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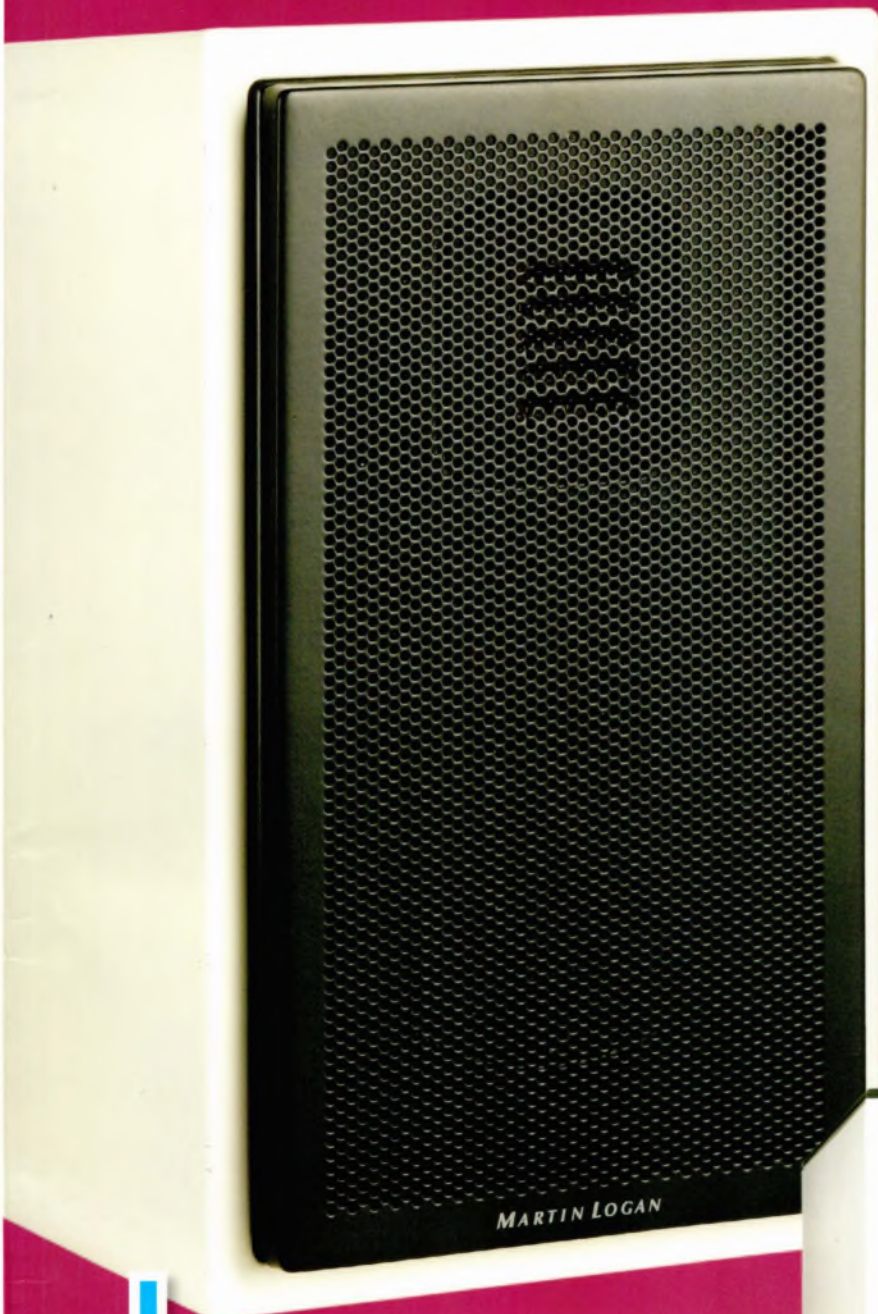
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editorial

This month, as we stumble headlong toward both the Munich High End show and our 100th issue, I've temporarily taken more of a back seat in the review haul. This is in part to reacquaint myself with the passion of music. Getting paid to listen to music all day is not exactly the toughest job in the world, but if your music is constantly used to assess the performance of pieces of audio equipment, you run the risk of being unable to switch off 'work mode' listening. By taking a short break from writing about products, I've already rediscovered my musical happy place.

It's something we rarely write about, but the importance of taking a musical break from time to time is a vital part of being a music lover, especially a music lover who's also fond of tinkering with bits of audio equipment. Spend too many hours listening to the same few test tracks over and over again can wipe out the enjoyment that is the reason why we all started buying bits of audio equipment.

The great advantage of audiophile single-mindedness is if you want to know which version of Ravel's *Bolero* is best (or which cartridge is best to play it on) that attention to detail is a good thing. But, the constant fidgeting and adjustment to a system that worked perfectly well before you started tinkering with it is a sure sign of *audiophilia nervosa*.

As such, I am currently deliberately limiting myself to one album a day. A rise and shine diet of music I've either not had a chance to listen to or haven't heard in years. None of it is 'work' music, either. None of it will be used in reviews (and no, that doesn't mean I'm listening to Sinetta or Max Bygraves albums). It's just 'me' time. A chance to listen

to music unencumbered by deadlines, note-taking, critical listening or fiddling with something.

And it's great. I think it's something every audiophile should do every few years. Turn off the big system and just play music simply, cheaply and for the sheer fun of things and discover new musical interests. Reset your listening levels.

Try it for yourself.

Hi-Fi Plus is fast approaching something of a landmark – its 100th issue. And we'd like you to be involved; we'd like you to tell us about your hi-fi high points of the last 14 years. Of course, if they happen to involve *Hi-Fi Plus*, all the better! Send your anecdotes and recollections to editor@hifiplus.com and we'll even print the ones that won't end up with court appearances!

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

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The Absolute Dream



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"...just music"

- Alan Sircom - HiFi+ 95 review

"an abundance
of detail..."

- Jonathan Vain - the absolute sound

"...clarity &
closeness that is
truly captivating"

- Chris Thomas - the audio beat

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Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming!

Room woes

You've been kind enough to offer me the benefit of your experience before and I hope you'll be able to do so again...

We've recently had some alterations done at home, which has more than doubled the size of our living (listening) room to roughly 6m x 5m. However, it is not a uniform rectangle and I seem to have a bit of a bass trap as a result of this. I've attached a very basic drawing to illustrate this. As it is our living room, I won't be able to get away with installing professional acoustic panels etc. (although my better half may have some degree of flexibility for something that's either discreet or deemed as domestically acceptable!) so is there anything I can do to help manage this? The room is carpeted with vertical blinds and curtains at the two windows, which are located on the two walls on the left hand side of the drawing. The settees are leather and the bookcase is well stocked with books and CDs. The chair and footstool were added a couple of weeks ago and have helped somewhat but there is still a dull boomy sensation in that area impacting on the overall sound.

I'm thinking about experimenting with subwoofery to support the bottom end of my standmounts, but I know I need to get the room under control first!

A secondary problem is that I'm struggling to get the sound to project very far into the room. I have experimented with speaker placement but I suspect that this may be down to two reasons: The first being that there is a 'border' as such in the middle of the room in the columns at each side and the boxed in steel at ceiling level (it did used to be two rooms after all...). The second being that the listening point is around 4.7m from the speakers and the speakers can only be placed around 2.3m apart.

For info the system is:

Bel Canto CD2 with Kingrex 2 power supply

Antelope Zodiac Gold with Voltikus power supply

Bel Canto M300 mono's

Gamut L3 standmounts on Partington Dreadnought Broadside stands

On the plus side the bigger room is giving me more detail and better separation, as if the system's got room to breathe now. I'd imagine both these subjects will come up later this year in your feature series on various aspects surrounding audio but anything you can suggest ahead of that would be very gratefully received.

Jason Watson, via email

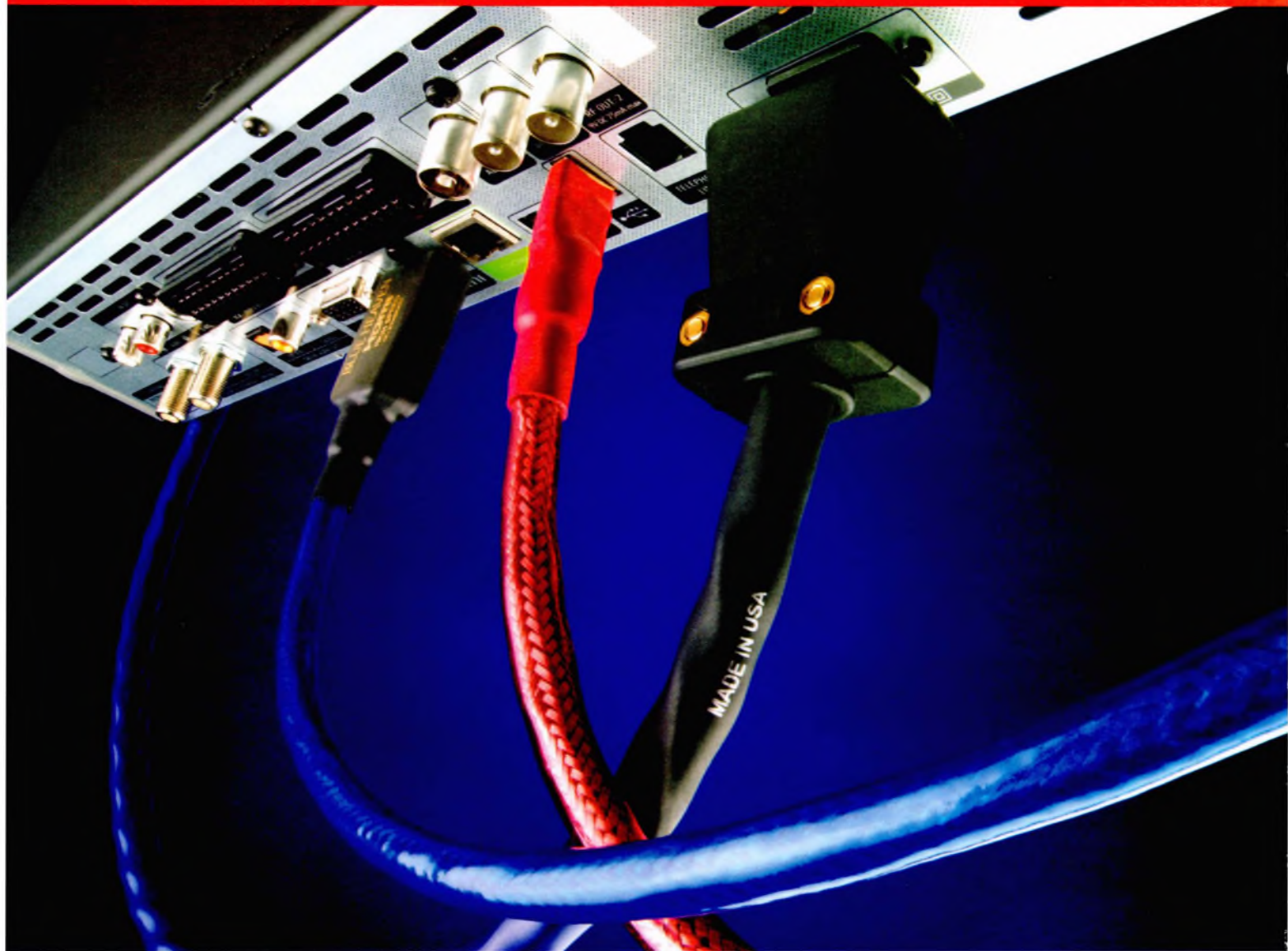
Yes, you do have some problems with that room that will not easily resolve themselves without some potentially domestically challenging solutions. Your listening position relative to the distance between the loudspeakers and the steel border mid way along the listening axis are significant impediments to

“As it is our living room, I won't be able to get away with installing professional acoustic panels, etc (although my better half may have some degree of flexibility for something that's either discreet or deemed as domestically acceptable).”



good performance, and the shape of the room is not ideal for audio purposes, but there are some potential fixes. Whether these fixes are domestically acceptable remains to be seen...

First, as an experiment, try moving the chair in the alcove of the room about 0.5m-1m in front of the settee facing the loudspeakers (so that the your head when sitting in this chair is roughly 2.8m-3m from the wall behind the loudspeakers). Experiment with moving the chair forwards ▶



“Born in the USA...”

The “one cable does it all” approach of HDMI might seem like simplicity itself – until you look inside that cable. With no fewer than 19 individual conductors, each with critical termination and transmission requirements, it should come as no surprise that not all HDMI cables are created equal.

With wide-bandwidth data, analog signals and even DC all running through the same connection, balancing those conflicting requirements and preventing interference is no simple task. The Blue Heaven HDMI cable uses Nordost’s proprietary Micro Mono-Filament, virtual air dielectric technology to create a precision wound cable with exceptional geometrical accuracy and consistency, electrical and mechanical characteristics.

Designed, manufactured and hand-terminated in the USA, the cable is double shielded and uses gold-plated, fully shielded, metal jacketed connectors to guarantee signal quality and connection integrity. This combination of superior technology and parts quality with painstaking attention to detail is what makes the difference. The result is clearly superior performance

that easily exceeds the HDMI standard and has gained the demanding DPL Seal Of Approval.

You want the best picture, the best sound and you need complete reliability. You want it all in one cable – a fit and forget solution. Well, now you can have it, because we have sweated the details. Nordost’s Blue Heaven isn’t like other HDMI cables – that is why it sets the gold-standard for audio and AV performance.

**Nordost Blue Heaven HDMI –
because the Devil is in the details.**

NORDOST
MAKING THE CONNECTION



- ▶ and provide you a (selfish) listening position for best listening (placing the sofa against the wall means sound bouncing off that wall is significantly undermining the sound from the loudspeakers - this can be diffused, but the closer you are to the wall, the more difficult and less effective the process).

You are also correct in identifying the potential bass 'enhancing' region in the alcove. However, I'd wager there are potential bass problems being caused by corners and interfaces around that room. There are also uneven first-reflection issues caused by the uneven nature of the room layout. Normally, most room problems can be solved by a standard set of room acoustic treatments (broad-band bass traps in every corner, absorption on the side walls, behind the listener and behind - or above - the loudspeakers), but in this case you may need an additional pair of traps in the extra corners of this room. I also suspect this would necessitate specific tuned-frequency traps in 'danger zones' (such as the aforementioned alcove).

If this is the case, and the problems endemic to the room are so severe no amount of 'listening through the room' is possible (I feel this is a fundamentally flawed concept anyway), you might want to try DSP room correction. Although audiophiles often dismiss DSP thinking the cure can be worse than the disease, in a very bad room, any mild problems DSP creates are as nothing compared to the overall improvements it brings to the sound quality – Ed.

British Steel

As if to follow up on Roy Gregory's recent reviews, I've just had the unexpected pleasure of listening to the Cardinal and Torus combo driven by Chord streaming/pre/power components at my local Hi-fi emporium, Moorgate Acoustics, which is preparing for a big Wilson Benesch/Chord day. Although the system was still warming up while I was there, it provided the most realistic sound I've ever heard. The whole system simply disappears. It would be too easy to overuse the superlatives. They're obviously products, which set the bar for the rest.

I'm inordinately proud of having such a world-leading company based in my home town of Sheffield, so it was a particular pleasure to be able to express this sentiment directly to Craig and Christina Milnes, who had been busy setting up the system. What was hugely commendable was their willingness to chat enthusiastically about their history in Sheffield, the process of design and their commitment to music. It's not often one gets the opportunity to chat with such people from within the industry while listening to their equipment, so I felt particularly privileged and would like to thank them for their courtesy.

Giles Morrison, Sheffield, via email

"I'm inordinantly proud of having such a world-leading company based in my home town of Sheffield, so it was a particular pleasure to be able to express this sentiment directly to Craig and Christina Milnes, who had been busy setting up."

Sheffield has long had a reputation for engineering and materials science excellence, dating back to the early days of the Industrial Revolution. It's good to see that while its time as the steel town is largely past, the regeneration of the town since the darkest days of the late 1980s and early 1990s has not left it entirely bereft of good engineering, and that Wilson Benesch is at the forefront of that revitalisation. Its rich musical tradition helps too – especially as Richard Hawley's Coles Corner remains one of the best albums of the last decade. All things considered, Sheffield still has a lot to be proud of... even if it's not London! – Ed. +

COMPETITION

WIN! More than £2,000 worth of Ensemble LUMINOSO and ESPRESSIVO cables must be won!!!



Hi-Fi Plus has teamed up with Ensemble to bring one lucky winner a complete set of the company's excellent new Luminoso and Espresso cables, as well as the ultimate in CD cleaner treatments.

Cheaper than Ensemble's top line cables, but still offering similar levels of performance and still made in Switzerland, the turquoise trio of Luminoso power and speaker cables, and Espresso interconnect will prove a popular choice for the discerning music lover. In our test of the cables last issue, we felt they "are masters at presenting the shape and feel of an orchestra." We also felt that all three cables "re-acquaint you with your music" especially if that music is made up of live, unamplified instruments, such as in jazz and classical recordings.

The prize (worth more than £2,000) comprises two 1.5m Luminoso power cords, a 3m pair of Luminoso speaker cables and a 1.5m Espresso interconnect must be won. The lucky winner will also receive a pack of Ensemble's excellent Visio CD cleaner treatment from the company's 'Makes Sense' range of accessories. Visio is an antistatic disc treatment fluid (it also comes with microfibre cleaning cloths) that also deep cleans the discs, which is said to improve the readability of CDs, DVDs and Blu-ray discs.

Competition Question

Where are Ensemble's products made

- A. Swaziland
- B. Scotland
- C. Switzerland

Please send your answer via email to competitions@hifiplus.com, placing the words 'Ensemble Cable Competition' in the title. Remember to include your name and address in the email. Alternatively, send your answer on a postcard (including your name and address and contact details) to "Ensemble Cable Competition, Unit 3, Sandleheath Industrial Estate, Sandleheath, Hampshire SP6 1PA". The competition closes on June 6, 2013.

Competition Rules

The competition will run from April 4, 2013 until June 6, 2013. The competition is open to everyone, but multiple, automated or bulk entries will be disqualified. The winner will be chosen at random from all valid entries, will be contacted via email (where possible) and their name will be published in the magazine. The Editor's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into.

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Sound & Vision, Bristol 2013

By Jason Kennedy



The audio industry's annual migration west to the Marriott in Bristol has become the most lively and entertaining show on the British circuit. You can see a surprising amount of new product there from brands both large and small, some of which manage to make remarkably good sounds given the limitations of a hotel bedroom. Pretty much every sector of home entertainment is represented albeit largely without the aid of multinationals; the one exception being JVC, which had a static display of a flat screen and headphones in the lobby.

This was the first time awards were given out for sound quality, an initiative set-up by the Clarity Alliance of which our illustrious editor is outgoing Chairman. The Clarity Alliance best sound of the show award went to **CAD** with its 1543 DAC. Scott and Isobel from CAD brought their home system which consisted of a laptop running JPlay, the latest prototype CAD USB cable, the 1543 converter, a Townshend Allegri autotransformer preamp and Brinkmann Mono power amps driving Dynaudio C1 speakers, cabling was Townshend throughout. The sound escaped the speakers so completely

that it was uncanny, not a bad effort for a show debut. There was also a new product of sorts in the shape of a shiny white acrylic CAD 1543; very Apple.

The boom in headphone sales has encouraged manufacturers to build better portable electronics and two rather appealing examples were in action at Bristol. The **Astell&Kern AK100** is a high resolution 'MP3 player', I don't know if it plays MP3s but it might, more important is that it plays WAV and FLAC files at up to 24/192. With a 2.4inch touch screen and nicely finished aluminium body it has 32GB of onboard space and slots for two Micro SD cards bringing the maximum potential storage up to 96GB. Not cheap at £569 it is in many ways a Walkman Pro for our time and thus highly desirable. Furutech's electronics arm **ADL** showed the X1 headphone amp (£485), not much bigger than an iPhone 4 it houses an ESS Sabre DAC and has USB in and optical output. It runs with iOS and Android devices at up to 16/48 or the full 24/192 with a PC. Headphone legend **Sennheiser** has also produced some headphone amps, their first ever in fact. The HDVD 800 (£1,500, top right) has an onboard DAC and USB input with jitter reduction circuitry while the HDVA 600 (£1300) only has analogue in and outputs. They were created for Sennheiser's HD 700 and 800 headphones but with the ability to drive high impedance loads via balanced and jack outputs they should work across the board.

Leema Acoustics took the highest room at the show (six floors above anyone else) and demonstrated the first DAC in its Constellation series. The Libra (£5,995, bottom right) has an impressive 15 inputs, including mappable I²S inputs on RJ45 connectors. Apparently Leema will be making a transport with this output, but Northstar and M2Tech are already using this connection. The DAC also has Leema's M1 USB module, a fully asynchronous receiver that works with Windows and Mac. Leema also showed its Elements Ultra Phono stage (£1,195); a fully adjustable MM/MC ready device with dip switches to vary sensitivity as well as resistive and capacitive loads which include a 100kOhm loading for MMs.

Chord Company the cable specialist was demonstrating a breakthrough that it's made with the geometry of interconnect cables. Dubbed Tuned Array the technique is being applied across the range to both analogue and digital cables, they don't want to share the secret but it's not making a great deal of difference to price. I heard standard versus TA versions of Sarum coaxial interconnect and was quite staggered at the extent to which TA revealed so much more ▶





▶ dimensionality in the soundstage. Chord Co used Spendor D7 speakers for the dem which are clearly very capable and really not very Spendor like. Meanwhile, **Spendor** also showed a replacement for the A6 called A6R (£2,500, above) which has a new crossover and a midbass driver that uses the same EP77 polymer cone and new surround as the D7 but in a two-way design.

