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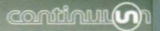


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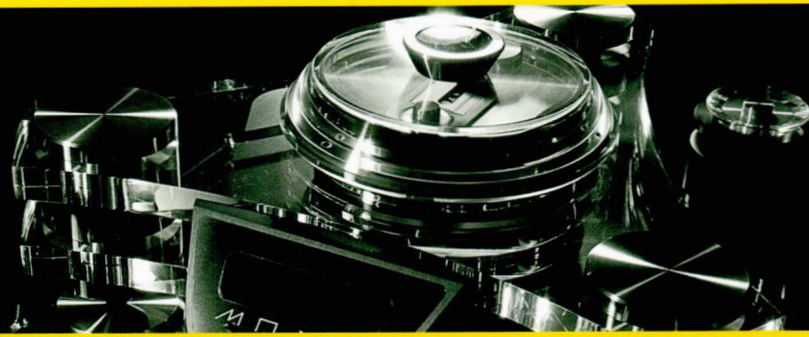
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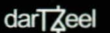


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Printed By
Advent Print Group
Andover

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

ISSN 1465 5950

It went round the Internet like wild fire. A photo shoot of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev having an oh so humble breakfast with his colleague, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Except that sitting behind the breakfast table was some exceptional pieces of audio equipment. It transpires Medvedev is a bit of an audiophile and something of a rocker, with a healthy collection of original vinyl pressings of Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, Deep Purple and the rest. He and his son are also into Linkin Park. As we now know from the photo shoot, he owns an Avid Acutus turntable and the company's two-box phono stage, a Naim CD player (model thus far unknown) and Daniel Hertz amps and loudspeakers. That system's got some serious high-end mojo!

Around the same time, our beloved leader let it be known that he'd bought a Mumford and Sons CD.

While we don't lionize our leaders and we don't necessarily want to ape the music and the systems they play it on, the Medvedev photos highlight a major difference in the way we perceive our hobby between East and West these days. Apart from the fact that our media would tear Cameron limb from limb for daring to waste his own money on expensive equipment, it's unthinkable that a UK parliamentarian would dare 'come out' and admit they liked to listen to music on good equipment, even though that equipment might come from the UK.

While open displays of wealth have a nasty habit of backfiring on politicians (we'd all assume the MP bought their system on expenses), it would be nice if one day our MPs could at least call upon our little industry as a beacon of UK quality engineering and technology.

I find it depressing that one of the biggest fillips to the audio industry in years has come from a Russian photo shoot. We still have a mighty reputation abroad

for good audio engineering – some of even it relating to products designed and built in the UK. But in the UK, we tend to play down our centres of excellence so successfully that the vast majority of it is now British in name only.

Hi-fi is an aspiration purchase in Russia. It's not simply something to enjoy, but to show that you have 'made it'. And, interestingly, the online nay-sayers for once have remained remarkably quiet about Medvedev's six-figure system. Who knows? Maybe a Russian President can make hi-fi cool again. +

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Back to Basics VII – Putting it all together

music matters

by Alan Sircom

THUS FAR, WE'VE BEEN LOOKING AT SUBSTITUTING INDIVIDUAL COMPONENTS IN ISOLATION. How do they come together? And which ones are the most important in getting a system to sound good? This was the object of my Whittlebury Hall seminars.

There were two stages to the test; getting the basics right and fine-tuning the already good sound. The first part ably demonstrated just how important moving loudspeakers onto good loudspeaker stands and how important room acoustic treatments are in getting good performance from a system (interestingly, it was one of the first demonstrations every run on UK soil that actually demonstrated the effects of room acoustic treatment by playing the system with and without a set of Advanced Acoustics Orbis bass traps and side panels).

From here, we inserted power conditioning (from Isol-8 on the first day, IsoTek on the second) and audiophile power cords. This surprised a number of people, who expected upgrading interconnects and speaker cables to make the biggest difference.

But it's the cable test that warranted the most post-match analysis. We used and then mixed up Cardas and Crystal cables. Some liked the sound of an all-Crystal system, some preferred the sound of an all-Cardas system. No-one who expressed a preference liked the sound of a hybrid Crystal/Cardas system. Under show conditions, I expected a lot of head-scratching and admissions of not being able to hear the differences, but "Don't sell these changes short," was the castigating response from one listener.

Tests like this are riddled with problems on all sides. They are too short. Listeners may have already heard enough musical samples to wear flat their critical listening skills. Under such settings, listeners might fail to spot more subtle changes or go for 'different' rather than 'better'. And there's always the 'joy sponge' element who through sheer force of negativity can suck the life out of a room. Yet even here it seems that the importance of such fundamentals can be heard.

It's here that we come to the end of our little investigation. Along the way, we've looked at what's taken as self-evident by audiophiles (and frequently dismissed by those outside our little fraternity), explored the significance and relevance of these axioms, I lost a lot of cynicism along the way.

So, what have we learned? First, it's relatively easy to make good sound – a well-matched source, amp and speakers placed at the right height and the appropriate use of strategically placed room treatment virtually guarantee that. But the jump from good system to great system is hard

and the road is treacherous. A systematic approach – ideally a stem-to-stern method that takes power, support and cabling into account – can bring about those moves from 'good' to 'great' without needing to alter the basic structure of the system. A 'bitza' approach (bitza this, bitza that) can work too, but pulling together the best of different systems can also do more harm than good to the overall sound quality. Many of these systemic approaches build from the power out.

The way they change the sound appears not necessarily tonal, but temporal. The effect of such components is found more in the breach than the observance, in that the effect it has on your listening is more immediately noticeable upon removal than installation. The best method is to insert product under test, listen to music, track any changes in your musical trends and then remove said product. If your music listening falls flat or you just stop listening as much, the product is helping your system put all its ducks in a row and moving from 'good' to 'better'. Often, you insert the device and hear no difference, almost forget about it, remove it and ten seconds later, put it right back.

The last point though is 'remain sane'. In the manner that only reviewers can dream up, I briefly intended demonstrating "the most expensive £1,000 system ever" with tens of thousands of pounds worth of treatment bringing the best out of a budget CD player and amplifier, and speaker stands that cost three times as much as the loudspeakers. Fun it might be, and the improvements such treatments bring to humble system are quite remarkable, but sane it is not. Go with what sounds right and what feels right for you and your system. But don't be bound by 10% rules or other conventions.

Ultimately, this can't just be smoke and mirrors... can it? +

MP3? Not for me!

hardware and taste

by Jason Kennedy

HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED WHETHER YOUR HARDWARE AFFECTS YOUR LISTENING TASTE?

While hi-fi shows sometimes seem to be a celebration of well recorded lift music hopefully that's not what most of us listen to at home, but I suspect that hardware does influence what we prefer. Valves are renowned for their natural sound and this quality makes music that's sung or played on acoustic instruments that much more realistic and enjoyable, there's nothing like a decent valve amp to bring out the timbre of wooden instruments and the beauty of the human voice. As a technology valves are distinctly euphonic, their characteristics seem perfectly in tune with the resonances of unamplified instruments. I am more inclined to listen to classical music in particular when I have some quality glass in the system and one friend has virtually abandoned electrically created music as a result of using this classic technology.

Of course the opposite is also true, you can't appreciate the full power and drive of heavy rock without solid state to provide the requisite grip in the bottom end. Led Zeppelin didn't use valves in their PA systems nor in the studio, there could have been one or two in Jimmy Page's guitar amp but not enough to make a difference to the choice of amplification at the replay end of the chain. It's also worth noting that guitarists like Jimmy Page, Hendrix and all those who follow in their footsteps chose their valve guitar amplifiers for the way the valves distorted when played loud. The tone the amps made was important, but it was for the crunchy, distorted sound it made, rather than its accuracy.

Ultimately we need amplifiers that make it easy and enjoyable to access all manner of music. Surely the point of a decent sound system is not only to make your favourite albums sound great but to make new music as accessible as possible. The best examples of both technologies can do this and, fortunately, they are not necessarily the most expensive. I used a Leak Stereo 20 for some time in my early days and found it worked well with everything I had to play, even if it didn't have the power to do justice to Deep Purple.

Technically at least, we are in something of a happy place when it comes to the equipment we use to replay our music, because it's no longer expensive or complicated to make a perfectly serviceable sound. Most budget electronics and loudspeakers produce a performance that is, to borrow a phrase from our American cousins, "good enough for Government work". Of course, there's a wide gulf between 'good enough' and 'good', and an even wider one between 'good' and 'great', but the tools for good sound are no longer the domain of a rich or technological elite.

However, there is now another more pernicious factor influencing the music we choose to listen to. But maybe that shouldn't be 'we' as I am referring to the MP3 format and those of us who appreciate great sound probably give it a wide berth. With CD's decline in popularity and the ease with which MP3s can be purchased and heard, it's a format in the ascendant. MP3 is a format that not only discards detail that's not considered to be important for psychoacoustic reasons but one that adds its own rather distinctive characteristics to the sound in the process. How significant the discarded data and the additional characteristics largely depend on the severity of compression used and the quality of the system used to replay those compressed files.

At an AES lecture by recording engineer George Massenburg last year, I heard the distortions that MP3 adds and which had been extracted by sum and difference. They are not pretty, in fact they are quite ugly and are only tolerated because of the sort of music that is usually found on the format. I can't imagine that anyone who reads this august journal would be able to tolerate an MP3 of classical music on a revealing system, yet the majority of music fans are happy to pay for this dumbed down format. Perhaps more troubling is the implication of the findings by Stanford music professor Jonathan Berger, that the current generation of listeners actually prefer the sound of compressed MP3 over lossless audio, because they like the sizzle-sounds MP3 brings to the party.

As these are the majority of music buyers today, and the majority tends to be influential, this sends something of a shiver down my interconnect cables. It also made me think that regardless of whether your amplifier glows or not, I think you should buy all those CDs you'd like to have now while you still can, because that format's days are numbered. +

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The 2010 National Audio Show

Whittlebury Hall 25-26 September

by *Steve Dickinson*

The doubters said it wouldn't happen; that the first National Audio Show at Whittlebury Hall in 2009 would also be the last. The second show, held on the weekend of 25-26 September proved the nay-sayers wrong and, if the impressions of the exhibitors are any guide, this year's event was even better attended than the first. That said, it isn't entirely clear how many of the attendees for this year's event were actually visitors from 2009 who hadn't yet found their way out of Whittlebury Hall's labyrinthine interior. Nevertheless, the corridors and rooms were kept busy for most of the day, particularly on the Saturday.

If anything can be said to have been disappointing about the show, the non-attendance of some big-name brands would qualify. While many had a substantial presence, Cyrus, Tannoy and Chord, for example, it would also be fair to say that the presence of some of the biggest UK names, like Arcam, B&W, Linn, Naim and others, was missed. Aside from a handful of products from Naim and B&W being used in dealer systems, I saw nothing from, arguably, the core of the UK big league manufacturers. Step forward dCS and Focal for a special commendation. I heard comments about dCS/Focal dominance at the show and their products were certainly extremely well-represented, their wholehearted support of the event in taking several large rooms (not to mention various other exhibitors using their products in their own systems) deserves recognition.

Absolute Sounds also took a suite of large rooms, with closed-door demonstrations of the new Wilson Sophia III loudspeakers and a selection of delights from Magico and DartZeel but, for sheer gorgeousness, there can be only one product: the new 300-watt monoblock amplifier from Dan D'Agostino. It was only on static display, but from its Fritz-Lang-Meets-Cyclops power meter, to the copper heatsinking and polished chrome chassis, this was a thing of great beauty and desirability. I don't care what it sounds like, I want one. Well, two, obviously. It even put the new Metronome integrated CD player, (so new,

the display unit was serial number 001) into the shade, somewhat unexpectedly. Well... almost!

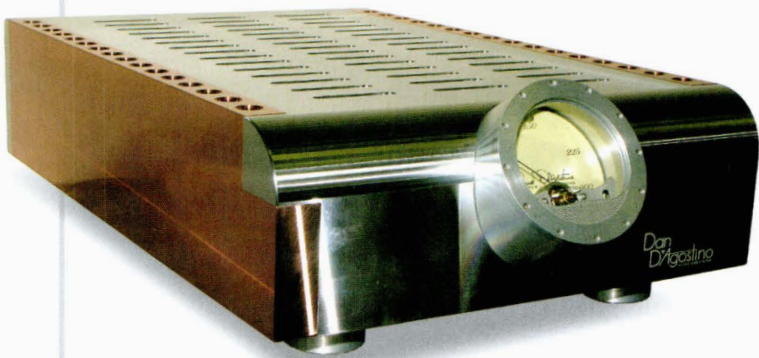
Absolute Sounds also had a couple of rooms open for casual visitors; a Micromega/PrimaLuna/Sonus Faber combination, a system at a rather more accessible price, communicated in ways I've heard some high-end kit fail to achieve. Rather less modest, in the same room, was a pair of Sonus Faber Fenice loudspeakers. Static display only, but making their presence felt, nonetheless. They sat discreetly at the side of the room, in much the same way that Michael Winner discreetly visits restaurants.

It's nice to see Magneplanar loudspeakers back in the UK and a pair of the new MA1.7s were sounding very fine in the Decent Audio room. Maggies used to be renowned as difficult to drive, the latest models are, apparently, a somewhat kinder load.

Audiofreaks were using the latest Avalon loudspeakers, the Transcendent, a £15,000 design using essentially the same cabinet as the £20,000 Indra but in a two-way rather than three-way configuration, fed by a variety of sources, including a Zanden CD player, a new 12" version of the Kuzma Stogi S/Stabi S turntable and an Apple laptop and HRT Streamer +.

This last is something which was very much in evidence at the show and reflects the changes in the CD market. Metronome aside, new CD players were notably thin on the ground, although there were some excellent and already established players from the likes of AMR and Gryphon as well as from the returning to the UK Burmester range.

Burmester also showed its new reference-grade 100 phono preamp, and this highlighted continued interest in top-notch vinyl replay. British companies like Avid, Revolver, SRM, Systemdek were showing well, while Canadian Oracle's turntables were back in the country after a long break. Although turntables are still proving remarkably popular nearly 30 years after its supposed replacement hit the street, the number of new vinyl decks was lower than usual this year. ▶



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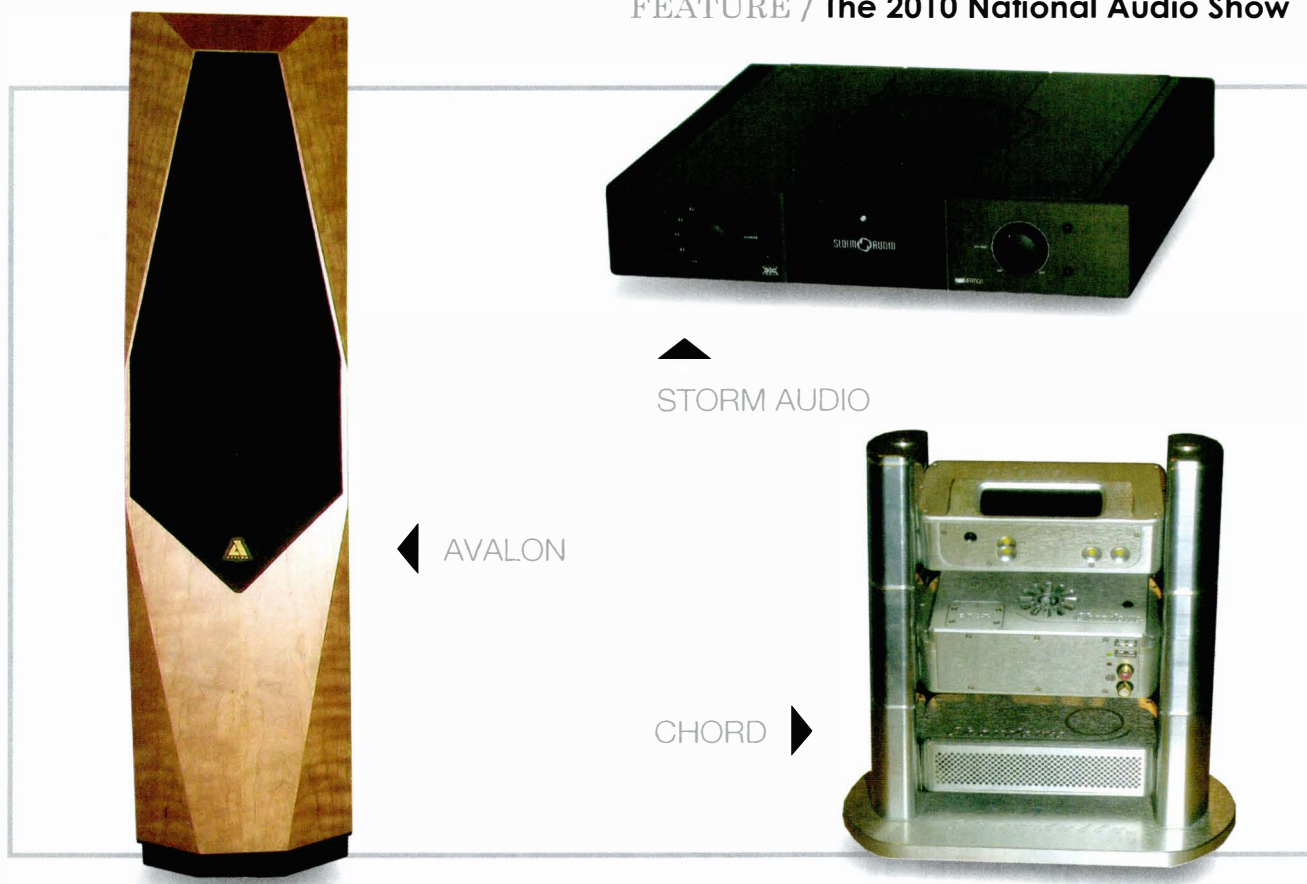
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▶ Storm Audio, a new name to me and one I'm keen to get to know rather better, were using a dCS Puccini into a pair of Focal 1028Be loudspeakers; their range of amplifiers was producing some of the best sounds to be found in any of the smaller rooms. Their proprietary StormFocus technology (used to better match amplifier and loudspeaker impedances, apparently) produced some excellent results, from a source and speaker combination I know very well.

Other new products at the show included a flagship floorstanding loudspeaker from Kudos, the £13,000 Titan; a new standalone DAC from digimeisters dpa, the PDM3; and additions to Chord Electronics' dinky Chordette range. This last being audio jewellery on an entirely different scale to the D'Agostino amp, but still possessing a fair degree of 'want-one' factor for anybody interested in exploiting the possibilities of computer, or personal-audio systems. Demand Better Audio were showing a range of loudspeakers built into carbonfibre spheres made by a Formula 1 contractor, and Tannoy had a room dedicated to their Kingdom Royal floorstanders, with more than a nod towards their classic Westminster Royals of yore.

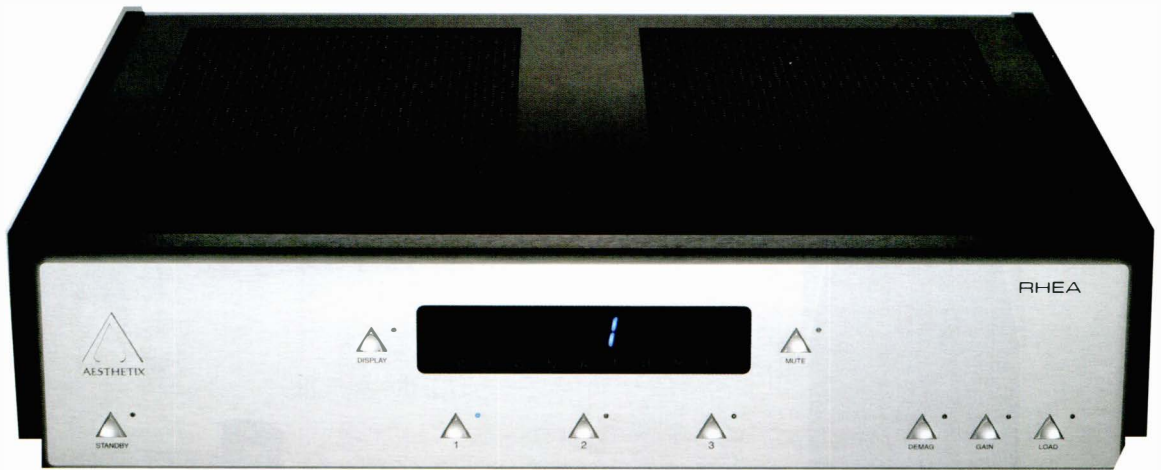
Of all the dCS and Focal rooms, The Music Project was perhaps the most ambitious. The system was partnered by the new David Berning ZOTL and ZH230 pre/power combination. Thanks to a meticulous set up, with MusicWorks mains distribution and supports, and MIT signal cables, all resulted in a system which seemed to get the best out of any music offered to it.

Good sounds were also emerging from the Vertex AQ room where, as well as their range of supports and cabling, they were demonstrating their new Aletheia DAC. This eschews upsampling, reclocking or other digital innovations in favour of more conventional 16-bit/44.1kHz processing, but implemented with careful attention to the sort of power supply regulation,

anti vibration and anti RFI methodology championed by the company. This 'Vertexed-up-to-the-eyeballs' approach to otherwise unremarkable technology seems to have produced an excellent-sounding DAC.

Talking of Vertex AQ, various seminars and presentations took place at the show, including a couple from Roy Gregory of Nordost and Steve Elford of Vertex AQ, to update us on progress in their measurement project since last year's show. This is now really starting to produce some very interesting and thought-provoking results; suffice to say, they can consistently detect and measure, repeatedly, the sort of differences we've been hearing in relation to supports, mains and cable looms for some years now.

All things considered, this second National Audio Show contained much of interest, and some truly memorable systems. It promised a lot and delivered most of it. Here's hoping the next one will be even better attended, by exhibitors and visitors alike. +



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Aesthetix Rhea Signature phono stage, Calypso Signature line-stage preamp and Atlas Signature hybrid monoblocks

by Roy Gregory

Lest there be any confusion, this review definitely covers the whole enchilada – phono, line and mono amps – but despite that fact it seems to fall naturally into two halves, partly for historical reasons and partly on grounds of value; but I'll get to those later. Way back in Issue 46, I got to review the original (non-Signature) versions of the Aesthetix Rhea phono-stage and Calypso line-stage, descendents of the massive (and massively expensive) Io and Callisto, six large boxes of all-tube extravaganza. I won't wade through the same history all over again, save to point out that Aesthetix main-man Jim White was once a mover and shaker at Theta digital, before his passion for things analogue (and the sheer excellence of its expression) saved his soul from the dark side. The products in front of me here can reasonably be described as third generation and boast quite a bloodline, apparent in their refined lines and equally refined performance.

Again, to précis that original review, the Calypso was cool, controlled but dynamic, where the Rhea positively buzzed with energy and musical enthusiasm. Both were exquisitely constructed with subtle yet distinctive styling and a range of operational versatility and niceties that left most other high-end units looking ill-considered and threadbare.

Their musical and sonic characteristics dovetailed perfectly, delivering a performance that stood comparison with some of the best about, despite their (relatively) modest price and carefully tailored weaknesses. At just under £7,000 the pair at that time, they represented an absolute bargain, one that carefully matched to a suitable system (a caveat that applies equally to the competition) were capable of delivering really impressive musical performance.

Now we have the Signature versions, outwardly identical and boasting upgraded internal components, the burning question as in every such case, is whether the additional performance is worth the extra cost. Nowadays, the standard Rhea and Calypso have crept up in price to £4,100 and £4,600 respectively, while the Signature versions run out at £6,500 a piece. That's a substantial hike in price, for which you get upgrades to critical inter-stage and output coupling capacitors (18 in the Rhea, 12 in

the Calypso) along with adjustable, air-core caps elsewhere in the circuits that allow their performance to be precisely trimmed. The standard rubber feet are also replaced by a set of the excellent (and expensive) HRS Nimbus couplers. Hold the parts in your hand and they might not seem like much, but custom Teflon caps don't come cheap and nor do other, audiophile varieties. Most of that cost can be seen in the parts count – although that doesn't necessarily make it good sonic value.

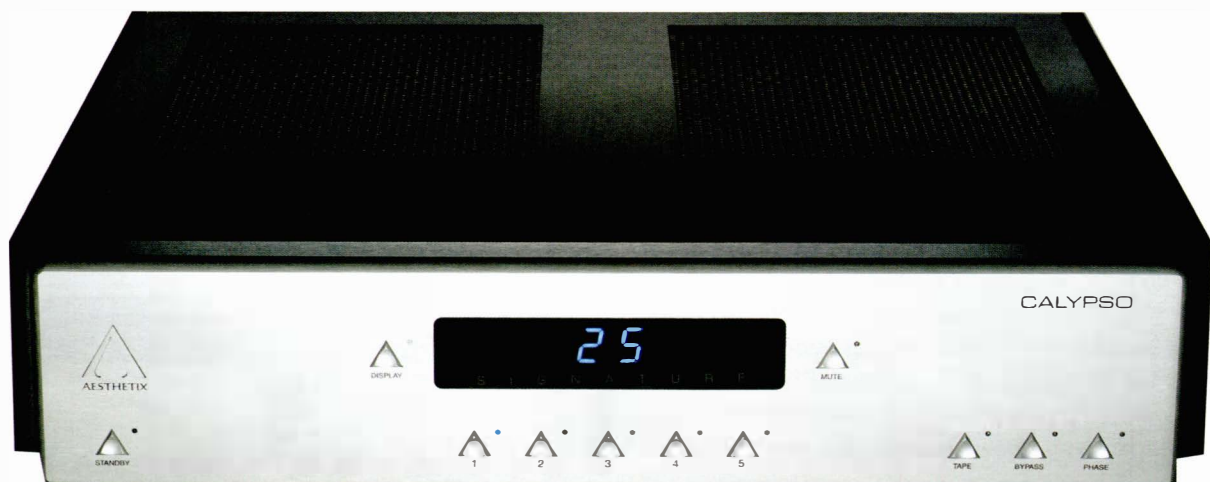
Fortunately, in this instance – and even given the gulf of elapsed time – there's no mistaking the fact that the Signature models have gone from very good to great. In quantitative terms that's not necessarily a long step, but in qualitative terms it's all too often an insurmountable gulf. What's even more important is that where the standard versions have distinct characters that definitely dovetail, making the whole greater than the sum of the parts and possibly placing limits on their application in isolation, the Signatures are far closer in character and better balanced overall.

Let's start with the line-stage. The standard version always had a potent bass performance, but was leaner and more restrained further up the range, whilst its transparency and lack of false emphasis did nothing to spare the blushes of source components or material. In contrast, the Signature version is a much more balanced performer. Listening to the Gunther Wand Beethoven 7th Symphony (from the superb Esoteric SACD set) the expected, explosive bass dynamics are all present and correct, but now there's more detail, more shape, texture and air around the notes, making the orchestral foundation far more convincing and purposeful. But now those qualities extend across the rest of the range, with a welcome colour and substance to the mids in particular, that makes instruments more immediately identifiable and natural, their contribution more effective. So the gentle, almost lilting combinations of wind and upper strings that characterize the first movement have a restrained poise and tension as they are first introduced, a natural swing and energy once the catchy melodies are established. It's a progression that leads you naturally through the work, reflective both of the consummate composition and performance. It's built on the ability to track the flow and density of the music right across the range and it is key to an involving and convincing performance. Add to that the fact that these improvements in resolution, noise floor and as a result micro dynamic and harmonic resolution, have been achieved without over-egging the spatial presentation and the Calypso Signature delivers a musical performance that is both convincing and compelling.

I recently reviewed the Pure Sound L300 line-stage, rejoicing that at last

I could add a new contender to my list of great line-stages – seemingly the hardest of all audio needs to fulfil. Well, line-stages must be like buses, because the Calypso Signature makes that rarefied list too – and in some style. The standard version is very good; the Signature is in a different league, its lack of musical constriction, character or emphasis allowing it to perform just as a great line-stage should – almost invisibly. Despite the relative brevity of its tenure it has already settled right into my system, trusted and relied upon in a completely unquestioning way. I love the way it just gets on with the job: no fuss, no drama and no drawing attention to itself.

I could almost use the same sonic description to sum up the Rhea Signature; interesting in that in this instance the musical journey has been in the opposite direction. The Signature sounds more detailed and refined than the standard version, but more importantly it also sounds calmer and more in control of the sheer musical energy it injects into proceedings with such apparent ease. Back to the 7th and in this instance the Speakers Corner pressing of the 1962 Karajan/BPO set on DGG (no EQ issues here as the 180g discs are RIAA): With multiple 'tables and cartridges currently in-house and under review, the Beethoven presented the opportunity to compare the Rhea's transparency to both the source and the performance. With Lyra Dorian cartridges mounted in both the VPI Classic and the ClearAudio Innovation, the Rhea clearly demonstrated its strengths. Not only was I able to connect both 'tables simultaneously and flick between them at the touch of a ▶



COUNTING THOSE FEATURES THAT COUNT...

I've already suggested that these Aesthetix units are unusually versatile, but that versatility goes way beyond simple convenience. Each of the products under test incorporates an array of features that contribute directly to its sonic performance and, just as importantly, your chances of actually realizing that performance in your own system.

Let's start at the front with the Rhea. This gives you three, independently configurable MC inputs, with front panel and remote control of not just nine different loads but also eight different gain settings, the latter being an often-overlooked aspect of record replay. Despite being an all-tube circuit, the Rhea can deliver up to 75dB of gain, theoretically allowing it to accept even very low output cartridges. In practice, noise levels at the highest gain settings are intrusive, but having that adjustability allows you to balance the system gain (and as a result, musical dynamics) against noise, critical in a fully optimised record replay set-up. And note the term "system gain"; given the huge differences that exist in line-stage gain characteristics, this adjustability also allows you to trim record replay levels to match those of CD. That means that real record collectors (and who else will fork out for a Rhea?) will be able to run anything up to three different tonearm/cartridge combinations, each optimised and gain matched to the system. Talking of forgotten or overlooked aspects of phono reproduction, Aesthetix also include a cartridge demagnetizing circuit to eliminate the build up of residual fields within the generator assemblies. Nice.

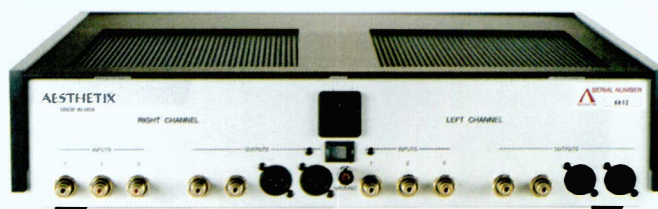
As well as the three sets of single-ended inputs, the Rhea offers two pairs of single-ended and two pairs of balanced outputs – which I have to say seems a little excessive. And if I wanted to get really snippy then I'd ask for either more loading steps below 500 Ohms (you get 250, 125 and 75), or a user definable value. And finally, given three separate inputs, for God's sake make the ground connection more accessible (it's right below the IEC input) and capable of readily accepting three separate grounds; how about a terminal strip?

