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*'Seduces the listener with realism and a sense of scale...
The Summit X will own your heart from its first notes'*

Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News (November 2009)

*'Reference-grade performance that you'd struggle to match
at double the price'*

Alan Sircom, Hi-Fi+ (Issue 66)

*'The Summit X is just too addictive to live without. I'm putting
my money where my mouth is and buying the review pair as
my new reference loudspeakers'*

Howard Kneller, SoundStage! (September 2009)

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W

elcome to the future!

This is the first issue of *Hi-Fi Plus* of 2010. According to old *Tomorrow's World* episodes, we should all be wearing silver-foil clothes and riding round in flying cars by now. So much for predictions. Still, this new decade is set to create some futuristic and significant changes to the way we acquire, store and even listen to music. Our 'guide for the perplexed' about computer audio is merely the recognition of that. Where we go from here... who knows? We are in the midst of those great changes already, but how they pan out and what those changes ultimately mean for hi-fi remains unclear.

What's truly fascinating about the hi-fi industry in 2010 is just how diverse it has become. State of the art computer audio systems rub shoulders with valve phono preamplifiers that wouldn't look out of place 50 years ago. The latter holds extra promise for the future too, because vinyl is very much back in fashion again. A surprising number of people born long after LP's sun was supposed to have set are setting aside their iPods and picking up phono once more. At the moment, this counter-culture is very retro; vinyl old and new is played on 'cool' old hi-fi systems. But, unlike those who would choose compressed music with artefacts as 'good enough', this suggests there are under-25s still taking sound quality seriously. But what's most exciting about this is that vinyl refuses to die.

Unlike CD. By the time you read this, Linn Products will have very publicly dropped its CD player range because it claims the downturn in CD and CD player sales makes the product line untenable in the long term. Whether this is the beginning of the end of CD remains to be seen, but I don't think Linn will be alone in making this decision.

Before we plunge headlong into the future, I have something of an apology to make. There are a number of projects that I had on the boil, intending to make it to this issue. A whole series of notes on products I have reviewed are sitting in my note pad. Then swine flu hit, and hit hard. Somehow, your ability to write cogent copy is undermined by the desire to cough up a rib or two. Fortunately, a good selection of the country's best writers were more than capable of picking up the baton, but my apologies go out to Musical Fidelity, Acoustic Solid, The Cartridge Man, Unison and all those companies who were expecting to see their reviews in print this issue.

Still, now you know some of what will be in the next issue, just so long as I steer clear of pigs wearing sombreros.

Alan Sircom
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contents ISSUE 70 EQUIPMENT+

COMMENT

- 5** **ALAN SIRCOM**
Music Matters
- 6** **THE HI-FI HERETIC**
The View From The Other Side
- 8** **INCOMING**
Your letters and emails

MUSIC

- 82** **CONTEMPORARY**
- 87** **AUDIOPHILE AND JAZZ**
- 91** **CLASSICAL**
- 96** **EVERY HOME SHOULD HAVE ONE**
Half Man Half Biscuit –
Back in the DHSS



- 54** **SUBSCRIPTIONS**
- 71** **BACK ISSUES**

- 10** **AUDIO PHYSIC CARDEAS**
floorstanding loudspeaker
- 22** **LAVARDIN IS REFERENCE**
integrated amplifier
- 22** **LECONTOURE MOBILE 160**
standmount loudspeaker
- 30** **MAGICO MINI II**
standmount loudspeaker
- 37** **CONRAD-JOHNSON TEA-2**
phono stage
- 40** **NEAT PETITE SX**
standmount loudspeaker
- 46** **ACOUSTIC SYSTEM**
acoustic control devices
- 49** **ALMARRO A340A**
mono valve power amplifiers
- 56** **VIVID GIYA G1**
floorstanding loudspeaker
- 62** **THE LARS**
two-box valve integrated amplifier
- 68** **MUSIC FIRST AUDIO**
moving coil step-up transformer
- 72** **GET BETTER SOUND**
audiophile instruction book
- 79** **QUADRASPIRE Q4EVO/SUNOKO-VENT SVT**
equipment support system

FEATURE

- 16** **COMPUTER AUDIO**
A guide for the perplexed
- 74** **BOB SURGEONER**
The Man Behind the Petite

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It's time to go back to basics

music matters

by Alan Sircom

ANYONE INVOLVED IN AUDIO IS CONSTANTLY EXPOSED TO A STREAM OF STATEMENTS that don't necessarily make a lot of sense to anyone out of the audio clique. Statements like "use better power cords to get a better sound", or "putting your CD player on this equipment table will improve its performance," or even "interconnect cables sound different." I think, in the spirit of 2010-ness, these audiophile claims of ours need testing at a more fundamental level.

Over the coming year, I plan to put these claims to the sword. So, instead of picking out individual products, I intend to evaluate generically whether interconnects, loudspeaker cables, power cords, power conditioners and equipment tables really make a difference, and how significant (or otherwise) that difference is. This is also the time to check whether the idea of using the same cables throughout works better than a 'mix and match' or 'bitza' cable set-ups.

Along the way, this should be a chance to experiment and test the tests, to see if there have been any new developments (or even potential developments) in audio testing that need to be evaluated and rated.

"A chance to experiment and test the tests, to see if there have been some new developments in audio testing that need to be evaluated and rated."

To investigate such claims though, you first need to strip back everything. So, I'll be using the same CD player, integrated amplifier and standmount speakers for the duration of the test. But that's it. No more fancy interconnect cables – replace them with giveaways. Speaker leads – from the nearby Wickes. Tables – the floor. Speaker stands – a pair of folding chairs bought a decade ago at the Cargo Home Store. My contention is that then, and only then, is it possible to determine whether the claims are built on firm foundations, or the quicksand of sales pitch.

There are distinct off limits products in this evaluation process. No valve amps or turntables. No computer audio or pre/power combinations. The reason for all of this is they could cloud the results. For example, throwing a valve amp into the mix will potentially highlight changes in support system that might be due solely to microphony that is inherent to valve designs. On the other hand, if a support system makes a change to a solid-state amplifier (something not generally known for its microphony), that's a more significant result.

Similarly, I'm deliberately limiting the scope of this survey to things that connect components and things the

components sit upon; mains products, interconnects, speaker cables, equipment supports and speaker stands. There is a world of things that interact with the room itself, that vary from the scientifically valid (room acoustics panels, often derived from studio engineering) to the 'I didn't know they were making another *X-Files* movie?' products that form a sub-etheric link between our universe and the 'fooniverse'. The reason for excluding these from this round of tests is simply because this series of evaluations could then stretch to infinity.

I'm also doing this as a reviewer, not an editor. If my conclusions find that there's no intrinsic difference between a giveaway cable and one costing thousands, that doesn't mean I have the right to force those findings on other reviewers. As an editor, I believe in freedom of speech rather than the magazine speaking as one voice; if my findings point in one direction and someone else's point in a different one, I should not use my editorial powers to overrule them. But it does mean that while I am testing these products on a more basic level, I will have to politely pass such products on to other reviewers for hands-on testing (Due to flu holding me up, some products tested last year will be printed next issue).

I'm also keen to make this an inclusive investigation. If this is the topic of my regular *Music Matters* column for the next year or so, then I want to invite discussion and argument. As such, I'm hoping this will come to dominate the letters and emails we publish in our *Incoming* pages, and I encourage comments from sceptics and believers alike.

So, your homework for this issue is... what do you think of the plan? Is it worth the effort, as of course these products do/do not make a difference? Should I stick with just the one system? Should I use a high-end, mid-price and entry-level system? Let me know at editor@hifiplus.com. +

The myth of the 'long-term' listening test

the view from the other side

by the Hi-Fi Heretic

THERE'S A COMMON MISCONCEPTION IN HIGH-END AUDIO. The higher the price of the component, the more time it takes to determine how it behaves. This is wholly understandable on a trivial level; if you are about to buy, review or recommend a thing, you had better make sure you got it down pat. Unfortunately, it's also wholly wrong.

Some of the thinking behind this comes from Savile Row tailoring. A properly made bespoke suit takes up to three 'fittings' following the initial consultation for basic measurements, fabric and style considerations. The first (the Skeleton Baste) is on the basic elements of the suit, to make adjustments to that original assessment to check basic fit, and any significant alterations happen at this point. The next (the Forward) is the fine tuning stage, where the basic construction of the suit is virtually complete, and the tailor can make last-minute alterations. The last (the 'fin bar fin' or Finish Bar Finish) is a fitting with a complete suit, save for the hand-felled parts like the buttonholes, to make the completed suit truly designed for the individual. The whole process from initial consultation to receiving the completed suit can take up to two months, but the end result is well worth the wait.

"In other words, the listener becomes acclimatised to the limitations of a piece of equipment and is thus more, rather than less, forgiving."

Most high-quality things don't need that level of bespoke adjustment. Someone buying an expensive car might take it for a test drive or two. They might even be able to borrow the thing for a weekend, but that's it.

Audio is deemed to be different; you are expected to live with a product for months on end to get a handle on the performance. A snap assessment is not enough, apparently. The difference between two products can only be determined by month upon month of listening.

There is a requirement to assess products (I would say 'loudspeakers' because most other things are near enough identical sounding) across a range of music programme, and possibly some system matching – although the synergy of a system is over-exaggerated. This could be performed in at most a day or two, so why the need for months of listening?

I suspect this is related to the 'give it 1,000 hours of running in' campaign. In other words, the listener becomes acclimatised to the limitations of a piece of equipment and is thus more, rather than less, forgiving. It is effectively inoculating

the listener against the bad parts of a product's performance.

Here's what I mean. Walk into a room with a buzzing lighting dimmer switch. You'll hear this almost immediately. Soon after, you'll filter this out. It's still buzzing away, but your brain has overcome that noise. By spending months running in a product, are you just compensating for the limitations of the system in your own head?

Controlled experiments have shown that when the brand name and the appearance of a loudspeaker are removed from the testing process, listeners quickly and consistently select the product that has the most linear measured performance. So, what's the point of the long-term listen?

A long-term test is unlikely to be performed blind, so it will be influenced by people learning to like the look of the product as well as learning to compensate for the sound quality. By way of contrast, a short, level-matched blind test effectively factors out the look of the product and its idiosyncrasies. Ultimately, a double-blind test is the least biased, but as they tend to conclude that there is no difference between most of the components magazines need to review, such things appear all too rarely.

By relying on a long-term sighted evaluation instead of short-term blind or double-blind listening tests, hi-fi magazines replace something that is directed toward delivering a more linear, more accurate sound with a test that compensates for limitations. Which means less accurate products make the grade simply because the reviewer spent long enough to get used to them.

The paradox is that if you spend long enough with a product, you learn to overcome limitations in its performance too. So, why should we be concerned? Because the term 'hi-fi' is short for 'high fidelity', and if you are choosing less able products that you learn to love, isn't that infidelity? +



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incoming

HIGH END AUDIO BUSINESS MODEL

As an audiophile, I'm acutely aware that audio retailers are the crucial link for high end audio to succeed. Unfortunately it's becoming increasingly difficult to audition high end audio equipment in all but the largest metropolitan areas. So I'm profoundly confused why audio retailers are not aggressively trying to convert perspective clients to the audiophile ranks. The audio industry appears to be transfixed on a small group of older males with financial assets, trying to get them to continually upgrade their audio equipment. While this approach does sell some very expensive audio equipment, an increasing and alarming number of high end manufacturers and retailers are going out of business. I'm confounded why a different business model is not being used.

The current business model has long been contributing to a serious contraction of the high end audio business rather than growing it. A new business model is sorely needed to attract new customers. Its unlikely students preoccupied with portable and cheap low resolution music or people trying to establish careers and families can be converted. But there's a significant potential audiophile customer base (35 to 50 years old) who have the financial means and have begun focusing more on themselves by that age.

Many in this age group have never truly been exposed to high end audio having been seduced by low resolution consumer electronics, price and portability. Audio retailers should begin targeting this age group via advertising and direct mail, inviting them to experience high end audio – at an acceptable price point! Many will become converts once they hear for themselves how awesome well recorded music can sound. But an affordable audio system would have to be assembled with a wow factor that would seriously impress perspective customers responding to this offer. Sound is paramount and price is critical in this business model, a complete audio system (speakers, amplification, digital or analog source, rack incorporating energy control, synergistic cabling, power conditioning, and room acoustics), costing roughly \$10,000 or less that provides the listener with credible coherence, articulation, imaging, and dynamic range.

Not a 'consumer electronics retailer' type of business model, but rather experienced and knowledgeable audio retailers that emphasize component synergy, system setup and tuning, and provide a good listening environment and experience. Audio retailers that can straightforwardly demonstrate to people what defines a good audio system, and are willing to provide follow-up service to ensure customer

systems are setup properly. Audio retailers prepared to provide service beyond the sale and mentor prospective clients at all price points. A good percentage of people receiving this kind of treatment will become repeat customers.

This business model would change the focus from targeting a small group of audiophiles at high price points, to building a much larger customer base highlighting good audio starting at a price competitive with a consumer electronics video system. It would also reestablish stereo as the primary system objective to contain cost, and emphasize music. This business model has the capability to grow high end audio.

Leonard White, via email

DIGITAL ENLIGHTENMENT

I am a dyed-in-the-wool valve guy. I've even had a pair of beautiful but overpriced Wavac 805 monoblocks with 55wpc, but when I bought a pair Quad 2905 electrostatic speakers, I had to change to a pair of valve monoblocks which gave 160wpc from valve called the '156' – the product was made by a Chinese company that only recently resurrected the tube (Eastern Electric also makes these products).

Unfortunately, the 'needle' on one of the monoblocks began to stick – this needle shows the output of the amp – and I sent it back to the dealer. I got a cheap pair of NuForce digital amps to make-do in the meantime.

The valve monoblock weighed about 55lbs and was huge. The Nu-Force monoblock weighs 7lb and two of them can be held in the palm of your hand. Output is 200wpc into 8ohm and 300w into 4ohm, and they went GREAT with the 2905s, which surprised me. When the other amp returned I decided to compare the two mighty valve power amps with the cheap and cheerful digital amps, which were the SE models just released.

I sent back the valve monoblocks and kept the digital ones.

They are linear (so the manufacturer says) up to 100kHz and, despite claims to the contrary, only a handful of manufacturers' amps are as good as that. Plus, only about three companies have overcome the many major problems involved in digital amps. These ones really do 'sound' like a valve amp – the very best of valve amps I should say – and also has the best of what solid state amps give, so you might be interested in reviewing them at some time. Valves and Quad Electrostatics go hand in glove but I assure you, the Nu-Force go even better.

That is point one... point two follows:

I also had a £24K dCS digital system which was considered to be by many to be the best in the world, until dCS brought out even more expensive gear... but I decided to take a chance and traded it in. What I got instead was an Apple iPod and Iomega harddrives and a MSB Platinum Dac III. MSB supplies many top hifi manufacturers with 'stuff', which then becomes that particular manufacturer's property, but MSB have been going now for 25 years and possibly lead the whole of the American hi-fi scene when it comes to music being recorded onto hard disc.

They 'did something' to the Apple iPod which I hold or have resting on the arm of the settee I sit in. It is wireless, it controls everything – volume, pause, forward, backwards, lets you see the artwork of 11,350 songs I uploaded onto the hard drive of the Apple – all the artwork is there whether you view it on the screen of the iPod or the screen of the MacMini with Snow Leopard software.

I have many different ways of finding a particular song or album or singer and uploading all my CDs to the hard drive was simple and easy. As was finding the artwork, the that the computer didn't find for itself that is. The end result means that anyone who buys very high priced CD replay systems is actually doing themselves a disservice.

The replay is fantastic. What I now have is easily the best I've ever had regarding a replay system. Naturally vinyl still sounds better but the MSB Platinum Dac III replays the CD at 284kbps and sounds as good as the dCS stuff. Anything put on the hard drive at 24bits sounds even better. I have been told that the Dac will do 32 bit when someone introduces CDs at that level of clarity. From what I've read, no other manufacturer has gone anywhere as far as MSB have in their DACs or iPods capabilities and the MSB stuff is modular. They pay you what you paid for it and give you the new one when it comes out. Their products are very expensive, although not in the league of dCS when it comes to pricing.

There you are... there IS a new world out there for digital replay and it can be had for a fraction of the price and sound as good or better as what went before. I hope this has been of some interest to you. The digital amps are awesome, those that are working properly and all the bugs ironed out of them, I can sincerely say, hand on heart, that these three grand digital amps sound better than any solid state amp or valve amp I've heard, irrespective of price... but, can I exclude the Japanese £150K valve amps please as I've

never heard them! And the Iomega drives are perhaps the best available to date for musical replay. They are the ONLY ones I would buy, as I believe that all other makes do not give good sound, and music is all about Quality Sound in my book.

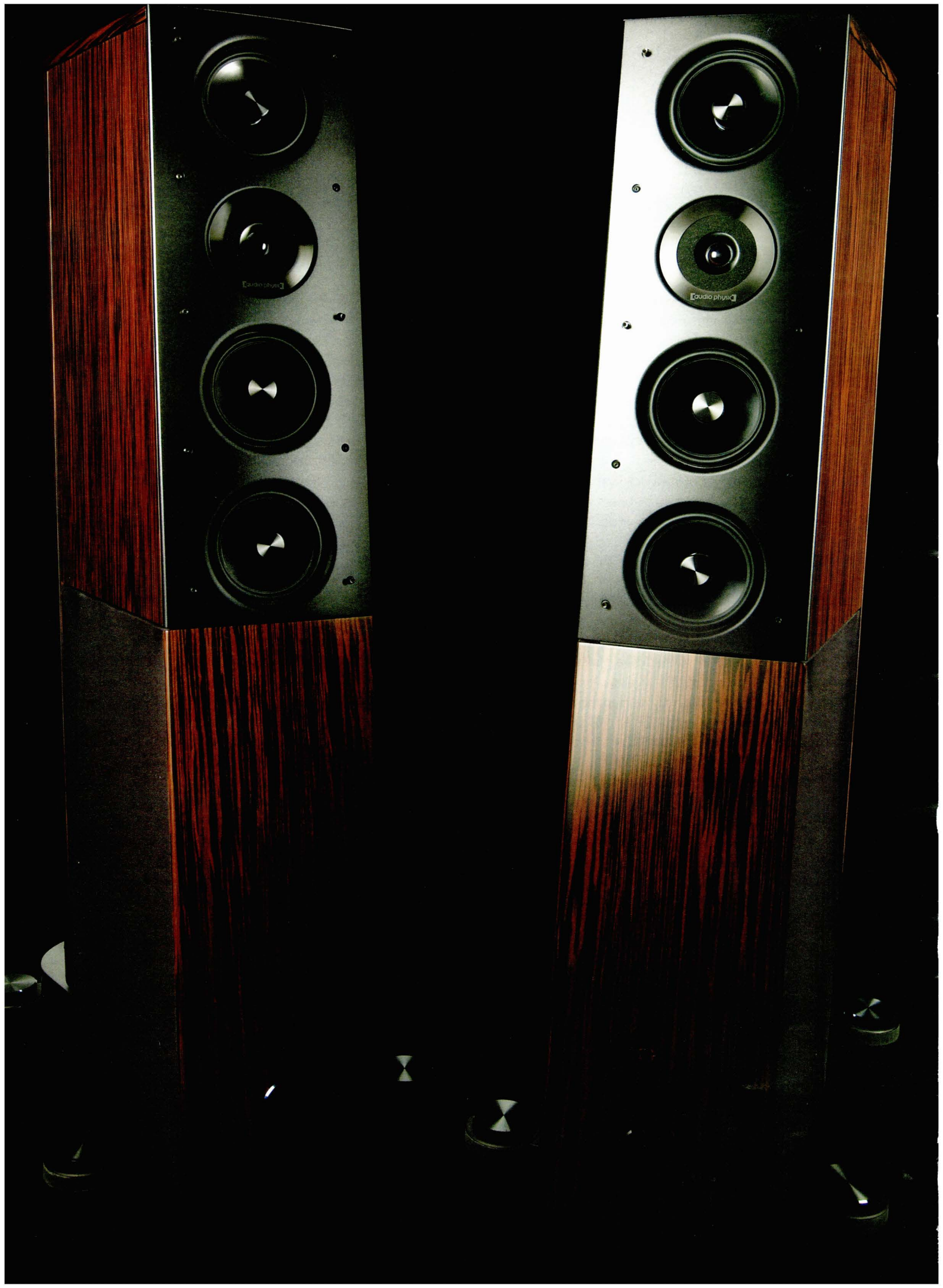
I think I'm right in saying that MSB are superior to anything available at the moment re the DACs – they are about £6.5K retail and I know you can get cheaper which may not do what the MSB can do but if you're paying thousands in the first place why not get the best?

It would be interesting to read something on the above subject... not only the digital amps I mentioned but also some sort of hard-drive system but please find out what MSB do to the iPod which no-one else does and what their DAC can do which others can't before you write a review – just food for thought as I saw the writing on the wall. Maybe in a couple of years time people with very expensive digital front end equipment may not be able to give them away; dealers won't want to take them in or if they do they'll be offering an insulting price – methinks this is the way forward for the future... yes, it's been the way of things, downloading compressed music for a long time now, but I can now do it too; 24 bit and clarity far better than CD. I look forward to hearing it soon, but right now I'm having too much fun with my 'new' system.

Des Diamond, via email

We reviewed the MSB converter last year, as part of a CD transport/DAC combination. It is extremely good. It's worth noting that dCS's latest disc playing solutions can also be used to connect to a computer using asynchronous USB and other companies are doing the same. The computer audio wake-up call is ringing round the hi-fi club as I write this.

As to the NuForce amps, watch this space later in the year – Ed. +



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Audio Physic Cardeas

by Alan Sircom. Photography by John Hytch

There's something reassuringly European about the Audio Physic range. Elegantly designed, subtle and very well thought out, the range is well-built, priced intelligently and manages to be popular both with the flat-earth crowd (after a bit of quality away-from-the-wall speaker action) and collectors of high-end Americana wanting a loudspeaker that fits in with our European design sensitivities.

The Cardeas is second from top in the Audio Physic range, but the Kronos flagship is long in the tooth now. And for once, Audio Physic trickles technology up, not down. The key stories in recent tales of Audio Physic centre around the company's Hyper Holographic Cone Technology, which first appeared in the Avanti and Virgo 5 models further down the line. Then came Cardeas, which takes the technology up a notch or six. In Greek mythology, Cardea was the goddess of protecting the home, but at 55kg, it's probably your spine (rather than the door hinges) that needs protecting.

Cardeas is a sealed box loudspeaker, medium-large by European standards and it requires a relatively large room in Eurozone terms too. This is in part because the Cardeas is a deep loudspeaker that needs to be a metre or so away from side and rear walls and needs to be a good 2.25 metres apart. But the old Audio Physic recipe of firing across the width of the room, with speakers set far wider than usual is not required here. It's more conventional in layout and room design.

What hasn't changed is the narrow front baffle that made Audio Physic so ground-breaking in the first place. The slimmer the front of the speaker the better the imaging, but with that imaging comes increased diffraction effects causing unwanted peaks and dips in the frequency response (this is usually perceived as increased coloration instead of obvious frequency anomalies). There are many ways around this (horn-loaded drivers, stick-on cork or foam surrounds, and the rest). Audio Physic's plan has been to use incredibly careful drive unit placement to minimise diffraction, but ensure the drivers are doing their level best to prevent diffraction effects in the first place.

Part of that is the use of the new Hyper Holographic Cone driver technology; yes, Audio Physic takes the rare and difficult path of designing its own drivers. In the woofer, this custom driver uses an aluminium frame with a plastic inner basket (most designs use plastic or metal, not the two together) allowing the heat dissipation properties of the former to blend with the improved damping of the latter. In the tweeter, Audio Physic went right back to the foundation stones of box speaker design and has just reinvented the cone tweeter for the high-end, albeit a cone tweeter with a dome sealing element presenting to the listener. Cone tweeters went out of fashion years ago, because they were either too stiff or too heavy, resulting in a tweeter that quacked like a duck or rolled off not long after the top registers of a bass guitar. Much of those problems were due to the relatively limited materials on offer some time ago and new low-mass, soft materials effectively solve those problems. The result is effectively the elimination of the ringing effects that can plague dome tweeter designs. A foam surround aids

the reduction of diffraction effects and Audio Physic's neat Active Cone Damping system (a silicone/rubber ring on the outer ring of the cone pushing back on the cone during its excursion) helps cut down ringing still further. All the drive units are ceramic-coated aluminium designs.

The result is a big, passive three and a half-way design with a 260mm side-firing bass unit, two 150mm mid/bass units, another 150mm unit as midrange and a 39mm dome on cone tweeter.

Isolation is a key part of the Cardeas ethos. The inside of the cabinet is multi-chambered to isolate the individual speaker 'ways'. The tweeter, mid, mid-bass and each individual WBT binding post are independently mounted on what Audio Physic calls its String Suspension Concept, while the tweeter's crossover is directly wired, eliminating the need for potentially resonant PCBs in the high-frequency region. The WBT posts already rest in the company's Vibration



Control Terminal; to then further isolate them from the surroundings is either gilding the lily or taking vibration control very seriously. Either way, it's impressive from a taking things seriously point of view.

