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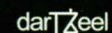
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editorial

EDITOR

Alan Sircom

Email: editor@hifiplus.com

CONTRIBUTORS THIS ISSUE INCLUDE:

Chris Binns, Dennis D. Davis, Richard S. Foster, Neil Gader, Roy Gregory, Alvin Gold, Jason Kennedy, Paul Messenger, Malcolm Steward, Chris Thomas

GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Louise Cowburn

Fonthill Creative, Salisbury

DESIGN DIRECTOR

Richard Hamshere

Fonthill Creative, Salisbury

PRODUCTION

Aaron Chamberlain, Shelley Lai

PHOTOGRAPHY

Simon Marsh, The Hi-Fi Plus Team

ADVERTISING/ ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER:

Pete Trewin

Tel: +44 (0)1425 655699

Fax: +44 (0)1425 655477

Email: pete@hifiplus.com

PUBLISHER

Chris Martens

THE EDITORIAL OFFICE CAN BE CONTACTED AT:

Hi-Fi Plus Editorial

Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd
Unit 22, Sandeath Industrial Estate,
Sandeath, Hampshire
SP6 1PA

United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)1425 655255

Fax: +44 (0)1425 655477

Net: www.hifiplus.com

Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd is a
subsidiary of Nextscreen, LLC, Inc.
8868 Research Blvd., Ste. 108
Austin, Texas 78758, USA

Net: www.avguide.com

CHAIRMAN AND CEO

Thomas B. Martin, Jr.

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There's a quiet revolution taking place in audio, and it started last year in a pub in Islington. It's called Classic Album Sundays. Starting in Autumn 2010, DJ Colleen 'Cosmo' Murphy took over the top floor of the Hanbury Arms pub one Sunday a month. That seemingly rare combination of music-loving DJ and audiophile, Colleen pitches up with a damn good system (there can't be many DJs that cue up a Koetsu cartridge, or play through Klipshorns) and plays an album as it was originally intended; complete, from first track to last.

It's indicative of just how far we've come that listening to a whole album has become a special occasion, but the idea of a gathering of people listening to a whole album in quiet contemplation (phones to silent, no comfort breaks because the flushing sound breaks the spell) is both rare, and the results magical. And the word is spreading; the BBC has covered the events, DJs and audiophiles alike have licensed the Classic Album Sundays concept and are doing their own thing, and its going transatlantic soon. My first sampling of the Classic Album Sundays experience wasn't on a Sunday, but the concept works and works almost immediately. Listening as a group to the complete album from one end to the other is surprisingly fascinating, exciting and moving.

The Classic Album Sundays movement is resolutely LP-based. This is entirely understandable and praiseworthy; the 12" vinyl LP and its sleeve are the canvasses upon which artists and artistes alike painted the soundtrack to our lives. The same totemic power of the album doesn't have the same 'reach', when peering at a CD sleeve, or even a computer screen.

Ultimately though, it's the album, not simply the media it is stored on, that is so important.

It's time to get involved. The Vintage festival is coming to London's Southbank Centre from the 29th-31st July. This festival – arranged in partnership with Wayne and Gerardine Hemingway – is given over to celebrating the best of British from the 1920s to the 1980s, as part of the 60th anniversary of the Festival of Britain. Naturally, the Classic Album Sundays concept fits beautifully here, playing the best of British sounds of the past on the best of British audio of today. And *Hi-Fi+* will be there, too.

This is not just a great way of putting high-quality audio in front of a new audience, it's a way of reinvigorating listening to music, an activity that is in danger of becoming very passive today.

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com

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Wiltshire Jazz Festival 2011

www.wiltshirejazzfestival.co.uk

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- Georgia Mancio Quintet
- Brass Jaw
- Amy Roberts
- Misbehavin'
- Charles Alexander/Andy Robinson Guitar duo
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incoming!

Law-abiding basement

I recently joined the digital generation, and have ripped all my CDs to a computer and have a Squeezebox Touch connected to a DAC where my CD player used to be. All my CDs are now very surplus to requirements and sitting in a few boxes in the basement. My wife would prefer those boxes to disappear altogether, but is this legal? Can I donate the discs to a thrift store or sell them at a yard sale and still listen to my files without infringing copyright?

Bill McTeague, via email

Copyright and wrongs

Apparently, according to the Daily Telegraph, the Brennan JB7 music player has fallen foul of the Advertising Standards Authority. It states that UK copyright laws forbid ripping a CD and by Brennan promoting that option, it incited customers to break the law. If that is the case, are Linn, Naim, Meridian and all the hi-fi magazines also trying to criminalise audiophiles by inciting them to illegally copy their music?

Alan Buchanan, via email

These two emails highlight the idiosyncrasies of copyright law in different countries. Bill (I'm assuming the use of the term 'thrift store' instead of 'charity shop' and 'yard sale' over 'car boot sale' means he is from the USA) is perfectly within his rights to rip his discs to a Squeezebox Touch, but he cannot sell them or donate them without first deleting the tracks of any discs he gets rid of. So, sorry... the CDs need to stay, even if they never get played again.

The right of an individual to make a copy of a recording for personal use is covered by 'fair use' clauses written into the copyright laws of most countries, except for the UK, which outlaws making a private copy of recorded music without the copyright owner's consent. Fortunately, the 1988 Copyright Design & Patents Act limits criminal liability to those whose actions directly damage the copyright owner; 'format shifting' (ripping a CD to FLAC or MP3) for personal use is covered by civil liability, thereby recognising that if you bought the recording through legitimate means, the copyright owner does not suffer as a result of your actions. And, thus far, precisely no one has been dragged through the courts for copying their CDs for personal use. However, by the strict letter of UK law, ripping discs and format shifting does mean engaging in an unlawful act.

While this poses major problems for companies advertising such products here, in reality bodies like the British Phonographic Industry are seemingly more concerned with criminal copyright theft (such as people uploading huge numbers of files they don't own to torrent sites like The Pirate Bay) than with pursuing civil cases against individuals who have ripped a few discs for personal use. Until such time as this desperately unenlightened aspect of UK copyright law is overturned, the best I can offer is that you seem about as likely to get done for personal use format shifting as you are for not engaging in your two hours longbow practice. Just remember to perform the appropriate incantation ("the law is an ass") every time you rip a disc – Ed.

Professional ethics

Why don't hi-fi magazines review more professional audio equipment? We're seeing more and more active loudspeakers, high quality DACs and studio room tuning equipment showing up in homes today, but the audio magazines don't seem to want to know. Is it because they are too cheap, or because they don't advertise with hi-fi magazines?

I've recently sold all my old audio equipment and now just use a pair of Ediol MA 15D (active speakers with built in 24/192 DAC, £150 from Amazon) and an old white MacBook filled with iTunes music and it sounds as good as anything I've heard before. Surely you owe it to your readers to cover this sort of stuff, rather than simply talking about cables over and over again.

Nathan Redman, via email

Routinely there are three points that keep pro-audio outside of the audiophile world, but even these are slipping. First, the lines of distribution used to be very different; audiophiles didn't go near pro shops and vice versa. This has largely been resolved; audiophile shops are more welcoming to pro gear and audiophiles have learned the power of the net. Secondly, many pro loudspeakers are designed for near-field listening, as opposed to throwing sound across the room like domestic loudspeakers. If you sit more than 2.5-3m from your speakers, a near-field monitor (designed to work at fingertip length from you) is going to sound very bass light, and sometimes not as focused as products designed for the task. Pro monitors also have a specific goal in mind – detail retrieval and insight into the mix – that can be at odds with more laid-back domestic listening. One could also cynically point to the relatively low box count active monitors create, and if you choose your hi-fi by size, weight and number of boxes in the listening room, passive will win every time – Ed.

news

Zingali Zero Series

The hitherto distinctly high-end Zingali loudspeaker range has been joined by the new Zero range. Designed for these Credit Crunchy times, the four new models (plus centre and subwoofer for home cinema) are designed to perform well at new lower price points, yet still use the compression driver and Omnidirectional horn-loading seen in the company's top models, as well as undamped live-wood (as opposed to veneered MDF) cabinets. Key to the new lower cost design is a new downward-firing bass reflex port, which gives big-speaker bottom end without the price tag.

The Zingali entry point is the new £1,695 Bookshelf Monitor, followed by the £2,850 Sei, £3,990 Otto and £5,495 Deici floorstanders. Those with rusty Italian should note the names mean six, eight and ten respectively and denote the size (in inches) of the bass driver in that loudspeaker. The Zero range remains built in Zingali's Aprilla factory (even down to the drive units) and is styled in four wood finishes as standard, with RAL gloss finish options at no extra cost. If you want a green horn, purple baffle and orange-bodied loudspeaker, go for it... you only have yourself to blame.

www.zingali.it, www.music-room.com +44(0)141 333 9700



Meridian Media Core 600

Combining the flexibility of a multi-room system with the one-box convenience of a standard music server, Meridian's new £6,000 Media Core 600 features a 2TB RAID1 pair of hard discs, that can both store and back up as many as 5000 albums in lossless, and can play this whole library in up audio end points, each with its own digital signal processing.

Designed to be the heart of a next-generation music collection serving system, the Media Core 600 can interface with any Sooloos-based component, as well as be able to be driven by an Apple iPad running the Sooloos app. The Core 600 can be controlled and fed discs from a Sooloos Control 15, or from a PC or Mac using the appropriate Control software. If connected to the internet, the Core 600 also supports internet radio and streaming music services.

A natural partner for multi-room Meridian Digital Loudspeaker applications, the rack-mountable Media Core 600 chassis is a similar size to the company's 808.3 Signature Reference CD player.

www.meridian-audio.com +44 (0)1480 445678

Acoustic Energy Neo 4

Acoustic Energy has announced the new top of the Neo range, the £699/pair three-way Neo 4. Driven by demand for potent floorstanding design, the Neo 4 features a triple-ported 70-litre cabinet with a 38mm wide-bandwidth dual ring radiator tweeter, a single 133mm aluminium alloy mid-range driver and a pair of 165mm aluminium alloy cone bass drivers, all made by Acoustic Energy itself.



Standing 1.2m tall, the Neo 4 sports an impressively dense 32mm thick MDF baffle and is claimed to deliver bass down to 28Hz. It also features high-quality components in the crossover, including polypropylene capacitors and air-cored inductors. Despite this and a 200W power handling, the new Neo 4 is designed to be efficient, with a suggested 91dB sensitivity.

www.acoustic-energy.co.uk
+44(0) 1285 654 432

Townshend Audio GPRE and GCD

Townshend Audio is slowly building up a complete system. The latest device in the path is the £8,000 Glastonbury GPRE preamplifier.

Trying to create the ultimate 'straight wire with gain' preamp, Townshend has eschewed conventional preamp design, going instead with a transformer volume control, based on a multiple-tapped autotransformer. The GPRE uses autotransformers to Townshend's own specifications, wound on nickel/mu-metal laminations and have 27 taps giving a working range of 57dB in 1dB steps. This features hundreds of feet of wire in each transformer, and uses Townshend's proprietary 'Fractal Wire'. Unlike most autotransformer-based preamps, the GPRE also supports remote control, to adjust volume and switch between the six RCA and two XLR inputs.

Then, in one of the longest gestation periods in audio history, Townshend Audio has also finally announced its universal disc player. The £10,000 Glastonbury CD Universal Player supports CD, DVD-Audio and SACD (it was designed pre-Blu-ray), with a Burr-Brown DSD179 chip, that can cope with PCM signals up to 24bit, 192kHz as well as handle SACD's Direct Stream Digital output without conversion. One of the key Townshend upgrades is to once again include high quality, custom wound 'Fractal Wire' transformers for fully-balanced XLR or pseudo-balanced RCA output. The GCD also runs on a 6V sealed lead-acid battery, which uses a trickle-charger that disconnects when out of standby. This can run for up to 30 hours on CD replay.

Next issue, we will feature an exclusive review of the Townshend autotransformer preamplifier, plus a unique view of the complete Townshend system.

www.townshendaudio.com +44(0)20 8979 2155

NEWS IN BRIEF

Leema has updated its multi-DAC Antila CD player. As the name suggests, the new £2,995 Antila IIS Eco is environmentally-chummy, with standby power consumption well below the new stringent EU limits. Leema also took the opportunity to upgrade its eight-DAC chipset to its new Quattro Infinity layout, which has a shorter signal path and – by housing each channel in separate screening enclosures – better stereo separation. And it's a Quattro, so it comes pre-approved by Gene Hunt!

www.leema-acoustics.com

Black Rhodium has raised the cryogenic ante with its new Oratorio DCT ULTRA interconnects. The company chills out the individual silver wires in the early stages of construction and then runs a second set of Deep Cryogenic Treatment to the fully assembled cable. The 99.99% pure silver wire sports Oyaide silver/rhodium over-silver-plated bronze or brass connectors (depending on whether RCA or XLR is selected) and comes in a dark purple sheath. Oh, and the XLR features Svarovski rhinestones to indicate channel. Prices start from £1,250 for a 1m RCA pair.

www.blackrhodium.co.uk

Both Sonos and Pioneer have announced they are jumping aboard the Apple AirPlay express. Pioneer has announced its 2011 range of AV receivers will all support AirPlay and Sonos' latest version 3.4 of its operating system supports the Apple wireless system... if you also buy an Apple Airport Express and connect it to a Zone Player. Sonos has also added an Android app for its wireless music streaming system.

