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UPGRADING: IS IT WORTH IT?

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editorial

It's that time again. It's the audio 'season'. In the past, when nights drew in and people stopped enjoying the Summer sun, they used to think of nothing better to do than to curl up in front of a nice warm valve amp and listen to some fine sounds on their fine hi-fi. From September to March, the stores were full of people buying audio equipment and seemingly every week another manufacturer or six would pitch up at a hotel and run a mini-show.

Those days are over. There's much less seasonality in audio buying these days. But those six months of the year when nights are longer still attract a disproportionate number of audio shows around the world. The seasoned audio rep might see his kids go to their first day back at school and not see them again until Easter, living out of a suitcase for weeks at a time.

The UK's big season event is just around the corner. The National Audio Show 2012 will take place once again at Whittlebury Hall, Northants, on the weekend of September 22nd and 23rd. And as ever, we will be there. This time we will be chairing an 'Ask The Experts' session where the combined brain power of audio's greatest and good will be assembled to answer your questions. Our combined IQs must stretch to beyond 100, so don't be surprised if we come up with a touch of genius.

There will be lots of first-rate audio on demonstration at Whittlebury Hall, but the one thing that might not be there in great numbers is upgrade paths. It's heroically difficult to demonstrate a series of upgrades in a show setting. Typically, the only way people do this is through timed demonstrations. But this month, we've caught upgrade fever. Not only do we walk you through the whole

systematic equipment upgrade path from the most basic integrated amplifier to a complex pre/power supply/power amp system, but also we take you through the latest – and free – changes to the excellent Devialet D-Premier.

It is with great sadness that we have to announce the passing of Enzo Natali. Founder of Audio Natali in Italy in 1959, Enzo was one of the most important early exponents of high-end audio in Europe. He was pivotal in bringing brands such as Audio Research, Krell, MartinLogan and Wilson Audio to a wider, international market and thereby ensuring high-end audio values extended far beyond the boundaries of the USA

Although his declining health meant he passed the running of the company over to his sons Luca and Marco, Enzo was always a strong influence in Audio Natali. He will be fondly remembered as one of audio's true gentlemen and sorely missed by all those who knew him.

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

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incoming!

Dealer delight

Reading the letters page in issue 90 (Audio's Grey Future), I was reminded of a time way back in the 1980s, standing in a shop in Shortmead St, Biggleswade hearing my first Rega turntable. I knew immediately I was going to buy this deck, with an RP77 cartridge on the black vinyl. The dealer actually asked me what do I hear, instead of telling me what I should be hearing. And what I heard was the deck was as good as any CDs.

The next upgrade was Russ Andrews' RP77 (ex-dealer demo).

All I can say is thank God for dealers like this, because without them I wouldn't have listened before I bought my hi-fi and would have never reached that standard where what I can hear on the hi-fi is close to what I hear live, which is what we all can but strive to.

Can I just ask Fred O'Connor to try a turntable at any good dealers and see what he can hear too. As with CDs, LPs are not dead either. Just try it and see.

Peter Scott, via email

It is worth bearing in mind that we have 30 years of CD development and, although many of the digital design elements are common to both, most audio companies have less than a decade's design time in the computer audio domain. Even those who are unconvinced of computer audio's sound today should remember that many audiophiles felt it took until the mid 1990s to 'crack' CD. If you think computer audio doesn't make the grade today, there's nothing to prevent it from making the grade tomorrow.

We need some leeway to continue to experiment with all aspects of computer audio to find out what does and does not make a difference. Whether the computer+DAC, networked audio or music server solution proves to be the best way of making music remains unclear today. But I believe there is a future, so I don't think the future of audio is quite as bleak as you paint.

Finally, Meridian has not stopped making CD players... it still has its M80 compact system and flagship 808.3 Signature Reference players on its Dealers good – and not so good – are struggling at the moment. It's good to hear some praise for their services. I suspect the way the ones that

“I also know that solid-state amplifiers have considerably lower distortion, vastly better damping factor, more flat frequency response and are generally more reliable than tube amplifiers. And yet, when I listen, I always end up preferring these older, more flawed devices.”

survive our 'interesting' fiscal recovery will cope is by increasingly providing a service 'package' above and beyond the call of duty. Unfortunately, the salad days of the 1980s are behind us. Making a good sound is just the first step today – Ed.

For better or for worse?

I have a significant personal conflict between the science and the art of audio. From a technical perspective, I know that vinyl has an objectively worse signal-to-noise ratio, a less even frequency response and a propensity for wow and flutter that makes digital audio a better prospect. I also know that solid-state amplifiers have considerably lower distortion, vastly better damping factor, more flat frequency response and are generally more reliable than tube amplifiers. And yet, when I listen, I always end up preferring these older, more flawed devices over newer, more objectively correct alternatives.

I am quite willing to accept this might be my own nostalgia at work, but I am in my mid-30s and by the time I was buying music, vinyl and tubes were already legacy and nostalgia is not an issue. And yet, I can't shake the concept that they sound better. Why is this?

Scott Pike, via email ▶

Legend



History is made. Legends are crafted.

TRANSCENDENT

"This is an open window into the control room, yes, but more importantly it's endlessly satisfying with it. It's like a musician's musician's speaker; capable of deep levels of insight into what's going on in a recording."

"..these loudspeakers do sensationally well with orchestral music (their dynamic range serves up those tympani with shock and awe on Pickard's 'Flight of Icarus'), they also start and stop with the sort of speed that's needed to play bangin' dance music."

Alan Sircom, Hifi+ issue 78

IDEA

"Tonally spot on, the overall presentation gives a sense of individual musicians working together, and the voices of those instruments, and the singers hanging together beautifully."

"..there's a physical authority to the sounds emanating from the Idea that makes the speakers so easy to get on with. And that's the big bonus of the Idea. You sit in front of them enjoying your music. A lot."

"These speakers are tonally accurate and they don't favour any end of the musical spectrum – I moved from Mozart to Pavement in short order and the Idea brought out the tonal majesty of the former and the gritty energy of the other in equal measure."

Which puts the loudspeakers in a class of their own."

"For those who crave a big image in a small room, I can't think of a better design whatever the cost."

Alan Sircom, Hifi+ issue 84



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“I wonder if this is something sexual. Thrusting your dongle into an open slot certainly sounds like it’s something more than just finding the way to the best sound quality. Or am I missing a trick?”

- *If I could answer this one succinctly and in the process resolve one aspect of the whole ‘objectivist vs. subjective’ audio turf war, I’d be on my way to that Nobel Peace Prize.*

The cognitive dissonance you feel is shared by many and in a way, the best way to resolve this is not to resolve it at all. If you enjoy the sound of vinyl, enjoy it. The same applies with valves (tubes). If you want to analyse your reasons for liking these things, feel free to do so. If the result of such analysis means you find new appreciation for solid-state or digital... great. If instead such research serves to deepen your love for turntables and tubes... that’s great too. Just remember in the process that not everyone will share your conclusions, and never lose sight of the reason why you got into this in the first place – the music – Ed.

What Would Freud Do?

Having happily made the jump to computer audio (a Squeezebox Touch and a Rega DAC, with a Netgear ReadyNAS in another room providing the storage), I can understand the reluctance for some to make the jump. As it means your CD collection is on display, this can be impressive, after all.

What I don’t get is the so-called ‘sneaker net’ idea, where you store all your music on one computer and then use a USB thumb drive to store the music you want to play in a session and physically move the media from your home computer to the hi-fi system. A friend of mine swears by this method, because he thinks it gives all the benefits of computer audio with none of the downsides.

Given the main benefit of computer audio (in my opinion, at least) is the convenience of having your whole music collection to hand, the ‘sneaker net’ concept strikes me as having all of the downsides of CD with none of the benefits.

I wonder if this is something sexual? Thrusting your dongle into an open slot certainly sounds like it’s something a bit more than just finding the way to the best sound quality. Or am I missing a trick? Certainly, whenever I’ve heard his way of doing things next to mine, mine sounds no different to me.

Robert Difford, via email

Are you still friends? I’m not sure many friendships would survive so Freudian a reading of their listening habits.

I’ve encountered a few people who like the idea of the ‘sneaker net’ and devices like the Bryston BDP-1 are intrinsic to this way of working. I’m not completely smitten with the idea because, as you say, the convenience of computer audio systems placing all your music at your fingertips is one of the primary benefits of the concept. Nevertheless, each to their own; audio remains a broad church to cope with people using USB drives, CD players and hard disk without undermining the whole audio caboodle. Enjoy it, and enjoy the differences. – Ed.

Getting to the core of music

A couple of years ago, a fire in the apartment below mine destroyed virtually all of our possessions (including my system and all of my record collection). The emotional impact of losing practically everything is enormous, but it puts the whole significance of audio and music replay into focus. Our insurance coverage didn’t prove as thorough as we hoped and as a consequence I had to seriously downsize our plans. My audio system ended up being about a tenth of the size and one-fiftieth the cost of its predecessor and in restarting the process of collecting discs, I have amassed about 250 ‘core’ recordings instead of the 6,000+ albums I used to own.

Curiously, I’ve found I both enjoy listening to music more through these reduced circumstances, but actually find I get more out of that limited album selection than I did from my previous ‘library’. Is it possible that there is a ‘tyranny of choice’; if you have a system that can play everything, and you have a wide range of music to play on that system, you end up spending more time choosing music than playing music?

I don’t find myself needing to upgrade my audio system and don’t find myself longing for the next great recording. I no longer have multiple versions of the same composition. The obsession has gone, replaced by the love of music that got me there in the first place. While I would wish upon no one the means whereby I came to this happy state, the end result for me has brought some great comfort in what has been an extremely difficult time.

Richard Hunter, via email ►

► Hi-fi hindrance

You asked 'do you like music, or the sound it makes?' (*Music Matters*, issue 87). Good question, but I bet you don't like the answer. Too many people like the sound of music, rather than the music itself. When even the archbishops of the cult of audio like you begin to come to the same conclusion, it shows just how deviant the audiophile world has become. This may make me no friends in the magazine's readers, but I think hi-fi is a hindrance to musical enjoyment, because it's so easy to get wrapped up in the sound quality that you can no longer simply listen to music for fun. We've all heard of people with an outstanding high-end audio system and five records to play through it, and I bet this is more common than some would care to admit. So shouldn't we just set aside the hi-fi and start listening to music more?

Ben Kingston, via email

I don't think this particular 'archbishop' had anything of the sort in mind. Yes, some do find themselves so wrapped up in the hobby itself that they forget it's about music, rather than the means whereby music happens. But I think this is relatively rare; most surveys of audiophiles show them to have music collections hundreds or thousands of albums deep. Those with exotic audio and no music are about as rare as record collectors with thousands of LPs and no record player; both exist, but are the exception rather than the norm.

It's worth bearing in mind that the size of record collection is not necessarily linked to that person's love for music. A manic Led Zep fan might only have a dozen 'legal' albums (and maybe twice that in bootlegs), but you can pretty much guarantee those albums get one heck of a lot of play every week. On the other hand, someone with the entire canon of western music in

"I think hi-fi is a hindrance to musical enjoyment, because it's so easy to get wrapped up in the sound quality that you can no longer simply listen to music."

their collection might only play an album a month. Under such conditions, the Zeppelin obsessive with a few dozen albums might be more 'worthy' of owning some exotic audio than the music collector with catholic, but frequently overlooked, tastes – Ed.

Audio dies with classical

The massive downturn in interest in classical music worldwide is going to destroy good audio. Our passion is built on Harry Pearson's 'Absolute Sound' concept, where the best hi-fi products are the components that strive to replicate the sound of the live, unamplified instrument in a natural acoustic. And that means you have to listen regularly to live, unamplified instruments in a natural acoustic environment to establish a baseline. Without regular attendance at classical concerts, the baseline to the Absolute Sound will diminish. And people are not attending classical concerts anymore.

The rot has already begun to set in. With no acoustic benchmark, people are choosing audio components on the basis of 'what sounds nice' instead of the traditional goal of 'high fidelity'. The trend of calling it 'audio', not 'hi-fi' only accents this. They buy loudspeakers with shrill, rising treble and complain that loudspeakers that are more faithful to the real sound of musical instruments are 'boring'.

With classical radio reduced to series of 'hits' (usually from advertisements or film scores), no serious musical education to speak of in most schools, and hi-fi magazine writers too eager to support the 'anything goes' mentality of today, there simply won't be hi-fi to speak of tomorrow.

Gene H Masters, via email

Not all countries have so unhealthy a classical scene. -The annual 'Proms' concerts in London's Royal Albert Hall frequently sell out every seat in the building, and many classical stations across Europe thrive.

We tended to move away from the term 'high fidelity' not as part of a great conspiracy to rid the world of 'hi-fi', but because by the mid-1960s, the term had become a nonsense, as it was stuck on anything from steam irons to breakfast cereals. When a mono transistor radio got classed as 'hi-fi', it was time to find a new term. While nowhere is a haven for classical (and jazz) acoustic music, the music instinct in all genre hasn't gone away. And while an 'anything goes' approach to musical replay is currently en vogue (because people tend to go with what sounds 'good' rather than what sounds 'right' whatever I or any other pundit might choose to say), the rise in products that do both well suggest the tide is turning.

The more cynical suggest the rising treble endemic to some loudspeakers is a result of the increasing average age of the audio buyer, anyway. If that is the case, it would apply whether the loudspeaker is used for any kind of music – Ed.



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What is your source? CD? Vinyl? Streaming?

Actually, we say it's your mains – that is what you listen to, that's what comes out of your loudspeakers.

Everybody, everywhere is afflicted with RF pollution that modulates the music signal to produce glare and hardness, stifles detail and jumbles timing.

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Tuners: Magnum Dynalab Amplifiers: Accustic Arts, Aesthetix, Bel Canto, CAT, Gamut, Sonneteer, Storm Audio, VTL.
Loudspeakers: Audio Physic, Gamut, Kawero - Vivace/ Chiara, NEAT, Totem. Cables: Chord Co., DNM, Nordost, Siltech, Tellurium, VertexAQ.
Mains: Vertex AQ. Supports: Arcici, Black Ravioli, Hi-Fi Racks, Stands Unique, Vertex AQ





The Joy of Upgrading Is the upgrade path a road to better sound, or a wrong turn?

By Alan Sircom

One of the defining aspects of modern audio is the upgrade path. The idea is to start small and humble and gradually improve components in the audio chain to build to something remarkable. Although the upgrade path reached its zenith in the 1980s (especially in the UK, where Naim Audio helped define a generation's audio goals), with the increasing cost of achieving high-end audio and with the squeezed middle income, the idea of starting small and building big is coming back in fashion.

The obvious manufacturer in this would be Naim Audio, but that path is well travelled (we hope to be covering the new Discrete Regulator Naim HICAP power supply in the next issue). So, instead we'll follow the fortunes of running through the Heed Audio pathway. As Heed has a smaller product line in its shoe-box sized range (an integrated amp and preamp – both with their respective power supplies, stereo and mono power amps, alongside the CD transport and DAC and upcoming phono stage) describing the options are less bewildering. In fairness to Naim, decoding the upgrade path isn't that complex in reality, just that there are many different upgrade paths depending on where you land on Planet Naim. Essentially though, what holds here for Heed holds just as much for Cyrus and Naim.

Let's start at the bottom and work up. Although there is a built-in DAC and phono-stage option, we're going to assume the same £1,350 DT CD transport and £1,300 DA DAC feeding all the options to prevent any form of bias. So, we start with the £1,290 Obelisk Si integrated amp; a minimalist 35w per channel shoebox. You can change channels and control the volume from the front (a bit more operational activity can be had from the remote control) and the inevitable blue LED shines bright. If beauty is skin deep, this one's built inside out, because as bluff as it is on the outside,

so it sings from within. It's a pacy, bouncy, deceptively powerful sound that is effortlessly communicative and puts a smile on anyone's face. It doesn't grace any particular genre of music, although full-on orchestral wig-outs a la Beethoven's Ninth or Mahler's Eighth do sound foreshortened. The Heed signature sound is a good one, reminiscent of classy British minimalist amps of the 1980s and 1990s, with much of the lightness of step but none of the gloominess that periodically plagued such designs.

So far, so good. But if we are upgrading, we face an immediate dilemma; power supply or power amp. Heed offers both. The £730 Obelisk X2 power supply is an overspec'd and deceptively heavy transformer-based power supply for the power amp stage of the Si. Essentially, this turns the integrated amp into a dual mono design, with the separate windings of the Si trafo taking a channel of the preamp stage and the X2 driving each of the power amp stages separately. In the process, the amp gets beefed up to 50W per channel. The other option is to go for the £1,350 Obelisk PS power amplifier, which also delivers 50W per channel in dual mono mode, letting the Obelisk Si act as a preamp.

This is where twenty seconds of demonstration is worth a thousand words. As good as the integrated/power amp combination is, it's absolutely no match for the integrated with power supply. The integrated with power supply sounds like you are getting all the benefits of the Si, but with added power, dynamic range, smoothness and extension. The integrated with power amp sounds 'cleaner', but at the expense of all the things that attracted you to the Heed sound in the first place. When hi-fi enthusiasts talk about something sounding 'hi-fi' in the pejorative, the Heed integrated/power amp combination is almost the perfect example of getting things ever so slightly wrong, where the integrated with power supply just improves the sound of the base Si in all the right ways. If you have a Heed Si, the X2 is the logical next step.

From here, the PS is the obvious choice. It's odd; how wrong the Si/PS sounds next to the standalone Si or Si/X2, but when Si/X2/PS are used as a trio, you get all the benefits in a rush. It's especially odd when you consider the X2 power supply only feeds the power amp stage of the Si, but this makes the Si preamp section a dual mono design with it's own dedicated transformer, so perhaps the oddness of the whole system is not as profound as first thought.

As a trio, you get the greater clarity of the PS stereo power amp, but with none of the shiny 'hi-fi' sound, as well as the rhythmic benefits of the integrated amp with and without the X2 power supply. This has an added bonus for biamping, as the output and gain structure of the power supplied Si and PS are functionally identical. I am not convinced this is a significant upgrade over using the Si as a preamp and the PS as the only power amp, but the built in power amp is there for the taking. In testing this, there's two schools of thought as to whether the built-in amps in the Si are best driving treble or bass. I suspect this depends on the loudspeakers used, but with a pair of old ProAc Studio 150s, the extra handling capacity of the PS was best used with the HF driver, for added smoothness. In great fairness though, the difference here was marginal to the point of inaudibility.

‘As good as the integrated/power amp combination is, it’s absolutely no match for the integrated with power supply.’

We are now faced with the only part of the tale where some selling on or trading in happens. The next step requires selling off that integrated amp and power supply and buying a dedicated £1,350 preamp (called, naturally, the Obelisk PRE). Like the Si integrated, this line-only minimalist preamp comes with a few options (phono and DAC boards) and can itself be upgraded in power supply terms.

In its basic guise, you go from three amp boxes to two, the preamp feeding the stereo power directly. The dedicated preamp on its own offers a distinct step up in transparency and solidity over the integrated amp and power supply. The integrated options are like engine options on the same car; the preamp is like buying a better car altogether. There's a sense of space around the musicians, and yet without sacrificing any of the inherent enjoyment of the integrated amp. This was the biggest single upgrade of the whole pathway, in my opinion.

And it's here's where I differ from the Heed (and presumably Naim and Cyrus) pathway. I think it's best to get the best possible power amplifier line-up and then ▶

► upgrade the power supply, rather than the other way round. Yes, in the process, you do run the risk of having a weaker link in the all-important preamp stage, but the improvement from the power amp makes the preamp sound sweet in its standard guise and sweeter still when upgraded.

So, when moving from PS stereo amp to £1,450 per side PM mono amps you change from one box to two and gain 20W per channel (if you biamp, keep the PS to drive the least demanding drive unit, because the gain structure is identical despite the additional power in the monos), but that brings far greater stereo separation, increased dynamic range and scale (unless you use torture loudspeakers, the 70W PMs will cope with even the most brutal chunk of classical dynamics with ease) as well as the silken satisfying harmonic richness of a good tube amplifier.

And finally (for me, at least) comes the £880 PX power supply for the preamp. This leaves the onboard power supply effectively superfluous. Where the other upgrades add power, this one adds smoothing and filtration, essentially giving the preamp cleaner power than the on-board PSU could muster. And it's here that the valve-like sound really comes into its own. If the pre+power combinations sound rich and smooth like a good valve amp, this takes on some of the quicksilver detail and elegance of single-ended triode amps, only with more power and less noise and second-harmonic distortion. It's perhaps not as big a jump as going to pre-power, but it's the icing on the cake, and makes a sound that gets close to appealing to all; those who want their music, er, musical will love the pacy nature of the amp. Those wanting solid-state accuracy will love it just as much as those who want SET like insight and immediacy. From a universal standing, the upgrades from integrated through power amp and then to preamp and power amp offer a move in the right direction in every step. From a Heed-specific standing, you just get more and better. OK, so those after cavernous deep bass and huge power will not put Heed on the wish list, and their upgrade path is a bigger (and heavier and probably more expensive) one. But for the rest of us, this is a

“There’s not a significant increase in ultimate volume level, but a vast improvement in insight into the music, focus, articulation... the works.”

workable pathway from the affordable to the outstanding in clearly defined steps.

The really interesting part occurs when turning back. Having gone from £1,300 worth of integrated amp to £5,130 worth of pre/power supply and mono power amps, there's not a significant increase in ultimate volume level, but a vast improvement in insight into the music, focus, articulation, rhythmic coherence, precision, depth, dynamic range, stereo separation, stage depth... the works. Going back, you still hear why the Obelisk Si should be considered a ►



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*Quote and text excerpt; Malte Ruhnke
Audiophile 1/2011*



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The new **Siegfried Series II** Reference Balanced Monoblock Amplifier

Even a brief listen to the new Siegfried Series II monoblock reveals the successful implementation of the new technology.

With its massive power handling capabilities, the Siegfried has always excelled at delivering effortless speed, dynamics and real control in the bottom end, with an almost organic bass quality. With this new version, even at low level listening one can enjoy the nuances and micro-dynamics of music.

The Siegfried II scales up from handling the smallest intimate performances to the largest orchestral fanfares with ease. It strikes the perfect balance between seemingly endless weight and authority, and effortless finesse.



VTL hosts the European launch of two major new amplifiers at Whittlebury Hall

The new **S-200** Signature Balanced Stereo Amplifier

VTL's legendary Signature series has long been valued by music lovers who seek outstanding sound at a fair price. The new S-200 takes that proposition to a new level by including VTL's latest technology in a space saving single chassis design. All the features and functionality of the renowned MB-450 and MB-185 Series III Signature monoblocks are applied to this new amp, including the distinctive sculpted faceplate with smoked glass window. With top quality parts, a fully balanced design, and innovative engineering, the S200 is a stellar performer as well as an uncommon value.

The S-200 bears a similar sonic signature to its bigger brother, the MB-450 Series III Signature monoblocks. The mid bass authority and control is excellent while the midrange and top end reflect natural timbres and instrument colours effortlessly. The amplifier's agility and speed, its very low noise floor, and its ability to drive a wide range of speakers are distinct features that few other tube amplifiers in this price category can offer. Pair it with VTL's TL5.5 Series II preamplifier for a sound that is extraordinarily compelling and inviting.



HEED – HOME AND ABROAD

Heed is intrinsically linked to another long-gone name from the UK: Ion Systems. The original Ion Systems Obelisk amplifier was designed by Richard Hay, and when the company dropped out of view in the 1990s, the original designs were retained and built in Hungary. They still are, but with a twist.

Why Heed thought the Ion Systems circuit was a good 'un comes down to the non-DC coupled design developed by Hay. Hay considers a transistor amplifier to be a 'valve amp built with transistors'. This does mean the amplifier is essentially only as good as its transformers, but given the sound of the Heed designs like the Ion Systems before them, that clearly isn't a problem.

The electronics are still Hungarian-made, but the UK versions are built and finished here, while international products are built entirely in the Hungarian factory. The principal difference between the two is the fit and finish of the case and the front panels. We get more flush-fit folded aluminium panels and a choice of colour in the Perspex front. And a slightly different logo.

Having had Hungarian-only and UK/Hungarian built examples of the same DT CD transport and DA DAC, the UK finished versions are better looking, sound the same and are not a game changer. There has been a small change to the DA in its use of Asynchronous USB now, but the basic circuit remains otherwise unchanged.

► fine amplifier, but the full works is in a different league. I doubt anyone could go back without a lengthy period of rehab.

This is not unique to Heed. What happened here happens universally. It certainly applies to Naim, and any brand that offers power supply upgrades generally follows the same path. Beefing up the power supply is a first option throughout. For those without power supply upgrades, the same thing applies – an integrated amplifier can be used as a preamp, but if you add a power amp to an integrated you will almost inevitably upgrade to a dedicated preamp. The interesting thing here is that although the amplifiers have identical gain structures (meaning you can use them in biamped systems without any problems at all), there is a big difference between integrated power, stereo power and mono power, even if that difference is not down to increases in sheer wattage.