This is one of the most character changing speakers out there. Out of the box, you'll get on the phone and start moaning because the speaker sounds 'pony' (Cockney rhyming slang – Pony and Trap...). A week ►

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► of through playing later, a magical transformation happens and everything beds in nicely. We used the Cardeas in a system comprising Oracle's sweet-looking, top-loading integrated CD player into a Belles VT-01 pre and 200 watt mono power amps. This made a perfect match for the loudspeakers, and fits nicely into the 40-350W amp recommendations Audio Physic suggests for the Cardeas. From a bit of experimentation, when it comes to power amps, transistors are your friends but tubes should be approached with caution. It's not a tough load, but those bass drivers could go all 'plummy' when used with an amplifier that thinks damping factor is something to do with a barometer.

The Cardeas does everything Audio Physic traditionally does well, great imaging, clean and detailed presentation, crystal clear midrange tonality, but with more, and more bass to boot. This was perhaps one of the stumbling blocks of previous Audio Physic products like the classic Step; the cheaper models were ideal for small rooms, but the bass was either MIA or slightly out of, ahem, step with the rest of the performance.

The Cardeas has a clever and revelatory bass. It's not there until you need it, then it kicks in perfectly well, perfectly accurately, perfectly deeply. There's a very slight warmth to the upper mids; mild enough to pass unnoticed on any normal speaker, but the clarity of the rest of the Cardeas is so remarkable that its mild warmth (it makes a dreadnought acoustic guitar sound more like a jumbo acoustic guitar) is apparent. The fact that it's only noticeable on specific instruments – and really likely only noticeable to someone who gets the difference in tonality between a dreadnought and a jumbo – paints it as really mild. Like so mild, you'd forgive it on a speaker costing twice as much.

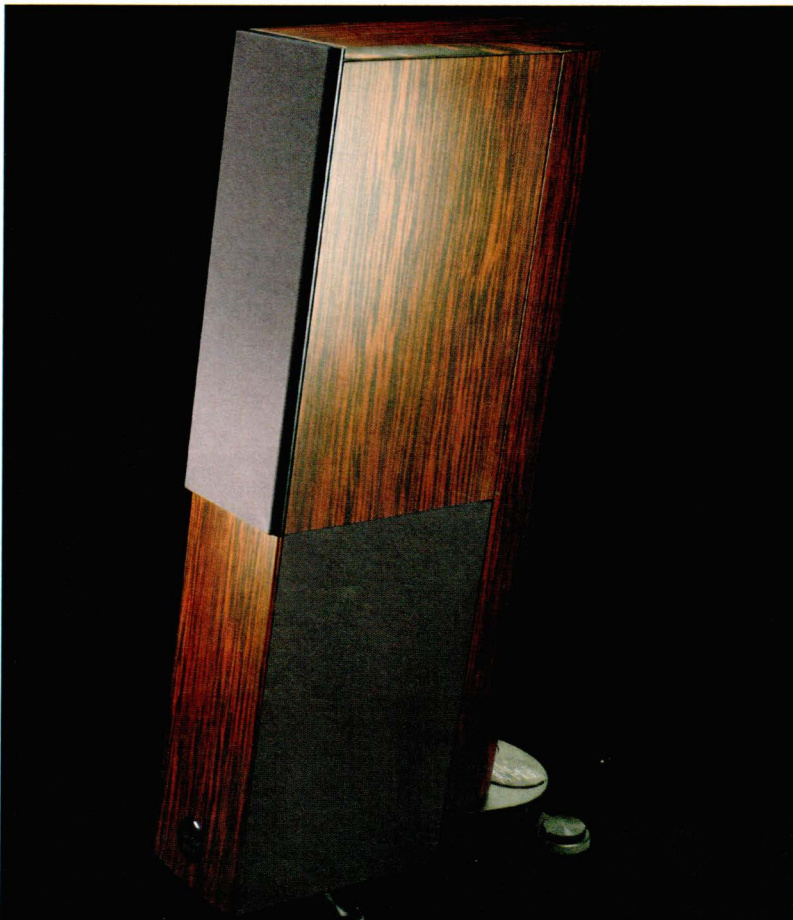
Ray LaMontagne's *Trouble* exemplifies precisely what is good about this loudspeaker. The loudspeaker is perfectly good at processing his unique blend of alt.folk and alt.country, making the presentation musically enticing and articulate. What it also does is act like your inner musicologist. The level of

“They will make almost any other loudspeaker sound like it's got a righteous overhang and a bass boom.”

detail in the mix makes you pick out not just all his performance, but the performance of those who influenced him. One track sounds like he's singing with the Band, another sounds like he's standing in for Van Morrison and so on. The same applied to the excellent eponymous XX album – all those 'Nico sings while Joy Division meets the Cure' dismissals on tracks like 'VCR' are valid, but behind that is a new band that actually has something of a bass-line. That's crystal clear here.

These are some of the cleanest, driest sounding loudspeakers I've heard, but in an entirely correct way. They will make almost any other loudspeaker sound like it's got a righteous overhang and a bass boom. Don't take that 'dry' sound for 'light'... this is a deep, powerful and dynamic sounding loudspeaker, just not one that adds any sense of excess fat to the sound. This might be disconcerting for people more used to the box joining in with the musical celebration, but it makes things like Little Feat's *Dixie Chicken* (on Mobile Fidelity) sound more like you are in the studio than in the listening room.

And out of the listening room, too. It's one of the secret acid tests of any good speaker system. If it sounds good outside the room, it's often doing something right. By removing your direct attention to the sound and listening to it at one remove, you hear almost unconsciously how the system sounds in terms of musical cohesiveness and dynamic drive. It's here that these speakers sound pretty damn fantastic. Kenny Burrell's *Midnight Blue* is a fine example of this. Cool ►



► guitar, sax and percussion jazz from the late 1960s, it's not that difficult to get this to sound good in the listening room, but walk out of the room and it often sounds remarkably flat. Not here, the sound is like the guys hanging out in your living room. Short of donning an Austin Powers outfit, calling people 'hep cats' and having drummers called 'Clem' on speed-dial, this is as close as you can get to recreating the event in the home. Niiiiice.

One of the things I've always admired about Audio Physic is their inability to shout music at you. In this respect, they are very much like the best BBC designs, only without the sense of restraint some of those thin-walled loudspeakers bring to the party. But where the BBC designs are almost frozen in time (thanks to that part of the corporation being closed down), this is the speaker for those who want to take that classic line of development a step further from a sonic standing. This loudspeaker raises that power exponentially. The tweeter is the sort of understated player that never gets in the way of anything, and it's only when you go back to other brash, tinny, tizzy, hard, soft, bright or dull sounding tweeters, do you realise what Audio Physic is doing is so very right in this speaker. That extends further down the audio band than usual, too, with remarkably honest sounding midrange and bass.

This helps make sense of Shostakovich's Trio for Piano, Violin and Violoncello, which is one of those strange pieces of music that often sounds more musically coherent the smaller the system is. It sounds fantastic and entirely understandable when you play it in a car, but often full-range systems focus your attention on the fireworks at the expense of the musical themes going on behind that. This still gives the weight to the music, but adds in a lot of the musical information that is left behind by many more 'flashy' systems.

Imagery is an interesting issue with the Cardeas. Like much of the overall performance, it doesn't grab you, but gently impresses you with its unforced, natural soundscapes. At first, it takes some getting used to, because so many products try to paint so obvious an imagery picture that they could make mono sound like surround sound. Put on something rich and deep – like Ali Farke Toure's last album – and the soundstage fills out. Instruments and voices hang in the space between the speakers like they were nailed there. Then replace it with something more close miked and lacking in air – like the Vampire Weekend album – and the soundstaging goes away. But not the fun – this poorly recorded album is the polar opposite of what constitutes good audiophile recording, but is full of the sort of energy that the modern music scene is so good at. Many high-end speakers will reduce this to the unlistenable pile; the Cardeas doesn't 'pretty up' the sound, but it makes it sound enjoyable.

If there's a drawback to this, it's that many who are in the market for a big statement loudspeaker are after big statement sounds. This is like the best two-way loudspeaker grown tall, with none of the problems you can sometimes get with a too-large two-way. That's a recipe for tightly focused sound and real-world instruments, but if you are wanting 200' tall pianos and piccolos with added 64' organ pipes, look elsewhere. I'm exaggerating somewhat, but those who equate high-end with 'big audio' will find these speakers wanting... for all the reasons that make them a world-class design.

Audio Physic's latest docks alongside some serious players in the high-end world – all the big high-end loudspeaker names have products at this price point, although some of these brands consider the Cardeas' price to be an entry point. This was a concern, because it would be so easy to come up with a loudspeaker that adds nothing that wasn't covered by the rivals. Instead, the Cardeas manages to add to the pantheon of high-end. If you are tired of large-



scale loudspeakers sounding big and fat and boomy in the bass, and want something that delivers big speaker scale with all the fast, precise and detailed performance of a neat little two-way loudspeaker, this is arguably the best of the bunch. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Audio Physic Cardeas
 Three and a half way floorstanding
 loudspeaker
 Infinite baffle design
Driver Complement:
 39mm HHCT cone tweeter
 150mm HHCM midrange
 2x 150mm HHCM mid/bass units
 260mm bass driver
Frequency Response: 25Hz-40kHz
Sensitivity: 89dB
Impedance: 4 ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD): 30.5x119x59.5cm
Weight: 55kg

Price: £16,500 (depending on finish)

Manufactured by

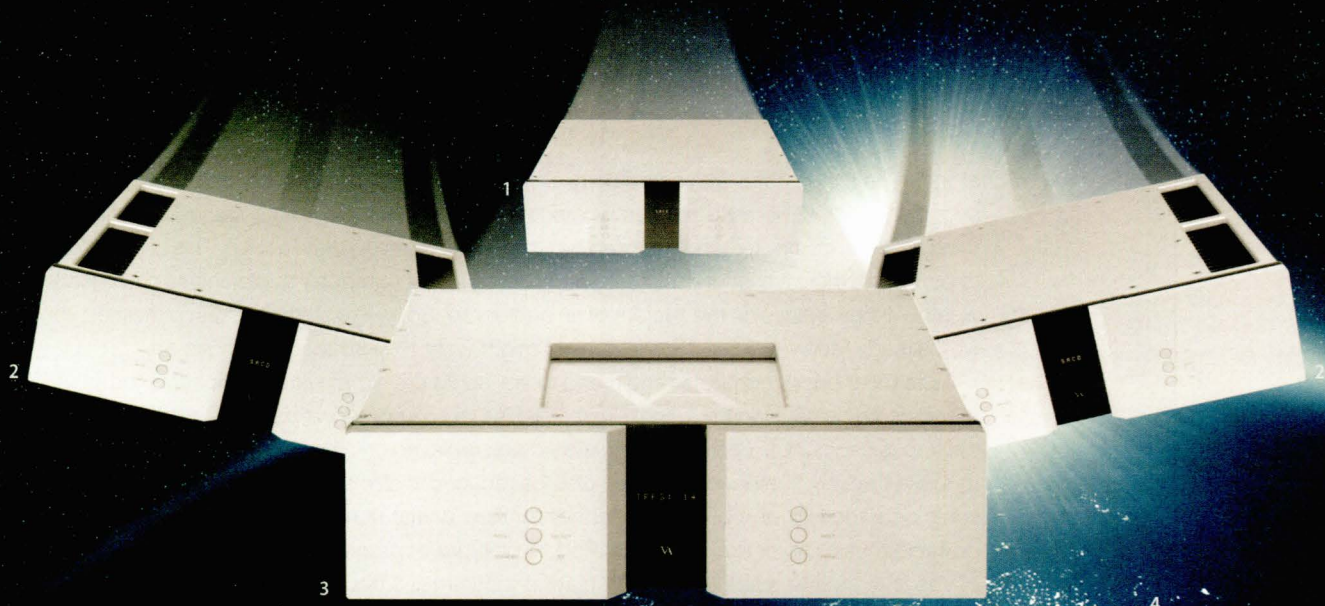
Audio Physic
 URL: www.audiophysic.de

Distributed by

C-Tech Audio
 Tel: +44 (0)7738 714 619
 URL: www.c-techaudio.co.uk

v i t u s **VA** a u d i o

music is indeed a journey,
so we create products that deliver a performance,
which can only be described as truly out of this world...



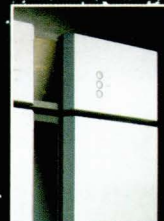
- 1. SL-101 Line Pre-amplifier
- 2. SM-010 Monoblock Amplifier (NEW)
- 3. SCD-010 CD Player
- 4. RC-010 System Remote Control

manufacturer


Vitus Audio, Denmark
+45 9626 8046
www.vitusaudio.com

uk distributor

Metropolis Music, UK
+44(0)1435 867 438
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computer audio: a guide for the perplexed

by Alan Sircom

et's start on a high note; with an apology. This feature is intended as a beginner's guide. It starts by making almost no assumptions whatsoever, except that the reader knows there is such a thing called a 'computer' and they can be used in the home to play 'audio'. This is not intended to patronise; there's a lot of misinformation circling about computer audio and its place (or even whether it has a place) in the system of an audiophile. So, we're starting at first principles; those who already feel well-versed in the subject might want to skim-read. Or move on.

At its most basic, computer audio and digital audio are almost interchangeable terms. A CD player could be considered a single-use digital music computer without too great a stretch, and the tracks on your CD can be copied, stored and replayed on a computer without any alteration to those tracks whatsoever. Files can also be reduced in size (compressed) for storage with no sonic degradation, or reduced still further to allow a vast number of tracks to be stored on a portable music player like the Apple iPod. A plethora of programs exist to control the process of copying, storing, organising and replaying those music tracks.

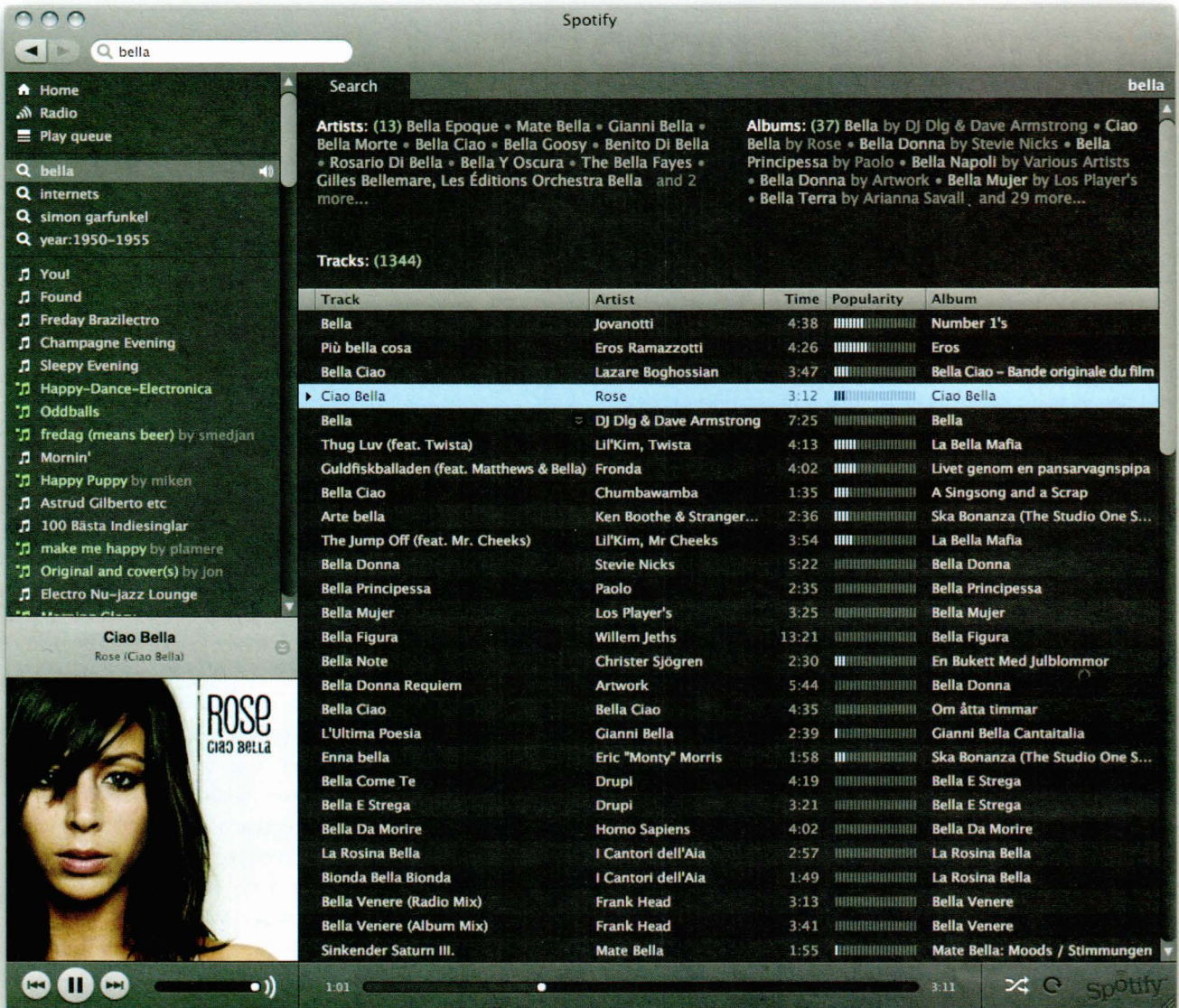
The addition of the internet and music downloading websites means you no longer need to use a CD as the carrier for your music. An increasing number of these sites now offer music in CD quality and beyond. The addition of audiophile-quality digital processors (DACs) with computer-grade connections either as well as or instead of the traditional coaxial S/PDIF, optical Toslink, balanced AES/EBU or high-quality optical ST connections, means the computer can deliver digital audio potentially at least on a par with your existing digital audio player.

An exciting new twist in the computer audio tale has been the impact of 'music discovery' sites like Last.fm and Spotify (opposite). These allow audio 'streaming', near instantaneous live access to any track or album on these companies libraries at the click of a mouse. Used wisely, these sites allow the listener to preview the music they intend to buy, before they buy.

Where to start

We're getting too far ahead too soon here. Let's start with the basics. Any home computer built in the 21st Century has the potential to be used as a source for computer audio. Of course, the newer the computer, the more computing power, memory and storage it's likely to have as standard, and it will be fully compatible with the latest software.

In most cases, buyers will have a choice of an Apple Mac or a Windows PC of some description, although a handful will prefer using the Linux operating system in place of Windows on the same basic PC architecture. Apple generally commands a premium, but is arguably the first choice for those who want an off-the-shelf music player solution, known as iTunes. Windows (by Microsoft) also has a default music player solution (known as Windows Media Player), but its principal strength is offering a vast array of alternative music software systems,



and most are free. Linux is growing in popularity and comes in many guises, but the operating system is arguably more intimidating for the new user. Endless arguments have raged over the superiority of one format over the other, but the reality is the distinctions are fading as the systems converge.

For music use, there are potentially more important concerns than the choice of operating system. Such as, if the computer is to be used in the same room as the system, how quiet does it operate? If it's to be used elsewhere,

“Any home computer built in the 21st Century has the potential to be used as a source for computer audio.”

will it form part of a network and if so, what kind of connections will be used. Today, typically many computer audio DACs (whether inside an amplifier or as a separate entity) assume you will be plugging a quiet computer or a laptop into your system and choose the USB connection. This has the advantage of being the easiest to set-up, but imposes a restriction on cable length between the USB port at the computer and the one at the DAC (the official limit of a USB cable is 5m). Firewire is a popular alternative to USB, especially in the

music business, but this is predominantly an Apple digital path and this means more rare, more expensive products that support the format (Apogee and Weiss are supporters of Firewire).

A more permanent connection – and one that can allow computers around the home to be connected into the system involves home networking, usually using the CAT5 cabling system and a multi-pin Ethernet connector. At this time, Ethernet-enabled DACs are less commonplace (Linn being the most public supporter of Ethernet at this time), but as the technology permeates through the audio industry, so such products will form a key alternative to USB. A third option is to use WiFi (wireless fidelity) connections to link a remote computer to an audio system. There are already systems that exploit this pathway (often using Apple's Airport system, such as ▶

computer audio: a guide for the perplexed

- ▶ Resolution Audio and Micromega) and more are expected soon. The stumbling block for some of the networked options has been displaying the album or track info from a computer in one room to a system in another, but even that problem has been largely solved thanks to smart phones being able to double up as a remote control.

There are also systems that take over the whole audio front end. Music client systems like Sonos and Logitech's Squeezebox include the display and D/A conversion in a single box that becomes just another source for your preamplifier or amp, with all the file storage handled by a remote computer in another room. This computer becomes known as the 'music server'. More exotic versions of this arrangement exist specifically for audio (Qsonix, Meridian Sooloos) and for audio and video (Kaledescape).

Files of all shapes and sizes

The tracks on your CD are, in fact, individual data files, stored in a format called WAV in PC speak, or AIFF for Apple users (the difference between the two files is down to byte order, but although this might be of great importance to geeks, has no audible bearing to sound quality). These are uncompressed 16bit, 44.1kHz PCM files, exactly the same as those read by every CD player since the early 1980s. As each CD can store

up to 650 megabytes of information, storing lots of CDs on a computer without any form of compression will soon eat through a lot of computer hard disk space. Data storage is cheap these days, but the amount of time it would take to archive and access all those gigabytes of information slows things down and kind of defeats the object of the exercise.

This is why compression is used. The word seems to automatically send shivers down the spine of an audiophile, but it need not be so scary in reality, because there's compression and then there's compression. The wholly benign form of compression is lossless. As the name suggests, the file is shrunk to take up less storage space but without any negative effects to the sound file itself. For the digital photographers out there, this is like taking a huge TIFF file and using ZIP compression to store and send it out. When the file is used, it's unpacked to its original size and no one's the wiser. Common lossless compression systems include ALAC (Apple Lossless





Audio Codec), APE (Monkey's Audio own codec) and FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec) and typically shave the file size by anything between one third and one half.

The next stage is data compression, as opposed to file compression. This uses complex perceptual coding algorithms to determine not what data can be thrown away, but what musical instruments. As we fail to hear sounds that are masked by similar, louder sounds, so these quieter sounds can be removed to save space. There are many different types of this kind of 'lossy' compression (so called because once that data is lost, it cannot be retrieved) but the most well known is MP3. The result of all this space saving is that where FLAC can halve the size of a music file, a 128kbps MP3 file can shrink the file by as much as 11:1.

Different levels of compression can be applied to a piece of music, a trade-off between space saving and audio quality; a 320kbps (or kilobits per second) file is notionally indistinguishable from an uncompressed 16bit, 44.1kHz PCM track but results in a relatively large file, while a 96kbps file of the same piece of music will result in compression artefacts that undermine the performance on almost any kind of playback (these can manifest as swirling 'flanging' sounds). Somewhere between the two lies a comfort zone for most people, but for serious listening on large hi-fi systems, most audiophiles seem to prefer lossless files.

War, what war?

With different architectures and file types, this sounds complex and like the start of a format war, but the reality is completely different. Most of these systems are more similar than they

are different, and they rely on the same basic protocols throughout. That means in most cases, if you buy one system and decide you want to change, your music comes with you without complaint or without bother on your behalf. In the case of the music player programs, they act independently to the music they play, because data is data. Some formats are proprietary (Apple's Lossless coding, for example) but transcoding to more universally used formats is possible and doesn't affect the music files. The days of the format war are hopefully over in computer audio.

There are decisions to be made over the choice of music player, but these are to do with picking out a system that suits your way of listening to music, not about influencing the sound. For many, music player means iTunes, Apple's almost ubiquitous media player software. It's the default choice of the Apple Mac user and the Apple iPod and iPhone user, which makes it incredibly popular. Other media players are available though, and some prefer the functionality or the simplicity of the alternatives.

For PC users, good choices include MediaMonkey, Foobar2000, WinAmp, and many more. Apple users get Songbird as an alternative to iTunes, with more to follow. Linux users get Rhythmbox and everyone can use VLC. Hardcore users also use a standalone 'ripper' software to transfer your music from CD with absolute clarity. Good rippers include Exact Audio Copy and dBpoweramp for PC, Asunder for Linux and Max for Mac, but unless you have a lot of very scratched discs, you'd struggle to hear the improvement. It's worth exploring the options here, but it's easy to get bogged down in minutiae, especially as each has its own set-up idiosyncrasies.

As with the choice of hardware, the software used to play can be considered a fit and forget, one-time choice, but if you decide to experiment with different software, the files will not be altered by the investigation process. Endless arguments rage over which software is best, but the differences are usually ones of taste and functionality rather than performance. ▶

computer audio: a guide for the perplexed

- ▶ In every other way, a computer audio source behaves like just about any other source. The analogue output (ideally from a DAC) connects to analogue inputs on your amplifier or preamplifier. The change this computer-side system is having on the industry means sometimes even the DAC is built into the amplifier itself, and we expect this to become more commonplace.

Yes, but why?