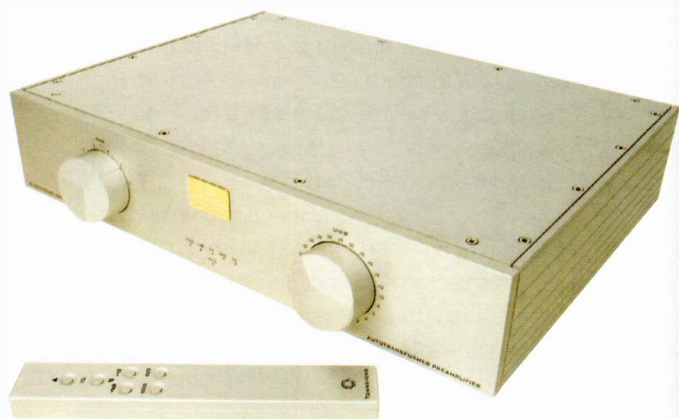
www.sonos.com www.pioneer.eu

Sonic Studio's Amarra high-resolution playback music player for the Mac has now reached version 2.2. Now free from requiring an iLok dongle, Amarra 2.2.1 supports automatic sample-rate conversion native FLAC playback and conversion, includes a four-band equalizer, a choice of dither algorithms and can be played as a cached RAM memory player. Amarra 2.2.1 comes with an independent playlist window (that doesn't require iTunes) and supports up to 384kHz sample rates for \$695, while Amarra 2.2.1 Mini excludes the playlist window and supports 192kHz sampling for \$295, and can be upgraded to the full package. A review of Amarra 2.2.1 will appear in the next issue.

www.sonicstudio.com

If you can gain access to HDTracks, be sure to check out the Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra, with Brian Baker on guitar. The composer of this new work – hailed by Guitar Magazine as a "landmark orchestral work" – is none other than premier audiophile label owner, David Chesky...

www.hdtracks.com



Remembering Syd Barrett – the audiophile way

An trendy art gallery in the middle of London's even trendier Shoreditch is not the first place you'd think of to find 100 people sitting round listening to a 41 year old album of frail, beautiful whimsy. Especially when they were listening to the album on state of the art high-end audio. But, this is the new music movement in the UK, and it's growing.

The Idea Generation Gallery recently hosted an exhibition of the art and paintings of Pink Floyd founder Syd Barrett. So, it was wholly appropriate to play his 1970 album *The Madcap Laughs* as part of the event. And right now, there's an undercurrent trend to play albums on vinyl and through good audiophile equipment, and it all comes down to Colleen 'Cosmo' Murphy.

It all began last year. Following a blog post from DJ Greg Wilson about how listening to music is becoming a background, passive activity, fellow DJ Colleen began inviting a few friends over to her house after gigs to sit round and listen to a whole album; always on vinyl, and always on a damn good turntable. Pretty soon, this grew into an event in its own right, known as Classic Album Sundays. Once a month, Colleen would move her home equipment into the Hanbury Arms in Islington, London, and play one damn good album from beginning to end. The BBC ran a couple of excellent features on these events, and pretty soon the ball began rolling. The Syd Barrett event was a logical extension of these Classic Album Sundays events.

This event was a little different, though. And high-end importer Absolute Sounds rose to the challenge. The audio system might be the means whereby the music happens, but this was something special; a Continuum Criterion turntable, Copperhead arm, Koetsu cartridge, Audio Research Reference phono stage and preamp, DarTZeel monoblocks, Transparent Audio cables and a pair of Wilson Audio MAXX 3 loudspeakers. This was an epic set-up, especially given the Absolute Sounds team – along with John Giolas from Wilson Audio, who made a whistle-stop visit to the UK just to help install the speakers – had just a few hours to install. This is the kind of system that could take a day or more to put together, but was rigged up in just a couple of frantic hours.

Colleen, along with Eddy Lawrence, music editor of *Time Out London* and Michael Fremer, *Stereophile's* vinyl ambassador introduced *The Madcap Laughs*, why albums are still important and why vinyl is still popular in



our increasingly digital world. Then, they played the album, and the results were fascinating. For some, it was the first time they had heard the album as a complete entity. There was enrapt listening, dancing and even applause at the end. Everyone stayed in their seats, even when Colleen flipped the disc over.

Everyone stayed silent throughout the whole event and respected the album for what it is. They even turned off their phones. The acoustics were compromised by it being an art gallery and the constant whirr of the gallery's file server could have held the whole thing back... but nobody cared when they heard the album played without restriction.

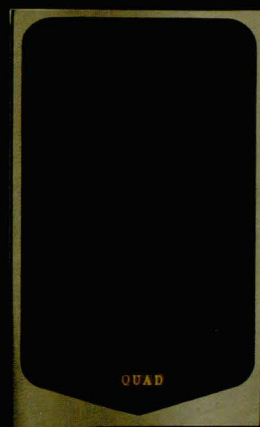
It was almost as if the last 40 years never happened, were it not for the constant whirring of the gallery's file server fans. The fascinating part was just how emotional the experience was for many listeners, who are now so used to music being a drift-in, drift-out, background activity today. By sitting and listening to the complete album in its entirety from front to back, without the distractions of TV, Facebook, telephones and all the other ephemera of the last 40 years, the process of focusing exclusively on the music was profoundly moving for some. And you don't get many times when a hundred people applaud the last track on an album these days.

Of course, the fact they were listening to the album on such remarkable equipment was in no small part contributing to the effect, but the fascinating thing was the only people asking about the price of the system were the hi-fi buffs; the rest were content to hear something wonderful, regardless of how much it cost. Probably very few would ever be able to afford something as high-end as this system, but the point was to introduce the iPod generation to an older, wiser way of listening, and to say it worked was an understatement.

Putting a hundred of London's glitterati into voluntary silence for the length of an album on the last Thursday evening in March this year is almost unheard of today. And if anyone remembers those days when people used to gather round at someone's house to listen to a great album... well, they're back!

I think Syd would have thoroughly approved. +

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HEATHROW SHOW REPORT

Audio World 11

By Alan Sircom

The big guys stayed away. Even the smaller big guys stayed away. This meant the show was smaller than ever before. But smaller doesn't mean 'worse'; in fact, in this case the smaller Audio World 11 (at the Park Inn Heathrow) meant a more cosy show.

By not having hundreds of exhibitors, the number of listeners moving from room to room seemed higher and there was seemingly more of a buzz about the show.

Audio World did see several key launches, including the first digital processor from Abbingdon Music Research; the £3,295 DP-777, from its Premier Class range. Designed for a world that straddles both HD and standard CD-based digital audio, the converter features two different converter pathways – featuring both a 16 and 32 bit chipset – depending on the data received. It also features what's claimed to be a zero-jitter global timing system and asynchronous USB input. As ever with AMR, the DAC features valves, but uniquely in the digital input stage as well as the output. It was making some very fine sounds in the AMR/Select Audio room.

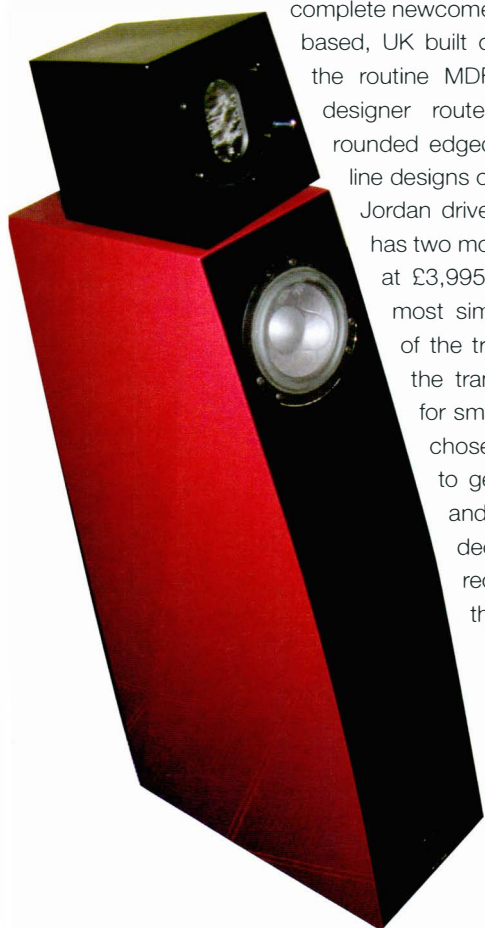
Another new release was a loudspeaker from a complete newcomer; JoSound. The Jersey-based, UK built company has not gone down the routine MDF monkey coffin lazy loudspeaker designer route. Instead, JoSound builds distinctive rounded edged, almost organically-shaped transmission line designs out of hugely sustainable bamboo and uses Jordan drive units as the motive force. The company has two models in the range, a one-driver 45/1 (priced at £3,995) and a £5,995 three driver 45/3. Unlike most similar designs, JoSound fires the exit vent of the transmission up and behind the driver and the transmission line itself eschews hard angles for smoother air flow. JoSound had unfortunately chosen one of the hardest rooms at the Park Inn to get to sound good (both Absolute Sounds and Musicology have struggled to make a decent noise in what is essentially a large, rectangular cardboard box in the past) and that room's bass-extracting character took



its toll, but the sound was enjoyable and expansive.

In the next room, Dave Jackson of High-End cables was showcasing his latest distribution line – the Raidho Acoustics loudspeaker range. Being played through Bel Canto electronics and through Quantum and Nordost Sort Kones, this was also a perfect time to show off Nordost's new Leif range of cables. The almost mandatory Lars Kristensen demonstration ensued... very successfully too. Equally mandatory at a hi-fi show, Sound Foundations room featured hot and cold running Keith Martin demonstrations of the IsoTek Super Titan, with similar success. Sound Foundations also highlighted the new Furutech ADL range of products (see page 61 for a review).

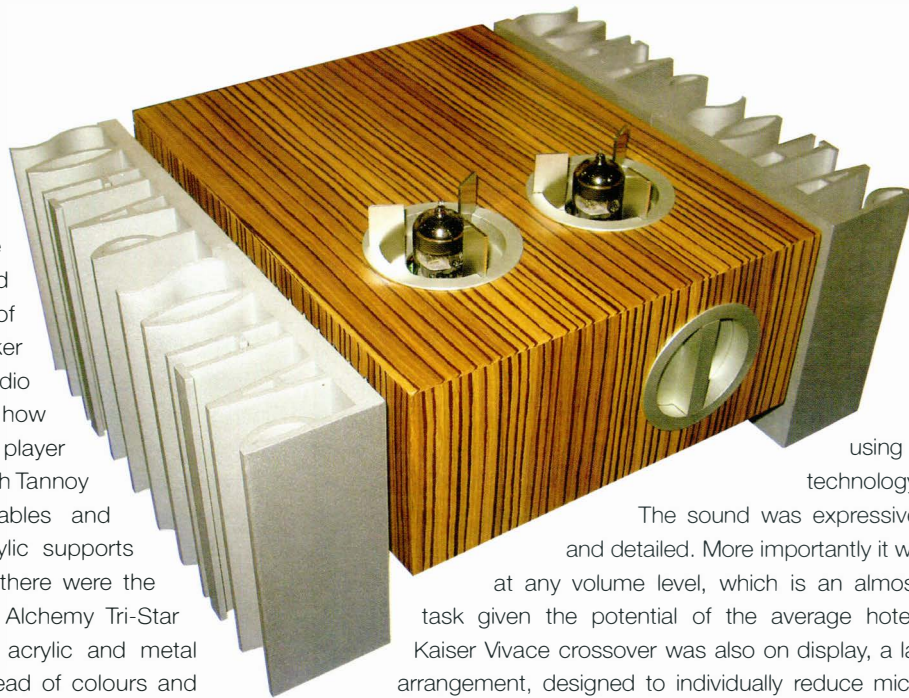
Unlike many recent shows, Audio World 11 was focused more on physical formats than file-based audio. There were exceptions of course (BitPerfect's increasingly elegant music server solution played through Calyx DACs and amps from Korea, for example), but there were a lot of LP and CD sources here. Among the highlights were the return of Densen (with Tellurium Q cables and Focal speakers in the Kog room), Audio Note's new tonearm (which sadly was not playing when I visited) in a surprisingly budget system for Audio Note, Inspire Hi-Fi with its range of manufactured decks and LP12/Rega mods and the excellent Funk Firm Saffire II turntable with the innovative F•XR II tonearm. This wasn't the show for launches of epic new players, but more showing what the current



crop of disc spinners of all kinds are capable of; witness Angelsound getting fine sounds out of a Dr Feickert Woodpecker turntable or The Audio Works demonstrating how good an Accuphase CD player can sound in a system with Tannoy DC8 speakers, MIT cables and lots of MusicWorks acrylic supports and power leads. Then there were the freshly minted Analogue Alchemy Tri-Star turntables, a UK made acrylic and metal range of decks in a spread of colours and options with the potential of trading blows with the likes of Scheu and Clearaudio in the looks stakes at least. The company also demonstrated its open-baffle loudspeaker, but the room was patently too small for such a design. We hope to hear more from this start-up.