In a way, the Heed upgrade path represents the ultimate challenge to the cynics and the scoffers; those who are using the increasing lack of in-store or at home demonstrations to suggest none of these differences exist. Because you can't hear the differences on page or online, they dismiss these differences as audiophoolery. But the only way to hear the difference is to actually hear the difference, whether in store or in your home. Just plugging in the power supply to the integrated amplifier is enough, and 20 seconds after doing so, you'll discover the cynics are wrong. Embrace your inner audiophool.

Ultimately though, is it worth the effort? That depends on the individual. If you have a desire to achieve the best and lack the funds to do that in one hit, taking a step-by-step path to greatness is a grand plan, and the routemap is clearly and consistently laid out here. More importantly, the means whereby the improvements happen over time is perhaps as much fun as the ends in themselves; part of the great audiophile experience is experiencing the improvements in steps, as much as simply buying your way onto the top rung of the ladder. On the other hand, we live in an impatient society, and if you need immediate gratification, this isn't the way to achieve it. In which case, the full Heed package fits the bill nicely too. I imagine more people will buy the Heed system (and possibly Naim) as an upgrade path, rather than as a complete system, because the journey is half the fun. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Heed Obelisk Si integrated amplifier:

£1,290

Obelisk Pre preamplifier: £1,350

Obelisk X2 power supply: £730

Obelisk PX power supply: £880

Obelisk PS stereo power amp: £1,350

Obelisk PM mono power amp: £1,450
per channel

Manufactured by: Heed Audio

URL: www.heedaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1452 858269



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Standing Tall... The KEF Blade Loudspeaker

By Roy Gregory.
Photography by Simon Marsh

Take one look at the KEF Blade and it would be easy to dismiss it as a novelty product – an ostentatious toy for people whose income has outrun their discernment. The Blade might look like a fashion victim's notion of hi-fi, but both its form and its function are seriously serious. This speaker is all about engineering, a project that has very definitely been built from the inside out.

The Blade has a clearly defined and unbroken lineage, stretching all the way back to the likes of the Reference 104/2 – and beyond. At its heart is the latest generation UniQ driver. Smaller in diameter than early versions of KEFs' established coincident mid/treble unit, the Blade driver pairs a complex metal midrange cone, formed from ridged lithium/magnesium/aluminium alloy with a carefully evolved aluminium dome that extends response out to beyond 30kHz. The midrange cone is further stiffened by a web of high-tech plastic ribs, bonded to its rear surface, which, together with a massive 75mm voice coil, ensure piston motion across (and beyond) its operating range. The striking "Tangerine" wave-guide serves to smooth the dispersion of the driver through the crossover frequency, a concern that extends to the smoothly curved and rubber damped baffle surface that surrounds the diminutive unit.

If there's not a lot to show for a driver that covers the range from 350Hz on up, below that frequency, the opposite is definitely true. After its sculpted, statuesque shape, the most striking feature of the Blade is the two 225mm aluminium coned bass drivers decorating each side of the cabinet. And it's not just their size that strikes you, but their position. These are a lot further from the floor than you normally see a bass driver. In fact, look carefully and you'll realize that they are actually symmetrically disposed above and below the UniQ unit, and as close behind it as possible. What is less obvious is that the motor system on each driver employs a long throw suspension and 95mm voice coil – the size you'd normally find on a 15" unit. The motors are so large that they literally sit back to back across the narrow cabinet, linked in a classic force cancelling arrangement.

Once you opt for a coincident array like this, the rest of the speaker follows from there. The cabinet is constructed from a two-part (front and rear) fibre-glass shell, stiffened with substantial internal bracing. The curved walls are designed to further stiffen the structure, as well as reducing diffraction effects and internal standing waves. The midrange driver enjoys its own, separately molded internal enclosure, while a massively stepped internal brace divides the bass cabinet into two separate and separately ported volumes, further

cutting down on parallel surfaces while also reducing the largest cabinet dimension, raising the resonant frequency of the structure well outside the driver pass-band.

The bi-wirable crossover is mounted in a separate section at the base of the cabinet and the whole kit and caboodle rests on a molded polymer foot, fitted with four M8 spikes, adjustable from above using the supplied allen driver. KEF builds a bubble level in the speaker's foot; there isn't a level surface anywhere on the cabinet, so some fixed reference is essential. Standard finishes are gloss white or black, but a range of exciting hues are available as cost options.

What KEF has done here is designed and built not just the best UniQ driver yet, but combined with a bass-end that matches it for quality and qualities. The cabinet is surprisingly light yet incredibly rigid, while the back to back arrangement of the bass drivers significantly reduces the energy passing into it. The result is a low storage enclosure with an incredibly low sonic signature. The lack of internal wadding, not required because of the cabinet's careful shaping, along with the massive motors employed means that thermal or pressure related compression is also vanishingly low compared to conventional systems. ▶



▶ Most speakers rely on boundary reinforcement to deliver deep bass from a manageable driver/enclosure combination. KEFs adherence to the point-source principle means it has to generate bass through sheer swept area. Hence the four bass drivers a side, the massive motors and the relatively modest -3dB point at 40Hz. Not much on paper, but boy, what bass it is!

SET-UP AND SYSTEM

It's not just the sound of the KEF Blades that is different; you need to treat them differently too. Positioning a speaker in the listening room is usually about optimizing bass weight, pace and timing – integrating the bottom-end into the whole. With the Blade, positioning is not so much to do with weight; it's all about the continuity and integration of the soundstage, establishing the spatial relationships between the elements in the band. And by getting the stereo perspective locked in, you are locking in rhythm too.

I worked the speakers backwards and forwards to establish the best placement for bass linearity, using toe-in to focus the soundstage. With the speakers pointing just outside of my shoulders, I then used rake (a small degree of forward tilt) to lock the soundstage together. You may not recognize that description, but believe me, try it and you'll hear it clearly enough.

The other consideration with the Blades (as with most speakers) is the choice of driving amplifier. A nominal four Ohm load, with a stated minimum of 3.2 Ohms and a 90dB sensitivity, there's nothing particularly frightening about the KEFs on paper. But, like many really clean, low distortion designs, the Blades go very loud almost without you realizing it. Get carried away and let your enthusiasm outrun the capabilities of the driving amplifier and you'll hear the tweeter start to shout. Sonically it's not a massive shift, but what does the damage is the way it forces instruments forward in the soundstage; normally so spatially coherent, anything out of place stands out like a carthorse in the Derby.

I spent a lot of time on this issue as it is the one major question mark over the speaker's performance, and the conclusion I came to is that while the Blade isn't blameless, it's not an inherent failing. I suspect there's something a little nasty in the impedance load at high

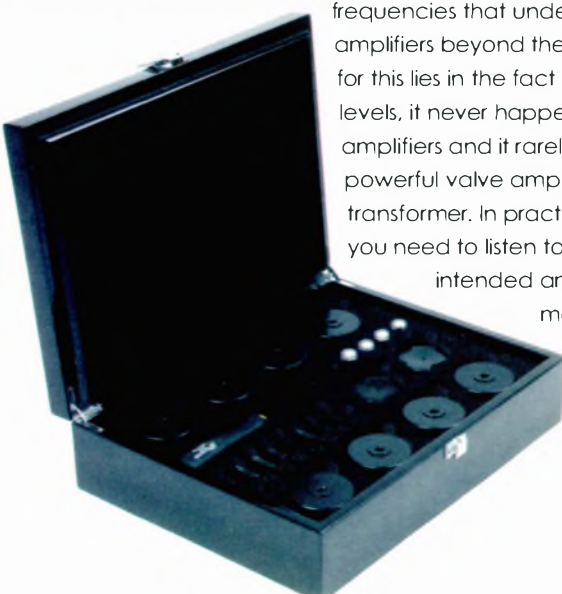
frequencies that under extreme conditions drives amplifiers beyond their comfort zone. The evidence for this lies in the fact that it never occurs at lower levels, it never happens with genuinely powerful amplifiers and it rarely happens with a reasonably powerful valve amp, insulated as it is by its output transformer. In practical terms it means that you need to listen to these speakers with your intended amp and be realistic about your material and listening levels.

As long as the amp is up to it, you'll be rewarded with truly exceptional performance.

One of my favourite tests for bass performance is the Cure's masterpiece, *Seventeen Seconds* (Fiction FIX 004). The whole album offers a serious low-frequency workout, but the combination of heavily damped kick drum and the rapid, repetitive notes of the bass guitar line on 'A Forest' are a test not just of a speaker's weight or bass impact, but its ability to delineate individual bass notes. The Blades' incredibly quick, clean and responsive bottom end allowed it to separate each successive bass note, identifying both its rhythmic placement and pitch. Sometimes, this cut can sound almost lethargic, on other occasions smoothly meditative, but the KEFs instill it with its true sense of urgency and anxious undertones.

This bass performance reflects several aspects of the Blade design: the lack of slowing or slurring effects from cabinet or boundary related non-linearities; the dynamic range and speed of response at low frequencies, delivered by the multiple massive motors on the bass drivers; the lack of thermal compression under continuous load. They add up to one of the most impressively convincing and engaging bottom-ends. Although the -3dB spec is modest, the -6dB point is at a much more impressive 28Hz, suggesting that the bass rolls off more slowly than in most reflex designs.

The Blades position instruments with considerable precision, in terms of width, depth and height. There's no tendency to stack instruments according to frequency, no tendency for louder instruments to shift forward in the mix – unless it's the ▶



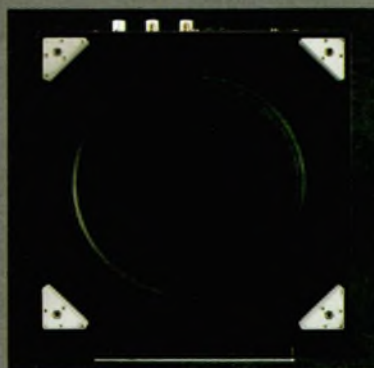
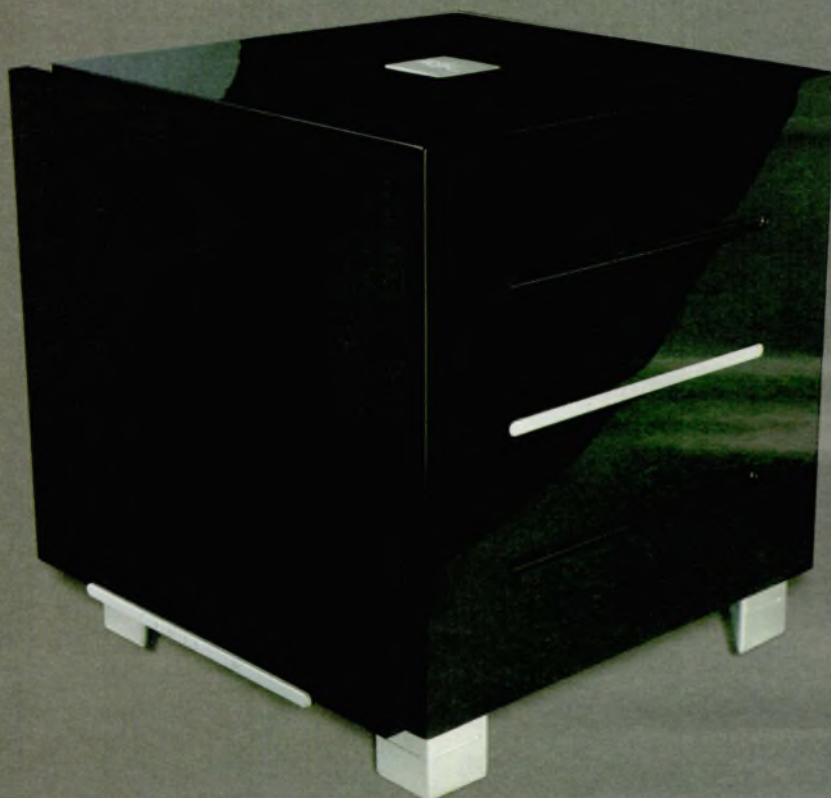
REL Acoustic's name is synonymous with state of the art sub bass. Recently launched, the new Serie R is the sweet spot of the line, embodying many of the techniques and strategies employed in our reference grade Gibraltar range, but at more accessible prices.

Twice as fast as the older R-Series, the added speed translates to greater clarity while the improvement in output is the result of bigger, more powerful bass engines coupled (R-328 and 528) to a unique carbon fibre downloaded passive that effectively doubles driven surface area. Serie R will play twice as loud as the previous generation-care of their next-generation Class D amps, twice as quickly, with lower distortion. For little difference in price.

Dynamics and tunefulness are enhanced by the bracing scheme employed within, utilising true laminated hardwood spars. And for true REL aficionados, know that the REL badge on top of Serie R doubles as the final damping element in combination with the internal bracing.

"The only downside is they are addictive. You start with one, and pretty soon you have three or four..."
Alan Sircom, HiFi+ Issue 85

SERIE-OUSLY DEEP BASS



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[sometimes]
technology meets art...



“They don’t just show you where the musicians were sat, they preserve the precise impact of that layout on the arrival time.”

electronics doing the pushing. Where the KEF scores is in its ability to float a truly independent soundstage. It may not enjoy the boundary definition of the biggest speakers, but nor does it suffer the inaccuracies introduced by faking that effect. Instead, the space between and around instruments is beautifully consistent and coherent, ensuring that each and every musical contribution has a place and occupies it.

These speakers drive a simple four beat bar with the impact and purpose of a jack hammer, but they’re equally comfortable unraveling complex be-bop rhythms or bringing a simple voice and guitar track to almost spookily realistic life. Notes are defined by pitch and placement. The KEFs’ spatial coherence rests in their mastery of the temporal domain; they don’t just show you where the musicians were sat, they preserve the precise impact of that layout on the arrival time of what each one plays.

So often, the true test of a hi-fi system comes down to whether it allows you access to great musical performances, or does it diminish the drama and artistic achievement. When you listen to du Pre playing the Elgar Cello Concerto, it should be an emotional and heartfelt performance; when you listen to Elvis Costello, you should get the edge and attitude in the lyrics, qualities underpinned in the playing; and when you listen to Narcisco Yepes you should marvel at the controlled intensity of his playing. The Blades are truly transparent to the musical performance, but they are also transparent to the driving system.

By now it should be apparent that the KEFs perform well above their price point. Just be aware that as well as sounding like a £50K speaker, you need to treat them like one too, especially when it comes to partnering electronics. At last year’s RMAF, KEF demoed the Blade with Parasound Halo mono-blocs, to considerable effect. Despite their (comparatively) modest price, these amps are long on quality and even longer on power – the perfect recipe for sonic success with the KEFs.

What don’t the KEFs do? Well, as I’ve already stated, they don’t recreate the full, recorded acoustic. But in almost all other respects they are remarkably accomplished. If they miss anything, it’s the last ounce of instrumental texture, but again, that really is only available from speakers that cost many times the KEFs’ price. Above all, their performance is so coherent and well balanced, that their sound is almost inherently satisfying. They are dynamic and rhythmically involving, communicative and capable of considerable musical subtlety.

In an industry faced with indifference, where too many of the opportunities we get to impress, end with a “How much?!?” or a “So what?” – and that’s before we reach the realms of “You’ve got to be joking!” – the KEF Blade genuinely delivers. These speakers wear their heart well and truly on their beautifully tailored sleeve. There’s no such thing as the universal product, and speaker manufacturers know that you can’t please all the people all the time. Nevertheless I think the Blade is a phenomenal speaker system and definitely one that I could happily live with. You might not agree. Listen to the KEF Blade and you might not fall in love – but I can’t believe you won’t be impressed. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, coincident source loudspeaker system

Driver Complement:

1x 25mm aluminium dome

1x 125mm Li-Mg-Al alloy midrange with LCP rib reinforcement

4x 225mm aluminium bass units in force cancelling pairs

Bandwidth: 40Hz – 35kHz ±3dB

28Hz – 45 kHz ±6dB

Maximum Output: 117dB

Impedance: 4 Ohms nominal (3.2 Ohms minimum)

Sensitivity: 90dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 363 x 1590 x 540mm

Weight: 57.2kg ea.

Prices: Standard Finishes

(Black or White): £20,000 per pair

Special Colours: £23,000 per pair

Manufactured by:

GP Acoustics (UK) Ltd

URL: www.kef.com/gb

Tel: +44 (0)1622 672261

Abbingdon Music Research DP-777 Digital Processor

By Alan Sircom

AMR is one of those 'small but perfectly formed' companies. The range isn't massive (until the DP-777, it comprised a Premier and a Reference Class CD and integrated amp, plus a Reference Class phono stage and loudspeaker, power cords, and fuses), but each device in the line-up has received class-winning reviews and has proved mightily popular. The company has the 'designed locally, built globally' approach that's proving so universally popular. And the DP-777 Digital Processor is the company's first DAC, designed from the ground up as a high-resolution audio player.

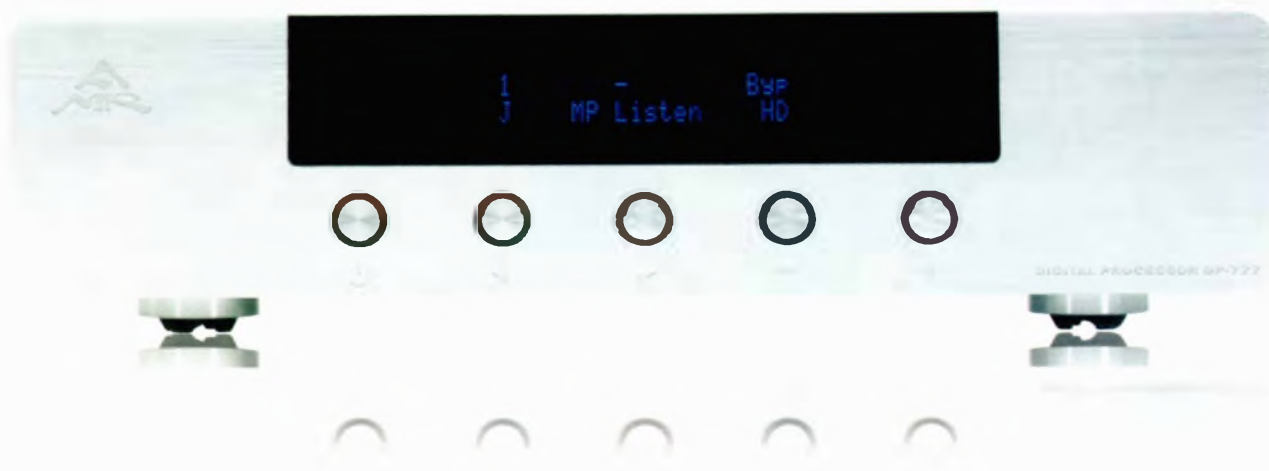
It's easy to forget that a lot of DACs actually come out of projects from the pre-hi-rez days; that they were essentially enhancements for existing Red Book CD players, rather than designed as high-definition devices. Some others are hi-rez-compatible, but the benefits of hi-rez are almost achieved through gritted teeth, as if high resolution is something that must be done to sell, but it's done under sufferance. The DP-777 on the other hand is unashamedly high-resolution in approach. So much so in fact, you could consider the DP-777 two DACs for the price of one; the converter's synch-lock sends the data stream down completely different pathways – to completely different converters (a Philips 1305 16-bit DAC for Red Book, a 32-bit Wolfson converter for the richer file sizes) – depending on the nature of the digital datastream. So, Red Book is given the best digital conversion possible and so is hi-rez. The AMR people think the two are not done on the same silicon, so they choose different circuits for the two tasks.

That's just the start. Each pathway has its own set of filter settings (two for Red Book, three for hi-rez), there are two jitter reduction settings (AMR's Zero Jitter system is itself fascinating; a combination of precision detection

of the incoming signal, stripping out the existing clock signal, applying its own super-precision clock through the medium of memory), a natty fluoro display and remote handset to control all of this manually, or automated settings for those wanting a quieter life. And not only a valve output stage featuring 6H1N triodes, but a 6H11 on the S/PDIF digital inputs. Binary thinkers might say this is 'insane', but AMR recognises S/PDIF as an analogue transmission of a digital datastream and thus subject to the demands of any analogue signal input. USB is handled with equal – but this time wholly digital – care and attention, attempting to make the pathway as unsullied and retaining 'bit perfection' throughout.

In short, even before you play a note through the DP-777, it's the perfect DAC for the modder audiophile. It's like someone else did the modding for you up front.

But it's use as a DAC is just half the story. At the rear is a switch. Flick that and the DAC also becomes a preamplifier, with two line inputs as well as digital source control. Increasingly, the need for



a standalone preamplifier begins to look a bit superfluous in an increasingly digital domain. This brings a true analogue preamplifier to the digital output of the DP-777.

AMR suggests keeping the DAC constantly powered and my one came fresh from a round of shows and demos, so if it needs running in, it was already done for me. Keeping it constantly powered keeps the valves on a low heat, but when fully powered up, the DAC does get comfortably warm, possibly slightly warmer than a valve preamp, but not worryingly so.

The DP-777 arrives at what could be considered S/PDIF's twilight years, but the attention to detail means the senior digital transmitter is given the best possible environment to shine next to those nu-digital formats. Intellectually, I'm not convinced by AMR's argument for using valves in the S/PDIF input stage, but sonically the argument is more convincing.

“The DP-777 arrives at what could be considered S/PDIF's twilight years, but the attention to detail means the senior digital transmitter is given the best possible environment.”

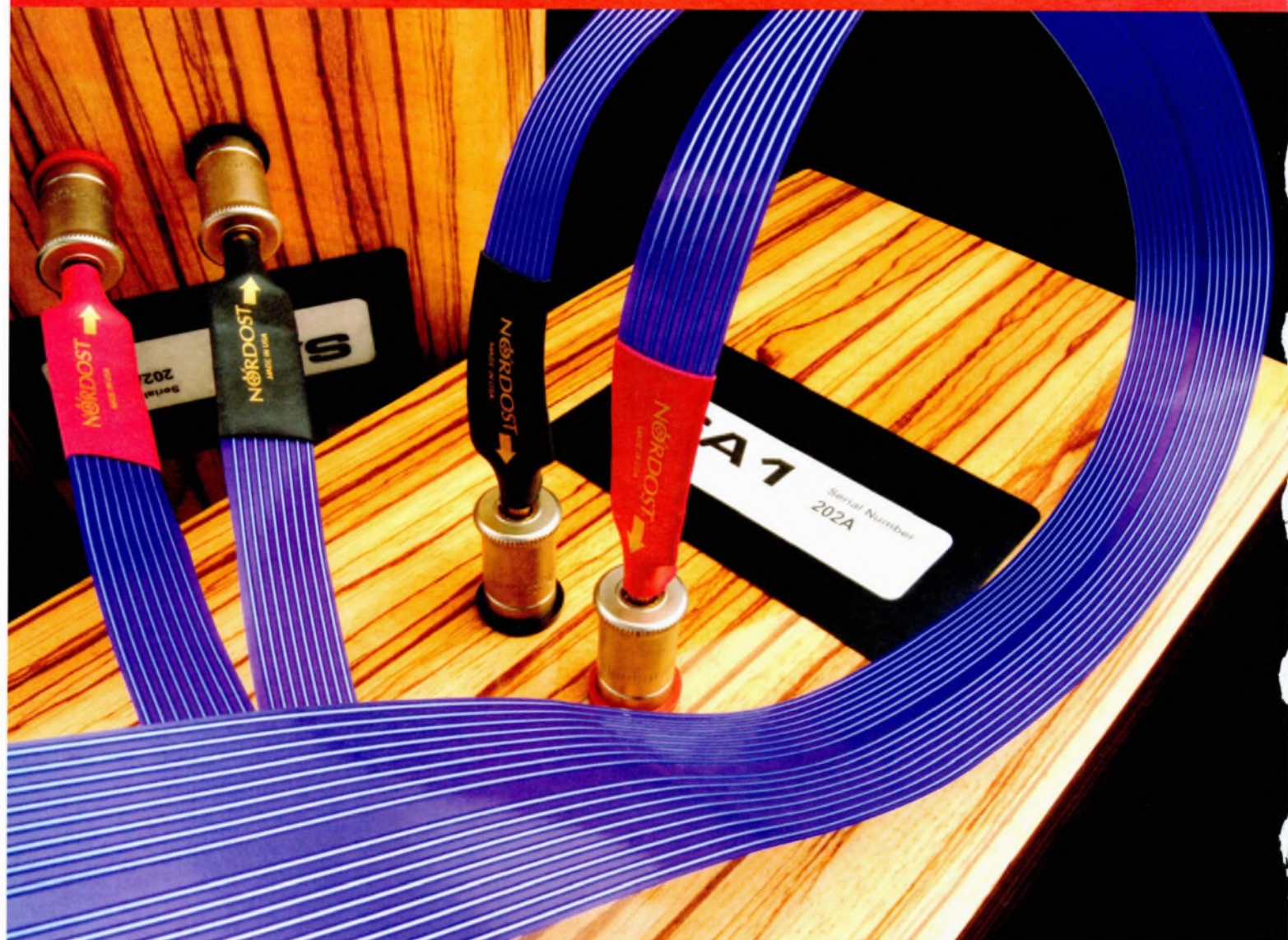
I've come to the conclusion that there are two ways of doing digital in the home. The first – and most common – is making that generic 'digital' sound; exceptionally clean, detailed and 'toppy' (sometimes very toppy, bordering on the thin and bright). The DP-777 isn't that kind of DAC. This is the kind of DAC for people who want a beautiful midrange, with the kind of rich, creamy bass and unforced treble and huge soundstage that makes people keep coming back to their record players.