The fact that you can do all this with a computer is wonderful, but what relevance does it have to good audio? One of the biggest misconceptions currently in hi-fi today is that computer audio means compromised audio. It's not hard to see why; many people consider computer audio to be synonymous with MP3 and those same people generally consider MP3 to be synonymous with low-quality MP3. While there are a lot of low quality MP3 tracks in circulation, this does not represent the entire story of computer audio; companies like Linn and HDtracks are now delivering music at master tape quality levels. But even with files that are as good as the original master tape available, the question remains; why should I bother?

There are many answers, but two of the most important are convenience and quality. Computer audio systems give you near instantaneous access to your whole music library. This has a fascinating effect on the way you listen to music. Although you still end up listening to complete works at a time, you also tend to investigate your music collection more thoroughly, as everything is to hand. On systems like the Sooloos for example, you can 'swim' through your record collection, picking out tracks connected to one another by drummer, producer, orchestra... you name it.

Then there's the quality issue. Many feel that CD files sound better when freed from being played direct from the CD, because you are not relying on on-the-fly error correction and because you aren't relying on an opto-electronic mechanism prone to vibration issues. But CD is only the start; high quality downloads offer potentially SACD and beyond sound quality in the home. This is something that only a few years ago was the stuff of

“Many feel that CD files sound better when freed from being played direct from the CD.”

dreams; music companies selling the Crown Jewels for not much of a premium. Now, it's becoming a reality. Again, expect to see such things blossom over the decade.

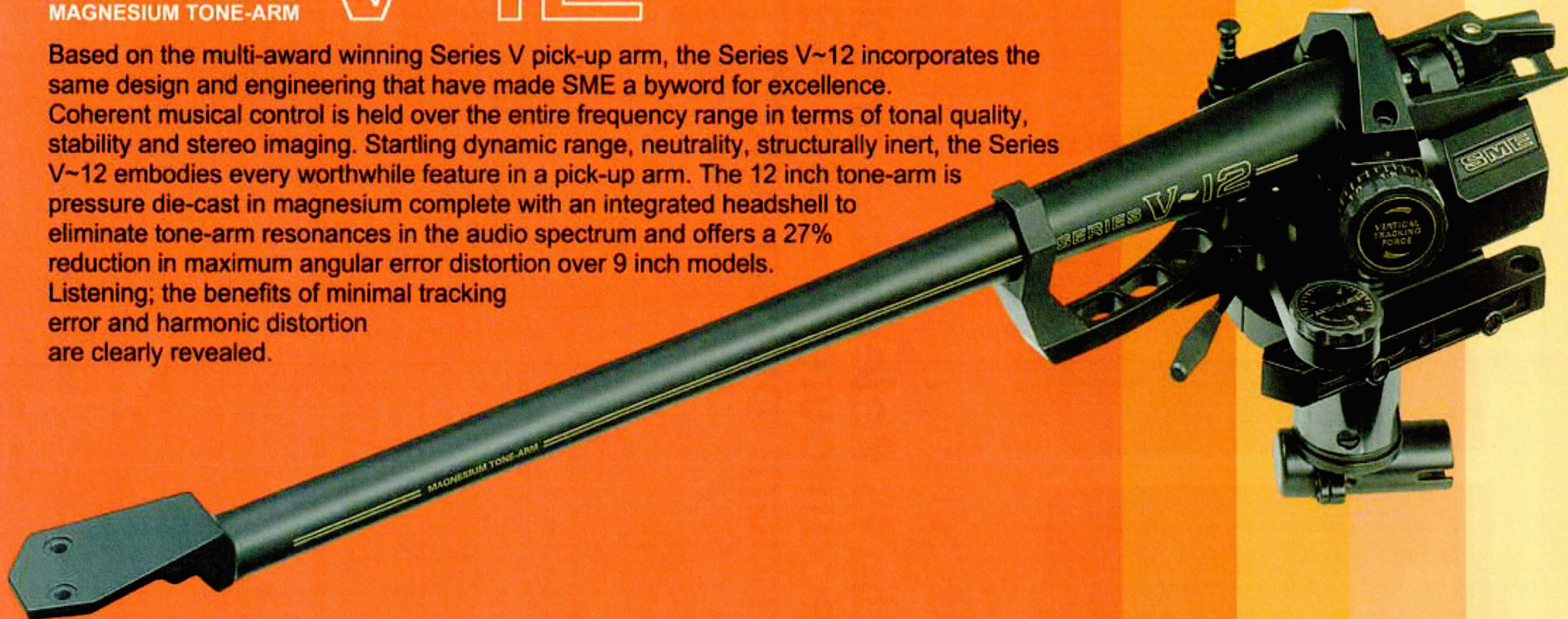
So maybe, the answer to the big computer audio question is not 'why?', but 'why not?' Computer audio will be a key theme in hi-fi of the second decade in the 21st century. It begins... now. +



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



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“The best pick-up arm in the world”



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Lavardin IS Reference amplifier and Lecontoure Mobile 160 standmount loudspeakers

by Ed Selley

It's relatively easy to put together a complete system. As a reviewer, you get on the phone or send an email to the right company. As a customer, you put yourself in the hands of a dealer. The result is the same, a complete package of great, good, bad or indifferent performance that should suit your tastes and room. But what happens if you are planning an upgrade?

That idea forms the basis of this test. Taking a good CD player as a starting place, what happens if you add in a similarly good integrated amp and speakers? Interestingly, it quickly became apparent that the make and model of player is almost immaterial. Although no-one's going to use several thousand pounds worth of system with a £20 second-hand clunker player and you are unlikely to partner this system with a player costing tens of thousands of pounds, anything between these two points works fine. So compatible in fact that mentioning the player is almost churlish. Other comparisons (to my existing amp and speakers) are altogether more important in the grand scheme of things.

Longer serving *Hi-Fi Plus* readers may remember the Lavardin IS Reference amplifier from way back in April 2001 where it left a sufficiently lasting impression to earn Product of the Year award. Having established that we liked the IS Reference as much as we did, why bring it back for review at

all, especially given that eight years have elapsed in the meantime? The answer (quite apart from "because we can") is that the products arranged here are the extension of the Lavardin design philosophy to include cabling and loudspeakers and for as long as the company avoids sources and supports, the closest thing to a full system incorporating the company ethos.

At the heart of the system, the IS Reference is unaltered from the original review. A slender integrated chassis, weighing less than seven kilos unboxed, the IS Reference is entirely unobtrusive. A pair of rotary knobs on the front panel selects between the four unbalanced line inputs and controls the volume. Otherwise, the Lavardin is completely free of controls with a few screw heads and a power light by way of adornment (there is a hard power switch on the rear panel). The casework is well built and feels solid to the touch but those who believe that any good amplifier should induce a hernia simply by looking at it may wish to go ▶

DEFINITIVE AUDIO



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.



- 1. KSL Kondo M7 Line Preamplifier
- 2. Living Voice OBX-RW Loudspeaker in Ebony
- 3. New Audio Frontiers 845 SE Integrated Amplifier
- 4. KSL Kondo Neuro Integrated Amplifier

- 5. SME 2012A Turntable with KSL Kondo iOJ Cartridge
- 6. New Audio Frontiers KT66 Legend Integrated Amplifier
- 7. Kore-Eda LLA-1 Control Amplifier
PLA-1 Power Amplifier



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KSL Kondo | Living Voice | New Audio Frontiers | Van Den Hul (cartridges) | SME | CEC | Kore-Eda | Sugden | Art Audio | Western Electric | Resolution | Esoteric | Reson

▶ elsewhere. The unique design feature of the IS Reference remains the efforts that the company has gone to in reducing 'memory distortion.' For those unwilling to spend too long considering matters on a sub atomic level, the entire circuit of the IS Reference is designed with a view to reducing the effects of the 'memory' of current flow that Lavardin states limits the performance of all other solid state amplifiers.

The Lecontoure Mobile 160's are a standmount design of relatively large proportions. This is in part due to their unusual design. The front consists of a relatively conventional compliment of a 25mm soft dome tweeter and a 160mm Polymer woofer. The rear panel is more unusual as it is a separate plate that is attached to the cabinet and contains a further 210mm driver that functions as a passive radiator and gives the Mobile 160 a surprisingly hefty low end for a standmount design. Connection is made via a single pair of terminals, with no provision for bi-amping or bi-wiring. The stated sensitivity of the Mobile 160 is 87.5dB/W, which seems curiously insensitive to partner up with the 45 watt IS Reference but in practice, the combination did not seem to lack any headroom when used together. The review pair were supplied in an ash finish and the quality of the cabinet work is excellent.

In keeping with the restrained design ideals of the amp and speakers, the supplied Lavardin cabling is slim and finished in a resilient black plastic shielding. Lavardin has made strenuous efforts to continue the suppression of memory distortion through the design of the cables and like the IS Reference, the results of this are well built yet unobtrusive units with most of their innovative thinking

concealed from sight. The interconnects and speaker cable are available in a variety of pre terminated lengths which should allow their use in all but the most cavernous of listening spaces. The mains lead appears to only be available in one length but this should again be sufficient for most environments.

Listened to in isolation of its partnering ancillaries, the IS Reference still makes a better justification for itself in five minutes than any deliberation of the specification or the workings of memory distortion is ever likely to. The overall effect is an amalgam of amplifiers – some music can be so open and valve like as to cause the brain some moments of discomfort when the eyes try

“The IS Reference makes a better justification for itself in five minutes than any deliberation of the specs is ever likely to.”

and reconcile the little black box with the sound the ears are processing. By the same token, the assurance of timing and the grip with which the Lavardin will secure over bass lines is something not possessed by any valve amplifier I have ever encountered at this relatively sensible price point. These two ▶

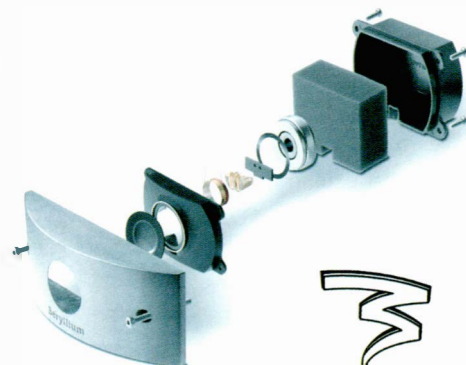


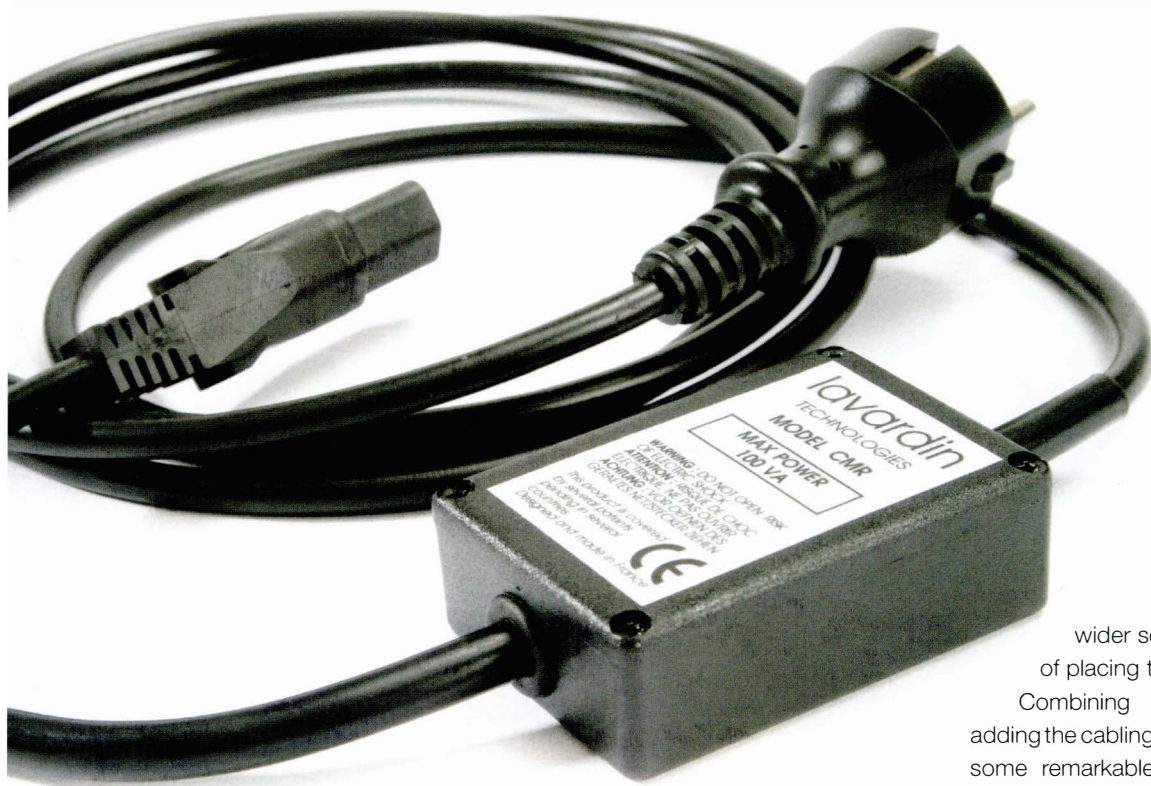


Electra 1000Be 2 - small details, great effects.

How do you improve a range that has been as successful as the Electra 1000Be? These, after-all are the speakers that brought the benefits of beryllium to the audiophile masses. With over 30 years of expertise in loudspeaker and drive unit design, Focal have always been aware that attention to detail is paramount, and a fine example of that resolve is here in the new tweeter diaphragm of the 1000Be 2. Only 2 millimetres larger, and artfully re-profiled, this remarkable dome (identical to that used in our flagship Grande Utopia) is a large contributor to the greatly improved performance. Simply put, you'll hear more music, and less loudspeaker. And for movie fans, the matching centre, subwoofer and surround speakers provide a cinematic revelation - every nuance that the producers intended. Focal Electra 1000Be 2. Experience every emotion.

Available in three standard finishes - *Champagne* (pictured), *Basalt* and *Slate Grey*.





wider setup, I preferred the results of placing them 'inboard.'

Combining these components and adding the cabling into the equation produced some remarkable results. The effect is of great accuracy but with the space, airiness and sense of life that it so often absent in solid-state amplification and makes valve ownership such a satisfying experience. The wonderfully idiosyncratic new Regina Spektor album *Far* is relayed with the passion and the intensity intact but with a low end that is the happy partnership of the Lavardin's skills in this area and the rear facing driver of the Mobile 160's. The transparency of the pairing – to which the supplied cabling

▶ diverse skills are partnered naturally together with no sense of split personality or contradiction. The IS Reference simply straddles two design ideals without ever landing hard in either camp. The natural tonality it possesses is achieved without warmth or wooliness, while the timing and grip are not easily provoked into any sense of stridency and harshness. It would be wrong to say that there is no discernable character – given that nothing else sounds quite like the IS Reference it has to be in some way distinctive – but the tonal balance of the system is likely to be affected far more by the nature of the sources than from the IS Reference.

The Mobile 160's demonstrate many similar attributes and are clearly the result of the same thinking and philosophy. Initially connected to my own Electrocompaniet ECI3 so as to allow me to get a 'fix' on their behaviour before connecting them to the Lavardin, they demonstrated remarkable neutrality and control which was perhaps at odds for how I expected a speaker with fifty percent more drivers than usual for a design of their size to behave. The Mobile 160's present a calm, detailed and totally unflappable view of the music. As you might expect, their bass response is strong for a design of this size but there was nothing like the level of interaction with the rear wall that might be expected from such a driver arrangement. If you are seeking passion and soul in addition to what might already be present on a recording, the Mobile 160's are unlikely to appeal. They will replay what they are given and make no apologies for it. Due to the asymmetric positioning of the tweeters it is also possible to experiment with the positioning of the speakers. Having the tweeters canted 'outwards' can increase the width of the soundstage if you are forced to position the 160's close together. In my



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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Lavardin IS Reference amplifier: £2,460

Lecontoure Mobile 160 loudspeakers:

£2,244 per pair

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URL: www.midlandaudiox-change.co.uk

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- ▶ seemed to support – ensures that you are given the opportunity of listening to the recording as it is. Only any personality present in the source equipment affects the reproduction. If this sounds somewhat clinical, that is not the intent but the assembled equipment is clearly intended to be a window on the music and will not sugar-coat proceedings. However, it is possible to secure a more emotional performance from the Lavardin by substituting something less accurate than the Mobile 160's. I spent an enjoyable evening with a pair of Audio Note AN-K SPz's in place and the result was warmer and in some ways more fun, but lacked the accuracy and superb low end of the Lecontoure design. The combination was able to achieve volume levels far higher than normally required with CD but vinyl users should consider a phono stage with a reasonable amount of gain.

The Lavardin and Lecontoure combine to form a cohesive and extremely talented system. They reflect well on the stated intention of Lavardin "to respect music." Any recording played via a source of similar design ethos will be presented in a beguiling but accurate and neutral manner. There will be a number of people who would prefer to accentuate the IS Reference's

open and unforced midrange by choosing speakers that are perhaps more emotive than the Mobile 160's and the Lecontoure's themselves will show more emotion on the end of less accurate electronics. For those who want to enjoy the experience of hearing what the artist and studio intended via a beautifully built and well thought out set of components, this combination takes some beating and deserves to be auditioned. +

"The Lavardin amp and Lecontoure speakers combine to form a cohesive and extremely talented system."



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Magico Mini II standmount loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom

There's a question that hangs around all kinds of branches of consumer electronics like a bad smell in a camper van – "Yes, but what's the best?" It's a nebulous question when you think it through, because it comes without qualification. An Aston Martin might be the best car ever made for posing round the Côte d'Azur, but it's almost pointless when taking the wife and kids out for a long weekend. A glass of Château Pétrus isn't going to make the grade when it's Château d'Yquem time. So, what's the best? It depends!

However, when it comes to standmount loudspeakers, the Magico Mini II makes a strong case for being the 'best'. You just have to think 'best' in everything it touches to make it so.

First, to get the best from the best, you need the best in amplification. The Magico Mini II is a power hog. The 87dB sensitivity and nominal impedance of four ohms is deceptive, as is Magico's claim that amplifiers between 50-250W fit the bill. The reality is you are going to need an amplifier at the top end of that scale as an entry point. The amp doesn't need to be disturbingly expensive, but it does need to deliver a lot of power well. Of course, the reality is if you are partnering a £35,000 loudspeaker, the chances are you won't be using it with a £350 amplifier. The amplifier (or at least the power amplifier) also needs to be solid-state – no anti-valve bias here at all on my part, but you'll struggle to get flub-free bass with hollow-state tech no matter how much you spend.

The room too needs to be the best. There's a misconception that standmount loudspeakers are designed for smaller rooms than floorstanders. This is patent nonsense and the Mini II is the perfect buster for that myth. The Mini II needs a really big room to come to life. Think 6x4.5m as a starting place. You'll need a good metre from the rear and side walls too. And it needs to be a ground floor room, because weighing in at 90kilos per side, if you try to put these upstairs in some homes, you are just inviting entropy and slipped discs.

Rolling out that 90 kilogramme per side statistic highlights why the Mini II are among the 'best' in standmount loudspeakers. The reason for that crazy weight comes down to the cabinet construction. The 'tree' part is made from 16 horizontal layers of inch-thick, 17-ply Baltic birch plywood. This is heavily cross-braced internally, but that's just the start. The 'metal' parts (the front and rear panels) are made from inch and a half thick aircraft-grade aluminium panels, anodized and curved to reduce diffraction. The drive units are connected to the 'metal' part and there is no mechanical coupling between 'metal' and ▶

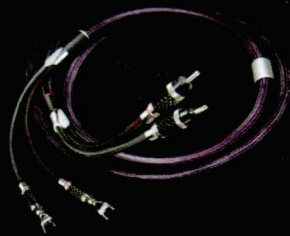


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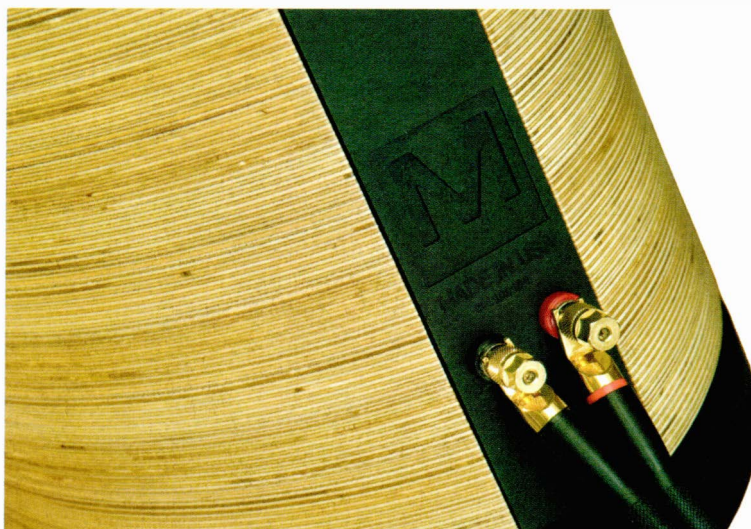


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► 'tree' at all. With such an uncompromising (read: bloody heavy) loudspeaker cabinet construction, the stand needs to be more than just some light, rigid affair. You could make a high-mass stand out of steel, but what's the point of using a stiff metal material that has great resistance to ringing and low energy storage like aluminium in the loudspeaker, only to use a material that has none of those properties for the stand? So, the backbone of the stand is aluminium, which contributes heavily to the stand's 54kg weight. The speaker is further decoupled from this mighty stand using ball bearings, and contributes a 2.7 degree backtilt to help time-align the loudspeaker drivers.



“This is a loudspeaker built by people who have never heard the phrase ‘built to a price.’ That obsession rubs off on the purchaser... if it doesn’t match your room, change your room.”

That loudspeaker is a two-way, sealed box design, featuring the 25mm Scanspeak Revelator ‘ring radiator’ textile dome tweeter with a phase plug (commonly considered to be the best – and certainly the most expensive – dome tweeter money can buy). This is coupled to Magico’s own super light, super stiff woven carbon-fibre sandwich basted with carbon nano-tube Nano-Tec 178mm mid-bass unit. Both drive units sport neodymium magnets; not uncommon in tweeters, grotesquely expensive in a bass unit. Nothing is left to chance, nothing is compromised in any way; even the voice coil is made out of titanium wire. And the crossover uses Magico’s Elliptical Symmetry Crossover (ESXO) design, which includes things like silly-money Mundorf capacitors the size of a man’s fist.

Going back to the ‘best’ claim, from the sheer roll-call of parts alone, it fits the bill because everything else looks compromised by comparison. This is a loudspeaker built by people who have never heard the phrase ‘built to a price’. That obsession rubs off on the purchaser; there are no finish options apart from the end-on ply and black aluminium sections. If it doesn’t match your room, change your room. No quarter given, or expected.

That also means the Magico Mini II makes huge demands on all the equipment that feeds it. Once again, this doesn’t spell ultra-expensive equipment, just intelligent partnering. The better the partners, the better the performance. And you will want the best performance out of the Magico Mini II; even if you start out with a good system, you’ll upgrade to get the best out

of that system because the Mini II demands it. It’s when you discover why the ‘Mini’ part of the name is significant, because you might end up spending as much as a Mini Cooper on the CD player, the same again on the preamp and as much as the house in Kensington that goes with the Mini Cooper on the power amps. No quarter, remember.

So, what does the ‘best’ standmount sound like? Nothing like a standmount. It sounds a whole lot bigger and deeper than any standmount you’ve heard up to this point. It’s got all the sublime ‘hairs raising on the back of the neck’ powers of Magico floorstanders, that remarkable ability to stop you in your tracks and force you to listen to any piece of music you might think about playing through the speakers. But this time with the sort of musical simplicity that only a sealed two-way box can produce. Put simply, it makes the sort of sound that gives you all the pace and energy of classic sealed box Brit-fi rhythm kings like Linn Kans with all the accuracy of good monitors and all the finesse of the a great high-end speaker. That’s a hard combination to beat. ►

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▶ Casting my ears back to the Magico V3 is perhaps a more relevant comparison. The Mini II is the better imager, but the V3 has more bass depth. Neither is a substantial trade. Interestingly though, I believe the Mini II also edges ahead in terms of dynamic range. This is a harder thing to compare, because you are comparing the range across different bandwidths, but I suspect the awesome dynamics of the V3 get an extra layer of awesomeness in the Mini II and that is something truly aw... impressive.

You can't help but throw music at the Mini II and it can't help but throw remarkably enjoyable sounds back. The musical generation process here is second to none, making light work of even the heaviest orchestral piece in a manner most two-way standmounts would panic at.

What criticism exists is largely philosophical in nature. The Mini II is potentially a loudspeaker in search of a perfect amplifier. You and it will never

be satisfied with 'just so', even if that should read 'just so much money that my bank account needs stitches'. This invites an interesting question; can a product be compromised by being uncompromising? I think your reaction to this question defines the Mini II for you. If you think 'yes' then there are a hundred loudspeakers that cost a fraction of the Mini II's asking price that will be almost as good and save you tens of thousands of pounds in the selection process. If not, you just opened yourself up to a world without compromise.

