACs have accurately weighted bass, but lack a bit of low-end “slam;” I cannot explain the origins of this phenomenon, but there you have it.

I should also say that the sonic characteristics I’ve described are, in the global scheme of things, pretty subtle. I would not recommend running out to purchase a product like the Zodiac Gold if you are looking for a really large or obvious transformation of the sound of your system. This doesn’t mean that you can’t hear the differences on offer here, because that’s not the case at all, but rather that the resulting differences don’t change everything the way a change in speakers, room acoustics or sometimes amplifiers can. (If a product, like the Zodiac Gold DAC, has very low distortion, but in a category where competing products also generally have fairly low distortion, this almost has to be the case.)

Moving on to the preamp section, I was impressed with how neutral the Zodiac Gold is. When I find a really good DAC that has been integrated, as in the Zodiac Gold, with the functionality of a preamp and/or headphone amp, I always worry that those “other function” will turn out to be the weak link. But that is not the case here. Apart from differences in features, I don’t know that you can find a unit sonically superior to the Zodiac Gold until you reach the top echelon ▶

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## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Antelope Audio Zodiac Gold with  
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**Resolution:** Up to 24-bit (supports 16-bit)  
**Sample Rate:** USB, up to 384kHz; S/PDIF,  
up to 384 kHz

**Digital Inputs:** one USB 2.0, two S/PDIF,  
two Toslink, one AES/EBU

**Stereo Analog Inputs:** one set balanced  
(via TRS jacks), and set unbalanced (via  
RCA jacks)

**Digital Outputs:** one AES/EBU and one  
S/PDIF, both de-jittered and re-clocked

**Stereo Analog Outputs:** one  
unbalanced (via RCA jacks), one  
balanced (via XLR jacks—with precision  
trim-able output levels on both  
channels)

**Headphone Outputs:** two via ¼" TRS  
jacks (phone jacks), both with user  
selectable 0 or 120 ohm impedance

**Frequency Response:** 20Hz – 40kHz,  
+0.0/- 0.1 dB

**Signal/Noise Ratio:** 129 db

**THD + Noise:** .0004%

**Dimensions (H x W x D):** 4.4" x 6.5" x 7.5"  
(main unit)

**Price:** £2,595, or £2,995 as tested with  
Voltikus power supply module

**Manufacturer:** Antelope Audio

**Tel:** +44(0)208 133 8355

**URL:** [www.antelopeaudio.com](http://www.antelopeaudio.com)

of today's highest of high-end preamps (products that typically cost quite a bit more than the Antelope does).

But with that said, let me add that many users choose certain preamps, not for their accuracy or neutrality, but for their subtle and presumably euphonic colorations. Their hope, I suspect, is to tweak the overall system sound by selecting a preamp whose colorations (or distortions) complement or offset weaknesses in the other system components. The Antelope is all about purity and neutrality on a 24/7 basis. Interestingly, though, this doesn't mean the Zodiac Gold sounds cold, clinical, edgy, or sterile: it means the preamp sounds natural, unforced, and relaxed.

Similarly, I thought the headphone amp was quite good. It sounds balanced and open, with very low grain. It has enough oomph to drive moderately difficult headphones like the Sennheiser HD800s, but some people might feel that the gain and overall drive capabilities of the Zodiac Gold are not quite sufficient for really tough headphones like the HiFiMAN HE-6. If you are super picky about your headphone listening, you might also find that the Zodiac doesn't quite provide enough high frequency "air" to make you happy.

On Shelby Lynne's "Breakfast In Bed" from *Just A Little Lovin'*, the Zodiac Gold sounded more "analog" than our reference DACs, which is to say it seemed a bit more compressed, but a little less shouty and smoother. The Zodiac doesn't make sharp transient dynamics seem edgy, and at the same time on macro-dynamics that build up over time, the Zodiac seems very stable and coherent. Kate Rusby's acoustic guitar on "I Wish" from the album *10* showed a similar graceful handling of micro-dynamics. Meanwhile, Feist's song "The Bad In Each of Us" from *Metals* opens with some significant deep bass. The Zodiac renders this clearly and with plenty of depth, but I would say that the sound is little less punchy than on our reference DAC. Ben Sollee's "How To See The Sun Rise" from *Learning To Bend* shows the even-handed clarity of the Zodiac. The track shows less treble splash and more open and extended dynamics than our reference DAC and therefore simply sounds more realistic.

The value of "combination" products always depends significantly on which elements of the combination you plan to use. That said, if you think of the Zodiac Gold with Voltikus power supply as a three-piece ensemble (DAC + preamp + separate headphone amp), you could view its price as quite fair. In fact, you could pay much more for each in order to achieve the level of quality on offer here. But if you are shopping in this price (and quality) range, the point is that the Zodiac Gold combines circuits that are competitive in each area, and it puts them in a compact package.

While we're on the subject of packaging, we had mixed feelings about the Zodiac Gold's controls. The build quality and feel is exemplary, but we were much less convinced by the use of a multi-function LED display window to signal various operational modes. Other control functions are also indicated in ambiguous or confusing ways. These switching and display strategies may offer specific benefits for the pro audio community, but they make the Zodiac Gold seem a bit idiosyncratic for audiophiles and headphone enthusiasts accustomed to more conventional components.

Antelope Audio's Zodiac Gold with Voltikus combines a very low distortion DAC that treats the nuances of music carefully, with a highly neutral preamp and a solid headphone amp. If sonic accuracy is a paramount concern, the Zodiac Gold belongs high on your list for products to evaluate. +

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Magnepan Mini Maggie Loudspeaker System

By Chris Martens

**W**ithout a doubt Magnepan has been on a roll over the past few years. First came the 1.7

floorstanders, then the 3.7 floorstanders. Recently, Magnepan has rolled out its new flagship 20.7 floorstander. All three of these tall, thin, dipolar loudspeakers are capable of delivering a big, pure, lifelike sound that is eerily coherent, and of doing so while delivering exceptional value for money. But strangely enough, the firm has also recently released a fourth new model—the compact, three-piece Mini Maggie desktop speaker system (£1,675), which for some reason has gone largely unnoticed.

At the heart of the Mini Maggie system are a pair of small (24 x 36cm), two-way “satellite” dipole speakers, each featuring a 11.4 x 22.6cm planar magnetic midrange driver and a 2 x 17cm ribbon tweeter (a shortened version of the very same tweeter used in the more costly 3.7 and 20.7). Like the large Magnepan, the Mini Maggie satellites are built as a mirror-imaged pair, so that listeners have the options of listening with tweeters oriented outward or inward. Then, to complete the package, Magnepan includes its moderately sized (49 x 57cm) DWM single-panel, dual-channel dipole lower midrange/bass module. The DWM includes built-in crossovers that enable it to work with the Mini Maggie (and several other Magnepan products), so that the game plan is to connect both your left and right-channel speaker cables to the DWM, and then run “stub” cables out from the DWM modules to the left and right satellites.

The entire system was designed specifically for ultra high-performance



desktop listening applications. In practice this means the satellites would be placed on the desktop and toed-in toward the listener, while the DWM panel would be placed on the floor below the satellites, within the foot well of the desk. In short, the Mini Maggie rig is meant for near-field listening environments, where the listener would be seated roughly a metre or so from the speakers.

The Mini Maggie satellites, like Magnepan's larger dipole speakers, need space to sound their best. Ideally, the Mini Maggie satellites should have a metre or more of open air space behind them for best sonic results. If, however, your room/desk arrangement is such that near-wall placement is necessary, contact Magnepan beforehand to seek advice. The firm may be able to recommend (or perhaps supply) suitable damping materials that could be placed on the walls behind the satellites to help tame early reflections.

Its compact, floor-standing DWM mid/bass module is a dipole speaker, and does not behave the way a box-type woofer would. Because the DWM contributes a significant amount of discrete left and right-channel midrange information to support the system's satellites, you'll want to make a point of positioning the DWM in a central location, so that it is equidistant from the two Mini Maggie satellites. Any other location can cause imaging to become skewed and to lose coherency.

Finally, let me point out that while the Mini Maggie system is small and relatively affordable, it is a very serious high-end speaker that should be driven by powerful, high quality electronics. How much power you'll need will be a function of how loudly you like to listen, but with the Mini Maggies as with any other Magnepan speakers, you'll want to choose an amp that's can drive 4-Ohm loads in a muscular way (well-intended but ultimately wimpy integrated amps need not apply). But feed the Mini Maggie system with “the good stuff”, and you can and should expect spectacular results.