The one thing you hardly ever read on a page of notes about a digital device is 'organic'. Digital at home goes for precision and detail, but that cohesive sense of music being made is elusive. But not here, the DP-777 doesn't sound like a record deck or anything arch like that, but it makes that digital sound seem fuller and less like what we've come to think of as 'digital' sound. And it's this fullness and other organic properties that make

valves in the S/PDIF stage seem like a good idea, because it brings out hidden virtues in the output of CD players. I'm acquiring classical CD box sets like they are going out of fashion, and Bernstein's spirited performance of Mahler's First Symphony (from the excellent almost ten symphony set that works out at less than £2 per symphony!) sounded expressive whether pulled off the disc or played via Pure Music on a Mac. Through both formats, the 16-bit, 44.1kHz recordings were rich, impassioned, dynamic and possessed of a soundstage that managed to convey width, depth and even height information well and show why the Concertgebouw is considered one of the best halls on the planet. Not like it was vinyl, more like the way music should sound. Breathtaking! I preferred the Classic DAC, in Bit Perfect II (with analogue filter).

Moving on to hi-rez was a tough call for me, because I have often stated my lack of conviction toward the purpose of high-rez, especially through the 'Organic' settings. Here though, I have to admit, my preconceptions toward high-resolution audio did seem more like 'posturing'. There is a big clarity benefit to be had from these files, both in absolute terms and when comparing high-res with standard resolution audio files.

All of this though was using the DAC *qua* DAC. There's a whole lot more to be had when using it as a preamplifier too. Once again, painting in broad brush strokes, the overall sound is one of satisfying fullness ▶



Three Steps To Heaven...

The best hi-fi components are just like any other thoroughbreds – you need to house and feed them properly if they're going to perform. Ignore the basics and they're just another collection of overpriced separates, rather than a well-oiled machine, greater than the sum of its parts.

But keeping everything working together really is as easy as one, two, three; proper support, proper power cords and a matching set of signal leads – interconnects and speaker cables. Consistency is the key, which is why Nordost's new Blue Heaven family (and the rest of the Leif Series) uses the same materials and technology to provide cable solutions from your wall socket, via dedicated digital and source designs, right through to your speaker terminals.



Now add the Sort Kone into the mix, a sophisticated support solution that is based on the same principles of mechanical tuning incorporated into the Leif Series cables and you've extended that coherent approach still further, building the perfect base for your system. It's this solid foundation and only this foundation, that will bind your carefully chosen components into a single whole – a whole that really is greater than the sum of its parts, finally delivering on the potential performance; performance – and performances – that so often remain elusive. So remember...

great cables are much more than just icing on the cake.

NORDOST
 MAKING THE CONNECTION

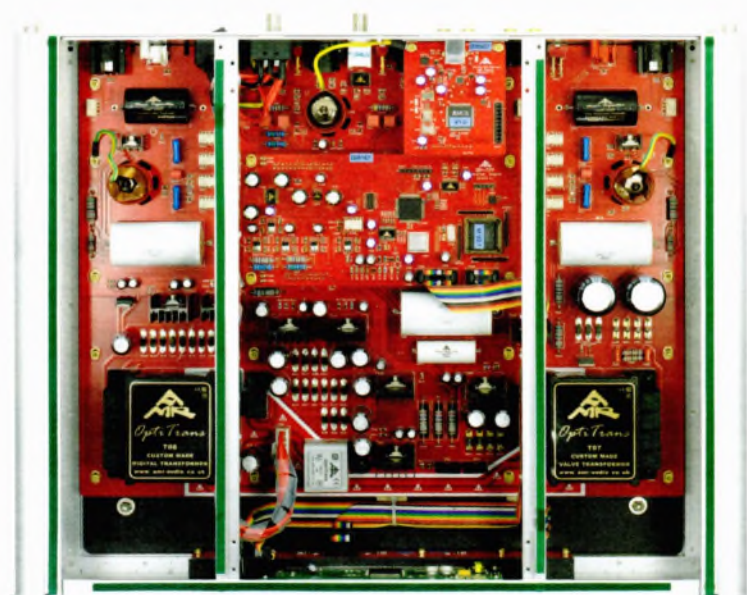
- ▶ and organically-grown sounds far removed from the steely stark sound commonly considered to be the state of the current art, yet peculiarly disliked by many.

AMR has made some big claims about the preamp stage, that it is as good as many of the best preamps around. I don't agree, but that isn't to say it's bad. I placed it in with some very stiff competition (a Berning preamp, and an Edge reference two box line stage) and it really wasn't up to the challenge. But, on price alone, that's hardly surprising – one cost roughly twice as much as the AMR, the other about 16x as much. That these two are perhaps some of the finest examples of the preamp-maker's art makes the comparison a bit unfair on performance standing.

At a more down-to-earth level, the preamp fared rather better. It's a smooth and refined thing at a point where most preamps are either 'too' smooth and refined or 'not' smooth and refined. Its presentation of stereo in particular is beguiling, just for its sheer depth, and the sense of musical flow from bar to bar is something close to delicious.

Whether in DAC mode or as a DAC/preamp I can imagine this digital processor polarizing opinion. One man's 'rich' is another man's 'fat', after

“It's a smooth and refined thing at a point where most preamps are either 'too' smooth and refined or 'not' smooth and refined. Its presentation of stereo in particular is beguiling, just for its sheer depth, and the sense of musical flow from bar to bar is something close to delicious.”



all. And that's one of the joys of really good equipment; it's not designed for everyone. There are lots of 'me too' devices out there that make essentially the small variations on the same sound, which will appeal to eight out of every ten music lovers. The DP-777 isn't one of those; it's the kind of product that will get under the skin of the two in ten, and stay there like it had been grafted on. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

High-Definition 32-Bit DAC:

Organic, MP Listen, Traditional (44.1/48/88.2/96/176.4/192kHz), Apodising 808 (44.1/48kHz)

Classic 16-Bit Multibit DAC: Bit-Perfect I; no digital or analogue filter, Bit-Perfect II; no digital filter, sinc(x) analogue filter

Digital Audio Inputs: 2 x XLR/BNC with HD Valve Digital Input, 2 x RCA/Toslink SPDIF Interface, 1 x 24/192 Asynchronous USB Input

Analogue Inputs: 2 x RCA per channel
Analogue Outputs: 1 x RCA/XLR per channel

Valve complement: 2 x 6H1n-EV / 1 x 6H11P fitted

Frequency Response: 20Hz to 20 kHz +0.0, -0.5dB

Signal-to-noise ratio "A" Weighted: > 100 dB

THD+N: <0.3%

Dynamic range: >90 dB

Channel separation: >90 dB

Output voltage (Digital Full Scale): >2V

Colour: Silver or Black

Dimensions (WxHxD): 45x12x37cm

Weight: 11.5 kg

Price: £3,395

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Backes und Müller BMLine 25 loudspeaker

By Paul Messenger

I first heard of Backes und Müller (usually abbreviated as B&M) way back in the mid-1970s. The original B&M speaker was indeed very interesting and technically radical, using an electrostatic sensor system to provide the feedback that the actively driven unit diaphragms required always to follow the music signal accurately. Although B&M's active feedback technology broke fresh ground, and while the speaker ranges themselves have undergone steady development, the company itself remained a fairly modest operation in size.

Things started to change when Johannes Siegler of ProAudio brand KSdigital took over the reins at B&M in 2000. Alongside work as a recording engineer, Siegler was a freelance DSP (digital signal processing) consultant during the early '90s, and this led to the formal beginning of KSdigital in 1996. The two companies appear to be a good fit, as at least one KSdigital model closely resembles a B&M model in overall configuration and features.

Despite its considerable – some would say looming – height of 1.6m, the 25 is actually one of the smaller models in the BMLine range, though it's also unquestionably costly at £35,990/pair. Like its larger 35 and 50 siblings, the driver line-up is carefully considered and organised to operate substantially as a line-source, an arrangement that has several implications. A line source tends to create cylindrical rather than spherical wavefront radiation: this can help avoid floor and ceiling reflections, and also reduces the rate at which the sound energy falls off when one moves away from the speaker to around half that of a spherically radiating design.

The way sound is radiated from a source depends on the relationship between the wavelength of the sound and the size of the source. A wavelength that's larger than its source will be propagated spherically (ie in every direction); a wavelength smaller than the source will be 'beamed' along a band that's perpendicular to the source.

The three-way driver line-up used here is designed to approach (at least approximately) the requirements of a line source, by making the vertical dimension of each 'way' (at least approximately) larger than the frequencies it's required to reproduce. The low bass is handled by two 240mm drivers with 190mm carbon-fibre reinforced cones, sealed-box loaded and mounted at the top and bottom of the rear panel. These inevitably radiate sound in every direction, though the fact that the four sources are very well spaced should help spread the excitation of standing waves. The upper bass and midrange is then reproduced by a tall vertical row of four 170mm bass/mid drivers with 130mm woven diaphragms covering a total span of 113cm – a span whose wavelength corresponds to a frequency of around 300Hz. These are located above and below an AMT (a pleated ribbon-shaped 'air motion transformer') tweeter that is slightly recessed and flanked by a waveguide that's attractively sculpted in wood. This device is 12cm high, whose wavelength corresponds to around 2.8kHz. Significantly, the dimensions of the mid and treble sources look well suited to deliver 'line source' output above 300Hz.

The enclosure is no less complex. It might appear to be a simple column, but only the front and back seem to be parallel. The sides are tapered, so that the back is slightly wider than the front, while the top is higher at the back than the front. This should help spread out and defocus unavoidable internal standing waves. The enclosure construction and materials are equally elaborate, with a front panel in Corian (a ceramic/epoxy mix) alongside a combination of MDF sandwiches, solid wood flanks and internal bracing. The whole thing sits on a shaped gloss black plinth that looks good, does slightly extend the footprint, and can accommodate spikes (but these were not supplied, used nor considered necessary).

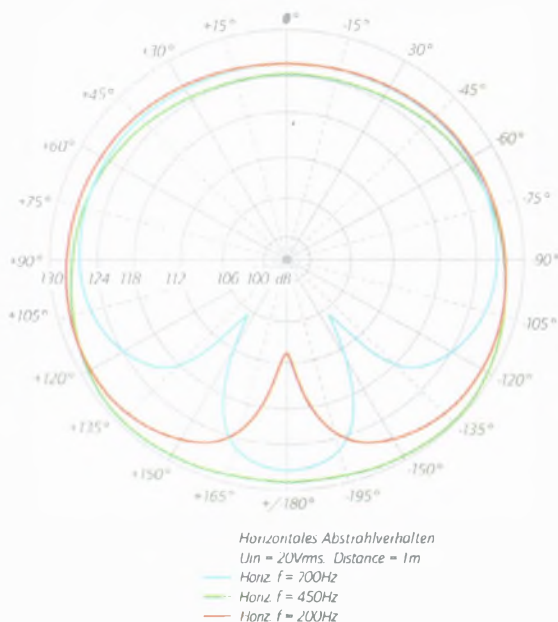
However, those basic details tell barely half the story. This is an active speaker, with a powerful MOSFET power amp for each of the three 'ways', plus extensive and complicated digital signal processing (DSP), and also (at the bass end) analogue processing.

“Explaining all the complexities would over-tax both the reader’s patience and the writer’s brain, but essentially this speaker converts an analogue input into a higher resolution (up to 27-bit) digital signal.”

There's a potential 1kW of total power here, split 400/300/300W between the three ways. One consequence of all that amplification and processing is that the speakers seemed to generate a fair amount of waste heat, though measurement indicated this was actually only around 45W per channel.

Explaining all the complexities would over-tax both the reader's patience and the writer's brain, but essentially this speaker converts an analogue input into a high resolution (up to 27-bit) digital signal on which the DSP can operate.

Much of the DSP activity appears to be automatic, which is probably just as well, since it seems to be far from simple. The designer of a digital active speaker can use DSP to correct for any limitations within the speaker itself, and that's exactly what is done here, linearising the phase and cleaning up the impulse response, as well as performing the crossover network. However, a loudspeaker has to operate in a listening room, and its interactions with the characteristics of the room is entirely unpredictable prior to installation. Accordingly, the BMLine 25's DSP features complex filtering and equalisation to enable room compensation to be carried out in situ.



▶ Connecting up the BMLine 25s requires balanced XLR inputs, so Backes und Müller supplied an example of its new ICE 502 pre-amplifier equipped with appropriate XLR outputs. This seems to be a simplified version of the established ICE 802 mentioned on the website, and was clearly an early production sample (since it was operated by a Philips-labelled system handset). It certainly looks

“I’m not a particularly fastidious person, yet even I found it difficult to resist the temptation to keep messing around with the various settings in the hopes of further refining the performance.”

very pretty, and it’s also very digital-oriented, with high quality on-board DACs and numerous (six) digital inputs (AES, 4x S/PDIF [2x electrical, 2x optical], plus USB), yet there are only two analogue RCA/phono pairs. The excellent Thrax Dionysus pre-amplifier provided a useful alternative to the B&M device.

The arrival of the speakers was a little unusual. Backes und Müller uses an operation called ‘Sprint Service’ to carry out its distribution and installation. This company contacted me and initially proposed delivering the speakers and leaving them with me for just 48 hours. I managed to arrange a more extended loan period, but a further surprise was that the installers made no attempt to adjust the speakers in situ. Although they worked pretty well, delivering a decent enough tonal balance when simply plonked down in the usual locations, there was also certainly some scope for fine tuning, especially in adjusting room interaction at the bass end of things. It’s actually possible to carry out the fine tuning procedures using a PC, but this option wasn’t available for this review; according to B&M, it’s still possible to achieve 95% of maximum performance without reverting to PC set-up.

The initial ‘as delivered’ in-room response wasn’t particularly promising, as room interactions left the bass region decidedly uneven, when measured under far-field, in-room averaged conditions, with significant excess around 50Hz and a lack of output 75-150Hz. The top end also looked a little too strong. As result the bass end tended to ‘thump’ on some tracks, yet the overall character elsewhere was a little too bright, and tended to sound a little aggressive when the volume is turned up high.

However, this is no ordinary loudspeaker. The built-in DSP facilities allowing significant adjustment of the tonal balance via its FIRTEC facility. This complex and elaborate feature certainly works, at any rate up to a point, though I wouldn’t recommend this speaker to anyone who suffers from OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder), as it’s difficult to resist the temptation to keep making small adjustments. I’m not a particularly fastidious person, yet even I found it difficult to resist the temptation to keep messing around with the various settings in the hopes of further refining the performance. Thereby lies, if not actual madness, at least a strong tendency to focus on the equipment rather than the music, which is itself somewhat disturbing.

The FIRTEC feature is implemented by cycling through 19 different stages. After setting the gain (which is best left at maximum), the next nine cover three parametric filters, each of which provide selection of frequency (27 options), correction level (+/-6dB) and Q (0.1-5.0). Another key adjustment provides up to +/-6dB of ‘shelving’, centred on 80Hz and 12kHz, while others address listening distance and absolute phase. While it cannot entirely counter the room modes, the FIRTEC feature certainly works up to a point, and proved quite effective in coping with the substantial imbalances found on delivery.



The active drive and DSP are responsible for the phase accuracy, and that factor, together with the fine acoustic distribution control, comes together to provide exceptionally tightly focused imaging. It's rare to find a large, full bandwidth speaker that is able to deliver such impressively precise imaging, but the BMLine 25 was superb in this respect, delivering fine focus of individual elements alongside convincing depth perspectives. There will always be a debate about imaging, and the way one

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive Units

Rear 2x DMC controlled 25cm bass speakers

Front 4x 17cm mid-range speakers with textile membranes

Front 1x mid-/high-range cylindrical wave emitter

Output Stage Power: Bass 400 / Mid 300 / High 300W with MOSFET technology

Frequency Range: 22Hz-24kHz (+/-3dB). Separation at 80Hz, 1200Hz

Input Sensitivity: Up to 20dBu

AD Converter: 27 bit Sigma Delta AD converter utilizing gain stacking

DA Converter: 24 bit Sigma Delta DA converter up to 192KHz

Analogue IN/OUT: XLR symmetrical

Digital IN/OUT: Digital AES input enabling direct connection to digital source

DSP: 60 MHz 32 bit floating point, 1500 dB dynamic

Process: FIRTEC equalizer, FIR frequency cross-over unit, limiter, volume control per software or hardware

Room Adaptation: Room adaptation using 5 filters. Distance Shift und FIR

Adjustment: BM Control PC software is available for remote control

Dimensions (WxDxH): 29x42x160cm

Weight: 69kg

Price: £35,990/pair

URL: www.backesmuller.de

Tel: +49 (0)2236 848445

designs a speaker to balance the direct and the room-reflected sound. Backes und Muller's 'line source' approach clearly favours the direct over the reflected sound, and this certainly accounts, at least in part, for its very sharp and precise soundstage imaging.

In terms of bandwidth, tonal balance and colorations, there's little to criticise here. The upper midband is perhaps a little too restrained, but even that could maybe be corrected by fiddling further with the FIRTEC DSP feature. At the same time it's very difficult to put a speaker such as this into any sort of comparative context, as one doesn't just get to contrast the sound of the loudspeaker with established references, but also has to take on board not only a change of power amplification, but also active filters, substantial DSP functions plus (in my case at least) the use of different preamplifiers.

This character did change somewhat according to the pre-amplifier being used, the valve-equipped Thrax Dionysus giving a rather warmer, richer sound than the somewhat more clinical solid state B&M. Furthermore, while timing seemed pretty good, the tonal character of the bass did seem a trifle odd, and somehow lacking in authority and drive. The BMLine 25 seems to do everything to an exceptionally high standard of competence, but there's a matter-of-fact quality here that somehow seems to emphasise the essentially 'digital' nature of this loudspeaker.

At nearly £36,000 per pair this is an unquestionably a very costly loudspeaker, though the fact that power amplifiers are included provides strong mitigation. Its major strengths lie in its flexibility that can certainly improve the tonal balance and minimise colorations, alongside a combination of excellent imaging, headroom and loudness capability. At the same time, its character clearly favours digital rather than analogue sources. +



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single box design."
(Chris Thomas - HiFi + Magazine)

Raidho C1.1 loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

The Raidho C1.0 was one of the big names in small speakers. The whole exercise was a radical attempt at redrawing the way audiophiles approach the concept of installing a loudspeaker, just as the modular design was a departure from the standard goals of loudspeaker design. The C1.1 takes that basic approach and runs with it, and runs somewhere very special.

The Danish loudspeaker begins with an "everything's important" approach to speaker design. Nothing is taken for granted. So where most loudspeaker companies of Raidho's size (and beyond) will buy off-the-shelf drive units components, the company builds in-house.

This began with the C1.0 loudspeaker, spread all the way up the line to the C4.0 and then the 'intel' gained from building the whole line could be introduced into the .1 series products. This means the on-paper differences between the C1.0 and C1.1 are not massive, and it also means the differences in performance between the two loudspeakers are unexpected.

To recap, the original C1.0 is a two way, boat-backed stand-mounted loudspeaker on a radical, decoupled loudspeaker stand. Stand aside, the obvious attributes of the C1.0 were the wide planar magnetic ribbon tweeter and the 'looks like an Accuton but isn't' ceramic mid-bass unit. That's a hugely sweeping statement covering a lot of ground, because that mid-bass unit is the only one out there that doesn't have its own chassis; the surround is bonded direct to the front baffle, while the motor is connected and decoupled from the same through a series of stand-offs. Meanwhile the tweeter is also built directly into the front baffle assembly. Aside from making changing any damaged drive unit an exercise in unbolting and reattaching a section of the baffle, the arrangement allows for super-fast energy dissipation.

The bulk of the changes between the two designs fall to new versions of the two drive units. The new tweeter has a different layout (a move from parallel bars of a ribbon to a woven pattern). This helps give the tweeter greater linearity and consistency (the width of the tweeter means there are natural gaps between the left, right and central magnets, and the woven tweeter pattern ▶



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“The fact you’ll struggle to get a bad sound out of the C1.1 could be a limitation, because there’s seemingly no impetus to go from ‘good’ to ‘wow’ if ‘good’ really is that good.”

overcomes the potential problems this causes). It also makes them more robust. Meanwhile below, the short voice coil has been improved – it’s now double layer wound – and the former is now titanium in place of aluminium. Aside from replacing the WBT terminals with home-grown multi-way sockets, that’s about it.

As before, Raidho recommends amplifiers from around 50W will do the trick; as the loudspeaker is a benign six ohm load and 88dB sensitive, it’s not a tough loudspeaker to partner. The company does recommend 50 or more hours of conditioning to shake down the drivers. Fortunately, the basic sound of the C1.1 does not go through massive evolutions in the process. I found the speaker remarkably amplifier friendly, although dark and brooding sounding amps are not a good match. The speaker is internally wired with top-

notch Nordost, so the logical match is a spot of Valhalla or so, and the decoupling devices are very Sort Kone in approach. That said, you don’t have to be slavishly drinking the Nordost Kool Aid to like what the C1.1 does, it’s just the C1.1 and Nordost are clearly thinking the same way.

I found the C1.1 exceptionally unfussy in positioning. Up to a point. There’s a great speaker in there that is easy to tease out, but those who want to really see what the speakers are capable of need to get hypercritical of placement. In a way, the fact you’ll struggle to get a bad sound out of the C1.1 could be a limitation, because there’s seemingly no impetus to go from ‘good’ to ‘wow’ if ‘good’ really is that good.

Although not a C1.0 user, I have spent some time in the company of these speakers and know what they were capable of. They were (and in the C1.1, still are) a precision, insightful and open sounding loudspeaker; dynamic, consummately musical, incredibly fast sounding and always entertaining. I found in the older model a slight disconnect between treble and bass, however; just enough to give a fraction of emphasis on the treble, which could make them somewhat ‘hi-fi’ sounding. Even that did not detract from the C1.0’s rightful place at the top of the standmount tree.

This didn’t prepare me for the C1.1’s performance. I expected that it would nail that disconnect, possibly going for a bit of extension top and bottom, but instead what I heard was a loudspeaker that easily surpasses the C1.0 in every aspect, even those attributes in which it was something of a world leader.

It’s so powerfully coherent across every boundary, what makes it so special becomes clear in moments. Instruments within the soundstage, whether that soundstage is a small jazz club or a whopping great concert ▶





TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Enclosure: rear ported standmount

Drivers: 1x sealed ribbon tweeter, 1x ceramic mid/bass unit

Crossover: 2nd order, 3kHz x-over freq

Frequency Response: 50Hz-50kHz

Sensitivity: 88dB **Impedance:** > 6 ohm

Dimensions (WxHxD): 20x37x36cm

Weight: 12.5kg per speaker

Price: £8,000 (black or white finish),
£9,300 (walnut), stands £1,695

Manufactured by: Raidho

URL: www.raidho.dk

UK Suppliers: High End Cable, Loud & Clear Glasgow

▶ hall, are given their full throat, unimpeded by the limits of the loudspeaker. OK, so the physical limits of a speaker of the C1.1's size does constrain the bass, but even here it's constraint by frequency response, not a constraint upon the scale of the loudspeaker's presentation. Put on a jazz standard like Cannonball Adderley's 'Somethin' Else' and these gifted, dead musicians spring back to life. I could wax lyrical about the reasons why this happens, citing the speed of the drive units, the integration between treble and bass or a number of rational explanations for the effect, but the net result is the music just seems more liberated through these loudspeakers. Instead of some of cool jazz's heroes ripping through some 'blah' standards, you get to hear why they were Blue Note's dream team; the interplay between Adderley and Miles Davis for example sounds fresh and new, as if two leading exponents of the form were riffing in front of you. Swap jazz quintets for symphony orchestras and the same happens. Even well-trodden recordings (von Karajan's early 1960s recording of Beethoven's Ninth, for example) get the swept clean and presented anew approach.