There's a spiritual heir to the Mini II – the Sonus Faber Extrema. Even if the two are completely unlike on every level, they share that headlong charge into uncharted territory approach that makes them at once exciting and a bit terrifying to be with. And, like the Extrema, the Mini II will be the sort of product that still commands high prices and hushed tones years and years after they go to the Great Listening Room in the Sky. There is, of course, the five figure elephant in the room. Can any standmount loudspeaker – no matter how remarkable – really command and justify so high a price? If you look at the Magico Mini II as a loudspeaker, instead of a standmount loudspeaker, it delivers a sound that is

“They share that headlong charge into uncharted territory that makes them at once exciting and a bit terrifying to be with.”

every bit as good as its price suggests. Most people will struggle to make that intellectual jump, but if you are an uncompromising soul with an accommodating bank balance and an equally accommodating listening room, this might just be the 'best' after all. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Magico Mini II

Two-way standmount loudspeaker

Infinite baffle design

Driver Complement: 25.4mm ring

radiator Revelator tweeter

178mm Nano-Tec mid-woofer

Frequency Response: 40Hz-40KHz

Sensitivity: 87dB

Impedance: 4 ohms

Recommended Power: 50-250 Watts

Dimensions (WxHxD, Inc stand):

38x106x45cm

Weight: 90kg

Price per pair: £35,000

Manufacturer:

Magico Loudspeaker Systems

URL: www.magico.net

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Absolute Sounds

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Leben CS-300XS Review
Hi-Fi+ Awards 2009 Issue



CS-300XS



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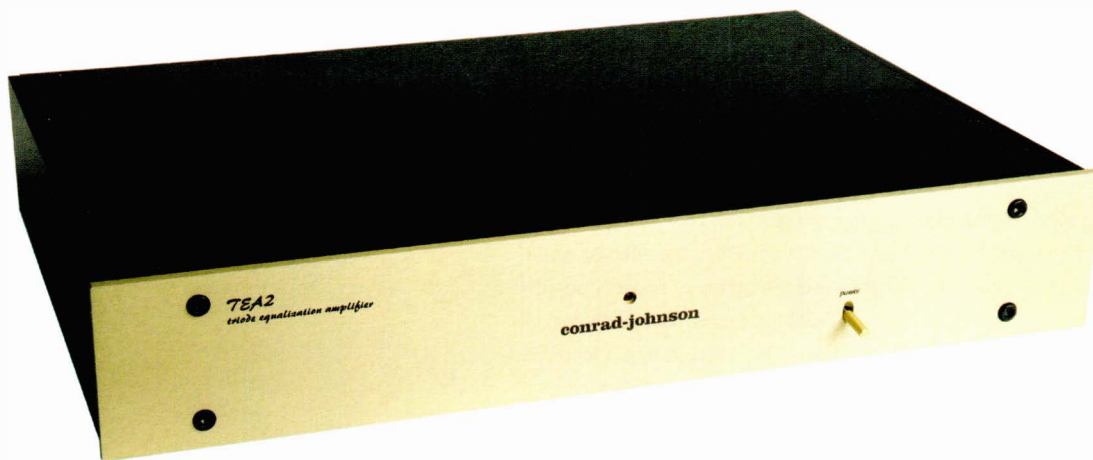


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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

conrad-johnson TEA-2 phono stage

by Alan Sircom

There are so many potential jokes on offer here; an Englishman, reviewing something called TEA from America. If only conrad-johnson was based in Boston. The TEA in the case of the TEA-2 phono stage has nothing to do with our national beverage, instead it's short for Triode Equalization Amplifier.

Following on from the reference-class TEA-1, but at a more down-to-earth price, the TEA-2 follows along the classic c-j lines (it's a good match for the line-only version of the Classic preamplifier, as the chassis are extremely similar and both do a good job of gold-fronted minimalism). In that vein, it's a zero-feedback preamp, bristling with high tolerance parts, with both the audio circuits and the related regulated power supplies exclusively feature the c-j regulars of polypropylene and polystyrene capacitors and precision metal film and metal foil resistors. All the other components and cabling are of a suitably high quality too.

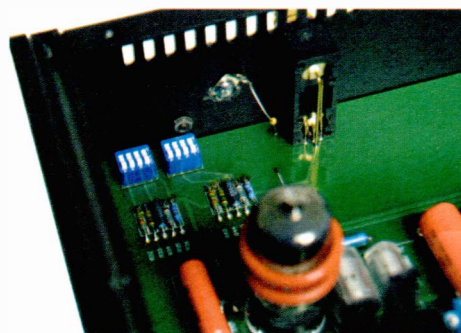
The heart of the TEA-2 is an audio circuit comprising two cascaded single-ended triode amplifiers, with a high precision passive RIAA network sitting between the two amp stages and a high-current MOSFET buffer at the output to give a low output impedance (slightly below 200 ohms). This makes the phono preamp deceptively simple (using only three 12AX7 tubes in total), but accurate (within one percentage point of the RIAA standard curve) and very preamp friendly.

Of course, such an audio circuit relies on a good power supply, or in this case... supplies. The TEA-2 bristles with discrete regulated minimum impedance power supplies, that effectively isolate each section of the amplifier from the other and the mains, to make sure power fluctuations, irregularities and all-round nasties don't affect the performance.

The phono stage comes in two flavours, high and low gain. The high version delivers 55dB of gain, which c-j claims is ideal for cartridges of 1.0mV or below, while the 40dB low-gain version is ideal for higher

output cartridges. Both versions have DIP switch-selectable resistive loading (see image below) to fine-tune the interaction between cartridge and phono stage. Low gain and a step-up transformer would be ideal too.

I used the high gain predominantly with an Acoustic Solid Solid One turntable with a Cartridge Man Conductor air bearing arm and the Music Maker Classic cartridge. This gave a lot of gain (4mV output) and meant the amplifier volume control needed to be handled like a safecracker to keep volume at bay. But this was a good test of the TEA-2's potential for overload. And it didn't, no matter what you chucked at it.



There's something so intrinsically 'right' about the TEA-2. It's the kind of phono stage that makes you wonder why you aren't playing more records, even when you are. It's not sweet or comfy sounding, but it's the sort of enticing sound that makes you just want to listen to a lot of music. ▶

▶ If it didn't sound like a back-handed insult, this would be called a phono stage with a Transatlantic accent. It has the solidity and image size, the sheer detail and the dynamic superiority of American high-end components, but it also has a lot of the up-tempo sense of speed and grip over the lower end that UK amplifiers are often so good at. Ultimately, it's more American than UK sounding and the sense of musical beauty wins over. Those who value their audio by its ability to track the elusive 'boogie factor' of Dr John records will pass on the TEA-2, but those who are less wedded to 4/4 time will find it has a lot to offer. On the other hand, those who do choose their audio equipment by the bar will be more likely to find a friend in TEA than almost any other American, tube (valve) or 'American Tube' piece.

In fact, what this offers is superior musical integrity, and that shows by it not overstating 4/4 time at the expense of other, more complex time signatures. Two easy ways of hearing this are *Dark Side of the Moon* by Pink Floyd and the whole of *Time Out* by the Dave Brubeck Quartet. Both use 'different' time signatures and some phono stages seem to enforce a more simple structure to what are (for the genres) complex temporal pieces. In other words, if you can find yourself tapping your foot along to 'Money' or 'Blue Rondo à la Turk' in an orderly fashion throughout, something is wrong. The TEA-2 clearly shifts from 9/8 time to 4/4 time and back again.

Where that enticing sound really wins out is with a damn good recording, like an old Decca SXL of *the Pirates of Penzance*. This is a simple Decca Tree microphone set-up, and gives you a true sense of sitting in front of a live performance on even the worst set-up, but here the sound comes alive. This is not about image size, solidity, detail of the ability to portray dynamic scale with a right-sized accuracy, it's all about transporting you to the Sadler's Wells theatre to listen to the D'Oyly Carte as a kid. Of course, that time machine activity can only take place when the equipment is good enough to deliver top-notch image size, solidity, detail...

Perhaps this is a sign of something important happening in audio. The TEA-1 is a remarkable reference point for LP equalization, but it's expensive enough to limit the number of people who can reach that high. The TEA-2 reaches almost as high for a significant cut in outlay. That makes it a perfect partner for the new wave of products that deliver almost as much as the reference point for a fraction of the cost (the VPI Classic springs naturally to mind). These two – coupled with a good sub-£600 cartridge from Dynavector, Goldring or Lyra for example, and you could have a turntable set-up for a little over five grand that you might need to spend £20,000 or more to improve upon. Now that takes some beating! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

conrad-johnson TEA-2 phono stage

Gain: Low Gain - 40 dB

High Gain - 55 dB

Overload: Low Gain - 175 mV

High Gain - 50 mV

Hum and Noise: Direct Inputs - 80 dB below 10 mV input

Phase: phase correct

Output Impedance: below 200 ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 48x9x35cm

Net Weight: 6.35kg

Price: £2,450

Manufacturer:

Conrad-Johnson

URL: www.conradjohnson.com

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[sometimes]
technology meets art...





EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Neat Petite SX

by Malcolm Steward

While at NEAT's factory (see page 75), I listened to each generation of the Petite on a simple vinyl and CD system powered by a Naim SuperNAIT. This might not be the most expensive or high-end amplifier set-up, but it is, in my experience, one that is exceptionally musically convincing and, like the newer generation of Naim electronics, far more capable of revealing hi-fi's cosmetic nuances.

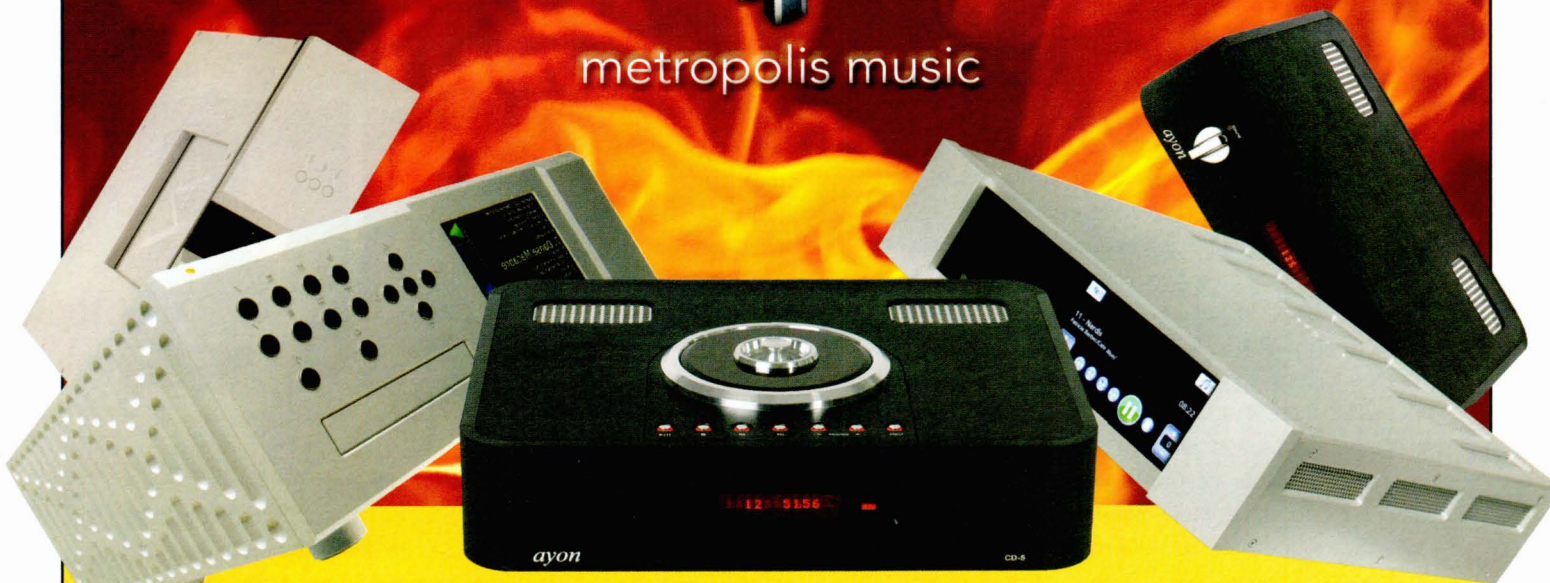
I confess that such aspects have not been important in order for me to enjoy music but, provided the system conveys the fundamental aspects of a performance, a three-dimensional stereo soundstage, air, detail, and transparency can all be bonuses.

Listening to each of the Petites, it became abundantly clear that although the way the first generation design conveyed music was spot-on, its handling of the hi-fi aspects of a performance was, as Surgeoner freely admits, a little wanting. Each subsequent generation retained the same musical confidence and fluency as its predecessor but the cosmetics became tidier and better knitted to the musical structure. One track we auditioned, for example, sounded distinctly two-dimensional on the mark 1 speaker with the backing vocalist appearing to be trying to upstage the lead singer. On the latest iteration, however, she had assumed the correct spatial and dynamic position behind the lead vocalist in what had become a three-dimensional sound stage and she was no longer trying to drown his voice. The improvements in the cosmetic presentation genuinely enhanced the musical performance in this instance, which, in my opinion, is a near remarkable achievement. Indeed, I wrote in 1991 that the Petite owed its performance to empiricism and painstaking tweaking, or what the design team called 'progressive assessment'. (The latest SX iteration has been undergoing 'progressive assessment' for more than 18 months, so it's a rigorous process.)

One thing that hasn't changed, though, are the demands this 'mini monitor' – or whatever the *à la mode* description happens to be at the moment – places upon the rest of the system: it still does not appreciate amplifiers that cannot muster sufficient current to handle dynamic material without clipping even though its HF unit is more tolerant of such than its predecessor; its enhanced clarity throughout the mid-band, in particular, means it prefers no-nonsense cables to the expensive tone control types; and its musical transparency demands absolutely premier league sources because it will show up anything less as disappointing and unrewarding. Accordingly I parked it upon Partington Dreadnought stands and drove it with a new generation Naim CDX2-2 CD player and HDX/XPS2 hard disk player feeding digital inputs on a Naim SuperNAIT connected with Chord Company Signature loudspeaker cables. Analogue signals came courtesy of a Well Tempered Amadeus GT with a Dynavector XX-2 moving coil connected to a Naim SuperLine phono- ▶



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Review of Quad Classic II Integrated by Ken Kessler, Jan 2010 Issue



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► stage. All the equipment was supported by Quadraspire Sunoko Vent stands. While this is a very respectable system it does not perform to the standard set by my regular Naim NAC52/Super-Cap and NAP250s so these were enlisted as well because the Petites will benefit from being bi-amped. This might seem extravagant but please don't knock the idea until you have tried it!

Even before they had warmed up and while still being powered by a little 50W Naim Uniti all-in-one audio player, the Petite SX demonstrated that instantly right quality, by which I mean that when you heard them the music sounded fluent, organic and immediately 'correct'. It flowed cohesively – even Varese's 'concrete blocks' of sound sat totally comfortably within their context in *Amériques* – and all music took on a thoroughly engaging, instinctive character. In other words, it sounded just as it should. And that is not an easy state to attain. How many speakers have you heard that, despite their attractive properties, did not immediately make you want to kick back, relax and become thoroughly absorbed by the music? Quite a number, I would imagine. And, do not forget, this was before the Petites had been fully run in or optimally positioned within the room.

Past experience with the design encourages one to dig out familiar, musically rewarding tracks to ensure that none of the previous model's communicative ability has been sacrificed or diminished in the new iteration. So I began my listening with the Renata Youngblood album *The Side Effects of Owning Skin*. As well as being a very sensual vocalist, Youngblood is also an accomplished craftsman (?) when it comes to song-writing, displaying an old-head-on-young-shoulders approach to composition, both lyrical and musical, along with an occasionally impish sense of humour. All this emerges with striking clarity through the Petite SX thanks, in particular, to the design's dextrous expression of vocal and instrumental phrasing and timing. The SX accentuates the emotional impact of even a slightly syncopated beat, quickly bringing a knowing and appreciative smile to a listener's lips.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect of its rendition of the album was the audiophile nature – in the completely non-pejorative sense – of the presentation. Detail abounded, dynamics were as finely gradated as I have heard, and her exquisite voice, guitar and accompanying musicians were arranged in a wholly believable three-dimensional acoustic. I am certain that this precision contributed to the musical enjoyment of the disc by permitting direct access to the contribution of each instrument in the mix.

The cleverest stunt the SX pulled off, however, was to encourage me to listen to *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* in its entirety... and, what's more, thoroughly enjoy the experience. It struck me here as an exceptionally well-balanced performer: remember this is predominantly acoustic, unaccompanied Dylan so there's nothing to bolster or soften the sound or to diminish the assault of his wheezy old harmonica. By contrast I next played some electric Dylan on the band-backed album *Modern Times*: the contrast between the two albums was not as marked as one might expect. On each, though, it was Dylan's voice and lyrics that dominated the proceedings, which is how it ought to be. On 'Spirit on the Water', Dylan and the band settle into a delightfully lazy jazz groove and one could sense the Petite SX positively relishing the challenge of keeping some snap in the tempo, which it did by precisely conveying the ASDR envelope from every note coming from every instrument... even Dylan's gently tootled harmonica.



The Petite SX, it transpired, is a delightfully open, exceptionally 'together' little loudspeaker. As its designer noted, the bass is a little leaner and tauter than before but this, I feel, is an advantage in that bass is only heard when it is truly meant to be audible: there is no overhang or drone, and notes begin and end as crisply as they should; depending, of course, upon the instrument that is producing them. Furthermore, there is no confusion between bass and kick drums, both having distinct timbre and note-shape that clearly delineate each instrument.

And please note that lean and taut does not equate to lacking in impact or weight. Anyone who imagines that is welcome to crank up the level and listen to 'Bass & Drum Intro' from the Nils Lofgren Band *Live* album in which Wade Matthews and Timm Biery out-Marcus Marcus Miller and out-Bonzo John Bonham respectively with some frenetic and weighty string-popping, slapping, and skin abuse. Every note had almost startling force and note shape, deftly enabling the speaker to expose how Matthews choked the strings to produce his delightful rapid-fire percussive runs and stunted harmonics. It was equally revealing with Biery's drum kit, painting a truly vivid picture of his – often very delicate – touch on the skins and cymbals, letting the instruments decay with accuracy and alacrity. Musically, this is a throwaway piece of virtuoso playing but in terms of pure sonics it was quite captivating.

One would not describe Albert Lee & Hogan's Heroes album *Like This* as being an audiophile recording. It most certainly is not: it contains music that one really wants to hear being played by musicians who display real passion for communicating through their voices and instruments – even in their virtuoso moments. Regardless, the ►



Blue Horizon is a design and manufacturing company specialising in professional-grade audio accessories. The Proburn cable burn-in accelerator is the first in a new range of audio products from Blue Horizon, developed for music lovers who enjoy high-quality sound and wish to achieve an even greater level of sonic performance.

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CABLE BURN-IN **An acknowledged problem in need of better solution.**

It is a well-known fact that high-quality audio and video cables improve over time when used in a hi-fi or home cinema system. A hard, closed-in sound with a distinct lack of bass are the qualities most noted when a cable is new; a cable that has been 'burned-in' will sound more open, extended and three-dimensional, with a more natural, less sterile performance overall.

Unfortunately, most high-quality specialist cables only get close to realising their full potential after months of use. Playing wide-bandwidth music gradually improves the performance of speaker and interconnect cables, yet technically they will never reach optimum performance with music signals alone.

The problem is quite simple. Real music has very little high-frequency energy, and thus will have a limited ability to improve a cable. Research shows that musical instruments may produce energy above 20kHz, but there is little sound energy above 40kHz. Also, most microphones do not pick up sound at much over 20kHz.

Furthermore, even the best burn-in CDs have a limited effect, owing to the limited frequency range of a CD player. A typical CD player has a sampling rate of 44.1kHz (Red Book standard). Digital theory (Nyquist) suggests a maximum frequency of 22.05kHz; the highest frequency is always half the sampling frequency. In reality, 20kHz is about the maximum because of the need to filter within the replay device.

Therefore, while it is accepted that sound, be it composed music or carefully generated frequencies played through an audio system, will improve a cable's performance over time, it must also be accepted that the overall effect is limited technically. Cables conditioned in



Blue Horizon Proburn Cable Burn in machine

"I have absolutely no idea why it does what it does, but it does it all the same." "...the conditioned set sounded like they'd grown more base, the soundstage increased in width and the treble seemed more alive."

Hi>Fi+

this way will never reach their true performance potential. Thus, an alternative method is required. The challenge is two-fold: burn in time and burn in effectiveness. How can a cable be fully conditioned, and the time required to undertake this conditioning decreased from several months to just one day?

Proburn's patent-pending technique fully prepares cables for audio or video use in a way that no amount of music ever can. To put this into context, Proburn produces 10,000 times the upper frequency limit of a typical CD player, which not only dramatically reduces the burn-in time for new cables but also fully prepares and conditions your existing cables. Proburn will also keep your cables performing to their full potential; condition them for 24 hours every six to eight weeks and your cables will remain free from negative charges and static problems.

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▶ wealth of musically relevant detail that the Petite SX managed to uncover on the disc was up there with the amount of information you discover on most tinkly audiophile trinkets. Here, though, this was not detail for its own sake. The clarity with which the Petites conveyed Lee's distinctly vintage sounding, Music Man guitar with lowered pickups, made the instrument and his playing as characterful as it had been weeks before when I had seen him and the band playing an up-close set in a small venue. Furthermore, the Petites took absolute delight in portraying the band's dynamism and their agreeable rhythmic patois that combines Anglicised Country and Western and Zydeco styling with straight-ahead Rock. The speakers also resisted sounding too brittle in the HF, a trap into which I have heard many other 'revealing' speakers fall. The Petites exhibited an almost polite tonal reserve while simultaneously being blisteringly fast and detailed – a neat (no pun intended) balancing act. They also provided – and I never imagined myself ever writing this twice about any speaker that I enjoyed so much – an appreciable, three-dimensional sound stage whose depth perspective was rigidly maintained regardless of instrumental levels or dynamics.

“The Petites exhibited an almost polite tonal reserve while simultaneously being blisteringly fast and detailed – a neat balancing act.”

The purity and cleanliness throughout the midrange, of which Bob Surgeoner spoke, helps portray vocal tracks superbly. Albert Lee and Peter Baron's harmonising on the Everleys' 'Crying in the Rain' was rendered sublimely – a magnificent and inspiring performance in which the singers' voices intertwined with immense subtlety creating a genuine lump-in-the-throat moment.

Perhaps, though, that is the forte of the NEAT Petite SX. It so perfectly recreates the inherent emotion and conviction that underpins a musician's performance. This goes beyond such traditional considerations as frequency response measurements, diffraction and group delay and slithers well and truly into the realms of metaphysics: what is it, for instance, about these little speakers that makes me so enjoy listening to Albert Lee when I would normally run several miles to avoid music that had any connection with Country or Western or, indeed, any band that had a Pedal Steel in its line-up?

The undeniable magic of the Petite SX is that it can portray such a vast and catholic range of music in such a way as to make it totally captivating. In the space of one lunchtime I listened to and thoroughly enjoyed Bobbie Gentry's album *Chickasaw County Child* immediately followed by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra's glorious portrayal of Elgar's Symphony Number 1. That is quite a distance in terms of musical genres, I am sure you will agree.

I think there are two main elements at which the Petite SX excels that make it so effortlessly communicative in musical terms: these are its leading-edge speed and the adroitness with which it resolves micro-dynamics. Fundamentally, the speaker times flawlessly while it also extracts subtleties and nuances from recordings that emphasise the sense of humans being involved in the playing, shifting around the beat and adding their character and style to the performance. To hear an example of this try an album with lots of space left in its arrangements such as Bruce Hornsby's *Scenes from the Southside*: listen, for example, to the brilliant phrasing of Hornsby's piano solos in 'The Valley Road'. Similarly, JJ Cale's 'After Midnight' (from *Naturally*) and 'Cocaine' (from *Troubador*) ably demonstrate how fluently the Petite SX

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, reflex ported loudspeaker

Driver Complement: LF/Mid: Custom 6.5-inch bass

HF: Modified ScanSpeak 2905 tweeter

Crossover: 3.8KHz (1st order LF; 2nd order HF)

Bandwidth: 35Hz - 20KHz

Impedance: 8 Ohms (6 Ohms minimum)

Sensitivity: 86dB/1 Watt

Dimensions: (WxHxD): 20x31x18cm

Weight: 6Kg each

Finishes: Standard: Maple; Cherry; Oak; Walnut; Rosenuit; Black Ash.

Piano Lacquer: Red; Black; White.