The most impressive new speaker at the show was **PMC's** BB5 se (£25,000). Apparently the room was limiting absolute extension, but I've never encountered lows of such power and speed at a show before. The BB5 se is not just a pro model with nice veneer; the tweeter has been offset for better imaging, it has a new flange on the dome midrange for greater dispersion and the cabinets have been beefed up for increased rigidity.

Rega has kicked off its 40th anniversary celebrations with two new components and another at the prototype stage. They had the shell of a Saturn-R CD player on show as well as an Aria phono stage (£798) and Elicit-R amplifier (£1,598) in action. Aria is an MM/MC stage with two transformers, and DIP switches to vary loading and gain. Elicit-R sees the

introduction of a new case design and a 105 watt power stage that uses the same output devices as the Brio-R but in greater number.

Michell Engineering turned the tables by unveiling its first cartridge, the £1,065 Cusis. Featuring a carbon loaded acrylic body, it has a boron cantilever with a nude line-contact diamond tip and a pure iron coil. **Audio Note** has been working on its analogue sources as well. Doing away with Rega parts entirely, the new Arm 2 one-piece machined arm tube, low slung counterweight and VTA adjustable arm base. Price starts at £650. AN also added the Princess monblock; a 2A3-based parallel single ended power amp with a six watt output and three levels of build starting at £4,500 per pair.

I saved what was one of the most talked about launches for last, that being the **Guru Junior**. The name Junior derives from its relationship to the QM10Two which has a similar driver array in a more complex cabinet for £800. It features anodised aluminium baffles and veneer or white lacquer finishes. Distributor Tom Tom Audio was using a Naim UnitiLite and providing a lot of entertainment for a system cost not far off two grand. +



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Hi-Fi Choice - May 2011

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Hi-Fi Plus - Sept 2012

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Lindemann 800 System

By Chris Thomas

Audio systems are mostly built by informed experimentation. Assembling components from different manufacturers, sitting them on something suitable and hooking everything up with well-chosen cabling. Structuring the whole installation from the ground up often comes with experience and a couple of costly mistakes. There are and have been many companies who have sought to avoid this by supplying an entire system, but it is rare to find one that has complete competence in every discipline.

For the past year I have been living with a pair of Lindemann products; the 825 DAC/CD player and the BL-10 loudspeakers. The Munich based company also makes an extensive range of products, and I had grown increasingly intrigued how they would perform in a full Lindemann system. So we contacted the company and were sent an 885 integrated amplifier and a set of its Kind Of Blue cables. The only thing I didn't have was their mains distribution block, so I used them with both a Crystal and a Quantum QB8 distribution block, and even through my dedicated mains spur, thereby also bypassing the mains blocks altogether.

Lindemann forged an enviable reputation for its SACD players but with the latest 825, designer and founder Norbert Lindemann has dropped this compatibility and renamed it as a High Definition player. The best way to think of the 825 is as a Hi Res DAC with a CD reader included. The CD drawer is a thin all-metal design that utilises a DVD drive, servo optimised to operate as a CD reader. To the rear are RCA and Toslink digital outputs, a Toslink digital input, a pair of RCA S/PDIF inputs and an asynchronous USB input. Outputs are a choice of both single ended and balanced. The DAC section operates at 24-bit 192 kHz while the USB is happy to receive data in the standard formats of 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4 and 196kHz. This is truly a



high-resolution compatible device and a well-built machine with a separate power supply that punches way above its price point.

The 885 integrated amp is a true dual-mono construction as there are actually two full amplifiers in the case, with the mains socket being the only shared component. Each amplifier has a 500-watt transformer to itself and both channels are configured in a fully symmetrical design with asymmetrical input signal being converted and controlled by a symmetrical volume control. Lindemann claims that this technique, commonly found in recording studios, offers improved dynamic abilities that they believe is critical when dealing with high-resolution recordings. The circuit design itself that is based on a single-ended push-pull amplifier idea that dates back to the early days of the valve amplifier.

Components have been specially chosen to greatly minimise the lengths of the signal path. It is a fully balanced Class AB design that incorporates a noiseless fan. I never noticed it getting particularly warm and never heard the fan noise at all. There are a couple of pairs of balanced inputs and three sets of single-ended while output connections comprise a single balanced pair. These are selected through the large rotary knob on the front that scrolls through

the inputs or of course via the excellent remote control. Power output is 135 watts into 8 and 250 watts into 4 ohms. Throughout my time with the 885, I was constantly impressed at just how hard this thing could really 'drive' a loudspeaker, a subjective observation not found in the pure specification figures.

I have heard no stand mount speakers that have come close to the BL-10 at their size and price point (I haven't heard them all though) and I have spent many a happy hour exploring music through them. This tiny design is the only stand-mount of the three-model Birdland range and comes supplied with a unique support. They say the best designs are the simplest and the low-mass folding system that comes with BL-10 fully substantiates that claim. These are made from twin thin stainless steel rod elements that are fixed at a central axis point so the whole thing can swing open, like the legs of an ironing board. The top elements are then hard-attached to a stainless steel plate affixed to the speaker, bringing the BL-10 to just the right height. The base has four outrigger cups that are used in conjunction with Lindemann's very simple, but effective hardwood block coupled by a small ceramic ball that separates the two. This appears to give a degree of resonance control and a firm footing for the stand but this is not a heavy, rigid design that holds the speaker absolutely rock solid.

The cabinet is surprisingly small at eight litres, but has obviously come in for special attention and Lindemann have gone with a multi-layer, constrained-layer composite construction that is formed by a 32mm layer of cork, between layers of 95mm Finnish Birch providing a kind of floating, sandwich effect. The cabinet certainly seems very inert. The outside surface is actually high-grade linoleum and it is the latter that gives the BL-10 such a different and slightly industrial look and I would imagine, extra stiffness. Available in many attractive colour finishes; it is also very easy to clean and certainly makes a change from the exotic wood or lacquered finish one might usually expect to see. The aim of the cabinet design was one of the Holy Grails of speaker designers, an absence of stored energy. This avoids the cabinet singing its own delayed song and in this design, it has been massively successful.

The drivers are German-sourced Ceramic designs. The bass/mid driver is a 165mm model, built by Accuton to Lindemann specifications and protected by a fixed metal grill. This unit was designed by Norbert Lindemann to have a full 30% extra cone mass than the equivalent Accuton model of the same size in an effort to achieve much better bass extension and power than one would normally associate with an eight litre cabinet. In the right system, the quantities of bass and the pure low-frequency extension that spring from this very small, rear ported design is a constant surprise and helps the speaker's tonal balance and sense of scale enormously.



▶ Eton supply the 25mm tweeter, a ceramic-coated, magnesium-domed unit, while the crossover and the Nextgen binding posts are both cryogenically treated. Internally the cabling is unsurprisingly Lindemann Kind Of Blue, offering the possibility of continuum of construction from the mains to the speaker if you want to take that route and I would advise that, given the opportunity, you seriously consider it. The 'upside down' configuration, with the tweeter being mounted below the bass/mid driver is chosen for purely musical presentation reasons that stem from the crossover design itself.

Even after a year of using the BL-10s regularly I am still surprised at the 83dB efficiency figure. It obviously needs factoring in when thinking about an amplifier less powerful than the 885, but I have used the speaker very successfully with Vitus' magnificent 025 25 watt Class A design on many occasions with no problem whatsoever.

This was the first time I had seen or used the Kind Of Blue cable set, but I think Miles himself would be pretty happy at the way they sound as he was certainly a "tone and texture man". They are made from very high purity copper that has received no surface treatment and Lindemann do not like the sound of silver-plating so it's about as "raw" as you will find. There is no screening and there are no ferrous components in any of the cabling. In fact the connectors that you will find throughout are low-mass hollow designs fabricated from copper alloys and those at the end of the power cords are unplated copper. The construction of each cable is twisted-pairs of conductors. As ever with all Lindemann products, there is nothing superfluous or remotely gimmicky in their design.

I love simple systems. A classic 'the fewer boxes – the better' approach really appeals to me and the Lindemann 800 system is about as straightforward as it comes. But, as ever, system installation needs meticulous care and attention to draw the best out of the components and allow them to fulfil their potential. So, I tried the CD player and amplifier on two support systems. The first was the bamboo Atacama Eco. Here I supported each component on four Stillpoints Ultra Minis. If I had more of the Lindemann wood and ceramic devices I would have used those, but the Minis did a great job and provided a much tidier and sharper focussed sound with cleaner dynamics and better musical structure. The speakers have their own specific footings so positioning is likely to be the biggest consideration here. But, as the stands attach to them and the whole package is so light anyway, it shouldn't take you long to find the ideal spot. I used a modicum of toe-in myself and sat them a couple of feet from the rear wall.

The second support system offers a dramatic lift in performance but an eye-watering price hike. The Stillpoints ESS rack is where all their technologies come together and the various levels of resonance control start to pile upon each other to offer the electronics a chance to reach entirely new levels of musical expression and communication, proving once again that a system constructed from the foundations up brings musical rewards and enlightenment that those that have not received this level of attention never attain.

The first few days of listening were really to ensure that the system had warmed through and settled down as the opening hours had left me slightly

"I love simple systems. A classic 'the fewer boxes – the better' approach really appeals to me and the Lindemann 800 system is about as straightforward as it comes. But, as ever, system installation needs meticulous care and attention to draw the best out of the components."



disappointed with the strangely flat dynamics. Pushing the volume onward and upwards did address this although in fairness nothing specifically unpleasant reared its head. This is always the case though, and a few days of hard running began to see the system rouse from its slumbers and the amplifier starting to use its undoubted muscle to good effect. I am never surprised at the way that systems come out of their shell after a lot of running, but always intrigued to see what emerges. As the presentation leaned out, the bandwidth grew and the picture gained depth and quite a lot of articulation. Instruments began to find their own space and freedom and I was starting to hear all the great things that the CD player and speakers

are capable of. The balanced interconnects that had been supplied interested me but I wished I had asked for a set of single-ended cables too. Every now and then a comparison between the two offers me the chance to confirm what I have felt for years, that I almost always prefer the single-ended option. Now I found that the remarkably unflustered and relaxed view of the music that I had come to admire about the BL-10 was back. The musicianship just flows at whatever rate the tempo decides and as the layers of detail increase the little BL-10 just shrugs its tiny shoulders and lets it pour into the room with a balance and body that never stops surprising.

The 825 CD player generates a huge amount of coherent musical information and this flows as well as the best single-box players I have heard and this includes some very expensive designs. It is also, given the quality of its DAC, extremely versatile. The BL-10 speakers, though very small, are quite stunningly good. Slot the 885 in the middle with the Kind Of Blue cables and you have a real powerhouse of a driving amplifier that exerts just enough grip over the music without sounding too contrived or artificial. There is very little to criticise but, as I have heard the player and speakers so often with other



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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

825 High Definition Disc Player

Formats Supported: CD, CD-R, CD-RW, Hybrid-SACD HDCD.

Freq. Resp: 1Hz-22kHz (-3dB)

Bit Resolution: 16/24 bit.

Sample Rate: 44.1-192kHz.

Price: £5,900

885 Integrated Amplifier

Power output: 135 W/Channel @ 8 ohms. 250 W/Channel @ 4 ohms

Min. Speaker Impedance: 2 ohms.

Freq. Resp: 1 Hz- 200 kHz.

Price: £7,790

BL-10 Loudspeaker

Efficiency: 83 dB

Impedance: 8 ohm nominal.

Drivers: 1 x 165mm ceramic. 1 x 25mm magnesium

Finishes available: 12 variations of linoleum.

Price: £6,350 per pair

Kind Of Blue Cables: (as supplied)

Prices: Power cords 1.5 m – £320. Signal: 0.75 m (XLR) – £410

Speaker Cables: 3.5 pair – £850

Manufactured by: Lindemann Audiotechnik GmbH.

URL: www.lindemann-audio

Distributed by: Audio Emotion Ltd.

URL: www.audioemotion.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 1333 425999

amplification and cabling, I have to say that the Lindemann amplifier is certainly tonally darker than I was expecting. Musically integrated and full of colour and texture but I do find it, when used with their cabling, to be slightly soft through the treble and the bass. This is an observation rather than a criticism. Single-ended operation had gone some way to improving this though. I was also a little underwhelmed with the amp's low-level performance and often felt that I had to drive harder to encourage it to really sing dynamically. The BL-10 has such a lively and animated midband performance but it seemed a little more restrained and less eloquent than I am accustomed to. This could well be yet another aspect of the long-term run-in possibilities of both the 885 and the cables as I have known some components to take months before really blossoming.

The fact remains though that this is an economically structured and beautifully balanced system that works wonderfully well as a whole. It is fast and detailed but with a great sense of unstrained musical eloquence. Both the CD/DAC and the BL-10s are truly superb products and very competitively priced, given the performance they are capable of. I have heard many, many far more expensive alternatives not shine so musically bright. They set the performance bar incredibly high and although the 885 amplifier puts in a solid shift and has no obvious musical limitations, I do wonder if it is at quite the same level as its illustrious partners.

The bottom line is Lindemann's products should be very seriously considered as I have heard first hand, over many months, how musically rewarding they can be. I know they are capable of providing an exceptional musical experience, but there is only one-way to find out for yourself. +



The Zanden Model 1300 phono stage

By Roy Gregory

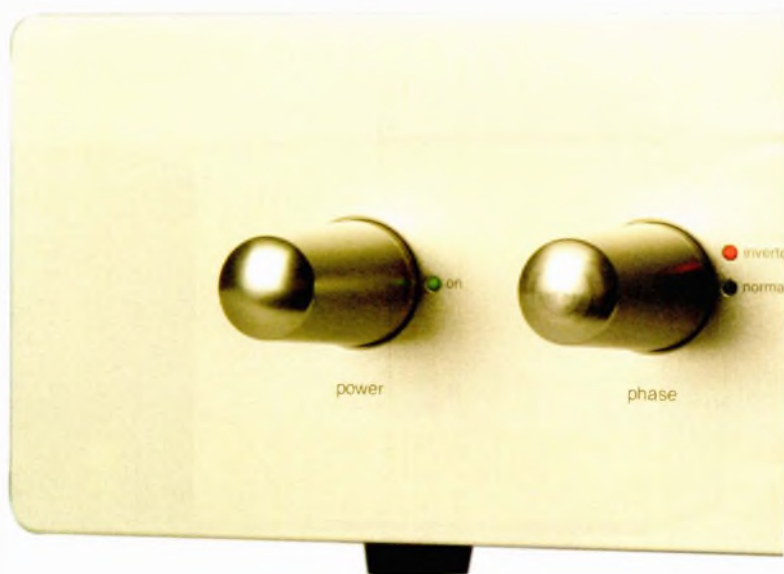
As a reviewer, the equipment in your system becomes an ever-changing landscape. There are products that come and go almost unnoticed, there are those that linger in the memory, some longer than others. Occasionally, a product arrives that leaves a deep and lasting impression, setting a standard against which others are measured. Those products are rare indeed, once in a generation happenings for most companies. But there's one company that's left me with two musical milestones to mark their passage, and that company is Zanden. Not content with rewriting the musical rulebook for digital sources with their four-box, Model 2000/Model 5000 CD transport and DAC combination, the Model 1200 Mk III Phono Stage was just as impressively memorable – and at £23,495 almost as ruinously expensive. So expensive in fact that there was no way that I could remotely afford its purchase – and believe me, I tried. Which makes the Model 1300 phono stage that's currently gracing my system a particularly fascinating prospect. Half the box for a little over half the price, how much of the 1200's magic can it deliver?

The Model 1300 will set you back a still considerable £13,495, but that's a Volkswagen Golf more affordable than its big brother. You lose the 1200's heavy casework, with its slabs of aluminium forming the chassis base and fascia, and you lose the separate, choke regulated power supply, the 1300 being built into a simple, slim-line, polished stainless steel case that's a little deeper than it is wide. But what you keep is essentially the same heart and soul that makes the 1200 so special. Component quality in the flagship product is better and the choke and film-caps in its PSU are larger than the parts used in the 1300, where they are constrained by both space and cost, but otherwise the two units are far closer together than they appear. That means that you get the same 6922 valve-based audio circuit as the 1200; the same Jensen step up transformers and 6CA4 valve rectifiers; the same LCR equalization circuit; the same polarity switch and the same pair of inputs, one for low output cartridges, one for high output models. Most important of all, it means you get the same choice of five different replay curves, covering RIAA, Decca, EMI, Teldec and Columbia – but more on that later.

For listeners used to treating their phono stage as a simple plug-and-play product, possibly involving setting cartridge gain and/or loading on a one-time basis, that probably seems like a daunting array of options and facilities, but it is precisely this versatility that makes the Zanden phono stages so special.

Let's not mince words; the Model 1300 is one of the finest sounding phono stages available. It is audibly and obviously cut from the same musical cloth as the 1200 and has the same almost addictive quality when it comes to listening. But it is also two phono stages in one; which you hear will depend on what kind of listener you are and what sort of record collection you have...

Plug the Model 1300 into your system and you could simply set it to RIAA, sit back and enjoy the excellent sound that results – and it will stand comparison with the serious competition that's out there. Despite the presence of glowing bottles in the circuit, don't make the mistake of assuming that the sound of the Zanden will be overly soft, sweet or romantic. With an engaging sense of energy and presence,



fluidity and timing, it is neither overly warm nor etched. Instead it is all about bringing recordings to life, imbuing them with that sense of purpose and drive, delicacy, poise and collective enterprise that conjures up the elusive quality of human agency. Play an acoustic recording, or a well recorded studio track through the Zanden and it really does sound like people: people singing, strumming, hitting, banging or blowing whatever instrument they're playing. The transformer input offers a fixed gain of 68dB (54dB on the low-gain input) but that is enough for all but the lowest output moving-coils. I ran the 1300 with the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement, Lyra Titan i and vdH Condor, all without noise or gain problems. Elvis Costello's 'Little Triggers' had just the right combination of presence, impact and brittle anger to reveal the underlying sense of emotional fragility, while the Record Shop Day only Leonard Cohen EP, Live In Fredericton was relaxed, spacious and atmospheric. A recently acquired secondhand King Super Analogue pressing of the Argo Mariner/Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields *Strings and Brass* (SLA (A) 1030) is beautifully poised, the contrast of layered tone and overlaid brilliance perfectly balanced, the precise beauty of Corelli's music brought to vibrant, shimmering life. So far so good; if you want to maximize the presence, energy and humanity in your recordings, the Zanden Model 1300 should be at the top of your shopping list. Other phono stages might offer more detail, control or definition, but if it's musical engagement you are after, then the Model 1300 delivers it in spades.

But that's only half the story. As genuinely impressive as the one-box Zanden is as a fit and forget solution, under the right circumstances, it can become an invaluable window into your record collection. It all revolves around those EQ curves

"It impacts upon an astonishing range of music and recordings. How about early US pressings of Kind of Blue, or Dylan's Highway 61 Revisited or Blonde on Blonde. You don't get much more mainstream than that – and you haven't really heard these records until you play them through a Columbia EQ curve."

and whether (or not) you can use them to their best advantage. Their *raison d'être* is to offer optimum replay conditions on a record-by-record basis, the very antithesis of a fit and forget one size fits all solution. But that starts from the assumption that different records demand different settings – and that as a listener, you are going to take the time and trouble to adjust the phono stage accordingly.

Isn't this all a bit eclectic and extreme – the sort of thing that only an obsessive collector of rare records would bother about? Actually, it impacts upon an astonishing range of music and recordings. How about early US pressings of *Kind Of Blue* (1959), or Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965) or *Blonde On Blonde* (1966)? You don't get much more mainstream than that – and you really haven't heard these ▶



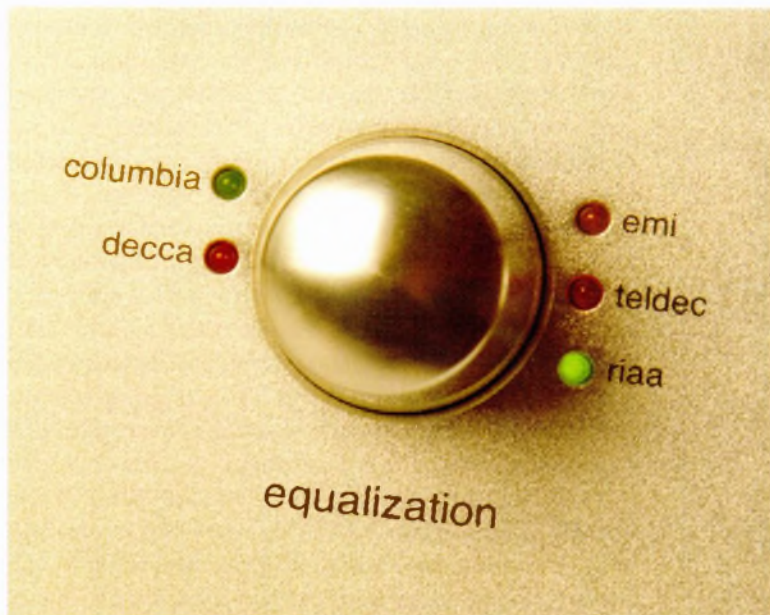
▶ THE GREAT ROCK AND ROLL (AND JAZZ, AND CLASSICAL) SWINDLE

The mechanics of record replay demand that bass and treble signals are both rolled off when cutting discs, those roll-offs reversed on replay. In 1956, the recording industry agreed to adopt the RIAA equalisation curve as a *de facto* standard – at least in theory. Unfortunately, common sense, human nature and the all too audible evidence tell us that record companies continued to use existing equipment and their own EQ curves, making non-RIAA discs long after 1956. In some cases, that practice continued right up to the advent of CD and the demise of large-scale record production.

Decca and EMI continued to use their proprietary curves well into the 1970s, while DGG seem to have never adopted the RIAA standard. Examples of post '56 non-RIAA pressings from other sources such as Columbia, Atlantic and Impulse abound, covering every genre from rock and pop through jazz and classical. And just to really confuse things, occasionally even the serial dissenters produced an RIAA compliant pressing.