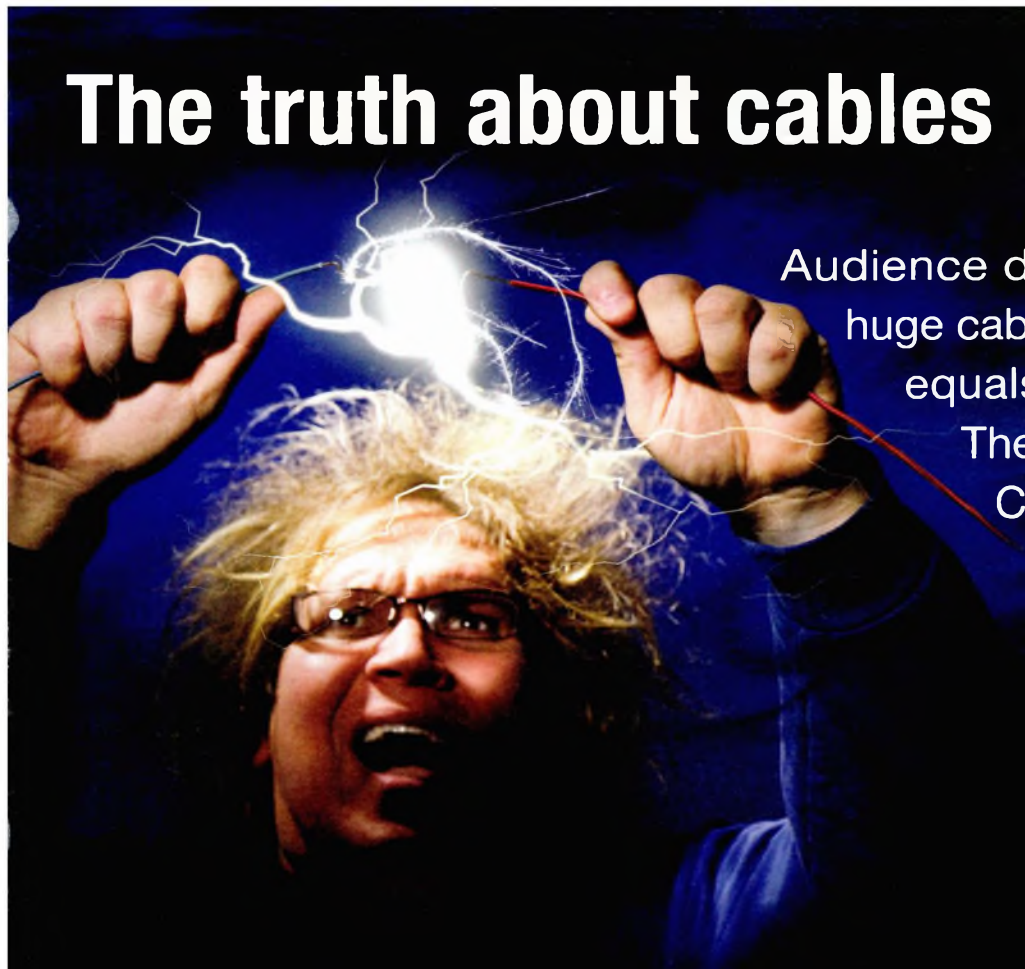
There is a 'but...' building. The C1.1 doesn't suffer signal compression gladly. Muse's 'Supermassive Black Hole' is almost all peak level. It's practically unlistenable on most decent loudspeakers, but the C1.1 makes it sound like AM radio. Given so many albums today are made (or remastered) 'hot', if your collection comprises 21st Century pop classics with a 2dB dynamic range, this is not the first choice in loudspeakers. This has more to do with laying bare what's missing from the recording than a fault of the Raidho, and is definitely not 'genre editing', because the loudspeakers sounded remarkable with Mastodon, Tool and, guilty secret time, AC/DC.

One of the C1.1's great strengths is it seems to know its limits. Far from trying and failing to slam a quart into a pint pot, it instead concentrates on making everything apart from that bottom octave as right as it can possibly be. That doesn't resolve the issue of the left hand end of the piano, no, but better leaving the issue hanging than making a pig's ear of the exercise. So instead of raggedy bass or boom, you get this delightful taut, fast and precise bottom end that just rolls off gently and evenly.

There's a word that keeps coming back, 'fast'. Recently, I've been enjoying the sound of good headphones; the diaphragm size makes them so fast they seem to be direct injecting sound into your head. After long in-head sessions, inch upon inch of flapping paper or plastic can sound as if someone's blunted the attack and initial decay of notes. A period of readjustment is required, to relearn the joys of the loudspeaker. The C1.1 manages to escape that fate, making a sound as fast as the music it's fed. None of this matters if you are listening to Brian Eno's ambient albums, but when you start working through the 11 disc set of Philly soul, speed of musical delivery is all-important in getting into the coke-fuelled disco record from the 1970s groove. While the C1.1 isn't just a loudspeaker for the headphone generation, it's worth noting that if we had more loudspeakers this fast, there might be less full-time in-ear migrants.

The C1.0 was good, but this is remarkable. It ranks among the finest standmount loudspeakers money can buy. Its speed coupled with its dynamic range make it capable of wrangling practically all music well, and while it doesn't delve into full range bass, what it does instead is make the rest of the frequency response come alive, especially in the all-important vocal region. A must-hear recommendation! +

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David Berning ZH-230 Mono power amps

By Alan Sircom

We have seen – and loved – David Berning’s innovative ZOTL (Zero Hysteresis Output Transformerless) amplifier design in the Quadrature Z and the ZH-230. But this is a new departure for Berning. David Berning’s amps are all reasonably custom-made, but this is a strictly limited edition, 12W Pure Class A mono amplifier, based on the 30W stereo ZH-230 chassis. More custom designs will follow.

Traditionally, the output transformers on a valve amp effectively define many aspects of the sound of an amplifier. However, some would prefer the sound of the valves to define the sound, rather than a coil of wire. Unfortunately, the execution of this idea isn’t as easy as the idea itself. Low current, low impedance amps with a dozen or more large power valves per side were the result at best; amps with a dozen or more large power valves prone to cascading failure at worst.

In the late 1990s, however, David Berning cracked the code. His patent is as simple and – in hindsight – obvious as it is brilliant. He realised that most of those valves in traditional OTL designs were effectively used for impedance matching. Pass that duty on to a DC-DC switching MOSFET power converter and suddenly an OTL amplifier no longer needs a floor full of valves. This power converter also includes a small transformer with a secondary winding specifically to drive the rectifier for the power valves, so the power valves load the DC voltage sources. Basically, what the Berning ZOTL circuit does can be neatly summed up by Berning itself, on its website: “the first amplifier using all-tube amplification to properly match the high-voltage, low-current operating parameters of vacuum tubes to the low-voltage, high-current drive requirements of dynamic loudspeakers without using audio-output transformers.”

The genius of this circuit design is it is universally applicable (any valve amp design in theory could use the ZOTL circuit, as Berning’s patent - reprinted on the website - demonstrates), but the implementation is not as straightforward as designing conventional transformer-coupled amplifier and thus far David Berning is the prime mover of ZOTL design. There’s no outsourcing, no foreign board stuffing or flow solder batch manufacturer. David and his merry men (which means, basically, David) make David Berning’s circuits.

These particular amps are virtually ZH-230 amps in mono form, except running in full Class A. The power supply, chassis and everything else (save for one phono socket blanked off per channel) remain as per the stereo amp... ▶



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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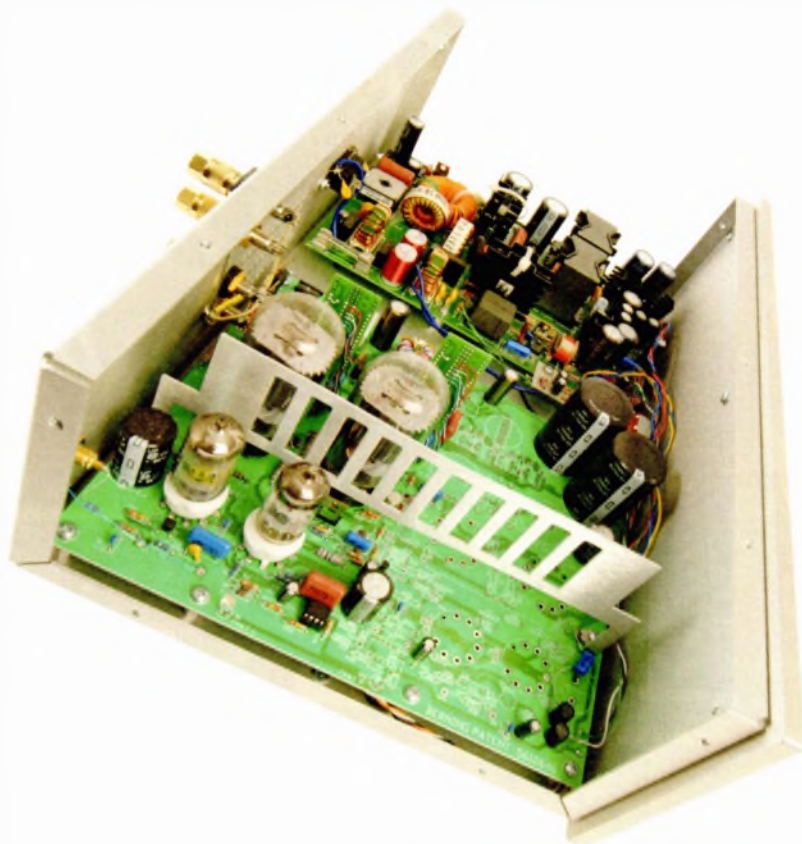
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▶ you just get two of them. In this early sample, this meant the rear panel had a hand-written label stuck on the rear. The raising of the bias to Class A means that, unlike most stereo-made-mono amplifiers, the power rating per channel *drops* to only 12 watts per side. It uses the same valve layout; but this time one 12AX7 input valve, a single 12AT7 as a driver and a pair of 33JY6 power tubes in each chassis. Tube rolling and substitutions - in the input and driver - are not only possible, but recommended, as Berning suggests this alters feedback, damping factor and output impedance to suit different loudspeaker designs. This, and the attenuation controls on the Berning ZOTL-One preamplifier (so obvious a partner as to make it an almost mandatory recommendation) fine tune the amp to the loudspeaker perfectly.

As ever with a Berning ZOTL design, you are in for a shock when lifting the amp, because it weighs next to nothing, especially by valve amp standards. Berning's preamp

“We are used to amplifiers sounding like there’s no devices between you and the music, but this is something more, er, less than that.”



weighs more, and the folded aluminium case is not from the 'inch thick' school. The amps sit on Stillpoints OEM feet, and this could perhaps be the most appropriated place for some custom decoupling feet around; it's not a microphonic design, but there isn't much in the way of mass loading to keep the amplifier from reacting to its surroundings and by adding the Stillpoints feet, resonance and vibration from the outside world is kept at bay.

Usually, companies start with a stereo chassis, go larger and mono, and then larger still. Berning's latest range started big and got smaller, and smaller. And what happens each time you go smaller is the sound gets even more engaging, even more satisfying. Given possibly the one of the most satisfying amplifiers of all time was the big Quadrature Z, and the stereo and now these new monos build upon that still further, there's something to be said for the whole 'small is beautiful' movement. Perhaps most interesting of all is how that applies to the main circuit of the ZH-230 too. By retaining the rest of the infrastructure but halving the valve roll-out per side, the amplifier takes an already graceful design and gives it inner poise, stillness, delicate refinement and clarity.

It's a truly uncanny feeling. We're used to amplifiers sounding like there's no devices between you and the music, but this is something more, er, less than that. It's like everything else sounds artificial and arch by comparison. It's a kind of "oh, that's how it sounds" epiphany; other amps could be likened to having your ears syringed, that feeling of sparkly clean detail that makes you think you could hear a pin drop from six miles away. That is sort of what the Berning ZH-230 monos do on a surface level. Underneath that however is something more like the musicians had more rehearsal sessions. That applies almost universally; I found the electronic-precise beats of Kraftwerk's 'Numbers' didn't manifestly improve from the Berning treatment, ▶

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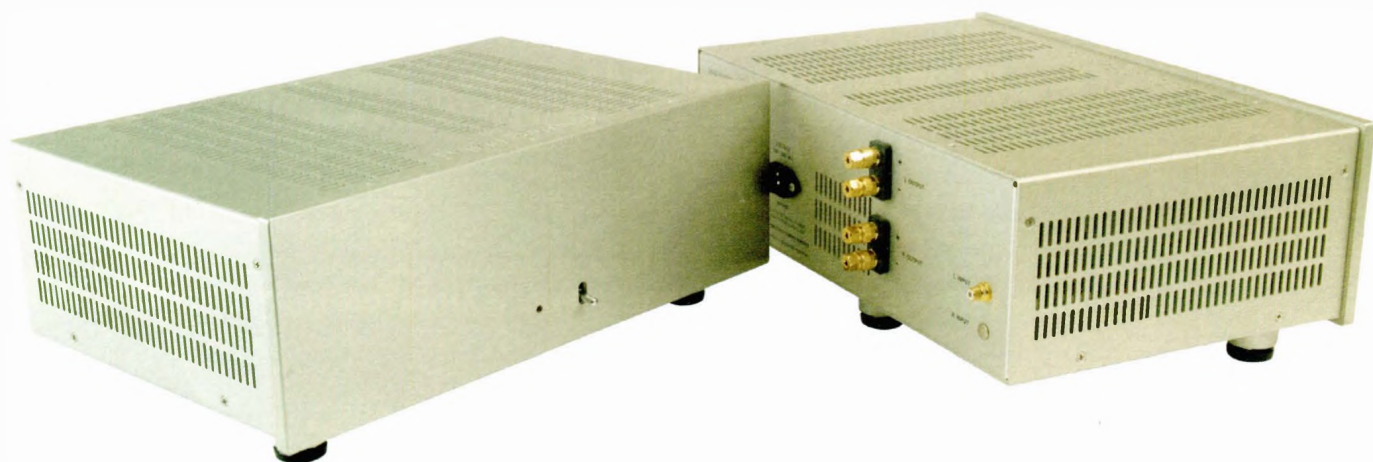


PEOPLE

Bob Ludwig



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▶ and the dynamism of John Bonham trying to destruction test a drum kit on Led Zep 4 needed more grunt behind it in the bottom end, but in almost everything else I played - from Gregorian chant to Grieg to Grinderman and all points in between, the sound drew me closer to the music.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Class A monophonic power amplifiers

Power output: 12 watts per channel
Output impedance: 0.6 to 2.7 ohms depending on tube complement

Input sensitivity: 0.4V to 0.75V depending on tube complement and load impedance

Tube complement: (2) 33JY6, (1) 12AX7, (1) 12AU7

Rear connections: 2 x RCA inputs, 2 x gold plated speaker connectors (Cardas)

Dimensions (HxWxD): 17x42x30cm per channel

Weight: 7kg per channel

Finish: Silver anodised

Price: £14,000/pair

Manufactured by:

The David Berning Company

URL: www.davidberning.com

Distributed by: Blade Audio

URL: www.blade-audio.com

Tel: +44(0)1252 737 374

I can see why so many musicians have poor audio systems (aside from the whole 'musician = normal person, but poorer' factor), because musicians frequently listen for things non-musicians skip over, but that needs tempering in the light of these sweet little amps. These amps resolve musical intervals brilliantly (that's the pitch change from one note to the next, something jazzers especially spend years training themselves to hear... and it's not as easy as it sounds), tease out the textural relationship between lines of music, harmony and rhythm as if it were a music theory masterclass. In short, musicians don't buy good audio systems, because they haven't heard what the Berning monos can do. And yet, for all that, the sound is full of the passion and dynamism that keeps you in awe of music. It's the kind of musical instrument that you could listen to the same piece of music 200 times in a row and still extract musical marrow from the 201st listen.

The (admittedly lightweight) elephant in the room is that 12 watts does limit the options in terms of loudspeaker selection. Unless you have something super efficient, you'll never raise the roof. But unless you are a knuckle-dragger, you'll probably not care. OK, the wrong speaker sounds very quiet and almost soft at the frequency extremes (tube rolling to match damping factor helps here), but go swiftly up the hi-eff rankings and you'll think 12 watts is more than anyone needs.

There is another obvious partnership, one that unfortunately I never got round to testing. Electrostatic designs have their own transformer in the audio chain and models like the original Quad 57s were designed to work with sub-20W power amp designs. Ridding yourself of one set of trafos in the valve amp makes for uncanny realism. I've heard such a performance before, with Quads 63s and Croft OTL IIIs and I believe I'd hear it here. If you have original Quad 57s, this should be the best amp you've ever heard for them. Report back if you find out.

In truth, we questioned the need for this amp, and indeed the need for a review of this amp. A limited edition 12W version of an already excellent 30W stereo amp for more money is going to be a hard sell. And it remains a hard sell right up until you hear the amps, and wonder what you are ever going to do without them. Personally, I cannot justify using them because they would ultimately place a difficult to overcome limit to the kind of loudspeakers I review... and I bitterly regret that. But someone else can, and I can get some vicarious pleasure from that fact. Please, please give these amps a loving home. They more than deserve it. +

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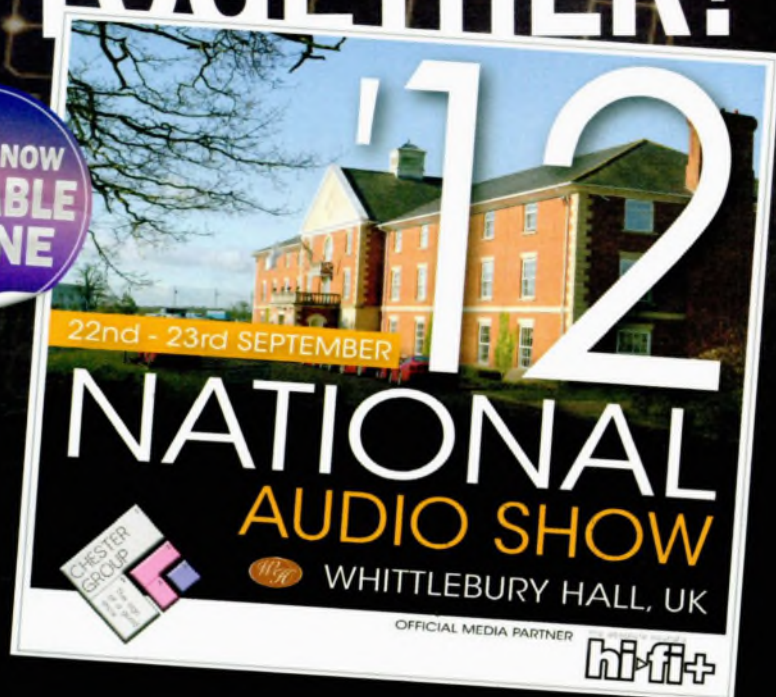
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Vivid Audio Giya G2 loudspeaker

By Jason Kennedy

How many loudspeaker companies build all their own drive units and fit them into ground breaking cabinets? And how many of those companies are genuinely breaking new ground? By my calculation the answer is very few indeed, and of those Vivid Audio has the lowest profile. I mean you don't need very many fingers to count the number of speaker companies that make their own tweeters and there are even fewer that go to the lengths that Vivid does when it comes to cabinet construction. The 'box' that the Giya G2 inhabits is made from two skins of reinforced glass fibre which sandwich a core of end grain balsa. That is 12mm thick slices of balsa in 50mm square blocks and triangles individually laid up by hand. The result is a very curvy and distinctive cabinet on the outside that is both stiff and light and which has no sharp edges to cause diffraction. It's genuinely leading edge stuff.

But what's the deal with the Giya G2? It looks just like the G1 that came out in 2008 and appears to have the same drivers. Put the two side by side however and you will see that it's a smaller version of the G1, with half the internal volume and 80% of its height. This is still a decent size loudspeaker that stands a metre and third tall but it's easier to accommodate than a G1 because the bass drivers are 50mm smaller in diameter albeit using the same motor unit, and thus don't go quite so low or so loud. This is not to say that they don't have grip, grunt or girth.

Designer Laurence Dickie's explanation for the G2's unusually strong bass is that his work in pro audio for Turbosound has taught him that using oversized magnets on lightweight cones delivers this result.



"The bass has many of the qualities you get with active loudspeakers, including impressive extension and power; some call it 'grip', others 'slam', but essentially it's a combination of power and speed that is hard to achieve with passive designs."

He compares it to the way that a large engine in a small car will give you more control, if it's driven properly. The drive in this case being the crossover design. In Dickie's B&W days (he was responsible for the original Nautilus) this approach was described as 'over shoved' – which doesn't sound very positive – but in this instance it brings considerable benefits. The bass has many of the qualities you get with active loudspeakers, including impressive extension and power; some call it 'grip', others 'slam', but essentially it's a combination of power and speed that is hard to achieve with passive designs.

It's slightly at odds with the graceful design of the cabinet, but the G2 is a bit of a beast. Power handling is quoted as a whopping 800 watts and its delivery is so clean that I can easily believe it would be able to take this sort of energy without showing any sign of strain. I certainly encountered nothing of the sort at the levels I wicked them up to.

To get back to the G2's make up, it's a four-way, five driver system with all metal units and catenary domes on tweeter and midrange. I noted that the tweeter dome is reinforced with a carbon fibre ring which is something that Bowers used to do in its 800 series because it stiffens the driver sufficiently to add a very worthwhile increase in high frequency extension before break-up, in this case the figure quoted is 44kHz. Tweeter, mid and mid-bass units all have tapered tube loading and all the cones have maximum ventilation through the basket and even the coil former which relieves pressure behind the central dome. The two bass drivers are braced against one another in a reaction cancelling arrangement that doesn't rely on



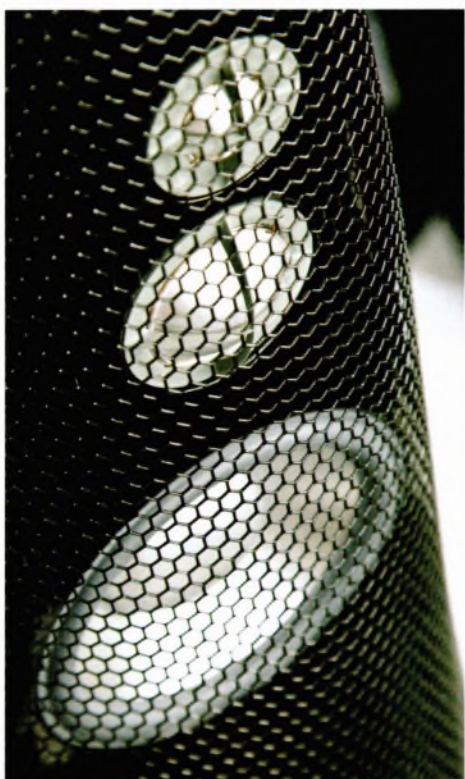
stiffness in the enclosure, in fact the units are mounted on 'O' rings to minimise the transmission of energy (as are the rest of the drivers for that matter). The bass drivers also have a massive 50mm of mechanical travel, something that Dickie must have picked up on in his day-job.

Given that carbon fibre is all the rage these days I asked Dickie why Vivid hadn't chosen this material instead of GRP for the cabinet skins. He agreed that CF is more of the moment and could look great but in practice its only real advantage would be a reduction in weight, which as this is not a car, would not enhance the potential sound quality of the speaker. The current vacuum infused GRP and balsa cabinet accounts for less than half of the finished speaker's 55 kilo mass which is arguably light enough. There is some carbon fibre in the G2 however; it's used to form the base, presumably because it can be moulded into more complex shapes with ease. The bi-wire cable terminals are right underneath the speaker which makes for a great looking rear end but a tricky cable swap if you're on your own, I had to lay them on some cushions to do the job. There are six threaded inserts for custom made stainless steel spikes but their use is optional and I went with the ease of positioning that the smooth base confers. Vivid also supplies high quality terminal jumpers for those preferring to single wire.

The first thing that struck me about these speakers when I got them up and running was the character of the recording on the Grateful Dead's *Blues* ►

► for *Allah*. Some speakers make the Audio Fidelity pressing of this album sound smooth and luxurious, perhaps a little bit more so than is likely to be the case with such a vintage record. The G2 reveals the warmth of the recording but also the unusual way in which the drums were laid down and the fact that this instrument is the key to the overall sound of this most jazzed out of Dead LPs. The record sounds much more of its age as well with lovely, chewy bass guitar notes and some top quality noodling from Garcia et al. A few more albums in, and it's clear that the G2 is a very fast speaker. There is no sense of overhang or smearing of timing, yet unlike many examples of the breed, it is also devoid of forwardness. The speaker's intrinsic character is totally clean which leaves acres of space for the qualities of the music to shine through.