Price: Standard finishes £1,250;

Piano lacquer £1,750

Manufacturer:

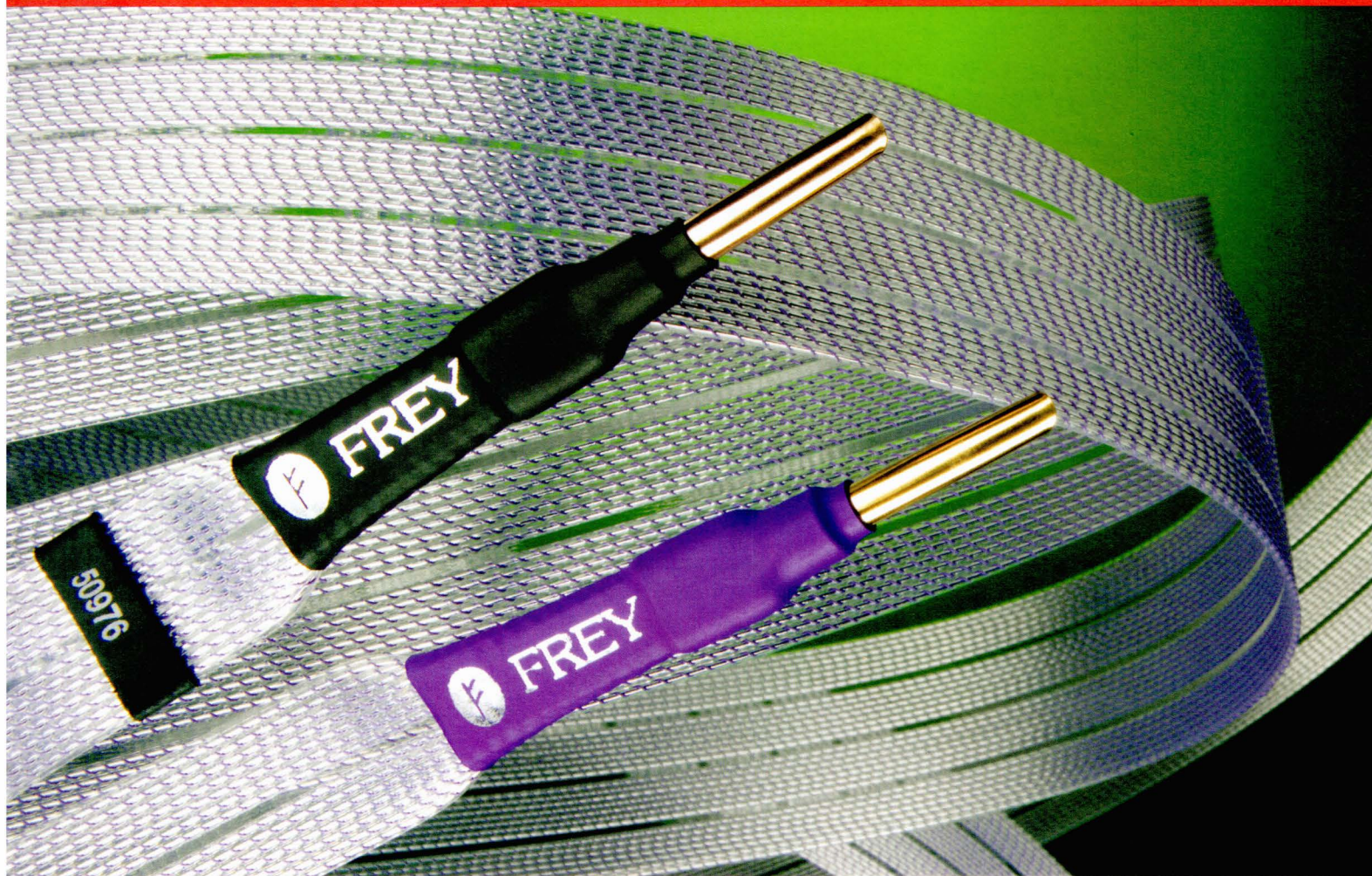
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handles the decay and release portions of the ASDR envelope. 'Call the Doctor' (on *Naturally*) also demonstrates forcibly how capably the speakers handle silence when notes end.

Indeed, there is something almost uncanny about the musicality – and how I have come to loathe that word – of NEAT's designs. They exhibit a natural rightness and a musically persuasive quality that seem to elude 99 per cent of all others in my view. That is why I believe that the NEAT Petite SX is geared to satisfy all camps: the music lovers and the finicky audiophiles. If you happen to be a music-loving audiophile, you should prepare yourself for a very pleasant double-whammy where musical fluency meets timbral and three-dimensional precision. This turns out to be an unexpectedly very happy union, particularly at the relatively modest asking price of £1,250. +



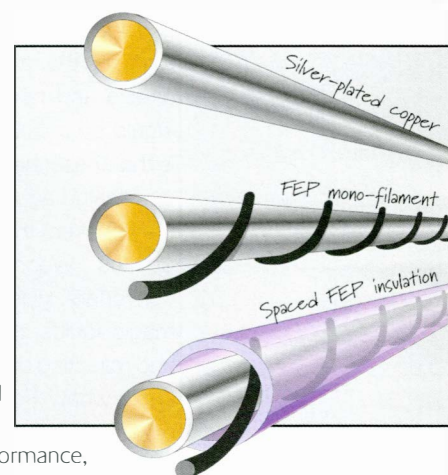
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Acoustic System Resonators

by Chris Thomas

Just because you can't imagine how something works it doesn't mean to say that it doesn't. That's my story anyway. Remember this, because you need to approach the Acoustic System resonators with an open mind.

Each of these consists of a small hardwood block that attaches to the wall with a sticky pad and atop each of these different woods on a three-pronged metal claw sits a dedicated cup with four elongations. The positioning of these resonating cups and where the blocks are mounted is crucial to their effectiveness.

Each cup must be orientated in a specific direction and tilted ever so slightly towards the wall. I used 3 different resonators. A Basic (Maple and Copper) fitted low on the wall between the speakers, a Gold (hard Maple and Gold) just about tweeter level and Platinum, again with a hard maple base which was sited half way between the Gold and the ceiling.

OK, now you will want to know how these are supposed to work.

Well, the manufacturers explanation won't really be of much use because they explain that "Scientific explanations are very complex." True I say but then, "They have to define the relationship between low-level overtones, diffusion effects and psycho acoustic perception." Yes, I imagine that would be a difficult thing to define. What they are trying to say is that these things work, take a listen and make your own mind up. Again I agree with them. My room has a fireplace between the speakers that has accumulated all sorts of audio and guitar detritus. Wooden blocks, floor protectors, plug adaptors, converters, glass and metal bottlenecks, Allen keys, bottles of magic liquids, the list goes on. Every one of these is resonating and reflecting or absorbing at different frequencies so... Oh, you know what? Forget all this, because here I am trying to apply my limited knowledge of the way the world works to these tiny resonating cups when all that really matters is can I hear any system improvements?

I wasn't at all sure at first as I suppose I was preoccupied with these little bowls stuck to the wall and anyway the manual says that after installing them for the first time I need to wait between 2 and 48 hours for them to start delivering because of "room pressure regulation, as the resonator is a passive device". I could go off on one again here but I won't. I shall remind myself

what I said in the first sentence. You've stuck with me this far, so here goes. I began to notice that the system was better focussed and sharper. The soundstage was better defined and the bass was tighter and better controlled. Notes seemed more sure-footed and pitch perfect. These things dawned over the next weeks so I left the singing bowls in place until I had gotten used to both them and the system. Then, three months later, I took them down and over the following days I felt that the music has softened and become less articulate. The system had slipped from its performance peak and now vocals were more smeared and the bass had certainly softened up. I was surprised but my ears were telling me things I couldn't ignore. Psychoacoustics? Possibly, but then cynicism is perhaps the easier path to take.

I think that with the Acoustic System Resonators you must ignore your whole reasoning of cause and effect and go with your ears. Do they work? I say yes. Why do they work? I say, don't go there. What I do know is that, given the choice of them being on the wall or back in their boxes, I want them firmly back on the wall. Just be prepared for a lot of questions from visitors. When they ask and they will, I just hand them the instructions and sit back with a Cheshire Cat grin. It's much easier that way. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Basic: £145 per resonator

Gold: £660 per resonator

Platinum: £1,315 per resonator

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URL: metropolis-music.co.uk

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Almarro A340A mono power amplifier

by Alan Sircom

Although there's currently a lot of exciting valve products coming out of China at the moment, this has given rise to something of a renaissance in tube products around the world. American and European valve-amp makers have all raised their respective games and their profiles to cope with the increased competition, but arguably it's Japan where the really fine valve equipment is coming from these days. And the Almarro A340A typifies this new wave of Japanese tubiciousness.

The Japanese valve amp market seems to fall into two distinct camps – time machines or alternate history machines. The first – best expressed by the likes of Leben – turn back the clock to the late 1950s or even earlier and produce recreations of past glories. Nothing wrong with this – there were some glorious valve products of that Golden Age of audio and attempts to relive those point-to-point circuits and retro-chic cabinets are backed up with a wonderful sound. Almarro takes a different route though; it creates an alternate history where transistors and chips always played second fiddle to tubes and imagines what today's modern power amplifier would look like under those circumstances.

A 40 watt push-pull class A design, the Almarro A340A sports a relatively simple (there's barely four-score parts to the whole thing), yet innovative design. Each chassis features a 5687 double triode at the input stage, a 6DJ8 double triode as phase splitter and a pair of 6C33C-B power triodes at the beefy end. The output transformer has taps for four, eight and sixteen ohm loudspeakers, accepts a single-ended phono plug and has

a rear-mounted power switch. The tubes are caged; a good idea because those the glass of those 6C33C-B tubes hits anything from 250-350°C within a few minutes of power up. Even so, the cage gets very, very hot. The sound is slightly freer sounding with the cages out of the way, though, but the trade-off between sound and safety makes me think cages are best. That being said, they really look the part exposed.

Almarro has been very clever in its use of negative feedback and damping factor control. These are controlled by two knobs on the top panel of the amp, flanking the double-triodes; if you turn the left knob clockwise, you increase the amp's damping factor (it alters the cathode feedback on the power tubes) and if you turn the right hand knob, you increase the amount of global negative feedback. With both knobs offering a 0-5 scale, the two combine to afford the user 36 different ways to fine-tune the amplifier to suit a loudspeaker (108 different permutations in total if you include the three transformer tapings). The 30-detent volume knobs at the front of the amplifier are useful for doing the same matching process to a preamp, although you could use this as the ▶

► ultimate one-source set-up. The front panel, with its maple and cherry front plate is almost the sole concession to colour and décor; the rest of the amp is a purposeful matt black.

Why 'almost'? Each chassis has a blue-red LED arrangement that shows the amplifier's status and auto-bias. When first powered up, the A340A gives you a 90 second red-blue light show as the amplifier comes to life. If that goes blue, everything is good in Almarro-world and it's time to play; if it stays red, the idle current of the left 6C33C-B has risen too high, if it flashes red, the right tube has too high an idle current. If this happens, Almarro recommends turning the amp off, waiting 20 minutes or so for the thing to cool down and swapping left and right power triodes. If the problem persists, it's retubing time.

There's one other issue. The fan. Each amp has a case fan at the back of the amp, in the transformer box. This helps keep things cool and dust free, but does mean there's a constant low background whirr that will never go away. Inner city dwellers might never notice this and it's not as annoying as the whine of a dimmer switch. But it's there, and if you live somewhere quiet and demand silence from your electronics, this will annoy. Shame really, because the amplifier chassis is otherwise remarkably quiet for a valve design, with barely a hiss through the tweeter, even at full volume.

This is an almost impossible amp to pin down in a sonic way, because it's not one amp... it's 36. You can use those NFB and DF knobs to dial in your sound and let it stay there, or they can provide constant tweaking jollies. If you prefer your sound more alive, set the NFB dial to 0 or 1; if you are prepared to trade vitality for detail and cleanliness, wick the same dial up to 5. Most will go somewhere in between. Similarly, if you want taut, precise bass, turn the DF dial up to the max, if you don't want your bass softer, knock it down to 2 or if you like your music with added flub (or want to try and patch up a bass-light sound) set it to zero.

For the record, with a pair of original ProAc Studio 140s, I liked the NFB at around 1 and the DF at 3. This gave a slightly dry bass, but with a good

"It's not one amp... it's 36. You can use those NFB and DF knobs to dial in your sound and let it stay there, or they can provide constant tweaking jollies."

trade-off between excitement and analysis. Your Mileage, as they say on t'internet, May Vary, depending on speakers and taste.

More or less irrespective of where you position those dials, though, the basic sound of the amplifier is one that's very airy and natural sounding, not rich or warm or colored as valve amps are suggested to be. It has good soundstaging, wide and deep, but not the sort of thing that draws attention to itself. Similarly, the detail levels are very high – this is not the sort of amplifier that will dull down ►



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► the differences between discs or players – but the crystal clear performance isn't the sort of thing you'll remark about. Why? Because you'll be too busy listening to music.

Bass here can be a trade-off depending on the DF setting. But it's always good and deep. It can be deep and dry or deep and bloomy, but the word 'deep' always creeps into the equation. Coming directly after a flea-power chip amp, the Almarro sound was perceptibly slower due to that deep bass, but it gave a sense of rightness to the sound. It really didn't matter what was played; Booker T and the MGs *Green Onions* album, the Eroica Trio playing Brahms piano trios, a Japanese import of *Led Zep III*, Bonny 'Prince' Billy, Big Beat classic Prodigy or no beat classic speech. In other words, whether audiophile noodling or lo-fi graunch, the Almarro did it all and did it all well.

There's a naturalness here. The sound doesn't draw attention to itself, in all the good ways. It's dynamic, but not unduly so, fast and responsive, but not excessively, focused, precise, articulate and detailed, yet not the sort of thing that makes you think 'wow, isn't that detailed?' In other words, the Almarro is everything those great Quad and Leak valve amps of the 1950s and 1960s were good for, but brought up to date. So, if you want fireworks, it will bring you fireworks, but only if there are fireworks on the record. Which is what most people should want from their musical replay system.

I'm beginning to think there's something of a sweet spot in hi-fi; below it, you get 'audio', above it you get 'audiophile'. In between... 'music'. The A340As are definitely in that Goldilocks position, and they never put a foot wrong from a musical or audio perspective. In fact, the biggest problem with this amplifier is it causes something called Almarro's Syndrome in listeners. Regular A340A users report atrophy of the lower extremities, caused by too many hours sitting listening to music. There is no cure.

Keith Cheal, the proprietor of Almarro's distributors Angelsound Audio was insistent on using the power amps with a brace of Vertex AQ mains leads. He needn't have worried, because the A340As sound good irrespective of whether they hang off the end of thousands of pounds worth of mains lead or a pair of grim old no-name kettle cables. These are wonderful sounding amps, in that sort of effortlessly musical way LS3/5a loudspeakers (and their progeny) are wonderful sounding loudspeakers. Spend time with these mono amps and you'll never look at another transistor again. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

A340A push-pull mono power amplifier

Connections: 1 RCA/phono input, 4/8/16-ohm outputs

Output power: 40wpc

Operational mode: Class A

Tube complement: 1x5687, 1x6DJ8, 2x6C33C-B

Frequency response: 10Hz - 40kHz

Available finishes: black with Maple/Cherry faceplate

Dimensions (WxHxD): 23x18.8x38.7cm (per channel)

Weight: 13.6kg (per channel)

Price: £5,895 per pair

Manufactured by Almarro

URL: www.almarro.com

Distributed by Angelsound Audio

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Vivid Audio Giya G1

by Jason Kennedy

There are a few people in this industry who give the distinct impression that they know a lot more about the audio engineering field than the majority. There are a lot more that try to give this impression, but that's only natural and when you've been in the game for a few years it gets easier to spot the genuinely knowledgeable. Loudspeaker designer Laurence 'Dick' Dickie is one such character; a man who served his apprenticeship at B&W's Steyning research labs in the days when they went in for real blue-sky thinking. Dickie went on to make an enormous impact on the company's range. He was after all responsible for B&W's most radical speaker ever, the Nautilus; a model whose technology has been trickled down across that company's entire range and beyond. He also came up with Matrix bracing technology before that. Clearly an original thinker. Nowadays he splits his time between pro audio company Turbosound and South African speaker maker Vivid Audio.

The Vivid Giya (pronounced Geeya) G1 is the company's largest and most ambitious model yet, something reflected in its high £34k price tag and a high and extraordinary bit of cabinet design. Perhaps more than any other speaker around right now, the Giya is the natural successor to the Nautilus. It uses tapered tube technology for all four sections; treble, mid, upper bass and bass in this four-way design. Unlike the B&W, it manages to incorporate reflex loading on the bass section, making it more efficient and capable of higher volume levels than its ancestor.

Giya stands over 1.7 meters high and weighs around 70kg; given that it's made of essentially lightweight materials, this gives you some idea of its 180 litre volume. One which

looks rather less substantial than that might suggest if you've come across a box that even approaches this size – most big loudspeakers don't break the 100 litre mark.

What differentiates Giya from all the previous models in the Vivid range is a proper name – one which is apparently the name of a South African dance – and a pair of side firing bass cones. When Dickie started working on what was originally dubbed the G1 he suggested a version of the K1 that was twice its volume with front and rear firing bass drivers. But the low 220Hz crossover point meant that this arrangement was problematic, so the drivers were placed on either side of essentially the same cabinet shape.

The result was ungainly to say the least, it practically had a beer belly. This meant that Dickie could start with a blank sheet in terms of shape, his aim being to build a speaker with sufficient internal volume that was also as elegant as possible. It was lengthy process that involved plasticine modelling, in much the same way as cars used to be prototyped, and further refinement of the design in CAD. One early idea was to incorporate an active sub resonance bass enclosure, the system used in B&W's PV1 sub, but realising how difficult it can be to sell active or even partially active speakers the company went for a passive vented system.

“This meant that Dickie could start with a blank sheet in terms of shape, his aim being to build a speaker with sufficient internal volume that was also as elegant as possible.”

The existing Vivid D50 midrange and D26 tweeter drive units were incorporated into the G1 along with a customised version of the C125 bass unit. The latter only needs to cover the upper bass in Giya so the magnet was given a shorter gap because it doesn't need to allow so much travel, and an exponential tapered tube was built to suit. For reasons we can only hazard a guess at, Dickie looked into using a diamond dome tweeter in place of the aluminium D26 but decided that the trade off: smoother roll-off above 40kHz versus reduced efficiency – Dickie reckons 9dB – made a good case for staying with metal. For the bass enclosure a new C225 drive unit was developed, this has a beautiful cast chassis with thin but deep ribs connecting the periphery to the motor system, the whole thing being shaped like a nose cone. Unusually it is devoid of mounting points for fixings, instead the C225s are held in place by a torsion bar between their magnets, the chassis edge being decoupled from the cabinet with an O ring. The driver has a three inch, long travel coil on a highly vented former – the tube that joins the centre/dustcap to the coil and to which the suspension is connected. This former is 40% open in order to relieve pressure behind the dust cap yet maintains mechanical integrity.

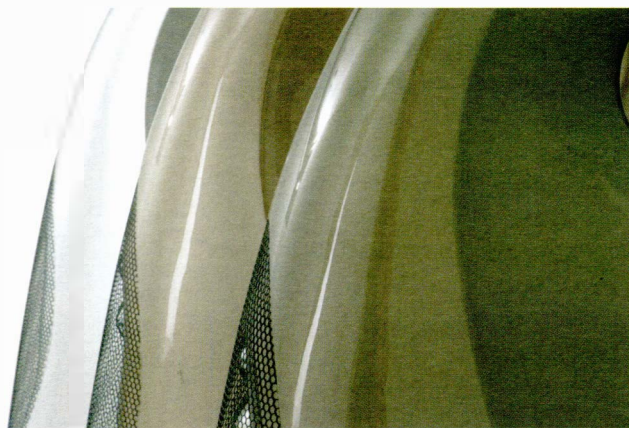
The most radical aspect of Giya is the use of a tapered tube (TT) or inverted horn for the bass system. The benefit of the TT is that it damps out reflections of the energy coming off the back of the cone, but merely adding a port to a cabinet with a TT reduces low frequency output from the port. Dickie discovered that by increasing the cut-off frequency of the TT to four times that of the port tuning frequency produces a bass system with good port output and no reflections. Producing a system that virtually eliminates in band resonance. The tapered tube on the Giya is formed at the top of the cabinet where it begins to curl around the circular opening, the reflex ports are of Vivid's preferred reaction



cancelling variety and sit either side at the back near the floor.

The idea to incorporate a hole into the cabinet came about when Dickie sat down with his artist neighbour Chris Stevens. I seem to recall that he also enlisted the help of an artist for the Nautilus, clearly there's something to be said for this approach to cabinet design if you are looking for a visual statement. These sketches were used to make a series of plasticine models – easily the most enjoyable part of the process I'm told – and the preferred shape was used as a template for the CAD process that resulted in a design that was prototyped in June 07 and unveiled at CES in January 08.

Unlike the existing Vivid range, Giya's size meant that it needed to be built light. This was done by making a sandwich of GRP skins with a foam core for stiffness. The reaction cancelling arrangement of the bass drivers obviating the need for structural mass in the cabinet.



▶ The result is a very elegant, sculptural loudspeaker that is chock full of original ideas, there's barely space to go into them all but it's worth pointing out that the mid and treble domes are not hemispherical as is the norm but have a catenary shape. This is very close to a parabola and was chosen because it pushes up the first resonance compared to a normal dome. The Giya cabinet is stiffened by glass fibre grids that run horizontally across it and account for much of the weight.

The crossover is built into the base. The option of taking it right out of the cabinet was considered because it offers the benefit of taking this sensitive system away from resonances but it would have compromised the visual side of things too greatly. According to Dickie, the key with crossover placement is to take it out of the field of the magnets in the speaker which has been achieved here.

“By adding the bass system in Giya G1, the company has proved that there is yet more to be discovered in my music collection.”

The cable terminals are hidden under the speaker and cables get to them via a cut out at the back of the base, this makes changing cables a two person job but does give the speaker very clean lines.

When I reviewed the Vivid K1 recently I was frankly blown away by its speed and lack of distortion. It was hard to imagine what could be done to improve on that model. By adding the bass system in Giya G1, the company has proved that there is yet more to be discovered in my music collection. It's not just about extension and power in the bass either but that certainly plays its part.

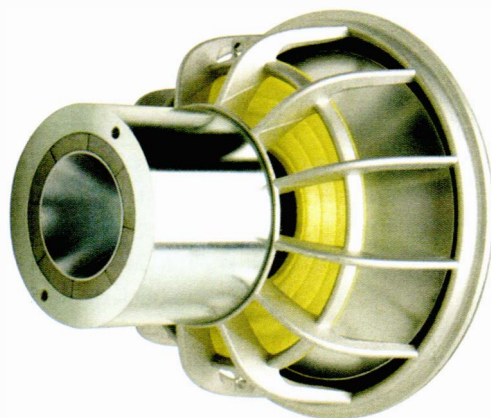
The Vivid designs achieve a rare degree of resolution and they make you acutely aware of the characteristics of the equipment used to drive them. When I had the K1 here I also had Leema's Pyxis preamp and Altair IV monoblocks and this proved to be a fortuitous combination, the speaker letting you know just how fast and real the amps can sound.

When the Giya arrived, I was using a top notch Naim 500 system and this also worked extremely well although its character is quite different to the Leemas as you might imagine. But the speaker seemed very happy in the company of either. It's a highly articulate design which delivers a degree of bass precision that is extremely rare. By taking away the traditional characteristics of a wooden cabinet, Vivid has made a bass system that goes all the way down

and yet can start and stop with the same poise as it manages higher up the band. By removing cabinet resonance to this degree the speaker seems intrinsically quieter, as if it has a lower noise floor, and can let reverb carry on for longer because it's not joining in and muddying detail.

You also get a strong sense of effortlessness. This is partly a reflection of the partnering equipment, but certainly not entirely and makes some of the most challenging material become significantly more appealing. I have some Kraftwerk remixes of Yello tracks which can be a little uncomfortable with many systems, but which were almost musical with this set up. The low frequency vibes of Me'Shell Ndegeocello reveal that Giya can deliver the sort of bass one associates with large active designs when driven by an amplifier of NAP 500 class. The effect of removing overhang, which seems to be apparent in all wooden cabinets that deliver real bass is quite strange. It gives bass instruments the subtlety and dexterity usually only apparent with instruments that produce largely mid and high frequency notes. In hi-fi terms, it makes the bass sound fast, but this usually means less extended and edgy. Not so here – this is tight and deep.

You can also play at high level without losing any of the composure, in fact things get better, you can feel the grip of the bass and appreciate the scale and depth of the imaging all the more easily. The there's the timing, the Giya responds to the Naim system's immaculate timing with glee, so much so that beat strong music can become ▶



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▶ addictive. The contrapuntal interplay between bassist Avishai Cohen and his drummer and pianist become a thing of wonder. Steely Dan's 'Gold Teeth' has a formidably tight groove that draws you right into the piece and kicks any ideas about changing discs, pressing pause or any other intervention into touch when its reproduced with this degree of groove power.

When the Naim system made its move, I went back to the regular Classé amplification and Resolution Audio Opus 21 disc spinner and struggled to get as engaging or revealing a sound. It was probably more evenly balanced but the amps in particular sound a little sluggish through a speaker that's as revealing as the Giya. Salvation came in the strange shape of a Japanese power amplifier called Digital Do Main B-1a. This is not a digital or class D design but is built around an obsolete output transistor called the V-FET, obsolete until this company resurrected it that is. The B-1a has a volume control so you can bypass the preamp and hook up a single source for a direct injection of intensely dynamic and fast musical reproduction. The amp's openness and speed allowed the Giya to totally transform good recordings into astonishing ones, the most impressive example being John Surman's new *Brewster's Rooster* on ECM. A disc that had sounded pretty good but musically a little dull until its full potential was projected into the room by this system. I pretty well had to re-write the album review so startling was the transformation.