But do you need to worry about replay EQ? If you solely listen to 180g audiophile or current pressings, the answer is no. Everything produced these days is RIAA compliant – the standard that's built into every non-switchable phono stage. But, if you have an extensive collection of 60's and 70's pressings, if you buy secondhand records and especially if you are a collector of older, first pressings, then the answer is definitely yes. RCA pressings were always RIAA, but those pricy Decca SXL wide-bands you've shelled out for, all the collectable EMI classical discs, a lot of jazz (especially the preferred mono pressings) and a surprising amount of pop music will only sound at its best if you've got a switchable EQ facility. Oh – and it's essential to make just about anything from DGG even remotely listenable.

The good news is that the adjustment itself is child's play. The Zanden offers a simply five-position rotary switch and a separate switch for absolute phase. The manual contains a crib sheet for guidance, but 'suck it and see' works too. The differences are far from subtle, with the correct EQ delivering not just a sense of tonal rightness, but a rhythmic poise and sense of performance and drama that's unmistakable. In fact, it's remarkable just how quickly you come to recognize correct (and incorrect) replay EQ. If you are serious about getting the best out of older records, a phono stage with switchable EQ curves is essential. Like everything else, the simpler the process, the more you'll use it – and musically, the results speak for themselves.



records until you replay them with a Columbia EQ curve. How about the famous Zubin Mehta *Planets* on Decca (1973)? Perhaps best of all, what about Karajan's 1963 Beethoven cycle, surely a cornerstone of any classical record collection? What makes this whole issue even more interesting is the existence of modern, audiophile re-pressings of many of these recordings. I've lost count of how many 180g, 200g, single-sided, non-groove-guard or 'special vinyl' versions of *Kind Of Blue* exist. And that's before you start including the speed-corrected editions. All of those will be RIAA. Compare them to an original pressing, using the RIAA curve and the audiophile versions stand up pretty well. But as soon as you switch the original to the Columbia curve the improvement is dramatic, the immediacy and sense of purpose, the clarity and transparency that comes from first pressings elevate the performance to a whole new level.

Likewise the Karajan Beethoven discs. The whole '63 cycle was recently released by Speakers Corner, who have done their normal excellent job. The 180g version of the Fifth Symphony makes the original pressing sound sluggish and bloated in the bass, thin and screechy in the highs. In fact, all the reasons that DGG records have such a poor reputation despite a stellar cast of recording artists. But switch the replay curve to Teldec and reverse the absolute phase for the original pressing and parity is quickly restored, the Speakers Corner offering quieter surfaces and a solid sense of presence, but the DGG now offers more life and energy, a greater sense of control and drama and a more palpable acoustic. Suddenly Karajan seems like a genuine musical giant, the Berlin Philharmonic a fantastic orchestra. Indeed, each time you do

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(Jonathan Valin, The Absolute Sound, April 2013)

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► these comparisons, almost regardless of record, the results are the same, differing only in degree.

For the listener who wants a plug and play phono stage the Zanden Model 1300 offers an enticing solution. Its combination of life, presence and engagingly musical presentation puts it right in the front rank of current analogue options. It's also compact, elegant and capable of accepting most cartridges available today. Yes, there are stages that offer more detail and some that deliver greater definition, but I've yet to hear one that delivers more music, and in that regard the 1300 follows firmly (and surprisingly closely) in the footsteps of its bigger and significantly more expensive brother, half its price yet delivering the lion's share of its performance. But combine that musical quality with the ability to switch EQ and absolute phase, as well as the option to connect a second tonearm (probably running a mono cartridge) and for the serious record collector or the listener who simply wants to wring every last ounce of performance from their recordings, the Model 1300 becomes the benchmark object of desire. With the best pressings of the best records, those adjustments really do make the difference between great sound and music that's stop you in your tracks spectacular. But the best news of all is that if aspiring to own the Model 1200 was a little like looking up at Everest, at least the 1300 is more like Mont Blanc! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: One-box vacuum-tube phono stage

Valve Complement: 4x 6922, 2x 6CA4

Inputs: Low output MC (68dB gain) High output MC/MM (54dB gain)

EQ Curves: RIAA, Decca, Columbia, EMI, Teldec

Output: 1pr single-ended RCA

Output Impedance: 3kOhms

Dimensions: 343 x 96 x 430mm

Weight: 8.6kg

Price: £13,495

Manufacturer: Zanden Audio Systems Ltd

URL: www.zandenaudio.com

UK Distributor: Audiofreaks

Tel: +44 (0)20 8948 4153

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk



Hegel H300 Integrated Amplifier

By Chris Thomas

The Hegel H300 is an integrated amplifier/DAC from Norway. As you might have guessed, the company is named after the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) and he and his thinking seem to feature quite heavily when you see Hegel equipment being discussed. Although for most British people Hegel's sole claim to fame was being immortalised in the 'Philosopher's Song' by Monty Python's Flying Circus ("David Hume/Could out-consume/Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel"), he was in fact one of the driving forces behind German Idealism and a whole branch of that school that sprung from his concepts (unsurprisingly called Hegelianism) insists that reality must be able to be expressed in rational – and therefore quantifiable – properties. That might sound like stating the bleedin' obvious, but it was groundbreaking thinking at the start of the 19th Century, and it should be considered something of a reality check for modern audio makers.

Hegel (the brand) has adopted the concepts of Hegel (the man) by designing distinctly 'foo-free' equipment; in the process being very big on the cost vs. performance equation

throughout its literature. So, let's have a look and see what is on the menu as far as the H300 as concerned.

Mmmm, yummy, the spec menu looks mighty good. Here is a chunky but conventional case with a rather subtle bowed front, a large on/off push switch, a pair of even larger rotary controls and a very clear blue illuminated display. Round the back there are a single pair of solid-looking gold plated speaker terminals and a decent analogue input capability of one pair of balanced and three sets of unbalanced connectors. Expanding things nicely, there is also a single RCA set of fixed-level Home Theatre inputs and unbalanced pre-out connectivity. The inclusion of a DAC is a welcome addition, because it means the box count can potentially drop to just H300 and a computer. But for CD users, there are a couple of coaxial S/PDIF inputs, supplemented by another couple of optical versions alongside a single USB input. You must admit that all this is beginning to look like a useful package indeed. The chip, the 32-bit AKM4399 is the same as that



found in Hegel's HD-11 DAC that AS favourably reviewed here last year, only Hegel has addressed minor criticisms by providing it with an improved power supply and re-clocking it. The company now believes it to be the second best DAC in Hegel's armoury, only surpassed by the new HD25.

Output is a substantial 250 watts into eight ohms from the Class AB amplifier, with stupendously low distortion figures achieved by the incorporation of the company's SoundEngine design and topology that incorporates FET transistors in the dual-mono preamplifier stage. The Hegel RC8 remote control is a chunky aluminium design that provides all the usual functions but also allows for control of the media player in a connected computer by having Play, Prev and Next buttons too. It can also be used if an external DAC is being used through its DAC Loop feature. This allows the external DAC able to receive the re-clocked signal then convert it, before sending it back through the balanced input. This is a welcome change to the generic remote controls that you often find with many products these days, bought in purely for the sake of offering remote operation. One observation though is that the remote itself is not a small credit-card type thing, so why are all the function buttons so small and located so closely together? Good remote controls are those that one can operate in a darkened room. They should least separate the volume controls from the rest so they can be easily accessed. Small details, but important ones nevertheless.

So, on the menu the Hegel H300 certainly looks an inviting proposition I think you will agree and we do, so I am told, eat with our eyes. The H300 promises power and high versatility to I paired it with the excellent Lindemann 825 CD player, both sited on an Atacama Eco bamboo rack and a pair of Focal Diablo speakers. I started by using some reasonably priced cabling from The Chord Company before upping the quality throughout with cable systems from both Crystal and Nordost.

The amplifier arrived with very little run-in time on the clock, and with any new product, it's often unclear just how much time is needed for it to come to life. Some designs (the D'Agostino amplifiers, for example) tend to come on song almost immediately and a day after first powering the device up, it is virtually as good as it gets. Others (like Ayre or Naim Audio) are notorious for requiring week after week of conditioning and running in to give of their best. Price, size of power supply, output (whether those watts are passed to the speaker cones or distributed to the wider world as heat), the designer's past 'form' or even component quality are no guarantee that the product before you takes hours or months to run in, or how big a change the run in provides.

Straight out of the box, the H300 was no different to many, many other hunks of amplification that have crossed my path in that it was distinctly without musical communication on first listening. Soft, flabby and without focus or much in the way of articulation, it was worthy only of background music and so it stayed, playing away on CD repeat for several days while I lived round it. Then slowly and in time-honoured fashion, it began to come round and I started to take notice.

The Hegel H300 is one of those designs that clearly undergoes significant changes for the better as the run-in process develops. Some time into its background listening tasks, I was slouching on the sofa doing a bit of iPad surfing when I began to notice that what had sounded like a bunch of unsympathetic separates appeared to be making friends and singing from the same hymn sheet. The previously paper-thin image presentation, once so one-dimensional had begun to detach itself from the cabinets of the Diablo and expand both forward and into the back of the room. A percussion section that I knew well had become just that; disconnected from the main musical body I could enjoy its driving precision and rhythmic link to the tempo. It was all beginning to sound as if the musicians had started to feel interested again and so was I.

As the hours, then days passed, I was starting to enjoy this Hegel amp a lot more and that became the story of my time with it. The more work I gave it to do, the more I became involved with listening to it. It has a very even-handed tonal balance and a rather natural way with voices especially. It employs its considerable power with discretion too, as it is not especially grippy or particularly taught; depending on your viewpoint (and choice of loudspeaker), this could come across as having an easy, unforced approach to bottom end, ►

“I was starting to enjoy this Hegel amp a lot more and that became the story of my time with it. The more work I gave it to do, the more I became involved with listening to it. It has a very even-handed tonal balance and a rather natural way with voices especially. It employs its considerable power with discretion too.”

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▶ or being less than totally specific in the bass. After a while I realised that if I sat back and tried to dissect its performance, I found it too soft and the midband a little over sweet but, fortunately I don't enjoy listening to music in that way and this is one of those products where the whole exceeds the parts by some way. The Hegel is very, very easy to live with indeed.

As if to prove these points, I changed the speakers for the Lindemann BL-10 and introduced a complete run of Nordost's Blue Heaven. I believe this to be one of the best balanced of all Nordost's cabling systems and its speed and lightness of rhythmic touch showed another side of the H300 which, by this time seemed to have reached something of a performance apex. Now the music was more tightly etched, each instrument had grown its own dynamic space and the whole picture was a lot more exciting. The depth that I mentioned before had expanded before my ears and the amplifier's considerable power could now be viewed as a musical asset rather than just a spec-sheet bonus. This is an excellent combination for the Hegel, although I would still characterise it as a touch soft for my personal taste. I did use the on-board DAC and it certainly works very well. Of course it throws up a whole new area of discussion as to how one should really configure a computer to get the best out of any USB DAC, but that is turning out to be complete subject in itself. Suitably configured, this does make for a very simple, high-quality music delivery system.

The Hegel is a very decent all-round performer in a tight end of the market place. It has power aplenty and – although this needs some intelligent system matching – will

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Single box Integrated amplifier /DAC

Analogue Inputs: 1x balanced (XLR), 3x unbalanced (RCA).

Fixed Analogue Inputs: 1 x unbalanced Home Theatre (RCA).

Digital Inputs: 2 x coaxial S/PDIF, 2 x Optical S/PDIF, 1 x USB.

Line Level Output: Unbalanced pre-out (RCA)

Digital outputs: 1 x coaxial S/PDIF.

Output Power: 250 W @ 8 ohms, 430 W @ 4 ohms.

Minimum load: 2 ohms.

Dimensions: 120 x 430 x 380 mm (HxWxD).

Weight: 25 kg.

Price: £3,895

Manufacturer: Hegel Music Systems

URL: www.hegel.com

Distributor: Aventure.

URL: www.aventure-europe.com

Tel: +44 (0) 1347 440101

not show itself up in the company of some very high quality loudspeakers. In a properly configured computer system, the DAC section is a real plus point and it certainly expands the appeal and value of is a rather tasty amplifier. +



The MartinLogan Motion 15 Loudspeaker

By Roy Gregory

The mini-monitor occupies a very particular and long-standing place in the affections of Anglophone audiophiles. The LS3/5a, the SL6, the AE1, the 805 and a host of other diminutive standmounts demonstrate the enduring appeal of the format. This means that recent entries to the market, like the KEF LS50, can at least depend on a degree of attention, if not guaranteed sales. The other thing they can depend on is some fairly serious competition – and not always from the expected quarter.

Enter then, the MartinLogan Motion 15, another of those little boxes that can. With distinctly pint-sized proportions, a high-gloss cabinet finish, a 'ribbon' tweeter and a price tag that's the right side of four figures, it might be tempting to dismiss this as yet another of those identikit Chinese-built miniatures, but before you do that, consider this: MartinLogan has been building products in China for over a decade, meaning that the company has got a handle on the logistics and QC issues involved. It has also been building hybrids from day one, which amounts to 30 years of experience with this apparently simple yet practically challenging approach. If any company can make the pieces of this particular jigsaw fit, the smart money would be on MartinLogan.

The Motion 15 actually uses a folded motion tweeter, a planar design derived from the legendary Heil AMT. This is paired with a purpose built, aluminium-coned, 110mm bass-mid driver in what amounts to the classic two-way arrangement established by the LS3/5a. The cabinet is 290mm tall, 170 wide and 220 deep, with a sloping top and a rear panel that offers a single pair of binding posts and a large, carefully contoured reflex port. Fit and finish are exemplary and you even get a thoughtfully executed grille. The threaded fixture on the rear panel (to allow for attachment to wall mounts) hints at the intended purpose of the Motion 15, a model that I suspect was conceived as a surround, extension or secondary speaker. But, whether by accident or design, what MartinLogan has ended up with is a stunningly capable compact monitor. I've hooked them up to everything from the Icon Audio Stereo 20PP to the VTL MB450 IIs and the Siltech SAGA amplifiers and I've been having a ball.

I used the Motion 15s on a pair of Track Audio 24" stands – which immediately raised the first issue. In my large listening room, the stand-height was fine, but used in the smaller lounge area – which is actually more appropriate to the speakers' size and capabilities – the tweeter ended up below the listener's ear. Now, you could just get some taller stands, but just as an experiment I flipped the cabinets, so that now they sat on their sloping tops, the tweeter now lower, but angled up. What a difference. Suddenly integration, mid-band energy and presence all improved significantly. It might have been a happy accident that happened to work under my precise circumstances, but it's free, simple and well worth trying if you think it's going to help. I also found that the speakers worked best slightly closer together than normal



placement and toed in to point just either side of the listening position. With those details attended to, it was time to sit back and be amazed.

The first thing that most people want to know about any little speaker is how much bass they can generate. In the case of the Motion 15 the answer is more than they have any right to. Better still, big bass from small boxes often comes at the expense of quality – but not here. The bottom end goes deep enough to satisfy, not so deep as to get into trouble and the bass notes produced are solid, tuneful and agile. No plodding, turgid ballast to worry about; bass guitars have pitch and drive, and while orchestral bass might lack weight and substance when compared to larger speakers, the speaker still delivers the necessary underpinning the music demands. If, like me you are going to use the speakers in free space, well away from boundary reinforcement, you'll need to play with placement, but I found that in this case, sideways movement proved more critical than front to back. But get it right and the little MartinLogans will reward you with a surprisingly solid and satisfying sense of presence and scale. The deep, undulating opening of Crowded House's 'Fall At Your Feet' was handled with aplomb, the evocative and instantly recognisable pitch

“Get it right and the little MartinLogans will reward you with a surprisingly solid and satisfying sense of presence and scale.”

steps perfectly clear, with no apparent loss of weight, while the upshift in tempo that signals the track's progress was navigated with the sort of assurance that escapes many a far more expensive and more ambitious speaker. The vocals are beautifully focused and natural, and once again, the voice is instantly recognizable.

Hanging a speaker like the Motion 15 on the end of a super amp like the SAGAs might be fun, but it's hardly representative. Much of my listening involved the Icon Audio Stereo 60 integrated amp. With a pair of KT120s per channel delivering a very healthy 80 Watts into 8 Ohms, combined with the little Logans' 92dB efficiency and 5 Ohm rating, there was no shortage of energy, a quality the diminutive speakers made full use of. The claimed -3dB point is 60Hz and listening to the speaker, I can easily believe it – helped no doubt by the large but carefully engineered port which doubtless adds ▶



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► a judicious degree of heft as things tail off. Helping deliver that substance is the 19mm thick MDF cabinet and machined aluminium front panel, constituting a substantial construction in a cabinet this small.

All the bottom-end in the world would be useless if it didn't integrate properly to the rest of the range. MartinLogan's long experience in combining moving-coil bass drivers with planar mid and treble units is readily apparent in the seamless presentation of the Motion 15. Not only is the crossover hard to pick tonally, you can't catch it out on dispersion either. The extended cello runs that characterize the Elgar concerto reveal no cracks or discontinuities, no changes in energy or tonality as the instrument reaches its upper range, while solo violin is equally contiguous. Even the intensity of Florin Paul's Bach Partitas recording fails to disturb the Motion 15's equanimity, with no discernable steps or breaks in his instrumental range, no discontinuities in his playing or phrasing. This most demanding and exposed of musical tests repeatedly traversed the speakers' crossover point without interruption or intrusion, which suggests that the designer has not only managed to integrate the disparate drivers effectively, he's done it in a musically invisible fashion, which at this price is mightily impressive indeed, as well as testament to the qualities of the FMT tweeter and its ability to project musical energy. Instead of clumsy bowing or stumbling phrases, sudden shifts in energy or presence, what these little speakers deliver is a perfectly focused and stable image, a little smaller than life, but credibly present and solid. The wider acoustic tails off – as you'd expect – but instrumental sources are pinpoint and the soundstage is coherent enough to accurately reflect a player's movement relative to the microphone – again, impressive at the price.

If the Motion 15s have a failing, it lies in a slightly cool balance, a swing that has its compensations on the roundabout of clarity and dimensionality. It makes them a perfect partner for solid and rhythmically coherent amps, the prime example being a push-pull tube integrated, but the various Moons, the Naim Nait or Storm integrated amps would all work well. The real beauty of this little speaker however, is that it is coherent and unflappable enough to make the most of affordable partners, accomplished enough to grow and do justice to some remarkably fine ancillaries. You could hang the Motion 15s on the end of any system and rather than being disappointed you are going to be amazed. When you've wiped the silly grin off your face you can marvel at their sheer poise and the graceful way they handle the most

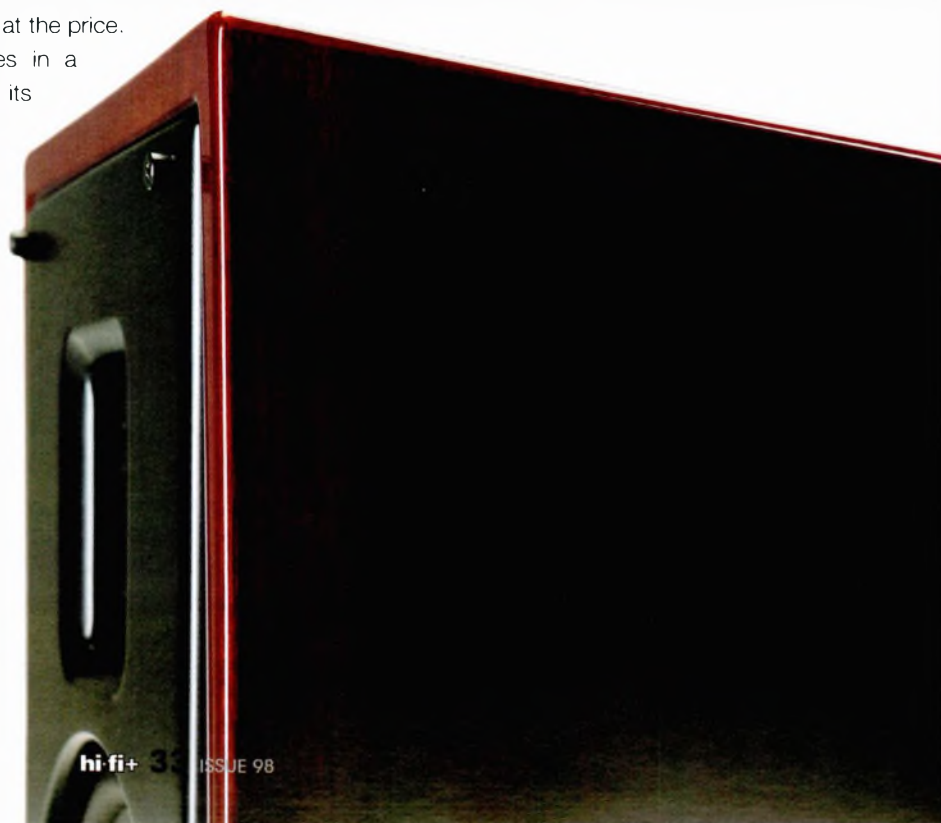
TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, reflex loaded hybrid loudspeaker
Driver Complement: 1x HF Folded Motion Transducer
 1x 135mm aluminium cone mid-bass
Bandwidth: 60Hz – 25kHz, ±3dB
Crossover: 2.700Hz
Efficiency: 92dB
Impedance: 5 Ohms nominal
Dimensions (WxHxD): 173x 290 x 242mm
Weight: 5.4Kg ea.
Finishes: High gloss black, white or red cherry
Price: £795 per pair

Manufacturer: MartinLogan Ltd
URL: www.martinlogan.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Tel: +44 (0)208 971 3909
URL: www.absolutesounds.com

complex of signals. Agile, communicative, competent and complete, what's not to like? There's a few exciting new compact monitors appearing at present; MartinLogan's Motion 15 could just be the surprise package that upsets the applecart. Buy, enjoy and even if you upgrade later, keep them for that rainy day; they're guaranteed to put a smile on your face. +



Cyrus Stream X₂ digital streamer

By Jason Kennedy

The Cyrus Stream X is the base model in a range of four which has recently been upgraded to version 2 status. This means that they are fully up to 24/192 speed and can deliver ALAC files, Apple's equivalent to FLAC, which is still an uncommon feature. The Stream X₂ is only a streamer; but if you want an onboard DAC, preamp or even an amplifier there are Cyrus models to suit your requirements. Stream X₂ has solely digital outputs and no volume control, it's the most singular and purist component in the Cyrus range. Peter Bartlett of Cyrus wanted this range of streamers to work well and be accessible; that's why he went to the expense of commissioning the N-remote, a handset with an LCD screen with which to peruse a music collection. Where other companies developed an app, Cyrus did it the hard way and from an ease of use point of view it was worth the effort and expense.