When that music contains a emotional message you know all about it, in this case Laura Marling delivered the goods on her *A Creature I Don't Know* album which is replete with fine detail yet strains at the compression on her voice when she raises it. Recording



"It is clear that the G2 is a very fast speaker. There is no sense of overhang or smearing of timing, yet unlike many examples of the breed, it is also devoid of forwardness."

character both good and bad is obvious with the G2, yet this only reinforces the intensity of the performance so it's been applied in an appropriate manner, enough so to provoke comments like "lummy and blimey jings, this is powerful stuff" from yours truly.

The speed applies across the band and does not require high power amplification to be enjoyed, I use Valvet A3.5 class A monoblocks and their 50 watts are enough to deliver bass lines that know how high when they are asked to jump. This was readily apparent with all sorts of music including the jazz blues of Conjure's *Music for the Texts of Ishmael Reed*. This densely packed recording reveals the various layers involved in its creation as well as its analogue nature even though I was playing a 24/88.2 HDTracks file. Cleaner, fresher pieces like Samuel Yirga's *Habasha Sessions* are even more real, in fact at low level this sounded truly magical, totally immersive, natural and effortless.

As you might expect from the aerodynamic shape of the enclosure imaging is a distinct strong point, Dickie suggested they be toed in so that the axis crossed in front of the listening seat which gave excellent stage width in my room but I preferred the tonal balance when sitting at the apex of the triangle with both speakers pointed straight at me. With a lot of speakers I find this set-up uncomfortable but the smooth, clean mid and treble on the G2 means that you can listen like this at any level you fancy and not encounter anything undesirable, unless its on the record of course. Something of this nature surprised me by turning up on 'Keith Don't Go' the Nils Lofgren live track that is in danger of becoming a new Private Investigations on the demo front. This was presented as a totally coherent whole by the G2s; where many speakers deliver lots of scale but little image focus, this time it's a man playing a guitar (with considerable skill) and both are in one spot in time and space. What you don't usually hear is the limiting applied at the crescendo, at least not to the extent that the Vivids reveal, all commercial recordings are compressed to some extent but so are a lot of loudspeakers, that is not the case here.

This track also revealed the total lack of cabinet coloration from the G2, a quality that can be heard in the extra acoustic space available for notes to stop and start in – the fact that they end when they should being the key here. The other tell-tale sign is the noise floor being lower than it usually seems, cabinet contributions are a form of noise so when they are dramatically reduced you can hear quieter notes and more note decay and it's rather addictive. So much so that the next pair of speakers I put on sounded positively crude despite their four and a half grand price tag, I appreciate that the price of that speaker is significantly less than that asked for the G2, but the difference was so great that it took several weeks to re-calibrate my expectations.

With music that has genuine dynamic range and depth of image such as Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* the power and scale of the orchestra is delivered in astonishing realism. This is where you really start to wonder

how such low bass can be so well controlled. It gives the soundstage extraordinary depth and scale and the music real fear factor, I don't think this piece was on an album called the *Power of the Orchestra* but it should have been.

Despite the phenomenal results I achieved with the G2s, I couldn't help thinking that better amplification would have got more out of them. But try as I might I couldn't get hold of anything truly suitable in the time available. I had my eye on the MSB S200 power amp that had made a brief visit a few months earlier, that has the power and finesse

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Configuration: 4-way 5-driver system

Cabinet: Glass reinforced balsa cored sandwich composite, carbon fibre base

HF driver: 26mm metal dome, tapered tube loading, catenary profile

Mid driver: 50mm metal dome, tapered tube loading, catenary profile

Mid/bass driver: 125mm with tapered tube loading, short-coil long-gap motor design, 50mm copper ribbon coil

Bass drivers: 2 x 175mm metal coned unit with short-coil long-gap motor design, 75mm copper ribbon coils

Bass loading: Exponentially tapered tube enhanced bass reflex

Sensitivity: 89dB

Impedance (Ohm): 6 nominal,

4 minimum, low reactance

Crossover frequencies: 220, 880, 3500 Hz

Power handling (music program): 800 watts rms

Dimensions (H, W, D): 1383, 360, 638mm

Net weight: 55kg

Standard finishes: black, pearl white

Price: £34,500 per pair

Tel: 01403 78 2221

Manufactured by: Vivid Audio

URL: www.vividaudio.com



to do this speaker justice, I think. There were times when a bit more bite on leading edges would have helped particular tracks and a good class AB amp would likely provide that. I tried alternative cables and these enhanced certain qualities but this is such a revealing speaker that you can hear what's missing rather easily.

Wyckleff Jean's 'Thug Angels' was one of the tracks that put me on the quest, its bass had far more subtlety than usual but not quite as much slam, something 200 clean watts would undoubtedly deliver. But with this track you are talking about a studio composite, a sound that has no real absolute. With a string quartet recorded with an eye to fidelity the result was as good as I have ever got. The instruments sounded totally real and provoked the realisation that the G2 has the finesse of an electrostatic combined with the power and dynamics of a boxed speaker. Very rarely can cones and domes deliver the softness of real strings complete with the acoustic of the studio so effectively, and even less common is one that can go from soft to loud and back again in such immediate and effortless fashion.

A lot is made of the wonders of 3D televisions, but even the best deliver a pretty poor facsimile of the real thing. With a speaker like this you are far closer to experiencing a solid presence in the room and you don't even need special glasses!

I got a superb result with the Vivid Giya G2, a better one it seemed than that with the G1 a couple of years ago. Although I put this down to mostly better ancillaries in the system and the advent of computer audio, but it's also likely that the slightly smaller size of the loudspeaker system suited the realistically sized room better. Suffice it to say that both are world class loudspeakers that should be considered by anyone looking for the very best that a sound system can deliver. +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Burmester 113 DAC

By Alan Sircom



Burmester doesn't do things by halves. When it does a thing, it commits to that thing. It plays the long game and it does it right from the outset. So perhaps no surprise then that Burmester wasn't the first out of the starting gates with a DAC when they suddenly became fashionable again. But instead of doing it quick, it did it right, and the 113 digital converter is the result.

Like any Burmester product, the 113 is expensive, and like any Burmester product, it's expensive because it is astonishingly well made. Unlike most Burmester products though, it doesn't have the mirror-chrome front panel. Instead, the 113 has a brushed aluminium front to match the sleeve-like case and the rear panel. It's what is becoming the standard half-size box shape for upper-end converters. Except that compared to most of these DACs, the 113 feels exceptionally solid.

Perhaps the build quality is overkill in a DAC (no moving parts, no demands to be used during an earthquake, virtually no need for it to be used in hand-to-hand combat), but in this case it means it will still be in service a decade or two from now, probably looking just as shiny and new as it does today. On build alone, it's the Chuck Norris of digital conversion.

Inside the 113 is a lot of common ground. The DAC project itself began as a spin-off of the MMI upgrade module that brings USB and Bluetooth connectivity to the 061, 069 and 089 players, and it uses many of the same circuit elements as seen in these fine CD players; so it uses Burmester's 'secret squirrel' DACs featured in the 069 flagship, it can stream Class 1 and Class 2 USB (Class 2 is native on a Mac, but needs a driver for Windows computers) which means potentially 24-bit, 192kHz audio from your computer. There's only five buttons and a power switch, but that doesn't stop it coming with a handy remote control and with four digital inputs (a Bluetooth aerial, USB, S/PDIF phono and 'TORX' or Toslink), two digital outputs (S/PDIF RCA and Toslink) and balanced and single-ended outputs. USB and RCA inputs are transformer decoupled to limit the ingress of RFI and ground loop noise.

There's a belt and braces approach to jitter reduction. The USB input is asynchronous, and therefore locked to the 113's own clocks, but the data stream is then put through sample-rate conversion. This means a 16/44 datastream from a computer gets locked to the internal clock and reconstituted as a 16/48 datastream, with the option for 24/96 or 24/192 upsampling. Any input (including 176kHz samples) is corralled into those three sample rates. I am slightly concerned that this is an enforced redrawing of the original datastream, and that 16/44 generally performs best as 16/44 and I'd like the option to keep it that way, but the end result sounds good regardless.

As with almost all DACs today, the 113 goes for clarity and detail. Fret noises on guitars, finger squeaks on violins, the faint ringing of the kit as the drummer hits the snare, everything gets through here. But the surprising thing about the 113 is not the excellent clarity and the detail. You'd kind of expect those, given from whence it came. It's the big and lively sound it bestows on the music. And that is 'bestows' not 'imposes'. Some devices seem to be like the Tito Puente fan club, in that you could play some Messiaen ►



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▶ and they'd make it sound like a salsa. The 113 will give everything the correct musical structure and balance of melody, harmony and rhythm required. This can make things hard to listen to – I 'get' Fiona Apple here; she's more than emo hippy crap through the Burmester DAC, there's some genuine struggle and torment that somehow seldom escapes the clutches of other converters. In this, the DAC performs very much in line with the audio output from its bigger brothers, the Burmester CD players.

“It’s also a very full sound. Not overly rich and not stodgy sounding. Just full. Instruments have a grounded, rooted solidity to them.”

It's also a very full sound. Not overly rich and not stodgy sounding. Just full. Instruments have a grounded, rooted solidity to them. The separation around instruments is perfectly delineated, and the low noise floor gives them a sense of three dimensionality, and when it comes to presenting an orchestra in full throat, the 113 more than rises to the challenge.

Part of this comes from the assured top-to-bottom coherence the DAC presents. This becomes exceptionally important with left-field jazz piano; hitting out a seemingly random array of notes from the same instrument can seem a little disjointed, even to jazz aficionados, but the 113 makes some sense of the cacophony. That coherence is pure Burmester, especially the big yet not lush sound. And that's the killer part of the 113. Five years ago, if you wanted this grade of sonic performance, that big, bold, confident and effortlessly musical presentation, you'd have probably bought a Burmester CD player, and it would have set you back as much as a new Audi. Now, the same performance is available for the price of a set of good alloys for that Audi. Isn't progress wonderful?

Finally, the philosophical debate about the need for resampling to 48, 96 or 128kHz aside, there's Bluetooth. No, not the performance of the Bluetooth circuits itself, because it's almost up there with the wired-in full fat sources. It's that bright blue molar that shines out right in the middle of the DAC if you

use Bluetooth. Blue-tooth... geddit? As it's a Burmester device, you can guarantee that light will burn just as brightly, just as blue 10 years from now. And probably just as silly.

I've long thought the only impediment to widespread Burmester domination was the price of admission. If there was a gateway product that delivered at least some of the performance of the company's top CD players, people would stop thinking them just as shiny objects and start hearing some of the world's best audio electronics. And in the case of the 113, that's precisely what you can do. I can see this making Burmester a lot of new friends, and this DAC comes very highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: Bluetooth (via supplied aerial, A2DP, APT-X), USB (Class One and Two), RCA S/PDIF, TORX/Toslink

Outputs: RCA S/PDIF, Toslink, RCA and XLR analogue outputs

Sampling rates: 16-bit, 48kHz, 24-bit, 96kHz, 24-bit, 192kHz

Dimensions (WxHxD): 20x6x16.5cm

Weight: 1.5kg

Price: £2,500

Manufactured by:

Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH

URL: www.burmester.de

"Far beyond my expectations" - Peter Ball



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AUDIO 10 (USA)

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IMAGE HI FI (Germany)



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"An utter delight" **Iain Manson (Owner UK)**

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Encounter MK3C

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"One of the truly special products I have reviewed in the last 18 years"
STEREOPHILE (USA)



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Most Wanted Component Award "So far ahead of the pack ... looks about to lap them. ..first choice for those looking for ultra musical LP performance" **STEREO TIMES**

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"Design of the decade" **HI FI WORLD**

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Artemis Labs SA-1 turntable and TA-1 tonearm

By Alan Sircom

Frank Schröder – the designer of the Artemis Labs turntable and tonearm – is something of an authority figure when it comes to vinyl. In fact, he's a walking, talking vinyl Wikipedia. So on the face of it, who better to design a turntable and tonearm? However, to date, Schröder's products have been extremely up-scale, hand crafted tonearms that have a waiting list that would put Morgan Cars to shame. Can someone who is used to working at that end of the market design products built in greater numbers?

OK, so the Artemis Labs SA-1 turntable and TA-1 arm are not exactly mass-produced, but they are designed not to be custom made, and this is very much at odds with most of Schröder's previous designs, which reflect his watchmaker training and fastidious approach.

As Schröder is best known as a tonearm guy, let's start there. The TA-1 uses a new form of magnetic eddy current damping mechanism in the horizontal plane, and in place of his unique string and magnet bearing assembly, the TA-1 sports a hybrid ceramic gimbaled bearing that is as near frictionless as is functionally possible. It also uses a calibrated centre post for VTA adjustment, but the provision for relatively easy on-the-fly VTA changes as found on his Reference arms is gone.

Azimuth is controllable by loosening the armwand screw and adjusting the wand and the one-point cartridge mounting common to all Schröder arms is used. This works by mounting the cartridge to one of a range of mounting plates and affixing that to the arm, thereby adjusting the effective mass and making overhang (more accurately, overhang and tangency) easier to adjust. Finally, the wand itself is made from a rich oiled kingwood, and the lead-out wires are one long, uninterrupted length of cryo-treated pure copper. The arm fits the standard Rega mounting.

The SA-1 turntable was the first turntable part out of the Artemis Labs stable (prior to the deck, the Californian company was best known for its range of very nice valve amplifiers). Again designed by Schröder, the deck uses a high-mass platter on a relatively low-mass chassis, driven by a very high quality DC motor that uses magnetic tape in place of a belt, because magnetic tape is of **uniform** thickness. Once more... fastidious. ▶



WALLS OF
SOUND



"IF YOU CAN FIND A CONVENTIONAL LOUDSPEAKER THAT DOES BETTER WHATEVER THE PRICE, I'D BE SURPRISED"

Alan Sircom, HiFi+ Jul-Aug 2012

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"By custom designing the loudspeaker specifically for the room, you can get a sound far better than you ever could shoe-horning the wrong speakers into a room."

Alan Sircom, HiFi+ Jul-Aug 2012

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Room acoustics play a critical role in what you hear and can have a greater effect than the rest of your system put together – as much as 10 or even 20db variations in frequency response. As every room is acoustically different, the speaker needs to be designed to compensate for this. We will measure the acoustics of your room from your listening position and then design your ultimate loudspeaker, for the flattest possible frequency response by using the most advanced acoustic measurement and design software available.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX...

So you think big, ugly boxes are necessary for the highest quality sound? Wrong. Quad proved in the '60s that the best box was no box at all – and a wall is even better!

"No fewer than three different sources of distortions endemic with conventional box loudspeakers are completely avoided."

Paul Messenger, HiFi Critic, Jan-Mar 2012

All drive units are built into your cavity walls for maximum acoustic performance and minimum visual impact. Why? Because acoustic energy from the rear of the drive units disappears into the cavity wall rather than being reflected back as distortion through the cone or the box sides. In addition, the rigid wall structure provides outstanding clarity. Bass is clean and clear, and incredibly deep, without the normal 24db/octave roll off or distortion associated with box loudspeakers.

"The overall bandwidth was quite exceptional, extending right down to the very lowest audible frequencies."

Paul Messenger, HiFi Critic, Jan-Mar 2012

THE SPEAKERS SIMPLY DISAPPEAR

"The aesthetic issues involved in a Walls of Sound speaker system are totally revolutionary, in as much as there really aren't any aesthetic issues. The in-wall loudspeaker simply disappears from view, and that alone takes it into a different dimension."

Paul Messenger, HiFi Critic, Jan-Mar 2012

THE WORLD'S BEST DRIVE UNITS

We use the world's finest drive units, building them into their ideal acoustic environment to perform at their best – and the results are stunning. All systems are three-way, with twin 8" bass units per channel up to two 12" units per channel for the ultimate system. 5.1 Systems are also available for the ultimate home cinema experience. Prices start from £10,000 per pair, including design, installation, loudspeaker cable and re-decoration, with all design work overseen by Stuart McGill, founder and CEO, Walls of Sound Ltd.

"Meeting and working with Stuart McGill has re-invigorated my enthusiasm for a radical approach that has real potential."

Paul Messenger, HiFi Critic, Jan-Mar 2012

HOW TO GET IN TOUCH

We are now installed in one of the World's finest HiFi dealers, Graham's HiFi in Islington N1. Alternatively, we invite you to come and listen in our own facility just outside Oxford (2 miles Junction 7, M40). Call us on 0845 121 3114, or email: stuart@wallsofsound.co.uk. We will be delighted to send you a brochure, or visit our website at www.wallsofsound.co.uk.



▶ The high-mass platter is a carefully down-to-the-micron machined billet of aircraft grade aluminium, weighing in at almost 7kg, and damped with a paper/felt inlay. The platter turns on an oversized, non-inverted bearing designed with overlong self-lubing phosphor bronze bushes, and with rough edges factored in deliberately to aid the even spread of the oil film. Three mat options are available, to best suit your room, system and tastes.

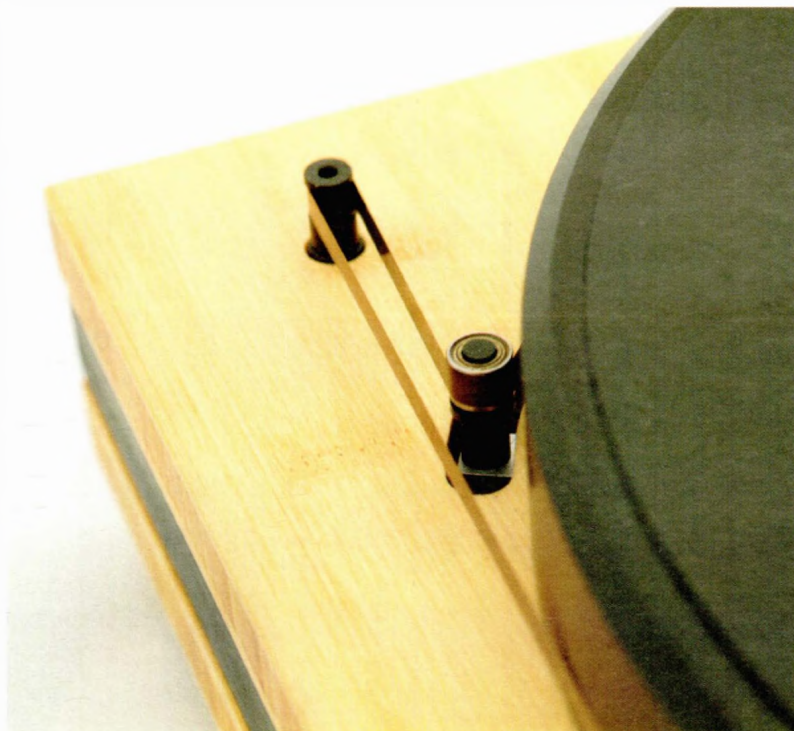
The 'belt' is a loop of magnetic tape. This has several advantages. First, it means there's a near-infinite supply of virtually free belts on tap. Next, tape is not rubber, so it is not bendy and stretchy; properties not recommended for precise speed control. As discussed earlier, tape's thickness is more uniform than any rubber or silicon belt. Then, there's the added bonus of a tape tensioner; something that's definitely not recommended with rubber belts, but mean the tape covers more than 90 per cent of the diameter of the platter. More contact means no slippage or side thrust issues. This connects to a Swiss DC motor with a lot of torque, working to a predetermined drag factor thanks to an eddy

current brake beneath the platter, so any traditional DC motor problems with variable load from cartridge drag are eliminated.

The chassis is a sandwich of a two layers of bamboo ply separated by a layer of ebony, with each layer of bamboo itself having three different layers with grain going in different directions. This effectively dissipates energy from within (vibrations from table itself) or without (footfall), without the need for a suspension system. The deck sits on three adjustable cones (Stillpoints are an option) and sports a small off-board power supply designed by John Atwood. This allows fine tuning of 33 and 45, and also includes a variable speed setting. It even has a notch in the spindle to centre eccentric spindle holes. A small Delrin puck sits atop the spindle.

Most good turntables go in one of two directions, sonically; added character or neutrality. This is different. It's like it retains all the good parts of all the character-led decks (the precision of a direct drive, the effervescence of a idler wheel, the 'bop' of a suspended deck) with the inherently neutral performance of the 'absence of character' set. That's a rare combination, the kind of deck that can go toe-to-toe with some of vinyl's really big guns on their own turf, and not sound out of place. The last time I got this kind of performance from a turntable, it was a Pink Triangle Anniversary, and where this scores over that particular legend is it extends that exuberant yet honest performance across the full frequency range.

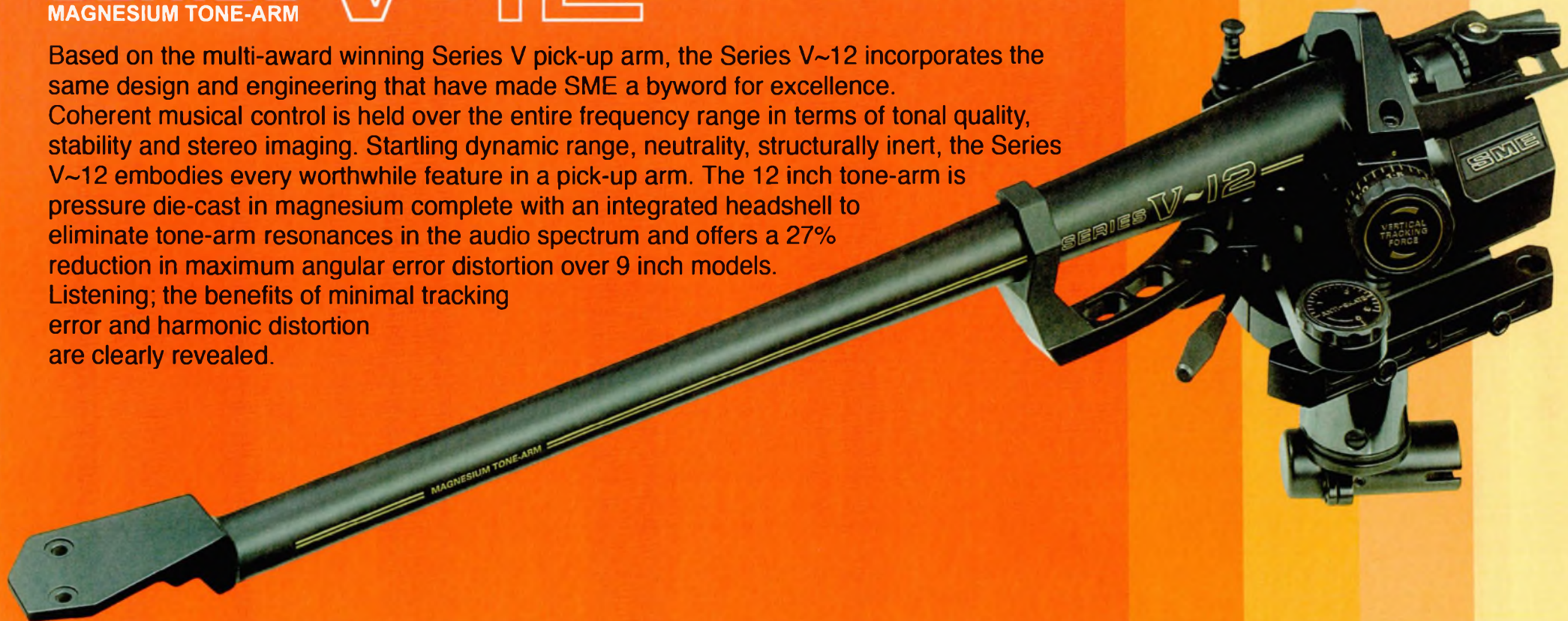
Normally, turntables that sound this deep also sound almost ponderous compared to lighter sounding decks. Not so here. This is a deck of rare depth and detail in that depth, but it is not weighed down or anchored by that depth. It sounds as breezy and light as a Rega, but with the bass of a good VPI and the sort of absence of background noise and 'inner calm' that still makes Voyd turntables highly valued. ▶



SERIES V~12

MAGNESIUM TONE-ARM

Based on the multi-award winning Series V pick-up arm, the Series V~12 incorporates the same design and engineering that have made SME a byword for excellence. Coherent musical control is held over the entire frequency range in terms of tonal quality, stability and stereo imaging. Startling dynamic range, neutrality, structurally inert, the Series V~12 embodies every worthwhile feature in a pick-up arm. The 12 inch tone-arm is pressure die-cast in magnesium complete with an integrated headshell to eliminate tone-arm resonances in the audio spectrum and offers a 27% reduction in maximum angular error distortion over 9 inch models. Listening; the benefits of minimal tracking error and harmonic distortion are clearly revealed.