I do not use the word “spectacular” lightly, because the Mini Maggie package is a desktop speaker system that sounds uncannily similar to the outstanding Magnepan 3.7 floorstander. I know this claim sounds like ▶

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▶ hyperbole, but it's not (I know this because I spent hours at the Magnepan factory comparing the two systems, and was forced to conclude they really are similar). The key differences between the two, as you might expect, are that the Mini Maggie package offers less deeply extended bass, a less expansive dynamic envelope, and shows somewhat less ability to convey image height. But in all other essential respects—including detail, resolution, purity, freedom from grain, soundstage width and depth, and above all, coherence—the Mini Maggie rig sounds for all the world like a pair of 3.7's on a smaller scale.

When I first sat down to listen to a properly set up Mini Maggie system, I was struck by three sonic characteristics in particular. First, the system exhibited remarkably realistic and convincing spatial properties, producing huge, spacious, and yet precisely defined soundstages of a type few speaker systems of any size or price could match. Second, the system offered unusually lifelike reproduction of musical textures, timbres, and low-level details, conveying a terrific sense of focus. Third, and I admit I didn't see this one coming, the system offered unexpectedly expressive dynamics. It handles both abrupt dynamic shifts in emphasis as well as subtle shadings of expression in the music with terrific speed, energy, and nuance—in the process making the presentation sound believable and alive.

One of my favorite test tracks is the Astor Piazzolla composition "Kicho" as performed by the Blue Chamber Quartet on *First Impressions* [Stockfisch, SACD]. "Kicho" opens with an elaborate solo played on acoustic bass, which ranges so high up in pitch that the initial illusion is of hearing a cello—until, that is, the bass suddenly plunges down into its lowest register, revealing tremendous depth and weight as it does. Later, the bass is joined by a vibraphone, harp, and piano, which together create an interplay of tonalities and textures—all unfolding within a moderately sized space. Each instrument enjoys its "moment in the spotlight," until the piece reaches its exuberant finale, driven forward with propulsive force by vigorous and powerful piano lines.

Taking each instrument by turn, I noted that the Mini Maggie rig gave the bass an appropriately light, breathy, and warm treatment at it initially played in its upper registers, while later revealing the instrument's darker, punchier, and more full-bodied side as it descended into its powerful, but never overblown, lower registers. You would expect the Mini Maggie to sound fine in the upper range of the bass and it did, but it was breathtaking to hear the system tackle the descent into the lowlands, capturing the way those low-itched strings energized first the large, wooden body of the instrument, and then—a split-second later—the entire room. Through the little Maggies, the harp sounded positively luminous, as did the vibraphones, while the attack of the piano sounded lifelike, articulate, sharply focused and riveting. In short, timbres and tonalities sounded spot on through the Mini Maggie system, which did a beautiful job of capturing not just the sound but also the "personalities" of each of the instruments.

The system offered truly remarkable spatial coherency, too, meaning that it effortlessly conveyed low-level sonic cues that showed subtle interactions between the instruments and the acoustics of the recording venue. Finally, the system exhibited surprisingly gutsy dynamics throughout, especially in those moments where the piano urged the other instruments in the ensemble toward a swirl of energy toward the composition's finale. Again, this wasn't so much a matter of the system playing loudly in an absolute sense (though it did reach pretty high levels), but rather a matter of the speed and authority

with which it unleashed brief, concentrated bursts of energy from piano keyboard, the vibraphones, and even the harp, as they spoke in unison.

The spatial characteristics of the system were perhaps even more clearly in evidence on the Michael Tilson Thomas/San Francisco recording of the Copland Organ Symphony. This tiny system creates a huge sense of space, complete with depth, width, and precise instrument localization. While it is true that the larger, floorstanding Magnepans can do an even better job of conveying the size and scale of the hall on this piece (especially in terms of conveying ▶

*"The Mini Maggie rig sounds for all the world like a pair of 3.7s on a smaller scale."*



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▶ image height), the Mini Maggie system is not far off, largely because it does such a terrific job of conveying stage depth and width.

When listening to well-made recordings such as the Tilson-Thomas/SFO performance of the Copland Organ Symphony, it can sometimes be a bit unnerving to listen to the Mini Maggie system, because your eyes and ears can't seem to agree on what they are experiencing. Your eyes register the fact that the Mini Maggie satellites are positioned roughly at arm's length from you upon your desk, while your ears confront a giant soundscape that suggest you are seated in a large concert hall with a broad stage spread out before you, perhaps forty or fifty feet away (talk about a "split-brain" experience!). As when listening to the Piazzola piece referenced above, I couldn't help but jot down this observation: "This system is almost headphone-like in its intensity, focus, and detail, but at the same time it offers the precision imaging and soundstaging of a more traditional full-size speaker."

On the very loudest passages of the Organ Symphony, which I had perhaps turned up to unrealistically high levels, I observed that the system occasionally became a bit strained on full-bore orchestral swells. In fairness, though, this might have been a case where the speaker system would have been fine with big crescendos, but where the amplifier I was using at the time was not quite up to the task. Even so, it was amazing to hear the Mini Maggie package tackle very demanding orchestral material with so much gusto.

The system is no slouch when handling modern pop recordings, either, as I discovered when I put on Imogen Heap's "Bad Body double" from *Ellipse* [RCA]. Part of what makes this track work, apart from Heap's catchy hooks and sly, wryly humorous vocals, is the sheer richness of the techno-pop textures, details, and effects it employs. I was so impressed with the Mini Maggie's handling of these elements that I simply jotted this note: "The 'atmospherics' on this track are phenomenal," rich in their layering and detail, yet well integrated with the musical whole. About the only area

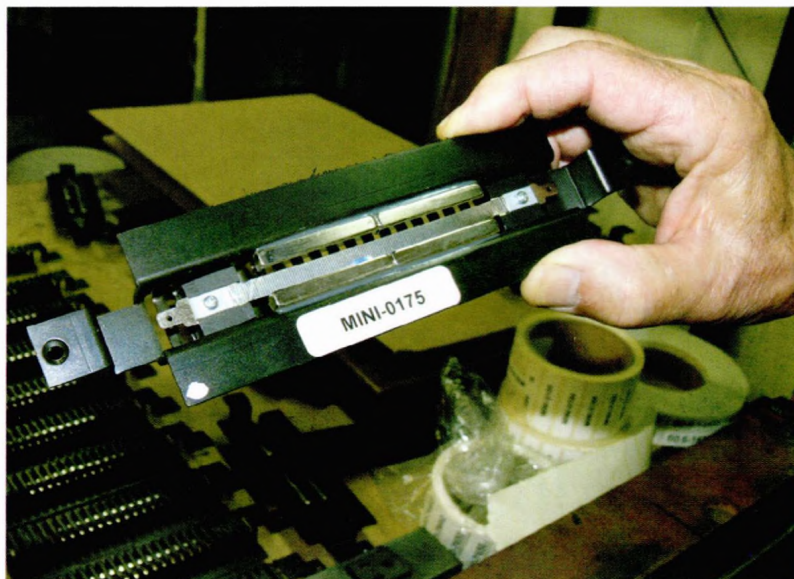
where I found the Mini Maggie system's performance underwhelming involved some of the downright subterranean synth-bass washes found on the track, which either went missing or sounded overly subdued.

Even though the Mini Maggie system was explicitly created for desktop use, some listeners will inevitably ask whether it might also be used as a near full-range satellite/woofer-type system in smaller rooms settings. I discussed this possibility with Wendell Diller and his initial response was to say that, while the Mini Maggies can work in some small-room settings, his opinion was that listeners might be better off choosing one of Magnepan's larger floorstanding models for those applications.

To cut straight to the chase, let me say that the Mini-Maggie system can work well, actually very well, in small-room applications, provided that you are willing to accept certain set-up requirements and also willing to accept a few performance caveats. You'll need a good pair of speaker stands, a powerful, high-quality amplifier, a rectangular room of around 120-200 square feet, and in almost all cases, you will need to add a second DWM mid/bass module to the system in order to get adequate bass performance and optimal overall tonal balance. Toe-in the Mini Maggie satellites (but never the DWMs) toward your listening chair (feel free to experiment with "tweeters in" or "tweeters out" orientations to see which sounds best to you).

When properly dialed-in, the Mini Maggie system as used in whole-room applications exhibits similar sonic benefits to those conferred on listeners by the Mini Maggie desktop system, but the system's dynamic envelope, if you will, effectively becomes narrower in whole-room applications, because you typically will need to turn up the volume to higher levels to get adequate output for whole-room listening. In other words, you are essentially using up a good bit of the speaker system's dynamic headroom, simply to get it to play loudly enough for whole-room use (you may also need a more powerful amp).

Also, the Mini Maggie system's overall tonal balance, and in particular its bass performance, tends to become at least somewhat room dependent—a problem that really never arises when using the system in a desktop audio context. Potential users should be aware that it might take considerable trial ▶



*Mini Maggie ribbon tweeter*

▶ and error experimentation in order to get adequate bass extension and weight (and frankly, some rooms see ill-suited for use with dipole woofers in the first place).