The problem with using apps is that you need the device that runs that app to be where you want to play music, iPods and iPhones have a tendency to be either elsewhere or being used for other purposes and in order to conserve battery they turn themselves off all the time (all right you can change this, but then the battery dies!). I have been using an iPhone to run a streamer recently and because it's password protected you have to dial in the number just to open up the app that was open five minutes ago. That said, a touchscreen is a sexy thing and the Cadence app for iThings and Androids is the result. However the handset developed for all the Cyrus streamers is a rather good thing, it has a motion sensor which turns it on and

you can choose music, control the streamer and teach it how to run the rest of the system (even third party systems). It's both RF and IR for this purpose and therefore able to control pretty much any component, be it a Cyrus or otherwise. The N-remote comes with a charging base and has a slew of backlit keys, some of which are irrelevant to this particular product. The only shortcomings are the rather small buttons for play, pause etc and a scrolling system that takes a bit of familiarisation – touch screens have the edge when it comes to long lists.

For net radio Cyrus has chosen to work with TuneIn radio which can be used in two ways, either scroll through the many stations that are accessible via, often numerous, tiers on the handset and select individual stations. The display shows you incoming bit rate, station icon and artist and track info when supplied. A slightly easier way of finding stations is to register on the TuneIn website and 'associate' your streamer with your account.

The main use for this device however is playing music stored on a NAS drive, material that you have either ripped from CDs or downloads from the net. The data is streamed to the Cyrus via Ethernet cable and the NAS needs to be attached to both the Stream X₂ and your router. Unusually the N-remote actually has a direct wireless connection to the streamer and doesn't rely on wi-fi. The unit itself will run wirelessly if needs be but if you want decent quality and consistency of connection the wired approach wins every time. And decent quality CAT6 is very cheap so there's no excuse except for the need to get the cable to the system.

Cyrus recommends placing the NAS relatively close to the streamer rather than having it next to the router and agrees with its competitors in suggesting you place a switch between router and NAS in an attempt to isolate the audio system from the rest of the network. I used a Netgear gigabit switch and two drives, one a standard WD My Book Live running the Twonkymedia server software and the other a Naim UnitiServe ripper/server. The latter has become my default digital source in the few months its been here as I can connect it directly to a DAC and it sounds better than a computer in all important respects, like the Stream X₂ it only has an S/PDIF coax output.

Operating the Cyrus is pretty straightforward once the controller is paired with the player and the system has established itself on the network, which is really just a case of plugging it into the Ethernet prior to switch on and typing in the network password via the black on green LCD screen.

You can connect up to four digital sources to the back of this unit and I guess this is a way of expanding the inputs on your DAC. There is a USB input for both playing material on a USB drive, so long as it's appropriately formatted, or to take a digital signal from an iPod.

Connected to a Resolution Audio Cantata DAC with Atlas Mavros coax



digital interconnect and pulling data from a Naim Unitiserve server the Stream X₂ delivers a highly detailed and very open sound. It's engaging at both high and low levels, and while there is plenty of drive alongside the fine detail this does not get in your face if you turn the level up. Rather, it makes for a fully immersive experience thanks to the scale of the soundstage. It's a precise and finely detailed listening experience that is a little cooler than the Unitiserve used alone via the same DAC. You get more detail out of the Stream X₂ but better timing with the Naim, but the latter has the advantage of sending signal directly to the DAC without passing it through a network.

The Stream X₂ times precisely; leading edges are well defined and free from grain in a style that few CD players can better. I have almost stopped listening to CD since discovering this and am coming to the conclusion that streamers are better than computers at delivering digital signals. This was clearly backed up when I put the Cyrus up against a Macbook running Decibel software, the latter had a USB connection to the DAC while the Cyrus was on coax which may have a bearing but the advantage was quite distinct. The streamer has considerably more gravitas, there is a palpability to the sound that makes everything more vibrant and real. I used a superb 24/96 recording called 'Chasing the Dragon'. This is one of the best in terms of room acoustics that I've encountered and with the Mac you get a good sense of the scale

of the venue. But when the Cyrus takes over this becomes more solid and three dimensional largely because the bottom end is fully fleshed out. This underpins the soundstage in a dramatic fashion and brings the music into your own room in a remarkably convincing fashion. It also delivers massive amounts of detail, the noise floor is very low so you can hear right down into the mix. It makes for a palpable sense of realism with a great recording and makes you want to hear more hi-res material.

A more appropriate competitor is the Naim SuperUniti. This is also an amplifier, but you can turn that part of it off. The Cyrus doesn't have the sense of timing nor the body that the Naim brings to the party, but it has a similar quality of pace and is strong on leading edge definition. This helps the sense of tension in pieces like Haydn's ▶



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Dimensions (W x H x D): 215 x 75 x 385mm

Weight: 2.15kg

Material: Die cast chassis

▶ Network connectivity: Cabled:

Ethernet, Wireless: 802.11g

USB drive format: FAT16, FAT32

Connectivity: UPnP and DLNA compatible

Apple iPod digital USB input

SPDIF Inputs: x 3

Optical Inputs: x 2

SPDIF digital output: x 1

Tune In Radio

MC-BUS

RS232

Supported File Formats: WAV, FLAC,

ALAC, AAC, MP3, WMA, AIFF

High Resolution 24Bit/192Khz

Control Interfaces: LCD front panel

display with twist & click control

Supplied with n-remote

Accessories: Wi-Fi antenna comes with magnetic base

Price: £1,400

Manufacturer: Cyrus Audio

Tel: +44 (0)1480 410900

URL: <http://www.cyrusaudio.com>

string quartet in D, Opus 79 which 2L has recorded so well (and offers as a free download), the Cyrus also does a good job with the violins in this piece, reflecting their vivacity with aplomb. I imagine that this comparison would not be that dissimilar to putting the Stream X₂ up against a Naim NDX, a streamer has a DAC onboard but is more than twice the price of the Cyrus, so the result makes sense.

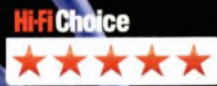
A similar thing happened when I pitted a streamer at less than half the price of the Cyrus up against it, this time a Cambridge Audio NP30 (£400), it suddenly sounded rather lame and insubstantial which shows that streaming is just as much an art as any other audio technology. What's surprising about the contrast is that both companies use the same Bridgeco streaming platform.

Radio quality naturally varies with bit-rate but the likes of BBC Radio 3 with its 320kbps stream are pretty convincing; not perhaps up with the finest analogue tuners, but capable of good stage depth and pretty solid imaging. I happened to catch *Peter and the Wolf* with David Bowie narrating which proved highly entertaining, both for the music and the odd juxtaposition of the Thin White Duke in 'hello children everywhere' mode. Finding stations like Radio 3 is not as easy as one would expect however and it would be great to have a search facility on the handset.

There is a lot to like about the Stream X₂, it's very nice to have a dedicated handset which can run the rest of the system and doesn't lock you out just when you need it. The sound is dynamic, never short on pace and opens up your digital files to an extent that few CD transports can hope to emulate. Cyrus has succeeded in making an easy to set-up and use streamer that delivers the sonic goods, it also works in systems that don't inhabit half width die-cast chassis, but I suspect it would really sing with a Cyrus DAC. +

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IsoTek EV03 Premier, Hi-Fi Choice, March 2013

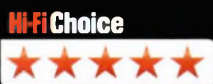
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ENIGMAcoustics Sopranino electrostatic Supertweeters

By Jimmy Hughes

For the well-heeled wanting the ultimate in high-frequency transparency and detail, these interesting horn-loaded Electrostatic Sopranino supertweeters from ENIGMAcoustics are worth checking out. They're designed to augment and extend the high frequency response of your existing loudspeakers, promising increased immediacy and clarity.

Being electrostatic, the moving diaphragm is extremely light, and the makers claim it achieves excellent transient performance with no 'breakup' modes or intermodulation problems. The unit is transformer coupled with a simple 2nd order crossover filter, and minimum impedance is about 3 Ohms at 12kHz.

Unlike other electrostatic units, the Sopranino's diaphragms are self-polarising, so there's no need for a separate power supply. ENIGMAcoustics call this technology SBESL – short for self-biasing electrostatic loudspeaker.

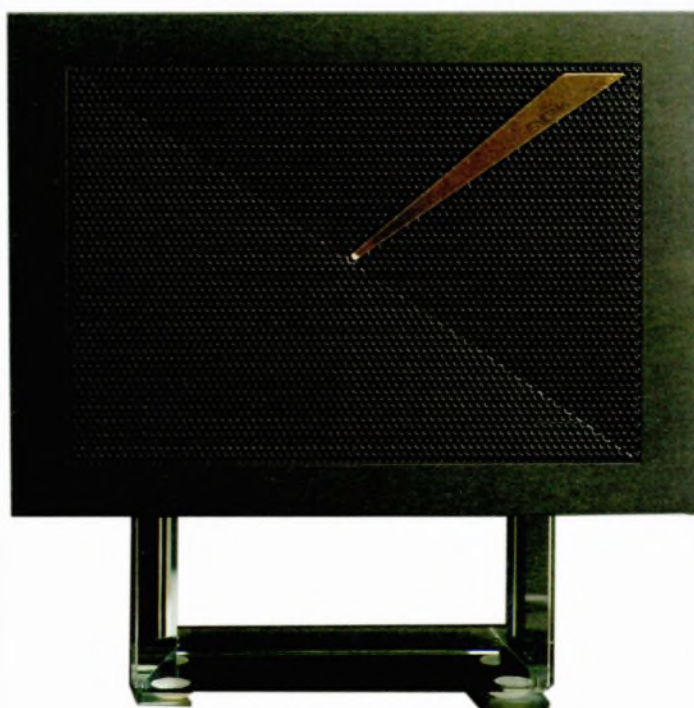
In terms of build quality, The Sopraninos inspire confidence. They're solid and well-made, with an aluminium

case and a half-inch thick glass frame that's sturdy, well-damped, and attractive to look at. The instructions warn against opening the enclosures up, indicating that damage will occur to the hi-tech drive units if this is done.

To help integrate them with your main speakers, each Sopranino has a three-way switch marked High, Mid, and Low. However, it's not output level that's affected, but crossover frequency. In the High setting, the cut off frequency is around 12kHz. Set to Mid, it's about 10kHz, while Low cuts off below 8kHz.

ENIGMAcoustics recommend the mid setting, and (after much experimentation) this was my preferred choice too. Whichever you pick, it's all very much down to individual taste, and the tonal balance/sensitivity of your speakers. Even the recordings played may influence your choice.

With a recording (or hi-fi system) that sounds dull and recessed, the Low setting might work best. Recordings that are forward and 'toppy' should benefit from the High setting. ▶



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On one side, the H300 is a spectacular integrated amplifier. With its 250 watts per channel, it is powerful enough to pair with even the most demanding loudspeakers on the market. Hegel's patented SoundEngine technology ensures completely undistorted and natural sound with a dynamic and powerful bass response. The H300 is, to a large extent, based on Hegel's Reference products rather than its smaller brothers.

On the other side, it has 5 digital inputs and this is where the alchemy comes in. Hegel's digital inputs are designed with unique technology that can make your computer, streamer or other digital device sound extremely good. You can take some of the most affordable digital music players on the market, connect them to the H300's digital inputs, and get fantastic musical and dynamic sound.

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- ▶ The Sopranino has a sensitivity of 86dB for 1W at 1m. This might seem slightly on the low side, but in practise you'll find there's enough output.

The ENIGMAcoustics Sopranino noticeably improves clarity, timing, dynamics, and projection. It can tighten up thick flabby bass, as well as giving transients a crispness that sound real. Sadly, 'perfection' doesn't come cheap. But then it never does. I used the Sopraninos with a hybrid fully horn-loaded loudspeaker from Impulse and Klipsch, having a sensitivity of about 93dB. My loudspeaker arrangement features the horn-loaded bass/mid drivers from Impulse H1s with the horn-loaded upper mid and tweeters (padded down) from Klipsch Heresy IIIs.

The Sopraninos, being horn loaded, sound much more assertive than the Townshend Maximum supertweeters I use. The music gains noticeably in terms of increased transient attack and immediacy, but there's no sense of the extreme highs protruding. Although you're enhancing the high frequency performance by adding supertweeters, the benefits go far beyond sharper crisper highs. It's amazing how much tighter, better controlled, and more powerful the bass sounds when you add a supertweeter like the Sopraninos. The music seems more vivid and alive, jumping out of the speaker boxes with added detail and dynamic projection. Everything is sharper and more crisply focused.

Imaging is more three dimensional, with enhanced height and depth, plus a more precise placement of voices and instruments in the soundstage. As you'd expect, the treble sounds crisper and more immediate, but at the same time the upper frequencies exhibit a lovely tonal sheen – helped, no doubt, by the Sopranino's exceptional purity.

ENIGMAcoustics claim an upper response out to beyond 40kHz, so it's possible to reproduce frequencies well outside the 20kHz limits of human hearing. Of course, once you pass the age of 20, your ear's HF response starts to diminish. By the age of 60, you're probably deaf above 14kHz – maybe even worse... Ah, the joys of growing old!

What can do about your flagging response? Perhaps surprisingly, a set of these Sopranino supertweeters will

definitely help. They're the sonic equivalent of Viagra, adding a brilliance and immediacy that's captivating. Although exploiting the extended response argues for sources with information above 20kHz, the difference can still be heard on CD.

Since I added the Klipsch high frequency drivers a few years back, my system has sounded a lot more immediate and assertive. Transients have better attack, and dynamically the sound seems more integrated – doubtless because the whole speaker is now fully horn-loaded from top to bottom.

Into such a speaker system the horn-loaded Sopranino integrated very well. It added lustre to something that's already pretty good. And being horn-loaded, it matches the other drivers in terms of dynamics and projection, although it was shown at this year's CES in less horn-loaded surroundings with considerable success.

That said, there is a risk the upper frequencies might dominate the mid-range and bass. For example, if Sopraninos were used with insensitive bookshelf speakers having limited bass and a bright tonal balance, the result might be an excess of high frequencies. Conversely, any system that sounds thick and dull will be transformed.

Envisage the Sopraninos working best in hi-fi systems that already offer extended bass performance. If your system is slightly bass-shy, then adding super tweeters might not be a smart move. But maybe that's an unnecessary warning, since anyone able to afford something like this will probably own big full-range loudspeakers already. +

CONTACT DETAILS

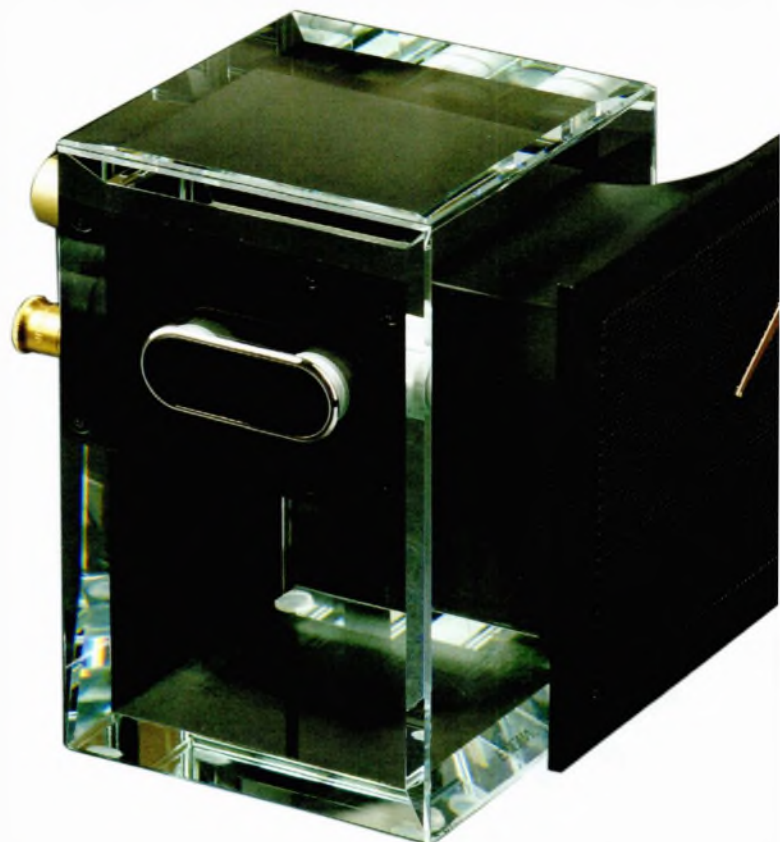
ENIGMAcoustics® Sopranino (CES Innovations 2013 Design and Engineering Awards Honoree)

Price: \$3,690 per pair

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The Sovereign Eternity Mono-Bloc Amplifiers

By Roy Gregory

It is remarkable just how often the appearance of audio products matches their sound. I guess to some extent, both are aesthetic judgments, but it is uncanny how often a chrome chassis denotes a glassy, flattened and forward sound, a champagne gold fascia a warm and rounded, almost cuddly sound. But the Sovereign Eternity mono-blocks have established a new linkage, one I've not experienced before. Their clean, solid, inscrutably enigmatic exterior is matched by the lack of accompanying information, the impenetrable chassis, devoid of fixings is just as opaque as the total lack of information that accompanies the product or is available on the company's web-site. Contacting the manufacturer elicited little more: a basic set of specs and an even more basic design brief.

Let's list what I know:

The Eternity mono-blocks employ an Emitter follower topology and are optimised/intended for even the most awkward loudspeaker loads (down to 1 Ohm).

The monolithic construction, devoid of external heatsinks but constructed from 10mm aluminium plate, is designed to operate as a constant, distributed temperature chassis.

Rated output is 700 Watts into 8 ohms and 1,200 into 4 Ohms.

The unit is DC coupled with a peak output current of 40 Amps.

The price is 25,990 Euros a pair.

And now, what I think:

The chassis construction is extremely neat and the amplifiers really quite compact, given their power rating. They are heavy, but not unmanageably so.

The speaker binding posts are split across the back-panel and recessed. That makes attaching spades awkward (the gated entry moldings don't rotate) while cables with short tails may not stretch. My Odins use 28cm breakouts, and with the acute angles required to gain entry, the resulting connections were less than comfortable. 4mm banana plugs



would have been considerably easier, and I recommend potential owners taking that route.

Despite the recessed gold inset on the front-panel, the appearance of the amps is surprisingly understated – as long as you can hide, ignore or obscure the huge gold badge on the top-plate. The Eternities make a definite case for rack mounting.

The solid chassis construction and huge potential power output (along with the transformer and power supply that requires) really lends itself to careful support and mechanical coupling to an effective, dispersive platform. The use of Stillpoints Ultra SS under the Eternity amps transformed their performance – and I use that term advisedly. Without the Stillpoints, these amps would have been taking the metaphorical early bath, ignominiously dispatched back to their manufacturer as hopelessly turgid, sluggish and temporally challenged. The Ultras changed all that making them in this instance, not so much an upgrade as an essential.

Finally, the company quotes no figures for input sensitivity but in my experience, it's on the lower side of average. Which is ironic given that the design brief for the amp suggests the intention to drive difficult (and therefore, presumably insensitive) loads.

So much for the background, let's get down to the nitty gritty – how these amps actually sound. Actually, in some respects it's actually quite nice to be free of the burden of technological expectation. Shorn of the associations or claims that go with specific devices, designs or topologies (not to mention the prejudices too) one is faced with a pair of near featureless lumps – signal in, signal out – all you have to do is worry about what they actually do, not why.

I used the Eternity mono-blocks with a range of speakers, including the Kaiser Chiara, the remarkable (and remarkably capable) KEF R900 and Crystal Mini. None of these are the sort of brutal load presented by various electrostatics, ribbons or multi-way dynamic designs. They don't stress the amps' power-supply or control the way an Apogee might, but they present these hefty mono-blocks with a different kind of challenge. While the Sovereigns displayed all the bottomless reserves of energy and control, stability and scale that suggests they'll laugh in the face of truly awkward speakers, or those that crave authority (owners of big B&W or Wilsons take note) I was more interested in the associated costs of achieving that sense of absolute power. After all, it's not hard to build a big amp and it's not hard to build an agile amp, but building a big, agile amp... that's another matter all together – which is one of

the reasons that years ago, I walked away from the very kind of speakers the Sovereign is designed to drive.