SME

“The best pick-up arm in the world”

▶ This almost doesn't need musical examples. What it does, it does universally. Out came some old faves, and some new faces alike: the Pixies *Surfer Rosa* album on Mo-Fi was especially interesting, the loud-soft trademark Pixies post-punk thrash can easily either descend into an unexciting slow drawl or a light and loud tizz, but here it was eerily dark and brooding, with malevolent snare drum attacks hitting you like a brick and then going away. The four trumpeters taking it in turn on 'El Gato' with Duke Ellington at the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival concerts (Speakers Corner reissue of the Columbia album) hit you with surprising force, or – in the case of Ray Nance's muted trumpet – surprising delicacy, and *Post To Wire* by Richmond Fontaine is rendered with such beauty and honesty, it's hard not to weep.

There was no desire to fiddle about here. The package works so well, you won't want

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Permissible Arm Lengths: 220mm to 260mm

Platter Speeds: 33 1/3 and 45 rpm, trimmable, variable from approx. 25 to 60 rpm.

Size: Motor Controller (WxDxH) 9.5x25.4x11.4cm

Turntable (including feet): 45x35x14cm

Weight: 21.8Kg

Price: £5,995

Artemis Labs TA-1 tonearm

Effective length: 239.3 mm

Pivot-to-spindle distance: 222 mm

Offset angle: 23°

Effective mass: 14 gr with Certal mounting plate; 19 gr with brass mounting plate

Price: £2,795

Manufactured by: Artemis Labs

URL: www.artemislabs.com

Distributed by: Cool Gales

URL: www.coolgales.com

Tel: 0800 043 6710 (UK only)



to break the spell. The turntable and arm between them make such sense together that breaking up the package seems like transgressing some moral code of audio conduct (before the TA-1, the SA-1 appeared with Schröder Reference and DPS arms, Regas modded and stock, even Naim Aro arms with success... so its place as a neutral platform seems assured, and I dare say the TA-1 will appear on as many different turntables as the Schröder arms turn up on). In truth, I didn't want to change a thing. Vinyl, for me, got to a special 'as good as it gets' place here. I wouldn't change that for another turntable, whatever its cost.

Finally, a word about the manuals. They are written by a man who knows more about vinyl than practically anyone on the planet, and a person who's mind works to a logical order. Even if you don't own – or even ever consider owning – the deck or arm, it's worth downloading the manuals, because they are a mine of information in their own right. OK, they are geared toward getting the best out of the SA-1 and TA-1, but there are some true turntable gems in there (especially about the relative tightness of different bolts in a turntable system... yes, it goes that deep). If you own the deck and arm, follow the instructions to the letter. Yes, installation will take far longer than you expected and you'll need some additional tools to complete the job (a blank groove record, a mono recording, a test record, etc), but when completed... wow!

I'd like to say I'm impressed with the Artemis Labs deck and arm, but it goes much deeper than that. I'm blown away by what it can do. OK, so it doesn't feed the restless audiophile who must adjust every parameter before they can listen and if you want your turntable to look like a glistening chrome aircraft carrier or a recently-cleaned oil-rig, there are other decks to meet your needs. But if you want a stable platform to play your records as they should sound, without all the hassle of fiddling about when set up, but with the sort of performance that has no real upper limit, the Artemis Labs SA-1 and TA-1 might be the only thing this side of Porsche pricing to ring all your bells. Artemis Labs hit the ground running here, by making one of the very best decks around. Highly recommended? Hell, I want one! +

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- High quality 24ct gold connectors.
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"IsoTek has built itself a reputation as a purveyor of mains conditioners that actually improve (as opposed to just alter) the sound"

HI-FI WORLD

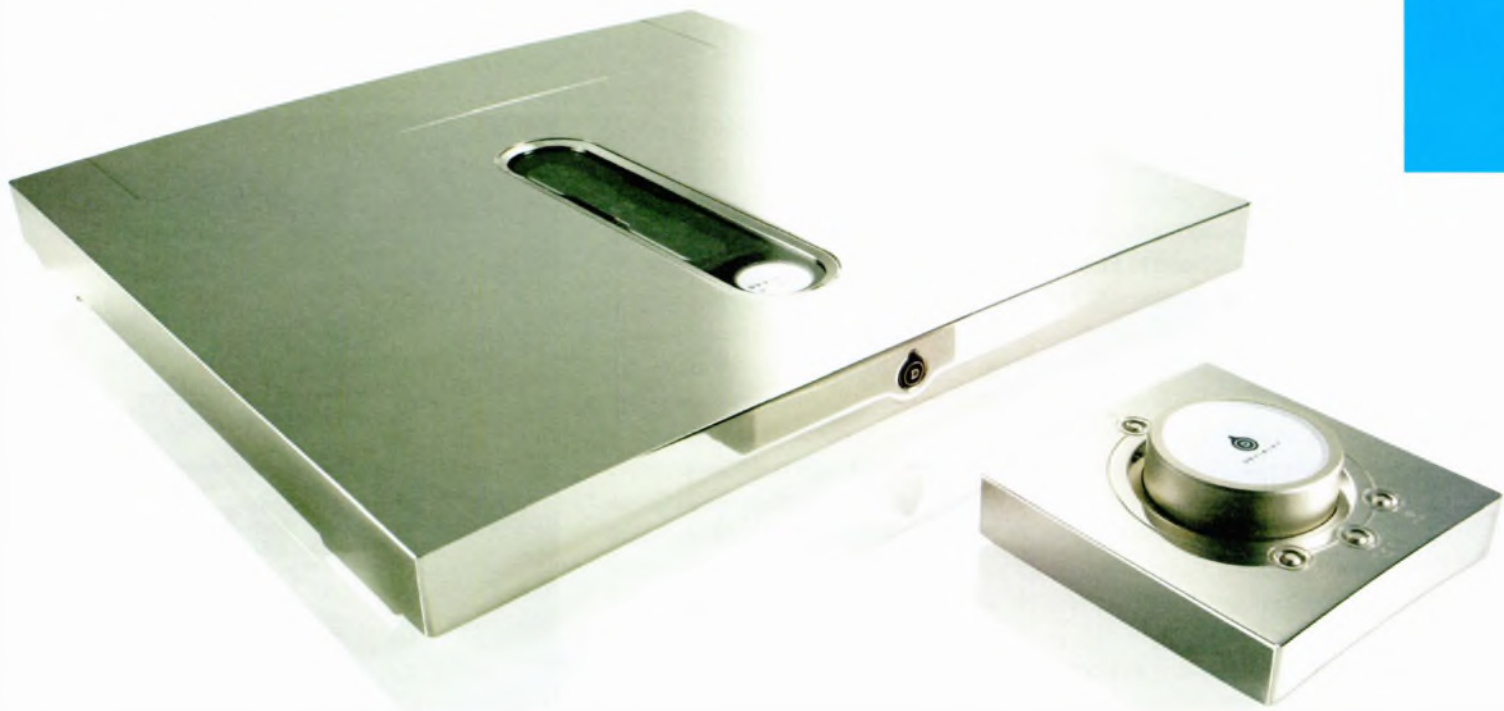
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Devialet D-Premier revisited

By Alan Sircom

Unlike most pieces of audio equipment, the Devialet D-Premier is worthy of revisiting. It's worth assessing in the light of both greater familiarity and the current state of the art. However, the D-Premier is unique in audio in that it has received some fundamental firmware upgrades since its launch, and it's worth checking to see just how much improvement these bring to the table. Then, there's the ultimate upgrade of using two D-Premiers in dual mono mode.

As such, we'll skip on much of the back-story, as you would have needed to have led a pretty sheltered audio life not to have noticed the D-Premier when it arrived on the scene a couple of years ago. A slim, chrome Parisian, the D-Premier blurs the lines between digital nerve centre and integrated amplifier, featuring the company's unique ADH amplifier circuit and some of the fastest, brightest converters money can buy. It was an engineering force to be reckoned with when launched... and it still sets the standard by which most products should be judged.

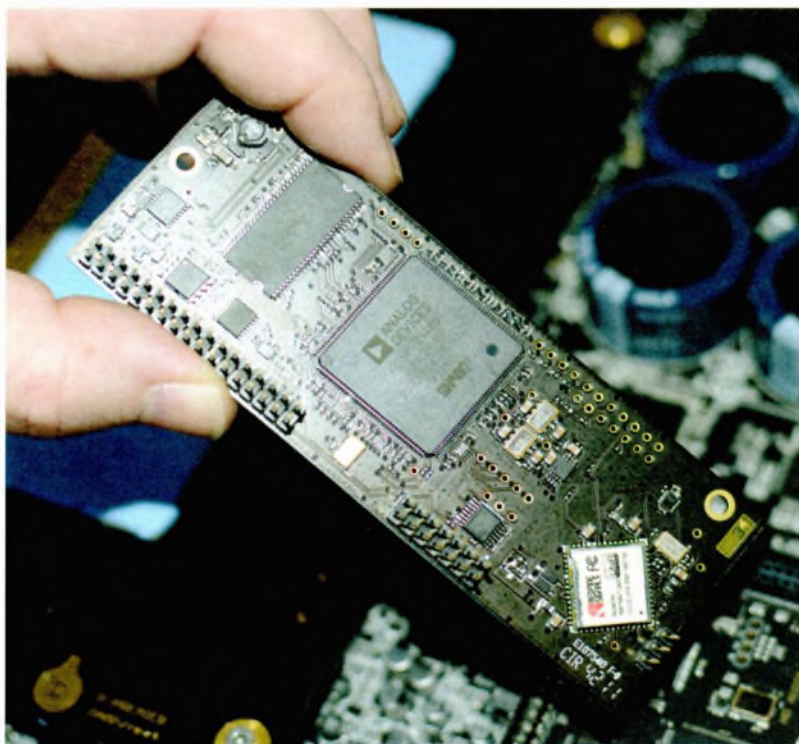
The intervening years of near constant play have been a regular ear-opener. I've mellowed slightly on my febrile initial conclusion, but that just means it only obsolesces about half its rivals, rather than nine out of ten. The amplifier makes short work of most solid-state audio electronics, above, at and below the Devialet's price of admission. Where it still finds successful challengers is in the valve world and in those amps that accent the rhythmic properties of music. Put another way, those designs that have a strong flavour of their own will always have their fans, but if you are looking for

an amplifier that gets out of the way of the music – especially if that music is in the digital domain – this still is the Alpha and Omega of high-end audio devices.

And that conclusion was prior to running any major firmware updates. My D-Premier was an early sample and needed a minor hardware modification to accept version 5.3 software and beyond. Version 5.3 brought a raft of improvements to the D-Premier, most notably access to the product configurator and Devialet AIR. However, the first generation of this wi-fi system wasn't entirely bug-free and we decided to hang fire for a more stable version. Enter Version 5.6 and Devialet AIR version 1.4 software, which show what the D-Premier really has to offer. In the meantime, a Wi-Fi board winged its way to us, for installation.

► The Devialet AIR upgrade box arrived with a small tool kit, including a Torx driver to open the rear panel of the D-Premier and an Allen key to secure the board. The one omission in the pack is an electrostatic earth tag (to prevent you frying the board with static), and this is not mentioned in the online instructions so I decided to follow Devialet's rules while standing on a carpet to see if anything bad happened. It didn't, but I recommend at least discharging any static before trying to install. Or get an expert to do the upgrade. It takes longer to open and close the case than it does to install the AIR card, but remember to download new firmware to the supplied SD card and reinstall this when first powering up the AIR-ready D-Premier. Installation is easy though... it works on your wi-fi network (you need to enter your network's basic details on that SD card, using the online configurator) and as long as you have iTunes on a Mac or PC on the same network and load up the Devialet AIR software on that computer, things are quite straightforward. Devialet suggests a 3.5m maximum between D-Premier and the wi-fi connection of the host computer. Thus far, the AIR program only works with iTunes, but it's hoped to extend its reach in subsequent versions (I'd recommend J River, J Play and Spotify player extensions as priorities). But, bringing the beating heart of the Mac direct to the beating heart of the D-Premier link means aftermarket quests for bit perfection (Amarra, Pure Music) become superfluous.

The configurator allows you to control a wide degree of operational aspects of the D-Premier, answering some of the functionality limitations of the original design. This includes a significant amount of tailoring to suit specific phono cartridges, power output, balance and tone control allocation, and the provision to drive multiple D-Premiers in mono – and eventually active – mode. The method is the same throughout; point browser at Devialet website, load firmware on SD card, use SD card slot to flash firmware on D-Premier.



I used the D-Premier in default mode and used both analogue line in and AES/EBU digital in from my trusty but rusty Lyngdorf CD-1, comparing the discs with their ripped versions through the Devialet AIR wi-fi connection. I preferred the wi-fi connection to anything wired. Granted this is not a night-and-day difference, but I consistently preferred the performance through the wireless connection because it sounded more focused, precise and immediate than the AES/EBU link, where previously the AES/EBU link was the preferred choice of connection.

It's a very 'digital' sound – clean, bright and energetic – but not necessarily in the way people use this term as a pejorative. It's like being closer to the music, rather than closer to the processing. As such, the Devialet D-Premier just improved upon what was its best digital connection. For free.

Thinking about the D-Premier in conventional hi-fi terms becomes increasingly pointless the more time you spend with it. You find yourself moving inexorably toward a wireless digital system when using the D-Premier today, simply because there isn't ►



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Meet The Ancestors...

The hi-fi industry refers to racks and other equipment supports as "isolation devices", going to great lengths to describe how these products protect electronic components from the outside world. Unfortunately, structure born mechanical energy is the least of your system's mechanical problems!

In fact, the greatest damage to sound quality is done by vibration generated within the equipment itself; from the mains transformer, the power supply caps charging and discharging, every resistor or transistor that passes the signal. And although that vibration might be small, it's also right where the fragile audio signal is, right where it can do most damage. And to make matters worse, most of your equipment comes with soft rubber feet, meaning there's nowhere for that vibrational energy to go. It just carries on circulating round the unit's internals until it finally dissipates. That's why hard cones or couplers work under audio equipment; they offer an exit route for that energy, so that it can dissipate in the supporting surface.

But not all cones are created equal...

Nordost's Sort Kones offer a superior solution to the problem of evacuating unwanted microphonic or vibrational energy from your audio components. They employ functionally optimized, mechanically tuned construction and carefully selected materials to provide a low impedance exit path. These different materials provide four distinct price and performance levels to suit all systems. And because every piece of equipment has a different structure, there's an extensive user guide to ensure that you achieve the best possible performance from your Kones, your components and even your speakers, so...

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► a penalty in doing so. When the Devialet AIR program includes a wider range of applications (as is intended) so the move to your computer as sole source and Devialet as digital hub will be complete.

Of course, all of this is predicated on using a D-Premier. Just one. Adding a second is a fascinating leap forward. Once again, you go to the configurator, turning one D-Premier into 'master' the other into 'slave'. Currently, you can use the D-Premier as bi-ampable (The master D-Premier takes the sources and drives all left channels, the slave merely powers the right channels, both sets of terminals are powered), dual mono (master drives left channel, slave drives right, only the +ve terminals are driven... make sure you don't wire out of phase here, because it's easy to do) or multi-room (with the second amplifier digitally slaving to the first one). By default, the two amps connect via the digital coaxial phono link, so just one cable between the two. It's hoped that full active drive will be an addition soon. I tried both dual mono (through the Raidho C1.1) and bi-amped (through an old pair of ProAc Studio 150) and dual mono is the way to go. Bi-amping sounds like the D-Premier; dual mono sounds like the D-Premier squared. In dual-mono mode, the amplifier seems considerably more powerful (it can be uprated from 240W per channel to 400W, but even in standard 240W per channel, there's a lot more control over the loudspeaker's bass drivers). The worry was that by increasing the 'right-sized' D-Premier would make a 'supersized' D-Premier. In fact, if anything it made the soundstage smaller, by making it more controlled and taut. This is one of those 'not a big changes' that ends up being impossible to live without. If you like the D-Premier, then the only thing better is more D-Premiers.

Finally, there's the app, which replicates the ace cool handset. It's designed for iPhones but magnifies to fit iPad screens, and it replicates the

big volume knob and the display of the D-Premier. It works well and if you are using Remote to control your iTunes device, makes the iDevice an all in one handset. Cool.

When it first came on the scene, the D-Premier effectively redefined what you could do with good audio. Today, the same still applies. It's cleverly kept itself just that bit ahead of the game. And remember these improvements happened for free (until you add more Devialets). Just when you think you know what makes the D-Premier tick, another software update comes along and raises the performance a notch. In short, it just keeps getting better and better. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Price: £11,450

Manufactured by: Devialet

URL: www.devialet.com

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

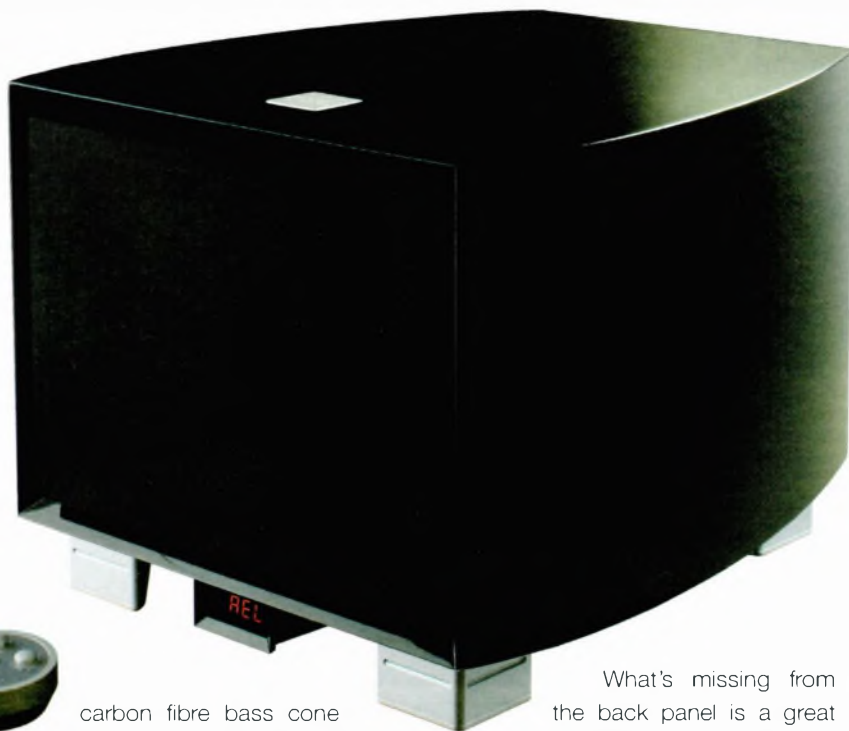
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REL Gibraltar G2 subwoofer

By Alan Sircom

Eleanor Roosevelt famously said 'do one thing everyday that scares you.' There's not much in hi-fi that's genuinely scary, except perhaps trying to cue up a really expensive cartridge while drunk and wearing a big sweater. But the Gibraltar G2 subwoofer... now that's a scary proposition. It's big and heavy and powerful, and it comes with a front panel red LED read-out that can tell you just how low or loud it is going. It can easily do both. Fortunately, it can be as refined as it is insane.

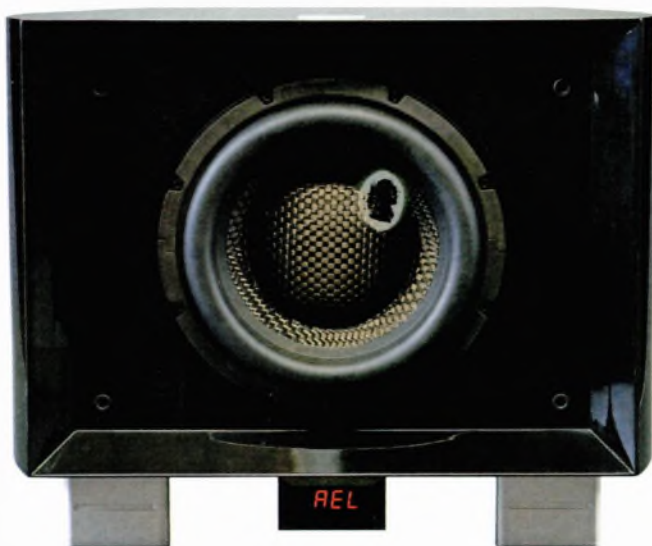
The G2 is a large, curved chunk of gloss black, with contrasting brushed alloy back panel and feet and a 250mm long-throw carbon fibre bass cone behind the front facing grille. It's no shrinking violet, as it takes up about as much space as a 28" CRT television (remember them). Except it weighs more. Inside is a 450W class AB MOSFET power amplifier (no Class D here) and the fastest filters in town, and a set of controls and connections. REL supplies all its subs with a 10m high-level-Neutrik Speakon connector, which is designed to connect the sub to the speaker terminals of your amplifier and LFE inputs for AV (you can use both). You can even stack them and a bold few have a floor-to-ceiling REL basstravaganza.



What's missing from the back panel is a great deal of control surfaces. In fact, the G2 has little more than a mandatory on-off switch next to the plug socket, because all the controls are removed to the hockey puck remote control handset. This controls crossover frequency, volume level and phase, plus a battery saving, make sure the kids don't mess up your settings toggle switch to lock the remote. As the LED read-out will tell you what you are altering when you are altering it, you can adjust easily from the listening chair.

There's two ways of setting up; earthmover, and the right way. As this sub can deliver bass you can feel in your retinas, unless you share a house with the ghost of King Tubby, not much is going to compete with the G2 when its dials are set to 'thermonuclear'. And you will do this.

Enjoy it; let your inner bass-nut out for a while, then set the sub up properly when you are all better. Just don't use the G2 as a weapon; a row with your better half is not improved by slamming the sub into high gear and putting Dub Syndicate on repeat – been there, done that, it ends messy. ▶



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“For a reviewer, the big difficulty with the Fuoco is putting notes on a page. You put a piece of music on, sit back and listen to it. The music ends, you have a smile on your face and a blank piece of paper... Any notes that drift into your head are all about the music being played..”

Alan Sircom hifi+ 87

FUOCO Sondoro integrated amplifier



For 25 years Ensemble has been providing great, rare-to-find listening pleasure

Get started with one Ensemble element - a SILINX cable, or a ZORBO platform^o - and a new-found musicality is opening up
^o*hifi+ 83*

Long-term satisfaction
Swiss made quality

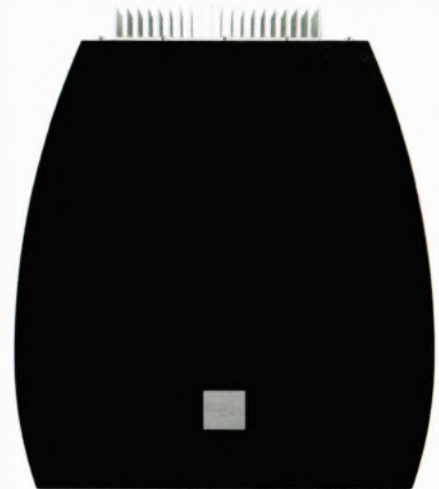
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Fortunately, when you've finished playing with the G2, it has as much grace as it does brute force. It also has one of the best manuals in audio, and unless you struggle to understand the controls on a kettle, the G2's manual will guide you painlessly through the whole process. The secret here is turning the subwoofer near a corner and turning it lower (in frequency and level) than you might expect. The best pieces of music to determine how best to set the system up include a *capella* female voices. What you should be listening for is the subwoofer kicking in at the point where the loudspeakers are running out of steam, but not to the point where the subwoofer can be easily heard filling in those blanks. As a result of this bass control and reinforcement, midrange and treble sounds appear free from the physical constraints of the loudspeakers, as if the speakers became more like point sources. There's a spot on the dials where the sound 'snaps' into sounding right; this is clear, obvious and immediately understood by the listener. The front LED read-out is an advantage here, because if you know broadly where the speakers stop, it's a good starting place for the subwoofer; better still, with remote in hand, you can set this correctly at the listening position.

When properly installed, it's almost impossible to describe the G2's sound, without describing the speaker it's being used with. The simple explanation is "your speakers, but better!" And it's that absence of its own voice that sets the G2 apart from most subwoofers, other RELs included. The point of a sub used to control the bass in a room and to reinforce the sound of the loudspeakers is for it not to have any intrinsic character of its own. Others – including others in the same stable – get very close, but this lives up to that ideal.