The Calypso seems almost prosaic in comparison to the Rhea's astonishing level of adjustability – but then it is only a glorified source select and volume control. Even so, the slim-line casework contains a fully differential and dual-mono tube circuit. There are five inputs, two sets of main outputs and a tape output (all either balanced or single-ended), with remote switching for all functions including absolute phase and the Theatre Bypass mode. Volume is set in 88, 1dB steps, using a discrete resistor ladder – and if you are wondering where the volume control is, the display window is also an up/down rocker switch. If you want to

get really picky you could point out the lack of a balance control or individual gain settings for the various inputs, but in my experience those things are rarely used in the real world – and the Rhea takes care of gain matching the record player.

How many facilities can you build into a power amp? Well, how many power amps have five front-panel buttons? Topologically speaking, the Atlas is a fully differential, balanced bridge design, using bipolar solid-state input circuitry and a single 6SN7 tube in its gain stage, to drive 300 Watts of bipolar solid-state output. That's into 8 Ohms; it delivers 600 Watts into 4 Ohms) It also boasts an incredibly complex power supply, with no fewer than three AC transformers (one dedicated to the high-current supply) and multiple chokes. The B+ supply is independently regulated and fed from its out choke input. But once again, Aesthetix goes that extra mile: two sets of inputs (both offering single-ended or balanced connection) allow the user to choose between a direct, full-bandwidth hook-up, or one that incorporates a high-pass filter. The latter allows the amp to be used in systems incorporating separate or integral powered sub-woofers, the roll-off characteristics and inputs being selected via two of those front-panel switches. The other three offer standby, mute and display control; like all the Aesthetix units, the display on the Atlas can be defeated for superior sonic performance. That mute is a nice touch too – especially with 300 Watts on tap. The Atlas amps – and the Rhea/Calypso – were shifted in and out of the system multiple times. Never once did they complain or misbehave; never once did I contrive to screw it up.

From their reassuringly solid yet elegant aluminium casework to their stainless steel shrouded AC circuitry, one look at the Aesthetix products instils a sense of confidence. That confidence is only bolstered by the units' substantial weight, even the line-stage being a grunt inducing lift. That impression of solid engineering, carefully executed extends to the range of facilities on offer. There's nothing superfluous here – just what you need to guarantee the best possible performance, arranged so that you will actually use it. Everything is on the front-panel – and it's duplicated on the remote. For once, here's a range that's inspires musical and operational confidence in equal measure, making these products a joy to use.



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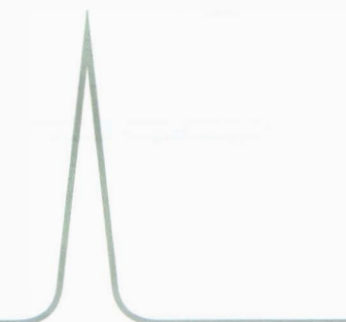
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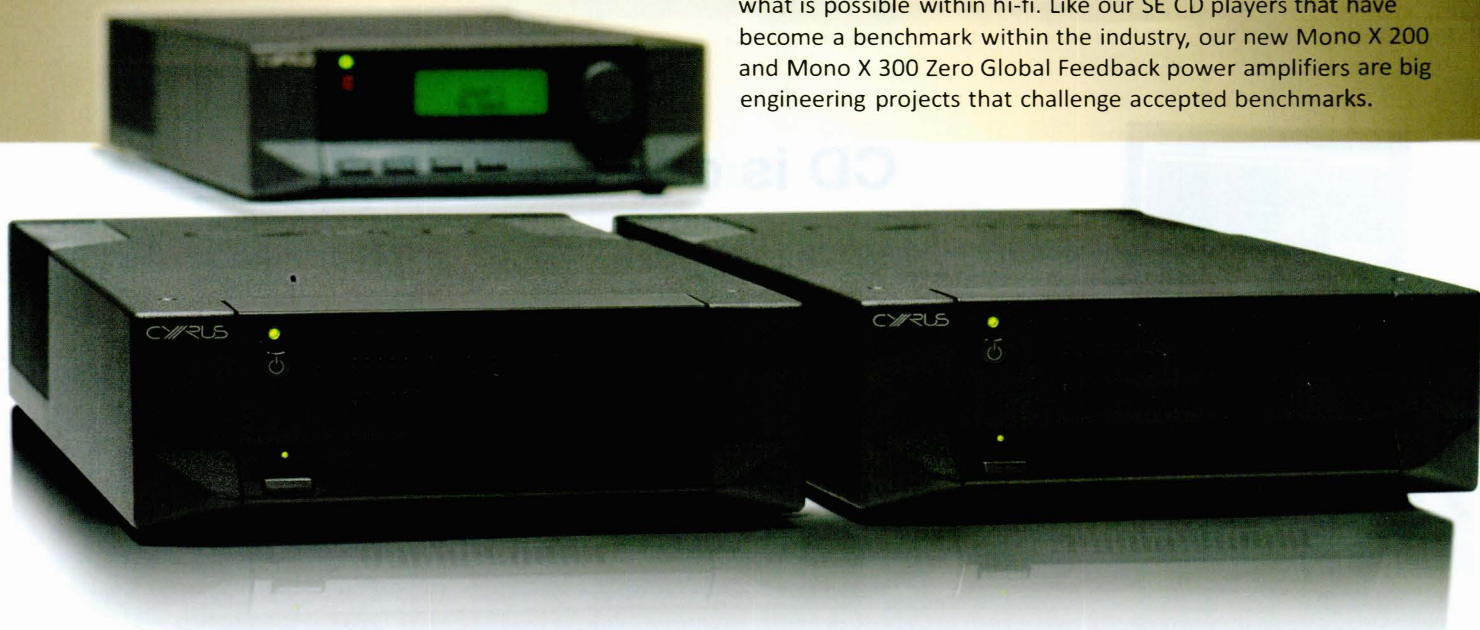
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▶ switch, I could ensure that both cartridges were operating with identical input settings. However, what is of more interest to the domestic user is the fact that both record players could have been perfectly optimised had they been carrying different cartridges; that and the sheer clarity with which the Rhea laid bare the contrasting sonic characteristics of these two 'tables.

Listening to Karajan on the VPI after time spent with the Wand SACD replayed on the Wadia 581, came as quite a shock. The sheer power and sweeping majesty of Karajan's reading left Wand's previously impressive efforts sounding rather polite and restrained. If the bass dynamics from the digital disc had been impressive, the impact off record was positively explosive, a result of the Rhea's combination of substance and enthusiastically energetic delivery. Of course, these are qualities it shares with the Classic and in truth, as entertaining as the results undoubtedly were, the greater poise and balance of the ClearAudio 'table definitely delivered a more thoughtful and balanced overall performance, whilst still benefiting from the sense of musical substance

THE SWEET SPOT...

The Signature editions of the Aesthetix electronics are a sonic *tour de force* – and compared to the competition they constitute something of a bargain. However that's not the same as saying that they are affordable, or even close to it. At close to £30K there's no escaping the serious cost of ownership involved here. Which brings me to some rather intriguing options...

Of course, there are always the standard versions of the Rhea and Calypso and those should certainly not be overlooked. But for those who can make do with a single, still fully configurable MC input, there also exists the Janus pre-amp. Essentially consisting of a Rhea input and gain stages added to the Calypso circuit and housed in the same box, just with more buttons, it is available in both a standard and Signature version. Okay, so you forego the separate chassis and dedicated power supply that the Rhea gives you, but at £6,400 for the standard version and £9,700 for the Signature, that's a cost/performance compromise that could be very attractive indeed unless you are a really dedicated vinyl listener or you need the three inputs on the Rhea (which amounts to pretty much the same thing).

But even more interesting is the existence of an Atlas stereo amplifier. Using identical casework to the mono-blocs, and offering exactly the same switching and operational options, it delivers a 'mere' 200 Watts into 8 Ohms (400 into 4), more than enough for many a listener's needs. Price? £7,700 – which amounts to more than half the amp for less than half the money! Once again, there are some component changes between the two, but the possibilities are enticing indeed.

Now, I haven't heard the Janus in either version – or the Atlas stereo – but they've got to be worth investigating, especially the power amp. Including either in the equation saves some serious money and brings these products into the price bracket that many people consider the upper reaches of personal expenditure. Much like the (sadly defunct) Hovland RADIA, the Atlas stereo might well prove to be all things to all men, that magical balance of virtues that seems to suit most people, most systems and quite a few pockets. I might just have to hold the mono amps hostage until a stereo heaves into view...

and emphatic dynamics delivered by the phono-stage. Having said that, shifting gear to Gabriel or Black Uhuru's 'Red' swung the balance back towards the VPI. Which brings us to the point; while the Rhea Signature retains the welcome musical enthusiasm and sheer solidity of the standard version, it has succeeded in harnessing it to a better balanced and much more subtle framework, delivering a far more convincing musical foundation.

Changes in cartridge are equally apparent, the benefits of Clearaudio's da Vinci over the Dorian being clear to hear. The greater detail, refinement and transparency of the (much more expensive) cartridge raised the game of the Rhea Signature yet again, underlining the fact that what we are dealing with here is a phono-replay system as a whole. The phono-stage takes what the record player delivers and passes it on, in this case without stripping away any of the essential vitality generated by a decent cartridge turntable combination. What's more, the adjustability means that you'll get the best out of the cartridge, whatever it is. The resulting sense of convincing musical substance is rare indeed in these days of ever higher-definition systems with their tendency to the lean and mean; but what's really impressive is the way that the Rhea Signature lends these positive qualities to the performance, whatever cartridge is delivering the signal – the better the front-end the better the results. Indeed, the combination of the Lyra Titan and the Rhea Signature is a marriage made for music, the micro-dynamic finesse of the former, the weight and body of the latter, adding up to a near perfect balance of virtues.

Like the Calypso, the Signature version of the Rhea offers better bass textures and definition than its standard stable-mate, but the natural advantages of analogue also allow it to show off the increase in air and space, colour and finesse that it provides right up to the highest frequencies. If the line-stage has gained weight and body, the phono-stage has significantly honed an already solid physique. Still leaning to the energetic side of positive, it's unflinchingly engaging and entertaining, whilst its more refined texture means that its tearaway tendencies have been tamed to the point where you could safely introduce it to ▶

▶ any well-behaved turntable. It might lack the micro-dynamic resolution, the immediacy of a unit like the Connoisseur, or the capacious soundstage of the ARC, but it has greater energy and macro dynamics than either, establishing it as a musically valid and versatile alternative to these stellar performers. In fact, the one thing lacking to make it the uncontested high-performance phono-stage value champ, is the switchable EQ available on the ARC. We've got the Rhea and the Signature version; might we see a "Reference" version in the future?

Which brings us to the second half of this review and the performance of the Atlas mono-blocs. The pre-amp components from Aesthetix, especially when used in combination, offer a sense of natural balance that prevents their sonic categorization as either tube or solid-state. Instead they succeed in offering the musical and operational strengths of both whilst sounding like neither, which is a neat trick indeed. The power amps attempt the same thing, but travel by a distinctly different route – the potentially poisoned chalice of hybrid design. Excuse my sceptical nature but all too often, amplifiers that combine tubes and solid-state in an attempt to deliver the best of both end up delivering the strengths of neither. The world is not littered with great hybrid designs and my heart generally sinks when another hoves into view. Imagine then my relief, my surprise, my pleasure in discovering that the Atlas, just like its siblings, delivers a musical performance that leans not to silicon nor to vacuum tubes, but is rooted firmly in the music itself. Living proof then, that it's not what you use but how you use it that matters – and, that things aren't quite as simple as they seem.

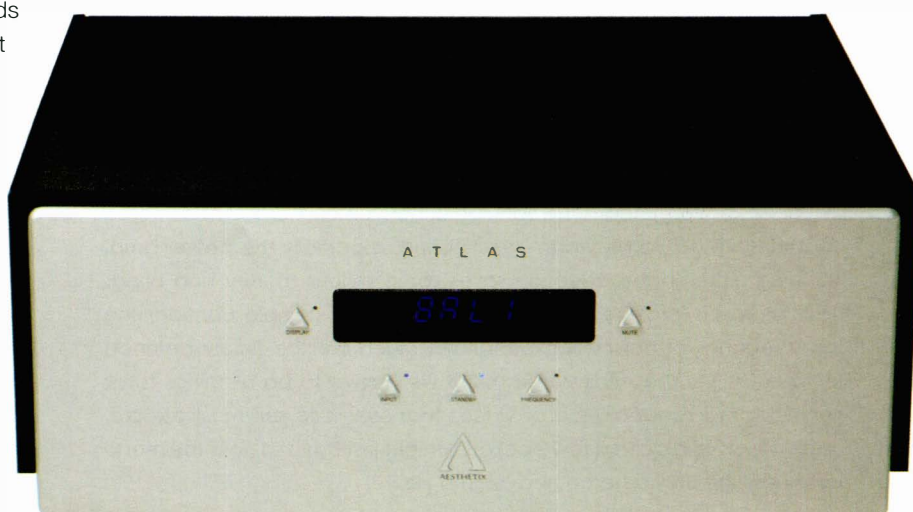
Let's start with the whole issue of just what does constitute a hybrid design? Traditionally, hybrid amps tended to use tube input and driver stages, coupled to solid-state (usually Mosfet) output devices – thus dispensing with the heat, cost and bulk of multiple power tubes and the output transformers that go with them. Audio Research turned that topology on its head, coupling solid-state front-ends to tube output stages – although the resulting amps didn't represent their finest hour. Now, the Atlas uses solid-state input circuitry, a 6SN7 gain-stage and bi-polar output devices. It seems that the church of hybrid is broad indeed.

However, let's consider line-stages for a second or two. A unit like the Pure Sound L300 is proudly, almost obstinately, pure tube, with every possible power supply and signal function given over to the glowing bottles. But what of units that use solid-state regulation and rectification to feed their tube signal circuitry – like the Rhea and Calypso? Aren't they, in a very real sense, hybrids too? I would argue that they are, and that this blurring of the boundaries signals a greater understanding of just what valves and solid-state devices can bring to the audio party. Certainly, if the success of these Aesthetix designs is any gauge, the question of what's inside the box is fast becoming secondary to the appreciation of what comes out of it.

The Atlas amps are at once delicately responsive and effortlessly powerful, capable of driving most speakers but doing so without ever sounding muscle-bound. There is a tendency amongst the audio

community, when faced with large, powerful amps, to reach for the smallest, most difficult to drive loudspeaker that they can find, hook them up and advance the volume. The Atlas monos are only too happy to play those games, but they don't really reveal just how good these amps really are. Indeed, one of the happiest combinations in which I used them was with the Focal Stella Utopias – all wide bandwidth, 95dB sensitivity and lightning response. If ever a speaker was going to reveal short-comings in the agility of the Atlas monos, this was it, but they absolutely thrived in each others' company. The bottom-end of the Aesthetix mono-blocs is just as solid and stable as the other units in the range, allowing musical dynamics and expression the firm footing they need to grow and breathe with natural life and presence.

If pushed to it, I'd have to say that the amps lean ever so slightly to the dryer side of the tonal palette, although that's through the mid rather than the lower frequencies, and by just about the same degree that the line and phono-stage pairing favours the romantic. Used with the Connoisseurs up front, the Atlas monos fed avidly on the textural and micro-dynamic niceties they were delivered, showing no shortcomings when it comes to subtlety and finesse. In fact, it's only when you put them up against amps like the Bernings that you notice a subtle grain to their textures and limitations in transparency. There is also, in absolute terms (though not in comparison to any but the very best of the competition) a subtle but consistent thickening of the bass frequencies. Does that contradict my earlier



observation? Yes and no: on the one hand, you'll hear it in comparison to an amp like the Quadrature Z (which knows no peer in this regard, at least as far as I'm aware); on the other, in general you won't notice it. What you will notice, and love, are the weight, substance and musical momentum that results, and the seamless and above all, natural way in which it underpins the musical performance. Likewise, the ultimate in acoustic definition, the space in which a recording is made, is achieved through greater bass transparency and definition – but then I'm not in the habit of perching atop a mike tree or dangling on wires from the concert hall's ceiling. The Atlas amps (in common with the other Signature units) deliver a just off pinpoint sense of image specificity which has far more to do with the sense of orchestral spread that I hear live from my generally preferred rows (F or G).

Like the line-stage and phono-stage, the real ability of the Atlas monos lies in their ability to step aside and stand behind the music. Listen for them – if you must – and you can identify their subtle influence on the music's passage. But they make it awfully easy to forget about them altogether. If the signal demands then they respond, but even under extreme duress (did I mention the way they encourage the use of "realistic" levels) their grace and unburstable enthusiasm delivers the music devoid of harshness or strain. Used as a set, the results are even more beguiling, making listening an immersive and musically compelling, at times almost propulsive, experience. I'm not convinced that they excel in any single musical respect, save their sense of musical energy and purpose, but they are oh so close in so many ways that perhaps it should be no surprise that as a system they come so close to the hi-fi and musical ideal of genuinely being all things to all men. After all – what's not to like?

When I reviewed the original Calypso and Rhea I alluded to their clever bass voicing, the way the subtle tailoring in the mid-bass in particular, fed their potent musical performance. In these three Signature designs that strength has been further refined, retaining the power but reducing and better integrating the tendency to the point where it is all but aurally invisible – yet loses none of its musical impact. Their musical presentation has a substantial and holistic quality, an evenness of energy from bottom to top, an absence of steps, dips or suck-outs that draw attention to themselves. It arrives as a whole and you hear it as a whole and that's what makes it such a convincing and immersive experience. The result is a range of electronics that should have the more established and certainly better known competition looking to their laurels.

A wise woman once wrote that, "There is a world of difference between truth and facts. Facts can obscure truth." I know just what she meant. Listen to these Aesthetix electronics as a set and yes, there are undoubtedly electronics (though not many) that are more accurate to the facts of a performance. However you'll travel a long way to find amplifiers that deliver a greater sense of the music's truth. I've

spent many happy hours listening to these Aesthetix Signature electronics – and mostly just for the pleasure. I would happily spend many more. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Rhea Signature Phono Stage

Tube Complement: 4x 12AX7LP, 4x 12AX7, 2x 6922

Inputs: 3x single-ended, independently configurable

Gain: Switchable, 7 values from 38dB to 75dB

Input Impedance: 47k, 10000, 5000, 2500, 1000, 500, 250, 125 or 75 Ohms

Phono Equalization: RIAA

Outputs: 2prs single-ended, 2prs balanced

Output Impedance: 1 kOhms (single-ended)

600 Ohms (balanced)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 454 x 95.25 x 457.2mm

Shipping Weight: 18kg

Price: £6,500

Calypso Signature Line Stage Preamplifier

Tube Complement: 2x 12AX7, 2x 6922

Inputs: 5x line-level – single-ended RCA or balanced XLR

1x tape – single-ended RCA or balanced XLR

Input Impedance: 40 kOhms (s-e), 80 kOhms (balanced)

Outputs: 2x single-ended RCA/phono

2x balanced XLR

1x tape – single-ended RCA or balanced XLR

Output Impedance: 1 kOhms (s-e), 600 Ohms (balanced)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 454 x 95.25 x 457.2mm

Shipping Weight: 18kg

Price: £6,500

Atlas Signature Mono Power Amp

Type: Hybrid (tube input) mono power amplifier

Tube Complement: 2x 6SN7

Inputs: 1x single-ended RCA, 1x balanced XLR

Input Impedance: 470 kOhms

Input Sensitivity: 60 mV (1 Watt), 3.1V (full power)

Rated Output: 300 Watts/8 Ohms, 600 Watts/4 Ohms

Output Connections: 1 set Cardas type binding post

Dimensions (WxHxD): 457 x 205 x 482.6mm

Shipping Weight: 31.8kg

Price: £15,500 per pair

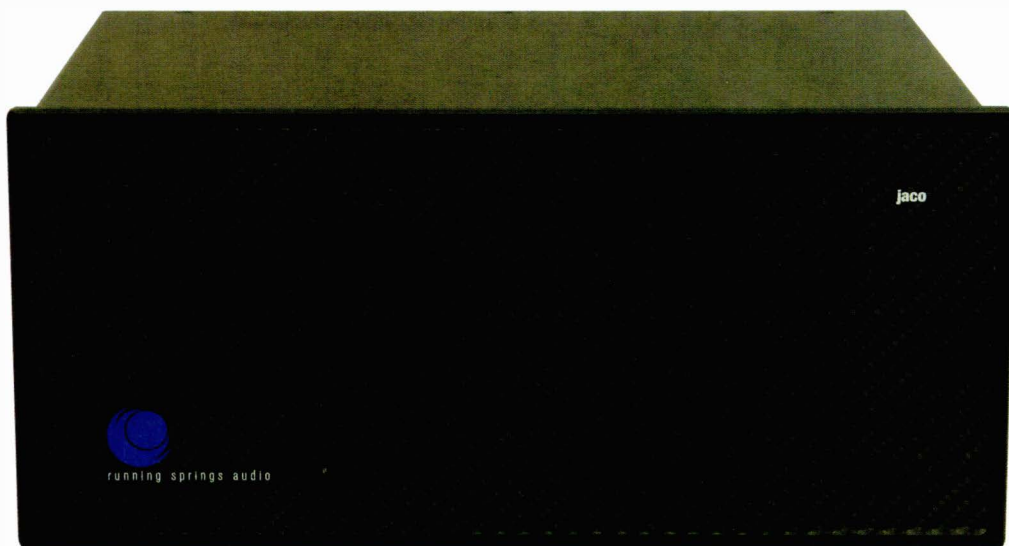
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Running Springs Audio Jaco power conditioner

by Alan Sircom

“Oh!” That’s your first and abiding impression of what the Running Springs Audio Jaco does to your system. You see, power conditioners are supposed not to make a Big Difference in the Big City. They are designed to make people far from the nearest power station help keep up with us Big City Folk and our clean power. They certainly aren’t supposed to do any good after midnight, when the juice is flowing sweetly. If anything, a power conditioner only gets in the way, suppressing dynamics.

These are largely historic statements about power conditioning. It’s not like that anymore. People like Audience, IsoTek, Iso-8, Quantum and Nordost have shown there’s more to power conditioning than you might think, and the latest conditioners don’t hinder any more. Even so, the RSA Jaco – named after bass legend Jaco Pastorius – still comes as a bit of a shock.

Perhaps the first part of the shock comes when you sit in front of a block so devoid of things to play with. No lights, displays, switches, buttons to press or things to stare at. No feet either, which is a strange omission as the Jaco is deceptively heavy and that’s a bad combination for scratching tables. It just sits there, 20A socket in one corner, four 13 amp power sockets (eight in US models) along the slanted back panel and a big 20A fuse. It’s capable of passing up to 1850W (it’s 2.4kW in the US because it comes with 20A sockets, but UK domestic circuits don’t exceed 15A) before it begins to struggle, so unless you are hooking up bi-amped flagship monoblocks, nothing’s going to faze the Jaco.

Each of those 13A sockets has its own isolation. Behind that is some impressive and proprietary passive voltage regulation and filtering. RSA builds some of the best-known capacitors in the business (you’ll find them in big-name products) and they’re put to good effect here. Having access to the keys to the component building factory means Running Springs can spec devices specifically for the Jaco, instead of building the product around off-the-shelf components. This helps give the Jaco the “Oh!” factor. ▶

“Having the keys to the component building factory means Running Springs can spec devices specifically for the Jaco.”

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Beethoven Baby Grand in Piano Black

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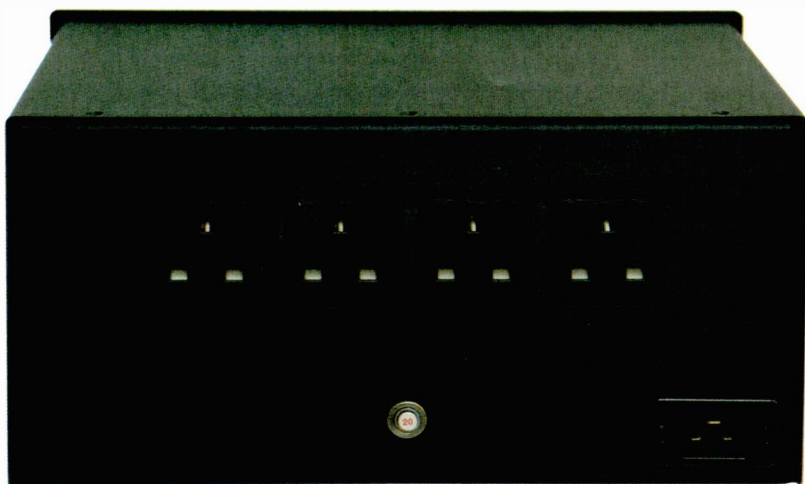
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▶ You begin to understand why the Jaco exists when you speak to the designer Dan Babineau. A music-loving physicist by training and electronics engineer by trade, his love of music was being hampered by the mediocre sound he was getting from his good audio equipment, which he attributed to the power. He decided to concentrate on voltage regulation, noise cancellation, and protection and – six product generations later – the products finally turn up on UK shores. Whoever said we were behind the curve?

Every aspect of the design is uncompromising, from the hand-wound inductors to the carbon-fibre resonance control, the Cardas internal wiring and the heavy non-ferrous chassis. It's all hardcore, and bloody heavy to boot. RSA supply two grades of power cable too; Cardas-derived Mongoose, or the HZ Crown Jewel power cable. Audiofreaks supplied the latter cable, which is impressive, but adding almost half the cost again to the Jaco, so it should be. Audiofreaks also supplied a more humble Cardas TwinLink to compare and contrast.

The 'Oh!' kicks in the moment you put it into the system. It's like the noise floor just fell away. It's not 'quieter', it's nonexistent on solid-state, surprisingly silent on tubes and significantly more dynamic on both.

Now that's strange. Most modern mains conditioners are at best neutral on dynamic range, and a few still squash the dynamic range of the sound. This one actually improves the dynamic range, and by no small margin too.

One thing I noticed on extraction that I didn't 'get' on insertion was just how important the Jaco was in letting you play at 'natural' listening levels. I used the volume control more frequently with the Jaco in place; not because the sound was hard or harsh but because the amp could be played a little louder. Which means you get the second, gradual 'Oh!' of realisation over the course of first week when you begin to play music with more range and with more frequency (as in, how often you play music, nothing to do with kilohertz) and as you feel confident to play music both louder and quieter than you would normally dare to try. Then finally you get a third 'Oh!' when you take the Jaco out of the system... this time an 'Oh!' of disappointment.

Back when I reviewed the Audience aR8, I commented that the adeptResponse sounded like a component has been upgraded. Through the Jaco it sounds like all the components in the chain have been improved. That doesn't leave the adeptResponse out in the cold, but it does give it some very stiff competition.

The strange thing I didn't expect here was the consistency. Put the Jaco in the system and it seems to do the same thing wherever you use it. It doesn't

get in the way, makes the background quieter and the dynamics more potent. It gets rid of the audiophile 'bad hair day'. Not in a small way, either.

Lastly, the Crown Jewel snake, next to the little Cardas mains cable. The HZ Crown Jewel is a 60 strand affair with fancy Furutech plugs and sockets and damping carbon fibre end caps said to filter RFI. At the moment, it's UK price is to be confirmed, but sums around the £1,500 mark have been bandied around. And yes, it did offer a distinct improvement over the Cardas Twinlink cable. It was almost like someone slugged the tweeter with a small capacitor across its terminals. The Cardas was not exactly a tone control, but a step backwards in performance, which I suppose is only to be expected given the price differential.

I confess to being thoroughly confused by the sort of improvement that's going on with the Running Springs Audio Jaco. The idea that changes of this magnitude can happen simply because the power gets treated seems absurd. But it happens, time and again.

"Oh!" indeed. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Running Springs Jaco power conditioner

Sockets: 4x 13A UK model

Max Power: 2.4kW (20A)

non-magnetic aluminium chassis

Proprietary passive components built to +/- 1% tolerance

Dimensions (HxWxD) 15.2 x 33 x 26.7cm

Weight 22.2kg

Price: £2,995

Manufactured by

Running Springs Audio

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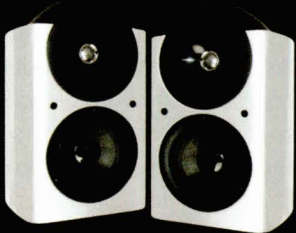
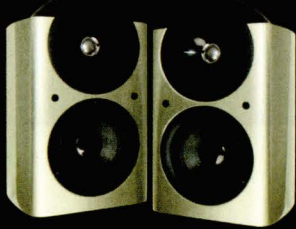
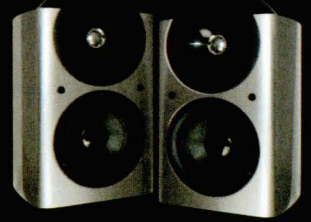
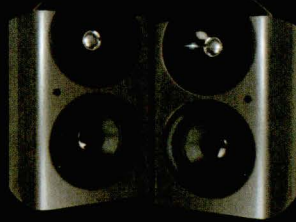
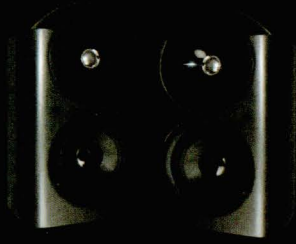
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Musical Fidelity M6CD, M6PRE and M6PRX

by Alan Sircom

You know how it is with Musical Fidelity. They are like buses; nothing for ages, then along come three at once. The M6i integrated amplifier was an impressive debut for Musical Fidelity's M6 series. A CD player, pre and power were on the cards. The first was expected, the second two slightly feared. My worry was that Musical Fidelity would simply take the M6i to bits and rebuild it into two separate parts. Actually, it did nothing of the sort.

All the boxes share the same clean lines of the original M6i. It's very Musical Fidelity, 21st Century style. Black or silver facings with side heatsinks, dimpled brushed alloy pushbuttons and other control surfaces. In other words, understated elegance. The differences – and similarities – stack up pretty quickly though.

The CD player is a fine place to start. No great display wonders from the front panel (it's a standard blue readout), the key elements are inside the player. Basically, it's a great DAC with a CD transport attached. Upsampling to 24bit, 192kHz precision ('true upsampling' says MF... as opposed to fake upsampling?), with coax, optical and USB inputs, digital, analogue and balanced analogue outputs, it's possible to consider the M6CD as a digital hub as much as a standalone CD player. With the marked downturn in fortunes for CD, this

represents a fine way of future-proofing the player, although a slight confusion is there is a second USB input in the preamp.

Fully balanced from front to back, the M6PRE runs in Class A mode. This makes it warmer than most solid-state preamps, but is designed to give the best possible performance. There's a built-in MM/MC phono stage, a USB input and a home theatre bypass circuit for home cinema fans. It looks almost identical to the M6i too, although the logo – made from surgical steel, apparently – differentiates it from the front. No tone controls (of course) and no headphone socket (MF makes its own headphone amp, so perhaps no great surprise there), but otherwise this is a pretty good, pretty standard preamp.

The M6PRX owes more to the company's titanic, er, Titan power amplifier than it does to the M6i. A fully dual mono affair, the M6PRX sports a dual mono bifilar choke regulated power supply. Those weaned on switch-mode designs might have a head-scratching moment, but choke regulation

was a big thing with valve amplifiers back when they could be built big. It makes a profound difference to the performance of a design, as evidenced by the Ongaku-like change to the Pure Sound integrated amplifier when it received a Border Patrol choke-regulated PSU. The downside to choke regulation is it's big, heavy and needs an expert to design it. Musical Fidelity has been making choke-regulated power supplies for decades, so it knows what it's doing here. Which is why the 'bifilar' part is key, too. Basically, bifilar winding allows one side to cancel the other's magnetic field and noise characteristics. It's a quiet way of making a very powerful amplifier. If 'power corrupts', then the M6PRX chucking out 260 watts per channel and a peak current of 140 amps must make it a very corrupt amplifier.