When Krell amps first reached these shores, especially when used with the sort of wider bandwidth speakers that were also alien to the 'Flattened' British landscape of the time, I for one was astonished by their ability to create a tangible, almost measurable acoustic space – the reach out and touch or walk-in soundstage of legend and cliché. The problem has always been, having frozen musicians and instruments in the spatial domain, to reanimate them in the temporal one. The very reserves of power and control that enable an amp to hold a discrete parcel of musical energy in space are themselves prone to inertia that prevents them letting go in a timely or deft fashion. Back then it often resulted in music that was sat on by the system, lacking the micro-dynamic spark and agility that fires the emotions and imagination, an exercise in the academic rather than the emotive. Latterly, things have evolved to a point where individual images and instruments are astonishingly detailed, yet they never join hands to create a band or a musical whole. The challenge facing an amp like the Sovereign Eternity is to master the signal's dynamic demands yet overcome these issues of textural, micro-dynamic and expressive resolution.

The good news is that the Eternities have all their big and butch credentials well and truly intact. A big, beautifully defined soundstage, peopled with solid, stable and dimensional images reminds you exactly where the term stereo comes from and what it really means. The musical foundation is equally solid, the largest scale works or most OTT soundtracks delivered with a weight and aplomb that leaves you with the feeling that, having just dispatched one torture track the amp is almost yawning, before saying, "Next". Playing 'Approach To The Line' from *The Thin Red Line* OST, there's a real sense of separation and structure to the multiple, overlaid low frequencies, but it's based on physical location more than the musical heartbeat of the piece. The piping, repetitive note that echoes the mechanical ticking and the ticking itself have an almost ghostly presence so precisely are they located in space, but overall, rather than a gently ratcheted building of tension, the affect is one of massive, almost stately progress, the end result more awe inspiring than dramatic, with a calm, confident pace and stability that actually dissolves any real tension. Impressive? Certainly: effective in its role of adding to and extending the action on the screen – not so much...

If you want a single piece of music that will stretch the ability of any amp to combine the assets of physical separation ►

▶ and artistic communication, you need look no further than the Gli Incogniti/Amandine Beyer reading of the Four Seasons on Zig-Zag Territoires. This is a paired away, minimalist rendition of these most familiar of works, yet it is played with such fire and gusto that it is almost like hearing them anew. The Sovereign amplifiers clearly separate the nine instruments, both in space and in the style of each player. They even capture the odd, sharp intake of breath that precedes a sudden jump in level, the occasional shuffle or knock from the spirited players and playing. But they also dampen the fire and mute the creative tension within the tightly knit orchestra.

Ultimately, the question is how much this matters to you as a listener. I've deliberately sought out the amplifiers' weaknesses; Lord knows, its strengths are obvious enough! Imagine a scenario in which a wide bandwidth dynamic speaker with a heavily subtractive crossover and a big bass unit (or two) that needs kicking into life – and then stopping with equal alacrity. This notional speaker is all about scale and an unflustered, unburstable sense of power. It is not a speaker that delivers the last vestige of textural or dynamic subtlety – and that's not what its owner should expect. In that context the Eternities would live up to their billing – and how. They'd deliver exactly the stability and sure-footed drive that would elevate that system to a whole new level, walk in soundstage and reach out and touch imagery included – along with stentorian bass and the perfect control to banish unsightly

edges or the nasty effects of strain. Understanding what any amplifier doesn't do is just as important as understanding what it does – and in this instance, just as important as siting and coupling it properly to the supporting surface. Make no mistake: These amps are all about making the earth move – just don't ask them to do mosaic... +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state mono-block amplifier

Rated Output: 700 Watts/8 Ohms (continuous) 1200 Watts/4 Ohms (continuous)

Maximum Current: 20A (continuous) 40A (100ms pulse)

Gain: 34dB

Input Impedance: 47 kOhms (RCA) 1 kOhm (balanced XLR)

Damping Factor: 750

Dimensions (WxHxD): 480 x 220 x 430mm

Finishes: Black or silver anodized

Price: €25,990 per pair

Manufacturer: High End U.V. GmbH, Germany

Tel: +49 (0)5068 2858

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Logitech/Ultimate Ears UE 900 Earphones

By Chris Martens

Ultimate Ears has made many fine universal-fit earphones over the years, but the firm is perhaps even better known for its custom-fit in-ear monitors, which are used by working musicians and other music lovers around the world. About a year ago I visited UE's factory in Irvine, California to audition and then be fitted for a set of the firm's then-new custom-fit, in-ear Personal Reference Monitors (PRMs). At the same time, also took the opportunity to talk with Logitech/UE Vice President and General Manager Philippe Depallens about upcoming products, one of which was UE 900 universal-fit earphone (£329) that is the subject of this review.

Philippe Depallens explained that the UE 900 plays two roles in the UE product line-up. First, the UE 900 stands as the firm's flagship universal-fit earphone range, meaning that it claims to be the best-sounding and most technically sophisticated product of its type that UE has ever produced. Second, the UE 900 is a bridge product of sorts—one that deliberately provides a powerful introduction

to the kind of sound quality listeners can expect from UE's upscale custom-fit in-ear monitors. As Depallens put it, "we want the UE 900 to be the go-to choice for recording engineers, producers, audiophiles, or musicians who want true monitoring quality earphones, but who—for whatever reason—choose not to go with custom-fit monitors." By way of illustration Depallens added that he could "picture recording artists keeping sets of UE 900s on hand to provide as 'loaners' for guest sidemen to use in the studio." Can a universal-fit earphone realistically keep pace with top-class custom-fit in-ear monitors? That's one question I hope to answer in this review.

As advertised, the UE 900 is technically sophisticated; it features a three-way design implemented through a set of four balanced armature-type drivers per earpiece (two bass drivers, a midrange driver, and a high-frequency driver). The UE 900 also takes big steps forward in terms of comfort, convenience, and ergonomics. Borrowing an idea pioneered in Shure's flagship SE535 earphone, the UE 900 features signal cables that are detachable, user replaceable, and that smoothly swivel to give the wearer greater freedom of movement and adjustment. This might seem a small, inconsequential design detail, but the impact on comfort and ease of use is significant. With many earphone designs the signal cables seem to dictate how the 'phones must be worn or where the earpieces must be positioned. The UE 900s, however, never have this problem; you simply adjust their earpieces as you until you find a comfortable fit and the cables smoothly swivel to accommodate you.

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As has become the norm for top-end earphones, the UE 900s come with not one but two signal cable harnesses: an audio-only cable geared for audio purists and a smartphone-ready cable that incorporates on-cord mic and remote control switches. Moreover, the UE 900s arrive with a broad array of ear tips (five sizes of standard rubber tips, plus three sizes of Comply-brand foam tips), along with a host of other useful accessories. In short, the UE 900 does a very good job of anticipating the needs and wants of real-world earphone users. But setting this promising background information aside, one key question remains: how does the UE 900 sound?

Before I tackle that question, let's establish a few ground rules. First, not unlike some high-end loudspeakers, the UE 900s need a bit of run-in time (though only a few hours or so) before showing their full performance potential. Over those first hours, expect the UE 900 to sound progressively more fluid, open, transparent, and relaxed. Second, please note that the UE 900's are, like most other great earphones we have tried, quite sensitive to amplifier quality. While you theoretically could drive the UE 900s straight from an iPod, we recommend that you use a very high-quality portable and/or desktop amp in order to hear them at their best. For our tests we used two very high performance portable amplifiers—the Ray Samuels Audio SR-71B The Blackbird and the ALO Audio Rx-Mk3B, both of which gave superb results and helped the UE 900s to 'strut their stuff.'

Very early on I found myself captivated by the sheer smoothness, openness, and resolution of the UE 900's midrange, upper midrange and treble frequencies. Some earphones (even some very expensive ones) show obvious colorations that spoil their overall sound, but the UE 900s do not. Instead, they consistently exhibit tonal neutrality and qualities of smoothness and evenness of balance that makes them seem uncommonly accurate, honest, and—for want of a better

“This isn't an earphone that bowls you over with artificially vivid low-level textural and transient details, yet it consistently reveals rich layers of information in the music, while also exhibiting effortless and natural transient speed.”

phrase—trustworthy. Moreover, the UE 900s deliver nonstop qualities of subtlety, nuance, and sophistication. This isn't an earphone that bowls you over with artificially vivid low-level textural and transient details, yet it consistently reveals rich layers of information in the music, while also exhibiting effortless and natural transient speed. The key, here, is that the UE 900 shows a beautifully balanced sense of proportion—never dramatizing one positive sonic quality at the expense of another. ▶

▶ Perhaps as a result, the UE 900 does a much better job than most of its like-priced peers when reproducing the subtler elements of vocal or instrumental expression. Through the UE 900 it becomes easy to hear instrumentalists pour intensity into certain individual notes to give them added emphasis and it is likewise easy to read the presence of heartfelt emotion (or lack thereof) in vocal lines. Through these 'phones you can instantly tell the difference between musicians who are playing with real conviction versus those who are merely "going through the motions."

To hear what I mean, just listen to Doug MacLeod's 'Lost Like the Wind at Night' from *Unmarked Road* [AudioQuest Hybrid SACD]. The song opens with MacLeod singing "Every once in a while/we got to have a war/ and I'll be damned/if I know what for..." and as the line is delivered one can hear through the UE 900s qualities of righteous indignation and sardonic black humor in the singer's voice. MacLeod continues with his indictment of war and warmongers until he reaches the song's chorus, where he steps up and his energy level and sings, "...and I wonder/bout these few words I write/ will they be heeded/or lost like the wind at night?" At that self-reflexive moment, you hear in MacLeod's voice both sadness—presumably at the thought that the song

"Try listening to Eva Cassidy's rendition of 'Stormy Monday'... On this track, the UE 900 faithfully captures the vibe, feel, and all-round acoustics of a great vocalist backed by a potent electric band in a small-to-mid-size club."

might be treated as entertainment but little more than that—coupled with a plea for his words to be heeded and given consideration—not merely thrown to the winds and forgotten. My observation is this: great audio products don't just try to reproduce sounds and textures in recordings; they dig deep for the thought and emotion that give those sounds meaning and value. This, in a nutshell, is a major part of the UE 900's appeal.

Similarly, the UE 900 navigates spatial cues in the music in a surefooted and revealing way, allowing listeners to discern in an instant the difference between mixes that capture multiple layers of 3D spatial information versus those made in a ham-fisted way with instruments hard-panned to the left or right and with little information in between. While I won't tell you the UE 900s offer soundstaging "just like great loudspeakers do," which would be an implausible stretch, I will say that they vividly convey a sense of three-dimensionality and spaciousness in records where those qualities are actually present.

For a good example of this, try listening to Eva Cassidy's rendition of 'Stormy Monday' from *Live at Blues Alley* [Blix Street] through the Ultimate Ears 'phones. On this track, the UE 900 faithfully captures the vibe, feel, and all-round acoustics of a great vocalist backed by a potent electric band in a small-to-mid-size club. In fact, the sense of realism is so uncanny that you might feel tempted to raise your hand to order a fresh round of drinks for your mates as you listen—until you remember that the whole experience is actually unfolding in your head and not in a real club. In my experience, this ability to get listeners to buy in to the musical reality of the moment is a rare thing to find amongst earphones and is a quality that sets the UE 900 apart.

Down in the bass region, the UE 900 proves deeply extended and appropriately powerful, though always taut, well defined, and very well controlled. Frankly, listeners acclimated to the sound of the many bass-heavy 'phones on the market might at first think the UE 900s are bass shy, though this isn't the case at all. In point of fact, the UE 900s are capable of deep, clear, and downright prodigious low frequency output when the music warrants. It is just that the UE 900s, much high-accuracy loudspeakers such as Avalons or Magicos, refrains from producing gratuitous bass until low-frequency content is actually present in the music, and even then the UE 900 simply shows you the bass that's present without embellishment or exaggeration. But when significant low-frequency content comes along the UE 900 instantly rises to the occasion, holding forth with power, clarity, and terrific low-end pitch definition.

What drove this point home for me was listening to the Choeur-Radio-Ville-Maries performance of Dubois' *Les Sept Paroles Du Christ* [Fidelio]—a lovely choral recording with pipe organ accompaniment that I found most instructive. Much of the time the emphasis in this piece falls upon the vocal soloists, the choir, and on the middle and upper registers of the organ. But, at certain key moments, the organ introduces powerful, very low frequency pedal notes (think of notes with serious energy way down in the subterranean 20Hz – 40Hz region). Without skipping a beat or becoming flustered in any way, the UE 900 reproduced those notes with power and grace and then carried on with its usual articulacy and resolution. It's a deeply moving experience to hear ▶



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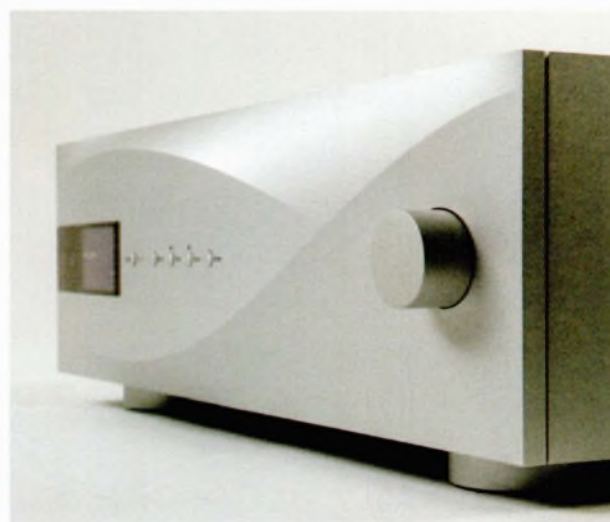
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▶ those potent low-frequency notes rise up out of nowhere and then gradually dissipate in an accurate, believable way—an experience few earphones can render as convincingly as the UE 900s do.

Can the UE 900's keep pace with top-shelf custom-fit in-ear monitors? My finding was that the most obvious difference was that the UE 900 could not realistically provide quite the same levels of extreme noise isolation that custom-fit monitors offer. This is one area with custom-fit monitors enjoy—and likely always will enjoy—a clear-cut edge in performance. But, with that said, I would say that the UE 900 comes ever so close to matching the sound quality of the firm's critically acclaimed In-Ear Reference Monitor (IERM), but at less than half the price. That alone is a remarkable achievement.

How good is the UE 900? My take is that it is one of the finest universal fit earphones on the market today. Relative to top-tier competitors such as the Sennheiser IE80, Shure SE535, or Westone 4, the UE 900's offers compelling sound quality, a somewhat lower price, and well thought-out ergonomics. Enthusiastically recommended. +

“How good is the UE 900? My take is that it is one of the finest universal fit earphones on the market today. Relative to top-tier competitors such as the Sennheiser IE80, Shure SE535, or Westone 4, the UE 900 offers compelling sound quality.”

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, quad balanced armature, universal-fit earphone

Driver complement: two balanced armature-type bass drivers, one balanced armature-type midrange driver, and one balanced armature-type high-frequency driver.

Accessories: Earphones, detachable audio-only signal cable, detachable signal cable with built-in on-cord mic and remote controls, ¼-inch adapter jack, airline attenuator, protective hard case, 'polishing' pouch, five pairs of silicone ear tips (sizes XXS, XS, S, M, and L), three pairs of Comply-brand foam ear tips (sizes S, M, L), manual and warranty card.

Apple device compatibility:

- Remote and Mic are supported only by iPod nano (4th generation or later), iPod classic (120GB, 160GB), iPod touch (2nd generation or later), iPhone 3GS or later, and iPad
- Remote supported by iPod shuffle (3rd generation or later)
- Audio supported by all iPod models and iPad.

Frequency response: 20 Hz – 20kHz

Sensitivity: 101.2 (50mW, 1kHz)

Impedance: 30 Ohms

Noise isolation: 26 dB

Weight: Not specified

Warranty: 2 years, parts and labour

Price: £329

Manufacturer: Logitech/Ultime Ears

URL: ue.logitech.com

Distribution in Europe:

Logitech Europe S.A.

Tel: +41 (0)21-863 51 11

Logitech UK Limited

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Definitive Technology StudioMonitor SM 45 Loudspeakers

By Chris Martens

Many audio enthusiasts associate the name Definitive Technology with so called “home theatre speakers,” but the fact is that the company also has roots that go deep in the area of affordable, high-performance monitors. Over the past year, then, the company has rolled out a three-product family of stand-mount Studio Monitors, the smallest and most affordable of which is the £550 Studio Monitor 45 (or SM 45, for short).

The SM 45 is a two-way, bass reflex-type monitor that is larger than you might at first expect (viewed from the side, it proves to be nearly a foot tall and deep). The driver complement includes a second-generation version of Definitive’s 25mm pure aluminium dome tweeter (which receives special heat treatment processing and a ceramic coating) plus one of the firm’s signature 133mm BDSS (Balanced Double Surround System) mid-bass drivers fitted with Definitive’s recently developed LRW (Linear Response Waveguide) phase plug. Together, BDSS and LRW technologies are said to give the mid-bass driver dramatically greater excursion (and thus dynamic) capabilities, lower distortion, smoother frequency response, and improved off-axis performance. A curved baffle plate with rounded edges also helps fight diffraction.

I found the SM 45s didn’t need a lot of run-in time and weren’t terribly fussy about placement. However, they need a little clearance from adjacent walls and sound best on stands that position their tweeters at ear level.

From the start, three aspects of the SM 45’s sound hit home for me. First, they sounded unexpectedly full-bodied and offered an astonishing amount of bass reach (down into the upper 30Hz region) – reach few other small monitors can match. Frequency response is smooth but perhaps not strictly ▶





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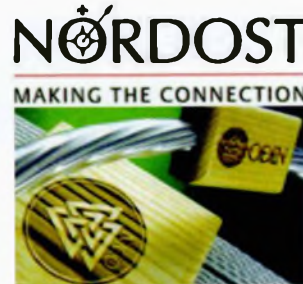
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► neutral, as the speakers do introduce a broad, gentle touch of bass lift from about 80Hz on down. However, there's not so much low-end emphasis as to sound garish, but rather enough to remind you that this is a serious, near full-range monitor – one that seeks to provide big-speaker depth and richness.

In terms of dynamic energy and significant bass extension the SM 45s manage to sound bigger and more full-bodied than their appearance might at first suggest. I found the speakers easily filled my mid-sized listening room with sound and that they readily embraced quiet and contemplative as well as more rambunctious types of musical material with equal measures of poise and good-natured grace. What is more, the SM 45s tackled records with significant amounts of punchy bass content in a fearless and for the most part very satisfying way.

Granted, the Definitives can, when fed extremely low-frequency material at high volume levels, be overdriven to the point where their mid-bass drivers momentarily

bottom out. I experienced this problem once or twice on low-frequency torture-test tracks that feature prodigious quantities of bottom octave bass energy. Realistically, this sort of brutal low-end onslaught can cause the SM 45s (and many other speakers I've heard) to stumble, but most of the time and on most musical material the SM 45s remain largely unflappable.

Second, the Definitives are much more dynamically expansive than most other monitors their size and price that I have heard. Many small monitors tend to dictate terms as to the types of musical material they can or cannot handle well, but happily Definitive's SM 45s are not like this. No fuss, and no whining; just music – almost any kind of music – rendered with big-hearted warmth.

Third, I found the SM 45s were relaxed, effortless, and at times down right holographic imagers. Many small speakers claim to have these properties and can even achieve them to some extent, but the Definitives take 'disappearing act' imaging to a much higher level and do so without requiring endless tweaking, fiddling, or fine-tuning.

To appreciate the broad appeal of the SM 45s, it's instructive to put on a piece of music that could, under typical circumstances, embarrass most small monitors – a piece such as the very taxing closing section of Mahler's Symphony No. 8 (Tilson-Thomas, San Francisco Symphony, SFS Media, SACD). Rather than falling flat on its face and sounding painfully overstressed, the little SM 45s just wade right in and play the music. Are there occasional moments of compression, low-level congestion and the like? Of course, but overall the Definitives' presentation not only hangs together, but also retains a significant amount of the scale, grandeur, and reach that makes this piece so majestic. ►



"...landmark products that only an audiofool would dismiss..." SG1.1 and Centroid arm review - *Stereophile*, November 2012



"Frankly? These are the best speaker cables I've ever heard."
Tellurium Q Graphite review - *HiFi World*, March 2012



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Stillpoints system review - *The Absolute Sound*, September 2012



▶ Similarly, the SM 45s approach bass and drum recordings in a fearless way. For an example, try the aptly named track 'Bass 'n' Drums' from Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones' solo album *Zooma* [Discipline Global Mobile]. This terrific recording is beautiful both in its power and simplicity as John Paul Jones on electric bass and percussionist Denny Fongheiser create a punchy, loping, intensely syncopated duet captured in a pleasingly reverberating studio space. In my experience, the track sounds most realistic when turned up to moderately high volume levels, where at its best it can give the sense of sitting in on the musicians' recording session. This track has been known to make some small speakers wilt, but the SM 45s gave a gutsy performance and did not seem at all out of their element, doing a fine job of capturing some of Jones' note bends on the low 'E' string of his bass as well as the powerful 'thwomp' of Fongheiser's kick drum. But the really surprising part was the way the SM 45s simultaneously captured the delicate, reverberant acoustics of the studio space and the complex shimmer of Fongheiser's cymbal and of his high-hats opening and closing.

Naturally, the SM 45s work for smaller pieces too, such as the title track from Anne Bisson's *Blue Mind* [Fidelio, LP], where Bisson's voice and piano sound pure and well-focused, although the accompanying acoustic bass does sound hearty almost to a fault. But overall, the musical effect is one where dense tonal colours, vivid imaging, and an overarching quality of sumptuous richness carry the day.

While the SM 45s may not offer the highest levels of resolution or strict textbook accuracy (because they introduce a certain amount of 'guilty pleasure' bass lift), they provide giant helpings of musical richness, relaxation and enjoyment at a ridiculously modest price. For these reasons and many more, Definitive Technology's SM 45s are a no-brainer recommendation for music lovers whose sights are set high, but whose budgets are limited. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: two-way, bass reflex, dual-driver, stand-mount monitor

Driver complement: 25mm pure aluminium dome tweeter, 133mm BDSS (Balanced Double Surround System) mid-bass driver with LRW (Linear Response Waveguide) pole piece.