When it comes to tube amps, you could have been forgiven for thinking you had wandered back into a chrome-plated version of the 1950s. Valves were everywhere, whether it was the shiny brilliance of Art Audio or the refined chic of Audion, the deceptively powerful Almarro monos or the cool precision of VTL. And not just new equipment, either; Howes Acoustics – when not making quarter-wave horn loudspeakers and tiny 3W and 6W single-ended amps – had some extremely lovely looking modified Quad II on show, being driven by Music First Audio passive magnetic preamps. MFA also showed its new phono stage in a room with Quad 303 and Quad electrostatics... and even a Revox open reel.

Far and away the best sound at the show was that in the Right Note room. The Bath-based dealer/distributor was demonstrating the new-to-the-UK Kaiser Kawero Vivace loudspeakers, fed by an Accoustic Arts CD transport into the now-finalised non-oversampling 16-bit Vertex AQ Alethia DAC and a Storm Audio integrated amplifier, fully optimised



using Vertex AQ technology throughout.

The sound was expressive, fast, deep and detailed. More importantly it was believable at any volume level, which is an almost impossible task given the potential of the average hotel room. The Kaiser Vivace crossover was also on display, a large, two-tier arrangement, designed to individually reduce microphony and RFI/EMI in key sections on a scale undreamt of in most loudspeaker designs. Consequently, the crossover platform of tankwood and capacitors was heavier than most integrated amplifiers in its own right. In many respects, this was the ultimate expression of the systematic approach laid down by Vertex AQ years ago, and – even judging by the performance in this room – shows just how valuable that is toward good sound. In fact, the only real downside to the Right Note room was that it was slightly off the beaten track and not everyone who visited the show got to hear just what it was capable of.

“The Kaiser Vivace crossover was also on display, a large, two-tier arrangement, designed to individually reduce microphony and RFI/EMI in key sections on a scale undreamt of in most loudspeaker designs.”

In fairness, for once there weren't many poor sounding rooms. I suspect there might be some kind of critical mass in audio shows; too many rooms playing music either wear down the listeners or mangle the mains supply, but whatever the case, this show seemed to get that balance about right, and the overall sound was of a higher than usual standard. +



MEET YOUR MAKER

IAG

By Alan Sircom

There is a temptation for journalists visiting China to go 'friendly idiot', be so taken in by the scale of the operation that we skip over the little details. However, it's hard not to be won over by the sheer scale of International Audio Group's Shenzhen operation. It's like someone got half the audio industry and put it in one place. Which, given that the Shenzhen factory complex is the place where every product from Audiolab, Castle, Quad, Mission, Wharfedale, and more are made isn't far from the truth.

IAG is the brainchild of brothers Bernard and Michael Chang, who run all manufacture out of China, with smaller repairs, distribution and marketing operations in local centres like Huntingdon. IAG also builds OEM products, professional and lighting equipment, and even built one of the largest yacht shipyards on the planet when it recently moved into that sector.

The main IAG complex in Shenzhen (just north of Hong Kong) is about the size of a small university campus, which is perhaps not so surprising as a good number of the thousands of factory workers are college and university trained. What is surprising is just how many things they do in the complex itself; there can't be many audio companies that make the signal wires in house. In fact, you could say that about everything aside from mining the metals, growing the trees and making the magnets (they magnetise the magnets in house, but the process of manufacturing raw magnetic material is beyond even IAG's ken). It's not just heavy industry and big, old machinery in place; there's state of the art wave soldering and CNC milling alongside traditional production lines

To put a real sense of scale on this, this is to most audio factories what Ford is to someone building a kit car. The factory is big enough to have its own fire brigade! And as if that isn't enough, there's an even bigger IAG factory complex under construction that is reputed to be the size of a small town!

Size is not everything, and Chinese manufacture has a semi-deserved reputation for poor quality control. Which is where the Chang brothers' smarts kick in. In the middle of the campus is a little world within a world where IAG's western engineers live and guests visit. Where many companies have the design section half a world away from the manufacturing, having designers like John Westlake (digital electronics), Jason Greenslade (analogue electronics) and Peter Comeau (loudspeakers) permanently on site helps the transition from design to final product. Less well-known among audiophiles, but perhaps the kingpin of what makes IAG's manufacturer different from most is Mubashar Ali, head of Quality Control and Production Engineering. Coming from a Formula One and ex-military background, he's a perfectionist with the sort of boundless energy that would quickly wear out a meth-head with 'roid rage, marshalling upwards of 2,000 staff and making sure even the designers' wildest excesses make it to market without unworkable failure rates.

Not that the design team are prone to folly. A small group of UK journalists were invited out to the Shenzhen factory to view the plant and see what's in the pipeline from the IAG brands. We were also shown some of the latest new products in the line-up, including the new Wharfedale Jade and Castle Richmond Anniversary loudspeakers, the upcoming Elite

"The factory is big enough to have its own fire brigade!"





and Safety minions in the UK would have a mild fit if they saw free-standing stairways without black and yellow tape and guide rails, or saw someone recycling metal swarf in recycled oil drums instead of the appropriate containers.

And there will be those who look at the heavy machinery and bemoan that the factory floor is little better than the average UK factory of the early 1950s, irrespective of the high-tech manufacturing lines elsewhere in the complex. And that probably says more about

UK manufacturing than it does about making things in China today. We've mostly stopped manufacturing to this scale and while there will always be people who pay a premium for handcrafted engineering, companies like IAG seem to have found the right way to get good quality at any price.



stereo and monoblock replacements for the Quad 909 power amp and the forthcoming Audiolab 8200 DAC/preamp, which takes the 8200 CDQ CD/preamp and does without the transport mechanism, as well as showcasing the new 8200A integrated amp and 8200 pre, power and monoblocks. There was even hush-hush discussion about the next generation of Audiolab digital products, including talk of potentially a pair of smaller, cheaper but extremely high-quality DACs from John Westlake. Given Westlake's past glories (the Pink Triangle DaCapo, the original Cambridge Audio DacMagic and more recently the digital side of the excellent Peachtree Audio equipment – built at the factory) these are something to look forward to while the rest of the world catches Olympic fever.

We were also given a quick tour of the multichannel world, with two excellent sets of Mission speakers (including a very tasty sub-sat system) and a forthcoming processor and multichannel power amp from Audiolab. Given the TAG McLaren Audio multichannel processor was one of the most respected devices in that field and Jason Greenslade's history in that product's development, this too is richly anticipated by those in the know. Right now, only the Luxman range is made outside of China, but even that is changing, with valve integrations and the new slimline valve range being tooled up for manufacture in Shenzhen.

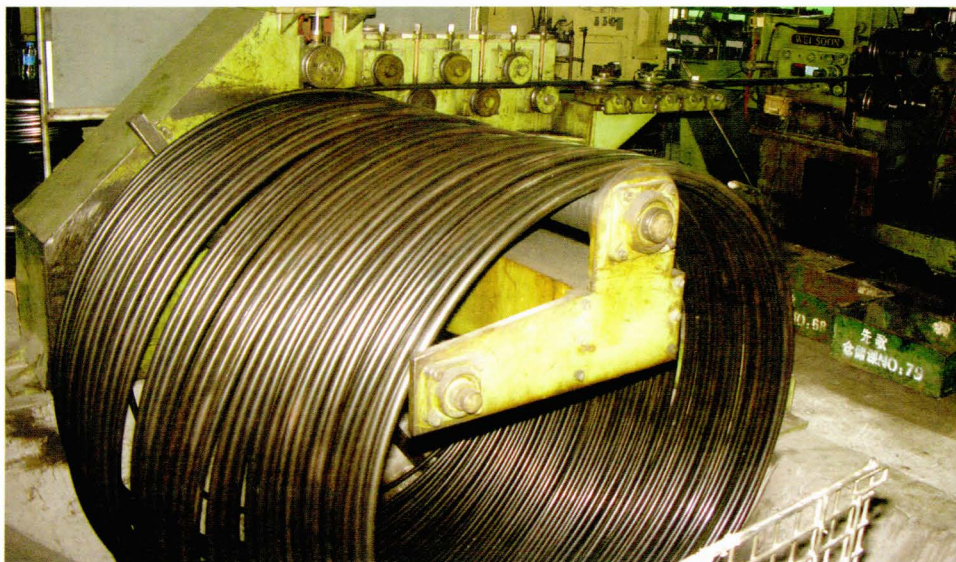
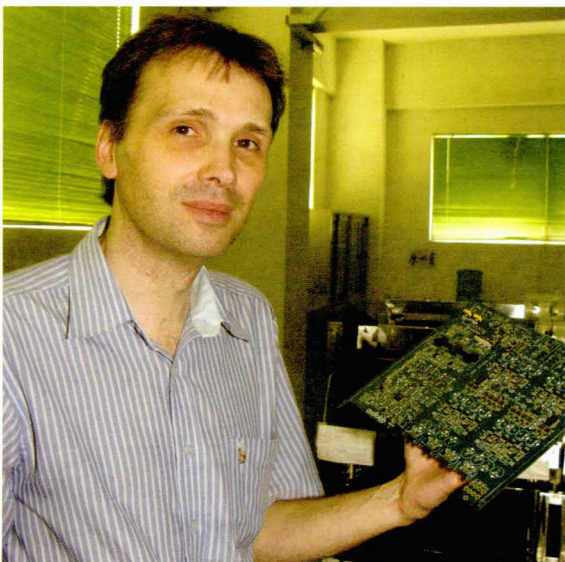
The tales of Chinese workers toiling 18 hours a day to earn enough for a bowl of rice are fiction. OK, so Health



Above: Mubashar Ali rules the factory with a rod of brass

Below left: John Westlake powerlifts an Audiolab PCB

Below right: It's not just light engineering...





EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Vienna Acoustics The Kiss Loudspeaker

By Roy Gregory

A casual glance at the Vienna Acoustics range might not spot it, but the company has a strong streak of individuality. It's there in the choice of drivers and development of the in-house Spider Cone technology, but it really becomes apparent when you take a look at the top of the line Klimt series. The floorstanding The Music is striking enough, but nothing quite prepares you for The Kiss, with its articulated cabinet and asymmetric stand. This is a carefully considered and finely balanced response to the compromises inherent in a stand-mounted design; from a purely sonic point of view, the stunningly beautiful appearance is by way of a bonus, but it is still an essential expression of the meticulously crafted whole.

The exquisite exterior of The Kiss – a quality that also characterises every other Vienna Acoustics product whose company I've enjoyed – is simply the surface manifestation of designer Peter Gansterer's guiding principal; the creation of loudspeakers as single, holistic expressions of an all-embracing design process.

At first glance you could mistake The Kiss for a two-way, its tweeter housed in a large faceplate. But this is very much a three-way design, and that upper cabinet holds a proprietary concentric driver, its flat, molded plastic midrange diaphragm surrounding a 25mm silk dome. What – no beryllium or diamond, no carbon-fibre, exotic paper or ceramic? No – instead, this fascinating drive unit depends on a synthetic polymer, derived from the TPX lightweight thermoplastic first developed by Audax, but Vienna Acoustics add small but critical amounts of polypropylene and other materials to create a unique new formulation dubbed X3P, in search of the Holy Grail of stiffness and excellent self-damping. To maximize those benefits it's also necessary to create a low moving mass – the traditional Achilles heel when it comes to plastics. But one glance at the Vienna drivers will show the web of radial and circumferential ribbing that is used to stiffen them, a complex engineering solution that optimizes the balance between weight and resonant behavior and led to the Spider Cone tag. Used extensively on the Company's bass cones, it's a technique that reaches new heights in the concentric driver. Here,

“It makes different decisions as to what is musically important, and as a result chooses different sonic compromises.”

the material is further refined with the addition of tiny glass particles, while the structure is almost inverted – the ribs being extended in depth to support the flat face. Each buttress or brace is then further shaped using FEA to trim unnecessary mass while retaining material exactly where it is required.

But, you might well be asking, why go to all that trouble? Because existing coincident driver designs, for all their advantages in terms of coherence and dispersion, all suffer, to varying degrees, from an inherent compromise: the phase-related distortions and subtle horn loading that result from mounting the tweeter in the neck of the cone. You hear it as a change in the character of high-frequency notes when produced simultaneously with output at the bottom end of the driver’s range. The flat diaphragm of the Vienna design effectively minimizes phase issues, while doing away with horn loading. It has also enabled Vienna to push the bass/mid crossover point down to around 100Hz – much lower than the 300-500Hz more normally found in three-way designs. This avoids blending drivers right in the heart of the human tenor range, a clear indicator of just how much importance Peter Gansterer places on the coherence and natural harmonic colours of the mid-band. Plastic driver materials will always struggle to match the likes of carbon-fibre, paper or ceramics for weight and speed of response, but where they score is in terms of the control they offer over resonant behavior and as a result, their ability to generate low bass and low colouration. If you can deal with the mass, then you receive the payoff in terms of superior texture and tonality.

Once you start adding that to other design choices (the complex and massively reinforced cabinets, the gentle slopes used in the crossovers, the attention paid to apparently minor details like the close

tolerance, in-house inductors and terminals) you start to build a picture of just where this speaker is coming from. Those first or second order slopes for instance, require carefully tailored and close tolerance drivers to work at their best. Perfect then, for in-house cone designs and final assembly by those perfectionists at Eaton. Complete that loop by designing and engineering crossovers in tandem with each driver and what you create is of a kit of philosophical (and physical) parts that fits together seamlessly to produce a coherent whole.