“The system in general cries out for good speaker designs like ProAc or Spendor rather than designs with metal domes.”

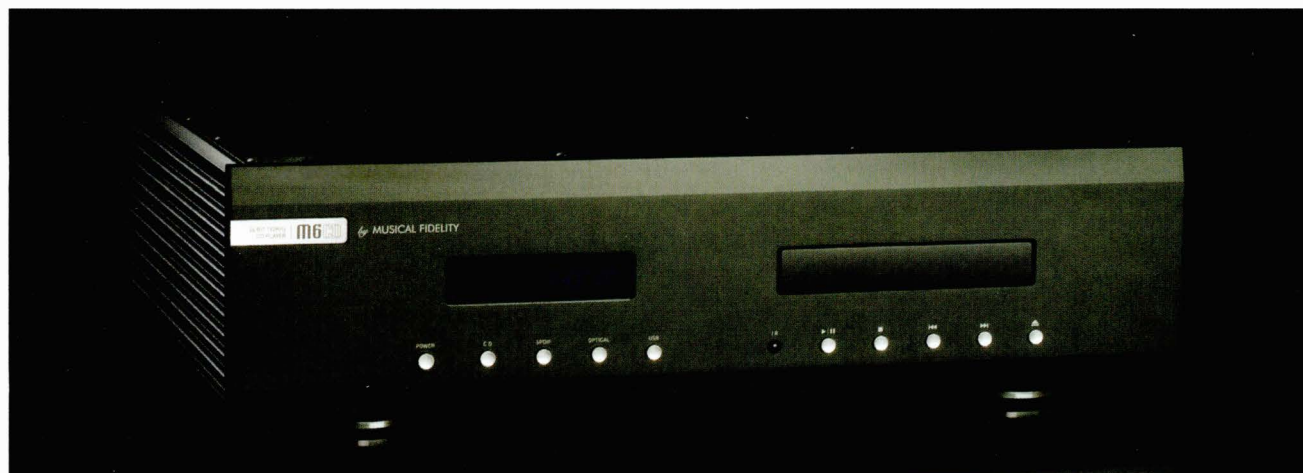
The first potential question on a potential customer's mind must be 'which USB input do I use?'. From a sound quality perspective, the CD player has the edge, but it's not a marked and significant improvement. The CD player is best used as a complete digital hub, acting as platform for computer and other digital sources, but it must be tempered by making sure you don't end up switching to the preamp USB input by mistake. I guess true platform agnostics could use a PC on one USB input and a Mac on the other, but I recommend picking one, and whether you go for convenience or quality, you don't really sacrifice much of either in the process.

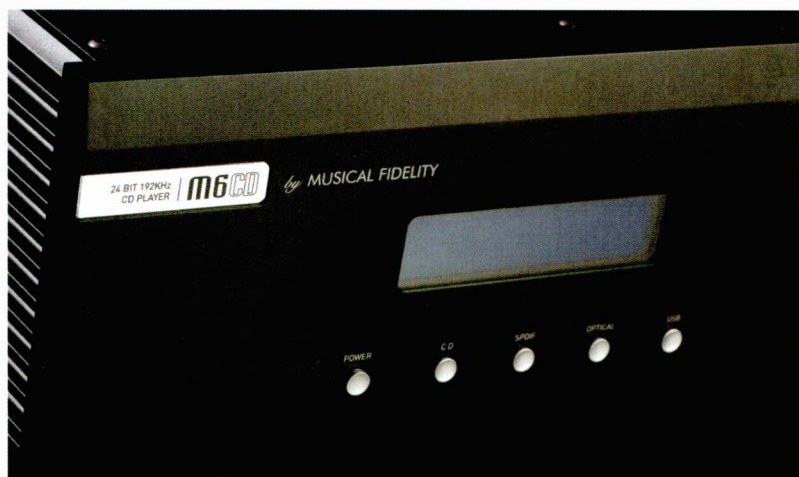
A far easier question is 'balanced or single-ended?' The answer is balanced. Every time. Unless you are comparing four-figure single-ended interconnects with DJ-chummy £10 a pop XLRs, you will struggle to find any justification to stay with single-ended between CD, preamp and power amplifier. That's not just for noise rejection over hundreds of metres of cable. It sounds better balanced through this MF combo.

Used as a threesome, the M6 package really shines. It's very much in the Musical Fidelity Power Product mode (as in, it doesn't sound like the A1, more like the old A370). That means neutral, crisp and dynamic to some, with a slight graininess to the sound that people tend to ignore, or even enjoy. Yes, there will always be someone who gets stuck on this and calls it hard-edged, but realistically this is a very neutral system with the right speakers.

The system in general cries out for good speaker designs like ProAc or Spendor (do these three ever sing with ProAc Response D Twos or Spendor S9s... wow!) rather than designs with metal dome tweeters. That being said, many love the combination with Monitor Audio. A little-known but truly delightful pairing is with Sonus Faber Cremona M floorstanders, as the neutrality of the electronics blends perfectly with the sweetness of the speaker sound.

The MF trio throw out an interesting conundrum for the reviewer. They don't seem particularly stand and cable fussy. The difference between a Townshend VSSS and a Quadraspire, the difference between Vertex AQ Kinabalu and Ensemble Zorba platforms (why do audiophile platform makers come ▶





▶ up with such left-field names?), moving from Crystal to Audience to Cardas to a set of ancient Exposure virtually identikit versions of Linn's K20 cable made little difference to the basic performance of the Musical Fidelity. So why the conundrum part? Because it makes reviewers ask if this a good thing or a bad thing. Certainly from a keep costs low aspect, the fact that the MF gear sounds virtually the same on a sideboard as it does on a state-of-the-art platform is a good thing and it certainly saves splashing out large amounts on good mains, interconnect and speaker cables, but does it mean it holds the sound back in the process? It certainly doesn't seem to in reality.

There's an earthy 'rightness' to the sound produced by the Musical Fidelity package. Sounds are rooted in a three-dimensional soundstage. Vocals are neither recessed or forward in the mix and very articulate. But the most immediate impression you get from the trio is the dynamic scaling it has. This comes across with most music, but especially on solo piano. Perhaps one of the acid tests of an amplifier, solo piano needs the electronics to be able to be both well controlled (to keep the speakers in check) and wild enough to cope with a sound that can push an amp from idle to its limits and back in a fraction of a second. Meanwhile, it needs to cope with those smaller, closer noises (the musician's breathing, squeaks of backside on leather, the pedals being used and so on). Brendel playing the first movement of Beethoven's 'Appassionata' sonata is a perfect example of this. Too little control and the right and left hand blur. Too much and it sounds flat and drab. The Musical Fidelity trio pass with flying colours.

What doesn't strike you at first but slowly burns into your brain in a wholly positive manner is the coherence. Not in a Mantovani 'cascading strings' sound, but where the instrument's tonal palette is accurate across its range. This is typically a function of the loudspeaker rather than the electronics, but the M6 trio show just how much a good set of electronics aid that goal. This seems especially important when listening to bass guitar; the character of a Fender Precision bass is different from a Fender Jazz, or a MusicMan Stingray. This distinction can be lost on many systems, it just falling into the category

'bass guitar', but the MF trio – coupled with a good loudspeaker – can draw out the tonality behind the notes and you can easily hear who's playing what.

Once again, a lot of this comes down to dynamic range, and it does seem like the M6 system has a lot of reserves on tap. Much of this comes down to the M6PRX. OK, using it with an amp-crushing loudspeaker load will see it hit its limits perhaps faster than the bigger power amps on the market, but used in the context of the sort of speakers this product would likely be partnered with and the MF package has an effortless quality that makes you confident that no music will be a struggle. In that respect, it almost makes your speakers seem bigger and better than they really are.

Of the three products, the breakout device is the power amplifier. The CD player is a fine addition to the portfolio, but I suspect those buying it will be those who want a matching CD player for their M6 products, rather than those wanting a CD solution in its own right – this is a bit of a shame, because it lives up to the Musical Fidelity name, being both accurate and tuneful, and never puts a foot wrong. Meanwhile the preamplifier is both excellent and excellent value for money, but there are a lot of excellent preamps out there. Once again, I can see this forming the centerpiece of an expanding MF system,

“Sounds are rooted in a three-dimensional soundstage. Vocals are neither recessed or forward in the mix and very articulate.”

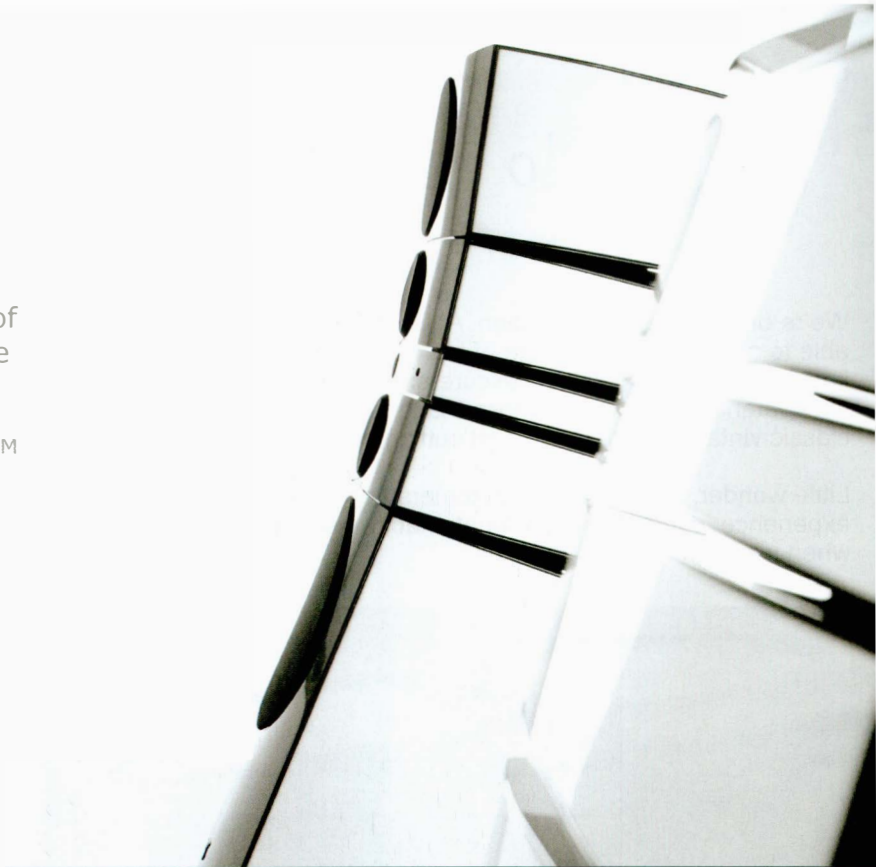
rather than the first MF product anyone would buy from the M6 range.

The power amp, though... that's a different proposition altogether. It's the perfect combination of motive force and grace that is not uncommon at twice the price, but hard to find paired up at this level. You can have an earthmover or a delicate flower power ▶

"Never have I had such a sense of palpable presence, of attendance at a musical event."

Roy Gregory, Hifi+

Grande Utopia EM



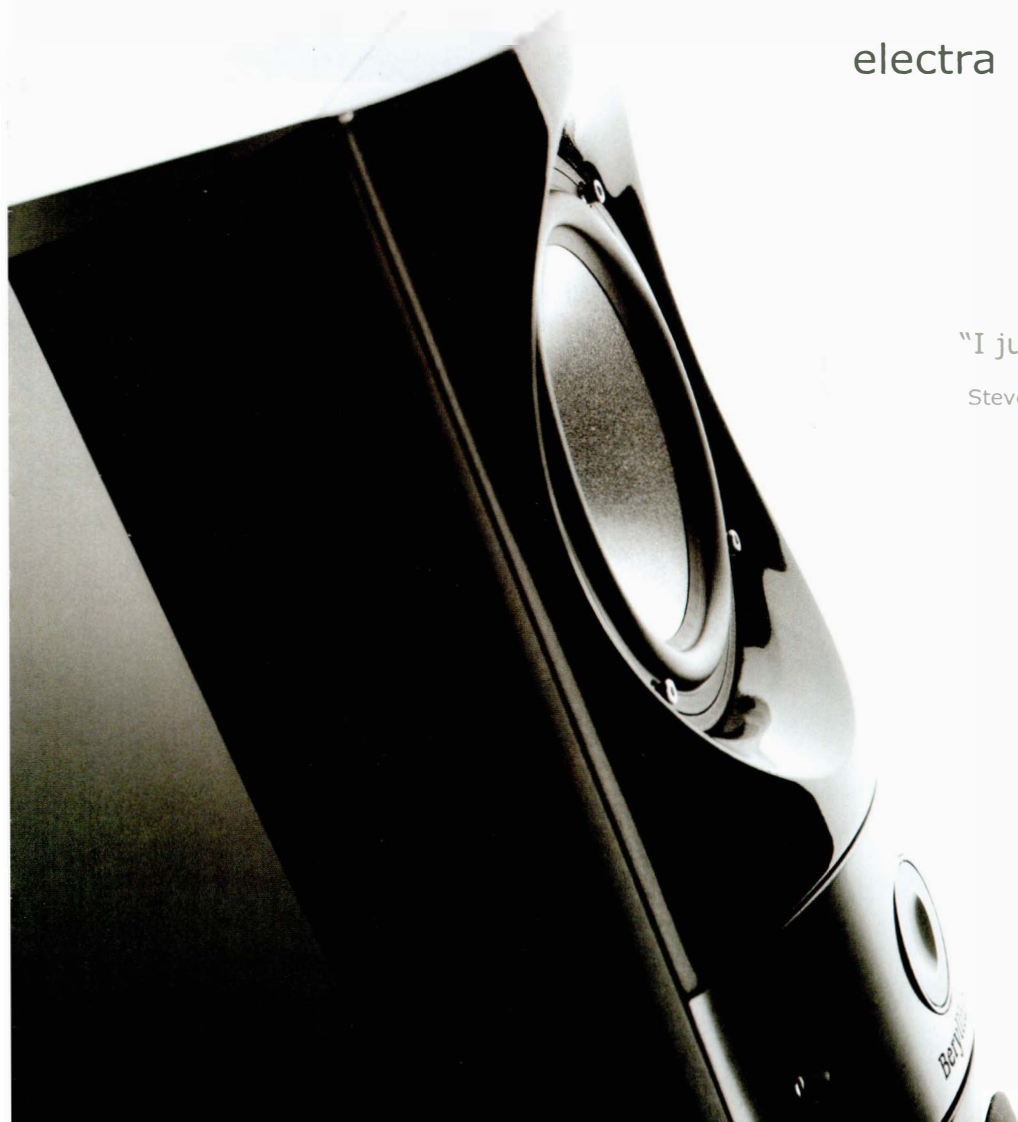
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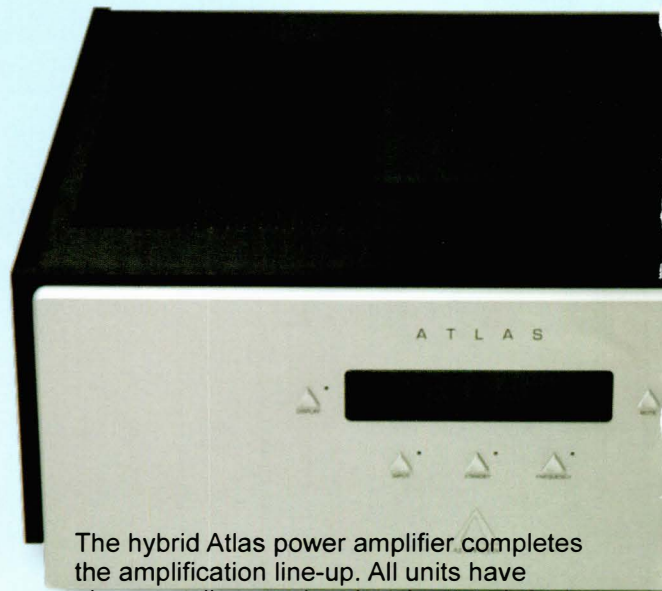
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Little wonder, then, that our customers frequently ask us to distil our experience, curious to know what exactly we fire up in the evening when we want to listen to music.



The hybrid Atlas power amplifier completes the amplification line-up. All units have elegant styling, cool and understated. And at our recent Bath hi-fi show, Jim introduced to the UK his first source component, the Romulus CD player, with a valve output stage. Look for the launch later this year, when reviewers again will struggle with superlatives.



Well, it will come as no surprise to frequent visitors here that Aesthetix electronics often feature in our main system. Designed and manufactured in California, Aesthetix components are based on valve (tube) technology, with microprocessor controls for ultimate configuration capability and remote control convenience. In a market where many competitors strive for high resolution above all else, sometimes painfully so, Jim White, Aesthetix founder and chief designer, manages the rarest of balancing acts: without forgoing any musical detail, he offers tone, tone, and more tone.

The Aesthetix Rhea and Rhea Signature phono stages, often the starting point for our Aesthetix customers, typify the experience. *The Absolute Sound* described the Rhea with three words, "open," "transparent," and "uncoloured", adding that it imparts "a sense of palpability and immediacy that recalls the magic of live music."

Of the Aesthetix Calypso and Calypso Signature linestages, *Stereophile* said simply, "That's how live music sounds."

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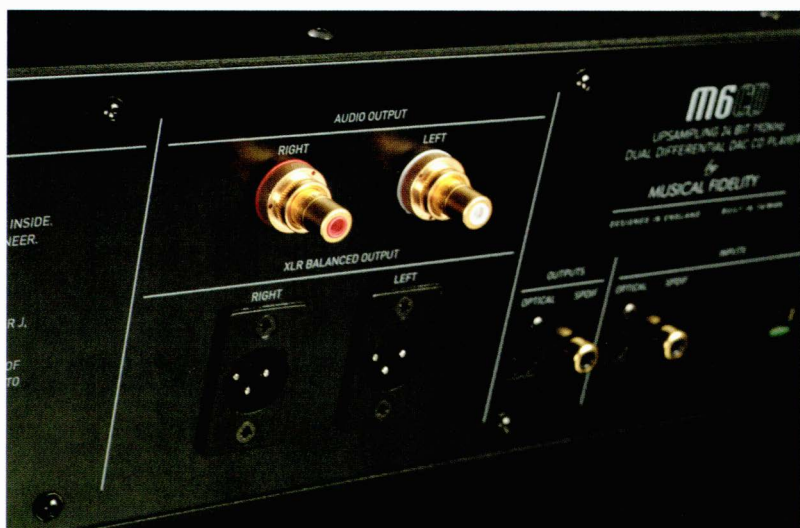
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The Victoria School House ≈ Bath

► amp at this price, but not the two together. It has the ability to grip onto your loudspeaker cones and never let go like a terrier with its blood up, but also has enough refinement to make the deft touch of Alice Coltrane's jazz harp and Pharoah Sanders lithe, abrasive tenor sax playing rise up out of the drone on the title track of *Journey In Satchidanada*, without undermining either. Most of all, though, it does what a good power amp should do, get out of the way of the sound. I played with this through a number of different preamps – including the Conrad-johnson ET3 tested last issue and the limited edition Siltech C1 pre coming soon – and it never imposed its character on the sound. That puts the M6PRX in with some very exclusive and very expensive company and at no time did it show itself up. There's a school of thought that suggests valve pre and solid-state power is the ideal set-up; the pre for 'show' and for 'glow' and the power for 'go'. The M6PRX adds a lot of weight to that argument. The fact that you can switch between inputs makes it something of a perfect product for the reviewer, too.

Played as a grouping, the power chord of M6CD, M6PRE and M6PRX are hard to fault. Best used balanced from one end to the other, the trio are unobtrusive, entertaining and a satisfyingly potent combination of sweetness and meatiness. I know that sounds horrid (like lamb cooked in Pepsi) but it works from a fundamentally musical position. Almost any one of these components on its own is good enough to stand alone and act as an introduction to the joys of Musical Fidelity sound, but it's the power amp that shines out as a true world-class product. The whole isn't far greater than the sum of its parts, but with parts like these, it doesn't need to be. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

M6CD CD player

DAC Specification: 24 Bit Delta-Sigma dual differential 8 x oversampling.

Digital Inputs: RCA Coaxial S/PDIF, Toslink optical, 1 USB type 'B'

Analogue Outputs: Line level 1 pair RCA & 1 Pair XLR

Digital Outputs 1 RCA Coaxial S/PDIF 1 Toslink Optical connector

Output Impedance 50 ohms

Digital Output: 0dB level

XLR 4.4V rms, balanced

RCA 2.2V rms, single ended

Dimensions (WxHxD): 44x12.5x38.5cm

Weight 11.2kg

Price: £1,999

M6PRE

Inputs: 2x XLR balanced, 4x single-ended line (one HT by-pass), MM/MC phono, USB type 'B'

Outputs: single-ended, XLR balanced

Voltage 9.5Vrms 19Vrms

26V peak to peak 52V peak to peak

Dimensions (WxHxD): 44x12.6x40cm

Weight 11.4kg

Price: £1,999

M6PRX

Output Power 260 Watts per channel into 8 Ohms (24 dBW)

Voltage 46 Volts RMS, 20Hz to 20 kHz; onset of clipping (130 Volts peak-to-peak)

Current peak-to-peak 140 Amps

Damping factor 210

Output devices 4 pairs per channel

Connections Line level inputs 1 pair line level XLR, 2 pairs line level RCA

Line level outputs: RCA connectors

Speaker outputs: 4 pairs 4mm banana plug/binding posts

Dimensions (WxHxD): 44x12.5x39cm

Weight: 19.7 kg

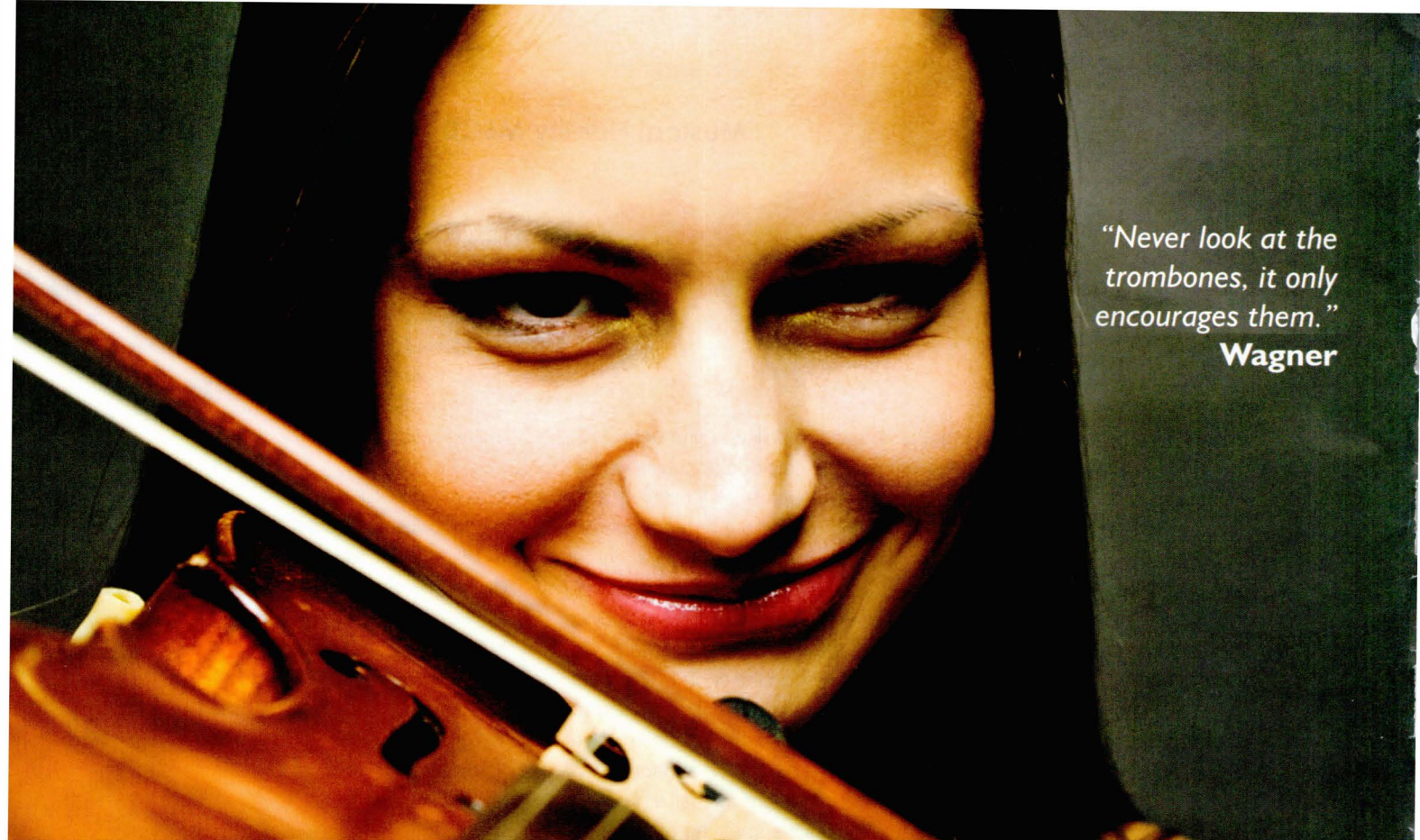
Price: £2,999

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trombones, it only
encourages them."
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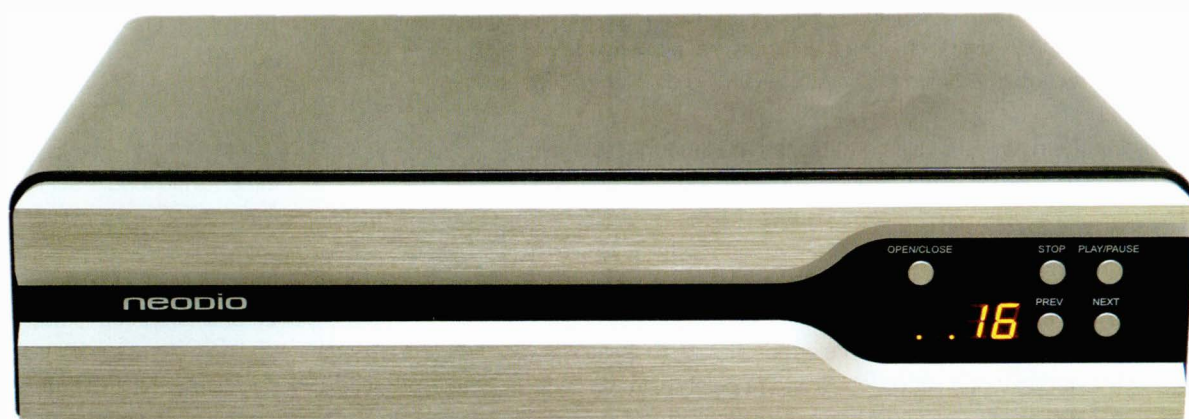
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Neodio NR22 CD player

by Alan Sircom

It's strange how quick things change. A couple of years ago, the idea of a high-end CD player sporting a USB input would have been unthinkable. Now, practically every new CD player features some kind of computer-friendly input. The NR22 from French brand Neodio is no exception.

The player is very similar in design and layout to the NR One we tested in 2009. Both use a central DVD-ROM drive sitting in a constrained layer base, both use a Crystal 24bit, 192kHz digital conversion, with 100MHz op-amps in the output stage and both sport a hefty 150vA toroidal transformer instead of the usual switch-mode supplies seen in many disc-spinners. They even have both balanced and single-ended outputs. To all intents and purposes, the two players are almost identical.

At least that's the theory. The NR22's DVD-ROM transport sits sandwiched between two slices of cork-damped plexiglass, the aforementioned addition of a USB input, and an 8mm thick curved cover of five constrained layers of tinted polymethyl methacrylate (PMMA). Naturally, the addition of a USB input demands a serious re-think of the internal layout of the player, and lots of cork-damping and care in EMI elimination. Small changes make big differences.

The company pays particular attention to the way the circuit is clocked, in order to minimise the dreaded jitter. Instead of the usual simple quartz-oscillator timing chip,

Neodio uses an analogue clock circuit; this seems counter-intuitive, because quartz is more accurate... but apparently very prone to microphony problems.

That means the player retains the distinctive, very 1970s French chic aluminium and PMMA front panel, with its completely hidden centre transport DVD mech, bottle-shaped inset for the five main controls and

“A high-end CD player sporting a USB input would have been unthinkable.”

basic orange LED read-out. And it still sits on three adjustable aluminium feet with cork inserts. It's a mark of just how engineering-led the designer, Stephane Even, is that the three are perfectly placed for resonance control, with the single front-mounted foot sitting directly beneath the transport mechanism.

As you might imagine, a lot of the installation involves getting the player perfectly level, which is comparatively easy, although the player is deceptively heavy and that slows the process down slightly. But do spend the time getting it perfectly level, though, as the resultant improvement ►

► in performance is marked. This is intriguing, because in so doing, Neodio gets to treat the CD like an LP; digital engineers are more keen on discussing conversion or error correction, this one considers the spinning disc as – guess what? – a spinning disc!

In case you think this now veers off into audio fantasy land, guess again. The engineering behind Neodio is very thorough and exacting. The company deliberately eschews audiophile grade components, preferring instead to use enterprise-grade components that have a very high reliability. So, even though this is hardly a hot running device, electrolytic caps inside Neodio products are graded to work at 105°C, so there's little chance of things going 'bang' during day-to-day use. It's why the preferred choice of chassis is a non-magnetic aluminium and wood sandwich. The one point that may cause some consternation is the plastic DVD-ROM drive – compared to the likes of Esoteric, it's not exactly awe-inspiring. Still, we use these in computers every day without a problem and if it's good enough for Meridian's Reference 808.3 player, it's good enough here.

Neodio is also currently exploring what it perceives to be the gaps between what we can hear and what can be measured. In particular, the company is focused on determining how dynamic range, tonal balance and soundstaging can be related to testing schema (this last is particularly difficult with conventional measurement, because most tests are performed using just one channel). Whether this will deliver any significant changes in the way people test products remains to be seen, but it's good to see companies like Neodio (and the 'knowledge alliance' of Acuity, Nordost and Vertex) pushing the envelope of listening and testing.

Of course, if you set out your store with regard to dynamics, tonality and soundstaging, you had better make damn sure your products do all these things well. Fortunately, Neodio has nothing to worry about here. The NR22 player – like the NR One that was tested last year delivers all the goods. Once again, it's in that happy place, with the detail of a dCS the naturalness of a Wadia, the stage width of an Esoteric and the bounce of a Naim. It manages to mix the best of these without sacrificing the whole.

Of those 'big three', the Neodio shines because it keeps them all in considerable balance. Dynamic players can sometimes sound hard at the top, tonal balance can come at the expense of a deep soundstage and top-notch imaging can sometimes sound a little dynamically flat. The Neodio's great strength is it keeps all three in perfect harmony. Which kind of makes it hard to comment upon, because it simply does what a CD player is supposed to do... although in reality most deviate from this balance, albeit relatively slightly.