The system's limitation in terms of conveying image scale, and especially image height, become more noticeable in whole-room applications. Even so, I would say the

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### MAGNEPAN MINI MAGGIE DESKTOP SPEAKER SYSTEM

**Type:** 3-way planar magnetic/true ribbon speaker system

**Frequency Response:** 40Hz – 40 kHz

**Sensitivity:** • Desktop satellite modules: 86 dB/500Hz/2.83V

• Mid/bass module: 86 dB/50Hz/2.83V

**Impedance:** 4 Ohms, satellite and mid/bass modules

**Dimensions:** • Desktop satellite modules (H x W x D): 36 x 23 x 3.1cm

• Mid/bass module (H x W x D): 49 x 57 x 3.1cm

**Weight (complete three-piece system):** 18.6kg.

### MAGNEPAN DWM MID/BASS MODULE

**Type:** Planar magnetic

**Driver complement:** 1-way

**Frequency response:** 40 Hz -5 kHz (wideband)

**Sensitivity:** 86 dB/1 meter/100 Hz/2.83 v.

**Impedance:** 4 ohms

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 49 x 57 x 3.1cm

**Weight:** 8.6kgs

**System Price with Dual DWM Modules:** £1,675

**Manufactured by:** Magnepan Inc.

**URL:** [www.magnepan.com](http://www.magnepan.com)

**Distributed by:** Decent Audio

**Tel:** (0845) 6019390 (UK only)

**URL:** [www.decentaudio.co.uk](http://www.decentaudio.co.uk)



Mini Maggie system is at least as good an imager as other systems its size and price, but it doesn't sound as big or expansive out in the middle of a room as it does on a desktop.

On the other hand, you have a modestly priced speaker system that, for all intents and purposes, matches the detail and timbral purity of Magnepan's exceptional 3.7, which is saying a mouthful. Does this mean, then, that the Mini Maggie rig is capable of higher levels of resolution and freedom from grain than the full-size Magnepan 1.7? Yes, it does. The tradeoff, however, is that the power response characteristics of the 1.7 (and of the 3.7) are much better suited for most whole-room applications, and their bass performance is much easier to tap in more kinds of rooms than that of the Mini Maggie system. For many listeners, just as Wendell Diller had predicted, the full-size Maggies would probably be the better choice overall. Still, there's real magic in the resolving power of the Mini Maggie system.

A colleague listened to the Mini Maggies almost slack-jawed in disbelief and then blurted out, "Their soundstaging is so believable and their imaging so precise that I can tell exactly—and I mean exactly—how big the stage is and where each ensemble member is seated. Most £2,000 speakers I've heard could never do this."

But let me supply just one further anecdote, which in a way parallels the story of Jon Valin's first encounter with Magnepan speakers over at TAS, where he mistook the sound of the speakers for that of a real piano. One day I played a very realistic drum recording, "Drum Solo by Dirk Sengotta", from the *Henrik Freischlager Band Live* [XYZ/Pepper]. Suddenly, there was a knock on my listening room door. A relatively shy, quiet member of our office staff poked his head in the door and said, "Forgive me for bursting in on you, but I just had to make sure you hadn't moved a real drum kit into the office, because from just outside the door it certainly sounds like you've got the real thing in here. Could I come in and listen for a minute?"

He was right; the drum kit on the recording really did sound almost real through the Mini Maggies, with the kind of tautness, snap, and definition that only very fine speaker systems possess. But what was even more important was that the Mini Maggies had proven their ability to win friends the old-fashioned way: namely, by making music sound so real that people can't help but stop and listen. Isn't that something we can all appreciate? +



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### EQUIPMENT REVIEW

## Tannoy Definition DC10T

by Allen Kirtz

I had started down the Tannoy review with high hopes of Mercury superlatives. I'd loaded up Adam's 78, and expected to begin my Definition DC10T review with something like "Wow. Half a day later, all I got is 'if you can bang your head when all about you are turning a deaf ear and blaring it on 'too' and 'you like a Tannoy Man, my son?' Hardly worth the effort really, but at least I hope you can sleep safe in knowing the coon goes untroubled for another month."

But the Definition DC10T is worthy of some right words. Because they are. They look good, sound good, are easy to drive, will sound fine in big rooms and small, are practically impossible to blow up (but I believe me), and put a huge smile on your face.

These are the biggest of a three-model range (the others are a smaller DC10T floorstander and a single-two-way-three-way DC10T standmount). The Definition range itself represents the upper-middle Tannoy tier — above this come the Denon and Prestige ranges, and the mighty Angstrom Nova. The DC10T features Tannoy's distinctive 25mm (1-inch) Dual Concentric driver — a large copper paper drive unit with a 25mm "Silk Veneque" horn-carved titanium cone tweeter built into the acoustic center of the drive unit. The tweeter here is one of Tannoy's Woodland designs, extending up into the super-tweeter range. A matching treated pulp 25mm bass driver (only without the tweeter) sits below the dual concentric unit.

Tannoy's love of the super-tweeter (this one reaches to 35kHz) is based in part on the idea that instruments have extended ranges beyond the audible and the Octave experiments that show human brain states are more in line with the original unamplified music when listeners are played with the original unamplified music when listeners are played recorded music that retains the original frequency range. Controversy still rages over the relevance of this in-real-world listening, but regardless, meta dome tweeters that extend far outside of conventional hearing are routinely less prone to ringing effects in our audible range.

The cabinet is a thing of beauty. It's a high gloss curved and elegant tower with two rear firing ports above the tweeter 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 subwoofer's lines don't need to be broken up with a large pleat. It's also not broken up by vents for the speaker grilles, which are affixed magnetically. Physically, the size of speaker demands a medium-to-large room, even though the speaker doesn't seem troubled by the room itself. The speaker is best placed a couple of feet from the rear and side walls, but once again



### EQUIPMENT REVIEW Tannoy Definition DC10T

the speaker is not that lassy and loam bungee can help put the speaker up against the rear wall.

One of the unique aspects of the rear panel is that each speaker terminal is an earthing lug (switched for amplified with a similar grounding terminal, which is used to enhance dynamic range and cut down on SE interference. I say "used to" because usually ground-ready amplifiers were the on-the-ground deal (before when the review was in progress). Before that terminal is some history: various technologies, originally treated components in the crossover network and three-class high purity copper in the hook-up wire.

Like most Tannoy speakers, the DC10T is "humble" with quality over quantity when it comes to amplification. It has a 16ohm input, single-ohm impedance (switchable), but although this means on paper it can be driven by practically anything, it needs greater amplifier muscle than it first seems. It was happier with more power like the Musical Fidelity M8 power amp, used in this test, and with this Dual Concentric driver test would show it was with lower power amps. However, a good low powered amplifier would still do, and the Supra A2 '88 proved a fine performance.

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

My biggest job as a reviewer of these loudspeakers is not to overblow the design strength. It's the difficult, these are usually the most fun you'll have with a set of speakers. Owing them is like having a burlesque show or later they both end up being the same for a party. In the case of the DC10T, you'll end up loving the Pure and Black Field. This is about as good as they get. The reason they can take a bit of punishment, go back in an enjoyable manner without breaking and by doing a wicked bass line.



Perhaps a little 'too' mid-bass, as in the very low end. This is not even quarters, though it's just deep and powerful. This is right up there for some reasons — those of us who love a good bassline will love it even more through the DC10T, but if you listen to the all-midrange EMI in Garage by Led Zep, you get some bass (and it's not real) or not, it's good base, deep power and surprising level of bass. But you need to be one arm your way. Also, Bruce Springsteen in a sentence or have been actually desired to drink up the Angel Young and headlining in an album. The DC10T will have to take its good as very much at the record end of music, maybe that's the worst of music can do to come, but it's not the DC10T's strong point. This is about the

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# EQUIPMENT REVIEW



## Tiger-Paw Khan LP12 kit By Chris Binns

**A**fter forty years of production there is very little to say about the Linn LP12 that hasn't already been said, except perhaps that it must surely qualify for one of the longest standing production units in audio industry. My first experience of this turntable occurred in 1977, having wandered into the shop front that was then the Naim factory. Julian Vereker, at first angrily dismissive having (correctly) surmised that I was a young impoverished student, proceeded to spend the rest of the afternoon playing music and emphasising the importance of the turntable in a hi fi system, something of an alien concept to both myself and most other enthusiasts at the time. The idea that he wouldn't sell me an amp unless I bought an LP12 seemed just weird; and I couldn't get my head around the fact that his preamp didn't have any tone controls. While that first meeting was something of a culture shock, I will never forget the sheer passion and drive of the conversation, something that I had rarely encountered before relating to audio. Move forward a couple of years to a time where I could consider buying a decent turntable, and the Linn / Naim philosophy was beginning to take hold and would in time form a divide in the audio community like no other, radically influencing (if not redefining) the hierarchy that applied to system building. What was less welcome was the accompanying narrow-minded arrogance adopted by many in the industry, an attitude that in this day and age is worse than useless, but sadly still pervades in some quarters.