The concept of subwoofer reinforcement is forever misunderstood. Set up properly, the G2 isn't about adding bass, it's about controlling it. This is a concept common to all REL subs since the early days, but in the G2, there's so much control on tap, it's as much about room acoustics as it is



about bass reinforcement. Yes, it can be set to stun little animals at 30 paces, but when its powers are used for good, the Gibraltar G2 can be a remarkably deft and precise improver of all audio systems. You might need to read this line a couple of times for it to make sense and sink in, but the G2 doesn't make its presence felt more forcefully than other subwoofers and as a result is very highly recommended! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Closed box, front firing woofer

Drive Unit: 250mm long throw, carbon fibre cone

Lower Frequency Response in Room: -6dB at 18Hz

Input Connectors: High-Level Neutrik Speakon, Low-Level stereo phono, LFE phono, LFE XLR

Output Connectors: High-Level Neutrik Speakon, LFE phono, LFE XLR

Gain Control Range: 80 dB

Power Output: 450 Watts (RMS)

Ultra High-Current Power Supply

Phase Switch: Yes, 0 or 180 degrees

Amplifier Type: Class AB

Dimensions (WxDxH, including feet):

50.9x41.7x61cm

Weight: 38.1kg

Price: £2,499

Manufactured by: REL Acoustics Ltd

URL: www.rel.net

Tel: +44(0)1656 768777



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HiFiMAN HE-400 planar magnetic headphones

By Chris Martens

It's hard not to be a great admirer of the most recent crop of planar magnetic headphones. They offer many of the benefits of electrostatic headphones (sonic transparency, openness, excellent transient speed and definition, etc.), while providing some of the key strengths of traditional dynamic-driver headphones (robust dynamics, powerful and well-defined bass, and the ability to be driven by conventional amplifiers). The only drawback I can see is that planar magnetic headphones have, as a rule, tended to be power hungry and pricey – until now.

HiFiMAN's new HE-400 open-backed planar magnetic headphone is the least costly planar magnetic headphone on today's market, and with a rated sensitivity of 92.5 dB and 35 ohm impedance this is one of the (if not the) most sensitive planar magnetic headphones available. Indeed, HiFiMAN says the HE-400 is so amplifier friendly that it can even be powered directly from an iPod (something no sane person would attempt to do with any other planar magnetic 'phone).

The lowered cost is as a result of Dr. Fang Bian of HiFiMAN making a concerted effort to design a planar magnetic driver that could be mass produced using automated assembly equipment. Unfortunately, the same design elements do not 'scale', so higher-performance planar magnetic headphones will likely always require hand-built drivers, and will always be priced at a premium.

Unlike the other HiFiMAN headphones,



which are finished in various shades of black or dark gray, the HE-400 is finished in a deep cobalt blue gloss. It features the same basic headband design as other HiFiMAN 'phones and comes with a leather (or leather-like?) headband pad, which could use a broader range of vertical adjustment. For some listeners (and I'm one of them) there is simply no way to avoid having the ear cups ride slightly too low on your ears. Mercifully, the headphone is relatively light, at just 440 grams. Most previous HiFiMAN headphones come fitted with plush velour pads, but the HE-400 is supplied with leather (or, again, leather-like?) ear pads. A detachable signal cable that connects to the headphone ear cups

via HiFiMAN's screw-on fittings is standard. The cable features high-quality wire sourced from the Japanese firm Canare, though it uses a different (and presumably less expensive) grade of wire than is used in cables for some of the higher-end HiFiMAN models. Termination is via a standard ¼-inch phone jack plug, but a 3.5mm adaptor (and a natty drawstring bag) are supplied in the packaging.

At first flush, I was slightly concerned because the HE-400 had a noticeably darker, warmer character than any of the other HiFiMAN models, and it also showed a judicious touch of upper midrange/treble roll-off relative to its siblings. One could most definitely hear the lack of upper midrange and treble power and clarity because tracks that had been warm and responsive throughout the entire range in other headphones, suddenly seemed much darker through the original HE-400, and felt like they lacked snap of listening to live music. This contrasted with the more neutral balance of the bigger models, although some ▶

“The HE-400 is so amplifier friendly that it can even be powered directly from an iPod.”

“I’d liken the sonic difference to the difference you might experience when switching between a four-barrel carb and a two-barrel carb on a well-tuned V8 engine.”

- ▶ have voiced the objection that these headphones – especially the HE-6 – are too bright for their own good.

Obviously this filtered back to the good Dr. Fang, because a Revision 2 driver was quick to emerge. The most noticeable change when listening through the HE-400s with Rev 2 drivers is a welcome boost in upper midrange and treble energy—a boost that greatly improves the headphone’s overall accuracy and neutrality. Not only do the new drivers help to define the upper register voices of most instruments much more clearly (especially when the instruments play in overlapping pitch ranges), but they also help provide an additional shot of dynamic energy to musical tracks as a whole.

I am a very big fan of both country and bluegrass music and some of my favorite test tracks come from the album *Alison Krauss & Union Station – Live* [Rounder]. I’ve found that the instruments used to create bluegrass music often play in similar pitch ranges so that the real definition and soul comes from hearing and appreciating subtle differences in timbres and voicing characteristics between the instruments. I felt the original HE-400 revealed musical timbres well over some parts of the audio spectrum (namely, the lower midrange and bass regions), but less well in others (specifically, the upper midrange and treble regions). For example, the original HE-400 had no trouble reproducing the unique thump of the upright bass but often lost definition when both the banjo and Dobro played simultaneously (something which, if you know your bluegrass, happens often). With the Rev 2 drivers in the play, the HE-400 sound much more clearly defined on simultaneous banjo/Dobro passages, so that the smooth, blossoming notes from the Dobro were easily distinguishable from the staccato plucks and rolls of the banjo.

Now the HE-400 was much more energetic and really brought the music to life. I’d liken the sonic difference to the difference you might experience when switching between a four-barrel carb and a two-barrel carb on a well-tuned V8 engine.

HiFiMAN’s Revision 2 version of the HE-400 takes what was already an exceedingly easy-to-drive planar magnetic headphone to the next level sonically. Specifically, the new drivers transform the dark and moody tone of the original HE-400, giving the headphone a much more neutrally balanced, audiophile-friendly frequency response curve. On top of the revised drivers, HiFiMAN has also upgraded the metal supports for the Rev 2 headphone’s ear cups as well as its signal cable termination plug layout. Both changes add style and increased functionality to the HE-400.

If you want the least expensive planar magnetic headphone on the market—one whose bass and midrange will remind you of the sound of considerably more expensive headphones, or you want a planar magnetic headphone that is well and truly easy to drive. This may be the only planar magnetic model around that you could, in a pinch, power directly from an iPod, the HE-400 is really the only option. Highly recommended. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

HiFiMAN HE-400 planar magnetic headphone with Revision 2 Drivers

Accessories: Fabric drawstring-type carrying bag, 3.5mm mini-plug to ¼" phone plug adapter.

Frequency Response: 20Hz – 35 kHz

Sensitivity: 92.5 dB

Impedance: 35 Ohms

Weight: 0.4kg

Price: £395

Manufactured by: **HiFiMAN**

URL: www.hifiman.com

Distributed by: **Highend Workshop**

URL: www.highendworkshop.co.uk

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Cardas Clear Power Cords

By Alan Sircom

Cardas' top of the range Clear cables were missing a key element until recently. Interconnects, speaker cables, even USB cables were all extant, but the power cord was conspicuous by its absence. In fact, the company was biding its time, as it has now launched three power cords; Cardas Clear M (for medium), Clear Power and Clear Beyond Power.

The Clear power cables all use the same basic layout seen in the Clear loudspeaker cable, except with three copper conductor golden ratio strand layouts in place of the send and return in the speaker wire. The difference is in the size of the conductors, the concomitant thickness of the insulation and diameter of the cable itself and the type of broadband filter used. All three feature a custom ('tuned') ferrite toroidal built into one of the Furutech terminators (the plug in the case of the Clear M, the socket in the Clear and Clear Beyond) and this passes all three legs of the cable. The combination of this and the multipath stranding are designed to combine to smooth power ripples and noise.

The easy way of thinking about these cables is 'good, better, best'; the Clear M does deliver a smoother, more satisfying dynamic range and unforced sound like the Clear cables, Clear extends that slightly and Clear Beyond knocks the performance out of the park with its elegance and refinement. And that's just with 'normal' equipment.

However, this is somewhat at odds with the Cardas take on its own cords. To Cardas itself, Clear M is the flexible Clear cable for source components and preamps, Clear is ideal for more meaty integrated amps and smaller power amps and Clear Beyond is set aside for the really big guns. In this sense, the Cardas cables offer smoothness, dynamics and refinement equally... you just pick the cable that fits the demands.

I think both are right. The common thread is transparency, smoothness, refinement, and natural dynamic range all coming from a perceptibly low noise floor. All of these elements are improved mildly when moving from Clear M to Clear, and improved markedly when going to Clear Beyond. You'll hear less of an overall improvement when moving from Clear M to Clear Beyond if you are using it with a CD player and a substantial difference when using it with a big power amp. On balance, I prefer the Cardas way of thinking, but there's

always the option to beef up your power for sources and preamps at a later date.

They reinforce the whole concept of cable families – using the Clear M for source and the Clear or Clear Beyond on an integrated amp makes a lot of sense, far more so than a Pick 'n' Mix solution. Above this though, what surprised me though was just how well and how these cables integrate with a wide range of devices. With more humble equipment they are smooth and silken sounding, but with the best, they simply disappear. It's not something you can easily describe, but can experience in an eye-blink. It's the icing on the Cardas cake.

The bottom line is the Clear power cords work. They work for existing Cardas users, and they work as a gateway drug to grow new Cardas Clear users. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Prices: per 1.5m cable

Clear M: £495

Clear: £695

Clear Beyond: £895

Manufactured by: Cardas Audio

URL: www.cardas.com

Distributed by: Audiofreaks

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)20 8948 4153

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"For less than \$300, these headphones are hard to beat. HiFiMAN's HE-300s sound excellent and would be a great choice for in-home headphone listening." Bob Archer, CEPro



"HiFiMAN has done it again with the HE300...nothing short of pure musicality." Headfonia



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"Hifiman has done it again, the HE-300 has set a new standard of performance for its price class." Steve Guttenberg, The Audiophile, CNET



"Incredible attention to detail with great build and audio quality. I was blown away." Fabian Povsic, BuyMeAniPhone.Com



"With its solid, mostly metal construction and audiophile-grade detachable cables, HE-300 sure doesn't look like it costs so little." Brent Butterworth, Sound & Vision

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Ecosse La Prima Donna interconnect and Big Red UC power cord

By Alan Sircom

There are cable brands that use an ornate range of increasingly left-field metals to conduct electricity. Ecosse isn't one of them. It relies on copper and silver, albeit of the highest purity, to do its bidding.

La Prima Donna is a coaxial design, featuring a solid-core 7N purity silver central conductor (0.33mm²), insulated from the screen by a surrounding of FPE. The cable is thrice screened; copper foil and two layers of silver-plated copper, separated by Teflon tape (the extra screening also allows this cable to be used in balanced XLR mode, although this was not tested). The whole caboodle is wrapped in neoprene and then jacketed in PVC and further wrapped in an additional black braid.

Our other choice of cable was a power cord; the Big Red UC. It features Monocrystal solid core ultra high purity copper conductors, braided in with a cotton fibre filler as acoustic damping. This is then screened using a tinned aluminium foil and a woven Monocrystal braid, all of which is wrapped in the soft PVC red outer sleeve and terminated at the device end with a Furutech socket.

Both do the 'disappearing' trick nicely. They impart little or no character upon the sound and don't err on the side of omission either; the Big Red in particular is very good at letting the electronics' bass weight pass unimpeded; not in a

kind of overt, 'big bass' sound but just in terms of improved resolution and expression in those lower octaves. My mains

is not so dirty as to need much filtration, but even in that context the Big Red gave the impression of putting the power in good order.

Meanwhile the LPD interconnect had a similar



effect across the board, a neutral and dynamically unimpeded presentation of the output of one device expressed across to another. No shiny highs or plummy mids entailed to the wire; this simply takes what one device offers and plays it honestly and without interpretation.

These two cables could in theory be used in a moderately high-end system where they represent a significant percentage of the total investment, or where the cost of the Ecosse cables is trivial next to the cost of the rest of the system. In a moderate system, they raise the game, but they also don't get in the way of an already raised game.

Perhaps the sole impediment to using these Ecosse cables in truly high-end systems is the price. The La Prima Donna and Big Red UC might just not cost enough to be taken seriously! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Prices: La Prima Donna: £600/1m pair

Big Red UC: £500/1.5m

Manufactured by: Ecosse cables

URL: www.ecossecables.co.uk

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Manufactured by: Ecosse cables



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SOFTWARE REVIEW

Audirvana Plus

By Jason Kennedy



Back in September last year, AMR put on a demonstration of computer audio to show off its new DP-777 DAC (see page 22). The source it used was an Apple Mac running Audirvana software. That software is now fully fledged and available online for anyone to trial, and the fact that AMR considered it to be superior to the likes of Pure Music was recommendation enough for me to give it a try.

Audirvana was developed by a Frenchman called Damien Plisson who is a computer programmer by profession and a hi-fi enthusiast by inclination. That is a good start to have if you want to build a software player.

What differentiates Audirvana Plus from its competitors is that it can be run in integer mode. This bypasses the mixing buffer and the float to DAC native format conversion that form the core audio stage of a Mac and operates at the level just above the kernel. This player adapts the DAC sample rate to avoid sample rate conversion – you can use whole integer upsampling if required – and can be operated in so-called 'hog-mode' where other applications cannot run while the player is operating. This can be achieved with other players but not as easily as in the case here, where a single tick on the preferences list means that apps that never sleep (Spotlight, Time Machine etc) are turned off, rather like Fidelizer in Windows.

Audirvana Plus uses 64-bit processing and has full memory play. Not bad for €39, especially as it sounds impressive as well; at least it does when you hook your Mac to a core audio DAC with a USB lead in the usual way. It is not compatible with the Resolution Audio Pont Neuf USB to Ethernet bridge that I usually use with a Cantata DAC/pre. But running in the traditional mode it is highly revealing; more so than Pure Music 1.82 in fact, with better definition of leading edges and excellent focus and dynamics. It has a precision to it that is not tarnished by grain or edginess and lets you hear oodles of low level detail that is usually masked. It's a warts and all sound that can seem a little stark

"It has a precision to it that is not tarnished by grain or edginess and lets you hear oodles of low level detail that is usually masked."

at times but is clearly a stronger reflection of the original content than usual. Audirvana strikes me as more real and honest than PM because the highs are cleaner and more extended and it times more effectively – no doubt due to the fine leading edge resolve.

I got superb results with some of the files I've been converting with DVD-Audio Extractor, albums like *Fragile* by Yes have rarely sounded so juicy. The Rickenbacker bass on 'Long Distance Runaround' sounds chunky and the voice has so much reverb applied to it, details that were never apparent on DVD-Audio players of yore.

The only real advantage that Pure Music had over Audirvana Plus was its ability to work with the iTunes interface but Damien has produced a version that looks and operates exactly like standard iTunes. I haven't figured out how to play FLACs with this version yet but imagine that this feature will be added before it's official release. The only fly in the ointment for Mac users who like to run the latest OS is that Mountain Lion does not support Integer mode operation, Damien recommends you keep a Snow Leopard partition to maintain this option. In my book this is a killer app, any Mac using music lover owes it to themselves to give Audirvana a spin.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Formats supported: AIFF, WAV, DSD, ALAC, AAC, MP3

Sample rate: up to 192kHz

64-bit processing full memory play+

integer mode dithered volume control

lzotope 64-bit sample rate conversion

Price: \$49/€39

Supplier: Audirvana

URL: audirvana.com

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FEATURE

New York's Finest...

By Alan Sircom

I so wanted to hate this guy. He has the life I was supposed to have. Why didn't I get the elegant house in an idyllic spot just out from Manhattan, the smart-yet-stunningly-beautiful wife, the great cars and all the trimmings. Worse still, why haven't I got a hi-fi system that's as good as his, even though that's what I do for a living? OK so there was that whole set of career choices that we made in our respective teenage years; he went down a path that saw him become a partner in a top law firm in New York and one of the most sought after Intellectual Property litigators on the planet, and I chose the perpetual navel gazing of philosophy with all the career prospects that can muster, but so what? I even want his Gibson Les Paul and that Marshall amp... damn you, green-eyed jealousy. Damn you to Hell!

But, despite all that, I just can't hate Bill Hart. He's a guy who wears his success well; with the confidence that it entails, but not a badge of honour. Me... I'd be showy, arrogant, and let's face it, a bit of a prick. Bill is a warm, charming and entertaining *bon viveur*. He's still a man of the people, albeit people with a kick-ass vinyl-only hi-fi.

He has his equipment in his Man Cave; actually, as it sits at the top of his late 18th Century Greek Revival house, it's more of a Man Lair. Sitting among his 10,000+ LP collection is one of the finest turntable systems I've ever encountered. And it's still getting better.

Bill's system when I encountered it comprised a Kuzma XL2 turntable, with a Kuzma Airline tonearm and an Air Tight PC-1 cartridge, all sitting on a HRS platform. This was fed into the outstanding Manley Steelhead phono preamplifier sitting directly to the right of the Kuzma, and thence below the deck to a Lamm Reference L2 two box line only preamp. This reached around the room (using high grade Kubala Sosna Elation cables throughout) into a pair of Lamm ML2 mono power amps (with spare tubes in the gentle grasp of the Buddha sitting between the two amps) into Avantgarde Duo horns.

The Lamm amps were sitting on Grand Prix Audio Monaco equipment supports.

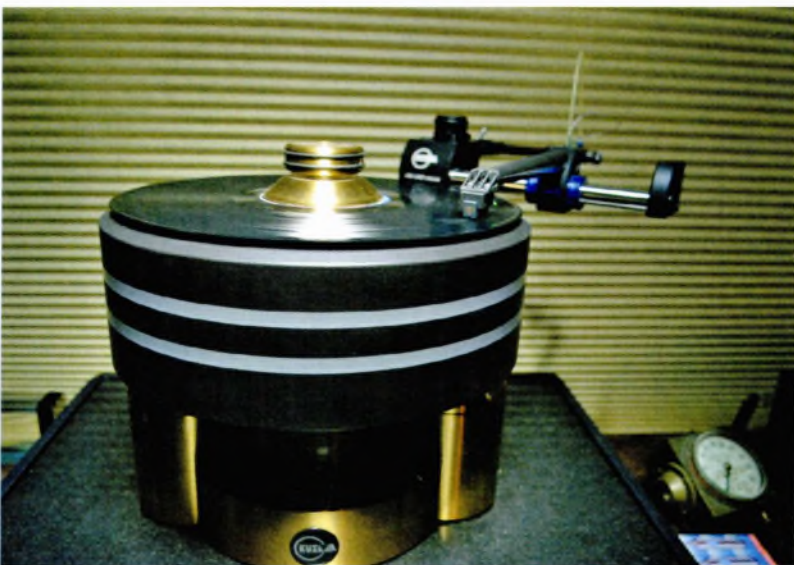
Unusually for a high-end US system, there's no power conditioning in place. Everything is run through a separate AC box on dedicated lines, however. The only exception to the rule here is the air pump for the Kuzma Airline, which runs off a large step-down transformer to isolate noise.

It didn't used to be that way of course. Bill started like most of us with a far more humble system that grew over the years, a sort of grandfather's blade of a system that moved through the years. Perhaps most tellingly, his loudspeaker journey was one that moved from boxes to panels to horns, starting with the almost industry-standard KLH loudspeakers, quickly through to electrostatic panels driven by Audio Research tube electronics and then finally to the Lamms and Avantgardes. Interestingly, he loved each step of the way for what it represented but wouldn't go back at all.

"My objective then, and now," he says, "was to achieve some semblance of real music using records. I spent decades listening to Quads, first the legendary ESL (a pair of which still molder in my basement ▶

▶ awaiting restoration) and later, a Crosby-modded version of the Quad 63. Then, as now, I used tube amplification and vinyl as the source. The midrange was always the first priority – boxed voices were a dead giveaway that the music was being reproduced. The Quads avoided that problem, but had other, well-known limitations; no deep bass, limited dynamics and the inability to generate convincing overall output and scale, particularly on large orchestral works and hard rock. At their best, listening to the Quads was like looking at life in miniature – sometimes a convincing portrayal, but a portrait nonetheless, rather than a full view of the proceedings.” He even writes better than me!

Although Bill wouldn't go back, that doesn't mean the equipment goes away. Alongside the system itself is a small shrine to his (and the world's) audio history. Those remarkable (and highly desirable) pair of Crosby-modified ELS-63s are never too far from the main room, along with some Quad II amps. There's also a pair of Decca ribbons next to the record collection, from an old 'HQD' type system... although the HQD system itself has left the building.



“I even want his Gibson Les Paul and that Marshall amp... damn you, green-eyed jealousy. Damn you to Hell!”

According to Bill, “the system is currently set up in a room with far too much other equipment, including two large studio-style equipment racks housing equipment for a video system; guitar amplifiers, a collection of books and detritus from vintage cars, etc, etc. Sort of a fantasy room of toys, odd parts and gadgets from years of collecting ‘stuff.’” The only thing I'd disagree with here were the words ‘far too much’. OK it was far too much for someone to play with at a single sitting. I began to feel the tug of terrible unprofessionalism, wanting to move in for a week, try to play the opening to ‘Sweet Child o’ Mine’ on his guitar, disassemble at least one gauge from an old Ferrari or an even older DC-3, ramble through his record collection and only come up for air when I felt suitably teenage again.

It sounded fantastic... the main system, not the collection of bits and pieces, which would probably sound pretty damn good in their own right (there can't be that many people who use Audio Research amplifiers in their home theatre rack system, and they could really make those old Quads sing given a few days). It managed to combine all the almost visceral physicality of horn sound without the obvious quacking sound and even had the speed and transparency someone who liked Quads in a former life would want from a system. The sound was truly effortless, like the musicians had climbed into Dr Who's TARDIS and appeared

in the room. If there was a weakness, it was hiding it well; soundstaging was more as in real life than a holographic simulation of reality, in that sounds were not presented in a faux 3D space but appeared in the room with you like a real musician does. Bass was as deep as you would expect or want in such a room and it gave an uncanny impression of solidity no matter what.

Bill, having lived with the speakers for some years, is more critical, "Avantgardes are not only demanding in respect to set-up and upstream components, leaving their sensitivity to noise aside. I've just never been convinced of their bass integration, despite careful set-up." Nevertheless, he's not into change for change sake. "We know that there is a great divide between the people that spend all their time listening to the equipment rather than the music. I like to fall into the latter camp, but to get the best music out

"To get the best music out of the system, I have to spend time playing with the equipment. And that can be fun."

of the system, I also have to spend time playing with the equipment. And that can be fun, not just in its own right, but in service of the magic we all strive for in audio reproduction."

The system is never in stasis though. Like any good music lover, his tastes ebb and flow, and they ebb and flow as much in audio equipment as they do in music. After my visit, a hum issue with the Lamm preamp forced a change, but not in the way you might expect. I'll let Bill fill you in on this, "The Steelhead, even with the best NOS tubes, lacked a certain palpability and sounded a little too 'hi-fi' in my system; somehow, the Lamm linestage ameliorated that; without the linestage, I focused once again on the Steelhead, and decided



to replace it. I am now in the processing of burning in an Allnic H 3000 and am using a substitute tube line stage while my Lamm awaits repair. I don't want to make any immediate judgments about the Allnic given that it is hasn't been broken-in, and my usual line stage is not part of the system, but it sounds very, very promising, even with these caveats (he later described it as 'marvellous'). The Steelhead might be better in a different system than mine; the line stage I am using as a substitute is a little too lush for my taste, at least in concert with the Lamm ML 2, but might be fabulous with those big solid state amps that we Americans are so fond of."

I was so knocked out by Bill's system that I made a rookie error in the photography. I photographed the system, right down to the last detail, but left that all-important image, that of Bill himself, to last. Then I forgot. Flying back to New York is a bit extravagant for a single image, so there's one fleeting picture of Bill with his back to the camera changing records. It's actually fitting. He's never still, always listening, always changing albums, always having fun. So, perhaps it wasn't a rookie error... perhaps it was fate. +



Is Zingali the horn for box speaker lovers?

music matters

By Alan Sircom

I'm perhaps not the person best disposed to talk horns. I'm not a big fan, and consequently most of the horns I like are the horns least liked by the aficionados. Nevertheless, I do appreciate the room-loading benefits, even if I can't overcome the coloration. As a result, I kind of get big Tannoys and Zingalis.

So, when there was a chance to zing up to Glasgow to hear the new additions to the Zingali Client Name loudspeaker range, I jumped at the chance. The pinnacle of the Zingali range, the new Evo versions of the Client Name – so called because you can have your signature staring back at you from the sculpted front baffle of the speaker – come in big, bigger and biggest sizes, limited by your room, your budget and just how big a loudspeaker your other half will let you have. When you are dealing with an 18" bass unit in the top speaker, this last is not an insignificant consideration. The look is the same throughout, but the reaction to it is different depending on size; the organic curved cabinet is available in a range of rich wood finishes, and from the front, you can't help looking at them and thinking 'Jelly Baby'. The reaction changes when a Jelly Baby standing about as tall as Labrador confronts you, or when you are staring down something the size of a small brown bear. The great thing about these speakers from a visual perspective is they polarise opinion; middle ground be damned, it's a love it or hate it aesthetic. All I'd say to the nay-sayers is give it time – a couple of hours in front of the Client Name Evo softens many a hard heart.