Frequency response: 35Hz – 30kHz

Sensitivity: 90dB

Impedance: 8 Ohm

Dimensions (H x W x D): 29.69x 17.14x 29.69cm

Weight: 5.4kg unboxed.

Price: £550/pair

Manufactured by: Definitive Technology

URL: www.definitivetech.com

Distributed by: Pulse Marketing

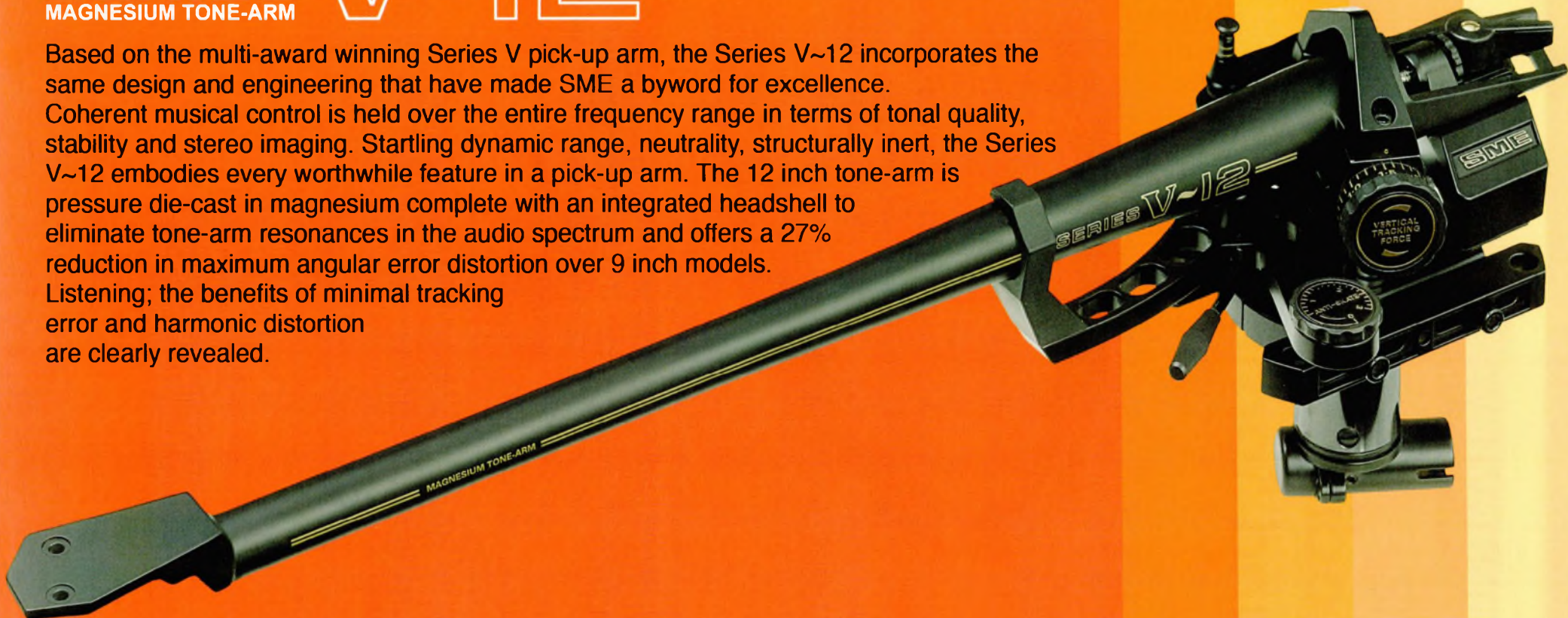
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SME

“The best pick-up arm in the world”

Black Rhodium Tempo and Samba

By Jason Kennedy

How do you get from a twist to a swirl to a samba? Not at your local Latin dance club, unless you are in Black Rhodium's hometown of Derby perhaps, and following the cable naming this company has been applying to its range of twisted speaker cables.

There is arguably nothing new in the cable world, but the use of twisted cable is comparatively rare. The layout has good 'form', though; Kimber Kable and The Chord Company are both advocates. The benefit is a reduction in RFI pick up; it reduces the cable's ability to act as an aerial, which means less noise alongside the signal... and that's always got to be a good thing. Samba replaces Salsa in BR's catalogue. It has the same silver-plated copper conductors, but the silicone rubber insulation is twice as thick. The thinking behind this is that it spaces the conductors further apart and this reduces the effect that the magnetic fields created by the signal in each conductor can have on one another. The drawback is that the spacing reduces the degree to which RFI is blocked, so as usual in hi-fi you are trading one advantage for another.

My sample of Samba was terminated in heavyweight, rhodium-plated 4mm plugs, which have a barrel that forces the pin out once it's in the socket for a good contact. The cable is a little confusing when you first install it, because the colour coding on the plugs is rather subtle – just red or white lettering on a gun metal background. Adding to the fun are direction arrows that run in opposite directions on either strand; make sure the red side has the arrows going away from the amp. Build quality is solid with shrink wrap collars at either end to maintain the twist, and I rather like the feel of silicone rubber... but that's possibly saying too much!

Black Rhodium supplied a three metre pair of Samba speaker cables, which I dropped into the system between Valvet A3.5 class A solid state monoblocks and Bowers & Wilkins 802 Diamond speakers. And it didn't sound too shabby at all; there is an immediacy to it, which translates into



plenty of energy and life and a body to the sound that gives it good presence in the room. The low frequencies are muscular; not perhaps as taut as they could be but not lacking in control. Patently, all that copper does help the amp stay in charge! Further listening revealed a slight forwardness to the midrange. This adds shine to a lot of sounds and a sense of speed, but is ultimately a coloration that gets in the way of finer sounds. In one instance, the sound of handclaps could only be discerned as a percussive noise of no clear origin. It's most obvious with something like solo piano, which takes on an extra vivacity that while quite appealing can get a shade fatiguing at higher levels. DNM Stereo Resolution can deliver sense of calm at a more competitive price (£160/3m pair), this rather less attractive cable is also considerably stronger when it comes to subtleties of timing and interplay between musicians. ▶



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► In fairness, this is a common tonal quality with stranded cables, and some of the more popular examples fall into this camp, so taste obviously plays its part. The balance factor is also dependent on the associated amp and speakers of course. A warmer sounding speaker than the 802 Diamonds could be lifted to delivering a more engaging sound with this cable, which is a good thing.

Meanwhile, Black Rhodium's Tempo interconnect is an addition to the range that fills the gap left by Symphony's move upmarket, thanks to it now being fitted with the more expensive Bullet plugs. Tempo is based on BR's Coda interconnect, but has twice the insulation thickness (1.2mm). This in order to minimise the proximity effect described above where the field induced in one conductor effects the signal in the other. This is also a twisted cable with stranded silver plated copper conductors and silicone rubber insulation in a braided jacket without shielding. This means that it's fine for all line level analogue duties, but not suitable for tonearms or digital purposes. Here there is heat shrinking on each plug with clear direction marking and Eichmann Bullet plug connectors, which are actually some of the nicer plugs to use in reality. When you are swapping out products on a regular basis, these things matter, but they also have their audible benefits.

Putting this cable in between a Resolution Audio Cantata CD/DAC and the Townshend Allegri preamp resulted in an open, full-scale sound with good dynamics and an even handed tonal balance. It's not as strong at timing as the

best in this price range, but doesn't sound slow (unless you are in the habit of some close direct comparison). In fact, I spent several enjoyable hours listening to a variety of albums with it in the system. Low level resolution is good too; you can hear the scale of the venue in the reverb characteristics and there's no shortage of air. Chord Chameleon Plus (which beat Tempo in terms of, er, tempo, in one of those close direct comparisons) is not as subtle; it has a more definite sound, but that's because there is less fine detail to show the recording's colour. In fairness to the Chord cable, it's nearly half the price of Tempo. In contrast, my ancient Townshend DCT 300 is more expensive than Tempo; it delivers a very similar result in the context of timing and tonal character, but adds greater low end power and image solidity. The difference, it must be said, is not huge.

Of these two new cables, I got the best result with Tempo. Samba has qualities that will suite some systems and tastes, but is ultimately a little strong on character in my system to be transparent. Tempo, on the other hand, should work in a range of systems and bring the sort of fine detail that only first rate interconnects can offer. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Samba

Conductors: 19x0.45mm (13 gauge) silver plated copper

Insulation: 2mm GPC silicone rubber

Connectors: Rhodium plated 4mm locking

Price: 3m pair with rhodium plated Z plugs: £480, £33.50 per 0.5m extra

Tempo

Conductors: 19x0.3mm (16 gauge) silver plated copper

Insulation: 1.2mm GPC silicone rubber

Connectors: Eichmann Bullet plugs

Price: £225/1m pair, £25 per 0.5m extra

Manufacturer: Black Rhodium

Tel: +44(0)1332 342233

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Fostex HP-A8 Headphone amp/DAC

By Alan Sircom



When we recently investigated the outstanding TH-900 headphones by Fostex, we mostly used them with an amp and DAC from the same lineage – the Fostex HP-A8.

They make a great team, but the £1,499 HP-A8 is a fine product in its own right. It features a 32-bit DAC (a Asahi Kasei AK4399 to be specific), with TCXO-derived asynchronous USB alongside traditional digital audio inputs, including a pair of Toslinks, a coaxial and AES/EBU inputs, as well as a line-level stereo phono analogue input and output, and a coaxial and optical digital outputs. It even has a slot for a SD card if you want to do some 'sneakernet' audio and DSD file replay.

The glossy front panel is fairly basic, with just a small input and output selector, two sets of 1/4" headphone sockets, a large volume dial and a fluoro display. Balance and the rest... forget it. If you want to control the SD card, or dive into some of the higher level menu settings of the HP-A8 (including choice of upsampling options, one of two filters or master clock settings) you need to use the remote.

The DAC is extremely neutral and detailed, even managing to bring out the complex soundstaging and interplay between Menuhin and the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra on the CD transfer of the Mercury classic rendition of Bartok's Violin Concerto. A tough call for any digital converter.

Then there's the headphone amp part. If the DAC gets it right, this gets it right squared. It's an extremely refined performer; not in a soft and sappy way, but neutral without any top-end edginess or brightness. It has excellent bass, too, with enough control to give a fine sense of grip to even the most difficult headphones, including the current headphone amp bogeyman, the dread HE-6 by HiFiMAN.

We broke these two apart deliberately. Fostex make a good headphone in the TH-900 and a good headphone amp/DAC in the HP-A8. Taken separately or as a team, they both do their jobs well. It would be easy to blur the performance of one into the performance of the other, but in reality, the HP-A8 is as easy to recommend as the 900s. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Price: £1,499

Manufactured by: Fostex

URL: www.fostexinternational.com

Manufactured by: SCV London

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REDEFINING THE STATE OF THE AMPLIFIER ART?

Stirling Broadcast LS3/6

By Robert E Greene

One of the grand chapters in the history of audio was the late 1960s/early 1970s BBC research program into how to make speakers with a truthful sound. The BBC had the worthy idea that it would be good to know exactly what its broadcasts actually sounded like, and it undertook to develop speakers that would do the job, commercial models not being sufficiently accurate nor reliably identical. The most famous speaker to come out of this program was the popular LS3/5a, but arguably the best was the LS3/6, perhaps better known outside of 'Auntie' circles as the Spondor BC-1.

Spencer Hughes, who was working in the mid-1960s for the BBC research program, developed vacuum-formed Bextrene cone drivers and designed the BC-1 speaker around one of them as a bass/mid driver. (The company name Spondor comes from Spencer plus Dorothy, his wife's name.) The BBC refused the speaker at first, this being a time when, in looking for loudness for rock, it was losing its otherwise mostly good sense. But respect for quality prevailed, and the LS3/6 (essentially the same speaker as the BC-1) was born.

Stirling Broadcast, well known already for reissuing the LS3/5a, has undertaken to reissue a modern LS3/6. Almost poetically, it asked Derek Hughes, Spencer and Dorothy's son and a distinguished speaker designer in his own right (*auteur* in particular of the remarkable Spondor SP1/2) to undertake the design work. And design work was required since the drivers of the original BC-1 are no longer available and have not been for some time. This was more than a touching gesture.

Derek Hughes is in a unique position to understand what was involved in making a speaker to match the LS3/6 specifications. And match it it does. The Stirling Broadcast LS3/6, in fact, earned on test by the BBC an official license, all these decades later, as meeting the specifications of the original licensing of LS3/6. (The BBC policy was and is to offer its models under license to any manufacturer who will undertake to produce the speaker as specified.) ▶





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Of course the question uppermost in mind must be whether this is just an exercise in nostalgia, or a loudspeaker of excellence and vitality in today's world. I say with no hesitation at all that it is the latter. No speaker today could be the unprecedented phenomenon that the BC-1/LS3/6 was when it first appeared, redefining as it did what was possible in low coloration for box speakers. But the Stirling Broadcast LS3/6 is a great speaker without question in my mind by contemporary standards, as well as a worthy tribute and successor to the original.

While audio has changed, acoustics is a mature science. Great acoustic ideas of the 1960s are just as great today. Second, the main change in speaker design has been in improvements in driver behaviour, and the LS3/6 uses modern drivers. The drivers are proprietary and custom-manufactured to specifications for Stirling for the LS3/6. Stirling is reluctant to reveal what company actually manufactures the drivers and I respected its privacy to the point of not pressing the point. But the bass/mid driver in particular, the heart of the speaker, is a superb one, to the degree that it seems to me really competitive with Harbeth's outstanding RADIAL bass/mid driver.

The speaker covers the whole range up to 3kHz with a single driver. This means that it has a kind of coherence that escapes multi-way speakers with crossovers somewhere around 500–600Hz, say. In the LS3/6, the whole range of musical fundamentals and a good portion of the harmonics of most musical notes emanate from a single driver. Of course many two-ways follow this pattern, but the LS3/6 has a large enough (178mm) driver and box that it is much more convincing in the bass and the lower mids than small two-ways. While for large music to be played really loudly in very large spaces, one might want to add a subwoofer or two, the LS3/6 is convincing on its own with orchestral and rock music. It will play surprisingly loudly without difficulty, and it has in-room bass extension sufficient to cover the normal orchestral range as well as most rock.

Moreover, the box shape—the classic two cubic foot box, a foot square and two feet high (this is pre-metric system engineering)—is tried and true. I always like to hazard a scientific explanation for these things, but I am not really sure of the reason that this particular shape and size work so well, but the fact that they do has come rather emphatically to my attention over many years (the BC-1 itself, the Spendor SP1, the Spendor SP1/2).

In addition, the use of two tweeters offers benefits. The LS3/6, like the other related models, has three drivers but two are tweeters, one crossed over to at 3kHz and one much higher, at 13kHz. Originally, as I understand it, the two-tweeter arrangement arose out of the need to simply cover the whole range cleanly and completely, but in fact there are advantages even in these days when very wide-range tweeters are available.

But one could make a speaker of this general type that would not have the remarkable sonic quality of the LS3/6. Derek Hughes has done a wonderful job of carrying the unforgettable sound of the original into the modern era. And most wisely he has firmly resisted the idea of modernizing the speaker in the negative sense. While the bass is less loose than my recollection of the Spendor BC-1, the LS3/6 still gives a warm full sound, indeed, with good pitch definition as well. Similarly, the LS3/6 remains determinedly not excessive in the top end. Top-end extension there is, but aggression that is all too often the modern style there is not. (Strictly speaking, there is a little perceived roll-off at the truly extreme top, but this is musically inconsequential and perhaps

even advantageous in practice.) And the midrange itself remains in the top echelon for a combination of clarity, resolution, and neutrality. And perhaps most of all, coherence—there is no crossover like no crossover, and the LS3/6 speaks with one voice over what amounts to almost the whole range of music.

Since one of the strengths of the BC-1 was string sound, I decided to play as my "first impression" the Budapest Festival Orchestra/Fischer recording of Dvorák's *Nocturne for String Orchestra* on Philips, one of my current string-sound favourites. Talk about putting a smile on one's face! This is the kind of music I play myself all the time—I belong to a chamber orchestra that plays a lot of pure string music. And the real sound was much in evidence here. The feeling of hearing the sound I hear at my rehearsals was considerable, to say the least.

Next I tried Bis' masterpiece of piano recording, Freddy Kempf playing Rachmaninoff's transcription of Kreisler's *Liebesleid*. The realism of the piano was most striking, and the beauty of it, too. And the micro-structure of the piano notes, their complex attack and decay and interplay

"This means it has the kind of coherence that escapes multi-way speakers with crossovers somewhere around 500-600Hz, say. In the LS3/6, the whole range of musical fundamentals and a good portion of the harmonics of most musical notes emanate from a single driver."



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▶ of overtones, was remarkably convincing. Indeed, one could not help feeling that there is some real magic in having a single driver cover so much of the musical range—and cover it so well.

Often speakers give perceived detail because of an exaggeration of some area of high frequencies. But the LS3/6s offered unusually detailed information about complex music without treble exaggerations. Indeed, this persisted even if I deliberately turned down the treble with an EQ device below its natural, correct level. The LS3/6 really does have, it seems, an intrinsically high level of information-transmission on complex music. Every individual instrumental line in the Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances* (Proarte, Dallas, Mata) and in the Dvorák *New World* (Delos, New Jersey, Macal) was made

extraordinarily clear, as was the reverberation of the individual lines. Things like the separation between say a trumpet call and the hall's response to it were revealed exceptionally well. Textures were all naturally presented and very clearly articulated. But none of this involved any aggression in the sound at all—it was just detail as it naturally occurs.

Attached to this is an unusual kind of perceived dynamic punch. Speakers seldom exhibit literal dynamic compression until quite high levels are attempted. But snare drum strokes are especially well-defined on the LS3/6. Even at low levels, where literal compression could not be an issue, the LS3/6s give a special articulation that comes across as dynamic excitement. Perhaps this is attached to the fact that the signal is undivided over most of the range, with the sound coming from a single driver. In any case, for what ever reason, the effect is there. This and the sonic impressions of the previous paragraph suggest yet one more time how well the BBC 'lossy' cabinet construction idea actually works, a point that tends to escape most contemporary designers, who are enamoured of "rigidity" on what often seems a reflexive basis.

You can hear the effect I am referring to on that old standby, Opus 3's *Tiden bar gaar*, where the drumming and plucking have unusually clean and articulate character and sound unusually "dynamic" for lack of a better word (though dynamics are not what is literally involved), without being over-etched in the least. And comes to that, the (Swedish) words are unusually well articulated as well and the voice has a very natural quality.

And the LS3/6s can play loudly, as noted above. They are easily capable of satisfying orchestral levels in a room of moderate size, with dynamic capacity to spare. With well over 100dB levels possible without strain at 2m, I felt no dynamic constraints at all in my 4.3 by 8.2m living room. I could blast away if I wanted to, with headroom to spare. The LS3/6 is a much more robust speaker than the original Spendor BC-1 and plays far louder without difficulty — one of the things modern drivers can do better than earlier ones!

The LS3/6s deal successfully with the floor interaction in the low midrange and upper bass. They sail down from 300Hz into the 40Hz region with no dip and no weakness, in contrast to the 'floor dip', the hole in response between 100 and 300Hz, that all too many other speakers exhibit. The LS3/6s thus give the orchestra the proper weight, substance, and solidity. And this happens with almost any reasonable setup: It is not a matter of inch-by-inch tweaking. The proper performance in the 100 to 300Hz region is crucial to the correct perceived balance and feeling of realism and musicality of full-range music. And here you get it. Bravo!

Incidentally, while the grilles of the LS3/6 can be popped off without much difficulty, I recommend not doing so. Grilles off brings up 6–7kHz a little and makes the sound less accurate tonally without actually giving any more in the way of real detail. To the extent that the (lower) tweeter is not absolutely smooth, it has a little hint of excess around 6–7 kHz, and to remove the grilles is to bring this to the fore. With the grilles on, much better, indeed excellent, smoothness is attained. And the removal of the grilles exposes edges in a way not, I should think, to advantage in terms of diffraction.

I do not have a pair of BC-1s or original LS3/6s in functioning condition. But I do have a pair of Spendor SP1/2s in good order, Derek Hughes' design from the early 1990s in the same general style—same driver configuration, same box size, itself a lineal descendent of the original BC-1/LS3/6 design. The speakers are similar but the exact balance is a little different, with the



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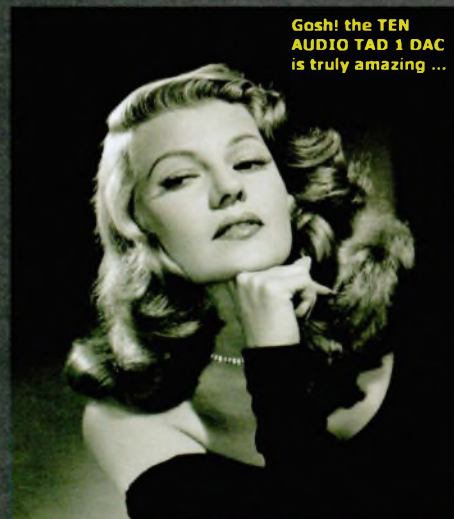
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▶ SP/2s having a bit more energy in the 1–2kHz octave than the LS3/6. Even within neutrality as commonly understood, there is room for variation! The LS3/6 has a more precise, slightly crisper sound, with a little more perceived definition, the SP1/2 has a perhaps even more precisely correct rendition of instrumental sound and a slightly smoother treble, set at a slightly lower level. A close call to choose between the SP1/2 and the LS3/6, down to the point where room conditions would make the difference perhaps.