So I bought a Linn on the basis of its sound, but not without casting a resigned glance back at the precision engineered, beautifully machined Technics/Micro Seiki/Trio alternatives. Lets face it, by comparison the LP12 hardly looked like a definitive engineering statement at the time, with bits of fibreboard, self-tapping screws and a degree of voodoo required in setting it up. Over the years I have owned or used several other turntables that together with CD's as an alternative source, have given me a more enlightened overview of what the Linn does and doesn't do. But whatever its faults, I find a well set up LP12 is never less than engaging and enjoyable to listen to, focusing as it does on the positive aspects of vinyl reproduction while not drawing too much attention to the failings.

At the height of its popularity it was considered heresy to apply modifications unless they originated from the Linn factory, these days it seems to be open season with a multitude of options that cover almost every aspect of the design from power supplies to new motors, plinths and sub chassis.

The Khan explores new territory by offering a replacement for the pressed steel top plate together with a new internal cross brace and fixing hardware, this can be fitted without any modification to the existing unit. The original plate was slightly curved to enable a stressed fit to the plinth, and a degree of inconsistency had to be taken into account during the set up procedure this was an area that could have a major influence over performance. It's also worth bearing in mind that the role ▶

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► played by this component is fairly critical, as it is effectively the foundation (albeit inverted) on which everything hangs or is attached to, looked at from this perspective it becomes clear how much of a factor it plays in the behaviour of the turntable.

Machined from a solid billet of aluminium, both the Khan top plate and the cross brace have a complex milled pattern on both sides to control resonance, the former is tapped to take the studs that replace the original bolts allowing better accuracy to the perpendicular. The surface is a fine blasted to a matt finish, a massive aesthetic improvement over the rather 70's looking original. The top plate is completely flat, and a useful (though not always necessary) addition is a couple of clamps to augment the two fixing studs, that come into their own if for example the plinth is slightly out of true.

The team behind the development of the Khan have collectively had plenty of experience with the LP12, and speaking with Mark Digman, one of the partners in the project it was interesting to discover that 'over engineering' a product is not always the best solution. During the process of prototyping it was found that making the Khan thicker and more substantial effectively killed the performance of the turntable, and the final product is the result of a considerable amount of fine-tuning and listening to achieve the desired balance of attributes.

The first consequence of the Tiger-Paw kit becomes obvious during the process of setting the turntable up, where the greater accuracy and alignment of the bolts allows everything to sit in place more readily, but I admit this was an observation rather than actual experience. Phil March of Phonography originally alerted me to the Khan, and having fitted a few of them kindly offered to do the set up, he also happens to be second to none when it comes to getting the best out of a LP12. The current example dates from the early nineties with Linn modifications up to the Cirkus and an Armageddon power supply, but nothing beyond that. Tone arms used while evaluating the Khan were the Linn Ekos (an early one) followed by a Rega RB1000 and an Alphason HR100S, while the cartridge for the main part was a Lyra Skala.

Possibly one of the most obvious character traits of the LP12 as a basic turntable has always been a tendency toward a 'mid bass hump' or coloration if you will, that resulted in a mildly emphatic quality particularly evident with kick drum and bass guitar. Back in the day with Naim Amplification and speakers such as the Linn Sara, its quite possible that this was a contributory factor in the whole foot tapping / timing issue, particularly given the kind of records I was listening to at the time. These days with a very different, wider bandwidth system (and a ►

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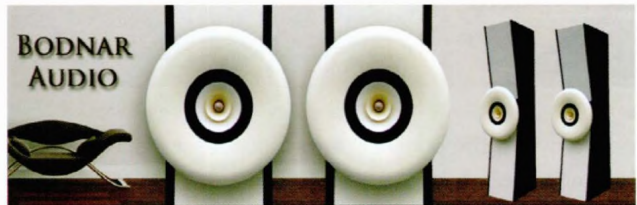
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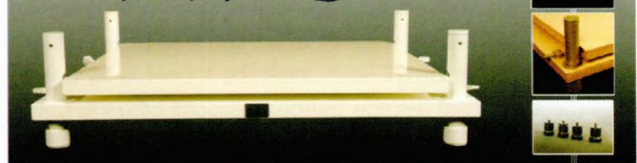
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► broader range of music) it is not as camouflaged as it once was, and although not objectionable is far more difficult to ignore.

The Khan had the immediate effect of reducing this 'bloom' at the bottom end. I will admit that my very first reaction was one of slight disappointment; it felt as if it had taken all the warmth and bass weight with it as well, but the whole system (and in particular the cartridge) was cold, and so was I. A little later that evening everything had fallen neatly in to place, and over the period of a few records it became abundantly clear what the Khan modification was doing. Before describing the changes with the lower registers, I have to mention what for me was the most striking difference – the sheer presence of the music. With the mid range liberated from the now absent enveloping coloration, imagery, sound staging and projection of instruments was noticeably more coherent with a greater sense of projection away from the speakers. This heightened level of definition and clarity extended through the mid and into the high frequencies, coming from what I perceived to be a generally quieter background, with lower surface noise and less in the way of intrusive clicks.

So the bass was definitely more even, but what I found really intriguing was how much lower it seemed to go, reminiscent of some of the heavyweight and very expensive high-end designs that I have lived with. Rather than just a indistinct presence, it had an agile clarity that revealed more information and detail that the pre-Khan Linn could not cope with. I'm not suggesting that it wasn't there previously, only that it tended to get lost amongst the less than well-organised bottom end. The really crucial aspect to this however, is that there was still a great sense of timing, which if anything was more natural and in keeping with the music than before.

Substituting the Ekos for the lighter RB1000 only served to confirm the differences I heard. I've always felt that that there was a mild conflict at the bottom end that somehow masked the full capabilities of the arm on a Linn, this was

far less apparent with the Khan in place. As a result, I heard much more of the fabulously open mid range, speed and attack that I know the Rega is capable of, and it no longer felt as if the arm and cartridge were being held back.

The LP12's success is all about a delicate balance of compromises. Tiger-Paw has identified what could well be a weak point in the design, and empirically come up with a very elegant solution that addresses the problem without disturbing that equilibrium. A lot of the available modifications for the Linn I have heard seem to work on a very 'hi-fi' level, and some end up making records sound a bit like CD's, at which point I lose interest. The Tiger-Paw retains all of the musical qualities that go to make the LP12 so engaging, and the upgrade will work on any LP12 regardless of age or level of existing modifications. However, judging by what I have heard I would suggest that within the turntable hierarchy, the Khan should be an essential upgrade for your Linn before you consider anything else. +



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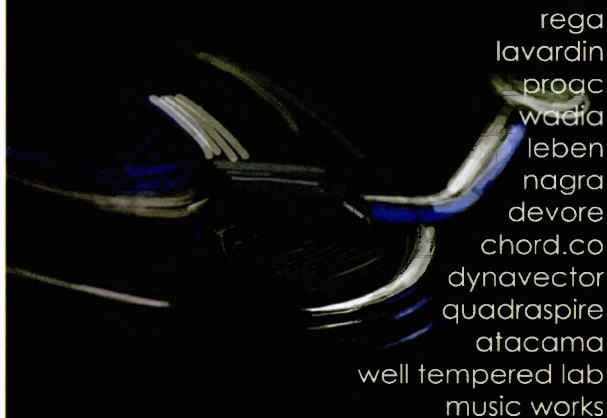
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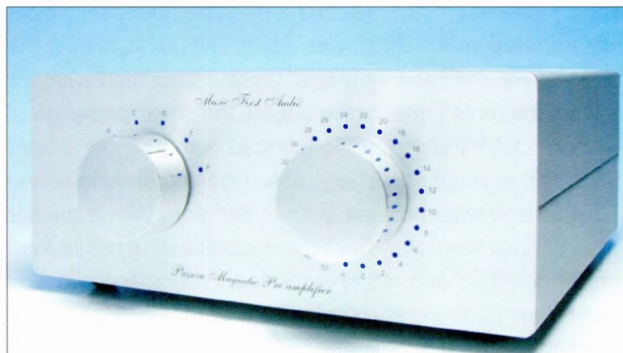
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Is 'Good Enough' good enough?

# music matters

By Alan Sircom

Put two audio manufacturers in a room for a couple of hours and they will end up discussing the 'demographic time bomb'. The 'hi-fi' concept always appealed to the mature end of the consumer electronics market, but where that used to mean someone in their early 30s, it now means someone in their late 50s. The worry is that with so few newcomers getting interested in the hobby, the hobby will eventually disappear. The difficulty is no one knows how to get enough newcomers interested.