There's a tendency with hi-eff loudspeakers (we're looking at speakers with high 90dB or better sensitivity ratings and easy eight-ohm loads throughout) to partner such speakers with tiny single-ended triode amps, but this isn't a mandatory recommendation here. Rather than careful pairing to place the emphasis away from limitations at the frequency extremes, the Zingali Client Name Evo revels in being incredibly electronics agnostic. I heard these on the end of the very top of the Burmester food chain and the partnership worked incredibly well.

The point of the exercise was as much to show the new Evo range (we've reluctantly dropped our short-lived news section, because of the timing involved in getting new information to readers, relative to the speed of dissemination of the internet) as it was to show what they can do across the board. And it's that latter aspect that showed Zingali's mettle. Traditionally, it's hard to make a range of horn loudspeakers retain the consistency of more commonplace box designs, because the sense of scale is uneven and the tonal balance tends to shift slightly across the range. They might all sound 'good', but good in their own right and there is no guarantee that if you like the voice of the smaller one, you'll like the voice of the larger. It normally falls to companies with large R&D teams and big research budgets to make that consistency inter-range.

Zingali has achieved that brilliantly with the Client Name Evo. As you move up the range, all you get is more. But in a way, all you get is a larger



set of room integration options. The smaller loudspeaker works well in normal spaces but will run out of steam in a big barn of a room, where the largest one will be intimidating in a box room but come to live in. No wayward honks or tonal aberrations as you move around the range, just entertaining, passionate speakers, one of which will fit your house.

I find the Zingali Omniray horn system to be the horn-loaded exception to the rule. It's the horn I could live with, without feeling I had lost more than I gained. And in the Client Name Evo, that reaches its ultimate expression. I couldn't use much more than the smallest Jelly Baby in my room, but it's tempting, and for me that's distinctly worrying. Is this the start of feeling horny? +

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record reviews

How To Read Them

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

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

This issue's featured reviewers are:

- DD** – Dennis D Davis
- RSF** – Richard S Foster
- JK** – Jason Kennedy
- AS** – Alan Sircom

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24 Pesos

When The Ship Goes Down

Orgate Records CD OPG0012



As you can probably tell by the name of the band, 24 Pesos come from... the UK. The band's breed of swampy Texas blues, sheer professionalism as musicians and intelligent songwriting makes them one of the front runners of the latest British blues movement.

Part of an 18-track set recorded over two days in a studio in London, the band pulls together a diverse range of influences. But it's perhaps the heavy influence of the late, great Freddie King that shines through most readily. All of the songs are intelligently penned and extremely well performed, although the outstanding tracks are probably the opener – 'Melon Man', the closer – 'I Don't Know' and 'Leadbelly', a tribute to... guess who? The studio sound is dry and tight too. Not a soundstage king or an obvious demonstration disc, but uncompressed and rhythmically complex enough to be tougher to play than it first seems.

It's not quite the blues crossover record some are painting it to be. It will appeal mostly to people with at least one SRV album in their collection, but that's no bad thing. It's the kind of music that if we'd had more than a day to barbecue things in our back gardens, this would have been the perfect soundtrack. Still, there's always next year. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Bluesmix

Flat Nine

Blue Duet CD BD003



The third album from London-based Bluesmix, Flat Nine sees the band in a funky and soulful mood. But mostly funky. You can't help but feeling there's a little bit of Blockhead in there; tight, almost ska-tinged grooving rhythms, helped along by some taut sax playing, that kind of old school mix. That's hard to fault.

OK, so the lyrics ain't exactly Ian Dury, but that's made up for with some really 'in the pocket' groove, arguably tauter and funkier than the band has ever been. The Grant Green-meets-Cornell Dupree tidy guitar playing and a fine underpinning of Hammond organ helps the enfunkentation process, too. But best of all, from an audio perspective, the recording is fantastic, cut to analogue master tape at Cowshed studios in London, and it shows. This helps give the sound something close to the Memphis soul sound of the 1960s.

The album is 11 cuts and everyone is a good 'un. Don't expect this to break new ground; you know what you are getting here. Best tracks for me include 'Well, Well' (tight, almost Rock Steady funk grooves), 'Running Through Rain' (Wah Wah-driven 1970s soul) and the straight 12-bar of 'I Really Want You Around'. I bet they are great live, too! **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



The Cinematic Orchestra Presents...



In Motion #1

Motion Audio/Ninja Tune

This is a gathering of musicians that TCO leader Jason Swinscoe has commissioned to compose for seven avant garde films. The musicians involved include pianist Austin Peralta, Austrian dancemeister Dorian Concept and TCO sax player Tom Chant, in each case they are aided by a string quartet that creates the tonal core of the album. The movies they have composed for are available on Youtube and many of these should be viewed because they are eminently engaging.

This collaboration takes us into deeper musical waters than anything previously released by Swinscoe and gets closer one suspects to where he was coming from when he made the *Man with the Movie Camera*. By giving himself and fellow composers the opportunity to work with this fine but uncredited group of string players Swinscoe has produced an album that is considerably greater than the sum of its parts. And rather longer than the seven track listing would suggest.

Fortunately – and given Swinscoe's appreciation of real instruments, perhaps unsurprisingly – this is a great sounding album as well. **JK**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Hat Fitz and Cara



Wiley Ways

Groove Laboratory Productions CD

Once upon a time, it was power trios. Then along came the White Stripes and the Black Keys and the power duo became all the rage. Now husband and wife team Hat Fitz and Cara Robinson have come along with their second album and invented the 'danger jug band power folk duo'. Aussie Fitz looks like he came off the set of *Deliverance*, but he plays a National resonator geeetar like his life depended on it, while Northern Irish singer/multi-instrumentalist Cara is more diminutive in stature but belts out a song with fire and passion, whether she's hitting the vocal chords, a washboard, a tin whistle or a drum kit. Mind you, these two could play a washing machine and an old fence and make it sound amazing.

Wiley Ways is a frantic affair, rootsy in a sort of blues-folk-meets-bluegrass-meets-methamphetamine way. Take the album title track, for example; country-folk-roots music that leaves you breathless by the end. Other stand-out tracks include the excellent 'Red Rattler', 'Eliza Blue' and 'Company Underground'.

It's also relatively well recorded by Jeff Lang, who also provides some additional instrumental support. It's cut a bit hot (like most albums today), but that seems to work here, making it loud and exciting. Love it! **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



My Bloody Valentine



Loveless remastered

2CD 180g LP

Creation Records/Sony

If you are of a certain vintage and spent 20 years ago shoegazing, it's time to get 'animated' (if you kept the shoegaze faith, that means swaying from side to side a bit), because finally Kevin Shields has re-mastered those two epic My Bloody Valentine albums, and made a third compilation of EPs on a double CD. We'll focus on 1991's epic *Loveless*.

Shields controlled the remastering project for the My Bloody Valentine albums from the outset. Being that difficult combination of obsessive, perfectionist and procrastinator, it meant delay upon delay. These albums should have been released as long ago as 2008. For *Loveless* in particular, Shields released two versions of the same album for the release; basically the original album cut, remastered slightly and cut a bit louder, and a 'back to the master tapes' version, which is slightly more dynamic, and a bit fuller sounding. Unfortunately, the discs are labelled wrongly, so the reissue is the master tapes version and vice versa.

Hi-fi sound quality it is not, but who cares. *Loveless* remains one of the finest albums ever, influenced a post rock generation (no *Loveless*, no Mogwai). Breathtaking stuff. **AS**

RECORDING
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Ann Peebles

I Can't Stand The Rain

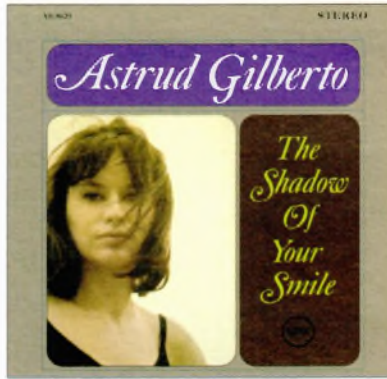
Hi Records/Pure Pleasure SHL 32079

180_g

Hi Records, best known for its Al Green releases, had its decade in the sun in the 1970's when its Memphis Sound version of rhythm and blues brought it a share of chart successes. Singer songwriter Ann Peebles helped out that situation with her second and biggest selling album *I Can't Stand The Rain* released in 1972. Backed by large horn and rhythm sections and a tastefully employed use of The Memphis Strings, Peebles recorded her signature tune and six others penned by her and her husband Donald Bryant, with a few added covers.

The diminutive fire-cracker of a performer defined female Memphis soul and her songs have been covered and sampled many times since. Hi Records produced an honest up front sound, well balanced between the soloists and band sections. Pure Pleasure has delved into the Hi catalog, releasing an Al Green and a Syl Johnson album as well as this Peebles title, continuing Tony Hickmott's talent for spotlighting outstanding music that may not appeal immediately to the audiophile sensibility but is great music deserving a greater audience. Kevin Gray turns in his usual fine remastering of this Memphis masterpiece that won't be shelved away at my place any time soon. Don't miss this great sounding soul masterpiece. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Astrud Gilberto

The Shadow Of Your Smile

Verve/ORG 115

45_{RPM}

Who doesn't love 'The Girl From Ipanema' sung by Astrud Gilberto on *Getz/Gilberto*? Astrud had no real musical background, but knew a little English, and the rest is history. In this, her second album for Verve, she crossed over again, this time leaving the safety zone of her husband's and Jobim's songs, to sing some American show tunes mixed in with Luiz Bonfa songs. Granted, her vocal limitations were more exposed on the north of the border written tunes. However, I enjoy this album more than most critics, and obviously so did the folks at ORG.

Recorded in parts by Bob Simpson, Phil Ramone, and Rudy Van Gelder, the original was good sounding in every way except use possible overuse of reverb to give extra substance to Astrud's voice. It never bothered me, and her rendition of the Bonfa numbers is mesmerizing. Maybe it's a guilty pleasure but I stand convicted of loving Gilberto's singing and Bonfa's songwriting. ORG has done the sound right with a fine mastering job by Bernie Grundman on two 45 RPM slabs of vinyl pressed by RTI in California and housed in a gorgeous fold-out cover.

It's an exceptionally good sounding album of lovely Brazilian cross-over music. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Jeff Beck Group

Epic/Audio Fidelity

AFZTL 1515

180_g

This is the second Jeff Beck Group, the one without Rod Stewart, and like all Jeff Beck groups, did not last long. The 1972 Steve Cropper production was roundly ignored, or worse, by contemporary critics and it sounded pretty abysmal, but in retrospect, many of the numbers on the album are very well done. Except for the Bob Tench vocals that remind you how much Rod Stewart was missed, the numbers could have been contenders for rock classic status. There are a couple of misses, but these are outweighed by some fine versions of 'Ice Cream Cakes', 'Going Down' and 'Tonight I'll Be Staying Here With You'. And then there is Beck's guitar god playing, which shines throughout. What distinguishes this new vinyl issue, however, is the excellent new mastering job by Kevin Gray at Coherent Audio. Gray has uncovered an exceedingly fine sounding album. Recording engineer Ronnie Capone, part of the Stax Record crew, worked with Cropper on this session, and did a fine job of capturing the drums and guitar. Perhaps it was Epic's efforts to sell Quad in the early 1970s that messed with the sound, but Kevin Gray has scrubbed away those problems and gives us some of the best sounding guitar god music ever. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC





John Coltrane

Prestige/Analogue Production
LP 7105



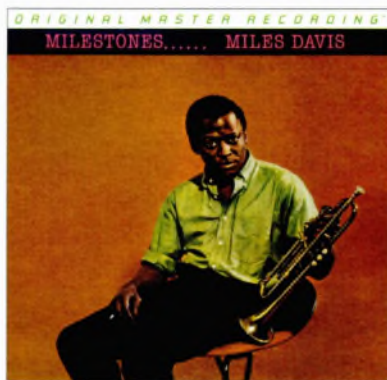
Acoustic Sounds has taken another foray into the Prestige catalog. Last time around, classic jazz titles from the Fantasy vaults were pressed as two 45-RPM LP sets, and it's not much of a stretch to say that this launched the current craze of 45-RPM deluxe sets. This time around LPs are released at 33-RPM and priced accordingly, with much better covers and pressed by Acoustic Sound's own pressing plant. Kevin Gray, who must never take a nap from his mastering duties, masters this series. First up is John Coltrane's first Prestige title as a leader, Trane's rhythm section was Paul Chambers, Albert Heath, Mal Waldron and Red Garland, with Johnnie Splawn on trumpet and Sahib Shihab on baritone sax.

This 1957 session presents some of the most accessible Coltrane on record, with an emphasis on ballads. The reissues replicate the original flat-edge vinyl and deep groove labels. The cover is heavy cardboard with a high gloss tip-on jacket. Kevin Gray's mastering is superb. This first effort makes my mouth water for a few of the truly rare titles in the series that have always eluded my reach and my grasp as a collector. I've owned original yellow label originals and later blue label versions of this album, and the fabulous sound of this new version should make any jazz enthusiast ecstatic. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Miles Davis

Milestones
Columbia/Mobile Fidelity
UDSACD 2084



In the late 1950's Miles Davis took his first great quintet, which had recorded a number of classic albums for Prestige to the mother of all labels. Columbia signed Davis to a contract unprecedented in its size for a jazz artist. This quintet, consisting of John Coltrane, Red Garland, Paul Chambers and Philly Joe Jones, is joined here by Cannonball Adderley. *Milestones* sequences a number of barn burners, with Miles playing at Dizzy Gillespie speeds along side of Coltrane, with slower numbers, but the overriding theme here is a heavy dose of the blues. The modalism that came to full flower in *Kind of Blue* appears on this album only in the title cut.

Instead, this heavily rhythm driven set contains so many ideas and amazing playing. This 1958 release was monaural only, but with Columbia's world-class studios, recording engineers and all tube recording chain, the original album does not lack for depth or bloom. Rob LoVerde and Swan Britton of Mobile Fidelity have produced a remarkable new mastering, and even the CD layer embarrasses the previous effort by Sony Legacy. Sounding analog like in a way few CDs do, I can only imagine what the forthcoming vinyl release will sound like. Highest recommendation. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Tord Gustavsen Quartet

The Well
CD, ECM



Norway's most enigmatic pianist returns with a slightly smaller band and a more familiar sound. Gustavsen, double bass player Mats Elertsen and drummer Jarle Vespestad are joined by Tore Brunborg on tenor sax, a line up that has been touring together for some time and which 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, his hands exploring terrain that while not startling in its novelty is nonetheless uncharted. 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. The colours he brings fit into the nordic shadings that made Gustavsen's name without walking over them. While there are reflections of Gustavsen's 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

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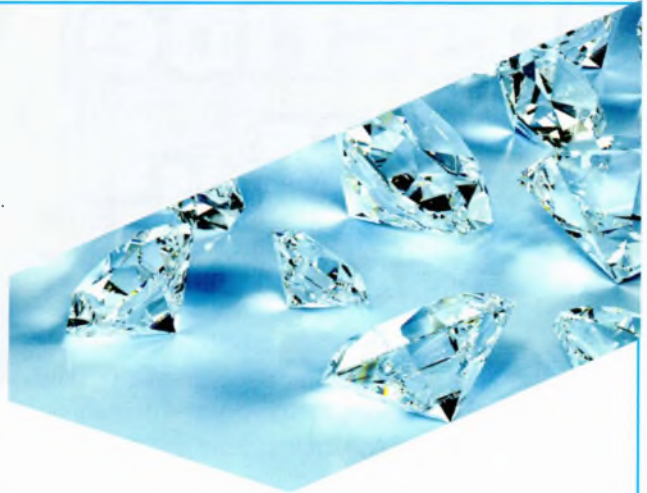
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Johann Sebastian Bach: The Six Brandenburg Concertos.



Richard Egarr conducting the **Academy of Ancient Music.**

Harmonia Mundi HMU 807461.62
Stereo and Multi-Channel Hybrid SACD.

Richard Egarr, a famous forte-piano and harpsichordist leads the Academy of Ancient Music in a rousing set of Brandenburg Concertos. Named after being 'found' neglected on a library shelf in Brandenburg Castle, these six concertos are among some of the best known works in Classical Music. Listening to the complete set takes less than two hours and you easily are able to discern what Bach has wrought.

These are some of the most easily accessible works by Bach and I can't recommend them highly enough. I've listened to the Boston Baroque/Martin Pearlman collaboration as well as the famous Marriner/Academy recordings. They don't hold a candle to the finesse and flavour of the Egarr set. Egarr and the AAM deliver delicious performances of these works that I think you will come back to often. This set of concertos has moved to the head of the class and I wouldn't want to be without it. Extremely infectious music, most highly recommended. **RSF**
www.harmoniamundi.com

RECORDING
MUSIC



Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 4



Glenn Gould and Leonard Bernstein
Columbia/Impex Records MS 6262

Impex had circled back to a classical music release from its usual pop and jazz choices. I had recently unearthed a box of Columbias containing all by Gould LPs, long buried away behind the stacks of new acquisitions crying out for attention. I grew up with Kempff's version of the 4th on DGG as my main reference. While Kempff could be idiosyncratic in some things (not the 4th), Steve Jobs could have had Gould in mind when he coined the phrase "Think Different". Gould took introspection to new heights, and he was made for Beethoven's most introspective piano concerto. His playing in this 1961 meeting with Bernstein is straightforward by Gould standards, with only his occasional humming interrupting the beautiful piano sound captured by the Columbia engineers. His interpretation is one of the classic performances of the masterpiece, and his sound is perfectly captured on this reissue. The same cannot be said for the orchestral sound, recorded in the Manhattan Center. Don't expect classic Mercury or RCA sound, as the hall acoustics were not ideal. However, Kevin Gray has done a fine job of preserving and polishing this beauty and Impex an equally fine job of packaging. Don't miss this wonderful performance. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Johannes Brahms: Variations on a Theme of Haydn in B flat, Op. 56a; Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68.



Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
conducted by Marek Janowski.

A PentaTone Hybrid SACD:
PTC 5186 307.

This has become not only my favorite performance of the 10 Haydn Variations, but I'm having a hard time thinking about any other performance of the Brahms 1st other than this new Janowski recording! The conductor is able to flesh out a Romantic tempi in the symphony I hadn't experienced before. While I still hold Walter, Munch, Boult and Barbirolli in very high regard, if you like the Symphonies of Brahms, you have to hear what Janowski and Pittsburg are doing. They've created a wonderfully spirited work with an artfully rich palette of color I've not associated with this work. It's a beautifully recorded disc and once again, the downconverted CD layer is excellent, but the award goes to the DSD layer. This is a disc I've played at least a dozen times since I received it and every time I hear it, I have to stop what I'm doing, sit and listen. This disc provides a very rewarding musical experience and a highly valued addition to the collection for all those who love Brahms. Highest recommendation. **RSF**
www.pentatonemusic.com

RECORDING
MUSIC





Mahler: Symphony No. 8. London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Valery Gergiev.

SA SACD

Victoria Yastrebova, Ailish Tynan, Liudmilla Dudinova, sopranos; Choir of Eltham College, Choral Arts Society of Washington, London Symphony Chorus.

Stereo and Multi-channel Hybrid SACD: LSO Live, LSO0669.

Anytime there is a recording of Gustav Mahler's 'Symphony of a Thousand', it is generally well worth hearing. One can never find the perfect 8th performed and I've been looking for one for quite some time. Gergiev gives a not-too-rushed outing and the engineers have given us quite an excellent level of sound quality. Time is a respectable 77 minutes and 22 seconds and while not quite redbook, it is convenient to have the entire symphony on one disc.

Producer James Mallinson and engineer Jonathan Stokes have done an admirable job in giving us exceptional sound in a work that is massively dynamic and quite frankly a very difficult composition to record. Recorded in St. Paul's as opposed to the usual Barbican the LSO utilizes, the listener will not find any dryness in this outing. I for one, think this a very well committed spectacular. Excellent soloists abound and there is no hesitation in my recommending this recording to all. **RSF**
www.lso.co.uk



Maurice Ravel: Daphnis et Chloé.

SA SACD

Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by James Levine; Tanglewood Festival Chorus conducted by John Oliver.

BSO Classics 0801, Stereo and Multi-channel Hybrid SACD.

Ravel began work on the score in 1909 after a commission from Sergei Diaghilev. *Daphnis et Chloé* premiered at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris by his Ballets Russes on June 8, 1912 with the orchestra conducted by Pierre Monteux. This Levine performance offers outstanding insight, grace and majesty with exceptional demonstration quality sound. The control, authority, insight and sheer energy committed to this performance is matched by nothing I've heard in recent memory. The entire affair is approximately 56 minutes long and the BSO forces are, quite simply, exceptional. The music, some of the composer's most passionate, is widely regarded as some of Ravel's best, with extraordinarily lush harmonies typical of the impressionist movement in music at the time. I am exceptionally fond of the music of Maurice Ravel and this is quite simply perhaps his stunning achievement. The BSO has a long history playing the music of Ravel and I believe they have outdone themselves with the live performance on this disc. **RSF**
www.bso.org



Tchaikovsky: 1812 Overture, "Moscow" Cantata, Slavonic March, Festival Coronation March, Festival Overture on the Danish National Anthem.

SA SACD

Mariinsky Orchestra, soloists and chorus conducted by Valery Gergiev. Hybrid Multi-Channel SACD Mariinsky Label MAR0503

Gergiev has to be one of the busiest conductors around and this disc shows why he's so popular. The 1812 offered here has the prerequisite cannon fodder and yet these performances tell me that I'm not tired of these classics, it's just nice to be reminded what I loved about them in the first place. The playing by the Mariinsky is of Reference quality and the sound given us by the engineers is second to none. Now this is a disc I could impress my friends with.

The "Moscow" Cantata offers an exceptional performance with Lyubov Sokolava, mezzo-soprano and Alexey Markov, a baritone, whose wonderful voices shines through this work and makes it truly special. The great Slavonic March takes on new life with and is truly a rousing composition. If you are looking to refresh your interest in some great Tchaikovsky, performed with a World Class Orchestra, Conductor and Soloists, look no further. Top recommendation. **RSF**
www.mariinskylabel.com



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PIR 40th Anniversary Box Set

every home should have one

By Alan Sircom

OK, so not every home probably will want this, but there are those who will remember the Philly sound of the 1970s and instantly pony up for this encyclopedic ride through the outpourings of Messrs. Gamble and Huff.

Back in the 1970s, the soul world was undergoing great change; Stax and Motown were maturing, focusing on big artists like Isaac Hayes and Stevie Wonder and a new generation of bands blending funk, soul and dance was emerging in and around Philadelphia. Add to this the song-writing genius and business acumen of Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff and the funk and soul sound of much of the 1970s was set in stone.

Gamble and Huff began their music careers as independent producers in the late 1960s, working with a string of big names like Wilson Pickett and Dusty Springfield. They turned their hand to songwriting, and the two combined in that syrupy string sound and tight rhythm section that came to dominate hit after hit. The duo eventually formed Philadelphia International Records in 1971.

Starting with M.F.S.B.'s 'The Sound of Philadelphia', the hits kept coming. They duo quickly got into their writing groove and a string of classic – and not so classic – hits sprung up. Perhaps the best known of all of these is the mighty 'Backstabbers' by The O'Jays, but at that transition point between soul and disco in the mid 1970s, Philadelphia was at the leading edge throughout. From the sensuous 'If You Don't Know Me By Now' by Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes or 'Me and Mrs Jones' by Billy Paul, to the disco pop of 'When Will I See You Again' by The Three Degrees, the PIR sound came to dominate the charts and the clubs worldwide.

It couldn't last. A payola scandal hit in 1975. More importantly, the Death to Disco movement in the late 1970s hit Philadelphia hard. The company exists to this day, although it was arguably past its prime long before the birth of CD.

Candidly, a lot of people left soul and disco way behind by the end of the 1970s. And it would have likely stayed that way were it not for passionate PIR fan Ralph Tee, who

collated a labour of jazz-funk disco love, creating a 10 disc collection of the best of Philadelphia. With a 60 page booklet chronicling last detail of over 12 and a half hours of music, this should be the standard-bearer for CD's 'endgame'.

Presented as something close to a typology, it's an ambitious project. It's been a long time since I put away my peg trousers and tassel loafers, but this makes me want to party like it's 1974. What shocks you with this collection is the hidden gems like Dexter Wansel's remarkable 'Life On Mars', from 1975; written and produced long before sampling, drum machines or loopers. Every single instrument in the mix had a musician behind it, something that's easy to forget in today's computer-generated world.

Some of these 175 tracks never made it to CD before, while others made it to rare groove compilations. In fairness, a few of these 175 tracks deserved never to make it to CD even today. But, even so, I think the world is a better place for remembering The Jones Girls and the Intruders. Perhaps. +



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