When the LS3/6 first appeared, speakers that were close to neutral were a rarity. Nowadays, quite a few speakers offer an essentially flat on-axis direct arrival, though far from all of them do. In this context of speakers that are in general terms flat, additional importance becomes attached to the radiation pattern of the speaker, to how it projects sound into the room and what the resulting in-room sound is like. Here the current LS3/6, like its ancestor, occupies a middle ground but is even so somewhat distinctive. The LS3/6 is, like all boxes, omnidirectional in the bass and switches to primarily forward radiation further up. It becomes a little beamy above 1kHz because of running a bass/mid driver up to a 3kHz crossover point, stable near the axis but rolled off at angles beyond say 45 degrees.

On the practical level, this means that the ideal performance is obtained for a centred listener with the speakers aimed directly at the listening position. And for the listener in that ideal position, the radiation pattern has considerable advantages. Whereas with wider-radiating speakers, one is running away from 3kHz energy (right around the frequency of maximum hearing sensitivity); with the LS3/6 one is trying to get enough of it, since there is something of a droop there in the overall room response.

There are theoretical reasons for not having too much 3kHz energy in terms of sonic naturalness (you can find a detailed discussion here: http://www.linkwitzlab.com/xo_eq.htm). And the proof of the pudding is here in the LS3/6—it sounds natural and non-aggressive with orchestral music at considerable volumes, allowing closer to close-up live levels than one might tolerate otherwise.

Returning to the stereo question as such: The narrowing of the pattern in this range has the apparent effect of enhancing image focus. A wide pattern can generate a sense of “spaciousness”: the threshold for enhancing spaciousness via sidewall reflections is lower by a good bit than the threshold for altering timbre so one can get the spaciousness without altering the basic sound. But this spaciousness is generated at the cost of de-focusing of the individual images. (There is a good bit written round and about how wide uniform radiation makes for good stereo imaging—but this depends on what one means by “good.”)

The LS3/6 has very precise image focus. And when big space is actually on the recording rather than being potentially promoted by sidewall reflections, it is admirably presented. Space in the true sense is of course a matter of locating things precisely, not just having some sort of sense of things all over the place—hearing the boundaries of the hall and so on is what real spaciousness is about. And here you get this. Listen for yourself, centered and with the speakers aimed at you. Remarkable stereo, indeed.

To say that I like and admire the LS3/6 is to understate the case. This speaker seems to me a true realization of a dream that many audiophiles have held for a long time: a modern (and available) speaker with the unique virtues of the Spendor BC-1/ BBC LS3/6—the extraordinary articulateness

and neutrality in real listening rooms—but without its dynamic limitations. The Stirling LS3/6s delivers the goods, and it is satisfying in musical terms at a very high level. This is a sound that is both attractive in its own right and true to the real sound of music in a way that most speakers do not approach at all. And when one looks at the price, the idea of a wild bargain comes to mind inevitably.

Speaker design has changed over the decades since the original LS3/6s appeared. Floorstanders have largely replaced stand-mounted speakers, narrow fronts have largely replaced wider fronts (for no better reason than visual fashion), ever wider radiation patterns have become popular—the list goes on. In some of these senses, the LS3/6 does not look contemporary. But the sound of real music has not changed. And the things that made the original LS3/6 so truthful to the live experience remain as valid today as they were then. If the word “great” means anything in speaker design, the new LS3/6 is a great loudspeaker.

Taken from The Absolute Sound issue 228

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way (dual tweeter) stand-mounted loudspeaker

Driver complement: 178mm bass/ mid driver, 44mm tweeter, 25mm tweeter

Crossover frequencies: 3kHz, 13kHz

Power handling: 90 watts continuous, 150 watts short term

Maximum SPL: 107dB/pair (2m)

Sensitivity: 87dB

Frequency response: 45hz–17 kHz +/-3dB

Impedance: 8 ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 30.5 x 61 x 30.5cm

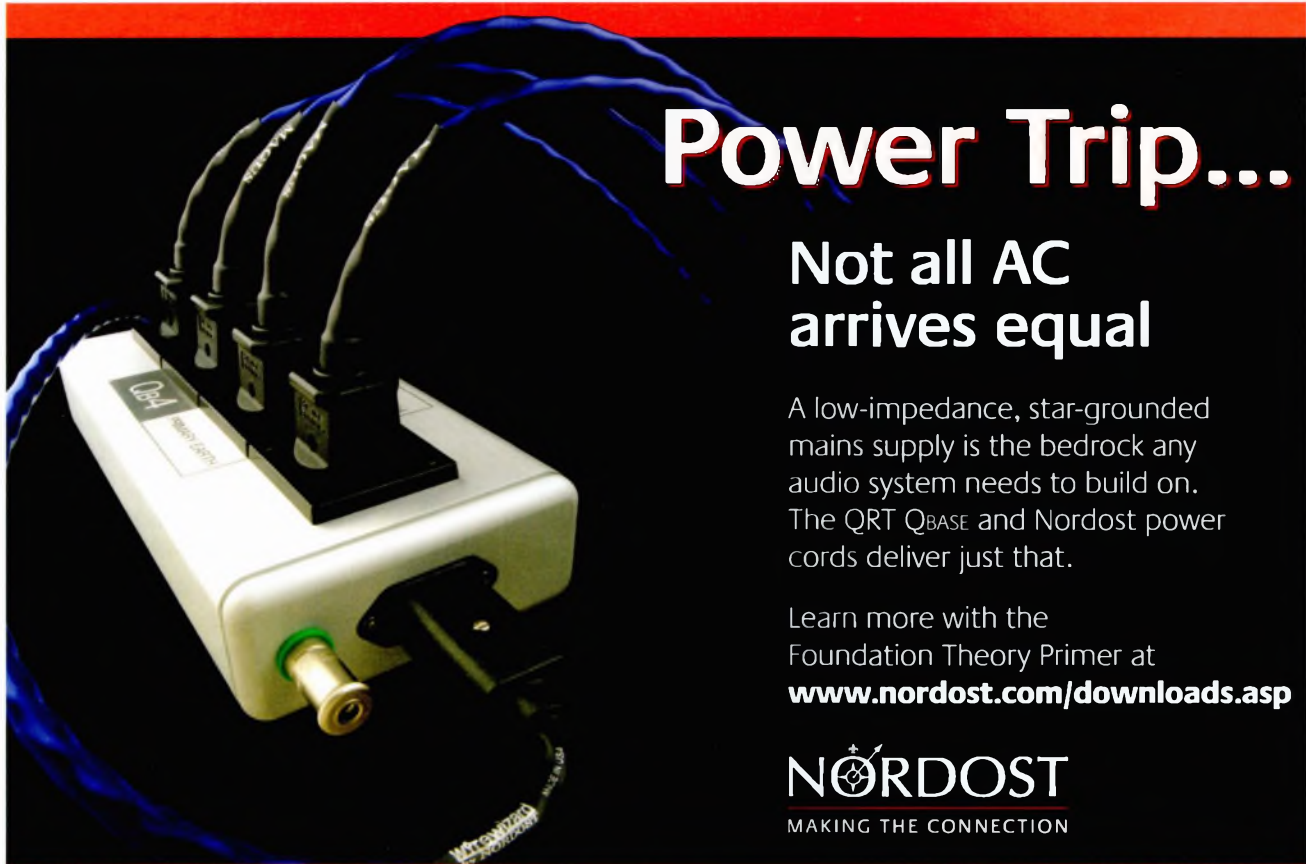
Weight: 18.5kg

Price: £2,814.60 per pair (in cherry or walnut finish); £3,057.60 (in 'Gold Label' wild oak, zebrano or rosewood finish)

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Fabian Povsic, BuyMeAniPhone.Com



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Brent Butterworth, Sound & Vision

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Follow-Up: Pass Labs XP-25 phono preamp

By Alan Sircom

This is in part an apology. In issue 94, we got the price of the Pass Labs XP-25 phono stage mixed up with another product's price tag. However, it is a good enough product to be worthy of a revisit.

Especially as there is a sense of effortless dynamics and precision that takes some time to get under your skin, because the XP-25's remarkable musical flow from bar to bar is so uppermost in the presentation. Moreover, the phono stage plays to the strengths of both the cartridge and what's playing on that cartridge, no matter what the LP is. If it's upbeat and fast paced, it will portray that. If it's

soft and sultry, it will portray that too. Yes, there is an underlying tonal warmth to the XP-25's presentation, but it doesn't get in the way of any kind of music.

In fairness, some of this deeper discovery comes with being ultra-disciplined with listening to the variation in cartridge loading relative to the cartridge used. You should consider the cart-maker's specs to be the starting grid, not the chequered flag. You may find the cartridge maker's settings perfectly correct or you may have to spend some weeks fine-tuning. But the joy is when it's right, it's so very right, you'll find everything else sounds off-kilter. I mentioned this in the original review, but even then I was still only about 80% there. A touch more experimentation and the sound took off in all directions.

The Pass Labs XP-25 has remained and will likely remain our phono stage in residence for some time. While I'd prefer more EQ curves than RIAA on its own, its ability to bring out the best in a cartridge means the XP-25 sets a very high standard. It did that when I thought it cost thousands more than the £9,495 it really costs. So, at its real price, it's very highly recommended! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: 2x RCA inputs for phono, earth tag

Outputs: RCA, XLR

Gain options: 53dB, 66dB, 76dB

Resistive loading options: 30 ohm, 50 ohm, 100 ohm, 160 ohm, 250 ohm, 320 ohm, 500 ohm, 1k-ohm, 47k-ohm

Reactive loading options: 100 pf, 200 pf, 320 pf, 430 pf, 530 pf and 750 pf

RIAA response: ± 0.1 dB 20Hz-20kHz

Distortion (MC): < .005 % THD @ 1mV

(MM): < .002 % THD @ 10mV

Unweighted noise: -93 dB ref. 10mV

(MM), -85 dB ref. 1 mV (MC)

Dimensions (per chassis): 43x10x30cm

Weight: 25kg

Price: £9,495

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URL: www.passlabs.com

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INTERVIEW

Robin Trower

By Jason Kennedy

British guitar legend Robin Trower got his big break when he joined Procol Harum to record their first album. Prior to this he had formed The Paramounts with Procol's Gary Brooker earlier in the sixties. He made five albums with Procol Harum between 1967 and 1971 – and another two when it reformed in the 1990s – but in 1972, he put together his own power trio; the Robin Trower band. This combo achieved considerable success in the 1970s, which peaked with 1974's *Bridge of Sighs* that was certified gold in September of the same year. Trower has played with numerous artists, including Jack Bruce (with whom he has made five albums since 1981) and Bryan Ferry. He cites Jimi Hendrix as a major influence but is also a big fan of earlier artists, especially the blues guitarists he mentions in the exchange below.

Trower's latest album, *Roots and Branches*, is a collection of covers and original numbers that blend seamlessly; so much so that I was fooled by one title (Shape of Things to

Come) into thinking it was a cover. He plays classics like 'That's Alright Mama', 'The Thrill is Gone' and 'Little Red Rooster' accompanied by bass, drums, keyboards and on Hound Dog by Paul Jones on blues harp. I caught up with him as he was preparing to take the album on tour.

JK: Your new album, *Roots and Branches*, features several covers of classic songs. Is this the music of your youth or songs that you play live?

RT: I set out to do my versions of a lot of my favourite songs from when I was growing up. I had about 15 songs set aside, but I could only come up with new arrangements for six or seven. I wasn't going to do them unless I was bringing something of my own to it, so I added some of my own songs. But I tried to make my songs fit in with the concept, with the style of music. Mine are all new songs, but I had to change the approach to get them to fit better.

I liked 'Little Red Rooster'. I was a big fan of the Howlin' Wolf version and the Stones did more or less a copy of it and I was determined to not to do that.

Were you the in the British blues vanguard?

Yes, it was the greatest time for rock'n'roll; blues, R'n'B, even pop was great then. Rock'n'roll inspired me, Elvis's guitar player Scotty Moore, Gene Vincent's guitar player Cliff Gallup – people like that inspired me to pick up a guitar.

Did you get into blues after this?

It would have been the late 1950s maybe early 1960s when I started to hear BB King and more blues. Around the time that Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf started to be imported on Pye International.

I like your version of Ray Charles' 'I Believe To My Soul', it's unusual to hear it on the guitar.

I was able to come up with something different for it, it's such a great song, I've always loved that song.

There's no Hendrix?

I really set out just to cover blues and rhythm and blues songs, I didn't think about going into rock'n'roll or pop.

Tell me about the musicians who played on the album?

The drummer is Chris Taggart who has played with me live for a year or so. There are two bass players; one is Livingston Brown who also produces and the other is Richard Watts who plays with me live. He also sings four songs on there and does most of the vocals with me live. Paul Jones plays harp on two songs; I only met him last year when he asked me to do a charity show. Luke Smith plays organ. He plays a lot with other artists, but I found him through Livingston.

There seem to be a lot of covers albums by veterans of the 1960s around these days, is it nostalgia?

With me the main impetus for doing some of my favourite old songs was that I'd be able to have some fun on the guitar, everything I do is driven by my love of playing the guitar. I thought I could really stretch out on that, 'The Thrill is Gone' is there for that reason.

Is that the secret of your success?

I'm sure that's how I'm still playing. It can't be satiated, also in the 1970s I was really successful and obviously that has long term effects on your career, that's where I feel that I have been very, very fortunate.

Has the MP3 and download era effected you?

There are people downloading my music. It seems to me that since the digital age, people have been more able to find different kinds of music. So, it's been a good thing.

I read that you gave Robert Fripp lessons?

Not really, in the 1970s he asked me to show him some blues phrases, how I do what I do. We were on tour a lot together when he was out with King Crimson and we got to be friends, he's still a good mate.

How about making an album with him?

It's one of those never the twain shall meet things, we're so different.

Is there any chance of a Procol Harum reunion at any time?

No, I wouldn't have thought so. I don't have a problem but Matthew [Fisher] and Gary [Brooker] have gone their separate ways.

Who are your all time heroes

All the obvious ones, all the great blues artists, Jimi Hendrix. My three favourite guitarists are Albert King, Jimi Hendrix and BB King, but only from specific eras – I don't like everything they've done. But, BB King got me going with *Live at the Regal* in the early 1960s. ▶

"I set out to do my versions of a lot of my favourite songs from when I was growing up. I had about 15 songs set aside, but I could only come up with new arrangements for six or seven. I wasn't going to do them unless I was bringing something of my own to it, so I added some of my own songs. But I tried to make my songs fit in with the concept, with the style of music."

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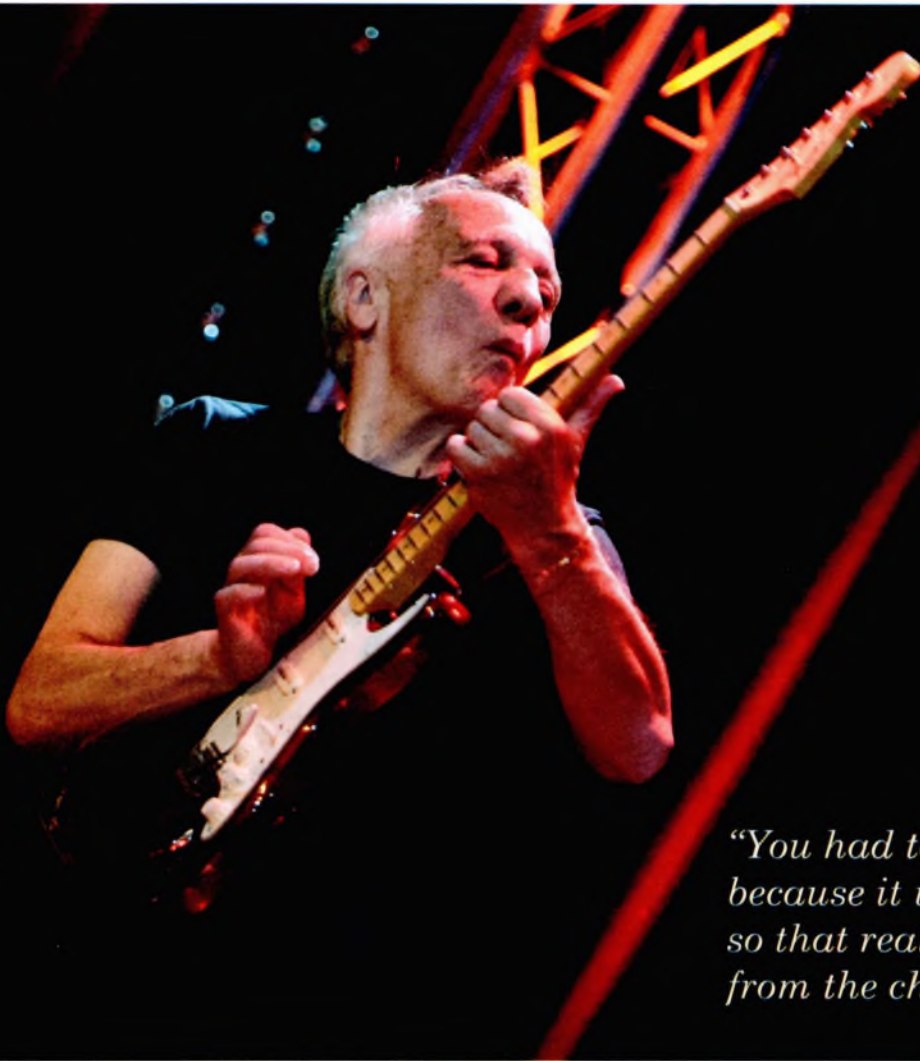
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“You had to be able to deliver live because it was all recorded live, so that really sorted out the wheat from the chaff.”

► **Do you have a decent hi-fi?**

I'm not really into that side of it so much. I must admit that I don't listen to a lot of new music now; I basically listen to my collection of 1930s and 1940s stuff that I've got on CD. Popular music from here and America, I really like Al Bowlly and Billy Eckstine, all that era. The musicianship was so wonderful then. Not that later eras weren't wonderful, the early rock'n'roll stuff, think of the Everly Brothers and Buddy Holly, the musicianship was wonderful as well. With the earlier stuff, you get wonderful playing and beautiful arrangements and because there's no electric guitar in it, I can listen to it without switching on the wrong side of the brain as it were. Very, very gifted players; not only technically brilliant but they had an awful lot of heart, which makes it so much more attractive. That's what's missing today when I hear modern stuff.

There are more people making music now. When you think back to the era of great music, there weren't very many people making records. You had to be able to deliver live

because it was all recorded live, so that really sorted out the wheat from the chaff right at the beginning. It really was only the greats that got heard.

They earned their stripes!

If you look at Buddy Holly and the Crickets, they were a band that were working non-stop every day. They were either out on the road or in the studio and they had a closeness and way of playing together that was honed. He was also a great songwriter and a great singer; that all adds up to something a bit special I think.

That's only one. Another good example is the Everly Brothers, that was really really beautiful stuff, beautiful singing, beautiful playing. Would the Beatles sound like they did initially if it weren't for the Everly Brothers? I'm not sure they would. +

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Distortion

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If a loudspeaker is mounted in a cavity wall, the rear energy escapes into the cavity, without affecting the speaker cone at all. It can also be demonstrated that a cavity wall, unlike a speaker box, causes no resistance to the movement of the cone, creating very deep bass. In short, the speaker reacts precisely to the signal fed to it – the perfect loudspeaker.

Vibration

The more solid the housing the speaker is in, the better. Vibration in a panel will ruin an otherwise very good loudspeaker. Your money is often spent trying to create a vibration-free box. A masonry or brick cavity wall is ideal, because it will not vibrate and will be the perfect 'anchor'. This ensures perfect transients and clarity.

Efficiency

A loudspeaker in a box loses efficiency because of diffraction. This is the tendency of low frequencies to radiate through 360 degrees, losing low frequency energy behind the speaker. This means more amplifier power is needed (+6db, or x 4) together with an increase in distortion

Mounting a speaker in a wall means that all low frequency energy has to project forward, meaning higher efficiency, and lower distortion.

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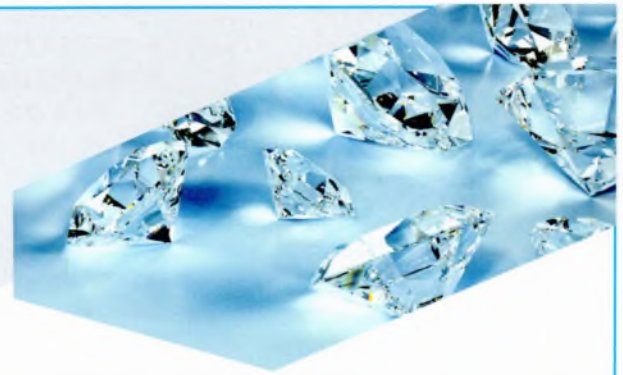
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record reviews

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

AS – Alan Sircom

PT – Pete Trewin

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Doug MacLeod

There's A Time

Reference Recordings HDCD



There's A Time ticks all the audiophile boxes. It's just a singer playing a one of three National resonator guitars or a crumbling Gibson acoustic, a bass player and a drummer, recorded in the large Skywalker Sound soundstage without any artificial processing or overdubs. Then again, the three musicians – Doug MacLeod on vocals and guitars, Denny Croy on bass and Jimi Bott on drums – are not the kind of people who need overdubs; everything's in the pocket and nary a note's out of place here.

It's a baker's dozen collection of Delta-style blues originals, played intelligently and well. MacLeod's voice may not make him the next Howlin' Wolf or Willie Dixon, but it is powerful and soulful and has good range. He's clearly every inch the bluesman – no "I got the not enough trust fund blues" here; MacLeod overcame childhood abuse and a profound stutter through his music, and ended up sideman to the likes of Big Joe Turner, so he's the real deal.