What I found very inspiring is the way it locked onto a groove, whatever that groove. You expect The Cure's *Mixed Up*

“What I found very inspiring is the way it locked onto a groove, whatever the groove.”

to be slightly ploddy and bass heavy (it's an early 1990s recording still suffering from TDS – Townhouse Drum Syndrome, named after the larger than life drum sounds from that famous and now-defunct West London studio complex). What you don't expect is it to also have a very strong, very definite beat, because the last time you heard that album ►





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▶ successfully dig up the beat in the mix, it was being played on vinyl. The CD was dismissed as a bad transfer. In fact, it's as much a function of the player as the disc.

A strange aspect of the NR22 that is also common on good vinyl – but rare on CD – is its ability to change tonality with each new disc. Albums are not recorded under the same circumstances and CD players have a tendency to smooth over these differences. The Neodio does no such thing; bang in the 1959 Beecham/de Los Angeles version of Carmen and the overall mix is very different from Stay Positive from The Hold Steady. Perhaps unsurprising given the different genre and the 50-year gap between the two, but most CD players blur this distinction.

“If there’s one word that can sum up the Neodio NR22 sound, it’s probably ‘lithe’.”

If there's one word that can sum up the Neodio NR22 sound, it's probably 'lithe'. The performance is fluid, natural, well-balanced, but most of all, it manages to sound like real music. This, above all makes the Neodio a rare pleasure to sit in front of, and you tend to listen to a lot of very varied music while engaging in that pleasure. It might not turn a jazz-hater into a John Zorn collector, but you will find new life in your old disc collection with the Neodio.

The USB input is actually very good and not just for show and to keep the player 'cred'. It is certainly a lot better than most on-board USB connections (including the Musical Fidelity M6CD and M6PRE). It's never going to eclipse a good DAC (even the HRT Streamer II+ and Arcam Solo rDAC show it a clean set of heels in ultimate clarity and focus terms) but it's more than good enough to keep the NR22 future-proofed.

One final point; ignore the XLR option where possible. It's not dreadful, but the single-ended is considerably better which means it's probably something of an afterthought. It also benefits from really good power feeding it, and the Running Springs Jaco tested this issue did wonders to the already good sound, making it still more dynamic and insightful.

As people rush to write off CD's future, it seems to be aping the progress of vinyl at back in the late 1980s, early 1990s. Back then, LP was a 'dead duck', and yet that period produced some of the best turntable designs ever, including many that have kept on going – albeit often in highly modified form – since that time. We then had the 'vinyl revival', the 'final vinyl' and the 'revived

final vinyl revival' and I suspect this will keep on going until journalists run out of the letter 'v'. I also suspect the same thing will happen to CD, and people will want more than just downloads and ripped discs. The NR22 is a world-class player that can do both well. I reckon this isn't the last we've seen of this clever French brand. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Neodio NR22 CD player

Transport mechanism: Modified DVD-ROM drive

Chassis: constrained layer aluminium wood chassis

Constrained layer 8mm PMMA cover

Inputs: USB type B

Outputs: RCA and XLR (2.6v rms)

Digital output: Coaxial S/PDIF

Converter: Crystal 24bit, 192kHz

Upsampler: Crystal, Asynchronous

Dimensions (WxHxD): 44x10.5x44cm

Weight: 12kg

Price: £10,000

Manufactured by: Neodio

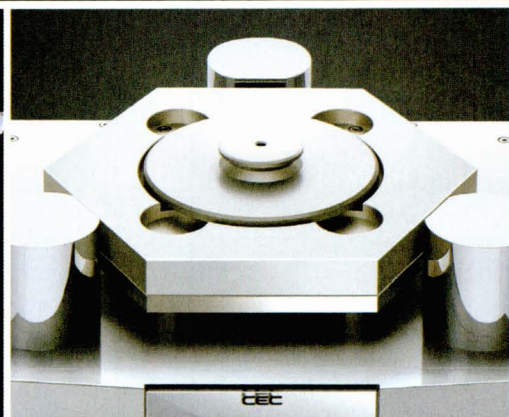
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Stax SR-007 Omega Reference Series II Earspeakers and SRM-007 tII Energiser

by Roy Gregory

Recently I had need, as one occasionally does, of a decent pair of headphones and, given that opportunity the audio glutton inside of me reached unthinkingly for the best available. Now, I'm no headphone aficionado, indeed I'm barely ever a serious headphone listener, but even I know that when you are talking headphones in audiophile and head-fi circles, Stax is a good place to start, so buoyed with the sort of received wisdom that borders on outright prejudice, I set about obtaining a pair of the legendary 'phones. And like so many people who operate on the basis of assumption and urban myth, when reality bites it surely comes as something of a shock...

The 'phones I was fortunate enough to lay my grubby mitts on were the Stax SR-007 Omega Reference Series II, placed one from the top in their six model range: fortunate because they served as a timely and salutary reminder as to just why Stax have provided the ruler against which all serious phones have been measured for the last 25-years; fortunate because they also demonstrated that far from being a second-

class option when it comes to listening, a decent pair of headphones actually offers a very different and in its own way, just as valid view of the musical performance. I may not be a regular headphone listener, but time spent with the Stax has convinced me that they offer a real alternative to my main system – one with its own very real musical appeal – rather than just a last resort when the big speakers and the big system that goes with them is off limits for one reason or another.

Being electrostatics, the SR-007s naturally need their own matching energiser, the SRM-007 tII, which amounts to a standalone headphone amp, complete with three line-inputs one of which is balanced, it's own volume control and a line-out so that it can be situated within a tape loop if necessary. It's a tube design, employing ▶

“Its gentle fit, a world away from the vice-like grip of studio ‘phones, means sweaty ear syndrome is a thing of the past.”

- ▶ four 6FQ7 valves and can drive two pairs of Stax phones if required from handy, front panel sockets. Styling has stepped straight out of a 1980's JVC catalogue – which makes it pretty much up to the minute.

The ‘phones themselves employ surprisingly large circular ear-pieces, in contrast to the traditional, rectangular Stax style of old. Look closer and the surprises continue. The beautiful leather pads have ‘D’ shaped apertures in order to get up close and personal with your ears, while they also rotate independently to further enhance the fit and comfort. Meanwhile, the outer, open face of each driver also rotates, allowing you to ideally angle each three-core ribbon cable. Given this beautifully engineered attention to detail, I was slightly surprised to discover that the headband is not adjustable. Instead, the wide support strap is simply elasticated. While initially sceptical, this arrangement proved remarkably comfortable in practice, and equally so on Louise’s far smaller head, so chalk up another to Stax’s long experience in the field.

The headset is reassuringly solid and nicely weighty, but all that attention to fit and comfort ensures that in use it never becomes a burden, while its gentle fit, a world away from the vice-like grip of studio ‘phones, means that sweaty ear syndrome is also a thing of the past. The supplied cord is a generous 2.5M long, but extensions are available should you need them. In its standard form this system will set you back a cool £2,995 but, if that’s not rich enough for your blood, then there’s also a tweaked or Kimik version, with a matched set of cryogenically treated tubes, EAT tube dampers all round and up to four days on the test-bench to make sure everything is perfectly balanced. This treatment adds a mere £300 to the ticket so, under the circumstances, why not?

Enough of practicalities, how do the Stax ‘phones sound?

Resident amp/speaker combination at present is the Berning Quadrature Zs driving the “one down from the Grandes” Focal Stella Utopia Ems, a combination that manages to combine phenomenal transparency and resolution with real scale and dynamic range. It’s an impressive and imposing set up. Compare that to the Stax system – which nominally sets out to do the same job – and you might think the result is a foregone conclusion. But you’d be wrong. Sure enough, the Stax ‘phones can’t match the sheer power, the

staging and the immersive presence of the big amp and speaker pairing, but there are other areas in which they can teach us a thing or two. Detail and intimacy are traditional strengths of both electrostatic transducers and headphones, and it’s no surprise to note that the Stax take these attributes to the extreme. But that alone doesn’t justify their status as a genuine alternative to more conventional replay systems. That comes from another attribute entirely – the elimination of the listening room.

Even the best-behaved rooms have an impact on what you hear. What the Stax ‘phones do is demonstrate just how big that impact is. Listen to a piece of music on your main system and then listen to it via the Stax; note how much clearer the musical phrasing is, the subtle shifts in level that characterize the playing, the ease with which you can follow the musical line. Now, both my system and the room lean towards clarity and a direct, explicit presentation, shorn of bass thickening or cosy richness. Yet the Stax still present a noticeably more connected and directed version of the musical performance. To quote a phrase, they let you hear the conductor – and I’m not referring to his breathing or tapping feet, but his musical influence, binding the orchestra and music as a whole.

The effect is programme dependent. The bigger and more complex the work the more obvious it becomes, so downsizing from the Brahms violin concerto to Bach mitigates the effect, but it doesn’t eliminate it. It’s just not as obvious. Downsize again to girl and guitar and you can barely pick it up, even when you know what you are looking for. Here the difference tends to get swamped by the contrast in presentation – ▶



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▶ perspective and acoustic versus detail and immediacy – with the speakers' more naturalistic musical viewpoint carrying the day. But as soon as you ramp up the number of instruments or the musical density, the 'phones start making ground and it's not long before their particular appeal starts to vie for your attention. Am I about to give up on my loudspeakers? No. But I am thinking that it's about time I invested in some serious headphones, not because they sound better than the speakers, but because they offer a different perspective. That perspective lays bare different aspects of the music, performers and their performance. It's not just about detail, but what that detail can tell you, and in some cases that's a night and day difference. Just try Neil Young's *Road Rage* on for size and you'll exactly what I mean.

Right about now the naysayers and "everything should be free on the internet" brigade will be spluttering their outrage at the proposition of spending more than £3K on a set of headphones. After all, you can pick up a set of 'phones for a lot less than these will set you back – and they too, will eliminate the listening room. But there's more to this than simply stuffing the speakers in your ears. Not only is there the question of the quality of the hardware involved, the transducer technology and the implementation, but there's also the issue of the precise relationship between the driver and the ear canal. With a speaker that's connected this intimately to a device as sensitive as the human ear, tiny differences will become readily apparent – with potentially ruinous results. Where the Stax score – and what you are paying for – is not just the engineering that's gone into the electrostatic drivers and their energiser, but the thirty plus years of experience that informs the placement of those drivers relative to not just your ears, but the whole range of human ears and the heads they're attached to.

That's the really scary thing. Just as a loudspeaker manufacturer has to make certain assumptions regarding the range of rooms his products will appear in, and average their response as a result, the headphone designer is faced with the self same compromise, and although the variables are smaller, so too is the margin for error. The thing that impresses me most about the Stax is not the level of performance they achieve (which is impressive enough) but the utter consistency with which they do it, irrespective of the listener's size or shape.

Stax refer to their systems as 'earspeakers'. It's an attempt to separate them from the run of the mill 'phones with which we are all familiar, but it also reflects the level of performance they have achieved. Headphones have never been treated particularly seriously in hi-fi circles, as reflected in the slang

PRODUCT SPECIFICATIONS

Stax SR-007 Mk II Earspeakers and SRM-007 Mk II Kimik Energiser

Price: £3,295

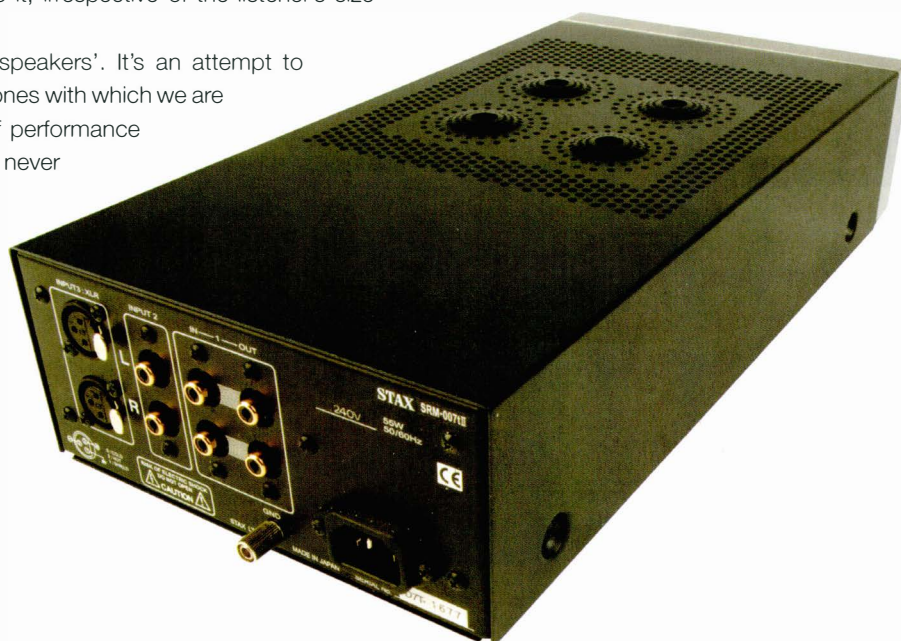
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moniker 'cans' – redolent with image of tins and bits of string. That's changing, largely driven by the iPod revolution, but that's still predominantly a budget concern. What the Stax 'phones demonstrate is that it's time to raise our sights and enjoy the lessons that these earspeakers (and their competitors) can teach us. £3K is a lot of money – but it's a lot less than a pair of Quadrature Zs and the Stellas! Besides which, there are four more affordable models in the Stax range. Give them a whirl; you might be surprised, you might be seduced, you'll definitely be impressed. +



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With its dedicated arm, the Model 30/12A possesses a majesty I hadn't heard before. Bereft of absurd, self-aggrandising over complexity exhibiting nothing but sane engineering and producing sound that's impossible to fault.

Ken Kessler Review – Hi-Fi News. March 2009

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Tannoy Definition DC10T

by Alan Sircom

I had started down this Tannoy review with high hopes of literary superstardom. I'd loaded up Kipling's 'If..' and expected to begin my Definition DC10T review with something highbrow. Half a day later, all I'd got is "If you can bang your head when all about you are turning it down and blaming it on 'foo'," and "You'll be a Tannoy Man, my son!" Hardly worth the effort really, but at least Kipling fans can sleep safe in knowing the poem goes untortured for another month.

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

These are the largest of a three-model range (the others are a smaller DC8T floorstander and a single-two-way-driver DC8 standmount). The Definition range itself represents the upper-middle Tannoy tier – above this come the Dimension and Prestige ranges and the mighty Kingdom Royal. The DC10T features Tannoy's distinctive 254mm (10-inch) Dual Concentric driver – a large doped paper drive unit with a 25mm 'Tulip Waveguide' horn-loaded titanium dome tweeter built into the acoustic centre of the drive unit. The tweeter here is one of Tannoy's WideBand designs, extending up into the supertweeter range. A matching treated pulp 254mm bass driver (only without the tweeter) sits below the dual concentric unit.

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

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



the speaker is not that fussy and foam bungs can help put the speaker up against the rear wall.

One of the unique aspects of the rear panel is that extra speaker terminal. It's an earthing tag connection for amplifiers with a similar grounding terminal, which is said to enhance dynamic range and cut down on RF interference. I say 'said to' because suitably grounding-ready amplifiers were thin on the ground *chez* Sircom when the review was in progress. Behind that terminal is some distinctly tweaky technology; cryogenically treated components in the crossover network and silver-plated high-purity copper in the hook-up wire.

Like most Tannoy speakers, the DC10T is happier with quality over quantity when it comes to amplification. It's listed as a 92dB efficient, eight ohm impedance loudspeaker, but although that means on paper it can be driven by practically anything, it needs greater amplifier muscle than it first seems. It was happier with more power (like the Musical Fidelity M6 power amp, tested in this issue) and with the Devialet D-Premier (tested last issue) than it was with lower power amps. However, a good low powered amplifier worked well too, and the Sugden A21SE delivered a fine performance.

“This size of speaker demands a medium-to-large room, even though the speaker doesn't seem troubled by the room itself.”

My biggest job as a reviewer of these loudspeakers is not to overstate their biggest strength. But it's difficult; these are possibly the most fun you'll have with a set of speakers. Owning them is like owning a barbecue; sooner or later they both end up being the excuse for a party. In the case of the DC10T, you'll end up buying Daft Punk and Black Eyed Peas albums... and loving them. This is because they can take a lot of punishment, go loud in an enjoyable manner without breakup and lay down a wicked bass line.

Perhaps a little 'too' wicked, as in it's very powerful. This is not room dependent, though. It's just deep and powerful. This is highly exciting for some listeners – those of us who love a good bass line will love it even more through the DC10T, but if you listen to the all-midrange *Exile in Guyville* by Liz Phair, you get some bass whether you need it or not. It's good bass; deep, powerful and surprisingly fleet of foot. But you need to be one with your inner Jack Bruce first.

If you've never used the term “banging choons” in a sentence or have never secretly desired to dress up like Angus Young and headbang for an afternoon, the DC10T still has a lot to offer. Its appeal is very much at the visceral end of music replay; cold, sterile analysis of music can be done, but it's not the DC10T's strong point. This is about 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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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Tannoy

DC10T floorstanding loudspeaker

Rear ported design

Driver complement:

Dual Concentric drive unit: 25mm

titanium dome tweeter with Tulip

WaveGuide in centre of 254mm

treated paper pulp cone

Bass drive unit: 254mm (10") treated

paper pulp cone with twin roll

impregnated fabric surround

Frequency Response (-6dB): 30Hz-35kHz

Sensitivity (2.83 Volts @ 1m): 92dB

Dispersion: 90° conical

Nominal impedance: eight ohms

Crossover frequencies: 200Hz, 1.4kHz

Crossover type: Passive low loss,

2nd order LF, 1st order HF, Deep

Cryogenically Treated

Power handling: 125w (continuous)

500w (peak)

Dimensions (H x W x D): 112.5 x 34 x

32cm

Weight: 34.5kg

Finishes: High gloss black, cherry or dark

walnut

Price: £5,000 per pair

Manufacturer: Tannoy Ltd

Tel: +44 (0)1236 420199

URL: www.tannoy.com

- ▶ passion in music, and that's something that is often lost in the desire for more detail and transparency.

So what applies to AC/DC applies to Albinoni. And it's a curious thing, you find yourself appreciating Albinoni all the more for that. The DC10T makes you discover why the composer laid down the dots in the first place. It's about 'feel'; modern music and virtuoso pieces for instruments are as much an expression of the musician's sensibilities as they are the composer's art. It's why we talk of Gould, Casals and Heifetz in the same way as we might discuss Miles Davis or Eddie Van Halen. The DC10T extends that passion to the orchestra and the band. And that's a passion igniter in the listener; you feel the energy that went into making the recording and the drive behind the person who wrote the music. That leaves you hungry for more.

“You feel the energy that went into making the recording and the drive behind the person who wrote the music.”

A lot of this comes down to the DC10T's effortless dynamic range. Unless you are pushing things (volume level, room loading, ears) to the limit, the sense of dynamic scale to music is deeply impressive. Yes, that makes you reach for the musical fireworks at first, but it's the more subtle music where that really hits home. You listen to something headbangers would dismiss as 'polite' (D'Anglebert harpsichord suites, for example, or the Eroica Trio's renditions of Brahms piano trio No 1) and you find not just the composition and musicianship impressive, but the weight and energy and passion behind the music comes out every bit as well as it does when Janis Joplin or Billie Holiday pour out their respective troubled souls to a microphone.

The downside? Perhaps some loss of subtlety and that 'strong' bottom end delivery. Those after the sort of refinement that electrostatic panels bring to string quartets might not find what they are looking for here. This is in many respects a graceful sounding loudspeaker with all the refinement to play any kind of music in an appropriate manner. But this is often overshadowed by the red-blooded energy it brings to sound. That's a trade-off many people would happily make.

Another trade-off comes with the balance between imagery and accuracy. The sound has a remarkable, encompassing imagery (forget three rows back in the stalls, picking out every musician in a layered soundstage; you are in there with the band), but this comes at the expense of a very slight 'quack' to the midrange. Once again, it's a trade-off most people would make, because it's not like it turns spoken word into Donald Duck-speak, but adds a faint plasticky projection to vocals. This doesn't get in the way of the vocal articulation, but

those who listen to mostly spoken word on their system would find better elsewhere.

Don't let these mild colorations 'colour' your feelings toward the loudspeaker. The DC10T is one of the most exciting and impassioned sounds you can get from a set of drive units. If you like your music entertaining – and let's face it, who doesn't? – this is one of the most communicative around. +



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Belles IA-01 integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

Belles is one of those understated names in audio that keeps cropping up as a universally good thing. It's an amplifier company; it doesn't make valve amplifiers or solid-state amplifiers... it makes amplifiers. Good, solid, no-nonsense, minimalist amplifiers.

The IA-01 integrated is a perfect example of this rolled-up-sleeves approach to making amplifiers. It looks almost identical to the excellent LA-01 preamp and couples that to the power amp stages from the MB200 power amps. Both of these have been reviewed here before, both of which were given a serious thumbs up in the process.

The designer – David Belles – is very much old school in his design. No op amps, not even much in the way of surface mount componentry. Just good, solid and mostly discrete components. The exception is the logic circuit chip, which basically lets the remote control volume and input selection, along with the trio of toggles for power, mute and input choice. The logic is rudimentary, in that you have to toggle your way through all four inputs in sequence and balance control is the stuff of legend, but you soon acclimatise yourself to this.

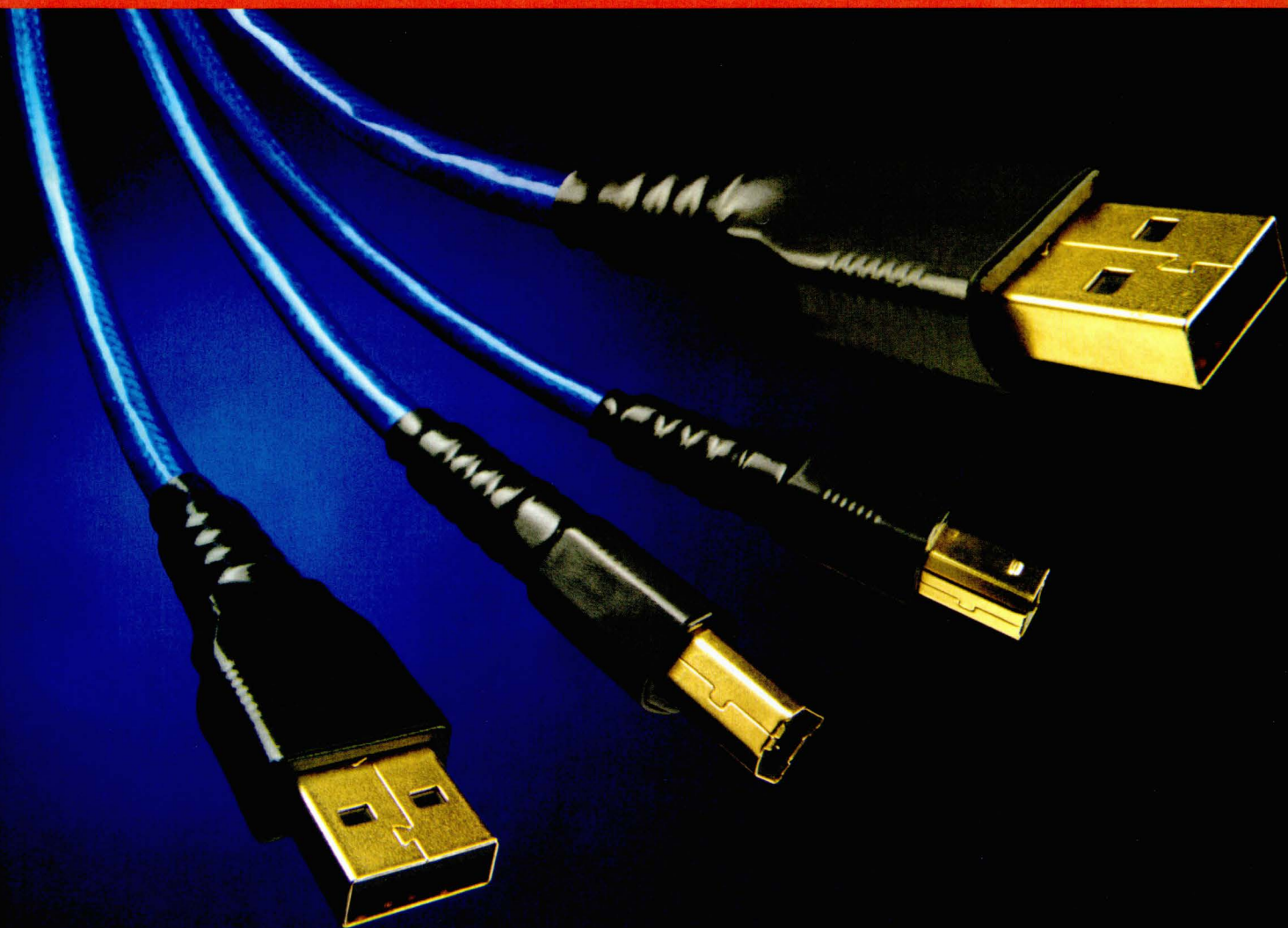
The amp features two pairs of power MOSFETS per side, mounted on the side heatsinks (the amp barely gets warm to the touch, suggesting Class AB operation). This delivers a very healthy 180 watts per channel, with more than 32 amps of peak current. The bulk of the chassis is taken up with a large toroidal transformer and two coke-can capacitors. These add bulk to an already heavy amplifier.

The solidity of build extends beyond the PCBs and internal architecture. The IA-01 is built on a reassuringly thick chassis, with 15mm thick, chamfered alloy front and

top panels, all resting on Stillpoints feet. The overall appearance is Spartan and functional at best. It gives the whole package an air of unburstability and shows where the money goes when it comes to build quality.

A useful additional consideration here is longevity and reliability. The design is engineered to last, and with all well-engineered products, it's not over-reliant on a host of hard-to-find components with hefty price tags. Belles has not scrimped on the components in the IA-01, but neither is it bristling with 'Famous Name' components. In the long term, repairs – should they ever arise – would not be a problem.

The Stillpoints feet are subject to a bit of to-and-fro conversations with the UK distributor apparently. Coherent Systems isn't a big fan of Stillpoints, preferring instead the Black Ravioli system. It would like to see Belles use Black Ravioli in place of Stillpoints, but thus far Belles is holding out on that one. Remember, this is Audiophile, 2010 style... shouting "They're just feet!" is punishable by death. The Stillpoints system works and I'm sure the Black Ravioli system works well too, albeit in a different manner from Stillpoints. ▶



Magic Bus?

Computer Audio Just Got Serious

Like all new formats and sources, it takes time: time to learn how to do it properly, time to learn what matters and what makes a difference.

Along with file formats and transmission standards, the cables used in computer audio applications can have a dramatic effect on sound quality. These are digital leads, and just like the digital leads in any other high-end audio application, they have standards to adhere to. It's just that the standard for USB (Universal Serial Bus) 2.0 cables is rather more complex than the 75 and 110 Ohm digital leads we are more used to. Their hybrid construction combines data and power conductors with multiple screens in a precision symmetrical array. Any geometrical or impedance deviation will materially effect data-integrity, making it a challenge that tests the ability of cable manufacturers to produce and consistently terminate cables that meet the standard sufficiently accurately for high-fidelity audio reproduction.

The new Blue Heaven USB 2.0 data cable is precision wound from dimensionally optimized, solid-core conductors that employ Nordost's proven micro mono-filament technology to

ensure ultra high transmission speeds with superb geometrical accuracy. Metal-jacketed plugs ensure shielding continuity and to further guarantee quality control and consistency, the cables are entirely manufactured and hand-terminated in the USA. This cable sets new standards of audio performance – not by inventing some new, “magic” technique, but by applying the same tried and tested technology and absolute attention to detail that has made Nordost audio cables market leaders across the analogue and digital domains.

Nordost's Blue Heaven USB 2.0 – a rigorous exercise in affordable excellence.

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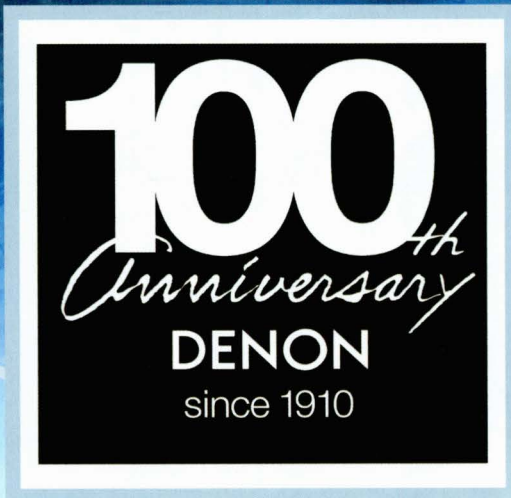
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“It’s upbeat, dynamic and extended without a stinging treble or an over-emphasised bass line.”

▶ Whatever support-related technology you decide upon, the basic sound of the Belles IA-01 is – perhaps unsurprisingly – similar to the LA-01/MB-200 in microcosm. It’s upbeat, dynamic and extended without a stinging treble or an over-emphasized bass line. In a manner not dissimilar from the VTL amplifier tested this issue, it starts from the midrange out, delivering a clear, lucid and unobtrusive midband. It’s little wonder so many of these amplifiers wind up with loudspeakers from brands like Cabasse – they demand a fluid midband and that’s precisely what the IA-01 gives them.

This is one of the big things about Belles; for an American amplifier company, the products don’t sound American. It doesn’t have the full-speed-ahead sonic fireworks display, the endless but occasionally slow-sounding power or the slick expansiveness of typical US iron. You don’t get the bright, powerful treble or the ground-shaking bass that you will hear from better-known US amp rivals, either. Instead, you get striking midband clarity and poise. Where the US connection starts to manifest is the IA-01’s ability to do that at high levels, because it’s backed up by some healthy power.

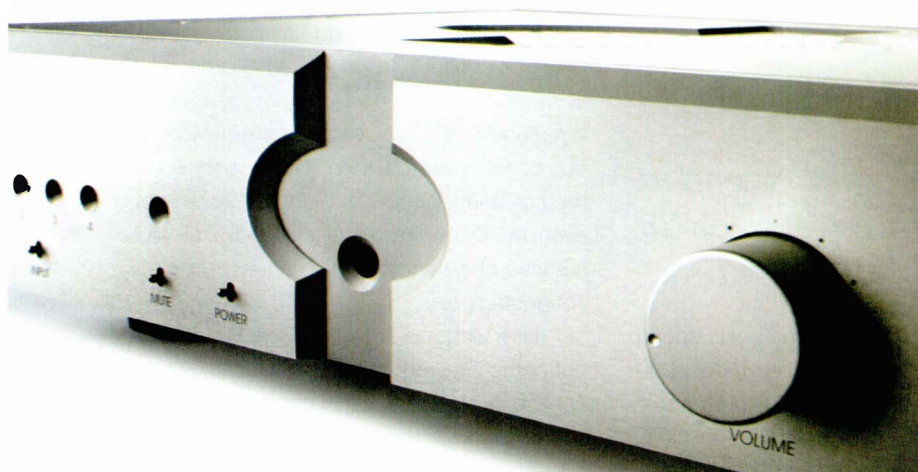
The other big American feather in its cap – which sets it aside from many European designs – is the ability to cast a very wide, holographic soundstage. The stage width appears extended further beyond the boxes, with considerably more depth and height information. There’s a very positive sense of being able to pick musicians out from the mix in the room, and the Belles seems to place you six or seven rows back in the stalls of a concert. There’s a slight sense of detachment between you the listener and the musicians (unless you listen in the near field), but this can be seen in a positive light as setting a stage

for the performance. This, coupled with the expansiveness of image, makes it the ideal opera lover’s amp, although it will also greatly benefit those who listen to a lot of live rock concerts – the *Allman Brothers live at Fillmore East*, *King Curtis live at Fillmore West* and *The Who Live at Leeds* (they’d run out of Fillmores by then, North and South having been annexed by the Carnegies), even AC/DC’s *If You Want Blood...* all give a sense of a performance, enhanced by the soundstaging.