“The incredible resolution of low-level detail means that harmonics, reverb, imaging and fine detail are brought to the fore.”

If you want to hear the life, the vivacity in a recording this speaker is one of the most effective tools for the job, its ability to reveal so much and add so little means that you are able to hear right into the mix. The incredible resolution of low-level detail means that harmonics, reverb, imaging and all manner of fine detail are brought to the fore. It's easy to get carried away with the excitement created by the wide dynamic range but it's the small things that really show how subtle this speaker can be. Its high sensitivity also allows it to work remarkably well at low volume levels, the detail is all there alongside a musical realism that is very rarely achieved without cranking it. A useful result from the point of view of both your ears and neighbourly relations.

Unfortunately it can't make all of your records sound fantastic unless you are very selective in your listening that is, the shortcomings of lesser recordings are inevitably revealed but this doesn't stop the music shining through. The extra openness afforded means that even noise infused albums like *OK Computer* give up fine detail that is usually smothered. The deliberate guitar distortion on Cougar's *Patriot* album is uncanny in its realism, I was concerned that I'd overdone the level at one point only to realise that the sound was on the disc all along.

Clearly with a speaker of this transparency, neutrality and ability the quality of ancillary components is going to be in the spotlight, it will show you precisely what your amp and source sound like. This should be fine in most instances but be careful about blaming the speaker if the result is not what you are after. While the Digital Do-Main produced a fantastically dynamic and live result I suspect that a slightly smoother and more powerful amp would be even better. It's hard to stress just how well the Giya G1 addresses the problems that usually afflict loudspeakers, it manages to seemingly eliminate perceived distortion and reveal the music in all its dynamic, tonal and temporal glory. It's very expensive to be sure but few speakers at any price are its equal. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Cabinet: reinforced advanced composite

Finish: high gloss automotive

HF driver: 26mm catenary dome aluminium

MF driver: 50mm catenary dome aluminium

Mid bass driver: 125mm aluminium cone

Bass driver: 225mm aluminium cone x2

Sensitivity: 91dB

Impedance: 6ohm nominal, 4 ohm minimum

Size (HxWxD): 170 x 44 x 80cm

Weight: 70kg

Price: £34,000

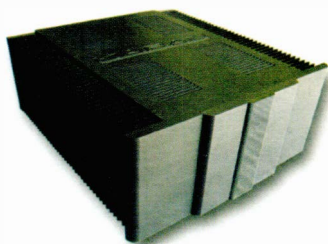
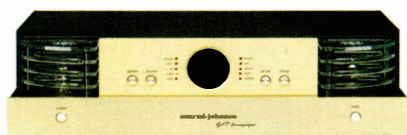
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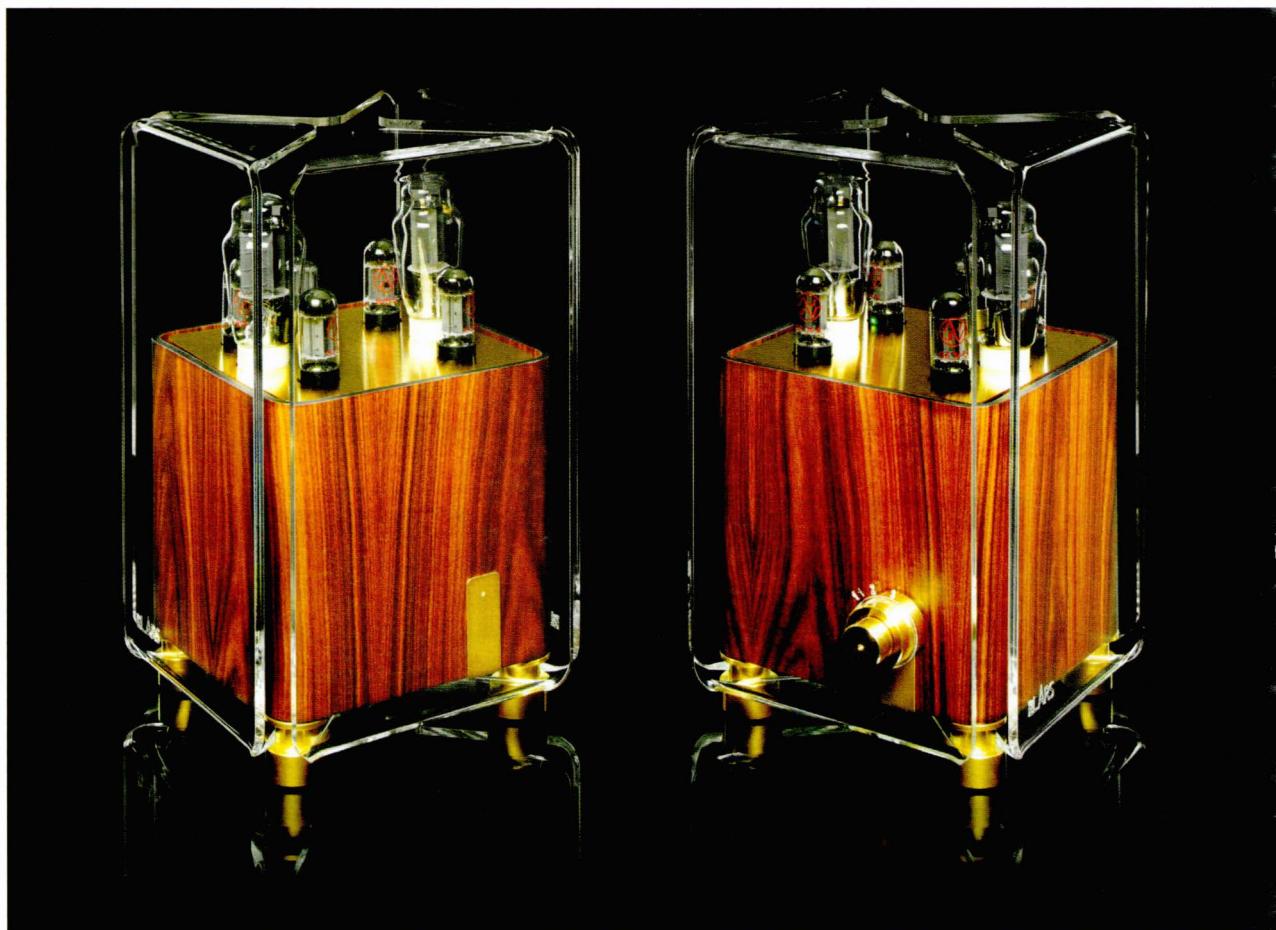
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

theLARS integrated amp

by Paul Messenger

This extraordinary amplifier is unique, and in a number of different respects. I guess there are more expensive amplifiers than this £71,300 two-boxer out there, but they haven't come my way yet, and they probably pack a bit more punch than the 20+20W (1% THD) rated output of this Swedish valve amp.

The two-box theLars might look like a pair of mono power amps, but in fact it's an integrated amplifier, albeit with a uniquely unconventional configuration. It's also uniquely beautiful, to these eyes at least, thanks to styling and packaging that's utterly different from anything else around.

Where it comes from, whether it's entirely practical, and quite what sort of consumer it's aimed at are the three key questions that require answering before getting down to what it actually does.

The last question is of course the easy one: theLars is clearly only for the very wealthy, and since there's no iPod connection, it's more likely to appeal to the surviving bankers and hedge fund managers than professional footballers. I still

find it hard to understand how any amplifier can cost more than twice my annual income, even if it is using the finest quality ingredients. But then I've never really understood the pricing of high end hi-fi equipment in general: usually the only justification seems to be you're paying for the sound that comes out, which I suppose is some sort of justification in an era where increasing numbers of people have far more disposable income than they actually need. At least a seriously expensive piece of hi-fi equipment will usually give lasting pleasure for many years to come, with rather lower maintenance costs than a yacht or a supercar.

It's really no surprise to find that an amplifier called theLars comes from Scandinavia, or more specifically Sweden. It's the creation of an experienced electrical/electronics engineer called Lars Engstrom, ▶

who spent his normal working life in radio communications and solving complex problems like allowing electric trains to operate across the bridge that now links Denmark and Sweden. Radio and audio have always been a personal passion, and his collection of restored old radio sets, and enthusiasm for thermionic devices in general provided the inspiration behind the distinctive (and distinctively named) theLars amplifier.

Because it's such a curious beast in nearly every respect, the practicality won't suit every user. Finding somewhere to put the two units is the first problem, because they're such an unconventional shape and size. Each unit has a 25cm square footprint, which grows to 30cm if the chunky acrylic (Perspex) covers are used, so locating a pair on a single shelf is tricky-going-on-impossible. And a total height (including the acrylic) of 50cm means it's definitely on the top shelf (or the floor!).

Although this amplifier integrates pre- and power sections, it does so in a very unconventional way. Just one of the units has a single (dual-concentric) knob that both selects the input and adjusts the volume, but both amplifiers have matching input and output sockets. The two units are then linked by a 2m multi-pin Burndy-type cable which carries selection and volume settings and adjustments from the 'master' to the 'slave' unit.



“The two-box theLars might look like a pair of mono power amps, but in fact it’s an integrated amplifier, albeit with unconventional configuration.”

Features and facilities are decidedly Spartan – too much so for some people I reckon. There’s no remote control facility whatsoever – a regrettable and largely inexcusable but all too common omission from valve equipment in my view. Volume and input selection are both available of course, but no balance adjustment or mono switch, and the inputs are restricted to just four at line level – two single-ended RCA phono types, and two balanced XLRs. The volume control has a strong detent action and a slightly ‘clunky’ feel, but the steps and law seemed very well chosen.

The styling is maybe the most striking feature. The essentially square body section is wrapped in a hot moulded veneer – a choice of five alternatives are offered – and while the rounded edges add an attractive touch, unfortunately the net result somehow looks less classy than it should, even though the metalwork of the top surface, the feet and the terminal block is allegedly gold-plated.

The cleverest feature is undoubtedly the acrylic panels, which not only look original and interesting, but are also surprisingly useful, though their curves might have been more carefully shaped. The edges of the lower triangles slot into grooves around and above the feet, and magnets concealed underneath the amplifier hold the acrylic pieces in place. The four panels around each unit leave a useful gap between them to ventilate the valves, yet make sure all are in full view. They’re not secured in such a way as to prevent prying fingers from deliberately ▶



▶ touching the valves, but do prevent accidental contact between flesh or clothing and the hot bits. The only down side seems to be that the acrylic panels have first to be removed in order to move the amps themselves.

Most valve amplifiers follow either the single-ended or the push-pull model, but theLars is neither of these. It's balanced throughout, consists of three distinct differential amplifier stages, and therefore has three carefully matched valve stages. Lars asserts that a differential amplifier gives lower distortion and better common mode rejection, which is really important in a zero-feedback amplifier. Exact valve-matching is also important that the valves are exactly matched, as there's no individual compensation for any current differential between the two valves in a pair.

The valves themselves consist of a 6N9P dual triode input, capacitor coupled to a pair of 6V6GT pentodes for the driver stage, and thence via transformer coupling to the 300B direct heated triode output tubes. A pair of GZ34 rectifiers is also used. All the valves were Philips branded apart from the classy looking Czech-made Emission Labs 300B matched pairs. A full set of spare valves, albeit of various makes, were also supplied, along with some very classily terminated heavyweight mains leads.

Some might complain that you don't seem to get a whole collection of exotic materials for the hefty price tag, but that's a red (and pickled) herring. Like loudspeakers, great amplifiers are much more to do with achieving a good overall balance than the inclusion of some mystically rare component or costly ingredient that represents a 'killer app'.

That being said, silver plated copper was selected for the wiring, and enamelled copper for the transformer windings. However, the winding techniques and choice of core materials were considered rather more significant. An amorphous core is used for the input phase splitting transformer, and high saturation silicone iron in the interstage and output transformers. One factor that does add significantly to the cost is that the soldering is carried out by Lars himself, because he believes that reliable, consistent and high quality lead-free soldering is too difficult a task to delegate.

One might question whether 20W is enough, and that of course will depend on quite a number of factors, including personal taste, size of listening room, normal listening distance, musical preferences, and loudspeaker sensitivity. Provided the sensitivity isn't too low (say below 88dB/W), or the room unduly large, 20W should prove ample for most purposes.

An extended loan period allowed theLars to be used with a wide variety of different speakers and several sources. The speakers used included PMC IB2i and Fact-8, Zu Essence, Wilson Audio Sasha and Rehdeko RK175, providing an exceptionally large range of qualities, impedances and sensitivities. In fact theLars is supplied with its Lundahl

“Some might complain that you don't seem to get a whole collection of exotic materials for the hefty price tag, but that's a red (and pickled) herring.”

output transformers set for 4 ohm loads, though settings for alternative loads may be supplied to order. The main hi-fi sources were a Linn/Rega hybrid turntable arm with Soundstream Strain Gauge cartridge, a Naim CD3/555PS CD player, and a Magnum Dynalab MD106T tuner. Speaker cable was Vertex AQ Moncayo, alongside various balanced and single-ended interconnects.

Happily, theLars sounds wonderful, which perhaps is only to be expected in view of its high pricetag. What is considerably more impressive, however, is that it always and invariably managed to sound lovely whatever the quality of the source that was being used, which is a much more difficult trick, and it seemed to bring out the best. Not that it hides the deficiencies of poor source material in any way – it's too good for that – rather it somehow managed to avoid making weak sources sound unpleasant. ▶



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▶ This has much to do with its splendidly innate sweetness through the upper midband and treble. There's simply no harshness in the sound of this amplifier, and therefore no tendency to exaggerate any untidiness or edginess in the signals. Indeed, a first impression was that the top end was a little too restrained, but more prolonged listening with wide-band speakers revealed that this was not the case at all. In fact there's plenty of top end fine detail, air and transparency here, but this is also exceptionally clean so there's a welcome freedom from any spurious 'hash'.

Besides being essentially very easy on the ears, theLars is also significantly faster than most amplifiers. There's little evidence of time-smear here, and if it's not quite the fastest amp I've ever encountered, it gets very close, and is more than a match for any solid state design I've encountered.

Helped by a very low noise floor, soundstage imaging is also first class, with fine depth perspectives, great transparency and first class focus. The BBC's Radio 3 programme *Choral Evensong* usually provides a fine example of miking a gothic cathedral in such a way as to capture the choir's singing in a very large stone-built acoustic with even and long reverberation times. TheLars sounded very natural and realistic here, with the plenty of clues to the size and disposition of the choir, and proper separation from the precisely ordered decay of the cathedral's reverberation. It also clearly defined the substantial imaging properties between the various speaker systems that were tried.

Indeed, if anything theLars seemed to highlight loudspeaker system differences, and only seemed to run short of power when pushed really hard. One could add that there was a strong tendency to wind up the volume with this amplifier because it sounds so clean and free from aggressive tendencies. The

“TheLars sounded very natural and realistic here, with plenty of clues to the size and disposition of the choir, and proper separation from the precisely ordered decay.”

only minor qualm was that the bottom end of relatively bass heavy speakers like the IB2i and the Sasha could have sounded a little tighter and tauter to advantage, and this led to a slight loss of tension and grip when playing heavy material from Massive Attack, the KLF and the like.

A pleasant surprise was just how well it coped with 'difficult' loudspeakers. The Wilson Audio Sasha, for example, might have a good sensitivity of around 91dB, but this is achieved alongside an impedance that drops to a dramatically low 1.8 ohms in the mid-bass. Such a load could prove problematic for any amplifier, never mind one using valves and output transformers, yet theLars seemed to take it in its stride, and happily drove the Sashas rather louder than one might expect.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: two-box valve integrated amplifier

Power output (1kHz, 1% THD): 20W

Sensitivity for full power: 150mV

Speaker impedance matching: 4ohms (8 or 16ohm available to order)

Frequency response: (+/-0.5dB).10Hz-40kHz

Dimensions (WxHxD): 2x 30x50x38cms

Weight: 2x 21kg

Price: £71,300

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The second nice surprise came with the Rehdeko RK175s. This extraordinary speaker is a mixture of heaven and hell, sonically speaking. Despite possessing very high sensitivity alongside an easy load, it's remarkable for the ruthless way it reveals differences between components, especially amplifiers. The speaker's freedom from timesmear and vigorous dynamics, plus its strong emphasis on the midband and presence is very unforgiving, especially of the limitations of solid state amplifiers, most of which sound uncomfortably edgy and aggressive. The sweeter midband and top end typical of valve amps sounds much more acceptable, and that was very much the case with theLars, which made a splendid partnership with this notoriously difficult speaker.

There are very few weaknesses. I did notice some low level hum with my vinyl player, and since there's no earthing post on the amplifier, I merely linked the tonearm base to one of the XLR clips using thin wire and a couple of croc clips.

TheLars must be the most beautiful amplifier I've seen – or heard. The stratospheric price will necessarily rule it out for most people, and it's hardly the most practical or convenient package around, either in shape, input flexibility or features. But the bottom line is that it delivers an intense musical experience, from two unusually beautiful objects. +

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The Emillé Labs
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Music First Audio Moving-Coil Step-up

by Andrew Harrison

Who would have thought that the oldest way to boost the output of a moving-coil cartridge was still the best? Despite decades of improvements in amp technology, it's easy to forget the simple, honest and potentially sublime benefits of a step-up transformer.

At vinyl's highest level, the moving-coil cartridge rules supreme. It's the best way to turn wiggling grooves into an AC current. Problem is, the voltage output of most moving-coils is tiny. Often, a cartridge might generate a few tens of microvolts under real-world conditions. All we have to do is preserve the signal from the turntable/phono stage sub-system, without losing any nuances, and certainly without drowning it in hiss or hum. And that's the point of the Music First Audio Step-up.

At its heart are two hefty S&B TX-103 transformers, one cylinder for each channel, hand-wound by Music First's parent, renowned transformer specialist Stevens & Billington Limited.

The TX-103 was designed as an MC transformer, starting with an oversized 80% nickel core and a series of copper windings, multi-sectioned and meticulously wound with clockwise and anti-clockwise layers. The over-engineering pays off with a practically flat audio bandwidth, said to stretch 10Hz to 100kHz. These trannies are big, mandating the generous case for what is a humble MC transformer.

Except the MFA Step-up has no need to be so humble. Instead of designing the unit as a one-size-fits-all solution, Music First Audio has included switchgear to adjust gain, load impedance and earthing. It's all built into an aluminium box that will be familiar to anyone who's seen the brand's giant-

killer Passive Magnetic Preamplifier. Just like that transformer-based pre, it has two large knobs facing front: but here, the left offers six different impedances, while the right selects between three levels of boost.

Let's look at gain first. The TX-103 transformer has an intrinsic 1:5 ratio between primary and secondary windings, so giving a 5x boost – or 14dB voltage gain. This will be too little for many MCs, so Stevens & Billington incorporates taps in the primary, effectively giving more 'gears'. By using half the primary windings, you'll get 20dB gain, or a 1:10 step up. The highest gain is found with quarter-primary taps: 26dB gain, or a 1:20 ratio. For my system with Ortofon MC Windfeld (nominal 300µV output) and Graham Slee Era V MM stage, this proved ideal. Setting gain is self-evident and easy. Impedance matching, less so.

To optimise the transfer of its tiny output, a typical moving-coil cartridge with a coil DC resistance of around 5 ohm often gives good results matched to an input of 100 ohm or less. Some cartridges may prefer something lower to optimise electro-mechanical damping (and/or tame the top end); some like 1k ohm or more for the most 'open' sound with extended response. ▶

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▶ Looking at the legends on the Music First's front panel, you'd be forgiven for thinking the company had rewritten the books on cartridge/phono stage optimisation. With positions marked 10k, 20k, 40k and 80k ohm (plus open-circuit), we're no longer in familiar 100 ohm territory. These are the values of resistors placed in parallel across the transformers' secondary windings. Depending on input impedance of your MM stage and the chosen transformer gear, a range of useful impedances can be dialled in, derived from the complex interaction of source and load impedances, and winding ratios. At the highest 1:20 gain and assuming a standard 47k ohm input of a MM stage, a choice of six impedances from 20 to 120 ohm is available from the front knob.

On the back of the box are a pair of phono sockets for input, another for output, a screw-down earth post, and a three-way switch to select earthing. Centre position is earth lift, and the left/right positions are marked Ground 1 and Ground 2, to denote a hard ground or via a 51 ohm resistor.

Overall construction is solid enough, using first-class components like Elma silver-wafer switches, even if the workmanlike casework is unlikely to trouble the judges of any design awards committee. It's sturdy and cleanly finished though.

As a reference point for the sound of the MFA, I turned to another step-up, an Audio Note AN-S2. Ironically, this also takes transformers manufactured by Stevens & Billington, albeit in a smaller and more representative sample of what you'll find in some hybrid transformer/valve phono stages up to a few thousand pounds.

In the context of a high-resolution system based on Sondek LP12 with full Funk Vector rebuild, Music First Passive pre, Chord SPM 1200C power amp and B&W 802D loudspeakers, the Audio Note makes a good ambassador for the breed. After the AN-S2, first impression with the MFA Step-up is of a tonally levelled midband, preserving more body in the low end, stretching low-frequency extension, accompanied by a subdued treble shading. But first impressions tell only part the story.

Once you're past the impressive neutral voicing, the real benefits of MFA's massive transformers start to manifest.

It's not just that the soundstage is deeper and more palpable – although who wouldn't welcome such a benefit? – nor that you've got that bit more reach into the sub-sonics. It's the manner in which instrumental lines keep themselves apart, rather than be mixed up like primary paints stirred to a brown amorphous gloop. The result here is clean sonic painting, needing less concentration to follow the chromatic shifts of the music.

Presented with rich and complex music, the MFA Step-up is unequalled in keeping its composure. Even if a moving-coil's output is tiny, this transformer patently possesses sizable overload margins, showing no hint of thickening or saturation from heavy groove modulation. It revels in preserving intact busy and dynamically testing pressings.

In the opening of the final movement of Piano Concerto No 3 [Ashkenazy, Decca SXL 6556], the tension and rollercoaster peaks of Rachmaninov's work shone through. It made a rendition through a wholly solid-state stage as dynamically limited as an early CD master.

Low bass doesn't come much rumblier than Massive Attack's *Mezzanine*, and here the MFA Step-up opened out infrasonic melodies while funk drum loops and strings and samples played overlaid without constriction. Leading edges of percussion remained unblunted, and surface noise dropped behind the music. Treble quality? Entirely unalloyed by any grain or edge, as true on a violin concerto or Verdi opera as with Bristol's finest.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Moving-coil step-up transformer
Anodised aluminium case
Three-position gain switch: 14dB, 20dB or 24dB
Six-position impedance switch: 10k, 20k, 30k, 40k, 80k dummy loads, and O/C; providing input impedance 20 ohm to 1.9k ohm, depending on selected gain and MM stage impedance
Frequency response: 7Hz–150kHz (–1dB, 5 ohm MC cartridge source)
2 x S&B TX-103 copper-wound transformers
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Dimensions (WxHxD): 21.6x20.3x8.9cm
Price: £1,695

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Despite all the available gain and associated potential for unwanted RF pickup and mains hum, the MFA Step-up proved to be the quietest way to raise delicate MC output I've heard. More than just quiet, its built-in bandwidth limitation – wide as that might be – may even filter endemic radio-frequency noise from the environment.

Its given response is well over five times that required for high-fidelity, but a finite ceiling means it can't magnify and pass higher RF into the system. I witnessed blissfully quiet backgrounds up to insane volume positions; and that sense of quietude within the playing music that tells you that you're in rarefied super-fi territory.

The very essence of vinyl record fidelity is preserved with this moving-coil step-up transformer, which adds nothing to the raw cartridge output by way of compression, noise, hum or colouring. And, given the way it opens the window wide on an LP recording, I'd hazard it takes absolutely nothing away too, other than a need to check those old records you thought were sounding a little shabby in places. +

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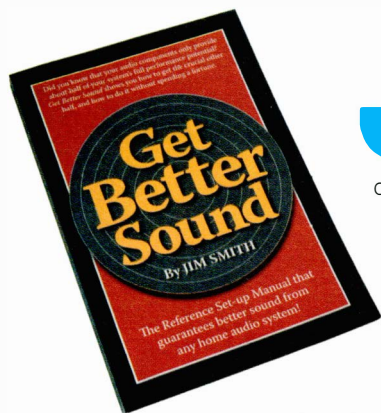
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BOOK REVIEW

Jim Smith's Get Better Sound

by Alan Sircom



Jim Smith has been in high-end audio business in the US for years, as dealer and demonstrator and most recently as the distributor for Avantgarde loudspeakers. His demonstrations were always highly respected by those who visited Jim's rooms, and he was no stranger to the 'Best In Show' plaudits for his systems. A decade ago, while with Avantgarde, he wrote a 16-page treatise called *31 Secrets to Better Sound*,

designed as much to explain to prospective buyers why a professional installation is so important in putting together a good audio system. *Get Better Sound* is the ultimate expression of that pamphlet.

Today, an increasing number of people buy online without audition or installation, while others might be many miles from the nearest installer. Although the expertise of the pro installer is still key, *Get Better Sound* begins to offer an DIY alternative, allowing the user (and their tool box) to put together a system with the sort of diligence and thoroughness asked of a professional. Although the use of professional tools like a real-time analyser, a sound pressure meter and more are recommended, a lot of the installation process can be performed with little more than enthusiasm, a pair of ears, a few well-recorded, well-known discs and a tape measure.