It's not going to be easy. The new paradigm is 'good enough', as identified in a 2009 feature by Robert Capps of Wired magazine. It's not compromise; it's a recognition that getting from 'good' to 'great' involves an exponential increase in time, money, energy and all the other things none of us have enough of. So, a landscape photographer might know a 10"x8" field camera delivers the best images possible, but a DSLR is 'good enough' to make good pictures. A Kindle might not be as ultimately as satisfying to read as a really well made hardback book, but it's 'good enough' in most settings. In audio terms, why seek the best massaged 24bit, 192kHz FLAC file when MP3 is 'good enough'?

However, 'Good enough' is not a phrase commonly heard in audiophile circles. Audio enthusiasts are often perfectionists. It's why we tweak... we are never satisfied. Whether it's plugging and unplugging cables to get a better electrical contact, choosing the right equipment table or even lining up those screw heads, we do those things because we are always seeking a better sound. To us, 'good enough' is not good enough. This is understandable, but wrong.

Until we manage to equate the 'good enough' mind-set with the perfectionist viewpoint of traditional audiophiles, I believe we'll always be unsuccessfully looking for new blood. That's easy to write and hard to do, however. Some brands are very good at this; Cambridge Audio, for example, makes products that work exceptionally well both for people who think an iPod dock is the pinnacle of high-end audio and for those who might spend six months auditioning different loudspeaker spikes.

Generally, the 'good enough' generation opts for cheaper products and changes them regularly, while the perfectionists on the other hand often spend a lot more on the products, but also keep them a lot longer. Generally, the 'good enough' generation are highly dismissive of things they consider unlikely to influence the sound quality; things like cables, supports and power products. Generally, the 'good enough' generation isn't that bothered with upgrade paths or with an expensive chase for increasingly better sound. The 'good enough' are not big on collecting or physically owning things either, as they are happy to put such things to the cloud or keep a virtual collection. And frequently play it through the crappy speakers built into a laptop.

We need to work with the 'good enough' generation, on all levels. At the grass-roots level, we all need to re-introduce people to the sound good systems can make. In building our man-caves and making our

hi-fi systems so inaccessible and ornate, we forgot to pass the baton on to the next generation. We need dealers who are willing to listen to the needs of a new generation of customers instead of trying to force them into the paradigms of the previous generations. And we need more manufacturers to make products that include the new without disenfranchising the old.

This is already changing, but not changing fast enough. As some of the old guard is retiring, they are handing over the reins to a newer, younger breed of maker, shipper and dealer. Others are moving with the times, because they are facing up to the significance of the changes to the industry. But there are many who are burying their heads in the sand, pretending the changes away from physical formats are a temporary thing. Some will naturally go away, but others will cling on for dear life, longer than perhaps they should, resisting change all the way.

My hope is that the two can sit comfortably together. If the 'good enough' people began to find there was life beyond the lowest common denominator, and the perfectionist in us all didn't just concentrate on the highest common factor, we might find we have a lot in common. What we all need to do is stop sniping at the other side; people who only listen to lossy compressed files are no more or less stupid than those who think cables make a difference.

It's two ends of the same continuum. +

*"The worry is that with so few newcomers getting interested in the hobby, the hobby will eventually disappear."*

MUSIC INTERVIEW



# Oli Brown

By Jason Kennedy

Oli Brown is a 22 year old guitar player and singer from Yorkshire, whose exposure to Jimi Hendrix turned him into a bona fide blues rocker with a hunger for success at an early age. Oli got his first break at 15 when he went on the road with American blues rockers Blinddog Smokin', he already has two albums under his belt and this year releases a third, *Here I Am* on Ruf Records (reviewed in this issue). He's clearly a very enthusiastic and hardworking guitarist, efforts which helped him win best band – and best album of the year for *Heads I Win Tails You Lose* at last year's British Blues Awards. Despite being of an age that you would expect to have been weened on downloaded MP3s he appreciates decent sound quality and is a major advocate of physical media. I caught up with Oli in one of his brief breaks from touring to find out more.

**JK: How long have you been playing**

**OB:** I've been playing guitar since I was 12 and I've been in this band for five years now. I skipped university, I wanted to start gigging for the education I wanted to get travelling, not really from a school.

I've been touring for four years, when I got signed to Ruf Records they put me on a tour called the blues caravan and from then on I've been touring extensively. I started the band five years ago but for a year we were just playing local gigs and then we got signed four years ago and I've been touring ever since.

**Why blues rock?**

When I was 15 I got invited to tour with a blues band in America for a couple of weeks. It was a lucky opportunity, they really taught me a lot about the music. The following year I went out for two months with them, I'd stay up to the early hours hearing about music and it gave me a lot. They showed me what other artists could do, they showed me DVDs of musicians playing and it taught me a lot about music. I kind of grew in love with the performance side of it, more so than the music side. I loved the way someone like Buddy Guy could hold an audience and make a show. With the songs I do on *Here I Am* I guess blues is an influence but I'm using it as a starting point, I'll do something different with it.

**JK: Presumably you were into the blues before this happened.**

**OB:** Yes, but I was more into the Hendrix style at that point. I was a massive fan of Hendrix for years that was all I really listened to. He went through blues stuff and then he wrote songs which are on a completely different level of songwriting. You can't really put your finger on what genre of music it is, it's genius.

**Have you heard anyone who has managed to pick up where he left off?**

**OB:** Honestly no, not in that kind of sense where it's a whole spiritual different level. I don't think so, there are some amazing songwriters but to take it to that kind of level with that style of signing and songwriting, it's hard to not try and sound like Hendrix when you do it. That's why I never touch a Hendrix song, I could never do one of his songs justice.

**JK: Is there a Brit blues rock revival happening?**

**OB:** I'm not too sure. There's a lot of it going around but I don't know about a revival, I think that the scene is constantly there, I don't think the scene changes. People creep out of it but that whole blues scene is always going to be there at a certain level. If it does go further then great but people need to hear more. Bands like the Black Keys they've taken blues as the roots of an influence but given it something unique, their own sound. On their latest album *El Camino* you can hear the blues influence but they've written something of its own style, that's what any artist needs to do to get to that sort of level. The blues scene is more likely to stay where it is than go any further, if that makes sense.

**JK: So you don't see yourself appearing on Jools Holland next week then?**

**OB:** Not if I was playing blues, that's why I write different tunes. I want to push out into bigger audiences and bigger things but I have to write the songs for that. When you're sat doing 12-bar blues and repeating the same first two lines you're not going to get very far. And also the best people have done that, I can't do a 12-bar blues like Buddy Guy does or Albert King, you only need to listen to them to realise that they've done different than 12-bar blues, they've done the best style of it. I can't touch that, I'm not going to try and copy something that's been done by enough people already.

**JK: Is the band on the album is your touring band?**

**OB:** Yes it is, Scott Barnes on bass guitar and Wayne Proctor on drums. Joel White plays keys on the album and we're looking at sorting out appearances for him because we want

to get a keyboard player into the live band as well, just to give it that bigger sound.

**What are your favourite albums at the moment**

I'm a big fan of the Black Keys, their new album *El Camino* is really good. Tom Waits' new album *Bad As Me* is fantastic as well, I like Tom Waits. My favourite album of his was *Mule Variations* and *Bad As Me* is quite similar. I listen to some old stuff as well, I just got Pearl Jam's remixed version of *Ten* and I just got one of D'Angelo's albums as well, Pino Paladino plays bass on it [*Voodoo*], he's such an amazing bass player I was listening to him all day yesterday.

**Do you have a hi-fi system?**

I have Cambridge Audio. I have a little speaker system in my room; it's sacrilege I know, but I have it connected to a Logitech Squeezebox so I can just find music online. It's not the same quality, I do have a CD player but I got the system a long time ago and I've got used to it now, I like the sound of it so I put anything



on and I get a good idea of whether I like the sound of an album or not. Your ears get comfortable with certain speakers.

**Which speakers?**

I can't remember but they're not great speakers I know that! All the money went on the amp system, I've still yet to sort out the speakers. I'm not at home enough at the moment to use them.

**Do you use an iPod on the road?**

Yeah I use an iPod and I've got some Shure earphones called SEM [probably SE115M]. I'm quite fussy when it comes to earphones and sound quality. I bought some Shure ones a few years ago and I just loved the sound of them so I saved up the money and got the highest grade I could get within reason. There is a difference in sound, with these ones I get to hear things that I otherwise haven't heard on songs, I hear a lot of nuances. Especially on the Tom Waits stuff, there's always little weird quiet things going on in the background. It's made me appreciate how clever he is with the songs, recording and song writing.

**You're almost sounding like a hi-fi nut! Are you part of the download generation?**

I buy CDs. I tend to buy a few tracks of iTunes and then I'll go and buy the CD. I like having the hard copy and also I like hearing WAV audio instead of MP3s so I tend to not put too much on my iPod but put all the tracks on as WAVs. I can't store as much but at least I hear it the best way I can. I like CDs, people spend time doing artwork and booklets, you don't get that on iTunes you just get the track. I always feel like I'm missing something – have I really just bought this album? It doesn't feel right, I love going to buy a new album.