Like all good amplifiers, the Belles gets out of the way rather than introduces its own sonic character. And yet, I can’t help likening it in a way with the Naim sound. This might not be the most uncolored presentation around for many, but Naim strives to make music entertaining and interesting. The Belles IA-01 has the same goal, but does it without the change of presentation.

This is perhaps what marks the Belles out best, that it goes for the musical enjoyment factor, yet does so without obvious compromises elsewhere. So, when you play something like the Butterfield Blues band, you get all the adrenalin and the bright, live sound, without feeling the music has been re-mastered for your listening pleasure by the electronics. ▶





▶ Where this doesn't work, however, is with 'loudness war' recordings. Discs that are clipped, compressed and loud sound clipped, compressed and loud. Although the amp has a delicate treble and open midrange, it doesn't enhance those compressed recordings in any way. It's not a completely warts 'n' all presentation, but these scarred for life tracks don't get much in the way of a soft landing from the IA-01. In truth, I don't know whether this honesty is a good thing (it's more accurate) or a bad thing (you might not want that much honesty), but I'm favouring the honest approach. Whether this is a major criticism or merely an observation does depend on how many compressed recordings like this you own. Most classical, jazz and back catalogue rock is largely free from such loud and compressed recordings – and new discs like Ray LaMontagne and the Pariah Dogs are fine too, but if you own a lot of new remasters, this could be more of an hurdle.

“It doesn't go for fireworks or flashy features. It's just built both to last and made to sound musically enjoyable.”

The amp has been criticised for its frequency extremes. I can see why, but I have another take on this. It will sound bass light next to amplifiers that will end up sounding ponderous in the process of delivering that extra low-end. That's a delicate balance – more bass, less speed or more speed, less bass – and I think it's one that Belles has got very right. This might be a cultural thing; we English are used to hearing our hi-fi light and tight, rather than big and (what we consider) blowsy. All of which would make me culturally predisposed toward the Belles IA-01 – its English accent is definitely more Gwyneth Paltrow than Dick Van Dyke. However, I'm not totally convinced this is a British thing,

because I'm not convinced there should be cultural differences between audiophiles. Music is music, no matter where you come from. And music sounds very good indeed on this amplifier.

This is going to sound like some kind of Zen Koan, but it's not hard to be impressed by the Belles IA-01, because it is not impressive. It doesn't go for fireworks or flashy features. It's just both built to last and made to sound musically enjoyable. Although there's better further up the Belles ladder, the IA-01 doesn't demand you upgrade, although I suspect the Belles integrated's quality will make it a stepping stone upwards.+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: 4x single-ended RCA line only
Outputs: 1x single-ended RCA line only
Freq Response: 20Hz-20kHz (-1dB), 0.2Hz-125kHz (-3dB)
Power output: 180 watts per channel
Input Impedance: 100k ohms
Distortion: IM and THD, less than .001%
Noise: less than 300 microvolts rms
Crosstalk: Over 45Db
Peak Current: 32 amperes
Damping Factor: over 2000
Dimensions (WxHxD): 43.2x8.9x33cm
Weight: 19kg
Price: £5,250

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Valvet P2c & A3.5

by Jason Kennedy

I have to say that when I got the Valvet P2c preamplifier out of its box it took me back, back to a time when you could sell great sounding kit no matter what it looked like. This wasn't so long ago it has to be said, but it's rare to find an imported product that's as down to earth as this. Build quality is, in fact, quite decent – it's the lack of fancy metalwork that stands out. The website shows a rather more attractive version with the ally fascia in a natural finish, but the all black version delivered is pretty basic looking by comparison. It's usefully slim though, thanks to horizontally arrayed valves and a separate power supply; even the input sockets are aligned horizontally. With nothing going for it in the male jewellery stakes, this has got to be a great sounding product to warrant distribution.

Valvet is a German company that makes a horn-loaded loudspeaker and two ranges of amplification dubbed Bricks and Blocks, the latter being the more ambitious models. Distributor Artisan Audio supplied some examples from the Blocks range, which has just been augmented with a more expensive preamp than the P2c called Soulshine, and whose A3.5 monoblocks are the finest the company makes. These solid-state, Class A power amps are rather more traditionally cased devices with heavy heatsinking down each flank and a chunky V shape cut into the front panel; subtle perhaps, but they look the money. They are compact enough to fit a pair on one conventionally-sized equipment shelf, but dish out enough heat to convince you of their operating class. They are specced as delivering 50 watts into eight ohms and take both balanced and single ended connections. Their feet are oak cones, which is not something I've encountered outside of the Russ Andrews accessories catalogue; this makes them

easy to slide onto a shelf but as there are only three per amp, stability is not 100%. The P2c likewise has three oak cones beneath it and as this is a wide lightweight unit one is forever tipping it when making connections – eventually you remember where to put your weight.

“With nothing going for it in the male jewellery stakes, this has got to be a great sounding product.”

Under its perforated lid the P2c has an ECC83 and an ECC81 for each channel of the phono stage and a pair of 6SN7s in the line stage. Everything is hardwired with silver, which suddenly makes complaints about the appearance seem churlish, as silver wired preamplifiers are pretty rare beasts at any price. Valvet's site suggests that it has remote volume control but the UK distributor eschewed this presumably on the grounds of cost, or could it be that it makes the p2c seem less hairshirt! The phono stage has transformers (which you can also have in silver for a premium) for the MC input and passive RIAA EQ. Inputs are selected 'blind' using the left hand rotary which isn't exactly helpful but does keep the fascia clean and you eventually remember where each input is. Gain is pretty high as is often the case with tube preamps but the Valvet power amps ►



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On demonstration

Raidho Acoustics



C2

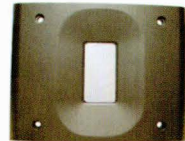
The Raidho Loudspeakers employ the very finest components, including Ceramic drivers which are hand built in house. The Raidho ribbon tweeter is unique and was the very starting point of the company. The new Raidho speakers utilize the very finest filters and crossover components in a topology unique to Raidho.



How many evolutionary steps does it take to make a revolution? The Raidho magnet system consists of 2 rows on neodymium magnets placed in a push pull configuration. Loudspeaker technology has moved very little in the past 50 years, with small improvement in real terms, taking a long time to realize. But now a systematic reappraisal of fundamental principals has changed the rules. Designer Michael Boerresen has created a new standard when it comes to delivering the life and drama captured in a recording.

Evolutionary ? Yes
 Revolutionary ? Absolutely

The C2 is an agile conjuror of a speaker, able to keep all the balls in the air at the same time. It is often an education to live with and I can do nothing but thoroughly recommend it.. Chris Thomas Hi-fi Plus issue 73



C1



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audience



Overall, very impressive. Robert Townsend -- Stereophile Jan 08

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Please visit the website for the full range of Audience Hi-fi products including their excellent power conditioners and power cords.



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HECO

TOWNSHEND

WBT

- ▶ have suitably low sensitivity so that you have some range on the volume pot, but using my active ATCs I had about three degrees to play with when a line source was in use!

The power supply box comes from the Croft school of industrial design and contains a compact transformer and a regulator valve, the umbilical that sends power is hardwired to the preamplifier with a DIN connector on the PSU, the lead is 90cm (3 foot) long. This separation was done to keep hum at bay but it was possible to put the preamp on a shelf above or below the PSU without this being an issue, what it didn't like was being too near the power amps.

The A3.5 power amp Blocks are push-pull Class A devices with a single pair of transistors in the output stage. This approach is also found in Gamut power amplifiers and one that is claimed to avoid issues arising from the small differences between individual transistors that can accumulate with multiple devices. Each monoblock has a 300 VA toroidal transformer with 100,000 microfarads of filtering (a Bryston 7B 600 watt monoblock has 30,000 microfarads by way of comparison) and the signal takes a very short path through the silver wired circuit without encountering a single capacitor on its way.

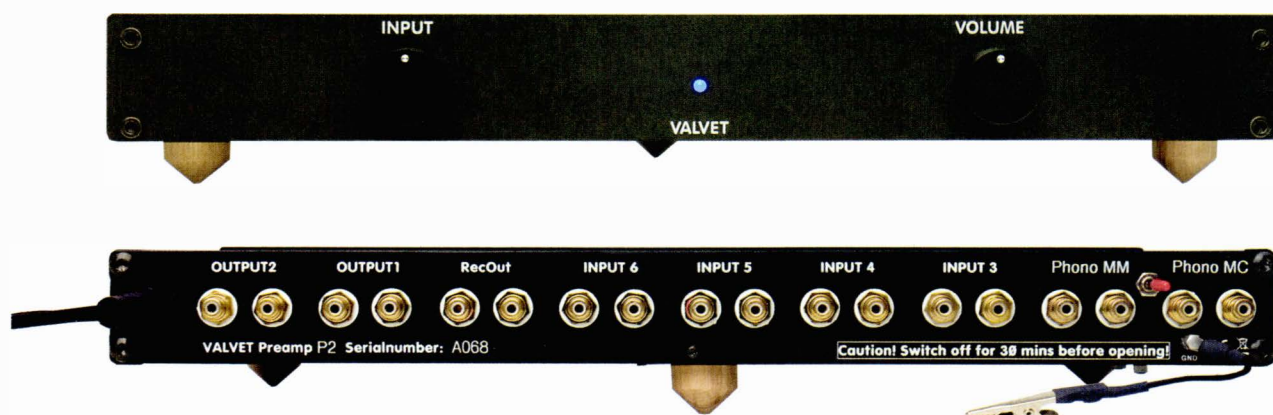
Valvet's approach pays off handsomely in the listening room, the pairing producing a rich and detailed soundstage that is palpably real with a great recording. Schubert's *Winterreise* D911 *leider* (Schäfer/Schneider) brings singer, pianist and studio acoustic into the room in a vital and convincing fashion thanks to superb dynamics and the lack of any edginess or grain from the power amps.

The monoblocks sound more relaxed, richer and more open than my Gamut D200 MkIII but don't image with the same degree of precision and ultimately lack the bottom end power of what is a rather more expensive 200 watt amplifier. However the organic nature of the sound, its sheer musicality, distracts you rather effectively and it's all too easy to sit back and be transported. As is often the case with valves, acoustic music is the main beneficiary, however the Valvets do wonders even with relatively compressed mainstream albums where their ability to open up the sound of instruments and voices is extremely effective.

“The pairing producing a rich and detailed soundstage that is palpably real with a great recording.”

Putting Keb Mo's *Give Peace A Chance* under a van den Hul Colibri cartridge onboard an SME Model 20A turntable rewards with absolutely gorgeous tone, this is a great recording and the Valvet's phono stage lets you know all about it. From the juicy bass line to the strangely damped snare drum on the opening track it draws you in to the music. This is also because the amps are transparent to timing, seemingly neither emphasising nor restraining transients but delivering dynamics in full effect. If the preamp has a shortcoming its in image scale, it doesn't manage to project height very well even with PMC Fact 8s which are strong in this department. This became pretty obvious when substituting an MSB DAC V with onboard volume control which showed that the A3.5s are easily up to the job of pushing the soundstage to the ceiling.

Out of interest I tried the P2c alone with my ATC SCM150 SL actives as these give a different perspective on things, in this instance a pretty positive one. Bass is particularly good for a tube powered device, ▶





▶ it's deep and quick with excellent timbre. With Genesis' remixed *Watcher of the Skies* you really feel the bass pedals and are swept up by the drama of the piece, I've not noticed how much reverb there is on the drums before either. My regular tube preamp, a Border Patrol Control Unit has a more open balance that makes voices seem more real, but it could do with some of the power that the Valvet delivers. With a van den Hul Condor MC on the Rock 7 it had me revelling in Lindsey Buckingham's picking behind Stevie Nicks' voice on the Fleetwood Mac track *Landslide*, there are clearly two acoustic guitars plus reverb then an electric comes in later on, the whole effect was pretty spellbinding.

The Valvet is usefully quiet, presumably this is down to the separation of the power supply from the signal electronics in the preamp but it certainly makes it easier to hear into recordings. And even with a not particularly sensitive speaker like the Fact 8 (89dB) you can achieve decent level thanks to the vitality of the sound. Despite the presence of transistors there is no sense of the controlling in the music, so you don't get bone crunching bass you get timbrally rich bass in the context of music that flows with ease and draws you into the experience. Clearly the Class A factor is dominant; it gives rather more even power than most tube amps but avoids the tonal greyness and occasional edginess of class A/B designs. The lack of image height could be down to the preamp not adding an edge to high frequencies and thus providing a more natural balance but it's hard to say whether either approach is correct. The question is which one makes you listen the longest?

Despite its utilitarian appearance the P2c is a well built preamplifier that offers an awful lot of sound quality for the money, you will be hard pressed

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

P2c

Phono stage: MM, MC (optional pure silver transformers)

Line inputs: 4

Input Impedance: line 47KOhm, phono), 100KOhm

Amplification: line 45dB, Phono 65dB

Maximum output: > 10 Volts

Dimensions (W x H x D): Preamp 445 x 50 x 300mm, power supply 222 x 90 x 230mm

Case: black powder coated aluminium with steel base

Front: 4mm, black or silver anodised (optional deep chrome)

Optional remote

Price: £3,790

A3.5

Power output: 50 watts into 8 ohms

Dimensions (W x H x D): 230 x 80 x 300mm

Case: 2-40 mm thick aluminium

Front: 10mm black or silver anodised (optional chrome)

Price: £3,750 per pair

Manufacturer:

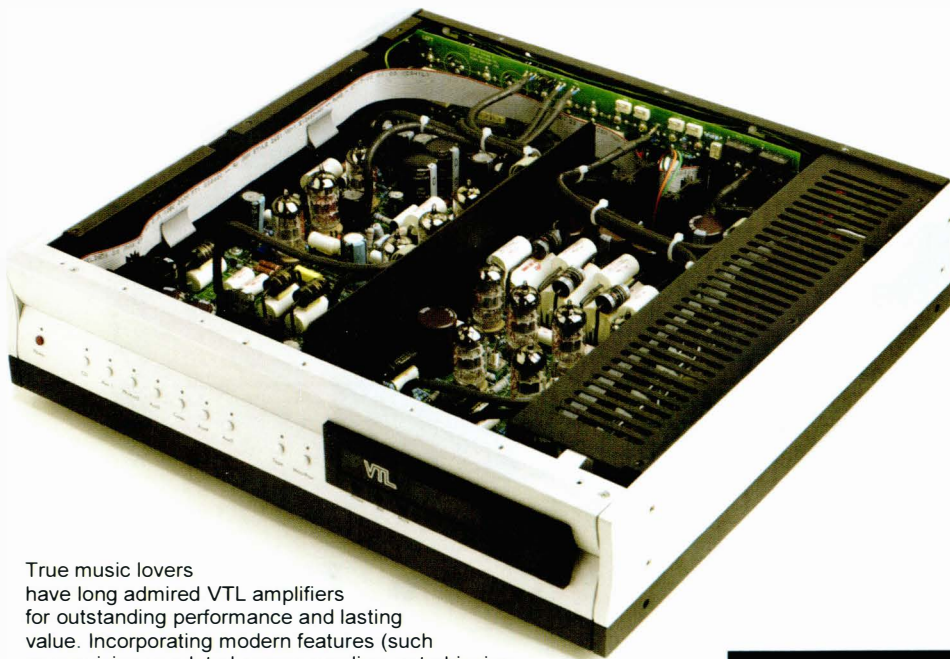
URL: www.valvet.de

Distributor: Artisan Audio

URL: www.artisanaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1494 858471

to equal it sonically with a better looking product. The A3.5 is by contrast very nicely cased and extremely engaging with enough grip to keep you rocking in the context of a relaxed and revealing demeanour. And I thought I didn't like the sound of silver! +



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MB-450 Series III

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Vacuum Tube Logic IT-85 integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

The VTL IT-85 integrated amplifier perhaps perfectly sums up the difference between UK and US audiophiles. And not just because we call them 'valves' and they call them 'tubes'. For UK listeners, 60 watts of 'hollow state' amplifier is impressively powered to slot in with our small rooms and small loudspeakers, but Stateside, the amp is considered almost low-powered.

In fairness to our American counterparts, it's not surprising given VTL's other products; thunderous big tube power amplifiers like the Siegfried, capable of delivering 800 watts per channel.

Vacuum Tube Logic has been absent from the UK audiophile line up for too long, but now it's back, thanks to the newly-minted Kog Audio. To bring UK buyers up to speed, the brand makes a range of preamps, power amps and this integrated, all entirely, confidently tubular in approach. The company has a reputation for making completely unfussy, unbreakable amps that is second to none; it was already making ultra-reliable products when it took a hiatus to make

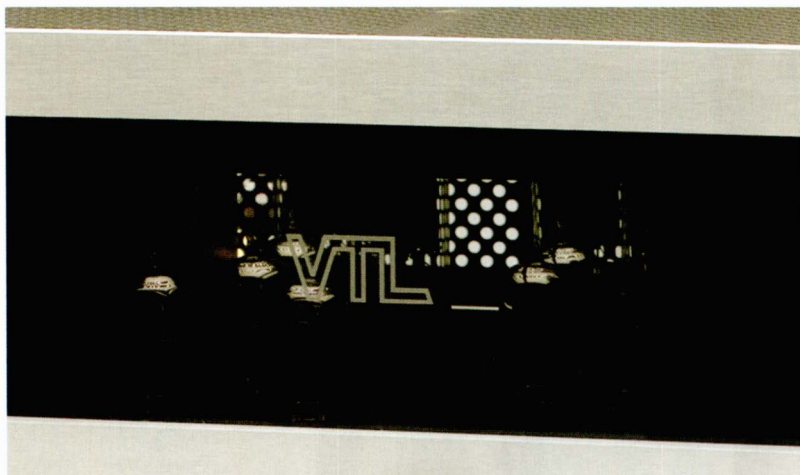
them even more bomb-proof. The decision is ridiculously logical; back in the day when tube amps were the only option, they were more reliable even though people knew how to handle them. Those days are gone, so an amplifier needs to be super-reliable and completely unfussy today.

The one throwback to the golden age of tube amplifiers is the size (and weight) of the amp. It's slightly smaller than modern designs. Packed into that smaller chassis are a pair of 12AU7, a pair of 12AT7 and a quartet of EL34 power pentodes. It's fully cased, although you can see the tubes glowing through the semi-opaque glass front panel (it's surprising how many tubes you see happily out in the open, despite it being in total contravention of EU safety standards). That means that holed top plate runs damn hot, damn quickly.

Tube amps can be judged in a very basic manner by weight; the amount of iron in the transformers will define in some respects the range and scale of the amplifier. At a packing weight of nearly 30kg, there's a lot of transformer in there. The result is an amplifier ▶

[sometimes]
technology meets art...





▶ that takes on all the benefits of tubes with the sort of “hit it with a hammer, you’re going to need a new hammer” build. That means a lot of VTL-made parts where normal manufacturers go for off the shelf products – fabricating your own speaker terminals is obsessive, but if the job’s worth doing... The end result is a product that oozes confidence and lifetimes of fuss-less use.

That’s the thing about VTL equipment – and the IT-85 is part integrated amp, part gateway drug to more VTL-ness – it’s so well made and its lines so right, that it’s hard not to see the beauty in the product. Strangely though, the pictures do not do it justice. No pictures do it justice. It just looks like some kind of 1950s radio on the printed page, but in the flesh it looks the business. It’s beautifully proportioned, the fit and finish is world class, the knobs feel right... the whole thing is how you’d imagine Modernist architects would want an amplifier to look and feel. It’s the kind of product you’d expect the hero of an Ayn Rand novel to build, while declaring something bold about individual rights and capitalism.

That power switch on the front panel makes the amp go into standby for 30 flashing blue LED seconds, then everything is up and running. There’s no need for separate taps for different impedances, just a single set of multi-way speaker terminals and five sets of phono sockets. Only mute and volume can be controlled from the little plastic handset and the front panel, and a processor toggle switch, ¼” headphone jack and toggle switch between speaker and headphone output completes the front panel, but more on that later.

The IT-85 does it from the middle outwards. In other words, it excels at making a sweet midrange first and foremost. And that midrange really draws you into the music; the SACD remaster of *Let It Bleed* ably demonstrated this, with tracks like ‘Love In Vain’ highlighting the interplay between acoustic and electric guitar, while Jagger’s voice is wonderfully clear and articulate. Before you jump to the conclusion that it lacks treble and bass, guess again. It has excellent, foot-tapping bass and fine, extended treble. Fine dynamics, too.

In that respect, it’s the valve amp for people who don’t normally like valve amps. It’s the amp that people who like Naim would actually like. That’s not because the IT-85 sounds like a solid-state amp – the mids are sweeter and there’s none of the spitch and siblance that can sometimes trip up solid-state,

especially with metal dome tweeters – but because the sound has that same sense of bounce, which gives the same play-another-disc fun factor. And none of the ploddy, blobby bass that solid-staters dismiss tube amps over.

What the IT-85 has over many rivals is how adaptable it is. You could use a good CD player and a pair of standmounts costing half as much as the IT-85, or you could make it the cheapest part of the system. In particular, it really benefits from a top-flight CD player – the Kog guys are really in favour of a maxed-out dCS front-end and that highlights just what the IT-85 can do. Similarly, you can put the amp on a side table or a high-quality platform and – while the sound gets smoother as you go up the scale – it sounds good on a side table. There isn’t a platform plateau, either; it sounded natural to begin with, and even more natural on a Vertex AQ Kinabalu. In short, it’s an amp that will grow with your listening.

“That’s the thing about VTL equipment... the IT-85 is part integrated amp, part gateway drug to more VTL-ness.”

With a good front end and speakers appropriate to the price and appropriately partnered with the IT-85, one of the big pluses is the imagery. The soundstage is open, wide and deep, with instruments neatly rooted in space. It scaled well too, not struggling when moving from uncomplicated girl-with-guitar music to full-tilt Pavarotti pumping out *Turandot* with those XXL lungs he had. But most of all is a sense of lucidity and insight that draws you in and keeps you there. ▶



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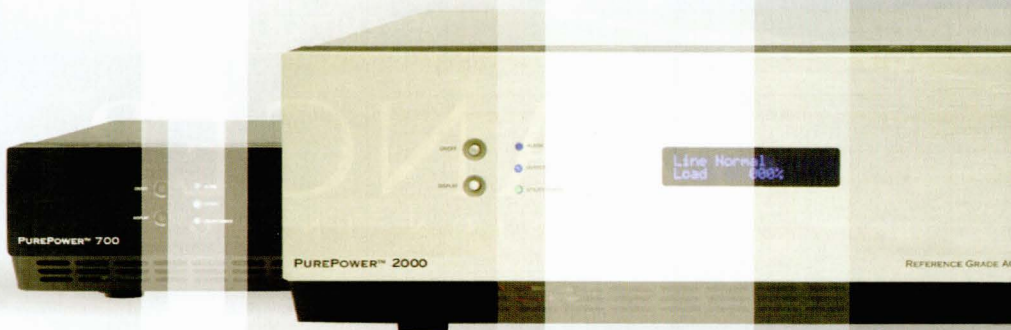


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Alan Sircom, HiFi Plus Issue 48

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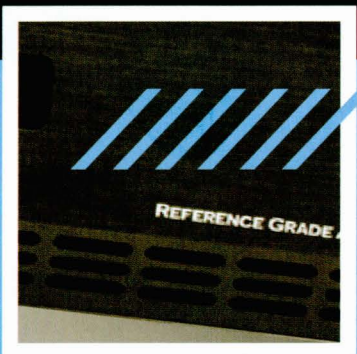
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▶ The only place where the IT-85 shows where it's not a bigger amp is when you start to raise the roof. It has a distinct loudness ceiling, beyond which it starts to sound creamy. Push it further and it goes all 'wall of sound' and closes up.

Let's be sensible here. It's a sixty watt amp, not a six watt triode or a six hundred watt behemoth. No one's really going to partner up the IT-85 with a pair of huge Wilsons or Magicos (or – given the Kog Konnection – Focal Grande Utopia EMs), and hopefully no-one's going to think a pair of 108dB horns will be a good match. Between these two extremes, it's such a great amplifier, it becomes something of a natural choice for those after a really right sounding device that will give you years of pleasure.

I mentioned the headphone socket earlier for a reason. By putting a toggle on the front panel to switch between speakers and headphones bestows the IT-85 with two big advantages. The first is a logical one – no more having to unplug headphones any time you want to listen to the main speaker system. The second is purely sonic; unlike most amplifiers, the IT-85's headphone socket does not have a headphone amplifier behind it... it has the whole damn amplifier. As a consequence, this is the finest headphone amplifier you'll probably ever hear. There's the tiniest amount of tube-rush noise – which is itself remarkable given the all-valve nature of the amplifier – but it is precisely the sound of the amplifier in microcosm. I can imagine some hardcore VTL users using this as a headphone amp in its own right, and I can also imagine people starting with the IT-85 and quickly migrating up to bigger things in the VTL portfolio. The only thing I can't imagine is someone entertaining another amplifier brand after buying your first VTL.

I started this review with pointing out the differences between US and UK audiophiles. The IT-85 is a perfect amp for many UK audiophiles. It's powerful enough to drive the sort of speakers we use to the levels we play in the rooms we live in. If that fits you, this is the kind of amplifier you could use for a long, long time. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

VTL IT-85 Integrated Amplifier

Inputs / Outputs: 5 Single-ended RCA / 1 pair 5 way binding posts

Input Sensitivity / Impedance: Line in: 180 mV, Amp in 575 mV / Line in 20kV, Amp in 135kV

Output Impedance: Amp Out: 1.55Ω, Headphone out: 16Ω, Preamp out: 400Ω

Power Consumption: Idle = 200W, Full Power = 600W

Valve Complement: 2 x 12AU7, 2 x 12AT7, 4 x EL34

Output Power: 60w (into eight ohms), 80w (into four ohms)

20Hz-25kHz ± 0.1 dB < 3%

THD: (Stable to 2W)

(Load settings: Speakers: 5W

Headphones: 50-500W)

Small signal frequency response

(< 0.2% THD @ 1W): 1Hz-75kHz -3dB

Class of output operation: AB1

Dimensions (HxWxD): 40 x 28 x 17.75 cm

Weight: 29.5kg fully packed

Price: £4,650

Manufacturer: Vacuum Tube Logic

URL: www.vtl.com

Distributor: Kog Audio

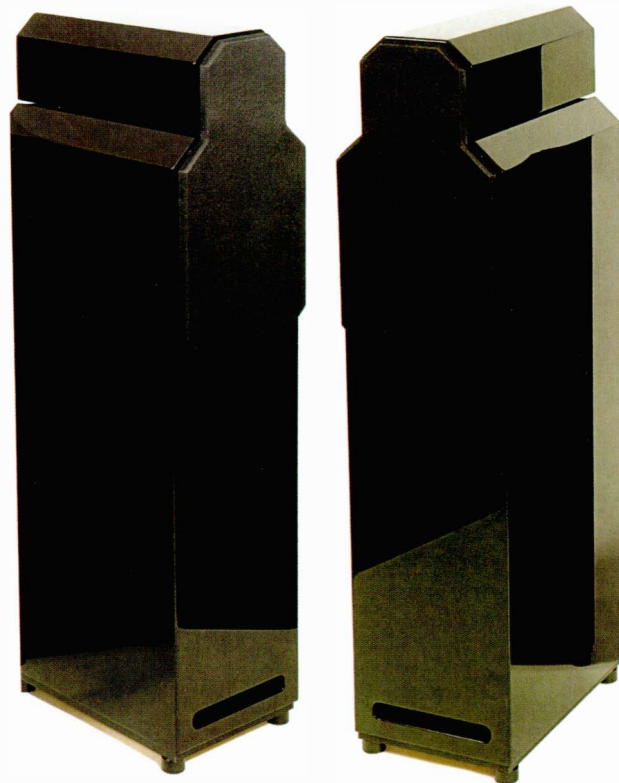
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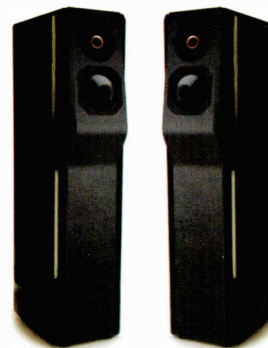
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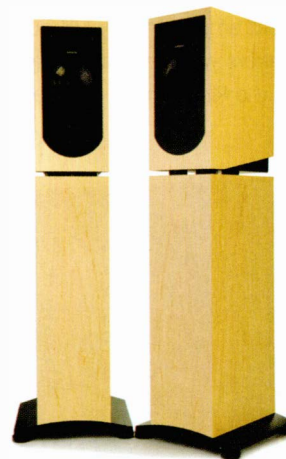
Chris Thomas on the Audioplan Kontrast V – HiFi Plus, July 2009



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Davone Rithm

by Paul Messenger

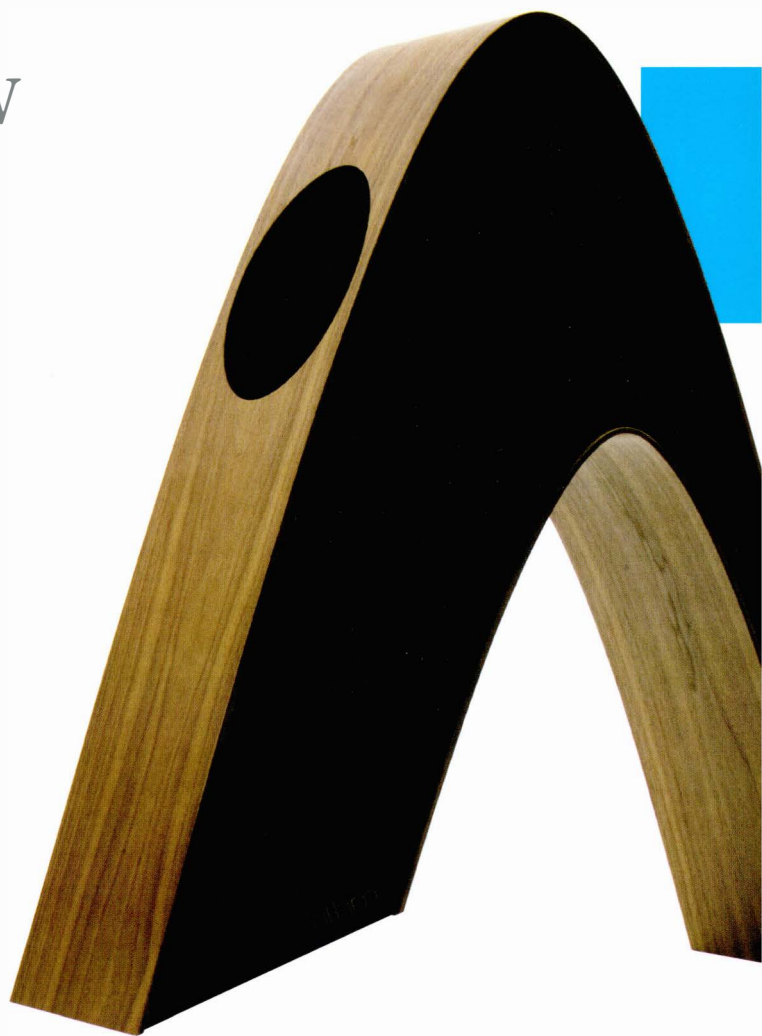
Loudspeaker buyers tend to be conservative folk, but the succession of rectangular boxes that dominate the marketplace does become rather repetitive, so it's always exciting to encounter a speaker that differs dramatically from the norm.