Taking The Kiss in detail, the concentric driver is mounted in a sealed cabinet, above a 230mm Spider Cone bass unit, itself mounted in a deep, rear-reflex ported box of minimal frontal area. The crossover, offers up an unusually broad mid-band, stretching from an exceptionally low 100Hz to 2.6kHz, and is fed via a single pair of terminals. The upper cabinet sits in its own, separate ‘shoe’ that allows it to be turned and tilted relative to the bass box, the complete moving element being shared with the floorstanding The Music, and that midrange driver alone covers virtually the entire human vocal range. Movement is facilitated by a beautifully executed and graduated vertical spike and horizontal gear, allowing the user to make precise and repeatable adjustments. The cabinet sides incorporate a subtle curve to aid rigidity and help dissipate resonance. Given the considerable depth of the cabinet(s) and overall attention to detail on show here, it should come as no surprise that that curve continues down both the outer and inner faces of the stand’s upright. No cutting corners here – sonically or aesthetically. The stand, or more properly I guess that we should call it a ‘base’, bolts securely to the underside of the speaker, is internally stiffened with steel rods and is supported on four adjustable spikes.

Why the adjustable head unit? Given its not inconsiderable bulk, with many a floorstander commanding a smaller footprint and less real estate to accommodate it, The Kiss does a good job of looking smaller than it is, and whilst one speaker might look a bit odd with its asymmetrical stance, the mirror-imaged pair are striking; the more so if they’re not pointing straight at you. The problem is, pointing right at you is how the concentric driver works best. Again, Vienna Acoustics are giving you the best of both worlds – precision set-up for the best musical performance combined with optimized aesthetics and some welcome latitude when it comes to positioning the bass unit. Small, rear mounted dip-switches allow for a modicum of subtle but useful room compensation in bass and treble,

With a paper bandwidth of 38Hz to 20kHz and 89dB sensitivity (which should be considered optimistic if my experience is representative) this speaker was never going to be easy to drive and so it proved. I don’t have details but judging from the positive way in which they react to power – especially solid-state power – I suspect their impedance curve could be sufficient ▶



▶ to make all but the most capable valve amps go weak at the knees. VTL 450 mono's were a notably successful match (in power terms at least) as were the Bernings, but I'd not recommend anything of lesser stature than that. Indeed, the best results I got were from the Jeff Rowland Design Group's new Model 625, a compact but beefy amp in the very best JRDG tradition. Hooked up to the matching Corus pre-amp, The Kiss really started to sing with the sort of propulsive bass drive and impact that leads me to suspect a bit of judicious mid-bass voicing might be at play here. Isn't that at odds with all those high-minded ideals regarding mid-band accuracy? Not if it's done carefully. In fact, when it comes to stand-mounted speakers, even moderately sized floor-standers, some degree of bass engineering is pretty much a fact of life. What really matters is that the bass energy appears in the right place.

The holistic sensibilities that inform its philosophical background and construction are immediately, obviously apparent in its musical presentation. Instruments and voices presented by The Kiss have a natural colour and substance to them, performances a coherent and singular presence that places them almost physically in the room. In part that is down to the emphatic low-frequency performance, one that offers up a solid rhythmic foundation and plenty of well-directed energy: in part to the fulsome harmonic envelope the speaker provides. These are strengths that it is both easy to demonstrate and hard to match. Even the most unlikely material benefits: Black Uhuru's 'Youth Of Eglington' from the magnificent Red album is wonderfully motive and purposeful, the solid rhythmic drive reminding you that it's Sly and Robbie in the engine room and Chris Blackwell at the controls. But it's the sheer beauty of Michael Rose's vocal, the expressive range and surefooted phrasing, the sublimely intuitive harmonies of Puma Jones and gruffer underpinnings of Duckie Simpson that make you remember that you are listening to the only serious pretenders to Bob Marley's crossover reggae crown. That wasn't to be, but that's another story. You can simply submerge yourself in this subtle and musically engaging legacy, but before you do, consider this: Marley was a great communicator and so was Michael Rose, and on this basis, so too is The Kiss.

So far so very, very good – but like most things in hi-fi, every advantage arrives with an associated cost, and the chunky substance that makes Red such a compelling listen also points to those areas where The Kiss pays its dues.

As an example of sheer musical intensity, the stark, raw simplicity of Gillian Welch's 'Time The Revelator' is a tour de force – one that presents any system with a whole range of challenges, plenty to feed on and plenty on which to fail. The Kiss doesn't disappoint. Few speakers are able to separate so distinctly the two closely grouped voices and guitars, in height and in tone. The image, solid, central and near life-

size is instructive too. But the presentation also lacks the surrounding acoustic space and the immediacy that other speakers deliver. It's a moot point whether that almost etched transparency and leaner, quicker sound is a sign of those speakers stripping away harmonic weight in search of heightened definition, or genuinely higher resolution – but the facts is the facts and when it comes to speakers you takes your choice of presentation. The Kiss delivers a more composed, richly hued and contained performance, poised and poignant but lacking that suppressed anger. In its place you get the beautifully balanced interplay of the voices and guitars, a window straight into the structure and sense of the song.

Absent other evidence you can simply take your pick and indulge your preference, but having heard the track on a range of genuinely full-range transducers I know that the truth lies somewhere in between these two extremes. Gillian Welch's voice isn't as refined as The Kiss would have you believe and those guitars have greater attack and edge. The recording does have acoustic boundaries and it's actually the combination of regret and anger that can make the track a truly coruscating musical experience. All of the speakers mentioned come up short. What I admire so much about The Kiss is that it has the courage of its convictions, the self-belief to serve up its own, chosen compromise for your consideration.

The natural scale and easily distinguished height of the Gillian Welch recording is no fluke. The Kiss delivers remarkably natural soundstages and perspectives from a whole range of material; so much so that it makes you realize just how congested, curtailed and bent out of shape many stereo pictures are. This isn't the flashy, reach out and touch imaging so beloved of audio reviewers ▶



looking for ever-greater hyperbole. This is essentially natural, in terms of spread, scale and presentation. If you can't hear the boundaries of the stage (and no speaker that's less than full range will deliver those) at least you get the whole area and the right shape. Ever wondered how the violas manage with the percussion sat in their laps? The answer is that in reality they don't have to – and you don't have to when you listen on The Kiss.

If you were feeling unkind, you could describe The Kiss as old-fashioned – and in a limited sense you'd be right. The combination of a wide-band plastic driver and a soft-dome tweeter certainly harks back to the early eighties, but this is an extreme evolution of that original DNA and there's no mistaking its sonic accomplishments, a musical presentation that qualitatively speaking, sits easily beside its peers. But it's interesting to note that in one respect at least, this Vienna Acoustics model does hark back to its forebears; I found The Kiss remarkably sensitive to volume level. To give of its best it needs precise adjustment on a disc-by-disc basis; too low a volume and the music seems flat and lacking in urgency, too high and it starts to shout, a discernable shelf appearing roughly (I'm guessing) where the tweeter meets the midrange driver. I find myself wondering just how comfortable that tweeter is dropping quite so low? But get it spot on (within a half notch on the Rowland's display) and the performance springs to life with solidity and purpose, a substance and coherence that belie the speakers' modest internal volume and sensitivity. I suspect that both of these effects might well be rather less obvious in the kinder and less revealing acoustic offered up by the average domestic environment, but they're things to look out for on audition.

If you want to dissect this speaker's presentation then you can point to three distinct aspects: its choice of a silk dome tweeter (which might broadly be characterized as the choice of tonality over bandwidth); the unusually broad bandwidth of the midrange driver (with the resultant gains in coherence) and the bass voicing. Ah yes, that bass – a subject worthy of deeper discussion because, as usual, the numbers don't tell the whole story. The quoted low-frequency limit of 36Hz is devoid of defining limits. If we were to assume that the figure is the (industry standard) –3dB point, then that would represent significant extension given the modest volume of the bass cabinet. Ignoring the numbers and going on the aural evidence, you'd have to say that the impressive bass impact and drive, coupled to the relative lack of acoustic information would lead one to conclude that the centre of bass energy at least, is significantly higher up the range. The result is that whilst music is presented with a powerfully propulsive sense of purpose, the largest orchestral crescendos will lack that swelling sense of absolute power: upright bass lines, whilst tactile, do start to fade towards the very bottom of their range. Is this a deliberate choice on the designer's part? Given the apparent thought and attention to detail that is obvious in every other aspect of the speaker it seems an equally obvious conclusion; obvious too because of the way it serves the music. No small speaker (and in real terms, despite its height and depth, The Kiss is a small speaker) can hope to offer really convincing low frequency scale and power. It's more a case of getting as much out as you can for most of the time – and in this regard The Kiss succeeds brilliantly. Actual bass output goes deep enough to properly underpin the rightness of those glorious mid-band harmonics, while the slightly larger than life mid-bass delivers the sense of drive and substance that prevents the music (and speaker) sounding small. Yes, as a result you hear more of the instrument, less of the space in which it was recorded, more weight than shape from the notes, but it's a trade-off that, given the upsides, I for one would gladly accept.

So what are we to make of the sublimely enigmatic Kiss? This speaker is an immaculately turned out, cultured and impeccably mannered prima donna. It is (as befits its station) fussy, demanding and unforgiving of dull or inadequate company. But cherished and treated with appropriate care – especially if spoiled a little bit – it is a welcoming and rewarding partner. Perhaps most interestingly of all, it's a speaker that breaks quite a few loudspeaker rules. No slow seduction here, no period of adaptation or growing familiarity. The Kiss was right from the start. It was inviting, engaging and deeply communicative. It doesn't necessarily deliver what you expect, but it also has the capacity to charm and surprise. It doesn't do everything but it does more than enough. In fact, odd though you might consider the name, having lived with the speaker, I can't think of anything more appropriate. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, reflex loaded stand mount

Driver Complement: 1x 180mm concentric driver with patented flat spider X3P diaphragm and 25mm silk dome tweeter
1x 230mm X3P spider cone woofer

Bandwidth: 36Hz – 20kHz (no limits specified)

Sensitivity: 89dB

Impedance: 4 Ohms

Crossover Frequencies: 100Hz and 2.6kHz

Weight: 66kg ea (complete)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 273 x 1270 x 540mm

Finish: Piano black, optional Sapele cabinets

Price: £12,500 per pair

Manufacturer: Vienna Acoustics

Net: www.vienna-acoustics.com

UK Distributor: Audyus Distribution

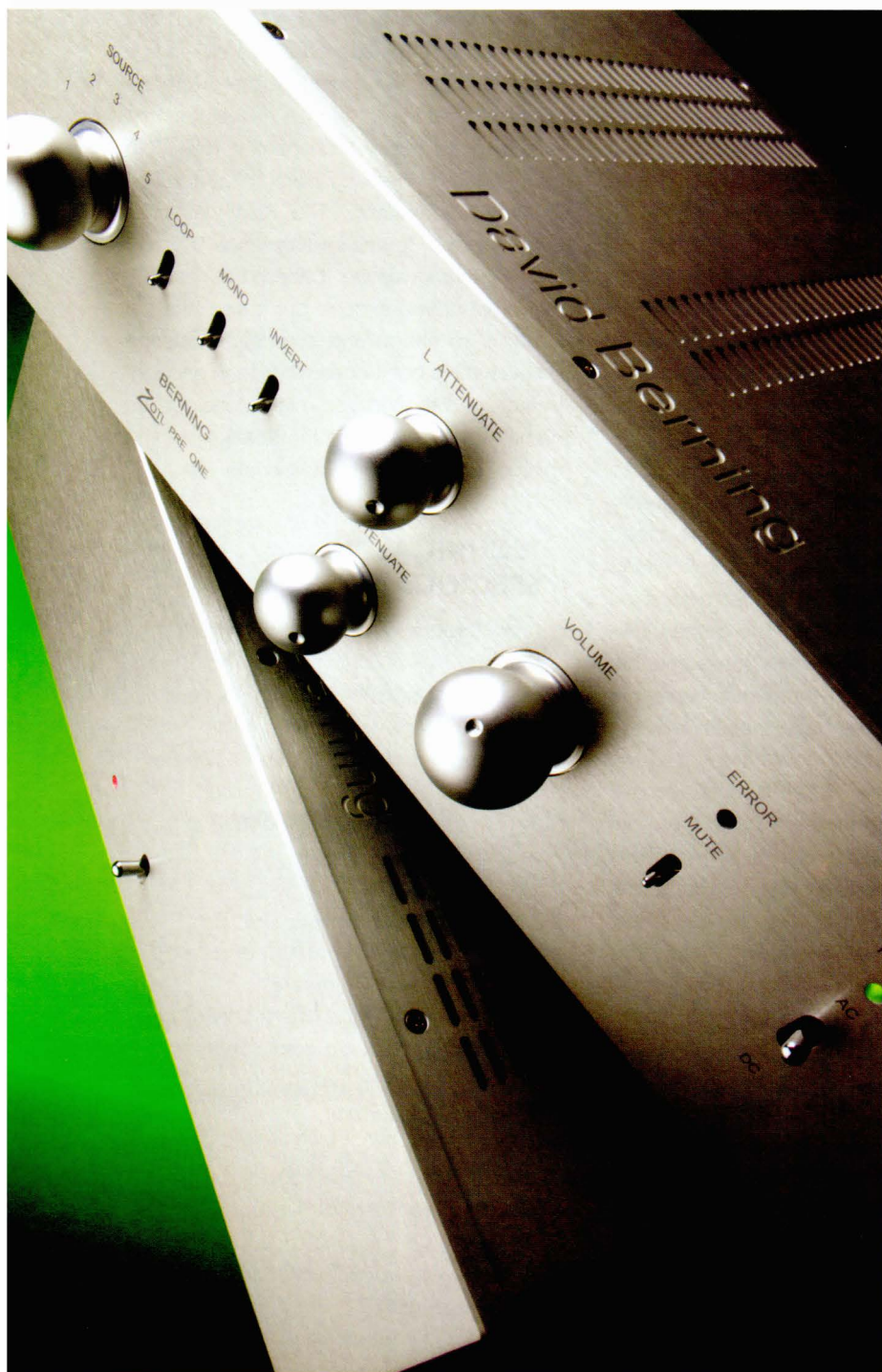
Tel: 01480 270551

Net: www.audyus.co.uk

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

David Berning ZOTL-One Preamplifier and ZH-230 Power Amplifier

By Chris Thomas. Photography by Simon Marsh



Last year was unprecedented where David Berning was concerned as he released two new products. * When I reviewed the QZ mono amps back in Issue 68 I was stunned by their performance and it is no exaggeration to say that they changed my whole idea about high-end audio amplification by redefining its possibilities. They were so musically intriguing that I became set on a long path towards acquiring a pair for my own use.