And it shows. The music is heartfelt... and wonderfully recorded. Outstanding tracks include 'My Inlaws Are Outlaws' and 'St. Elmo's Rooms and Pool', which not only highlight the musicianship but his wry writing style. Nice! **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



How to destroy angels_

Welcome Oblivion

Columbia/The Null Corporation



This is what happens when frontman Trent Reznor isn't Nine Inch Nailing it. Reznor, his wife Mariqueen Maandig, the English electronica musician and composer Atticus Ross, and NIN's art director Rob Sheridan formed the post-industrial *How to destroy angels_* in 2010 and this is HDTA's first album.

Although it sounds like two or three strung together EPs, it is often extremely well recorded (it can be downloaded in 24/96 FLAC and ALAC and tracks like 'Strings and attractors' are a torture test for a system's transient delivery), but the difficulty may be that where Reznor's past works were innovative and influential, this can sound derivative. It's not consciously trying to be The XX meets Joy Division in the studios of French electronica duo Air, but that's how it occasionally ends up.

The standout track is 'Ice Age', a near acoustic folkly ballad with some truly dark undertones and some very atmospheric industrial noise building to the climax. The more angular title track and the *Man-Machine* era Kraftwerk rhythmic precision of 'Recursive Self-Improvement' are also signs of greatness at work. Between them, the three tracks are good enough to justify the price of admission – almost. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



King King

Standing in the Shadows

Manhattan



At the forefront of the hot British blues scene (although there's some heavy kilt action going on; perhaps 'British' should be read as 'Glaswegian'), the four-piece King King is fronted by guitarist and vocalist Alan Nimmo (of the well-respected blues act, the Nimmo Brothers) and most of the cuts on the album are penned by Nimmo and bass player Lindsay Coulson. The British Blues scene is heavily influenced by a combination of Texas blues and heavy British rock styles. That's an easy mix to get very wrong, and requires consummate musicianship and a good 'read' on writing riffs and lyrics that stay just the right side of sounding cliché filled. But fortunately, that expert musicianship and good song-writing seems to be King King's happy place.

Standing in the Shadows is also a well-balanced album, with powerful rocking numbers like 'More Than I Can Take' rubbing crotchets with more poignant tracks like the almost soulful 'What Am I Supposed To Do'. It's also recorded with a very live feel, especially in the drum kit, which sounds forward and very direct. Subtle... no, but I defy anyone to listen to this without playing air drums, air guitar, air organ, air backing singer... the list goes on. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds

Push The Sky Away

Bad Seed Ltd



It might be hard to believe, but the Bad Seeds are 30 years old. *Push The Sky Away* marks the welcome return of founding bass player Barry Adamson, although it's also the first not to feature guitarist Mick Harvey.

After the more raucous *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!* (and the excellent post-punk Grinderman side project), this is an album of bleak ballads. The source of inspiration for these is weird wide web; Cave went in search of the odd side of the information superhighway, "Googling curiosities" as he called the project. It's a smaller, more drifty sound than we're used to from The Bad Seeds, often using samples, drum machine loops and synths in place of drums and guitars. And yet, it works brilliantly with the slow-build restraint born out maturity and middle-years angst.

There are several outstanding tracks, including the dark and building 'Jubilee Street', the sublime Wikicommentary 'We Real Cool' and the majestic 'Higgs Boson Blues', which would be worth the price of admission alone. The recording quality is good; not demonstration quality, but respectful of the music itself.

Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds have been aging disgracefully for years. Long may it continue! **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Steven Wilson

The Raven That Refused To Sing (And Other Stories)

Kscope



One of the founders of Porcupine Tree, prog rock polymath Steven Wilson has engaged in several solo projects in the 21st Century, but *The Raven...* is arguably the best of them. Despite thoroughly seeped in the art rock/prog rock tradition of the 1970s – with phased pianos, Mellotron tones, complex rhythms, even more complex guitar runs, and the odd organ and flute solo – it's not simply pastiche (even if the casual progger might not see the distinction). Neither is it simply someone out of step with time; it's prog, pure and timeless. There's even elements of jazz mixed in with the baroque. I couldn't help play it back to back with *The Yes Album* and Rush's *A Farewell To Kings*. And it stands up to the comparison very well indeed.

It's also exceedingly well recorded with outstanding bass, although like most modern recordings, it's a bit 'hot'. That's better than a rolled off wannabe 1970s recording, or a syrupy 1980s 'Asia' style over-produced mix; it's just a clean and up-front sound that perfectly fits the music. All six tracks are standouts, and I suspect in 20 years time, it will be this rather than Muse albums that will be played as the finest examples of post-prog prog. **AS**

RECORDING



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**Cassandra Wilson**

33 RPM 180g

Belly Of The Sun

Blue Note/Pure Pleasure BST 35072

This is Pure Pleasure's second issue of a Cassandra Wilson LP previously only available on CD. Wilson is one of the premier jazz singers of the 21st century, but she rarely limits herself to a traditional jazz role. Here, she includes covers of Dylan, the Band, James Taylor, Jimmy Webb, Robert Johnson and Mississippi Fred McDowell with her own compositions. Intending a blues foundation for the album, she set up a recording studio in the Clarksville, Mississippi train station and filled out her working band with local musicians.

As is often the case with Wilson's albums, the tunes do not always coincide precisely with the intended theme, but that should not deter anyone who loves contemporary jazz vocals. Her pop covers are exceptional and her own writing is first rate. Her cover of Fred McDowell's *You Gotta Move* makes me want a whole LP of them. The only bump in the road is *Wichita Linema*. This is the first appearance of this album on vinyl, and it is vastly superior to the CD version. The songs are comfortably spread across two discs. Danny Kopelson, who has done fine work on numerous Wilson and James Carter releases, was the recording engineer. It was re-mastered for vinyl at Capitol Studios by Ron McMaster. Very highly recommended. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC

**Frank Sinatra**

33 RPM 180g

Where Are You?

Capitol/Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-406

Mobile Fidelity continues apace with its second cycle of Frank Sinatra reissues, but this is not (as they say) your father's MoFi. This time, Mobile Fidelity has released Sinatra's two early torch song masterpieces (along with *No One Cares* MFSL 1-408). *Where Are You?* was recorded in 1957, Sinatra's first album arranged by Gordon Jenkins and backed by his lush string heavy orchestrations. This is Sinatra at his best, an album full of "ballads of loneliness and longing" as the record jacket says. It's about the girl that got away, the girl that kicked Frank in the teeth, the girl that left Frank with nothing but a cigarette to sooth his mood. Nobody ever did this kind of theme album better, and no record company ever captured Sinatra during his prime like Capitol.

This was the first album Sinatra released in stereo, but Mobile Fidelity wisely chose the far superior sounding mono version for reissue. Up until recently, the Sinatra series was mastered by Rob LoVerde, but the latest two are credited to Krieg Wunderlich, a Mobile Fidelity stalwart. Wunderlich has hit another home run with this Sinatra classic. Compared to a first US pressing, the pitch stability is more spot on and the string sound much fuller. Another gem polished to perfection. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC

**Herbie Hancock**

45 RPM 180g

Speak Like A Child

Music Matters/Blue Note 84279

Hancock's albums are always filled with a wealth of new ideas and surprises. *Speak Like A Child* follows his two highly praised albums *Maiden Voyage* and *Empyrean Isles*. It was 1968 and while many were taking to the streets to riot or protest, Hancock announced a gentler approach in his album title, if not quite as obvious as Lennon's "All You Need Is Love" of the year before. Hancock's sixth Blue Note album is forward looking not only in looking ahead to a brighter future, but also in the sense of not being stuck in the music of the moment.

Speak... features Mickey Roker on drums, Thad Jones on flugelhorn, Peter Phillips on bass trombone and Jerry Dodgion on alto flute. The harmonic structure of Hancock's writing is more complex than in the albums that preceded it. It picks up where the Miles Davis quintet was heading — the most intelligent and progressive music making of the day. This was not an especially successful Rudy Van Gelder recording, and the original Liberty pressing made things even worse.

This splendid new mastering by Kevin Gray and Ron Rambach repairs the thin sound of the Liberty pressing, which got in the way of enjoying this music. Excellent issue of a jazz masterpiece. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Marianne Faithfull

33 rpm 180g

Broken English

Audio Fidelity/Island AFZLP 148

Anyone who thinks of Marianne Faithfull as the sweet, yet troubled young thing, hasn't heard *Broken English*, one of rock's enduring masterpieces. By the time she recorded the album in 1979, her voice had been ravaged by drugs, booze and cigarettes, and she turned in a complex punk rock musical performance that was delivered like a series of grenade explosions, from the X rated lyrics of 'Why D'Ya Do It?' to her gut-wrenching cover of Lennon's 'Working Class Hero'.

The album was recorded by Island Records at Matrix Studios, and like many of Island's recordings was very well recorded. Audio Fidelity, the successor to DCC Compact Classics issues most of its classic rock albums on gold CD only, but praise the lord that *Broken English* comes to us on vinyl. The new issue was mastered by Kevin Gray at Coherent Audio, pressed on 180 gram vinyl at RTI in California and packaged in a handsome fold-out cover, with the grey cover photo from the US release rather than the blue tinted UK cover. The tonal balance of the reissue is very close to a UK original. What is not close is the fullness of the bass in the reissue, which makes the original sound like the bass was rolled off. Top recommendation. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Thelonious Monk

33 rpm 180g

Monk's Dream

Impex/Columbia CS 8765

Monk's Columbia recordings were made between 1962 and 1968, an extremely prolific period that left us live and studio albums of Monk alone, in a trio, with a big band, and with his great quartet of Charles Rouse, John Ore and Frankie Dunlop. These LPs are among his best, and *Monk's Dream* stands comparison with any Monk album, regardless of date or label. This first Monk Columbia release has the perfect balance of Monk's solo ingenuity, along with a group that seems to stay with this most idiosyncratic of players as if guided by telepathy.

While the album does not contain any of Monk's signature tunes, they are all (but one) tunes he had recorded here and there on earlier albums, and each is a gem polished to perfection. The tunes were recorded over several days in late 1962 at Columbia's famed 30th Street Studio and the recorded sound in its original form was to top drawer. At least that is what I thought until I heard this new reissue from Impex Records mastered by Kevin Gray with assistance from Robert Pincus. The sound of this new issue is to die for and then some. Impex releases only a handful of LPs each year, but its track record for taste and great sound is unrivaled. Perfect in ever way. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Weather Report

33 rpm 180g

Tale Spinnin'

Columbia/Speakers Corner PC 33417

Back in the 1970s, Weather Report released at least one record per year for a decade without Columbia filling in with live concert recordings. The constants were founders Wayne Shorter and Joe Zawinul, both of whom played in the Miles Davis *In A Silent Way* sessions, at the birth of jazz fusion. This 1975 recording represents a period when the group's music was more oriented to funk grooves and extended solos, but before Jaco Pretorius added his more melodic and rock tinged approach. The additional Shorter solos are a particularly welcome. *Tale Spinnin'* is supposed to evoke a multicultural street fair of song and dance.

The recording engineer for these sessions was Bruce Botnick, best known for his work with the Doors. His very fine work on this album was somewhat sabotaged by the thin 'oil embargo' vinyl of the period. Not so with this beautiful Pallas pressing from Speakers Corner. The reissue was mastered by Willem Makkee in Germany and while I doubt Sony released the original master tapes to Europe, the excellent sound of this reissue is extremely detailed and places the abundant electronic cues across a very large soundstage. Highly recommended to fans of this genre. **DD**

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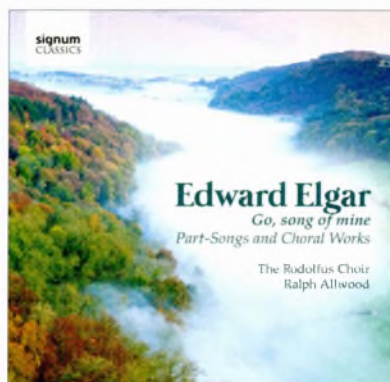
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Edward Elgar: Go, Song of mine. Part-songs and Choral Works

CD

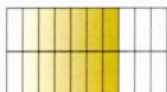
The Rodolfus Choir
 Ralph Allwood – director
 Signum Classics SIGCD315

The British composer Sir Edward Elgar had a great ability to compose a diverse range of music. This album sees both sacred and secular pieces. Track one, 'Go, song of mine', after which the album is entitled is taken from a 13th century text by Guido Cavalcanti. It is a song of grief. There are also some well-known tracks such as 'Ave, Verum corpus', which is regularly heard in church music, not to be confused with Mozart's version of the same text.

The Rodolfus Choir is comprised of young singers who have attended The Eton Choral Course, a course run by Ralph Allwood at the world famous Eton College. The choir regularly tours and appears on radio and television.

Ralph Allwood was Precentor and Director of Music at Eton College until 2011, he travels extensively across the globe leading coral courses and workshops. He is also an International judge for choral fetivals. His vast expertise as a choral conductor shines through in this album. He has groomed a choir and his insight into the music can only be realised through their performance, which is outstanding. **PT**

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Engegårdkvar tetten

SA

String Quartets – Haydn,
 Nordheim, Bartok
 Engegård Quartet
 2L-091-SACD

Once again 2L have put together a great combination of music, it is said that they like their combination of music on their discs to be as much fun as the music selection in a concert and this proves true on this album.

The opening Quartet is Haydn's String Quartet in G Major, op.77 no.1. The first movement bounces around the notes and keys in a jolly manner. The contrast of the following *adagio* movement is wonderful, while the final two movements of the Haydn's Quartet are both *presto* and require some precision fingering from the string instruments, expertly executed.

The Nordheim are entitled Duplex for Violin and Viola. This contemporary modernist Norwegian composition is from 1992, and throughout Nordheim explores the full range of both the violin and viola. At times the pieces feel like games, where the two instruments are chasing each other.

Bartok's String Quartet no.5, sz 102 is one of six quartets exploring new harmonic methods. His Hungarian heritage and the folk songs he learnt as a child influences this. He uses many chromatic movements, often parallel and often contrary motion. This quartet was commissioned and premiered in Washington. **PT**

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Rachmaninov: The Piano Concertos / Paganini Rhapsody

CD

Valentia Lisitsa
 London Symphony Orchestra
 – Michael Francis
 Decca 0289 478 4890 5

The Ukrainian pianist Valentina Lisitsa actually gave up on her career as a musician and was working in Washington. Then, she posted a video online of her playing some Chopin Etudes. It became an internet sensation and soon after, Lisitsa was signed by Decca.

This two disc set contains all four of Rachmaninov's piano concertos; it is no mean feat to play just one of these; all four in one box, played with such lucidity and passion, one cannot fail but to be moved.

Lisitsa is never overpowered by the London Symphony Orchestra. They are sympathetic to music, as one would expect from an orchestra of such note. Both Lisitsa and the LSO perform these fabulous works with great ease, Rachmaninov was considered one of the best pianists of his time. He utilises his in depth knowledge of the piano in many of his works, he explores the full capacity from full range to wide note range, which require much stretching on the part of the soloist! His music is beautifully demonstrated in this album, which I would highly recommend. **PT**

RECORDING
 MUSIC



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Every Home Should Have One Original Album Series/Classics

By Alan Sircom

A few years ago, some bright spark at Rhino records (since the late 1990s, a division of the Warner Music Group) decided to sell us our music once again. Armed with the vast back-catalogue of 50 years of pop, rock, soul, R&B and every other kind of contemporary musical genre from the Warner, Elektra and Atlantic stables, Rhino came up with the 'Original Album Series'. Around the same time, another bright spark at Sony Music had the same idea, plundering its Arista, Columbia, Epic, Legacy, Sony and even RCA back catalogues to form the 'Original Album Classics' series.

Who came up with the idea first is immaterial, the concept is very similar. These are mini box sets, each containing several CD pressings of original albums from the artist or band in question, all in repackaged card versions of the original album sleeves. The concepts differ slightly; the Rhino sets are usually five albums in strict sequence, focused around a well-known disc from the artist; Sony's series include three-disc sets and frequently skip over the big hit album of a particular artist (this might not be a bad thing; if you are looking to buy five Carole King albums, the chances are you already have *Tapestry* in your collection and might resent buying it once more).

In both cases though, the whole concept is very much pandering to those who were there at the time. Let's be honest, no-one in their 20s today is likely to rush out and buy a five-CD set of the best Foghat or Dokken albums.

The logic is impeccable, especially from the stance of selling you what you already own while it's still possible. You were there at the time, you may have these albums on vinyl, but possibly only one on a CD transfer, and these five-disc sets allow you to fill yer boots with the remaining discs you never bought – or bought on CD. It doesn't matter if the plan is to replace worn out old LPs – or pad out that discography you never quite finished at the time – with CD versions for playing on a player or to rip the albums to a computer, the concept works because the five-disc set is generally sold at only slightly more than the full price of a new CD, making the discs cheaper than downloading the music through iTunes, for example.

The collection of Original Album Series and Classics are both a little random – Sergio Mendes and Pantera or Smokie and Patti Smith are not typical musical bedfellows – and it's designed very much for an American audience (The Young Rascals, for example... and who in the UK would ever listen to five Warren Zevon albums?), but there are some gems in there from a

range of genre (Donny Hathaway, Roberta Flack, Dr John, Rickie Lee Jones... even Echo and the Bunnymen and the B52s).

The good and bad news is these are not remasters, just repackaged versions of the original (or most recent) CD pressings. In other words, it's pot luck whether that means you get a carefully transferred version of the original, free from the current drive to push the recording into the 0dBFS brick-wall, or the result of get the CD out quick mid-1980s drive-by mastering.

I've bought about a dozen of these sets since they launched, and it should be said that the sound quality has been mixed. The 2008 Byrds set from Sony covered the albums from *Mr Tambourine Man* to *The Notorious Byrd Brothers*, were the 1997 excellent Vic Anesini Super Bit Mapping masters in a cheaper package. On the other hand, the 2010 Little Feat box are the 1980s transfers – fine, but with a muddled sound that's no match for the original vinyl.

Although at this price, why bother complaining? You could buy three box sets for the price you might pay for single album über-pressing from Japan. Buy 'em while you can. +



Original Album Series: Rhino Records.
Original Album Classics: Sony Music.
Both typically under £20 per set

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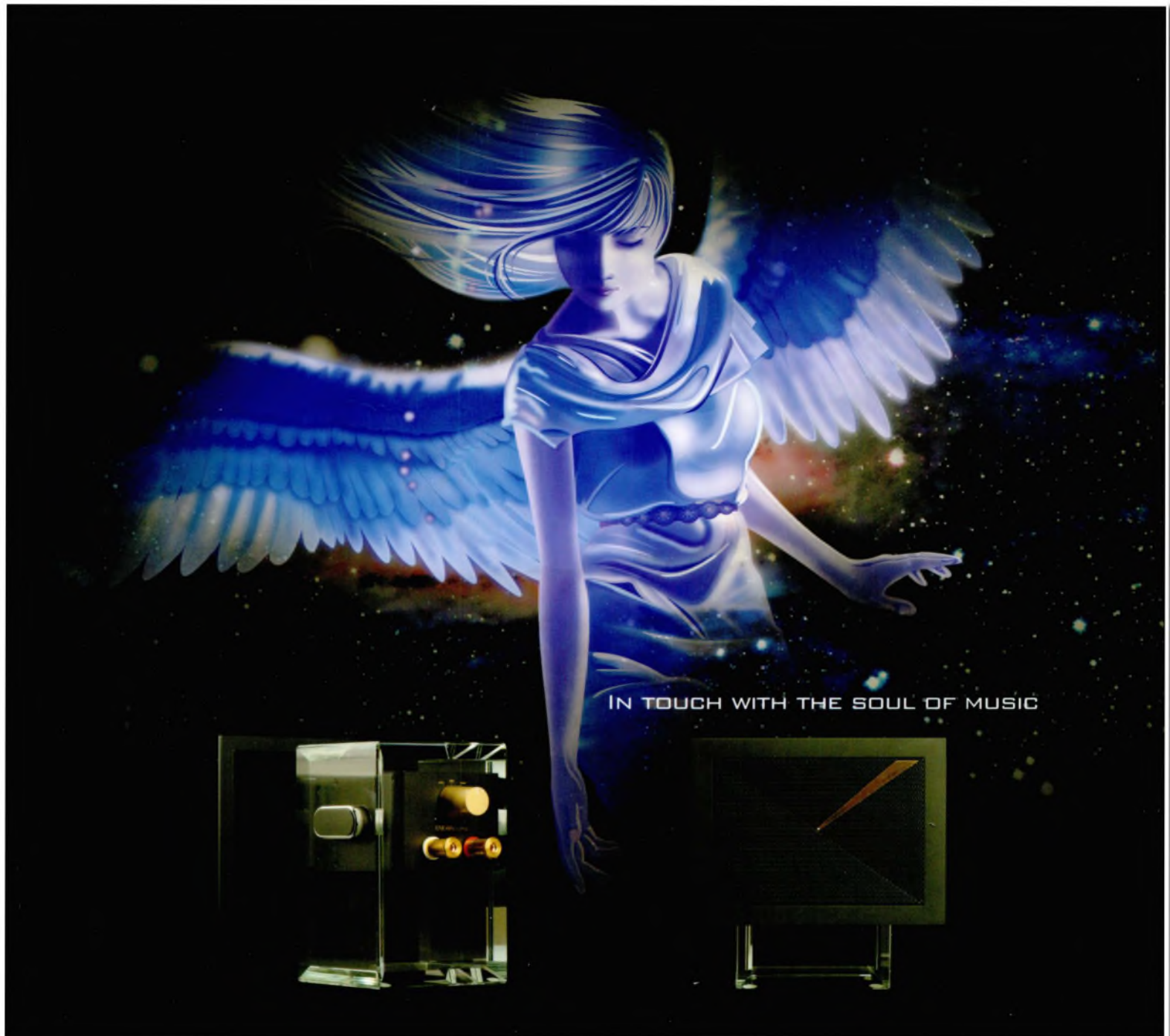
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