The book comprises 202 'tips', all geared toward improving the sound of your system, followed by a handy glossary and a Who's Who of high-end brands. OK, some of these 'tips' are anecdotes, some smack of filler (one is Jim's personal arsenal of demonstration discs), some may apply more to American listeners than UK ones (19x14' with a 10 foot high ceiling is not a 'medium to small' room, and our wall construction differs, for example) and some are relevant for multichannel systems, but taken as a whole, *Get Better Sound* is a force for good in stereo.

Smith takes everything into account (from logging volume levels and favourite tracks on labels on the back of CD jewel cases, to creating your own audio 'road map' for an upgrade path), but it's the installation tips that make the book worth the cover price. In non-tech, non-threatening language, Smith suggests setting out a grid for the perfect position of loudspeaker and listening position alike and then fine-tuning the system by working the grid. He describes when it's appropriate to not set up the system symmetrically, angling the speakers correctly (especially for panel speakers)

and more. I don't want to give too much of his game away, but anyone who has spent time to determine that the best disc to run in loudspeakers is an album of sounds of surf breaking on sea shores and suggests keeping a logbook of tweaks and the way they alter the performance of a system, is tweakmaster general, and should be respected for that.

There's an arrogance of the DIY'er that runs through audio like a red thread today. The "I know better" brigade who can tell you more about a product than its designer, despite only seeing a thumbnail photo of that product; they are the people who would never dream of owning this book because 'it will teach them nothing new.' Sadly, they are also the people who could most benefit from *Get Better Sound*, because they are also invariably the ones with systems that sound horrific. I'm not so arrogant as to presume I know better and learned a lot from *Get Better Sound*. It might not be the book I would wish to write (mine would have more hookers on rollerskates, tigers, and martini-related ejector seat incidents), but if I were writing an instruction book for audiophiles, I would wish it were as good as this.

There are two ways of looking at this book. It's either the best book on audio installation around or it's the OCD grooming manual. I think it's the former. If you follow the book to the letter, you will improve your system, and you'll spend nights lying awake wondering whether your speakers need another half a degree of back-tilt. Either way, it does what it claims and you'll *Get Better Sound*. +

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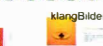


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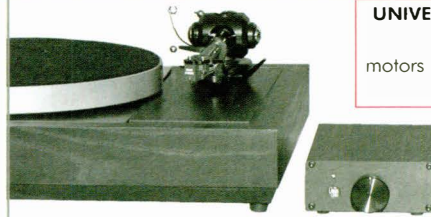
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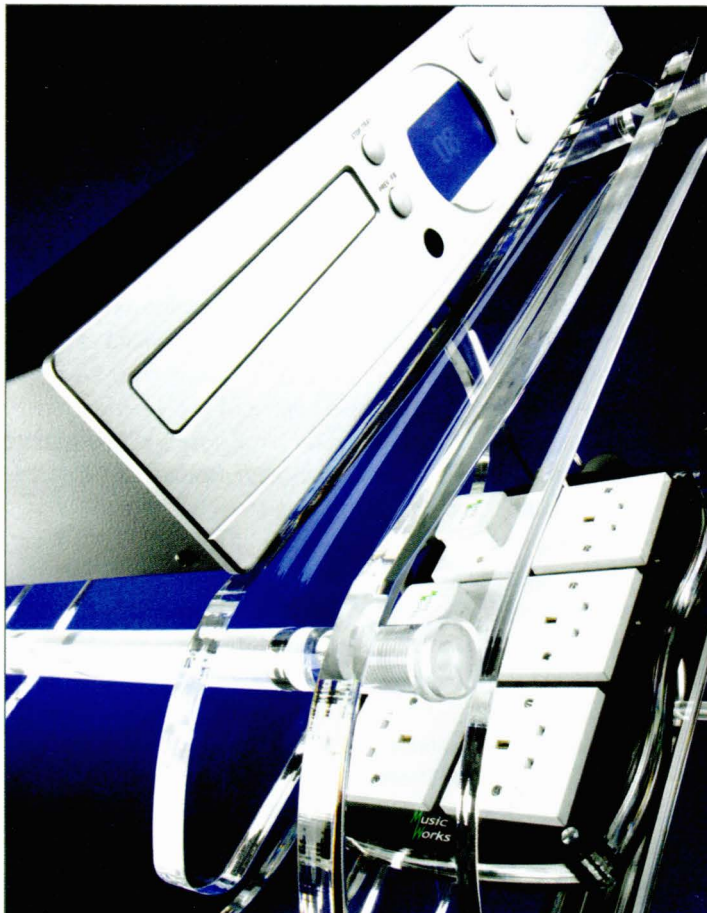
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The Man Behind the Petite

by Malcolm Steward

Nearly twenty years ago I heard a relatively inexpensive loudspeaker that was so convincing and so musically persuasive that I had no choice but to add it to my reviewing arsenal. It has subsequently justified that decision on many occasions, especially when used within the context of my preferred Naim electronics, which readily expose any weaknesses in the equipment to which they are connected. That speaker, the NEAT Petite, quickly became my compact stand-mount design of choice.

Two decades later and that splendid little speaker is appearing in its fourth (SX) iteration. Yet in all the time that I have been a NEAT user and fan I have never seen the factory in which the speakers are designed and manufactured. So, I ventured onto a train destined for Darlington, which is the closest station to NEAT's HQ in the charming, historic, market town of Castle Barnard, where I would chat to company founder and designer, musician, Bob Surgeoner about the Petite.

Malcolm Steward: Where did the idea for the original Petite originate?

Bob Surgeoner: In 1988 I was working in retail at North Eastern Audio Traders in Darlington. We felt that there wasn't a small speaker at that time that did what we thought a small speaker ought to be capable of doing. There were some good loudspeakers around but none, we thought, truly exploited the potential we believed existed for them. None, for example, played loud well, had decent bass extension, and was sufficiently analytical – or, at least, was sufficiently analytical without being too clinical. So we decided to see what we could make just to sell in the shop: nothing more – we had no grand plans for world domination.

We hooked up a basic cabinet that was produced using, let us call it, the most economical cutting pattern for a sheet of eight by four MDF, put some drive units in it along with a rudimentary crossover, and it sounded truly awful. That was on a Friday evening but we persevered and by the Sunday we had it sounding none too bad. Over the subsequent two or three months we made it better and better and we eventually realised that we had achieved a performance level considerably higher than that we had originally set out to produce. We had messed about with various drive units and settled on a Tonegen bass unit, which we found among some discontinued stock in a Henry's Electronics shop in London's Edgware Road. That driver worked exceedingly



well in the context of our speaker. We played what was to become the Petite regularly in our shop and the reactions of people who heard it helped convince us that we were really onto something with it. The following year, after we had sold several pairs in the shop, we decided to take it down to the Heathrow Show and see what a wider audience would think of it. We were nervous because it was a rather basic looking confection with zero finesse but we were overwhelmed by the public's positive reaction to it. That made us decide to try to make a commercial proposition of the Petite.

MS: I don't know about the design having no finesse: I quite liked the stippled, Hammerite-style finish.

BS: The co-designer's father had a woodworking shop that made our cabinets. That paint finish was the only one he could offer. We used that cabinet for several years although, with hindsight, it might have helped commercially if we had moved straightway into wood veneers but we were utterly naïve in terms of manufacturing as a discipline: we had no comprehension of how to be a manufacturer because this was the first time we had manufactured anything. It was a very long and steep learning curve but, thankfully, in the early 1990s, it was fairly easy to sell good-sounding products even if they were plain-looking. We learned a lot but then there was a recession and that stalled us for a while.

Around 1994/1995 we encountered a problem with our tweeter supplier, Audax, who changed the specification of the unit without any notification. We had to look at sourcing another tweeter and that ultimately meant that we had to redesign the whole speaker. We ended up using a Tonegen ribbon tweeter, which is really not a ribbon but an EMIT device. This was a bit risky because the crossover point for it was much higher than one would normally use in a two-way with a 6.5-inch ▶

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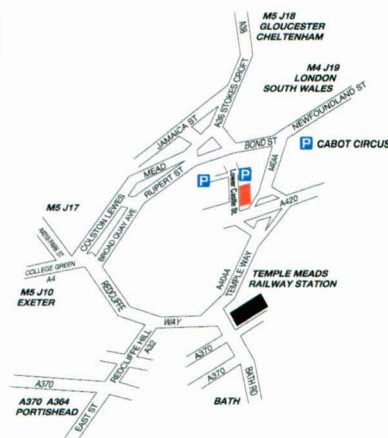
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▶ bass – and we didn't want to change that because by now we were having that unit produced to our specification. The tweeter and its integration into the design proved beneficial because although I had no complaints about the musicality of the original, it was less-than-ideal in other respects.

MS: You say it was flawed yet it still fares exceptionally well for a speaker that is twenty years old. What do you consider the original Petite's flaws to be?

BS: It comes down to the dichotomy of whether the speaker is successful in hi-fi terms or in musical terms. Those two things can be mutually exclusive, and in musical terms I think that original is as good as anything that's available today. I don't think there's any question, though, that it has 'technical' shortcomings.

MS: Why did the improved Petite mark 2 not last as long in the market as its predecessor?

BS: We had only been selling it for about a year when Tonegen decided to discontinue that tweeter. We could not put together a deal to rescue our supply so we had to replace it, which was a considerable nuisance. Obviously, every component in a loudspeaker plays a part in the sound but I believe that it's the tweeter that gives the design its defining character. For that reason I am very picky about tweeters: not only do they have to be technically excellent but they also have to be capable of hiding the fact that they are a hi-fi component – they have to 'disappear' sonically. I went through a dozen theoretically ideal tweeters before I ended up with a kind of radial version of the Tonegen ribbon, based on an Infinity design. It was, like the design it replaced, flawed and not easy to integrate with the Petite but we persevered and wound up with a very organic, human sounding loudspeaker. Technically we should not have crossed it over as low as we did but that wasn't evident when you listened to it. In fact, we have used that tweeter successfully in several other designs including the Elite.

MS: So why have you now decided to replace the Petite mark 3 with the Petite SX?

BS: There are a number of reasons, one of which is that customers, distributors and the press like new things and the Petite mark 3 has been around for a decade so now seems a good time to change it from a commercial perspective. Another reason is that although that EMIT tweeter is very comfortable with a lot of power it tends to be easily damaged by less powerful amplifiers clipping. If that tweeter is clipped regularly its performance can gradually deteriorate. Although it will still work the top end of the speaker becomes harsh and glary. We've seen more of these over the past three years

and it became a problem that we needed to address. So the soft-dome tweeter we use in the Petite SX is pretty well indestructible. I should point out that finding tweeters is never an easy task. Sure, you can find one that works and sounds okay but finding one that delivers the magic we look for can be a very long, drawn out process. The Petite SX is also tuned slightly differently to previous iterations, which makes it leaner and tighter in the bass. It is also purer and cleaner sounding through the mid-range and crossover point than its predecessors.

MS: Can you foresee a time when you will stop revisiting the Petite?

BS: One reason that we've changed the Petite rather than drop it is because we have a strong emotional attachment to it: it was, after all, NEAT's first product.

MS: Your test equipment consists of an assortment of musical instruments and a wind-up gramophone, and your listening room is also kitted out to serve as a recording studio. You are not a typical loudspeaker designer, are you?

BS: In the days of the original Petite we just listened to our favourite music and tried to make it sound as revealing and as good as we thought it could, to the point where we were really excited by it. It wasn't simply a quest for detail unless it was musically relevant. But that's a long process: it took 18 months to take the design from the first prototypes to being production-ready.

Over the last few years, our own music has become increasingly important in the evaluation. It's not whether the speaker succeeds in hi-fi terms – accurately replaying the recording – but whether it can get under the skin of the music and reveal what the artist or band was trying to say with that interpretation of the music. Naturally, the sort of insider knowledge gained by playing on a recording is invaluable when you judge loudspeakers with it. And listening to a recording in the same room in which you recorded it offers equally valuable insights.

Much of loudspeaker design is predictable – you know what to expect when you re-tune a cabinet or alter a crossover – but much is not. Sometimes, though, you hit upon a combination of components that clicks and lets you hear beyond the hi-fi and appreciate the music's intent or previously unheard playing nuances or a musical joke.

Ultimately I design speakers to make my heart beat faster – just the way it does when I am playing live music to an audience, especially as part of a small group of other acoustic musicians. I find that situation very exciting and I want customers to enjoy that same excitement when they listen to my designs. +

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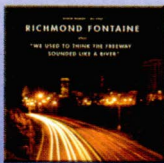
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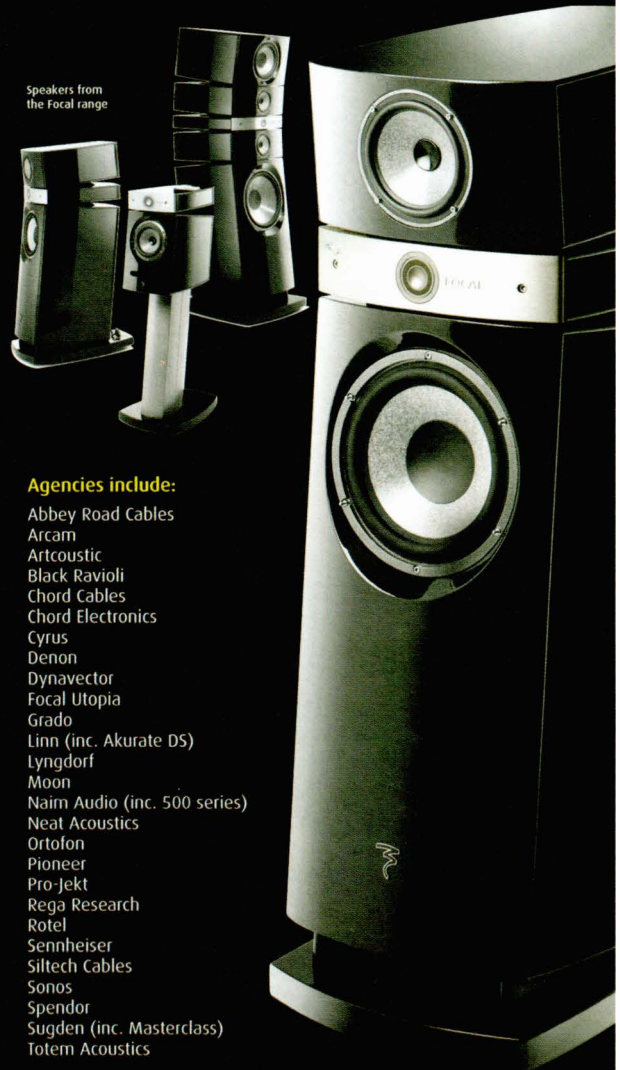
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Quadraspire Q4EVO and Sunoko-Vent SVT Racks

by Roy Gregory

Since they first appeared in 1995, Quadraspire's elegant, versatile and compact racks have been my default choice for accommodating hi-fi equipment, especially where price and funds are at a premium. The attractively understated modular approach also allowed users to grow their rack along with their system.

The original Q4 rack has evolved somewhat over the years, but the elements that made it work in the first place – the veneered MDF shelves and modular aluminium uprights – are still present and correct. In fact, its biggest single failing as a hi-fi rack was that it was too small; perfect for the likes of Naim or Audiolab, anything that stepped outside those dimensional norms was always going to be a struggle to accommodate. That problem was solved by the arrival of the Sunoko-Vent, a bigger brother to the Q4 with a larger footprint, thicker shelves and thicker, solid aluminium uprights. Designed from the ground up as a hi-fi rack, it also incorporated slots cut in the shelves to help ventilation. Together they offered affordable and attractive solutions for almost any system situation, be it a plethora of black boxes littered with green lights or a smaller number of much larger units, filled with glowing bottles. And so things might have stayed, but for Quadraspire's search for even better sonic performance. Enter the Q4EVO and Sunoko-Vent SVT.

At first glance the new models are indistinguishable from the originals. In fact, it offers an upgrade option, but we're getting ahead of ourselves.

It's not until you flip the Q4EVO over that you see the difference between it and the original. The underside of each shelf is deeply scored by a series of grooves, spreading out from the centre point and augmented by a quartet of organic loops in between the spokes. The intention is to break up the dominant resonance within the MDF structure and sonically there's no missing the benefit. Working with a basic two-box system based on the Creek Destiny products, moving from an original Q4 to the EVO delivered a noticeably cleaner and crisper sound, with an increase in both micro and macro dynamics and a welcome gain in instrumental colour. Playing the SACD release of Genesis' *Selling England By The Pound*, the dense layers were noticeably better separated, their individual textures more distinct. The complex, overlapping ▶

▶ sounds that create the opening to 'I Know What I Like' are clearly defined, both in character and space, while the ticking track that heralds the vocal moves much more definitely across the soundstage, left to right in an arcing path. When Gabriel's vocals start, spoken and intimate, not only are they held apart from the backing, but they are much more immediate, the transition from speech to singing more natural and more obvious. These changes are all about degrees of expression and contrast rather than wholesale transformation, but they're well worthwhile – enough to make a replacement shelf or two for core components worth considering.

The changes to the Sunoko-Vent table are similarly unobtrusive but rather more far reaching. It too gains from grooving on the underside of the shelf, although the parallel ventilation slots that already exist mean that the remodelling can be far more subtle, with a fan of grooves cut across the underside of the ribs, subdividing them into different lengths. The other big change is hidden away at the interface between the shelf and uprights. Here, a brass insert allows much greater tension to be exerted when tightening the legs while the additional material interface is claimed to help dissipate energy into the structure more effectively. With a mix of original shelves, shelves with inserts and shelves with grooves, it's easy to hear what each mod is doing.

Of course, there's also the question of how the larger table relates, sonically speaking, to the original. In reality, the choice of support will probably depend more on the equipment being supported than anything else, but it's worth noting that even in their original forms, the Sunoko-Vent enjoyed a worthwhile edge in terms of transparency and the tonal separation of instruments over its smaller brother. The new Q4EVO actually demolishes that difference, but then, the revised Sunoko-Vent has its own cards to play.

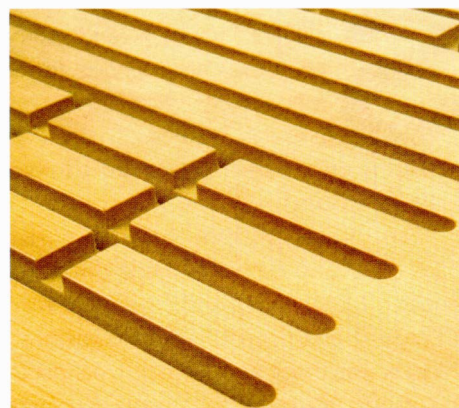
One of the things that I like about the big, Quadraspire table is its inherent sense of confident stability, a quality that extends to its sonic character. Ironically, the new brass inserts on the SVT shelves detract slightly (very slightly) from that four-square stability – physically at least. On a standard, low table you'll barely notice, but build five or six shelves high with longish spacers and there is a definite flexibility in the overall structure. The good news is that it doesn't extend to the sound, which is bigger, bolder and even more confident than before. However, if you are supporting large, heavy units then two lower racks might be a better way to go – not that that is exactly news!

The brass inserts have a very worthwhile effect on the sound of the rack, bringing a clarity and sense of added purpose to the sound. They make the original shelves sound congested and a little muddled, so that on a track like the aforementioned 'I Know What I Like' with its dense and murky bottom end, it becomes much easier to separate the bass guitar and keyboard lines from one another (and Phil Collins drums) once the inserts are in place. Likewise the multi-tracked vocals on Moby's 'Mistake', where the fan of additional chorus voices behind the central vocal are far easier to pick and separate from each other. No, it's not night and day but it is worthwhile, releasing more of the performance from the electronics, more of the performance from the artists.

Moving up to the latest shelves with the additional grooves in their underside, once again you get a small but noticeable improvement. This time it has more to do with texture and instrumental identity, but taken with the improvement that comes with the inserts the results are definitely worth having. Familiar recordings like the Du Pre/Elgar Cello Concerto sound much more like themselves – remember that we're talking a pretty modest set of electronics here – with the solo instrument rich, woody and vibrant, the string and woodwinds much more distinctly voiced in support. Dynamic contrasts,

so critical to this emotive performance, are more dramatic, as is the sense of musical light and shade. Finally, when things get really busy (the crescendos in the Elgar, or the *ffff* passages in Holst's Mars [The DG Steinberg, replayed on the VPI Classic] an underrated performance if ever there was one) the system manages to sound less strained, less on edge, less likely to lose control. In fact, while I would call this an evolution rather than a revolution that doesn't undermine the value of what's been achieved; these changes are entirely to the good, with no downsides whatsoever, and that itself is pretty unusual.

If you already own a Quadraspire table, should you rush out and upgrade the shelves? Any new shelves you need will be of the new type anyway, and it would certainly be worth making sure that those go under the key components in the system. Likewise, if you are going to go to the expense of upgrades to your equipment, then it might be worth including the cost of a new shelf too. Worthwhile with the original shelves, the increase in dynamics and transparency that Stillpoints couplers introduced was greater with the later versions of both Q4 and SVT, underlining the fact that these racks are an excellent basis for future upgrades. +



SPECIFICATIONS

Q4EVO: £95 per shelf

Sunoko-Vent SVT: £200 per shelf
(both including columns)

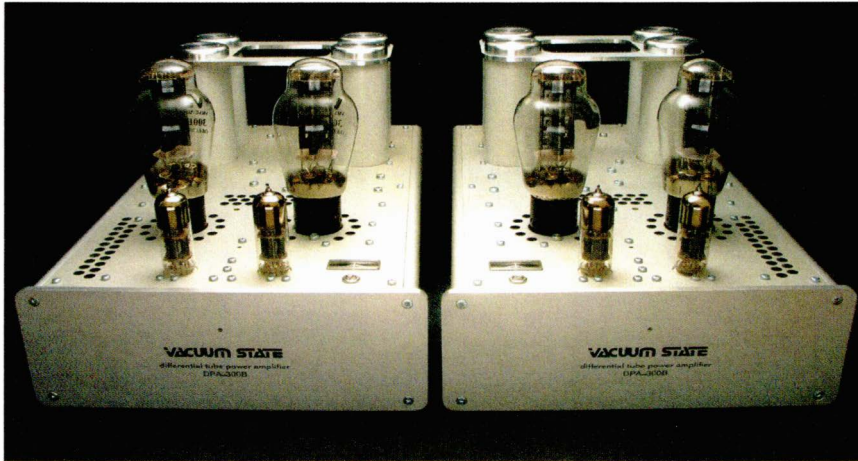
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record reviews

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.

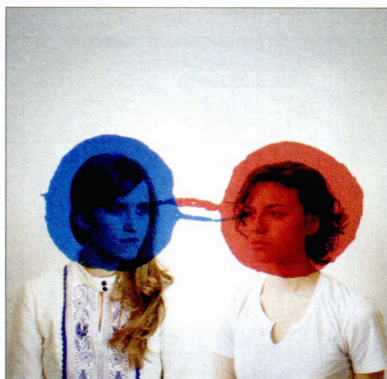
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information, the scale rates a standard,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

This issue's featured reviewers are:

- DD** – Dennis Davis
- RSF** – Richard S. Foster
- AS** – Alan Sircom

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	CD		120g LP
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	XRCD		200g LP
	Double Disc		10" LP
	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
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Dirty Projectors

Bitte Orca

Domino WIG229

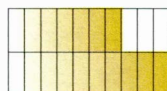


And so the centre of the music universe returns to New York City once more. Brooklyn's Dave Longstreth mixes together practically every musical genre to create chaos out of order. There have been comparisons to David Byrne, because both have a magpie's view of musical composition and they have recorded together. But, just when you think you have this art-house collective pinned down, they turn things round again; one moment almost Anthony Hegarty torchsong, the next Tom Verlaine being backed by Salif Keita's band playing on Stylophones, followed up by angular new-wave prog. Yet, it all works. Truly weird and wonderful.

It's also at times surprisingly well recorded, such as the lovely 'Two Doves'. But this is not an album you buy for recording quality; you buy it because there's hasn't been anything this anchovy wibble hatstand in music since Frank Zappa.

If you like your music to have 'density', if you favour albums that reward the listener over time, if you ever bought a Captain Beefheart record... this has to be one of the best albums of many a long year. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Animal Collective

Merriweather Post Pavilion

Domino WIG216



If the Dirty Projectors are today's Captain Beefheart, Animal Collective are today's Beach Boys, sprinkled with a touch of Tangerine Dream. As a consequence, the band's ninth album polarizes opinion; some think this is the most exciting cut of the last decade. Others think it's derivative trendy nonsense.

Animal Collective are arch experimenters. They constantly play with their music and their vocal lines. The most immediate and approachable track is the beautiful harmonies of 'My Girls', one of the most uplifting tracks of 2009. The rest take some time. I've been listening to this album for almost a year, and when it finally hit, it hit hard. I'm still struggling with some tracks – 'Taste' for example – but each listen brings this closer to perfection.