It was predictable that a preamplifier would be required to fully realize the potential of the advanced ZOTL technology that lies at the dynamic core of the Berning sound and the Pre One has fulfilled that need. It is a lightweight, comprehensively equipped, single-box unit with retro styling hints and some unusually shaped knobs. It has 5 inputs, one of which can be equipped with a phono option. There is a processing loop selector, a switch to invert phase, a mono switch and not only a 24-step main output level control but also separate attenuators for each channel. There is no remote control. The unit can be powered either by mains or a 12V battery supply, selected by a front panel switch. There is also an unusual but nevertheless welcome rear-mounted 1/4 inch headphone socket of notable quality making the ZOTL Pre One just about the best headphone amplifier I have heard. Do leave the headphones unplugged when you are listening through speakers though.

The tube complement consists of 4 x 12 AU7s for the line stage and pairs of both 12 AT7s and 12AX 7s if the optional phono stage is supplied. Moving coil also requires the inclusion of two transformers.

*As I was writing this review I discovered that a limited edition pair of ZH-230 pure Class A 12-watt per channel mono block amplifiers have also been announced, making three new components in the last twelve months

Cartridge loading is achieved by changing resistors on a copper plate and can be easily accomplished, as no soldering is required. All rear connections are Cardas gold-plated RCA phono connectors and the unit, like all recent Berning products, are fitted with Stillpoints OEM Universal Resonance Dampers (3 each for the pre and power amps) for feet. This allows for the possibility of attaching them directly to Stillpoints 3-legged Component Stands or even the latest, quite excellent Ultra devices, both of which bring notable gains in performance. David Berning's ZOTL technology is used in the PRE ONE to provide an extremely robust output drive that he claims goes some way towards overcoming interconnect cable parasitics so, in theory, the quality of the connection between pre and power should become less dependent on using high quality (and cost) leads. While a modest interconnect does make a very good sound though, a really fine example still brings worthwhile results.

The ZH-230 ZOTL power amplifier is a stereo chassis 30 watt per channel design in an unadorned case of almost the same size as the preamplifier. Speaker connections are 2 sets of Cardas gold-plated connectors accepting both spade and 4mm plugs and preamp connection is by RCA phono. There is no XLR/balanced option as on the QZ. The tube complement is 4 x 33J6 for power and the unit normally comes equipped with a 2 x 12 AX7 input and 2 x 12 AT7 driver tubes. Tube life is suggested as 10,000 hours. As with the Pre One the tubes are auto biased which means that tube rolling is possible and in certain circumstances quite necessary, as installing different configurations change the amplifier's feedback and output impedance. Berning provides a table in the manual explaining how to attain the various values. I swapped the AX 7 input tubes twice, initially for a pair of NOS (new old stock) Telefunken 12 AT 7s (ECC 81) and then a pair of Siemens 12 AT 7s to reduce the feedback levels to better match the Raidho Eben C1, C2, Focal Diablo and Kiso HB1s I was using throughout the 4 month listening period. While I would wait until after you get

used to the ZH-230 in its standard configuration first, the result was a very different sounding amplifier. The Telefunken in particular are well thought of in tube circles and I found both these and the Siemens to be preferable to the standard Chinese tubes supplied. Not only was the amplifier now better matched to the speakers, but there was also considerably more flavour and colour to the music with richer harmonics and better control and definition right across the bandwidth. Dave at Blade Audio, the UK importers, can also suggest and supply various makes of tube and explain what they bring to the sound and character of the amplifier. I should add at this point that the output tubes cannot be changed for another type and feel compelled to mention that, for your own safety, you should always remove the power lead before attempting to change tubes.

Each component on every board is hand soldered by David. There is no flow soldering or out-sourcing any of the work and it is perhaps unique that the man who conceived the amplifier also designs and literally builds every one from the ground up. These units are both non-magnetic and lightweight, due to the lack of large transformers. But the casework and chassis are also very low mass and this is part of the design and hence the sound. If they were both shrouded in half-inch thick aluminium plating they would sound quite different, and not as good, although their perceived value would be higher. I also like the way that both amplifiers and the Pre One in particular, run relatively cool, quite unlike the blazing cauldrons of heat I have so often found with conventional tube amps.

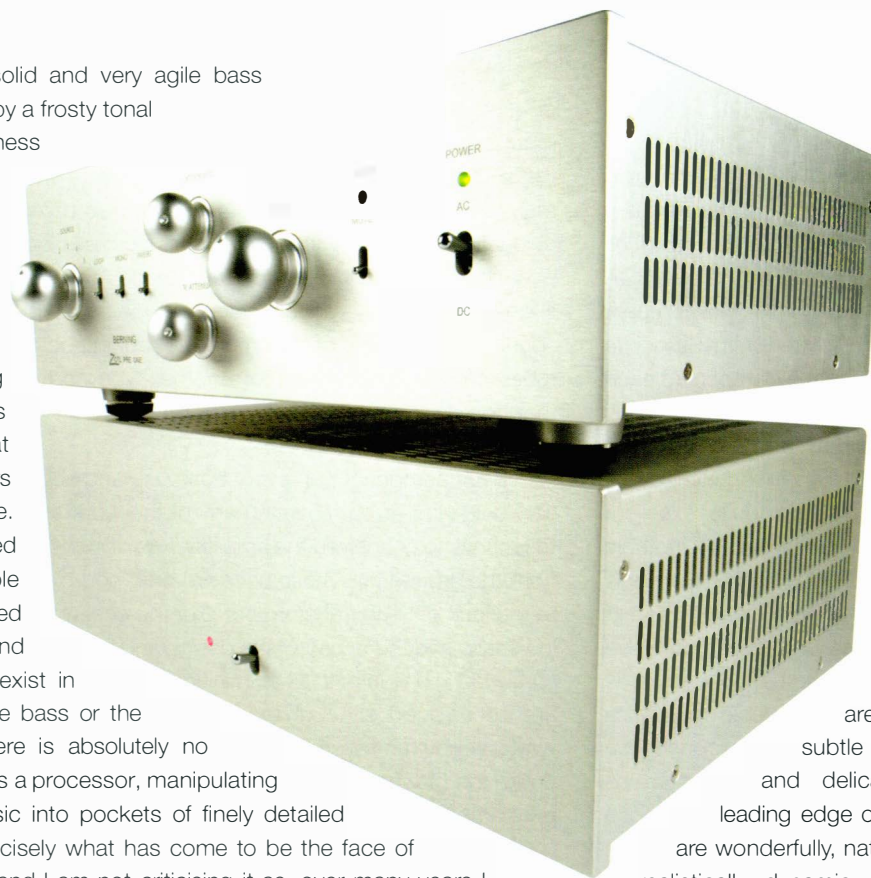
The biggest problem with most tube amplifiers is that great hunk of transformer sitting between the large glass bottles and the speakers. It changes the high output impedance of the tubes to a low impedance to drive the speakers. But, if it could be done away with and the speakers could be driven directly from the tubes, well, how good would that be? This is the world of the output-transformerless (OTL) amplifier. Most use large numbers of tubes, can be temperamental and have no way of accurately matching the impedance between the output tubes and the speaker. What David Berning has done is to design a way that the output tubes meet the varying impedance demands of the speaker by allowing two-way communication between the two. A small transformer (hand-wound by David and not an audio transformer) in Berning amplifiers operates at a single (radio) frequency of 500kHz and acts, out of the signal path, as a carrier for the communication between the speaker and the output tubes. In this way it emulates an ideal output transformer but without the limitations. His patented impedance matching design is a complex subject to comprehend in anything other than layman's terms unless you are a student of advanced electronics. ** It is perhaps easier to understand in principle rather than in detail.

The results of this completely innovative thinking and design is the ZOTL amplification system that, once optimised, allows you to stop evaluating and start enjoying the music without the need for constant analysis of the quality of the amplifier by trying to assess frequency-selective components of its character or behaviour. When you sit and listen to Berning amplifiers, you might well think that you are listening to music "made" in another way and it seems almost as if it is coming from another place. With many high-end amplifiers

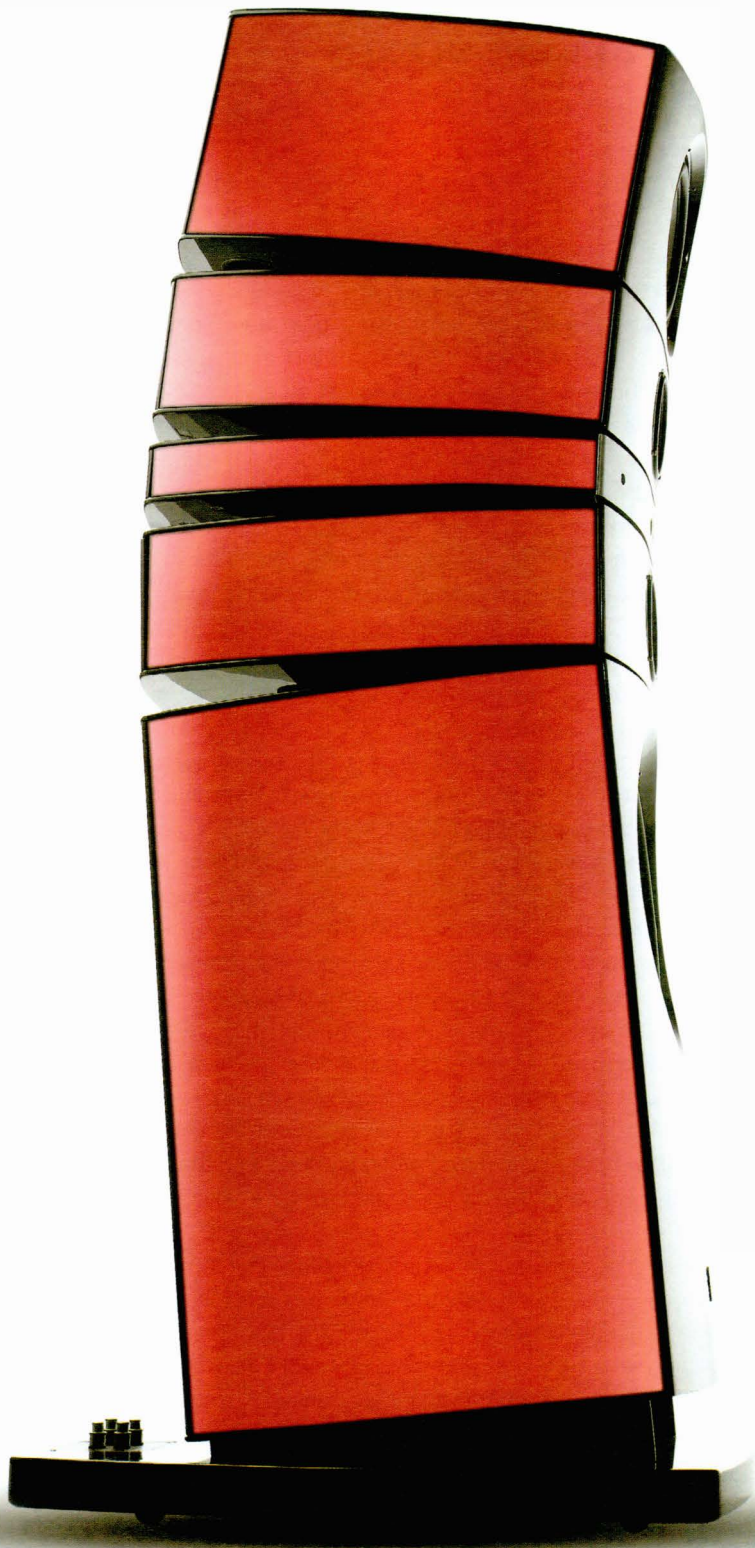
** For more detailed information on how David Berning has achieved his impedance matching design please read www.davidberning.com and in particular the review of the ZH-270 by Charles Hansen on the same site.