**Who are your heroes, obviously Hendrix is one, anyone else?**

Sean Costello is a hero of mine, I'm a massive fan. Sadly he died at 28, he was a blues rock artist who wrote contemporary blues and had his own style and he was a fan of Tom Waits as well, he just had a similar taste to me. I'm a big fan of the Black Keys and I've been listening to Reef quite a lot as well, they're album has definitely been a reference point for *Here I Am*.

**What's your touring schedule looking like?**

We're in France in March and start the UK tour in April, then we go to Germany in May and then on to north America through July and August, there's plenty going on but I get edgy if I'm not gigging. I need shows! I love being on stage and having fun with people, I've always wanted to be on stage. When I was growing up I wanted to act, I like being in the limelight. Also I love travelling so it's a great job.

Oli Brown's *Here I Am* tour starts in Manchester on April 11th



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# record reviews

## How To Read Them

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

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

*This issue's featured reviewers are:*

**RSF** – Richard S Foster

**JK** – Jason Kennedy

**AS** – Alan Sircom

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**Bap Kennedy**  
**The Sailor's Revenge**  
 Proper Records



50 year old singer-songwriter Bap Kennedy played with Energy Orchard back in the day, and the Belfast boy has worked with the likes of Shane McGowan and Steve Earle. He can also call up some of the best musicians in the business for his latest album... and got Mark Knopfler to ride the faders.

It's a country-meets-folk work, all soft laments and light tones. The recordings are filled with lots of acoustic guitar and mandolin, with some lovely, subtle pipes work and even the inevitable Knopfler-esque finger-picked electric guitar in the mix, and it is both brilliantly performed and recorded, to the point where I'd half-expect to hear this round a the halls of hi-fi shows before too long.

People have focused on the Knopfler element. And while the recording quality has his trademark lush and slick quality, there is nothing wrong with this. The recording can get a trifle big and mushy in the bass with tracks like 'Please Return to Jesus', but even here it's never far from demonstration quality.

Standout tracks include the title track and 'Jimmy Sanchez', but they don't stand out too far, because all 11 tracks are of excellent quality. Excellent songwriting, great musicianship and fine recordings... what's not to like? **AS**



**Gotye**  
**Making Mirrors**  
 Universal



It's a clever thing; making something new that both does and doesn't sound new. Gotye has got it down pat. This, Wally De Backer's third outing manages to sound edgy and new to people who stopped buying albums around the time of Peter Gabriel's *So*. You can't help listening to this album, without harking back to classic Thomas Dolby, Sting, even George Michael references from 25 years ago. And yet, it also manages to sound new and experimental.

The breakout single 'Somebody I Used To Know' is a perfect example of this two-fold style. It's very 2012, but could have been the breakout single to a Peter Gabriel album of 1988, with its clever polyrhythms, deceptively simple orchestration and lyrics filled with mock portent.

Fortunately, the recording quality seems to be stuck in the 1980s too, but in a good way. Slightly overproduced, but not overcompressed, the Gotye sound works because – unlike the 1980s sounds it calls upon – it isn't all Yamaha DX7 syrupy identisynth sounds. The odd thing is, I can't help thinking we'll be liking this one in 20 years time, just as we still like albums like *Aliens Ate My Buick* and *Faith*.

Perhaps good music is timeless after all. **AS**







## Lambchop

Mr M

City Slang

CD 180g

The great thing about Lambchop is you know what you are going to get with each album – something entirely different. OK, so death metal is probably off the list but each of Kurt Wagner's 11 studio albums defy description and whatever description applied to one album will not count next time round. This one – *Mr M* – might best be described as vibrato-infused alt-folk-lounge-country melancholic Americana. Except that it is and isn't any of those things.

This ranks as one of if not the finest work from the collective, in terms of songwriting, flow from track to track and recording quality alike. It's a heartbreakingly beautiful album in all aspects; dedicated to Vic Chestnutt, this is the kind of album you need to listen to repeatedly; it's easy enough a listen that the intensity of the lyrics can wash over you. After a few listens, you get the full effect; it's like finding the whiskey glass two inches out of reach, and being too depressed to drink.

My worry is that I'm not sure where Wagner goes from here. There's something ultimately worn down. He's never been the happiest chap on the planet but even those things that bring him solace seem to have lost their lustre now. I fear the 12th studio album from Lambchop will just be 50 minutes of well-recorded sobbing. **AS**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



## Oli Brown

Here I Am

Ruf Records

CD

For his third album, Oli Brown puts the rock side of his blues-rock sound into high gear. Perhaps it's the new hair, but he's got a definite 1970s hard rock sound to his new power trio. His sound is still very much in the blues domain (and sometimes falls back on his strong Texas blues influences), but we see more of the graunchy side of this young, talented blues guitarist.

He's also proved to have a fine set of lungs on him, too. He can belt out a song on power chords or vocal cords alike, and it's rare for a guitarist to have that powerful a voice. He needs that voice to cut through the mix on tracks like the title track and opener.

The recording is pretty good, although tracks are cut very hot. Tracks like 'Manic Bloom' and especially 'You Can Only Blame Yourself' are on the borderline, though, and I'd prefer a lower average level and more peak level, than everything as loud as everything else. On the other hand, 'Start It Again', 'Devil In Me' and 'Like a Feather' are just good solid rock recordings.

Brown neatly side-steps the 'difficult third album' syndrome, by enough of a change in direction to keep his obvious talent refreshed, but not so much of a sea-change that he loses his growing fan-base.

Top stuff! **AS**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



## Ron Sayer Jr

Better Side

Ruf Records

CD

This classically trained singer-songwriter guitarist from Norfolk certainly knows his chops; very much in the funk-infused, soulful blues style of the likes of the late, great Danny Gatton. Sometimes – like Gatton before him – that mix can be a trifle clunky, but Sayer carries it off thanks to some outstanding playing.

His voice has been likened to Paul Rodgers (you could say that of almost every white blues player under 60, such is the influence of the former Free frontman), but his strength is in his fingers; a mature and precise guitar style, whether snapping out fast paced funk ninth chords, or picking out some fine solos. The rest of the band is tight too, and the recording is generally well sorted, if not the most spacious soundstage on record.

Just two of the dozen tracks on the album are covers, and both covers – 'My Mother In Law' (the Etta James classic) and Tab Benoit's 'Baby Blue' – get a tidy New Orleans soul-funk-blues feel. But for all his frenetic pace on tracks like 'Bad Thing' and 'Baby Blue', he's actually at his best when staying in a solid slow blues such as 'I Ain't Leaving'. This shows his deft touch and intelligent writing and playing alike.

I wonder if he gives guitar lessons? **AS**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



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**Brad Mehldau Trio****Ode**

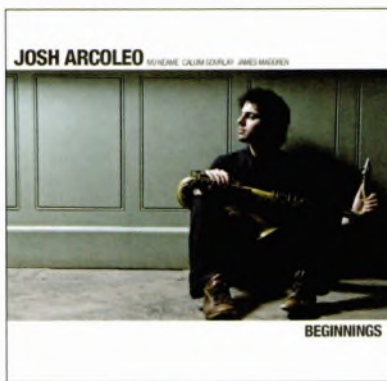
Nonesuch



Brad Mehldau's sets have traditionally been clever and complex reworkings of classic jazz, blues and pop standards. This time though, it's the trio's own compositions; sophisticated odes and eulogies to real and imaginary people. So you don't get to play "what's that tune?" Instead you get a taut take on 21st Century jazz with plenty of classic undertones. It's both technically competent enough to keep the moderns happy, but melodic (well, modal) enough to keep those who think jazz died in the 1960s sweet too.

The trio's first output in six years really steps up the pace. When the trio starts playing the changes, things get fast, but just this side of frenetic. Mehldau's improvised piano onslaught inevitably invites comparisons with the likes of Monk and Oscar Peterson, but this only serves to show what kind of company he keeps. And it's a real ensemble piece too, with outstanding bass playing by Larry Grenadier and top sticks work from Jeff Ballard. It's all very taut, full of bright ideas and gusto.