There's something odd in a good way about the sound. Play it as background, play it through computer speakers or headphones and it's OK. Play Bluish on a honking great hi-fi system and it comes alive. It's pretty far from demonstration quality, but it could be the perfect demonstrator to show why a hi-fi system is important, if not one to show off the performance of that system. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



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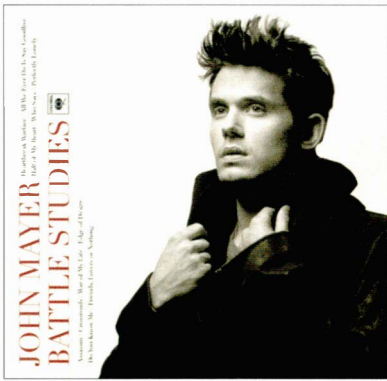
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John Mayer

Battle Studies

Columbia



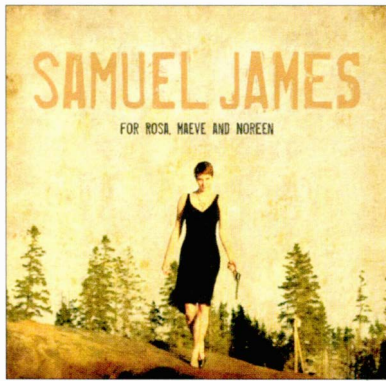
I like John Mayer. As a guitarist, he's an extremely talented, innovative and economical player. As a pop star, he's never one to take himself seriously, even when hounded on one side by grillions of screaming kids and by hoards of paparazzi trying to pin down the ex-Mr Jennifer Aniston.

The trouble is, this is his 'breaking up with Jen' album, filled with honey-dripped pap like 'All We Ever Do Is Say Goodbye', or the strangely U2 tinged 'Heartbreak Warfare'. Everything is very slick and beautifully produced, but on most tracks you won't care. 'Who Says' shows signs of the old talent (both as fingerpickin' guitar player and as songsmith). And his upbeat version of Robert Johnson's 'Crossroads' is the best track on the album, as he rips into some very smooth, very slick solo work – this might even make his teen fan base explore the likes of Cream (as if!).

The rest of the album just sounds like Sting and James Blunt doing ever-so-worthy covers of Eagles records.

Mayer's career arc meant that each successive album showed an artist growing into his talent, balancing the guitarist's desire to wig out with his intelligent, if somewhat populist, songwriting talent. Sadly, *Battle Studies* sees Mayer in retreat. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Samuel James

For Rose Maeve and Noreen

Northern Blues Music

NBM0056

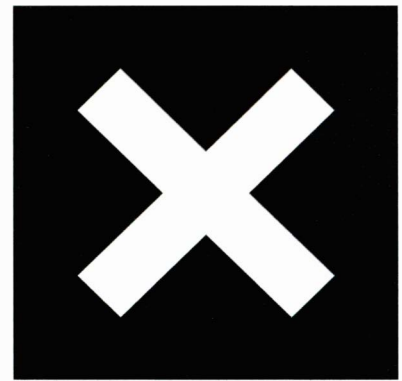
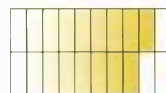


By all rights, bluesman Samuel James should be about 110 years old now. He's got that authentic sounding scratchy voice and some serious guitar chops too, whether fingerpicking or slide. He's not bad on the piano and blues harp too. He also writes his own songs, although I suspect he has a time machine that plonks him back in 1928, where he picks up a bunch of songs that Son House would have played were he not in the big house at the time.

Fortunately, James doesn't sing about experiences he could never have these days. He sings about 'now' stuff in a linear, almost Mose Allison fashion. Take 'I'll Break Your Promise' for example; from the voice and the musicianship, you could be listening to a superbly recorded Mississippi Fred McDowell. But James has also spotted that blues musicians back in the day were entertainment, not just 'fixin' to die' depression songs.

So, we have in Samuel James a prodigious talent, armed with a good ear for a song, outstanding musicianship and a voice that perfectly fits his acoustic blues, all wrapped up in a very natural (if slightly rolled off) acoustic. What's not to like? **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



The xx

xx

Young Turks YT031



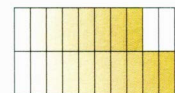
We like to think we are all free thinking individuals. When I first heard The xx album, I thought "This is really, really good" Then you discover this is a band for us old gits to think we are still 'down with the yooof'. The young South London four-piece (now a three piece) must be really hacked off that their following is made up of both lads and dads. Still, if you will do a Jools Holland set early in your career...

It's not hard to see why The xx are a magnet for fortysomethings; those minimalist pop records are something straight out of 1980s Cure, or The Jesus and Mary Chain albums, with a liberal dose of Blue Monday-era New Order. They sing about VCRs too in cool accents reminiscent of Propaganda. In other words, if you were there for the 1980s, you might as well give in to the inevitability of this album now.

There's more to The xx, though. This is intelligent – if mardy – pop, but the remarkably competent production job (by the band's beatmaster Jamie Smith) more than makes up for the seriousness.

Stand out tracks include the excellent and moody 'Fantasy', the minimalist dancey 'Basic Space' and the last three increasingly intense tracks of the album. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



The New Angle on LP Reproduction: Introducing the Lyra Delos MC Phono Cartridge

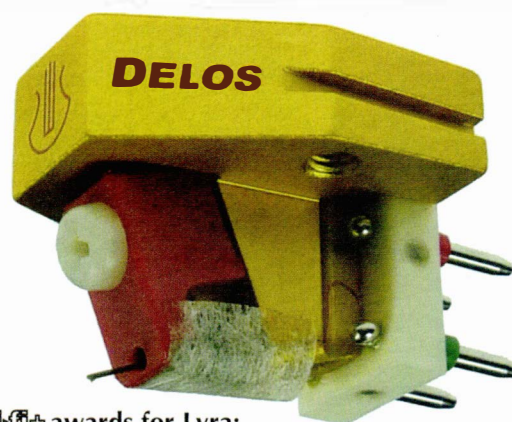
An analog LP played back with an MC cartridge can sound exceptionally good. Normally, the more cost put into the cartridge, the better the sound. However, sometimes what is required is not more cost but more clever engineering, as with the Lyra Delos.

A major problem with most cartridges is that the signal coils are located so that applying normal tracking force restricts performance. The reason is that the cartridge's signal coils *should* have the same angle as the magnetic circuit when the tracking force for playback is applied, but are nearly always designed so that applying normal tracking force pushes the signal coils out of alignment with the magnetic circuit. This impairs the sensitivity and linearity of the coils, and reduces the quality of sound.

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Jonathan Carr, Lyra Designer



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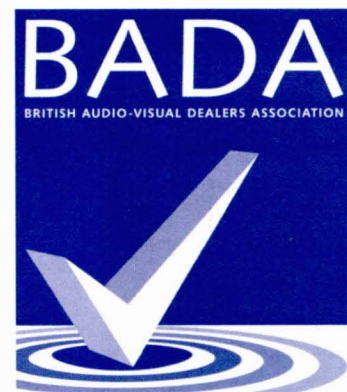
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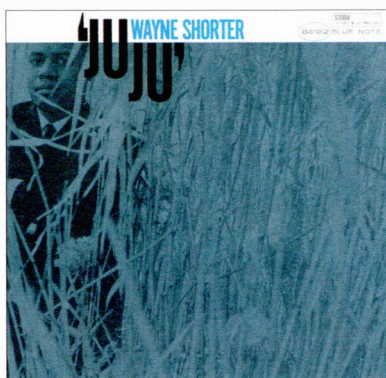
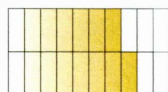
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This box set collects four LPs of a 1960 show in Denmark, and the line up for that concert is unbelievable—Stan Getz, J.J. Johnson, Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge, Benny Carter, Dizzy Gillespie and Cannonball Adderley. And that's not a complete list my any means!

These sessions exhibit tighter group cohesion than many, but when you throw this many great soloists together you can't expect a polished studio session. That said these are some of my favorite *JATP* releases. In listening to these sessions for the first time in years, I found myself frequently breaking into a grin—these are FUN sessions. This is a treasure trove of music that has never been released on CD or even reissued on LP, and unlike reissues of familiar albums offers a treasure trove of discoveries.

These are live recordings and the recording quality is quite good for a live road show. The LPs were remastered from the original master tapes. Original copies of the individual LPs are quite common, but the pressing and mastering of MGM vintage Verve releases was on the decline, and these beautiful Pallas pressings are clearly superior. Speakers Corner has boxed the individual LP jackets in an attractive box. Very nice indeed. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Wayne Shorter

Juju

Blue Note/Music Matters 84182

180g

Although all love the 1950s classics, many Blue Note collectors pine for reissues from the later part of the catalog. That wish is fulfilled with the release of Shorter's 1964 masterpiece *Juju*, which bears the unmistakable imprint of John Coltrane's influence.

Shorter's sound here is closer to that of Coltrane than he would ever exhibit on record again, and less like the Shorter sound he developed as a sideman of Miles Davis beginning in 1965. His quartet is made up of Coltrane sidemen McCoy Tyner, Elvin Jones and Reggie Workman. Shorter's astringent tenor tone on this LP was to give way in future Blue Note sessions, but his genius as a composer would not wane. Shorter's search for a new jazz idiom was far removed from the Blue Note sound of Lou Donaldson or Ike Quebec or any of the Blue Note stable.

This is essential music for any jazz collection and the new mastering by Hoffman and Gray for Music Matters is definitive. The sound is appropriately biting but has the richness of tone and palpability that is missing from the original pressing. There are more Shorter titles in the Music Matters' pipeline and I hope this tasty morsel is just the first course of a full run of Shorter Blue Notes. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Michael Brecker

Pilgrimage

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 2-316

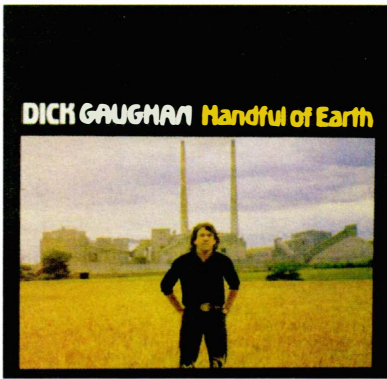
180g

Michael Brecker died in January of 2007 after a long battle with MDS and leukemia. His final album, *Pilgrimage*, was released a few months later on CD. Herbie Hancock, Brad Mehldau, Pat Metheny, John Patitucci and Jack DeJohnette joined Brecker in these sessions. These great artists were paying a final tribute to their friend and play a program of Brecker compositions. There is no clue in Brecker's compositions or performance of his declining health. Brecker's sidemen turn in a performance which seems less a tribute than a celebration.

The album was well received by the critics and the jazz public in 2007 and the music deserved those accolades on a purely objective level. First released as a CD, the 77 minutes of music exceeds the limits of what a single LP can properly reproduce, and Mobile Fidelity has issued the record as a two 180 gram LP set. This album also bears the imprint of Brecker's debt to Coltrane, updated with the innovations of Miles Davis' late 1960's quintet. This is an excellent choice by Mobile Fidelity for reissue—first rate playing, an exceptional recording and a contemporary performance. The fine remastering by Rob Loverde easily trumps the CD original. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC





Dick Gaughan

Handful of Earth

Three Black Feathers
TBFLLP003

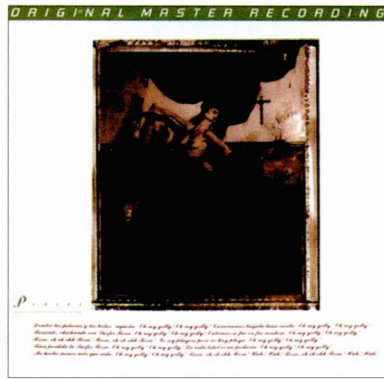
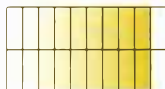
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Having worked on tributes to folk legends of the Left (such as Ewan MacColl and Woodie Guthrie) in the late 1970s, the Scottish folk musician Dick Gaughan released *Handful of Earth* to huge critical acclaim in 1981, and the album went on to be Melody Maker's album of the year and fRoot's album of the decade.

This is a sparse album, mostly just Gaughan accompanying himself on the acoustic guitar and here the album is at its best – 'Both Sides The Tweed' with electric guitar and piano sounds almost overproduced compared to the impassioned 'Cragie Hill'. But this is overstating things, there's not a duff track on the album.

New label Three Black Feathers is concentrating on bringing these excellent albums back to life and the pressing quality is little short of excellent. Gaughan's guitar style is precise and difficult to get right on LP, but the remaster (taken from the original masters and performed by Sean Magee at Abbey Road) is first rate. That it comes with extended liner notes and new photos and an interview with Gaughan is icing on the cake. Folk folk will have already worn their original copy flat through overplaying. Buy this! **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Pixies

Surfer Rosa

Mobile Fidelity
MFSL 1-296

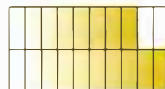
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This is the Rosetta Stone of indie rock. Before this, all was jangly guitars and floppy fringes, or full-on anger punk. On *Surfer Rosa* (and *Doolittle*, also on MFSL), the Pixies combined hard and soft on the same track, a switchblade of delicate tones and edgy thrash, turning in an eyeblink from soft, light pop to speaker breaking intensity. One of the most influential albums in the genre, it's not overstating *Surfer Rosa's* importance to say were it not for this album, there would have been no Nirvana, no PJ Harvey and maybe even no White Stripes.

So, imagine that heart-stopping moment when the MoFi people found out there was a recently discovered, first generation original analogue master tape lying round. The GAIN 2 Ultradisc SACD and this GAIN 2 Ultra Analog 180g vinyl LP are the result. And Black Francis' 13 tracks on that original album sound better here than they ever did. Visceral, raw, detailed and at times huge sounding, this was how producer Steve Albini heard it.

22 years on, it still sounds fresh, helped in no small part by this superb reissue. Every bit as significant as the Velvet Underground's first album, this is a must have for any collection. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Nic Jones

Penguin Eggs

Three Black Feathers
TBFLLP001

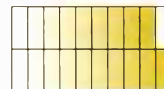
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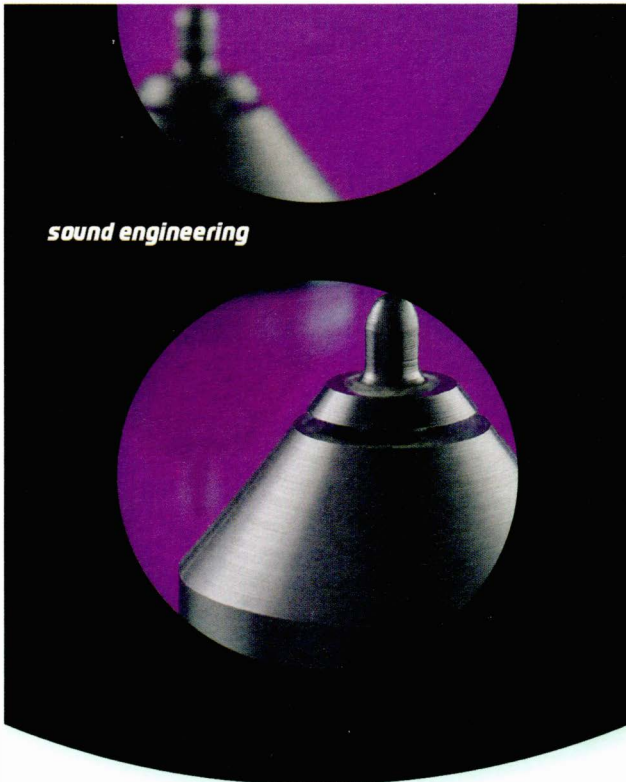
The British Folk revival was in full swing at the end of the 1970s, and perhaps the brightest star in the folk firmament then was Nic Jones. His 1980 album *Penguin Eggs* has long been considered one of the finest English folk albums ever. Kate Rusby certainly thinks so, while Mike Harding's army of Radio 2 listeners voted it the second best folk album of all time.

It's not hard to see why. His strong, percussive guitar style and his fiddle playing were hard to better and his voice has all the lyricism of a Martin Carthy. This is very traditional English folk at its finest, from a performer the like of which we won't see again (he hasn't played since a major car accident in 1982).

The 200g pressing has done Jones proud and revitalised one of the most complete folk albums of its time, and beyond. This isn't some commercial giant cashing in on its back catalogue; it is a labour of love, and the people at Three Black Feathers are clearly passionate about keeping the past of the folk revival alive. You just can't help be pulled along by such passion and energy, especially when the pressing lives up to the rest of the package. **AS**

RECORDING
MUSIC





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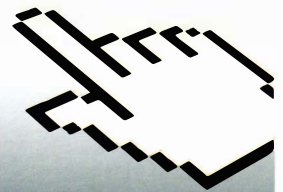
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N Grove Manchester Aug 2009

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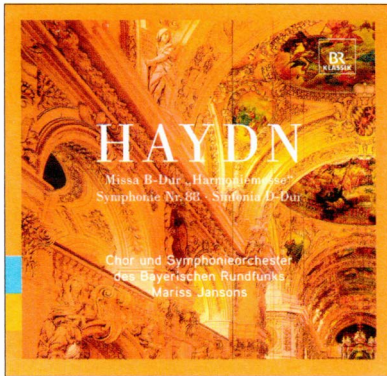
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Joseph Haydn: Sinfonia in D major; Symphony in G major; "Harmoniemesse" Mass in B flat major.

Mariss Jansons conducting the Chor und Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks. BRClassics 403571900102 **SA**⁽⁵⁾

I have just heard one of the finest all Haydn programs I've listened to in quite a long time. I've tended to lean more towards Mozart in the past, but I'm here to tell you that this disc, with Jansons, is absolutely sublime. While the Sinfonia in D major is a nice little piece, the drama and insight into the great skills of this other ultra famous Austrian composer begins with the Symphony in G. Well formulated, logical in execution, it never fails to entertain with a touch of frivolity and great depth of understanding. This symphony is an excellent work and the performance is exceptional.

The sound quality, while excellent on the CD layer, is bettered as you can imagine on the DSD layer. I've several performances of the Harmoniemesse, but I'm here to tell you that this one will stand the test of time. The placement of orchestra, chorus and soloists is pretty close to perfect and the singing is out of this world. This is a disc that should be in every classical music collector's library. This should **not** be missed by anyone. **RSF**

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Schumann: Kinderszenen, Op. 15. Brahms: Paganini Variations, Op. 35.

Claudio Arrau, pianist. PentaTone Classics PTC 5186 170 **SA**⁽⁵⁾

PentaTone has brought to light in their 'Remastered Quadro Recording' series, two more masterpieces that have been refreshed and given modern sound and with that a soul that accompanies this music handily. Arrau delivers an insightful, frolicsome performance of Robert Schumann's "Scenes from Childhood". This is a well known work and Arrau is gentle yet firm in his fingering technique and you are really listening to this great master at a time when he was still at the height of his creative powers. I can't speak highly enough about Kinderszenen enough.

The Brahms/Paganini is clearly a tour de force that holds no obstacles for Arrau. I've not heard this performance before and it is rapid fire perfect. I'm afraid we won't get many more Arrau discs from PentaTone and I'm very appreciative of having these performances with a modern sound I could only dream of. Yes, the CD layer sounds fine, but the DSD layer is where the magic is. Regardless of your playback equipment, this is a disc that will not bore you and will stand the test of time of repeat playing. Heartily recommended. **RSF**

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Sergei Rachmaninov: Prelude in C sharp minor, Op 3 No. 2; 10 Preludes Op. 23; Thirteen Preludes, Op. 32.

Steven Osborne, Piano. Hyperion CDA67700 **CD**

Rachmaninov composed 24 preludes, one for each musical key. Today we are given a wonderfully textural set of documents by the famous English Pianist, Steven Osborne. Osborne's repertoire is large and varied, from Liszt through Messiaen, from Alkan, Britten and Debussy on to Michael Tippett. The 75+ minutes of outstanding performance and sound contained on this disc will show even the casual listener how well Osborne has mastered Rachmaninov's works and we now have them at our disposal anytime we care to listen. He brings a level of clarity and conciseness to the music; he's clearly playing with great affection and we, the listener, are the recipients of his emotional bond.

There is something magical about these performances and not only am I pleased to have these recordings complete on one disc, I feel they set a new standard of excellence and offer another proverbial feather in the artists cap. A job well done with music that is easily accessible and enjoyable. The engineers have captured the sound quite well and so I highly recommend this disc to one and all. **RSF**

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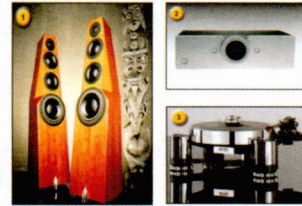
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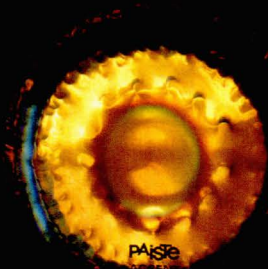
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Half Man Half Biscuit – Back in the DHSS every home should have one

by Alan Sircom

AUDIOPHILES – LOOK AWAY NOW. THERE'S NOTHING FOR YOU HERE. Half Man Half Biscuit don't make audiophile recordings, but if they did, they'd probably be simultaneously the worst and the funniest audiophile recordings in the world.

Birkenhead's best-known four-piece post-punk satire act, Half Man Half Biscuit shot to something almost not quite approaching fame in the mid-1980s with their epic *Trumpton Riots* EP, followed closely by HMHB's most important album to date – *Back in the DHSS*. Shooting to number one in the indie charts and number 60 in the UK album charts in 1985, the album of sardonic digs at popular culture, as expressed by musicians never once hobbled by the constraints of musicianship. And yet, somehow, HMHB got under the skin, and stayed there.

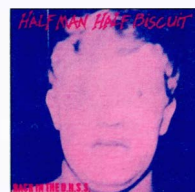
To understand *Back in the DHSS* is to drink deeply from 1980s Britain; even the album title is a parody of the Beatles 'Back in the USSR', while recognising the millions of unemployed signing on with the Department of Health and Social Security at the time. If you weren't around in Thatcher's Britain, you need a translator to even begin to get the references and without the references the jokes quickly fall apart. HMHB are like The Fall in clown shoes and an obsession with B-list celebrity. The middle eight from 'God Gave Us Life' is a perfect example – a dead-pan Merseyside voice intoning "...and He also gave us Una Stubbs" with vitriol. Wry, with a touch of Viz-comic to those who were there at the time, "who's Len Ganley, and why is everyone doing his stance?" to the rest of the world. This dates the album, and although each subsequent album deals with popular culture of the time, there's still a root in those early days.

As you can probably guess, HMHB is a lyrics band. You don't go to see the Four Lads Who Shook The Wirral for widdly-widdly guitars, epic drum solos or big-haired vocalists bellowing out air-punch power ballads in an effort to recapture their glory days. Instead, you get four normal blokes who can just about play their instruments knock out parodies of everything, who just happen to be fronted by Nigel Blackwell, arguably one of the country's most talented folk lyricists.

The band may have never capitalised on those early successes, but neither has it sold out. Subsequent albums have offered more of the same, and each with an album title the like of which any newspaper headline writer would happily sell a major organ for; *Voyage to the Bottom of the Road* (which featured the excellent 'Paintball's Coming Home'), *Trouble over Bridgewater*, *Achtung Bono* and *CSI: Ambleside*. But more of the same is what you want with HMHB.

HMHB is also one of those bands you can't discuss without mentioning Peely. The broadcaster and journalist John Peel (1939-2004) was a keen supporter of the band, and they recorded 12 *Peel Sessions* for the BBC. The band's return, following the 1986 split, was announced on John Peel's show in 1990. HMHB was only one of a vast list of bands Peel 'broke' in the UK; Pink Floyd, Roxy Music, Joy Division, The Fall, The Smiths and PJ Harvey all received early career boosts from John Peel, while he helped the UK launch of bands like Nirvana and the White Stripes. Peely's death in 2004 left a gaping hole in the UK music business that still needs to be filled.

The most current *Back in the DHSS* CD pressing mixes tracks from the *Dickie Davis Eyes* and the *The Trumpton Riots* EPs. If you weren't there, don't get it, because you won't get it. If you were, it's back to hating Nerys Hughes (from the heart). +



HALF MAN HALF BISCUIT – BACK IN THE DHSS

1985 Probe Records
Nigel Blackwell (singer, guitar, songwriter)
Neil Crossley (bass)
Simon Blackwell (lead guitar)
Paul Wright (drums)
Derek Lloyd (keyboards)

Track Listing (1993 CD)

1. Busy Little Market Town
2. God Gave Us Life
3. Fuckin' 'Ell It's Fred Titmus
4. Sealclubbing
5. 99% Of Gargoyles Look Like Bob Todd
6. Time Flies By (When You're The Driver Of A Train)
7. I Hate Nerys Hughes
8. The Len Ganley Stance
9. Venus In Flares
10. I Love You Because (You Look Like Jim Reeves)
11. Reflections In A Flat
12. I Left My Heart in Papworth General
13. Architecture, Morality, Ted And Alice
14. Albert Hammond Bootleg
15. 1966 and All That
16. The Trumpton Riots
17. All I Want For Christmas is a Dukla Prague Away Kit



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