► I have heard a rock solid and very agile bass performance let down by a frosty tonal balance or a harshness at high frequencies. Or a beautiful vocal presentation coupled with a soft high-end and an unreasonably spongy bass. But the notion that dissecting the sound into segments to try and evaluate what the Berning amplifiers are doing is nonsense. The music is created as one. The treble does not sit, perched atop the midband and neither does the mid exist in a separate world to the bass or the rest of the music. There is absolutely no sense of the amplifier as a processor, manipulating and arranging the music into pockets of finely detailed information. This is precisely what has come to be the face of high-end amplification and I am not criticising it as, over many years I have heard and enjoyed many designs that are supreme at portraying music in this way. The yardsticks by which myself, and many others have assessed an amplifier's worth and desirability has been through the personal imprint that they bring and leave on the music. The super-etched needlepoint information that are so much a part of the modern high-end amplifier's armoury has led to a situation where the more leading edge detail you can squeeze out and the more separate it can be held from the next crystalline piece of musical detail the better. This can be hi fi at its best. But real advancements in musical sound quality just have to be about more than heavier, ever-more complex casework and better components in the same old circuit or increased power with a tighter bass and a more holographic soundstage. The amplifier, as a processor, encourages the assessment of these differentials, as within that judgement is quite often where the differences lie. Somehow, somewhere, the music is too often reduced to a supporting role when it becomes a tool for evaluating the quality and desirability of a piece of audio equipment when it should be the other way round.

The ZH-230 has very strong sonic links to the qualities of the QZ but obviously doesn't have the same driving power or musical weight, though they most certainly do possess that very special sense of note development, transition and musical progression through time. It was one of the main reasons I bought the bigger amplifiers and it has to do with the way that the notes are born, exist and then decay and flow into whatever follows and in my experience, no amplifier does it better. The Bernings have no inbuilt sense of inertia as if the sound is being driven from the speakers. Instead the amplifier almost seems to breathe the music into the room and they do this with a very different sense of musical energy that just allows things to happen. They are equally as impressive when the musician rests between notes or chords, as the sense of tranquillity followed by anticipation is palpable. The quiet is as important as the playing



and this is because of the way that the amplifier deals with decay into silence. There is no mechanical or electronic artifice here and although they do not have that hyper-real tonal bloom that attracts a lot of people to tube amplifiers, they are full of the most subtle colourful shading and delicacy. Around the leading edge of instruments they are wonderfully, naturally, precise and realistically dynamic and free, without snatching at the note or feeling remotely over-analytical or artificially and electronically etched. They are extremely organic and clean and along with the QZs, quite easily the most transparent designs I have heard which encourages you to look with your ears hard into the music and see each instrument in a more detailed and completely rounded way. Listen even deeper because, given an appropriate system, that resolution, dynamic shading and feeling of focus will not stop evolving. The complete absence of solid-state grain or compression means that the individual components of the music are rich with flavour and texture regardless how complex or demanding it might be. But don't get the idea that these amplifiers share the relative slowness of other transformer-coupled tube amps. They are fast, really fast and like all the best amplifiers, they never draw attention to that fact. I found that I played a lot more acoustic and female vocal music during my time with them but they are very willing to kick out if you ask them to get ►



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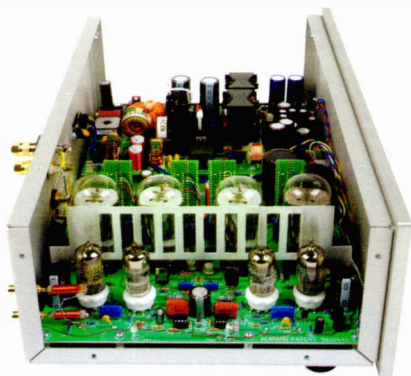


Focal UK

0845 660 2680

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ZOTL PRE ONE.

Type: Single chassis preamplifier

Power: Mains or 12v battery

Phono input: Optional and configurable

Inputs: 5- line level 4 if phono option fitted/ RCA sockets (Cardas)

Remote: No

Tube complement: (4) 12 AU7 high-level stage, (2) 12 AX7 + (2) AT7 phono stage

Headphone socket: Rear mounted ¼ inch

Dimensions: 15x42x33cm (HxWxD)

Net weight: 6 kg (13lb)

Finish: Silver anodize

Price: £7500.00

ZH-230 ZOTL Power amplifier

Type: Single chassis stereo power amplifier

Power output: 30 watts per channel

Output impedance: 0.6 to 2.7 ohms depending on tube complement

Input sensitivity: 0.4V to 0.75V

depending on tube complement and load impedance

Tube complement: (4) 33Jv6, (2) 12 AX7, (2) 12AU7

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

Dimensions: 17x42x30cm (HxWxD)

Weight: 7kg (15lb)

Finish: Silver anodize

Price: £7500

Manufacturer: The David Berning Company

URL: www.davidberning.com

Distributed in the UK by: Blade, Farnham, Surrey, UK

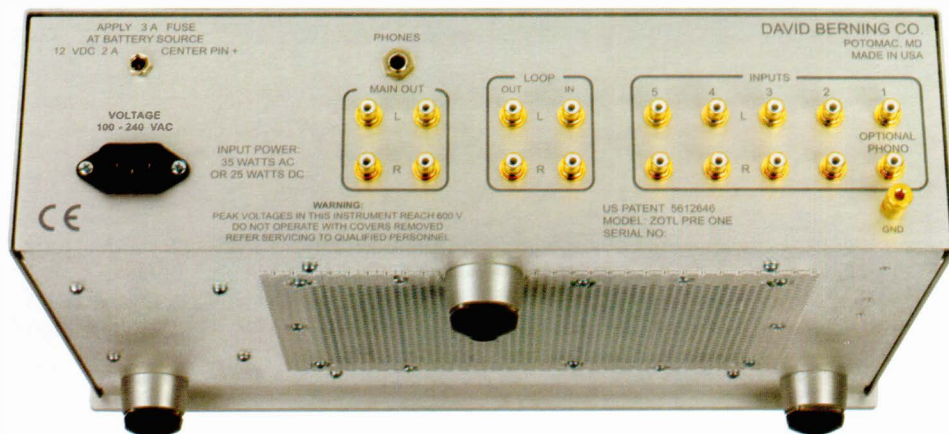
URL: www.blade-audio.com

e-mail: david@blade-audio.com

Tel: 01252 737 374

▶ to grips with something much heavier and are not at all shy when doing so. If the occasion demands it then the Bernings are more than capable of swinging big dynamics. You certainly need to bear in mind that, at 30 watts this is no muscle-amp, but even so I think you would be surprised at just what a useable output that is when you remove grain and leading-edge distortions. Polyrhythmic music is no problem whatsoever. Ask them as many questions as you like with different interweaving tempos, real and implied and they will unravel each thread with ease and in an unflustered and relaxed way. When the music moves through time as naturally uninhibited as this then questions about timing are irrelevant because the rhythmic flow and the way the amplifier realises tempo with all its associated elements, emphases and subtleties really comes under the heading of overall resolution. This is where the Pre One and ZH-230 are so supremely confident and to the point. Their sensitivity to micro-dynamics leaves them unsurpassed when it comes to showing you pure musical expression and phrasing. It's as though they are plugged in to the playing on an emotional level and they can change your mind and involvement with a piece of music in one insightful heartbeat.

Considered as a separate component, the preamplifier is full of gain, and presence partially due to the low-loss ceramic circuit board material. Put simply, it has a "big" sound and is also one of the best two line-stages I have ever heard, regardless of price. Those two individual channel attenuators I mentioned earlier are shunted to ground, out of the signal path when fully advanced but I can detect no loss of resolution when they are employed. The first 3 clicks each reduce the level by 1 dB and I often use them to take a touch of gain out of the system when the recording level is high or I want to lean the sound a touch. It does not impact the actual music but, especially if you listen in the near field and use a pair of high efficiency speakers, the ability to "trim" the sound in this way is extremely useful and similar in effect to altering the position of the speakers. I found the Pre One is a lot more versatile because of their inclusion and they could also come in useful when matching sensitivities with an alternative power amplifier. But these two really belong together if you are going to get the full benefits of David Berning's remarkable designs. I believe that these amplifiers are important in the audio world because, as well as their technical brilliance and innovation, they remain supreme at playing and bringing new music into your life and I can pay them no higher compliment than that because that is precisely what it is all about. +



[sometimes]
technology meets art...



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

SPENDOR SP100 R2

By Paul Messenger

I believe Walter Chrysler was the first who observed: "There's no substitute for cubic inches". He was talking in American and about car engines, but one could equally well substitute those lovely metric litres and apply the quote to loudspeakers.

The LS3/5a appreciation society will doubtless object to such a statement, and there's no denying that tiny speakers have several inherent advantages. I should therefore replace that quote by another that states: "A good big one will always beat a good little one", a much more defensible statement because it emphasises the word 'good'. That's partly because it's not only

much harder to build a high quality large loudspeaker than a small one, simply because it's far more difficult to control much bigger enclosures, but also because the deeper one tries to delve into the bass, the more room interaction problems raise their heads and get in the way.

But the facts remain, if you want the very best, that's bound to include loudspeakers capable of delivering genuinely deep bass alongside exceptional headroom, such as the new £6,295/pair Spendor SP100R2 reviewed here.

It's not a pretty loudspeaker, for sure – indeed some visitors described it as downright ugly. It definitely (quite deliberately I suspect) takes no account of the fashion trends that seem to drive the loudspeaker business, being a very large (37x70x43cm) stand-mount. But it does largely adhere to the dictum that form should follow function, at least within the confines of a single rectilinear enclosure, which on this occasion encompasses a considerable volume of around 90 litres.





This is the latest member of Spendor's Classics, a range that really originated way back in the early 1970s. The SP100R2's earliest traceable ancestor is arguably the 1973 Spendor BC3 (though some might point to the 1960s BBC LS5/5 monitor, built by KEF). Both these had broadly similar driver configurations to, but rather slimmer enclosures than, the S100 which replaced the BC3 in 1989. In 1994 the S100 morphed into the SP100, then the SP100R, and now becomes the SP100R2, essentially upgrading and updating the drive units and crossover network components within a similar shape and size enclosure.

All these models were or are essentially large three-way stand-mounts (albeit with an extra HF2000 supertweeter in the BC3), and all these Spendors used and use a variation on port-loading a large and very refined 12-inch bextrene-coned bass driver. Extra elastomer damping is now applied to the cone.

The SP100R2 has a new 180mm (7-inch) midrange unit with a translucent 115mm diameter cone in ep38 polymer, and a fixed central 'bullet' phase compensator. Sandwiched between the bass and midrange driver is the new, nominally 22mm, SEAS-sourced wide-surround tweeter that has been spreading through Spendor's several ranges recently. The twin ports that flank the tweeter are now injection-moulded for improved linearity.

Well- and carefully-damped thin-wall enclosures have been a key Spendor feature since its earliest days. The theory is that the relatively cabinet walls will resonate at lower frequencies than stiffer structures, so that the unavoidable cabinet colorations are

moved away from critical midrange frequencies and down towards the bass region where they cause less harm. The inset front baffle has been beefed up for the SP100R2, improving its mechanical integrity and the control of the thin-wall sides. (The rear panel is also inset.) The total weight is 34kg, which is substantial enough, but actually quite modest in view of its bulk.

Again in the Spendor tradition, all drive units and crossovers are individually calibrated and pair-matched during manufacture, and the (optional) grille is also carefully designed from an acoustic point of view. The complex, phase-aligned crossover network is well stuffed with high quality components, such as ClarityCaps, and internal wiring uses heavy silver-plated multi-strand copper conductors with superior insulation. Two pairs of multi-way socket/binder terminals are bolted directly through the rear panel, optionally linked by supplied brass strips.

Choosing the stand height caused some angst, as one tends to place a speaker so that one's seated ears are around the same height as the tweeter, or between the tweeter and the midrange unit. Because the tweeter is set below the midrange unit here, that requires 60cm stands, which is an aesthetically challenging prospect. While agreeing that tall stands should work well, Spendor suggests 35-50cm stands will be more acceptable domestically, so both were tried.

In-room frequency response measurements were taken under far-field stereo conditions, with the speakers mounted on 19 inch stands and sited well clear of walls. This 'power response' showed a pretty good bass alignment, very well maintained down to -2dB at 20Hz, while the room-mode-related boost at 50Hz stayed under reasonable control.

Output is just a little strong across the whole bass region, and very smooth and well balanced through much of the midband. However, there's also a rather obvious peak across the 1kHz and 2kHz octave, and some unevenness 2-5kHz. Raising the speakers up onto higher 24 inch stands (admittedly not a particularly pretty sight) did improve the overall balance a little, by rendering that 1-2kHz peak a little less obtrusive. ▶

“Again in the Spendor tradition, all drive units and crossovers are individually calibrated and pair-matched during manufacture”

▶ Spendor's sensitivity claim is a quite conservative 89dB/W – I'd have given the speaker 90dB. Furthermore, although the impedance trace is quite complex, it never falls below an easy-to-drive 7 ohms. The ports are tuned to a very low 23Hz.