Nonesuch are also generating a good set of recordings now. Perhaps still not up to the excellent standards set by ECM, but the three instruments sit in a good soundstage, well separated and with good tonality, and with a mix that retains a lot of dynamic range. Excellent stuff! **AS**

**RECORDING****MUSIC****Josh Arcoleo****Beginnings**

Edition Records

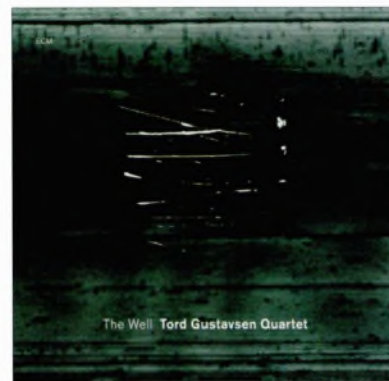


This really lives up to the album title. Tenor Saxophonist Arcoleo is a 23 year old graduate of the Royal Academy of Music and this is his first album. He's assembled a four-piece – Calum Gourlay and James Maddren on bass and drums respectively, with Ivo Neame on piano – that is as intelligent and as lyrical as his playing.

Arcoleo is a supremely competent player, with touches of Joe Henderson-like lyricism and grain to his tone. And yet, many of his compositions have a nervous feel. Whether he's lacking the confidence to match his chops and that will grow with time, or whether that will be a part of his style in the future, only time will tell. But he already has the trappings of greatness about him and his playing and his compositions, of which the title track is perhaps the most left-field and interesting, but tracks like 'Glade' mark him out as cut from the New-Cool cloth.

Edition has done a nice job with the recording too. It's slightly lush and woody in the bottom end but with some acoustic ambience in tow, which gives it the right sense of historic placement to it. It's more Sunday at Dingwalls than Sunday at the Village Vanguard, but the close-knit mix works well here.

This really is a beginning, and we are going to see a lot more from someone this talented. Highly recommended. **AS**

**RECORDING****MUSIC****Tord Gustavsen Quartet****The Well**

ECM



After 2009's *Restored, Returned* Norway's most enigmatic pianist returns with a slightly smaller band and a more familiar sound. The human voice is no longer featured but Gustavsen, double bass player Mats Elertsen and drummer Jarle Vespestad are joined by Tore Brunborg on tenor sax, a line up that has developed into a well honed unit as this album reveals. All four players gel effortlessly, moving like a shoal with Gustavsen's subtly Bill Evans inflected lead in the centre. They manage that clever trick of making gentle music that's interesting, play it quietly and it's relaxing but turn it up and there's plenty to engage with. Brunborg fits in effortlessly providing timbres and soundscapes that flesh out the trio. He takes centre stage on some pieces but is never in your face, realizing that you can make an impression by playing subtly as long as you don't lapse into bland smoothness.

The colours he brings fit into the nordic shadings that made Gustavsen's name without walking over them. While there are reflections of his first three albums, there are plenty of differences too, specifically a greater use of melody and also more density in places. If anything it moves in the direction of EST but at a more measured pace and with rather more depth as a result. The ECM recording is as ever pristine. **JK**

**RECORDING****MUSIC**



**Jeremy Pelt**

CD

**Soul**

HighNote

In a way, this should be called the Jeremy Pelt Quintet, because on *Soul* – the group’s fourth album together – it’s very much a team effort. That said, it’s clearly led by that trumpet and flugelhorn. Pelt is being (for once, rightly) compared to the likes of Miles Davis, Lee Morgan and even Freddie Hubbard, but it’s his work as an arranger that strikes you here and as such it’s hard not to think of him channeling a young Wayne Shorter. No, really.

With the exception of a short lyrical interlude from Joanna Pasquale in ‘Moonglow’, the seven tracks are all instrumentals, featuring fine tenor sax work from JD Allen, crisp piano playing by Danny Grissett and a tidy rhythm section featuring some very noteworthy deft bass from Dwayne Burno and Gerald Cleaver on drums. Pelt is on fine form too, but he steps away from the limelight enough to show just how good an ensemble this quintet really is.

The Joe Marciano engineering falls somewhere between the sound of classic Blue Note recordings and their bright RVG remasters. It’s a modern, clean and dry recording filled with instrumental detail rather than endless ambience. Nevertheless, it’s a fine addition to the jazz canon. I can’t imagine anyone who likes hard bop or modal jazz not adding this to their collection. **AS**

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**



**Roger Glasper**  
**Experiment**

CD 180<sub>g</sub>

**Black Radio**

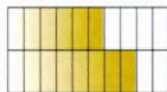
Blue Note

Jazz cannot exist in its own little bubble. Without new styles and influences and without new people discovering the idiom, it risks withering on the vine. Fortunately, people like pianist Roger Glasper are always on hand, to crunk up the whole thing. And crunk it up he most definitely does on *Black Radio*.

I’m always hesitant when it comes to huge collaborative events, and having names like Erykah Badu, Bilal and Mos-Def on the line-up could spell a giant mess of sound. Fusions of soul, jazz and hip-hop have been done with varying degrees of success. This is definitely one of the higher points of the genre. Viewed as a series of solo tracks, *Black Radio* could be misread as failed fusion experiments, but taken as a whole, the album sets out what could be a formula for 21st Century jazz. That takes ambition, and it’s that ambition that Glasper has in bucketloads.

I’m not a fan of the jazz-meets-hip-hop tracks, because they sound clunky, like a Death Metal String Quartet. Also the vocoder with a back-beat cover of Nirvana’s ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’ was probably ill-advised, and highlights the over emphasis on the rhythm – as if the drummer was the last person to tell the engineer to turn it up. But as a whole concept, it deserves high praise. **AS**

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**



**vijay iyer trio**  
**accelerando**

ACT

CD 150<sub>g</sub>

**Vijay Iyer Trio**

**Accelerando**

ACT

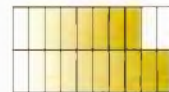
Following up on the trio’s 2009 hit album *Historicity*, pianist Iyer, bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Marcus Gilmore join forces once more to create an album of now, and the wow of now.

Vijay Iyer enthusiasts might remark that he’s ‘done’ Michael Jackson’s ‘Human Nature’ before, but this time it has an energy, aided by some very quirky off beat, off kilter drumming, which gives the whole track a radically different feel. And the title track brings electronic percussion to the party, making for a sound that keeps you on your toes and tweeting.

There’s a lot of contemporary riffs and modern elements suffused through the whole album, but you need to know your obscure musical influences and less well-known regions of the jazz canon. And, although an ensemble, it’s very much Vijay Iyer that takes the lead.

In a way though the most powerful influence is possibly early Kraftwerk (from the *Ralf & Florian* days, the cuts that sadly didn’t make it to the recent box set). It could easily drift into noodly navel-gazing experimentation, but stays on the right side of musicians playing with their music. The end result could well be the sort of piano work jazz students will be studying in years to come. A good close-knit recording too, one that lets the dynamics breathe. All told... brilliant! **AS**

**RECORDING**  
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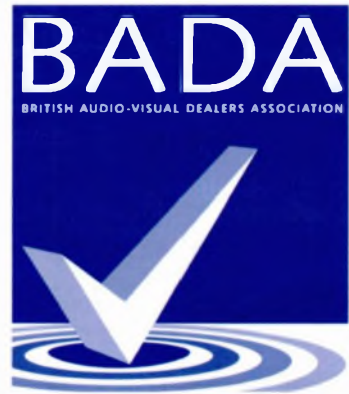
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**Johann Sebastian Bach**   
**Sonatas and Partitas,**  
**BWV1001-1006; Johanna Martzy,**  
**violin. Testament SBT2-1467;**

Johanna Martzy is a violin icon. Her performances display a high level of technical skills with outstanding rhythm and a beautiful tonality. Whatever Martzy seems to play, the performances are never rushed or hurried. I have had these performances in many forms over the years: LP, CD and reissue records from [www.coupdarchet.com](http://www.coupdarchet.com) and now Testament. The Testament reissues are as good as they get on silver disc and I'm glad to have them.


There are so many performances of these works on disc and almost every violinist today has recorded all or part of the complete sonatas and partitas, but Martzy has my heart. Martzy is not a showy or exhibitionist type player. She has a deep understanding of these works and she matter-of-factly displays how beautiful a violin can sound. To my mind, these are the finest performances of these works I've ever heard and that includes performances by Joseph Szigeti, Emil Telmányi and Jascha Heifetz. I consider performances today more technical than romantic and while I am impressed with the soloists mentioned above, Martzy is the one for me.

**RSF**

[www.testament.co.uk](http://www.testament.co.uk)

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**



**Dancas Brasileiras**   
**Sao Paulo Symphony Orchestra**  
**conducted by Robert Minczuk.**  
**Bis-SACD-1430.**

This disc was recorded in sessions in April and December 2003; why it took so long for Bis to release this is unclear, but I'm glad it's here now. "The Sao Paulo Symphony Orchestra of symphonic works, tone poems and operas by Villa-Lobos, Camargo Guarnieri and other Brazilian composers, have demonstrated the variety of their national music, and in the same way this disc brings proof of the rich and many-faceted nature of Brazilian dance." This disc is nothing but plain fun. It's filled with music I've not heard before and a few pieces I know intimately.