That's definitely the case with Danish newcomers Davone, which has recently introduced its first two models, both of which fly defiantly in the face of the usual stereotypes. The Rithm and the Ray are anything but rectangular boxes, and indeed look like someone has actually designed them, albeit someone with a touch of nostalgia for the Danish school of furniture design that set the post-WWII style agenda.

At £2,700 per pair, the Rithm certainly doesn't come cheap, but it does indisputably have considerable style and flair – two qualities that are sadly lacking in the pantheon of today's hi-fi speakers. The Rithm is also unusually compact and discrete, so it looks a very tempting prospect provided its clean, uncluttered lines fit in with the rest of the home décor, and the price isn't a deterrent.

Davone describes this speaker as a two-way reflex, but I think that because the enclosure shape is rather different from the regular rectangular box, it may well behave rather more like quarter-wave loading, a technique akin to horn loading that I've found often delivers superior bass agility. One can see some physical similarity between the Rithm and earlier designs like the Jens Posselt Albatross, or the Cain & Cain Abby (which I reviewed in *Hi-Fi+* 62), though the two obvious differences are that the Rithm folds the tapered column over, to create a neater appearance, and uses a conventional two-way driver arrangement than those other two models.

Whether or not there's any validity in the above comparison, this remains an unusually pretty and practical speaker, even though the construction techniques defied all attempts to examine the internals. The solitary drive unit is recessed, so that a thin covering black cloth grille sits flush with the attractive 6mm three-ply walnut woodwork of the 'front' (and 'back') panel. The black painted side panels also appear to be relatively thin, and are inset a few millimeters from the edge of the 'front' and 'back' panels. The ported base at the front – tilted somewhat to let the sound out – appears to be hardboard, and there's some evidence of fillets reinforcing the junctions between the sides and the front/back panels. Threaded sockets accommodate 6mm spikes front and rear, and the enormously deep footprint ensures outstanding fore'n'aft stability.



The shape is not only strikingly unusual, it also makes a great deal of sense on several grounds. Because the solitary co-axial drive unit is tilted backwards at approximately 17 degrees from the vertical, it can be set rather lower than usual while still pointing its forward axis upwards towards seated listeners. Although it's probably preferable from a performance perspective to get a main driver rather higher off the ground, the compromise here is arguably acceptable in the interests of superior domestic interior design and discretion.

The driver here is actually a two-way co-axial unit, mounting a tweeter on the polepiece in the centre of the main bass/mid cone. The fixed cover made detailed inspection impossible, but under torchlight the cone, roughly 110mm in diameter, looks quite complex, with circumferential rings (possibly a second spider) near the centre. The tweeter appears to have a fabric dome 25mm in diameter. A single pair of good quality socket/binder terminals is appropriately located low down on the rear.

Since access to the driver seems quite awkward, one minor worry concerns the possible difficulty of servicing the speaker in the unlikely event of a fault developing. ▶

▶ Measurements showed that the Rithm is essentially well balanced overall, even though it does rather lack smoothness, with evidence of peaks around 50Hz, 150-200Hz, 1.2kHz and 12-14kHz. That said, the in-room far-field averaged response still holds within +/-5dB above 60Hz.

The port is tuned to around 39Hz, giving decent in-room bass extension down to around 24Hz, though that's partly because the port resonance interacts with room modes to create a substantial rise centred on 50Hz. Sensitivity is claimed and confirmed at a fairly modest 86dB, though that's by no means unreasonable considering the decent bass extension and an easy-to-drive amplifier load, that only falls below six ohms above 6.5kHz. The pair match was pretty good too.

Listening took place intermittently over several weeks, using a number of source, amplification and accessory components. These included Naim NAC552 pre-amp with NAP500 and NAP135 power amplifiers, Naim CDS3/555PS and Rega Valve Isis CD players, a Magnum Dynalab MD106T FM tuner, and a Linn/Rega hybrid record player with Soundsmith Strain Gauge cartridge.

Sonically speaking this isn't the most exciting speaker around, mainly because its presence band (above 1.2kHz) is a quite laid back. But it is basically well balanced overall, and is always easy on the ears, allowing the volume to be turned up high without letting the sound become unpleasantly aggressive.

In fact the Rithm positively relishes being played at high levels. Turning up the volume seems to wake it up and bring out its best features. Despite the measured unevenness, the bass actually seems to work rather well, with decent agility and a welcome freedom from overhang and thickening – very much a quarter-wave character in fact.

The low-set drive units do undoubtedly result in a low-set image; this will be unfamiliar and some may find it a tad tiresome too, but the imaging

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Davone Rithm

Frequency Response: 50Hz-20kHz (anechoic)

Impedance: 8ohm

Sensitivity: 86 dB/2.83V

Power Handling: 80W (IEC 268-5)

Driver: 182mm+25mm coaxial

Crossover: 3,200Hz

Bass Loading: Bass reflex

Construction: 6 + 10 layer form pressed walnut + beech veneer

Finish: Walnut, black side panels

Weight: 12 Kg

Dimensions (WxHxD): 214x699x579mm

Price £2,700 per pair

Manufactured by: Davone

URL: www.davoneaudio.com

Distributed by: ABC Audio

URL: www.abc-audio.co.uk

Tel: +4(0)208 462 1379

itself works well enough, with good freedom from boxiness, decent focus, and the 'axisymmetric' consistency that automatically comes through using a co-axial drive unit.

On the one hand, it might be said that the Rithm delivers a decent enough but rather unexceptional standard of sound quality at a fairly high price. On the other hand, it has uniquely tasty styling that is both highly effective and very discreet.

Although the sound might have been smoother and more dramatic, its lack of aggression will be a major plus for those who like to play their music loud, and the way it keeps everything well under control at high levels is very impressive. +



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

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

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

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

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

Jonathan Carr, Lyra Designer



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Arcam Solo rDAC digital converter

by Alan Sircom

We're all rather partial to a spot of dCS here at *Hi-Fi+*. And it's not just because of the slick front panels; the dCS sound is detailed and tonally precise and zaps into focus like few other digital products can do. Trouble is, not all of us have the requisite depth of wallet to spank down thousands and thousands on a digital source. So what could be better than a £299 DAC that gives you a sweet taste of that dCS technology? That's where the Arcam Solo rDAC comes in.

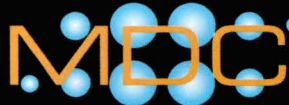
Arcam is no stranger to DACs – its original Black Box was one of the first off-board digital converters ever made – but like many companies, until recently it had left the DAC off the roster. Computer audio has brought the DAC back with a vengeance, in part because the DAC interfaces between computer and audio system and in part because CD player sales have dipped significantly of late (an interesting aside, both the Musical Fidelity and Neodio CD players in this issue sport USB input).

Arcam has long had a connection with dCS, too. It used a variation of the company's Ring DAC in its Alpha 9 and CD23 players. The Ring DAC is not implemented here (this new rDAC sports a Wolfson WM8741 digital converter, which is no slouch), but it does license dCS's version of Asynchronous USB connection. The rDAC outputs single-ended only and has switchable coaxial, optical and USB inputs. There's another

input too, but more on that later. The rDAC gets its juice from a 6V wall-wart power supply.

Thing is, it doesn't feel like a £299 converter. It feels and looks heavier than you might expect. Compared to the likes of the Cambridge, Musical Fidelity V-range and the HRT, it's the most complete product of the bunch. Solid build, one touch button that moves through a series of front panel LEDs, switching from red for no lock to green for go. The intuitive display of the iDecco is better at determining lock or lack thereof, but the traffic lights look works well. The USB input doesn't need driver software, whether using Mac or PC, and it appears as 'Arcam rDAC'.

There's two ways of looking at this DAC. The first is the simple fit and forget upgrade to a CD and USB link. The second is looking at it as a high-end DAC without the high-end price. The fit and forget option makes life easy. It's detailed, natural and dynamic, especially on the USB input, because anyone who thinks computer audio is brash will love this DAC because it doesn't have a brash chip in its circuits. Comparing it with the HRT Streamer II+ was interesting, because the HRT is more immediate and exciting sounding, where the Arcam sounds softer. ▶



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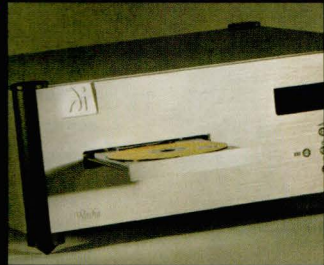
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Lamm LL2.1 amplifier front panel showing controls: POWER, REMOTE, MUTE, OPERATE, OFF, OUTPUT LEVEL (LEFT, RIGHT), min., max., -15dB, LINE, TAPE, LINE1, OFF, DIRECT, SOURCE, LINE2.

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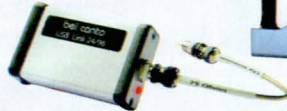
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▶ The rDAC is also extremely consistent, sounding the same through USB, Toslink or coaxial. The Asynchronous USB input does bring PC sound up to the highest common factor of digital outputs from CD sources. Whichever way you use the rDAC, it delivers the same satisfying presentation. And that holds as much with Brahms as it does with 'Bongo Rock', even when the latter is streaming out of a Spotify account.

The big plus point is the naturalness of the sound, though. It creates an excellent sense of living, breathing musicians playing music in the room. It throws out a very wide soundstage too; although this is largely tempered by speakers and room, the rDAC's vivid and wide stage gives any system the best chance it has of presenting a wide image beautifully.

But there's the other side. The side that gives the Arcam some serious attention, with interconnect cables and support systems that cost more than the DAC itself, fed high-quality lossless files (up to 24/96) and perhaps even using things like Amarra. Then a dramatic transformation takes place. You still get the softness, but with it comes sublime detail. Not dCS detail, but more in line with top sound quality. I suspect someone will come up with a tricked up power supply that should bring out even more from this top-class, inexpensive deliverer of high-end digits.

I suspect the softness is a deliberate plan, to help mitigate the effects of loud and compressed recordings. If so, it works relatively well, although if the track is clipped and compressed, there's not much that can be done to save the sound. But the smooth and refined sound helps tame pushed to the end-stops loudness war casualties and makes the most of the very limited dynamic range these things bring.

Ultimately, I still prefer the output of the HRT Streamer II+. It's more vibrant and immediate sounding. But it's also limited, if you plan on making your DAC more of a digital hub than a one-source dedicated device. And – it must be said – the differences between the Arcam and HRT are ultimately very small.

This is one of the most 'now' products in audio today. It's designed to bring the most out of online sources, but doesn't sacrifice much when used with traditional CD. It's very well built and for £299 represents fantastic value. Asynchronous USB brings computer audio up to a very high standard and this must be one of the most important 'transition' products as we move from a CD to a post-CD world.

And finally... back to that last input. The rDAC comes with a blanked out 'ANT' socket. This is designed for a wireless antenna – plug in a wireless antenna (running under the made-for-audio Klear wireless network system) and a USB wireless dongle and you get uncompressed Asynchronous USB connectivity between computer and DAC. As people increasingly use a laptop

to store their music and that lappy need not be physically tethered to the hi-fi system, the wireless transmission option is a highly logical option. This was not available as we went to print, but we'll run an update in a later issue. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Arcam Solo rDAC digital converter

Inputs:

- 1x Optical S/PDIF (Toslink socket)
- 1x Coaxial S/PDIF (Gold plated socket)
- 1x USB
- 1x Wireless (optional, requires dongle)

Outputs:

- 2x RCA / Phono sockets (Gold plated)

Output Level: 2.1VRMS (at 0dBFS)

THD+N: 0.003% - (0dBFS, 1kHz, 22Hz to 22kHz, unweighted)

Noise: -104dB - (relative to full scale, 22Hz to 22kHz, unweighted)

Dimensions WxDxH: 16x11.1x4cm

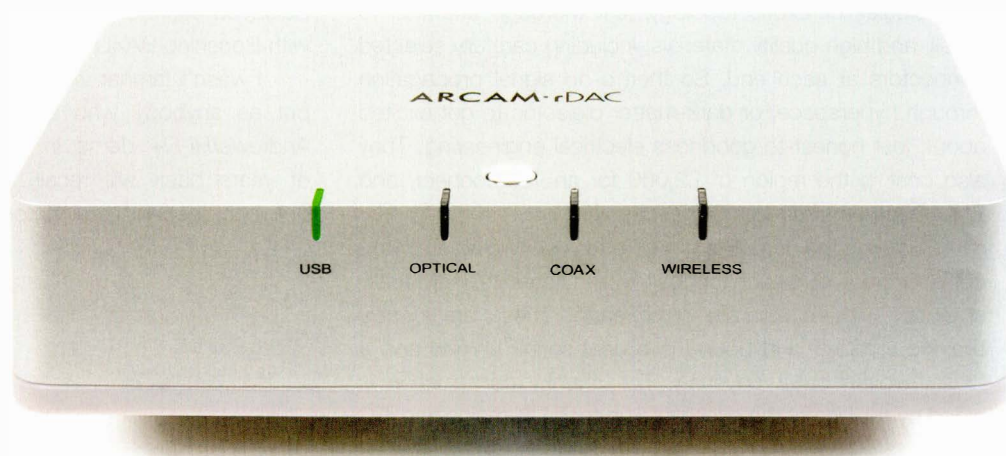
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Z-Axis Reference Power leads & B42 interconnects

by Steve Dickinson

Let's start with the idea that you, gentle reader, are a cable sceptic. Let us say that, for argument's sake, you have a good command of GCSE physics, and you therefore dismiss notions of propagation speeds, phase distortion, skin effects and other flummery as self-evidently so secondary as to be effectively irrelevant. For our purposes; provided the basic electrical stuff is within acceptable limits, it's job done. Something perfectly sensible can be achieved for around £100. I'd have to agree: there are mains leads and interconnects out there, costing around £100-200, which do a good job. So why would anybody want to spend 10 times that amount on either?

The Z-Axis products are new. The current range comprises interconnects and power leads, but loudspeaker cables may well appear later. They don't claim any clever technologies or exotic topology, just thorough attention to detail, and high quality materials, including carefully selected connectors at each end. So there's no signal propagation through hyperspace, or dark-matter dielectric to get excited about, just honest-to-goodness electrical engineering. They also cost in the region of £2,000 for an interconnect, and £1,000 for a mains lead. Oops.

So here's the deal. The power leads use two silver-plated copper conductors each for positive and negative, individually shielded, with a separate 4mm earth. These are loosely braided together and bound in a heat-shrink shroud and a loose, woven outer covering. The chunky construction is aided by the use of the excellent Furutech UK mains and IEC

plugs. The interconnects use four solid silver conductors, rectangular in cross-section, 2.5mm x 0.3mm, two for each signal and return. These are sheathed in a proprietary mix of silk and oil-impregnated cotton for the dielectric, wrapped in clear heatshrink for mechanical protection. There is a floating, braided copper screen and a smart, durable outer sheathing. Termination uses beautiful, if chunky, Bocchino RCA plugs (or XLR if you are that way inclined) which, together with the silver conductors, contribute significantly to the luxury price. The interconnects come in two styles, the B42 uses Bocchino B24 connectors, the B52 terminates the same cable with stout Bocchino B2 plugs. Balanced users can choose the B72, fitted with Bocchino BAXLR plugs.

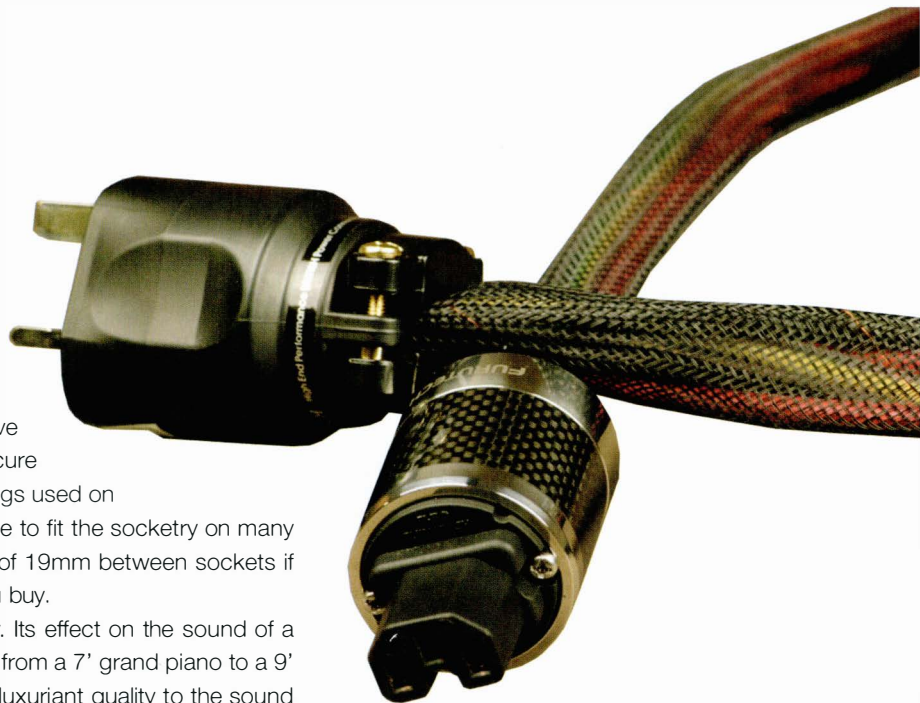
I wasn't familiar with these connectors, but as anybody who attended the Russ Andrews/*Hi-Fi+* dems in Bristol a couple of years back will recall, the differences between decent connectors, very good

connectors and nasty Chinese copies, can be absolutely crucial to system performance. The Bocchinos fall firmly into the 'very good' category and also benefit from a very positive locking action onto the socket, making for a secure union 'twixt cable and boxes. Beware, the B2 plugs used on the more expensive interconnect may be too wide to fit the socketry on many boxes. Z-Axis recommend a minimum distance of 19mm between sockets if using its B52 interconnects, so check before you buy.

The B42 interconnect has a majestic quality. Its effect on the sound of a system is rather like that you experience in going from a 7' grand piano to a 9' concert grand. There is an opulence; a luscious, luxuriant quality to the sound which you don't miss beforehand, but once introduced, is hard to sacrifice. This gracefulness is something many silver interconnects seem to specialise in, but not all achieve with the same degree of coherence. The seductive, but sometimes superficial, beauty such cables can bring is very easy to like, but less easy to live with, long-term. The Z-Axis cables don't fall into this trap; there is a depth of insight, a sense that one has been allowed further into the music. 'La Habanera' by Yello, from *One Second* (Universal, 06024 9830758)

"The Z-Axis don't fall into this trap; there is a depth of insight, a sense that one has been allowed further into the music."

starts with a crowd scene which the B42 sees deep into, giving form and substance to the, otherwise, often amorphous voice-sounds. If this sounds like a pointless party-trick, imagine a similar effect in orchestral, or massed choral, music. The B42's ability to discern timbres down to a more individual level adds not only to the quality of the experience, but also to the naturalness of the reproduction. Take any live recording you own, and ask yourself this: if the audience sounded more human and less like an overdub, would this add to the atmosphere and impact of the performance?



Compared to my usual Nordost Tyr, an interconnect which competes, broadly, on price, the B42 is weighty and authoritative. Like a good lens, it allows one to zoom in on the smallest detail almost at will. The Nordost lacks a little of this inner transparency and grainlessness, but tonally is brighter and crisper, with a characteristic treble energy I like and admire. Untitled II, by Graham Fitkin, from *flak* (GFCD990901) is a complex, rhythmically demanding piece for two pianos. The Z-Axis gave me a rich and sonorous piano tone, I could sense the weight of the instruments shifting, pendulum-like, as the syncopated rhythms walked their walk. The Nordost exchanged some of this weight for pace and flow, the bass notes traded some gravity for a little more definition and tighter timing. Not, by any means, a foregone conclusion, your choice is likely to come down to personal preference; after several weeks with the Z-Axis, I found myself still favouring the Nordost, its overall coherence wins the day for me, but wouldn't argue with anyone who preferred the newcomer.

It was a similar experience with the mains leads. The similarly-priced Nordost Brahma gives a broad-spectrum sparkle to upper treble which the Z-Axis doesn't ►

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Hi-Fi Choice Editor's Choice: January 2006
Hi-Fi Choice: The Hi-Fi Awards 2006 Bronze Award

GAMUT CD3
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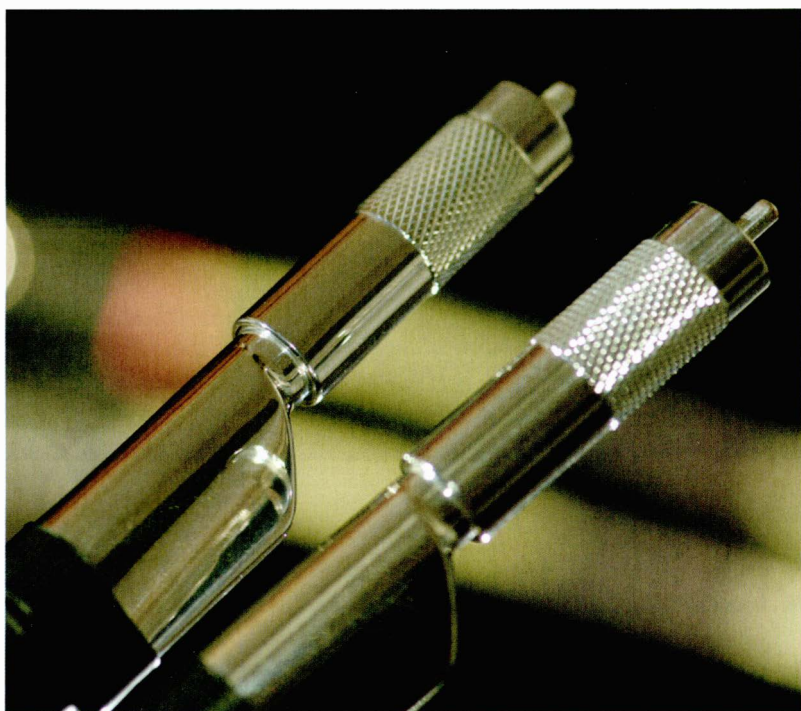
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Workshop Notes 13: A Tale of Two Turntables. British Brio versus German control.....

It is an irony, 30 years after it was laid to rest, that vinyl sounds better than ever. Brilliant, if fanatical, designers like Conrad Mas and Helmut Brinkmann have pushed the performance envelope so far that vinyl still gives even the very best of digital not just a run for its money, but very often a good kicking. And that's before we factor in the thousands of LPs we vinylistas still own and the very special magic of it all. **AVID** have perfected the suspended, belt-driven design and their new SP spec double belts and upgraded power supplies are way ahead of anything else on offer. Joining the fray is a particularly interesting turntable from Germany the **Brinkmann Bardo** – no belts, no suspension, direct drive, mass loaded & with electronic speed control. Unsurprisingly, they sound markedly different. Which is better? That is for you to decide. These two outstanding, fresh-off-the-drawing-board designs are at Audio Workshop Norwich raring to go and eager for your attention. Please don't disappoint them.....Call me, Julian Musgrave, and hear the best that vinyl can offer.

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“The Z-Axis products do deliver on their luxuriant looks, and have impressed many people who have heard them.”

approach, but it compensates with weight and texture in the lower registers. I suspect the Furutech mains plugs are responsible for a significant part of the performance of the Z-Axis Reference Power leads, which have given some excellent results, with an overall well-rounded performance, natural weight and sense of flow. They can, however, sometimes sound a little matter-of-fact: Solveig Slettahjell's version of 'Second time around' from *Silver* (ACT 9715-2) has a languorous, exaggerated *portamento* vocal which takes great liberties with the metre. Coupled with the relaxed jazz swing of the rhythm section, this can sound disjointed, even careless, in a system which doesn't pay close attention to timing. The Brahmas, by virtue of their treble extension and a crisper leading-edge to notes, brought some necessary control, atmosphere and intimacy.

The Z-Axis products do deliver on their luxuriant looks, and have impressed many people who have heard them while in my care. Meticulously made, with well-chosen materials and connectors, it is clear where your money is being spent. I think they work, because they can improve the sound of your system to a degree which would be hard, perhaps impossible, to achieve by simply spending the same budget on better boxes and more sensibly-priced cables. If you're still a cable sceptic, you should take a listen. +

SPECIFIC PRODUCT SPECIFICATIONS

Z-Axis B42 interconnect

Bocchino Technology B24 RCA plug; 2x silver-foil, shielded conductors

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1.5 metre pair £2,268

Z-Axis Reference Power cable

Furutech rhodium mains plug; Furutech rhodium FI-50 IEC plug.

1 metre £1,095

1.5 metre £1,314

2 metre £1,533

Also available:

B52 interconnect

Bocchino Technology B2 RCA plug; 2x silver-foil, shielded conductors

1 metre pair £2,467.50

1.5 metre pair £2,961

B72 balanced interconnect

Bocchino Technology BAXLR, 2x silver-foil, shielded conductors; silver foil ground

1 metre pair £2,010

1.5 metre pair £2,412

Standard Power cable

Furutech gold mains plug; Furutech rhodium FI-30 or FI-28 IEC plug

1 metre £990

1.5 metre £1,188

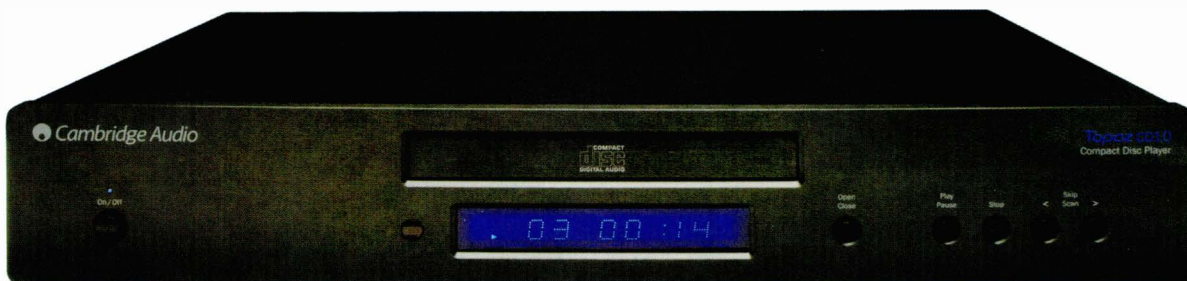
2 metre £1,386

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Cambridge Audio Topaz AM10 Integrated Amplifier and CD10 CD Player

by Neil Gader

Cambridge Audio has engineered some of the most consistently well-reviewed electronics this magazine has covered. Very recently I fell *hard* for the elite Cambridge Azur separates, the 840E preamp and 840W amplifier [TAS, Issue 186]. *Hi-Fi+* Editor Alan Sircom was very taken by the Azur 650A and 650C amp and CD, *TAS* Editor-in-Chief Robert Harley was over the moon for the Azur 840C CD player [Issue 174], and *Playback* Editor Chris Martens was smitten by the Azur 840A integrated amp [Issue 167]. Surely something has got to give. Every team has an under-performer, right? At least this is what I was thinking as I unpacked the £170 AM10 integrated amplifier and the identically priced CD10 compact disc player, key components in Cambridge Audio's new entry-level Topaz line. Would these be worthy of making the starting lineup or simply end up being the proverbial swing and a miss?

Cambridge Audio considers its Topaz components its 'basics' range. Beyond the 35Wpc AM10 integrated amplifier and the CD10 CD player reviewed here, there is the SR10, a stereo receiver with 85Wpc priced at £230. With Topaz, clearly Cambridge is targeting the prime sub-£300 territory—NAD

country. In fact you might say Cambridge is making a BEE-line in that direction.

Topaz AM10

Generally speaking the high end is not a very inviting place for gear of modest means. I can't tell you how many times I've brought friends around and invariably they'll look right past a humble little amplifier like the AM10. But there's a long history of little amps that have been hugely underestimated.

The AM10 might be a "just the facts, ma'am" integrated but it's hardly undernourished. Its brushed aluminium exterior and thick front panel are inviting and stylish. Judging by its surprising heft there's a pretty good size toroidal transformer inside too. The back panel houses five pairs of RCA inputs, and there's even a built-in phono stage for moving magnet or high-output moving coils. A nice touch given the selection of budget turntables and superb

LP reissues currently available. Tone and balance controls are software-driven via the setup menu — sadly, no tone bypass though. And there is a front-panel headphone jack and mini-jack for a personal audio player. The AM10's display is easily readable and gives full source and volume feedback. Finally, a nicely featured remote is supplied and able to control both amp and CD player.

Okay, 35Wpc doesn't sound like a lot of power. But let's put this in context. Amps only know they're small in a big room or with the wrong speaker. Shackled to a low-sensitivity loudspeaker in a palatial listening room and urged to perform routinely in the 95dB+ range, we would indeed have a Houston-level problem. But that's not the AM10's job description. The AM10 exists for the smaller application—to provide high-level musicality in tighter confines.

In that context, the AM10 does a great many things right. It throws a spacious soundstage with solid depth retrieval and a locked down central image on vocals. It's strongly midrange weighted with a gradual softening of response as it inches toward the frequency extremes. I very much liked what I heard with Kissin's piano during *Pictures at an Exhibition*, quick but not strident on top with realistic resonant cues. And Arturo Delmonni's violin possessed an even balance that to my ears touched all the right harmonic and timbral bases. Both the AM10 and the CD10 comported themselves with a blend of presence and tonal honesty that is more consonant with high-end ideals than beer-budget values.

Obviously there are limitations. In dynamics and low-frequency extension the AM10 is no piledriver. Headbanger rock—like the reissue of Pantera's *Vulgar Display of Power* [Atco] —makes clear that guitar and percussion transients are a bit suppressed. The AM10 shows a little too much character in its drier upper register. I found the harmonized vocals during Linda Ronstadt's performance of 'Blue Bayou' (from the recent Mobile Fidelity reissue of *Simple Dreams*) to be a touch brittle without the elbow room the collective voices typically have. Likewise, Clark Terry's trumpet on *One on One* [Chesky] has a whiter signature in its upper octaves. You can hear a little bit of the AM10's electronic fingerprint in the acoustic space around the musicians and, at times, the imaging among players seems a little more vague and the orchestral layering less than distinct. Mostly I missed what you shell out the big bucks for—that ethereal cushion of air that underlies, embraces, and immerses the listener in a well-recorded acoustic performance. Listen to the Ray Brown Trio's take on 'Cry Me a River' from *Soular Energy* [Groove Note], and you'll know what I mean.