Sonically the SP100R2 has plenty going for it, but there are some grounds for criticism nevertheless. The speakers were positioned well clear of walls and placed first on 19 inch and subsequently on 25 inch Kudos S100 stands. The driving system primarily consisted of Naim NAC552/NAP500 amplification, Naim CDS3/555PS and Rega Valve Isis CD players, Magnum Dynalab MD106T FM tuner and a Linn/Rega hybrid vinyl player with SoundSmith Strain Gauge cartridge. Interconnect and mains cables were from Naim, Phonosophie, Vertex AQ, the Chord Company and TM Systems. Speaker cables were VertexAQ HiRez Moncayo.

Besides listening to the SP100R2s at length in isolation, it was also possible to compare them directly to several relevant references. These included historic Spendor BC1s, plus the PMC IB2i and B&W 800 Diamond current models.

The SP100R2's most obvious strength lies in its impressive overall homogeneity and coherence. Cabinet coloration is clearly very well controlled indeed here, which is really quite surprising for such a large enclosure, and a testament to the efficacy of Spendor's unique 'thin wall' cabinet approach. And because it largely avoids generating listening fatigue, that in turn makes this speaker very easy to listen to over the long haul.

It was certainly significantly preferred on the higher 25 inch stands, whereupon the speaker were remarkably adept at 'disappearing' sonically, leaving just the music properly laid out across the soundstage, with full bandwidth and wide dynamic range. That said, image depth did seem a trifle constrained.

It's not entirely without coloration: comparisons with the BC1 showed that the SP100R2's measured upper-mid peak was audible enough as a slight 'cupped hands' exaggeration. While voices are a tad over-projected and the top end is a shade restrained, neither of these factors are particularly intrusive, nor do they significantly detract from the impressive overall character.

The bass end of things adds plenty of weight and scale, but its grip and tension are a little less than the best, and these showed their limitations when confronted with heavy rock and dance material. In truth, this speaker just seems a little more comfortable with Mozart than with Massive Attack

One major advantage that a big 3-way has over more conventional 2-way designs is of course greatly increased power handling and loudness capability. That certainly applies to this speaker, but perhaps rather more important is the very sweet, natural and delicate sound it delivers when operating at very low levels.

It's difficult to evaluate the value for money of a very costly loudspeaker like this, but the SP100R2's £6,295 per pair seems to fit in with its rivals pretty well. It's not as good as the big B&W 800 Diamond, but it's only a third of the price, while it seems like pretty good competition for the slightly more costly PMC IB2i. Each of these speakers has its own quite distinct physical and sonic characters, both of which will influence any purchase decision. One might be unlikely to pick the SP100R2 on aesthetic grounds, but it does supply a wonderfully homogenous, full bandwidth sound that will particularly suit those that favour classical material. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 3-way stand-mount
Drive units: HF 22mm wide-surround
 Midrange 18cm, ep38 cone
 LF 30cm, damped bextrene cone
Sensitivity: 89dB/W (90dB/W measured)
Crossover points: 550Hz, 3.8kHz
Frequency response: 45Hz - 20kHz ± 3dB anechoic
Bass extension: -6dB @ 35Hz anechoic
Impedance: 8 ohms nom, 6 ohms min
Pair matched: within 1dB
Power handling: 200W unclipped program
Finish: cherry or black ash veneer
Size (wxhxd, cm): 37x70x430
Weight: 36kg
Price: £6,295 per pair

Manufacturer: Spendor Audio Systems Ltd, G5 Ropemaker Park, South Road Hailsham, East Sussex. BN27 3GY UK

URL: www.spendoraudio.com
Tel: 01323 843474



The Cool Gales Analogue Fest

...will be in Bath on Saturday, 4 June, at the Bath and County Club. We'll be featuring several fabulous stereo systems, ranging from the eminently affordable to the ultra high-end. No AV, no surround-sound, no TVs, just pure two-channel sound with a focus on analogue, plus a few digital front ends.

Several components will be making their UK debuts this year, including the magnificent **Artemis Labs SA-1 turntable and TA-1 tonearm**, both designed by analogue guru Frank Schröder and hand-built in California.



Aesthetix will feature their no-compromise **Eclipse lo phono stage**, a two-box, 24-valve beauty.



Esoteric will demo their extraordinary range of amplification for the first time at any UK event, including the **E-03 phono stage**.



≈ COOL GALES

Eclipse TD will have their speaker range for audition, including the top-of-the-range **TD712z Mk 2**, "more life-like and cohesive than just about anything you can buy" (*What Hi-Fi?*).

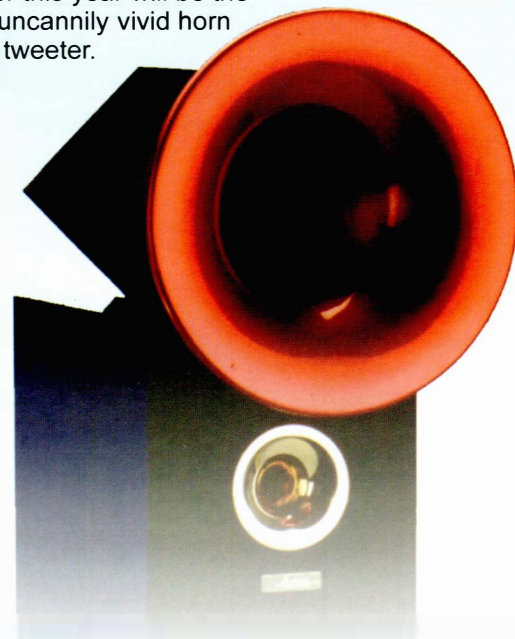
Leema Acoustics will be showing their new **Elements range** of compact components, perfect for a budget or second system, plus of course the rest of their fabulous range.

The new **Stax earspeaker system range** will be on dem, also for the first time at any UK event.



There'll be a demonstration of the **Keith Monks** record cleaning system, our reference here at Cool Gales.

And our guest speaker this year will be the **Acapella Violon**, an uncannily vivid horn design with a plasma tweeter.



There'll be loads more. **Diverse Vinyl** will be on hand, offering the best of new vinyl pressings. Also on hand will be Jim White of Aesthetix, Mallory Nicholls and Lee Taylor of Leema, Jon Monks of Keith Monks, and Alan Sircom of *Hi-Fi+*.

The Bath and County Club is located just off Queen Square in central Bath, a short walk from the Charlotte Street car park. Doors open at 10 AM, and we'll close at 4:30 PM. The £3 admission includes tea and coffee, with all admission proceeds going to **Action for Children**.

For more information, visit
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Kuzma Stabi S-12 turntable and Stogi S-12 tonearm

By Alan Sircom

No matter what kind of turntable you use, like or prefer, there's something about the Kuzma Stabi S that will always attract. It's that well-engineered minimalism – just a brass T-bar (inherently rigid and not vibration prone) with a motor at one end and a bearing fitted into one of the spars. Who needs feet when rubber O-rings do the job? Even the platter – a pressed and machined aluminium plate that is anodized and plated, then fitted with a rubberized textile compound mat – is engineered for rough-housing.

The Stogi S damped unipivot is similarly minimalist in construction, in its none-more-black and brass finish. Like the deck, it's built to last; maybe not to the road-digger solidity of the turntable, but you could still win a bar brawl with the arm and not find a scratch on the thing. And fortunately, both products have a sonic performance that gives as good as it gets, and the Tonka Toy build does not undermine the excellent sound quality.

All of which caused a spot of panic when Kuzma announced it was to make a 12" version of both deck and arm. Would the magic be broken? Would it still be the sort of turntable you might imagine Brunel would

make? Fortunately, both rely on healthy doses of a 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' ethos, and the extension in no way compromises the performance of the original designs. Which says a lot about those original designs that they can be extended out relatively easily. And also, given the elegant simplicity of the design, it's a near-zero maintenance product.

“Fortunately, both products have a sonic performance that gives as good as it gets, and the Tonka Toy build does not undermine the excellent sound quality.”

If you are the kind of person who thinks manuals are for wimps, you'll love the pairing. While it's not as simple as unpacking it and pressing the 'go' button, taking the deck out of the box will still probably take longer than putting it together. The arm assembly is more involved and you'll need the manual – especially as there's a silicone-damped dashpot to contend with – but it will still take you longer to accurately align a cartridge than it will to install the arm. The only truly difficult parts involve adjusting VTA (an exercise in getting an Allen key under the arm base, which can be tricky), azimuth adjustment (the counterweights double up as tracking force and azimuth compensation) and anti-skate. This last involves connecting a weight and wheel on the base to a little brass hook on the arm itself and can be fiddly. In fairness, anti-skate bias adjustment doesn't seem to be that vitally important here, perhaps a function of unipivots in general.

Kuzma supplies comprehensive manuals for both deck and arm, along with a suitable protractor designed for a 12" arm, but this last was being printed at the time of writing, so instead I used the excellent revised version ▶

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▶ of the Dr Feickert protractor to great effect. As most vinyl-lovers know, the two alignment points on the deck are not the secret to the 12" arm's potentially great sound, it's the lower distortion between these two points that makes the difference.

The review of the Stabi S-12 is essentially going over old ground. What applies to the standard Stabi S applies here in almost identical measure. It's a very quiet, measured sounding deck, more concerned with providing a neutral platform for the arm

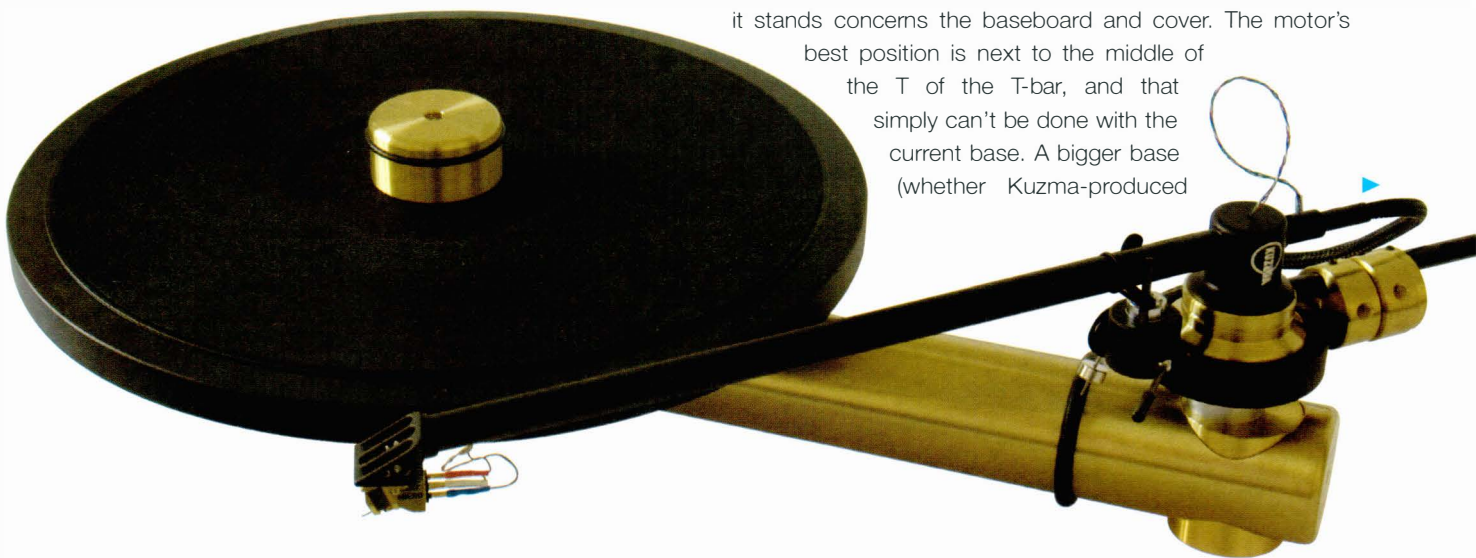
“If the deck is designed to get out of the way so the arm can extract the maximum information off the groove, this arm steps up to the task perfectly.”

to extract the maximum amount of information than it is making a song and dance about the process of spinning a platter. It retains the sense of music rising out of a neutral silent background and the overall presentation is pitched only slightly on the warm side of things (this really only manifests itself when compared to colder sounding decks like the Clearaudios of this world, and is reminiscent of Notts Analogue and SME decks... so it's clearly a tonality popular with UK ears). As mentioned before, the big issue here is that there is no issue; if you like the Stabi S, you'll like the Stabi S-12.

The Kuzma Stogi S-12 is the true star of the show, not least because this is one of two S-12 variants; the other – expected soon – places the arm on an outrigger of the Kuzma VTA base, allowing both on-the-fly VTA adjustment and fitting to a deck designed for 9" arms. Ignore that for the moment, however. The move from 9" to 12" necessitated a longer chassis element to compensate for the longer arm tube and there were a few adjustments and improvements to the basic design along the way. The arm retains the same medium mass and damping schema as the standard Stogi S, which makes it a fine choice with good moving coil designs. The Benz SLR tested last issue was – I felt – a cartridge made for the SME. Then I heard it on the Stogi S-12 and realised what wonders it was still giving up (so much so, I think the cartridge is worth a thorough re-visit). The arm doesn't sit as comfortably with high compliance, low mass moving magnets or moving irons though; the damping at the base tends to make the cantilever of such designs a touch too active when riding warps in records.