We are given demonstration sound on both the SACD and CD layers here and it just doesn't get much better than this. Villa-Lobos is probably the most famous of Brazilian composers but I can assure you that compositions by Nepomuceno, Levy and Lorenzo Fernandez are all of equal importance. Two pieces by Alberto Nepomuceno open the program in ebullient style and performances just continue to get better and better. There is great height and depth to the orchestra recorded here and it's just wonderful. Highest recommendation.

**RSF**

[www.bis.se](http://www.bis.se)

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**



**Vincent D'Indy**   
**Symphonie Sur un Chant**  
**Montagnard Francais, Martin**  
**Helmchen, piano. Camille Saint-**  
**Saëns: Symphonie No. 2 in A minor,**  
**Op. 55; Ernest Chausson: Soir de**  
**fete, Symphonic Poem, Op. 32.**  
**Orchestre de la Suisse Romande**  
**conducted by Marek Janowski.**  
**PentaTone Classics PTC 5186 357.**

A truly French disc, the St. Saëns symphony is something that has yet to appear as well as the Chausson poem. Helmchen does a wonderful job with the D'Indy piece-holding his own during the climaxes and his skillful handling of the slow movements make for an interesting and insightful performance. The venue I believe is probably Victoria Hall in Geneva which gives a very reverberant sound to the mix. Saint-Saëns' Symphony is not oft recorded-mostly we hear No. 3 with the grand organ in the finale.

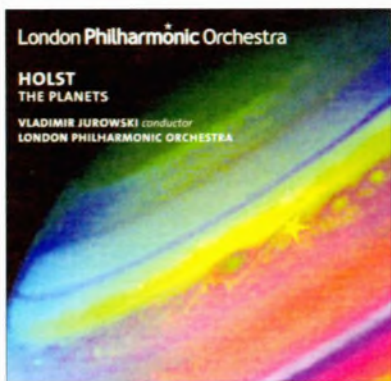
Janowski does a superior job of fleshing out the orchestra and what could be a 'dull' work takes on a great place in the musical repertoire. Ernest Chausson was a bit of an odd man out when considered against many 19century composers. He came from a very wealthy family and actually was trained as a lawyer. This Symphonic Poem is a fitting way to end this delightful disc. SACD or CD, you'll love this release.

**RSF**

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**Gustav Holst**



**The Planets Suite; London Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir. Orchestra conducted by Vladimir Jurowski, Chorus led by Neville Creed. Compact Disc recorded at Royal Festival Hall, London; LPO 0047.**

I have enjoyed Holst since my earliest days listening to Classical Music and have enjoyed many performances along the way. At just 43 minutes, the forces here are moving at quite a hectic pace: almost three minutes faster than Boult's classic rendition. 'Mars' takes on a new brutality that seems to suit the excerpt quite well. 'Venus' is just lovely and here Jurowski slows the pace and we get to catch our breath. 'Mercury the Winged Messenger' takes over. It reminds me of a courier service late with their parcel.

Fast pace notwithstanding, I thoroughly enjoyed this budget disc. The sheer quality of the playing and the recording, from a concert at the Royal Festival Hall in London in May last year, make it well worth considering. And that's the key to this disc: exceptional musicianship from the Orchestra following an outstanding conductor. If you're looking for a demo quality performance of an old war horse, look no further. Truly outstanding in every way.

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**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**



**March K.445; Divertimento K.334 & Oboe Quartet K.370. Scottish Chamber Orchestra Ensemble directed by Alexander Janiczek (violin). Linn CKD 376**

Linn and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra (Ensemble) continue their tradition of outstanding performances and superlative sound quality of the works of Mozart. This a joyous outing from beginning to end.

The Divertimento has 6 movements comprising of an opening sonata form Allegro, a set of variations (which Linn has given one track to each of the theme and following six variations), a Menuetto & Trio, an Adagio, a Menuetto & "double" Trio and a concluding Rondo finale. "The tone of the strings is pure but radiant. There is no overt virtuosity on display for these players (all principals of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra) they put themselves entirely at the service of Mozart's delightful score. The Rondo finale underlines the finesse and delicacy of the playing and cannot fail to place a smile upon the face of even the most jaded listener."

While the CD layer is of exceptional quality, the joy is really on the SACD layer. Most energetically recommended.

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**Romantic Overtures**



**Württembergische Philharmonie Reutlingen conducted by Ola Rudner. ARS 38 083. Works by Weber, Spohr, Meyerbeer, Mendelssohn and Wagner.**

Ola Rudner was not a name I was familiar with but having heard this delightful disc, I will keep my eyes and ears out for other performances. The orchestra here is in top form and the entire disc makes for an outstanding listening experience. Each overture is a jewel and the recorded quality by the engineers is second to none.

Three of the eight overtures presented were composed by Carl Maria von Weber and begin with Abu Hassan followed by Oberon and then Der Freischutz. I especially enjoyed Abu Hassan and I'm sure you will also. There is a very insightful and introspective portrayal of Mendelssohn's 'New Hebrides' that I particularly liked. The sound quality, as mentioned earlier, is excellent. This could easily become one of my demo discs-it's that good. While the SACD layer is especially warm and lush, the CD layer fairs quite well. There is a generous 68+ minutes of music and there is absolutely nothing to find fault with. The orchestra and conductor here are exceptionally talented and I strongly recommend this disc.

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## The Concept Album

# every home should have one

By Alan Sircom

If you are aged somewhere between 40-65, male and were perhaps a bit socially awkward in your late teens, chances are you have a concept album in your record collection. Remarkably, although the concept album's Golden Age was the decade from the birth of psychedelia in the late 1960s until Prog Rock was gobbled to death by Punk in the late 1970s, they exist to this day. Now, when pundits mourn the death of the album, a collection of tracks with a distinct beginning, middle and end seems alien. But, while they might not be the most popular genre in rock, the concept album is still going. If not exactly going strong, people are still making concept albums. And that's brilliant!

Although it could be argued that some of Frank Sinatra's Capitol Records era output (such as *Come Fly With Me*) represents the first concept albums, it's generally considered that the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band* was the first commercially successful concept album. Its success, coupled with the ability for rock musicians to extend the idiom beyond an individual song, quickly established a medium that would prove popular and durable. It would create some of the most memorable albums and songs ever known, and some of the longest drum solos.



Through the first few years of the concept were dominated by British bands; British Invasion groups like the Kinks and the Who quickly followed in the footsteps of the Fab Four, while up-and-coming groups like The Moody Blues, King Crimson and Pink Floyd were also developing what would become progressive rock and took the whole concept album to new places. Hugely successful albums like *Tommy*, *Days of Future Passed*, *In the Court of The Crimson King* and *Dark Side Of The Moon* and the rise of Prog meant concept albums would become hugely popular in the early 1970s.

A second wave of acts quickly latched onto the concept album. Yes, Genesis, ELP and David Bowie in the UK, Kraftwerk in Germany, Rush in Canada and many more all made. In a way, progressive rock was both the making and the breaking of the concept album in the UK, but in America, the concept album was not tied with any specific genre, and as a consequence acts as diverse as Marvin Gaye, Alice Cooper and Frank Zappa all added to the concept of concept albums.

Punk's ethos meant the late 1970s and most of the 1980s were a lean time. Nevertheless, the pomp of 1980s pop did deliver a few gems, including ABC's *Lexicon of Love* in 1982. Instead, the concept album became the preserve of the heavy bands; in the early 1980s, it was the stadium rock acts like Styx and Meatloaf, later it became the metal acts like Queensrÿche that carried the concept album baton.

The 1990s saw the growth of progressive metal acts like Dream Theatre, Opeth and Jane's Addiction, Britpop megastars like Blur and alternative rock kings such as Radiohead and The Smashing Pumpkins dominated the music scene with a spate of true concept albums. The concept album was back.

While the early 21st Century saw concepts like *American Idiot* from Green Day and Tool's *10,000 Days*, the shift away from owning CDs to downloading tracks looked as if it would spell the end for the concept album. But remarkably, the second decade of the 21st Century has shown the concept album still has resonance. The concept album is still a force to be reckoned in the metal idiom and bands like Muse and Coldplay have even shown a return to progressive rock ideals with recent concepts. In the last year, we have seen grand concepts from Danger Mouse and Danielle Luppi (*Rome*), P J Harvey (*Let England Shake*), Richmond Fontaine (*The High Country*) and Air (*La Voyage dans la Lune*). Air's album in particular is only two wigs and a kaftan away from sounding like a Rick Wakeman album from the 1970s.

Despite a world far removed from the psychedelic age of the Beatles, the pomposity of the age of Prog and the menace of dark metal, the concept album survives. So, don't be too ashamed of that three-LP copy of *Yessongs* anymore. Just remember that when your kids are listening to the latest Linkin Park album, they are doing exactly what you were doing back in the day, just with less patchouli oil. +

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