To get the most out of the AM10, the amp/speaker match-up is everything. It's a truism that if you don't have a lot of power on tap, head for a speaker that thrives on the output you have. A compact like the PSB Alpha B1 is

“Both the AM10 and the CD10 comported themselves with a blend of presence and tonal honesty that is more consonant with high-end ideals than beer-budget values.”

a winner, and some offerings from B&W, Paradigm, Focal, Rega, or Triangle would be great choices as well. The AM10 will thrive with a warmer speaker—one with controlled midbass support and a relaxed top-end. It's 'cheap as chips' value that won't leave you asking for seconds.

Topaz CD10

Source components will perform pretty much up to spec in any setting. This is in contrast to amplifiers, which mandate a synergistic relationship with a loudspeaker to perform at a peak level. The CD10 compact disc player did not disappoint. It made an instant connection with me and quickly left its entry-level origins in the dust. Like the AM10 it's a back-to-basics machine. It may not upsample to 384kHz/24-bit or possess the dual-differential DACs of the Azur 840C, but the CD10 still has its share of 'go-faster' gear. It packs the formidable Wolfson 8761 DAC and a convenient S/PDIF output for driving an outboard DAC, and uses double-sided surface-mount boards to shorten signal paths. Nice. Operation is smooth, although the drawer of this front-loader is a little sluggish. No biggie.

From the first disc to the last the CD10 went about its business without a hitch. Tonally neutral but with a slightly forward middle range, it has enough smoothness and detail to make you think you might have stolen something. Some players convey a flatness, perhaps best described as a lack of colour or rhythmic energy. But this player just had an engaging liveliness that kept me focused on the music rather than the clock. On Diana Krall's cover of 'A Case of You' from her *Live in Paris* disc [Verve], I could immediately settle in and enjoy the quickness and transient speed that underscores the

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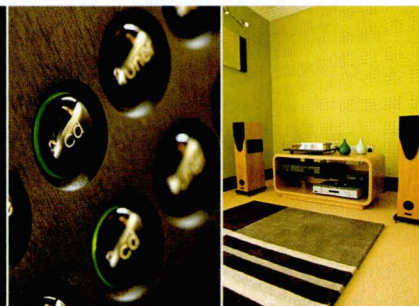


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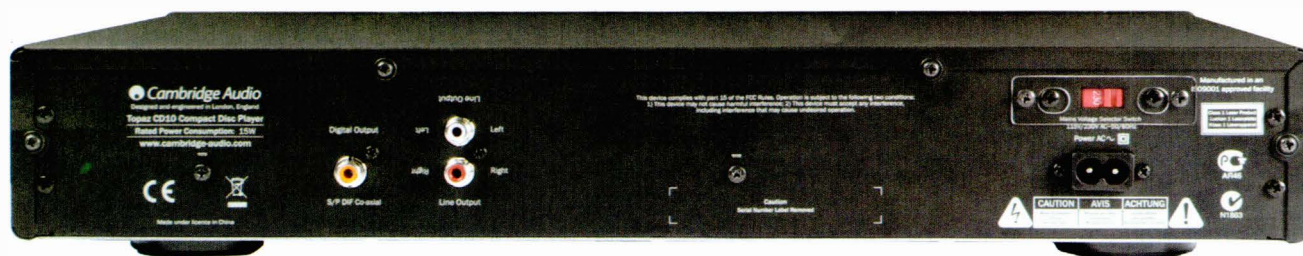
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▶ electric moments unique to well-engineered, live recordings—right down to the occasional microphone clipping when she nails a piano key a little harder than anticipated.

Even in the face of a daunting reference player like the Audio Research CD-5 the CD10 hardly capitulated. True, the CD10 reveals a character that's a little lightweight in bass presentation with a slight veiling overall. A signature that creates a gentled-down presence and one that tends to overly smooth the sonic tableau—and, as in the example of Krall's piano, to slightly reduce the expressiveness of keyboard transients and cap the largest dynamic swings. But even tasked with feeding source material to a speaker like the distinctly high-end TAD CR-1, its subtractions are essentially benign. On the Norah Jones cover of Hank Williams 'Cold Cold Heart', those subtractions mostly involve a hint of treble dryness on the vocal and a less expansive, layered, and reverberant acoustic. The CD10 won't plumb the complex harmonic waters of the stand-up bass on this track as deeply nor will it reveal the full extent of the transient attack off the string—that distinctive flutter and ripple. And, on 'The Nearness of You' from the same Jones' album *Come Away With Me* [Blue Note], the solo piano's resonances seem to bump up against the virtual walls of a narrowed soundstage. However, this is what it frequently comes down to with digital—a constriction of openness, a reduction of that almost subconscious sense of dimension and bloom that analog seems to effortlessly provide. That the CD10 allowed me to bridge the digital/analog divide to the extent that it did, and do so for the price Cambridge is asking, is tribute in and of itself. Truly Topaz's little gemstone.

With both components the Topaz rookies are rock-solid units that provide a rewarding array of the musical thrills and finesse you'd expect when getting started in the high end. And the Topaz CD10 is a real standout. But the season is young and competition is keen in this segment. However, with Topaz dialed in, Cambridge's latest hitting streak remains unbroken. +

Review originally published in The Absolute Sound, issue 205.

“Even in the face of a daunting reference player like the Audio Research CD-5 the CD10 hardly capitulated.”

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Topaz AM10 integrated amp

Power Output: 35 watts (into 8 ohms)

Frequency Response: (-1dB) 5Hz–50kHz

Inputs: Five plus phono, one MP3 mini-jack

Dimensions (HxWxD): 7.6x43x34cm

Weight: 5.6kg

Price: £170

Topaz CD10 CD Player

Inputs: One pair RCA

Outputs: One digital coaxial

Disc formats: CD-DA/CD-R/CD-RW/CD-ROM

MP3/MP3 Pro/WMA

Dimensions (HxWxD): 8.5x43x31cm

Weight: 4.3kg

Price: £170

Manufacturer: Cambridge Audio

URL: www.cambridgeaudio.com

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herb alpert

by Jason Kennedy

The trumpet player Herb Alpert had a series of massive hits in the sixties and seventies and is best remembered for tunes such as 'The Lonely Bull', 'A Taste of Honey' and 'This Guy's in Love with You'. Titles that you may not remember but tunes which are immediately familiar when you hear them. His work produced five no.1 hits, eight grammy awards and a remarkable 72 million worldwide album sales. Understandably he commands the respect of other musicians, Miles Davis said in 1989 "You hear three notes and you know it's Herb Alpert. He gets right to the point of what he's playing."

Alpert was also the A in A&M records the label he started in 1962 and which had artists as diverse as Squeeze, the Police, Supertramp, Humble Pie, Procol Harum and Peter Frampton on its roster.

In September, the BBC aired a documentary about this life and work which of late has included painting and sculpture, he has produced a book of his sculpture called Black Totems and has recently returned to touring with his wife Lani Hall. When I met him shortly before the program was aired he looked twenty years younger than his 75 years. Success, it would seem, can be beneficial for a man.

JK: Have you been playing all the way through since the sixties?

Herb Alpert: Not all the way through, I took a hiatus in '69 and disbanded the group and I was having emotional problems playing the horn so I stopped for a while and regrouped in '74. I did a command performance for the Queen but that only lasted about two years then I did a solo career with Rise. Now I'm doing concerts with my wife, who was the lead singer of Brazil 66.

JK: You started A&M before you hit the big time, what prompted you go it alone at that stage?

NL: 'The Lonely Bull,' which was the first release on A&M, that's what started A&M in 1962. I'd been in the business for a while, I was partners with Lou Adler, we wrote a couple of songs with Sam Cooke one was a huge hit; 'Wonderful World'. I produced some records, I studied acting for a while and recorded for a major company for a year prior to starting A&M Records.

I had a big eye opener when I was recording for RCA Victor for a year. I learned what not to do [laughs].

JK: What's that?

NL: What shouldn't I do? I should treat artists delicately and make sure that the company knows that a music company revolves around the artist. When I was recording for RCA, the

studio could not have been any colder, it had white tiles on white ceilings on white floors, I didn't feel welcomed in their studio. Then I had this experience of listening to a playback and I felt like it needed more bottom end, more bass so I put my hand on the board and lifted the bass and the engineer slapped my hand. He said "don't ever touch the board again, this is a union house". I was looking at him thinking wow man this is amazing, shouldn't this thing revolve around the artist. So I learned my lesson there and I applied all that stuff to A&M.

When we had studios it felt like a living room, a cosy place with great colours, it had a crystal embedded in the wall, it was a welcoming spot and I think the artists felt welcome because of that. Seemed like the obvious way to do things.

JK: I guess the music business has changed dramatically since you started A&M?

NL: Holy shit man, it's a whole different business. Now it's a business in the traditional sense run by lawyers, accountants and bottom lines. It's a whole other thing.

In big companies in the early days you had the A&R staff who really were passionate and talked about music, now they talk about how much money they're going to make. There's no way to project how many records you're going to sell or CDs.

JK: What advice would you give to young musicians today?

NL: Surround yourself with good honest people into what you're doing, be sure you have a good working knowledge of the internet, it's a great tool for exposure. Be honest, try to be yourself, try to make music that's originally yours as opposed to trying to copy the beat of the week.

It's the only way to sustain in the business. You can have a hit record if you have some spiffy song and an interesting arrangement but like Quincy Jones says if you can't recognise the artist within 20 seconds you're making the wrong record. Which is I think pretty profound.

You get swayed by what's a hit and you think well if I make something similar to that I'll have a good shot, but I was lucky I took that 'Lonely Bull' and instead of doing it sideways I started experimenting with other types of rhythms etc.

JK: Sideways?

NL: A lot of people get a hit record and they do another record that has traces of that hit record, so you can relate to it, I think that's the danger. I'm not saying all artists do that but I was lucky when I received letters from all over the world with people telling me how much they appreciated this vicarious ▶



interview: herb alpert

▶ trip to Tijuana. It struck me like “wow man, the music is visual, that’s what I’ve got to make: visual music”. I was conscious of that.

Tijuana inspired the first record, I used to go to bullfights in Tijuana and they have a little brass section that announces each event, so I was kind of taken by that feeling. Of course I was drinking a lot of wine at that time. But I was trying to capture that, whatever that was. I never listened to mariachi music, I was claimed to be part mariachi, but I never related to that comment. There was a certain passion that you feel at a bullfight that I was trying to capture.

JK: Are there any artists that you wished you had signed?

NL: There were a couple of masters, in the sixties people used to record a master, send it to the company to see if they would take it. I missed a record called ‘Louie Louie’, I remember the original record from the fifties but I passed on the Kingsmen’s version. I thought it was out of tune, too long and all the things I don’t like about a record, but man that record hung on number one for several weeks. But I never liked that record so I had to be straight with it.

JK: Who did you listen to when you were young?

NL: Classical music, I was classically trained. I started as a long-haired classical musician then I got corrupted. I heard Louie Armstrong, Miles, Clifford Brown and those guys were just off the cuff, just closing their eyes and playing. I was tired of playing other people’s music. One day I was in the orchestra playing Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* and I was really taken by the stereo effect, leaning in my chair listening to everybody and thinking that’s a good sound, that’s fun to listen to. I forgot to come in! From that point on I thought I’m not so crazy about playing other people’s music. If you’re really true to what they’re doing you’ve got to interpret the music through their concept not through your concept, there’s very little leeway for putting your own personality into it. I wanted to express myself.

Playing jazz is a whole other language, it’s not like classical where you get trapped into playing diatonic scales and they sound a certain way and if you try to do it the same way with jazz it sounds really corny. It takes a while to be able to get onto that feeling, that’s what I tried to do with the Tijuana brass music, try to keep it spontaneous. Even though it’s a toe tapper and there’s good melodies it was very spontaneous. I never rehearsed the songs before I recorded them. If you listen close there’s goofs in there, it sometimes slips a gear but I like that. It gives it a realness.

I’ve been exploring with sculpting what makes something engaging to listen to or what makes something engaging to look at as a sculpture or a painting. What is that thing, when you hear Charlie Parker playing a great solo you say fantastic, what do you like about it? Man I don’t know, I like his passion,

yeah so what? I like the notes he chooses, so what? You can’t pin it down.

When I’m sculpting I’m going after that, I’m trying to do something that appeals more to the soul than to the eyes, when people they react to they don’t react with their brain, it’s a visceral reaction. I think music is the same way.

Sam Cooke was an amazing character who really taught me something about feel. He’d come in with these corny lyrics on a piece of paper and he’d pick up his guitar and play and it would sound like a whole different thing. It was honest to him and it was a real eye opener for me. It comes back to it ain’t what you do it’s the way how you do it.

JK: And who do you listen to now?

NL: I like jazz artists, of the young trumpet players Roy Hargrove is the guy I like a lot. I listen to classical music too, it’s in my DNA, I like Ravel, Beethoven too.

JK: What stereo equipment do you use at home?

NL: Gold Star Recording was a famous studio in Los Angeles, a lot of the Phil Spector records were made there and some of the Beach Boys ones as well. They had these Altec 604D speakers and when they went out of business I got those speakers from them and I have those in my living room. While mixing this album I was using some speakers that were not giving me the true sense of what the quality of the bass and top end was. I have a friend who does most of the mixing for Hans Zimmer the film composer so I went in to his studio and listened to the rough mixes that I had and he showed me ProAc speakers and those are the speakers I mixed on. Very accurate, they’re not glamorous but they’re true. A lot of the studios in Los Angeles are using them now.

Sometimes you hear speakers that make everything sound wonderful and when you’re mixing and you want to get the bass in the right place and the top and the mid section right you’ve gotta get speakers that aren’t putting you on. That aren’t exciting you too much, just giving you the cold, bloody truth.

JK: You have a foundation that sponsors the arts.

NL: I’m interested in the arts and education and try to give to organisations that need a little helping hand, organisations that I believe in. There’s an organisation in Berkeley, California that’s studying whether compassion can be taught which is really out there but boy do we need that. Any kid that has the passion and the talent to want to pursue their dream needs to be encouraged, it’s tough out there. We need the arts. Sometimes in the States the arts are extra curricular activity and it should be part of the curriculum. It gives kids discipline and a feeling of well being to be able to create something. You don’t have to be a professional at it to have that experience. +

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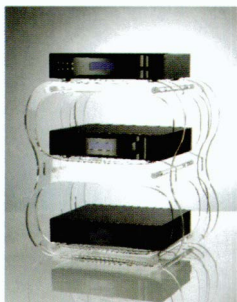
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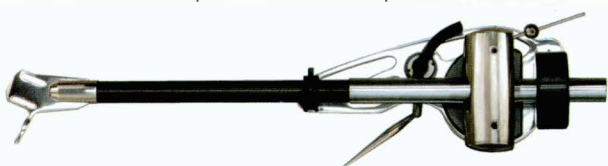
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record reviews

How To Read Them

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

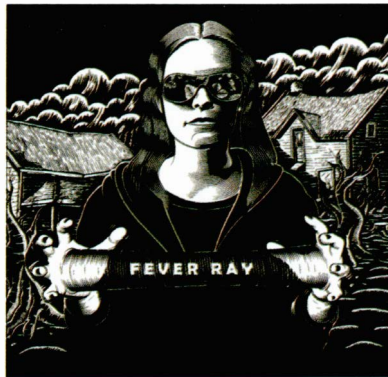
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information, the scale rates a standard,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

This issue's featured reviewers are:

- DD** – Dennis Davis
- WG** – Wayne Garcia
- JK** – Jason Kennedy
- ML** – Mark Lehman
- TL** – Ted Libby
- AQ** – Andrew Quint
- AS** – Alan Sircom

Key to Icons

	CD		120g LP
	Gold CD		150g LP
	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		200g LP
	Double Disc		10" LP
	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
	SACD		Vinyl Double Album
	Hybrid SACD		Multi-Channel



Fever Ray

Fever Ray
Rabid 039X



I've been meaning to write about this one for some time. It was released last year, but like many albums, I only started playing it a lot a few weeks ago. It's the solo project of Swedish singer-songwriter and electronicalist, Karin Dreijer Andersson. Until Fever Ray, Andersson was best known for her work with electro duo The Knife.

It's a cool album – in the crisp, and frosty sense. It's a cross between ambient and Bjork-like electronica, but instead of Her Wierdness' singing like a fax machine noodly oddness, this is more introspective. It's remarkably ethereal, and extremely well recorded. One could argue that everything electronic is straight out the studio anyway, but tracks like 'Dry and Dusty' have a spooky attraction that sort of burns into your head.

I suspect this is the album that should have been the soundtrack to a million adverts had The XX not happened last year. It's not the conventional audiophile fare, and it has that 'soundtrack for a Scandinavian film about murder and ironing' feel to it, but it tends to end up in the CD tray more than any disc I've played in the last few months.

After all, any album with a lyric that goes "we talk about love, we talk about dishwasher tablets" must be worth a listen. **AS**

RECORDING

MUSIC



Ray LaMontagne and the Pariah Dogs

God Willing and the Creek Don't Rise



Sony CD 88697-650862

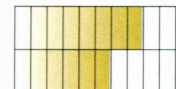
LaMontagne's fourth studio album is in fact his first as a solo artist, despite the band in the title. Ethan Johns is gone and it's recorded in his home studio. He learned a lot from the legendary producer, but he's also been taking a leaf out of Rick Rubin's book and needs to have some time apart from his reverb unit and cut the disc a little less loud next time.

Still, what we have here is LaMontagne's raspy vocal in front of a very country-flavoured four-piece. The odd thing is it's one track, followed by a very different album – the first track 'Repo Man' is an out of place funk number in the Ben Harper *Fight for Your Mind* mold. What comes after is pure alt.country with tracks like New York Is Killing Me and Are We Really Through could be straight out of middle-era Ryan Adams' songbook.

There are some killer cuts here – 'This Love Is Over', is a perfect example, a fine jazzy shuffle, that everyone thinks is a lost track from John Martyn's *Solid Air*. But that's the thing about *God Willing...*, you end up cross-referencing it against other people's work, and that's something you never had to do with previous Ray LaMontagne albums. **AS**

RECORDING

MUSIC





Stornoway

CD 180g

Beachcomber's Windowsill

4AD CAD3x20CD

An indie folk band called Stornoway with the word 'Beachcomber' in the title, you might be forgiven for thinking of the script for *Whisky Galore*. So, perhaps it's no surprise the band comes from... Oxford, possibly the nearest you can get to being land-locked in an island nation. Singer/songwriter Brian Briggs approached multi-instrumentalist Jon Quin at a freshers' week at Oxford and began collaborating soon after.

Although first appearing in 2006, this is the band's first album. Stornoway combines folk sensibilities including a heady mix of acoustic folk instruments with amplified guitars, basses and keyboards.

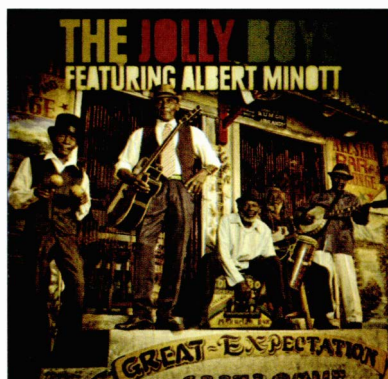
The album kicks off with the excellent 'Zorbing', a slow-burn that starts with bass and solo voice and builds into a crescendo of trumpets, geetars and more. Some canny lyrics and the voice to sing it well add to the mix. It's also well recorded, with a wonderful clarity to Briggs' voice, rising above the sometimes heady, almost blurred mix.

It's almost perfect pop, raucous rock and fine folk, yet none of these; tracks like 'The Coldharbour Road' sound at times like a folky Stone Roses, which may confound as many as it appeals to. Who cares, Stornoway is one to watch. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



The Jolly Boys

CD

Great Expectation

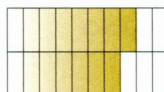
GeeJam/Wall of Sound WOS079CD

Mento was the not-quite-calyпсо precursor to reggae. It has all but died out, but this Port Antonio band (originally formed in 1955) is bucking the trend with an album of cover versions to die for. Their rise to stardom in the UK was meteoric, as the album appeared just days before a blistering appearance on Jools Holland's show. Shades of Seasick Steve, perhaps?

The album is patchy, but always entertaining. Their version of 'Rehab' has become the stuff of legend, and their renditions of 'Perfect Day' and 'Ring of Fire' are must listens, but the opening version of Iggy Pop's 'The Passenger' leaves much to be desired, especially as the vocal appears pushed into clipping. In a way, 'The Passenger' is close to white reggae anyway, so a mento version is not too much of a deviation from the original. The same does not apply to 'Blue Monday', that electro-dance classic 12incher from New Order. Somehow it works and manages to sound just the right side of not being a novelty record.

No, this will never be another Buena Vista Social Club, but it has its strengths. If nothing else, it introduces the UK audience to a music scene that had all but vanished. I wonder if this is the start of nu-mento? **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



The Fall

CD 180g

Your Future Our Clutter

Domino WIGCD245

The Fall's discography would take a magazine in its own right. This 2010 release is the band's 28th studio release, which joins 30 live albums, 35 compilations albums, numerous EPs and collaborations released in the band's 34-year history. The only consistent band member is frontman Mark E Smith. His abstract, surrealist lyrical style coupled with a raw energy has given the band a consistent and loyal cult following since the tail end of the days of punk. The fact that one of those loyal followers was the late, great John Peel helped.

This time, Smith has teamed up with a young and headstrong group of musicians to belt out the kind of rhythms you don't hear anymore. This is the post-punk version of *The Sheffield Drum Record*; the sort of energy that makes you want to let rip and take down a few drive units, all topped off with Smith's drawl.

Every track a corker, there are a couple of exceptional rip-snorters. 'Cowboy George' is the unexpectedly successful combination of C&W tremolo guitars and Smith's word salad, while 'Bury Parts 1+3' starts like a detuned radio, kicks in just too late with seemingly powerful drum sounds, then goes full-tilt at about three minutes with heart-attack dynamics and clarity. Shock fun! **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC

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Illinois Jacquet

180g

Swing's The Thing

Speakers Corner/Verve MGV-8023

Jacquet's *Swing's The Thing* has long been an under the radar collector's item combining great jazz playing with one of the best recorded jazz albums of all time. This is the first reissue of this title during the audiophile era and this release should lift this classic into the radar zone. The first thing you notice is the line up of musicians. Jacquet is joined by swing era greats Roy Eldridge, Jimmy Jones, Ray Brown, Herb Ellis and Jo Jones.

This 1956 session captured these musical giants in a rarified performance. Side A includes 'Las Vegas Blues', 'Harlem Nocturne' and 'Can't We Be Friends'. All three songs are as good a performance as you will ever hear, but Harlem Nocturne falls into a category all its own—after you revive from the induced film noir trance you start wondering how many jazz performances can stand in the same company with this one and you come up with a very short list. But wait—there's more. This is also one of the best sounding jazz albums ever made with some of the best sounding horn work on tape, and Speakers Corner has done a fine job mastering this gem. Acoustic Sounds will be releasing this title in a 45-RPM mastering, so this LP is finally getting its due. A desert island disc at any speed. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Kenny Dorham

180g

Afro-Cuban

Music Matter/Blue Note 1535

Listening to Dorham's masterpiece is like walking into a hot jazz club and being swept into a *Fantasia* like musical adventure, handed off from one jumping solo to the next. *Afro-Cuban* is one of the most magical sessions in the Blue Note catalog, especially for the first half of the album, and I can think of no other Blue Note title that gets my adrenalin rising so quickly. The album combines two 1955 sessions, a Latin octet first released as a 10-inch record and a bop sextet, although the sessions share five musicians including Art Blakey—the other great proponent of Latin music in the 1950s, as well as Hank Mobley. This two LP package presents the two sessions each on its own disc, so it's like getting two great records in a single package. Both sessions are outstanding, but so different that they stand apart and on their own. Not until this reissue series began did I appreciate just how good a recording job Rudy Van Gelder managed in his earliest sessions. The big mono sound is so wide and deep that it could be mistaken for really fine stereo. Remarkably the tapes have held up and one could easily mistake this for a modern recording. Another legitimate masterpiece from Music Matters. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Oddjob
Clint

CD

Oddjob

Clint

ACT

The Clint referred to in the title of Oddjob's fifth album is the one you naturally think of. And it's not just a catchy title this disc is an homage to Mr Eastwood's films of the sixties and seventies, Oddjob interpreting and exploring the possibilities of compositions by Lalo Schifrin and Ennio Morricone alongside lesser known film score directors, including Eastwood himself who wrote a piece for 2007's *Grace is Gone*. So we start off with a drum machine backed *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* and work through the *Magnum Force* theme, and gems like 'Musical Pocket Watch' from *A Few Dollars More*. A total of 12 pieces in all.

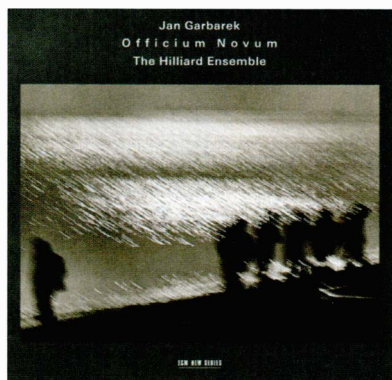
It's a great idea and the five Swedes in Oddjob do it in style, they have a substantial arsenal of largely acoustic instruments at their disposal and make the most of tonal range and textures. There's bass clarinet on one piece, trumpet on another and even some powerhouse drumming on the all too brief 'Where Eagles Dare'. The cinematic element is dominant and the quality of composition significant.

The recording is dynamic and spacious with gorgeous timbre and chewy bass, I for one am intrigued to see if they can do as well live. If you want to get a flavour try Morricone's 'Ecstasy of Gold'. **JK**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Jan Garbarek/ The Hilliard Ensemble

Officium Novum

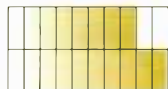
ECM New Series 2125

CD

This is the third album by the Norwegian Jan Garbarek and English vocal quartet The Hilliard Ensemble and the second in the officium project series. 1994's *Officium* was a success that broke jazz and classical boundaries, this latest instalment titled *Novum* or 'new' treads similar ground by combining Garbarek's soaring alto and tenor saxes with the distinctive ecclesiastical sound of the Hilliards. It consists of 11 pieces of music and one short poem read by the actor Bruno Ganz. The music spans 700 years, so *Novum* is a bit of a contradictory title, but the interpretations by this ensemble are undoubtedly different to any that have preceded them. The material comes from a number of composers but the majority are Armenian liturgical pieces which are entirely suited to the Hilliard's style. There is also an Arvo Pärt composition 'Most Holy, Mother of God' in English, which works well as the voices are beautifully layered.

The recording, made in an Austrian monastery, places Garbarek in a cavernous reverb, so that he floats ethereal above the relatively dry sound of voices. The instrument ultimately has the most spiritual power, it intones a higher message because it bypasses language. **JK**

RECORDING
MUSIC



[em]

Live

ACT

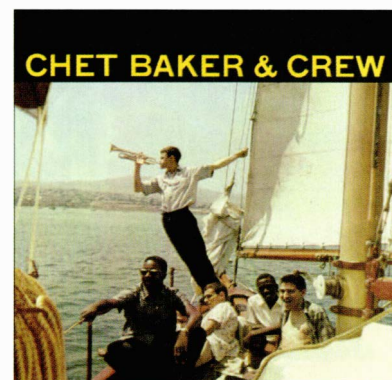
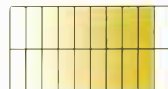
CD

[em] is as the subtitle on the case suggests a young German jazz trio made up of pianist Michael Wollny, double bass player Eva Kruse and drummer Eric Schaefer. This, their fourth album for ACT, captures them live at Jazz Baltica. They remind me of EST at that band's most full on, preferring muscularity and diversity to pure groove. This is jazz-rock in its truest sense thanks to the way that all three musicians collaborate to produce a multifaceted wall of explosive sound that is so tight knit it's uncanny. It's not all at full-tilt, there is an occasional piano solo and that instrument naturally takes the lead but more often than not they lock into a vibe that revels in adventure and excitement.

Wollny is not afraid of taking them down more abstract paths either, his right hand reaching toward the fringes of free improvisation and without the bass and drums he might have got there. The material gets trickier or more interesting depending on taste toward the disc's end and there is some mercurial playing from all three that keeps you engaged and gives your disc spinner a proper workout.

The recording is full in all respects, scale, dynamics and bandwidth and transports you to the event in full effect as a result. **JK**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Chet Baker & Crew

Pure Pleasure/Pacific Jazz PJ-1224

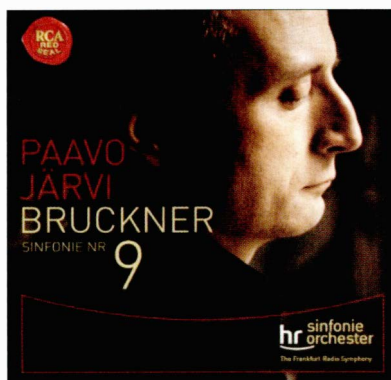
180g

In the 1950's Miles Davis and Chet Baker vied for popularity in the trumpet polls and I've always wondered if the early cover for Davis' album *Miles Ahead* was the inept attempt of someone in Columbia's art department to copy the cover art of this Chet Baker album from 1957. Regardless, both albums are among my favourite 50s trumpet albums.

Here Baker is joined by Phil Urso on tenor Sax and Bobby Timmons on piano, Jimmy Bond on bass and Peter Littman on drums, fresh off a long European, recorded over three sessions at the Forum Theatre in Los Angeles. In 1957 Baker still had his good looks and his playing was at its peak. This two LP set includes the original 8 songs from the LP plus 6 additional tracks first included in the CD release. This is one of the great west-coast jazz LPs, and like most records recorded by Richard Bock, it presents a nice spread out mono soundstage with each instrument well defined in space. Although not credited on the cover the reissue was mastered by Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray, whose Southern California mastering facility gives the pair easy access to the master tapes. And they've done a fine job on this masterpiece. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC





Bruckner: Symphony No. 7. (SA)
Frankfort Radio Symphony,
Paavo Järvi.

RCA

Bruckner: Symphony No. 9. (SA)
Frankfort Radio Symphony,
Paavo Järvi.

RCA

For many coming to Anton Bruckner's symphonies for the first time, the composer's vaunted reputation can be puzzling. In work after work, there's a traditional four-movement layout, similar orchestration, and recurrent melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic elements. With each of Mahler's symphonies, one enters a completely different world; with Bruckner, we're revisiting the same landscape with a more evolved perspective.

Paavo Järvi, beginning a Bruckner symphony cycle for RCA with two of the finest works in the canon, has the right stuff to bring off the composer's heady rhetoric. Järvi's a master of orchestral colour and he finds the opportunity for extravagant tone painting while never losing a handle on the architecture of Bruckner's lengthy paragraphs, consistently maintaining a powerfully dramatic narrative.

In Symphony No. 7's opening Allegro moderato, the first phrases in the lower strings possess a sensual contour that other conductors reserve for the celebrated Bruckner Adagios.

RECORDING



MUSIC

The slow movement—a tribute to Richard Wagner, whom Bruckner worshipped—is soaring, devotional, and profoundly moving. The Scherzo has a determined drive without becoming obsessive. It provides a welcome respite from the intensity of the preceding two movements. Järvi's finale is optimistic and uplifting, a fulfilling conclusion to a substantial spiritual journey.

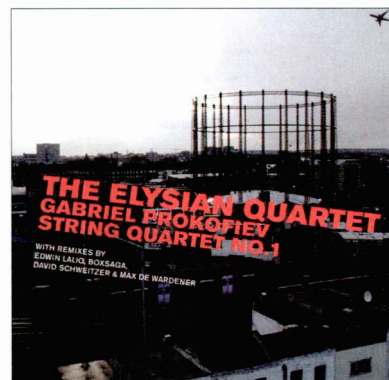
The Ninth is Bruckner's final masterpiece; at once forward-looking and a culmination of everything that came before. In Järvi's hands, the first movement has a cosmic intensity, ending with a blazing orchestral sonority. Here, the scherzo is darker in character, more menacing, despite a warmly human interlude that breaks through. Järvi's pacing of the 27-minute Adagio is exceptional, with the affective logic of the movement fully illuminated. It's now appreciated that Bruckner completed much more of the Ninth's finale than was generally realized and one can hear successful realizations of that music (Harnoncourt, on SACD, for instance.) But Järvi has us feeling that, perhaps, the quiet ending of the Ninth's Adagio is exactly where Bruckner's extraordinary symphonic canon should end.

In the Frankfort RSO, Järvi has a partner with exemplary Bruckner credentials. The ensemble is now clearly a world-class institution. These discs also mark Sony's return to the SACD business and deliver an intoxicatingly deep, richly textured string sound with beautifully characterized woodwind and brass sonorities. The conductor and engineers exploit the small gradations of loudness possible with DSD encoding, and the dynamic range is very wide. No. 7 begins almost imperceptibly, so set levels carefully. RCA's multichannel mixes are spacious and dimensional. **AQ**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Prokofiev, Gabriel:
String Quartet No. 1.
Elysian Quartet.

180g

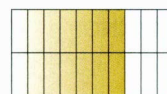
Nonclassical

New "classical" compositions on vinyl? Here's the First String Quartet by Gabriel Prokofiev, London-based grandson of the great Sergei. There's a polycarbonate release of the complete quartet, but the vinyl incarnation includes only two movements of it. Along with—get this—four computer-derived, digitally layered 'remixes' of the music set to hip-hop dance beats. Like his grandfather, Gabriel has a strong iconoclastic streak, and the idea of making a string quartet into a source of communal variations suitable for gyrating youths in a strobe-light-lit dance club is wickedly subversive, in a good way.

The music itself is minimalist, plucking, knocking, screeching, scratching, scrabbling, slithering, and lurching along to a steady pulse (overlaid with many syncopations) in an amiable, dancing-robots manner. Despite bone-dry timbres and grating dissonances, it has some nifty tunes, albeit of a rudimentary sort.

To my surprise, I rather enjoyed it, and the imaginative 'remixed' variations, too. The Elysian Quartet's playing is harsh and sandpapered, but suits the idiom. Recorded sound is up-close and hot, with lots of bite and detail but little air, and not a hint of subtlety or sweetness. **ML**

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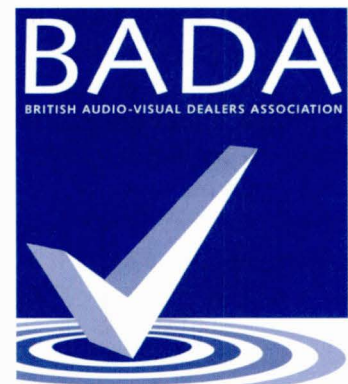
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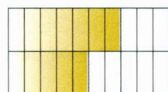
Rachmaninoff: Symphonic Dances. Vocalise. Dallas Symphony, Donald Johanos. 180_s
Turnabout/Analogue Productions

This recording has been an audiophile favourite for decades. Engineer David R. Hancock captured a rather dry but clarifying acoustic in McFarlin Auditorium at Southern Methodist University in May of 1967, and the sonics stop just short of being overly analytical. There's good timbral accuracy and detail: muted brasses have a snarling bite, and percussion—bells, tambourine, triangle—sparkle.

Despite a legacy that included stints as music director by Paul Kletzki, Antal Dorati, and Georg Solti, the Dallas SO was a second-tier ensemble that lacked the tonal pulchritude required to optimally bring off Rachmaninoff's late masterpiece. The principal oboe is frequently unpleasant to listen to and the extended passage for winds alone in the opening movement gets tedious. Johanos's reading misses the sweep, emotional depth, and virtuosic flair of the best. Likewise, his *Vocalise* is short on the tender pathos that makes this short work a perennial favourite.

If these performances *do* float your boat, Analogue Production's 45rpm remastering improves upon the venerable Athena LP release from the late 80s, with better dynamics and a fuller "middle" to the orchestral sonority. **AQ**

RECORDING
MUSIC

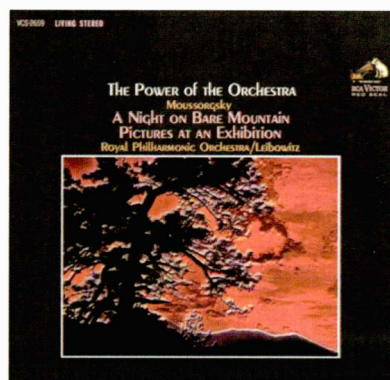


Dutilleux: D'ombre et de silence. Robert Levin, piano. CD
ECM

This record reminds us it's risky to typecast an artist. We know Robert Levin as an outstanding Mozartean, but here he puts his compelling musicianship and technique at the service of one of the greats of our own time. The disc takes its title from the first of Henri Dutilleux's three preludes, all of which are presented here, but the centerpiece of Levin's program, rightly enough, is the magisterial *Sonata* (1948), one of the supreme contributions to the 20th-century piano literature.

Listening to it, one gets a very Baudelairean sense of beauty and malaise coming together, wedded, in this performance, to sheer aural exhilaration. Around it Levin offers the smaller works: the three *Préludes*, *Figures de résonances* for two pianos (with assisting artist Ya-Fei Chuang), and assorted interludes and pieces for young pianists—all of it music that repays repeated listenings. With his wonderful symphonies, brilliant concertos, exquisite chamber pieces, and these keyboard gems, what a gift Dutilleux has been to our impoverished times! As for sonics, what more need be said than that this is another superb piano recording from engineer Markus Heiland? **TL**

RECORDING
MUSIC



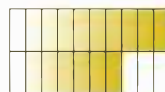
Mussorgsky: Night on Bare Mountain; Pictures at an Exhibition. Royal Philharmonic, René Leibowitz. 180_s
Analogue Productions

Some find guilty pleasure in a hot fudge sundae; others in shoes; and some in things I can't write about here. For audiophiles, it's in records like *The Power of the Orchestra*, surely one of the most thrilling recordings ever made.

This 1962 classic from the RCA Living Stereo catalogue was recorded in London's Kingsway Hall by Decca's Kenneth Wilkinson. Given that this is one of the most famous of great sounding recordings, *Power* was ripe for the deluxe 45rpm vinyl treatment.

Mastered by George Marino, this edition delivers—in *spades*—all this record is desired for: a palette of instrumental colours as vivid as Kodachrome and as rich as a sampler of chocolate confections; a magnificently lifelike soundstage of tremendous width, depth, and air; and brass choirs, massed strings, high and low percussion delivered with extraordinary weight and effortless dynamic power. The ultimate demonstration disc, it's guaranteed to show what your system can and *can't* do. The problem for me with *Pictures* is I will forever link the "Gnomus" section with Marty's "dance quintet" in *The Big Lebowski*. **WG**

RECORDING
MUSIC



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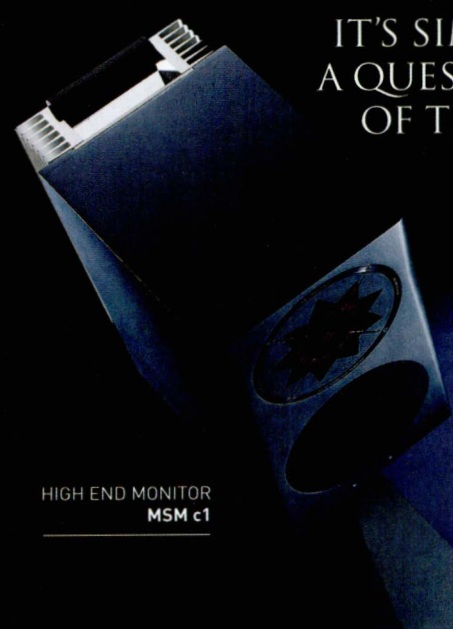
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CABLE OF THE YEAR

Tellurium Q cables

Reviewed in issue 75

Cable prices go from mild to wild. Good cable prices start at wild and keep on going. So it's refreshing to happen upon a set of cables certainly deliver the sonic goods, yet don't cost as much as a small island. Tellurium Q is a new, small British cable company (co-founded by Colin Wonfor of Inca Tech and TOCA fame). Two thin multistranded copper cable loudspeaker cable appeared last year and began to earn a reputation as a world-beater. They have been joined by two interconnect cables and two more up-market cable designs.

The material content of the cable is secondary to the patented ideas behind it. Tellurium Q is designed across the board to first and foremost preserve the phase relationship in a musical signal. This also comes over as a remarkably deft and lucid midband in all the variants, that lucidity extending out further and further as you move up the speaker cable ranges. Basic Blue can transform the sound of even the most humble system, while Ultra Black is remarkable in any system. The interconnects, too, have the same midrange lucidity and match the speaker cable perfectly.

Tellurium Q may be the new kid on the block, but it's got some serious moves. Expect great things from this hot new brand. +

Tellurium Q interconnects

Single-ended £279/m

Balanced £359/m

Tellurium Q loudspeaker cable

Blue £16 per metre, unterminated

Black £46 per meter, made to length, terminated with Z plugs

Green £145 per metre, made to length, terminated with Z plugs

Ultra Black £248 per metre, made to length, terminated with Z plugs

Manufacturer Tellurium Q Ltd

URL: www.telluriumq.com

Tel: +44 (0)1458 251997

Distributed by Kog Audio

URL: www.kogaudio.com

Tel: +44(0)2477 220650

Errata: We printed this page with the wrong words in issue 75. Our apologies to all concerned!

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Cardas Clear Beyond

Tested in issue 74

Clear was an excellent speaker cable. Clear Beyond doubles the amount of cable, with better bass and soundstaging, but only for the best systems

Price: £9,300/3m pair

Manufacturer: Cardas Audio

URL: www.cardas.com

Distributed by Audiofreaks Ltd

Tel: +44(0)20 8948 4153

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

JPS Aluminata

Tested in issue 68

Aluminium-copper alloy cable that is one of the smoothest sounding around, with a profound reduction in background hash. A real grower, too, especially when used with the company's Superconductor 3 power cables.

Price: £2,395/m

Manufactured by JPS Labs

URL: www.jpslabs.com

Distributed by: The Music Room

URL: www.music-room.com

Tel: +44 (0)141 333 9700



Fleetwood Mac – Rumours

every home should have one

by Jason Kennedy

RUMOURS WAS THE THIRD BEST SELLING ALBUM OF THE SEVENTIES. However, I get the impression that some music lovers shun it because it was so successful... albeit surprisingly not as big a seller as Pink Floyd's *The Wall*.

The story behind *Rumours* is one of legendary relationship breakdowns between John and Christine McVie and more obviously between Lindsey Buckingham and Stevie Nicks, the fact that Mick Fleetwood had also broken up with his wife Jenny makes you wonder what was in the water. It's the tensions that result from having to work with such recent exes that give this otherwise smooth, poppy west coast album its emotional edge.

The original Fleetwood Mac was started by Peter Green, a musician who was ranked alongside Eric Clapton in the pantheon of guitar gods, but Green abandoned the band as a result of mental illness. Thereafter it struggled to maintain a steady line-up and eventually shrank to the rhythm section of drummer Mick Fleetwood and bassist John McVie, and his wife, the singer/pianist Christine McVie. Fleetwood was therefore fortunate to come across the *Buckingham Nicks* album in Sound City studio in Los Angeles at a time when Buckingham himself was in the studio. It was of course a mutually beneficial meeting. As a result new Fleetwood Mac's eponymous album was a major hit in North America and sold over five million copies but was not quite as rock'n'roll as *Rumours* which clearly struck the right note at the time.

Its appeal lies in the combination of the original duo's easy rhythm playing, Buckingham's intrinsic feeling for melody and the way that the three singers harmonised so well. The contrast of Christine McVie's relatively mature and honest voice with Nicks' dusky tones is superb and both were first class solo singers. It also finds Ms McVie playing Fender Rhodes and Hammond B-3 organ on all tracks although this is more obvious on some than others; apparently she and Buckingham worked out the structure of most of the songs together on piano and guitar.


The recording was done at the Record Plant in Sausalito, California where engineers Ken Caillat and Richard Dashut went to considerable pains to get the sound right, although Caillat is quoted as not being that happy with the heavily damped nature of the facility. Not many albums sound as good as *Rumours* does at its best, however, so something must have been right. That something might have been down to the equipment use, with top notch microphones, a then state-of-the-art 24-track 3M tape recorder and an equally impressive API mixing console. The recording sessions were described



by Christine McVie as a 'cocktail party', a party fuelled by more cocaine than many so-called indulgent bands can imagine, if the stories are true. But it's the results that count and there is little if any filler on *Rumours*, from which four singles were released. And there's also what has become the most famous track on the album... 'The Chain'. Anyone who watched F1 in the nineties will be familiar with the bass line that forms the song's bridge.

For me *Rumours'* highlights are its quieter pieces, I couldn't help falling for Stevie Nicks when I heard 'Dreams', a state of affairs only further inflamed by the album's closing song 'Gold Dust Woman' with its dobro accompaniment. McVie's 'Oh Daddy' is beautiful with fabulous backing vocals and the spare, percussive use of guitar and keyboards. But the highlight of the album is Buckingham's 'Never Going Back', a remarkably concise and economical piece of picking on an acoustic guitar that sounds spectacularly luxurious thanks to the way that extra guitars are layered so effectively.

Rumours may have been a massively expensive album to make but its global success – the tenth best selling album in US history – would seem to warrant the indulgence. And this should also make it easier to find a good pressing, yet they aren't that common. We need Speakers Corner or the like to make some new ones. +



“Never look at the trombones, it only encourages them.”
Wagner

Performance *with PASSION*

Chord Sarum range

The Chord Sarum cable range won't just reveal the real performance capabilities of your hi-fi components. It will allow you further and deeper into the thrilling emotions within a musical performance and will show the true prowess of your favourite musicians and singers.

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Will cleaning the mains supply improve my system?

The first input into any audio or AV system is electricity. It flows through the system, utilised by each component in turn to create the signal that eventually moves the speakers' drive units and delivers the pixels on-screen. What we see and hear is ultimately fashioned from, and by, mains electricity – it's the 'raw material' from which the 'art' is created.



As the electronic devices we use proliferate and the demand for electricity escalates, the quality of the electricity we feed our systems continues to slide. Running an audio or AV system on unconditioned mains is like running a car on dirty petrol; performance is degraded and the engine's longevity is reduced. For people who care about sound and picture quality, it's a serious problem. The solution? IsoTek.

The mains supply is polluted by numerous contaminants; we are constantly bathed in a sea of RFI and EMI, which corrupts the electricity supply and degrades the performance of audio components. What's more, all the electrical items you use in your home, from computers to washing machines, affect the supply and erode your system's potential.

The improvements delivered by IsoTek power conditioners are immediate and emphatic. The noise floor drops and the sound gains greater focus, with reduced grain and improved clarity. Bass is tighter and better defined, treble gains space and 'air', and the overall musical performance appears more solid and dynamic, and hence more 'real'. In AV systems, picture quality is similarly enhanced, with richer colours, improved depth and greater definition. 

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Discover IsoTek and unleash your system's full potential. You'll be glad you did.



For more information on how cleaner power can benefit you visit our website:
www.isoteksystems.com

the 2010 Hi-Fi+ AWARDS!
HIGHLY COMMENDED
See page 2

“ The lift in performance is quite remarkable ”

IsoTek Aquarius Hi-Fi Choice



simply the best

The critical acclaim for IsoTek's class-leading **Aquarius** mains conditioner continues unabated



“ Very highly recommended ”

Alan Sircom, Editor Hi-Fi+

Launched in the autumn of 2009, IsoTek's mid-range Aquarius mains conditioner had a huge reputation to live up to. After all, it replaced the GII Mini Sub in IsoTek's line-up – a product that “above all others made mains conditioning a feature in the UK hi-fi scene” according to Alan Sircom, Editor of *Hi-Fi+*.

With that kind of heritage, the Aquarius simply had to excel – and boy, does it ever! Supplying six outlets to feed an entire audio system, it delivers a host of proprietary conditioning technologies specially developed for IsoTek's latest EVO3 generation of products.

The world's most esteemed audio critics have been unequivocal in their praise. Comparing Aquarius to the GII Mini Sub, Alan Sircom wrote in *Hi-Fi+*: “What we have is a sound that is fuller, seemingly rising out of a quieter background... Going back to the original is like going back to hamburger when you've dined on steak. Going back to the original mains is like eating the box the burger came in.”

“Going back to the original is like going back to hamburger when you've dined on steak. Going back to the original mains is like eating the box the burger came in”

Paul Rigby is equally impressed in his review for *Hi-Fi World*, describing the Aquarius as “an effective improvement to a good hi-fi system” whilst delivering the magazine's maximum score of five ‘globes’. “That the IsoTek Aquarius delivered previously unheard details from my familiar LPs says it all,” concludes Paul.

The praise continues in *Hi-Fi Choice* magazine, where Richard Black declares “...the lift in performance is quite remarkable”. Given that the Aquarius retails for such a modest sum, it's no wonder that it earns the maximum five-star rating for value for money.

The critics agree: no other mains conditioner at the price comes close to the Aquarius. Its unique technologies deliver class-leading sound quality and unbeatable protection, enhancing the performance of every component to which it is connected. It is, quite simply, the most cost-effective upgrade an audio lover is ever likely to make. ⚡

HI-FI WORLD VERDICT



An effective improvement to a good hi-fi system, this serious product justifies its price.

- FOR** Clarity, midrange detail, bass control
- AGAINST** Nothing at the price

the 2010 Hi-Fi+ AWARDS!
HIGHLY COMMENDED

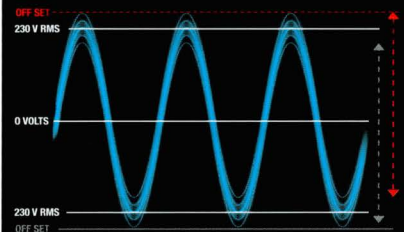
“ The highly popular GII Mini Sub gets a significant makeover, with increased dynamics and quieter backgrounds. Time to trade in that Mini Sub ”



ISOTEK SYNCRO

“Syncro delivers serious improvements... It's really not a question of whether to purchase, but when”

Hi-Fi Piac, Hungary



New for 2010, IsoTek's Syncro is much more than simply IsoTek's top-of-the-line power cable; it also incorporates innovative electronics designed to tackle the increasingly prevalent issue of 'DC on the mains'. Syncro 'synchronises' the mains supply in order to deliver a perfectly symmetrical sine wave, thus delivering significant sonic improvements when used with any high-quality audio or AV system.


The first review of the Syncro has just been published in Hungarian magazine *Hi-Fi Piac* and the reviewer is hugely impressed. Further reviews are set to follow in revered audio publications the world over, including *Hi-Fi World* and *Hi-Fi+* in the UK.

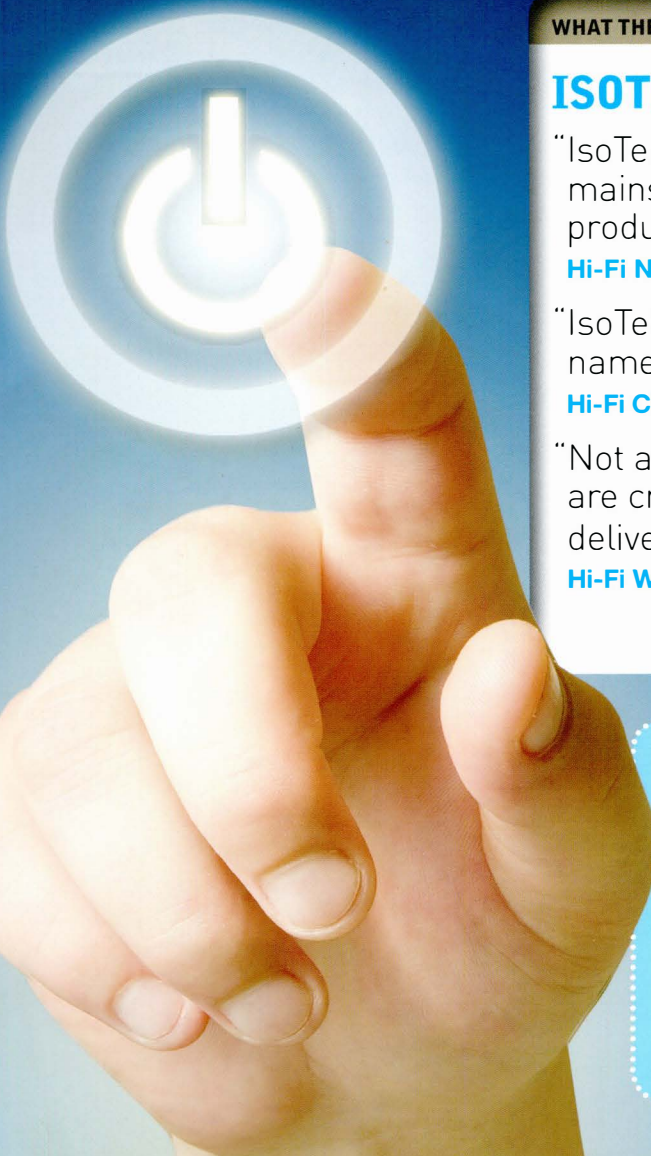
IsoTek the source of your system's power

IsoTek is the UK's leading manufacturer of power management products for high-performance audio and AV systems, with a proud history of innovation dating back to the company's inception in 2001. IsoTek products have consistently raised the bar, their unique technologies delivering class-leading performance and earning numerous awards from the world's most prestigious audio publications in the process.

More than 40,000 customers in 44 countries enjoy IsoTek products, all of which are manufactured in Europe, designed for purpose and built to last.

In addition, many well-known audio component manufacturers choose IsoTek technology to aid product development and demonstration, including Arcam, Denon, Genesis, Marantz, Monitor Audio, Nordost, Pioneer, PMC, Roksan and TEAC Esoteric.

No other company can replicate IsoTek's bespoke filtering circuits, unrivalled levels of protection and ability to enhance sound and picture quality, born through extensive research and painstaking attention to detail. In the world of power management, IsoTek is unique. 



WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY ABOUT

ISOTEK

"IsoTek is the leader in mains conditioning products"

Hi-Fi News

"IsoTek is the UK's biggest name in mains filtration"

Hi-Fi Choice

"Not all mains conditioners are created equal... IsoTek delivers the sonic goods"

Hi-Fi World



IsoTek products:

- Enhance sound and picture quality by filtering and regulating the electricity supply.
- Protect valuable equipment from damage caused by lightning strikes and power surges.
- Extend the lifespan of electronic components via stringent supply regulation.



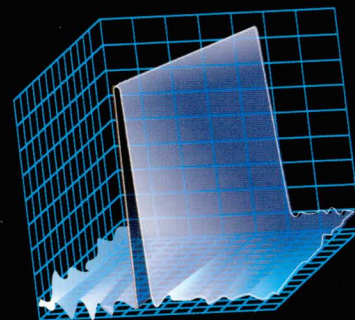
ESOTERIC

IsoTek® TEAC

FULL SYSTEM ENHANCER CD

"This could well be the most cost-effective audiophile tweak in existence"

6moons.com



Just like the human body, audio systems need regular exercise to ensure they are ready to perform at their best. IsoTek's Full System Enhancer & Rejuvenation Disc is an intensive 'workout' for audio equipment, containing specially developed signals to help run-in, demagnetise and rejuvenate your entire system.


Every signal on the CD has been produced according to strict mathematical criteria, covering the complete range of frequencies and amplitudes that a system may encounter during music playback. Critical acclaim has been effusive, with Hi-Fi News describing the disc as a "must buy".

Available from December, IsoTek's Full System Enhancer has been repackaged as a special-edition CD released in conjunction with Esoteric – TEAC's high-end audio division, renowned for making some of the finest digital replay systems in the world.

“ A series of A/B demonstrations showed IsoTek’s clear superiority ”

take part in a 30-minute documentary about how mains conditioning can improve audio and AV systems, to be broadcast on Vietnam’s largest television station. While there are many power filter brands on the market, a series of A/B demonstrations showed IsoTek’s clear superiority.

Following Vietnam, the IsoTek road show continued to Singapore, then Brunei and finally on to Malaysia. More seminars, workshops and demonstrations followed in each location, partnering IsoTek products with a wide variety of audio equipment chosen by the respective hosts. In Singapore, a relatively modest two-channel set-up was used in contrast to the exotic components from Mark Levinson, DCS and Avalon employed in Vietnam; in Malaysia, it was TEAC Esoteric, Parasound and Eggleston Works. Whatever the system, the result was always the same: the improvement delivered by IsoTek was emphatic.

Before flying back to the UK, the IsoTek crew had time to take in the stunning night-time city views from the 421m-high Kuala Lumpur Tower. Truly, the trip had been a towering triumph, further propelling IsoTek’s soaring reputation among lovers of high-quality sound and vision in every corner of the globe. 

ISOTEK MUSIC NEWS

In addition to improving sound quality when playing music at home, IsoTek products can make a tremendous difference in the studio when music is recorded. Major record label Universal Music is well aware of the benefits, having used IsoTek equipment during the recording of the latest album by George Lam, one of its biggest-selling Asian stars.

George is a leading exponent of ‘Cantopop’ (a colloquialism for Cantonese popular music). Mixing traditional Chinese musical influences with international styles including jazz, rock ‘n’ roll and rhythm ‘n’ blues, Cantopop is hugely popular throughout Southeast Asia. His latest album, *LAMUSIK*, was recorded with the use of IsoTek power cables and conditioners throughout the recording chain to ensure optimal sound quality.

Ernest Lau, of Universal Music’s audiophile recording division, was instrumental in specifying IsoTek equipment for the recording sessions. “We chose IsoTek power conditioners because of the sonic improvements we knew they would bring to the recording,” said Ernest. “The most surprising thing was the difference the IsoTek Syncro cable made in powering the mic and pre-mic that was used to capture George Lam’s unique vocal. The increased dynamic range was quite staggering”. 



ISOTEK TOURS ASIA

In the summer of 2010, IsoTek embarked on an ambitious tour of Southeast Asia, delighting audio lovers with the power of 'clean mains'

With distribution in 44 countries, IsoTek is a company with a truly global reach. Among the most important international markets is Southeast Asia, with a vibrant and expanding audiophile scene made up of genuine enthusiasts keen to trial anything that promises to improve their sonic experience.

Every summer, IsoTek travels to Southeast Asia to meet with customers and distributors, conducting seminars, training sessions and press events to demonstrate the emphatic improvements its products make to audio system performance. This year's tour was the company's most extensive yet, covering 3,000 miles from Hong Kong to Vietnam, Vietnam to Singapore, Singapore to Brunei and Brunei to Malaysia.

First stop was the Hong Kong High End Audio Visual Show, the largest event of its kind in Asia. Taking place in the prestigious Convention and Exhibition Centre in Hong Kong's magnificent Victoria Harbour, this year's event entertained almost 30,000 visitors throughout its three-day duration.

During the show, IsoTek's Keith Martin conducted a series of live demonstrations encompassing all aspects of power conditioning for audio systems. A specially devised machine nicknamed "The Noisy Neighbour" was used to replicate the mains sine wave offset caused by everyday household devices like hairdryers and dimmer switches. This is a condition that is damaging to audio quality, but is easily remedied by Syncro, IsoTek's new top-end power cable.

The Aquarius, IsoTek's mid-range mains conditioning unit, was also demonstrated extensively during the show. Keith used a device to measure 'noise' on the mains electricity supply before and after the introduction of Aquarius. Before Aquarius, it measured +60 per cent; with Aquarius, it was reduced to just three per cent. The 100 or more audiophiles that crowded into each IsoTek demonstration witnessed the resulting sonic improvements first-hand. From Hong Kong, the IsoTek crew flew to Vietnam for another raft of seminars, dealer visits and training sessions. In between, they found the time to



Above and right: Keith Martin, IsoTek's founder and managing director, demonstrates the benefits of using IsoTek products to packed audiences in Hong Kong

new products

IsoTek's Ultra Reference Series kicks off with **Super Titan** – the ultimate high-current mains conditioner

Launched in 2005, IsoTek's multi-award-winning Titan is widely considered to be the best mains conditioner on the market today. Its innovative technology, designed specifically for power amplification, forms an epoch-making partnership with the IsoTek Nova, which delivers the same exacting level of quality for source components and preamplifiers.

Never a company to rest on its laurels, however, IsoTek's continual pursuit of excellence in the field of power management has enabled it to raise the bar once more. The company's latest product, Super Titan, is the first of a new flagship range of power optimisation components called the Ultra Reference Series. It takes the Titan blueprint and enhances every element of its design to deliver a new benchmark in the field of mains conditioning for high-performance audio and AV systems.

Like the existing Titan, the Super Titan is designed specifically for use with power amplifiers. However, it is twice as powerful: while the Titan is capable of delivering 4,600W of continuous current, the Super

Titan delivers 9,200W. With 35,500W of transient power on tap, Super Titan is quite simply the world's most powerful audiophile mains conditioner.

No matter how powerful the amplifier, however current-hungry it may be, Super Titan delivers a super-clean, ultra-consistent supply of electricity without limitation, ensuring the world's best amplifiers perform to their full potential every time.

In addition to its unrivalled current capability, Super Titan delivers class-leading RFI/EMI filtration and a massive 135,000 Amps of instantaneous and repeatable surge protection. IsoTek's proprietary KERF technology secures a pure, symmetrical signal path through the unit, while the company's Direct Coupled Design concept, originally developed for the Titan and further enhanced for Super Titan, ensures optimal high-current filtering.

Fashioned from aluminium, Super Titan's rigid outer casing is cradled in a specially developed support structure called ISIS




ISOTEK PROTEK

New this winter, ProTek is an ingenious plug-in protection device for audio systems.

It incorporates IsoTek's newly developed IPS (Intelligent Protection System), ensuring continual protection against electrical spikes and surges whilst adapting the level of protection to suit transient conditions – a bit like ABS brakes in a car. Unlike most protection devices on the market, many of which are restrictive to audio performance, ProTek delivers rigorous protection whilst ensuring optimal operating conditions for your system.



(Independent System Isolation Support). The main unit is point-clamped between two panels at the top and bottom, each of which is formed of a special resonance-damping material sandwiched between two ultra-dense Corian plates, with the overall structure supported by four substantial aluminium pillars.

Is Super Titan the ultimate high-current mains conditioner? Unquestionably. And only one company could build it: unequivocally, it's IsoTek. 

CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR THE

ISOTEK TITAN

"The Titan is a revelation"
What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision UK

"It is, quite simply, the most impressive mains filter we've ever heard"

Hi-Fi News UK

"This is the first time we have heard such a dramatic improvement from an audio accessory"

HiFi Review Hong Kong