If your unipivot kung fu began and ended with the Naim Aro, the concept of damping may seem alien, but it works. It means the arm doesn't feel twitchy when cueing up a record. It also seems to give the arm a more clearly defined and authoritative bass and a more extended top end. If the deck is designed to get out of the way so the arm can extract the maximum information off the groove, this arm steps up to the task perfectly. What this offers is a sense of even-handedness that is made all the more real and valid by the reduction of tracing distortion a 12" design brings. What this means in musical terms is simply more gets through and does so with greater clarity and neutrality. I find the Pixies Surfer Rosa on MoFi to be a real torture album for most decks, because adding distortion to an already distorted sound can make for a very grating sound. Here, it manages to retain all the energy and excitement of this seminal post-punk band, but also does so with greater precision.

The criticism that can most readily be leveled at the current deck as it stands concerns the baseboard and cover. The motor's best position is next to the middle of the T of the T-bar, and that simply can't be done with the current base. A bigger base (whether Kuzma-produced





TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Kuzma Stabi S-12/Stogi S-12 turntable/ arm combination

Motor type: Synchronous AC motor

Main assembly: Brass T-Bar chassis, oversize aluminium platter

Suspension system: Unsuspended turntable

Arm type: 12" Damped unipivot tonearm

Complete price: £2,750 (excl. Cartridge)

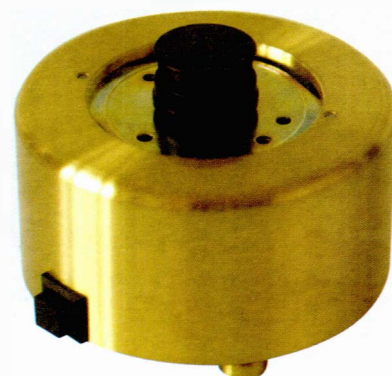
Manufactured by: Kuzma

URL: www.kuzma.si

Distributed by: Audiofreaks

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)20 8948 4153

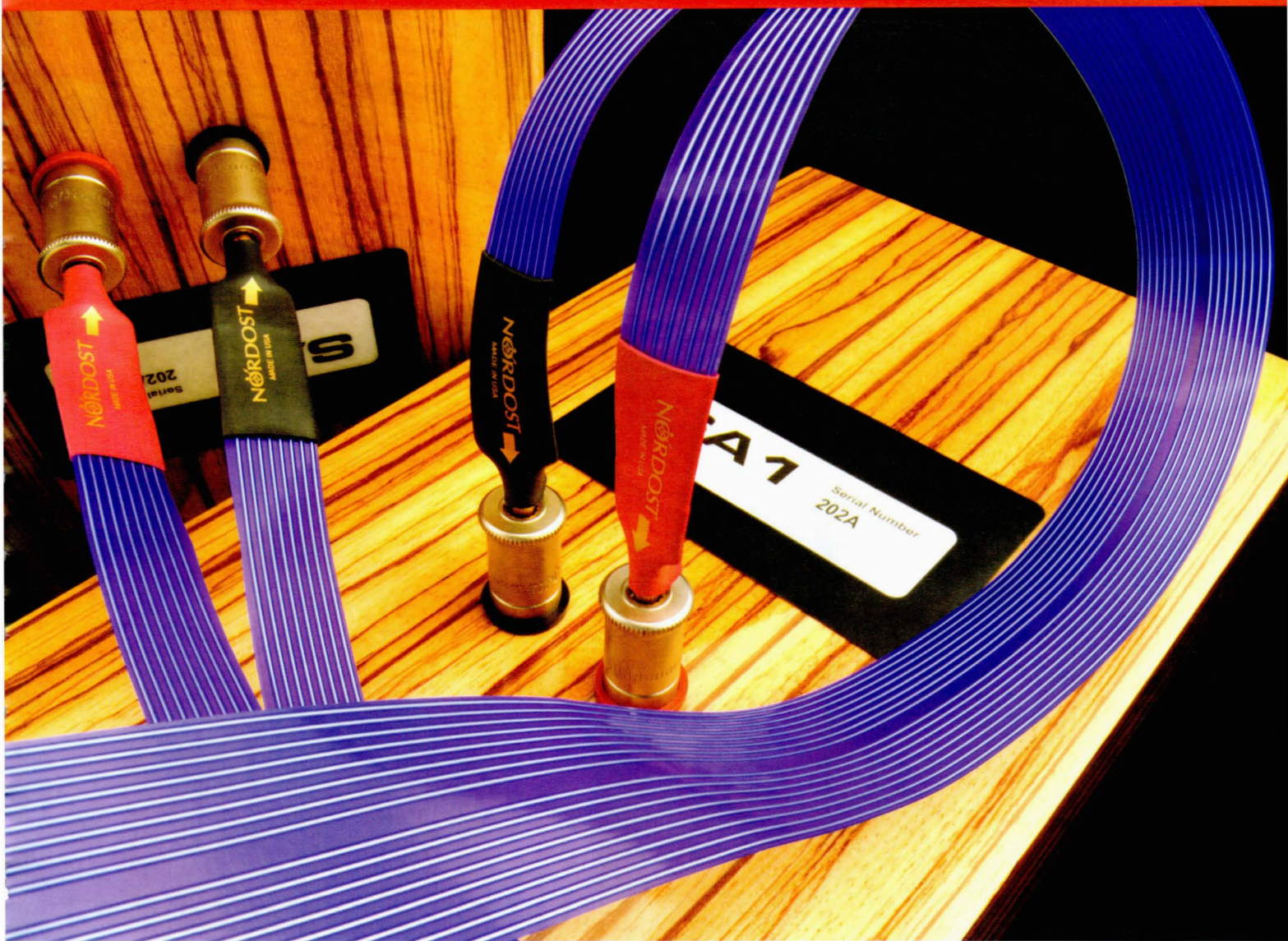


► or custom-made) would be a lot better, as would a new larger cover. I suspect both are in the pipeline. There is also the price-creep that comes when adding those extra arm inches. The standard Kuzma Stabi S/Stogi S combination is roughly the price of a Michell Gyrodec, while the S-12 combo costs as much as an Orbe. It is still competitive (in fact, the deck+arm costs slightly less than a 12" SME V arm on its own), but it does put the Kuzma combination up against stiff competition. Fortunately for the Kuzma combo, it still wins.

Finally, there are a couple of potential upgrades that will raise the sonics still further. The first is a Heavy Platter kit, a £450 extension that sits between existing inner and main platter to add mass. There's also the SD (or SD-12 add-on, which is a relatively straightforward standalone outrigger that can be used to add a second arm to the Stabi without tears. Fortunately, all of these upgrades can be made post-purchase, and the only mechanical actions that need to be performed to the deck are basically lifting up parts of it.

There is also an upgrade that's popular outside of the UK, which adds an electronic speed control box and brings superior speed stability and the chance to switch to 45rpm without using the supplied pulley adaptor. As this brings the cost of the complete package up to almost £4,000, the distributor thinks this is an upgrade too far.

There is a temptation to think of the Stogi S-12/Stabi S-12 combo as the stretch limo of the Kuzma world. But it's more than that; the typical stretch takes a perfectly reasonable car and messes up its suspension geometry, fills it with an uncomfortable and garish interior that always faintly smells of spilled Remy Martin, cheap perfume and Lambrini sick. In short, it's tacky. This just adds to the Stabi S/Stogi S, and takes nothing away, apart from tracing distortion. It's no longer cheap, but still represents one of the cheapest ways to get into the joys of 12" arms today. If you really love your vinyl, this is the next step forward. +



Three Steps To Heaven...

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

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



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

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

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MAKING THE CONNECTION



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

ATC SCM100SL AT

By Jason Kennedy

In the once smoky, now merely claustrophobic world of professional audio you don't come across many passive loudspeakers with separate power amps. I've visited one exception which proved the rule and that was Abbey Road where B&W were sponsoring the monitoring, but in most instances you get a

pair of nearfield monitors on the desk and a bigger set of speakers further away, and both will be actively powered. It makes a lot of sense in that environment because they take up less space and offer more control, and when you are playing at high level all day you want a monitoring system that can take the punishment without sharing the pain. The studio and the PA world is where ATC made its name and where it continues to have fun, designing custom made systems for concert halls and the like. The guys running ATC, Billy Woodman and Bob Polly, give the impression that they don't give a monkeys

SME MODEL 20/3



This finely engineered precision turntable is built to the same exacting standard and incorporates many design features originated for the Model 20/12. Massive construction, extensional damping of major surfaces and lack of vibration from moving parts ensures exceptional detail, resolution and uncoloured performance.

The Model 20/3A illustrated is equipped with the acclaimed Series V *'the best pick-up arm in the world'*.

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HI-FI WORLD

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“Despite their size they are remarkably easy speakers to accommodate inasmuch as they are not as fussy about placement as the average large passive design.”

about the domestic audio world. But contrarily the company keeps on building variations on its pro themes for us end users and the SCM100SL AT is one of those. It's a floorstander, or tower version, of the stand mounted active 100 litre three-way that has been in the range for quite a while and which also exists as a pro model. The tower design gets rid of a less than beautiful stand and produces a more substantial looking speaker, real wood veneer extends nearly to the ground where it has a black plinth which accepts spikes or glides if you'd prefer not to nail these heavyweights to your polished wooden floor.

The actual drive units are fixed to a baffle that's also in black and adds another 34mm to the braced 18mm thickness of the cabinet. This provides an edge for the grille to slide onto, an arrangement that ATC recommends you use when listening because the grille is designed to eliminate diffraction at the sharp baffle edges. ATC makes two of the three drive units in this speaker at its facility near Stroud in Gloucestershire, only the tweeter is brought in. ATC started out as a drive unit maker and has continued on this path for the independence and flexibility that it provides.

The tweeter is a 25mm soft dome with a neodymium magnet while the mid is ATC's classic 75mm dome, a key driver in the company's range and a fundamental reason why these speakers are so revealing. Like the bass driver it has flat, edge wound OFC wire in a short voice coil that operates in a long magnetic gap for maximum control. Another control factor is the use of massive motor assemblies/magnets combined, in the bass driver, with ATC's Super Linear rings which sit between the main magnet and the voice coil, the latter suppress eddy currents in the voice coil which allows for increased impedance and in sonic terms a reduction in third harmonic distortion. This is probably why pianos have more body, attack and dynamic range than is usually the case. It's impossible of course to separate what the drivers contribute from the amplifiers in an active loudspeaker, this like the rest of the Tower range has a 350 watt class A/B tri-amp pack on its back and an electronic crossover between input and amps. The direct connection from power amp to drive unit is the major advantage of active loudspeakers, the amps are tailored exactly to the requirements of the speaker and there are no crossover components between the two. The other side of this coin is that active crossovers are more complex than passive ones which makes it harder to build truly transparent examples. If you want real world dynamics however there is no other route this side of the full range horn that can do the job, and no full range horn that I've heard has the bass extension on offer from the 12inch bass driver on this speaker. This monster is the reason for the overall girth of the SCM100SL, that is girth in terms of size and prodigiousness in the bass, if you want to feel the earth move this is the device to achieve that end.

Despite their size they are remarkably easy speakers to accommodate inasmuch as they are not as fussy about placement as the average large passive design. Specifically you can put them quite close to a rear wall and, room shape allowing, this doesn't result in exaggerated bass. The front firing port helps here as does the fact that they are voiced for transparency and precision rather than flattery, a situation that can give the impression that they are tonally lean. But play a few more pieces and you discover that they merely reflect the original balance with greater accuracy than usual and ▶



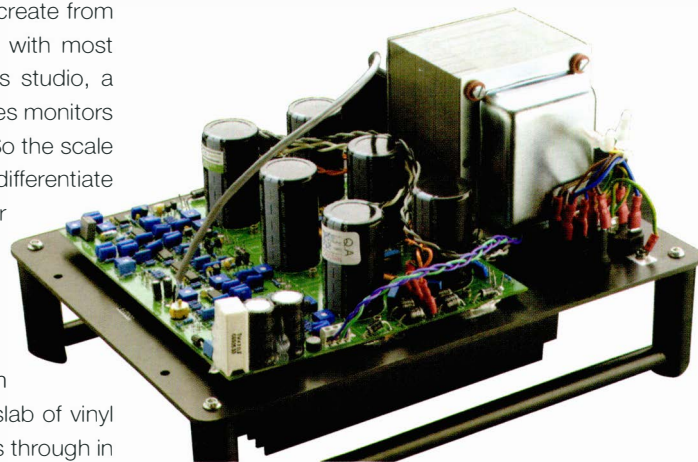
▶ that some recordings have considerably more low end on them than others. This point gets to the nub of what these speakers are about, the differences between recordings, this rather than fidelity to an oft non-existent absolute is what all hi-fi should be about. With purist recordings of acoustic music it's possible to have some idea of what a high fidelity result might sound like but in all other cases there either is no absolute sound or it's nearly impossible to know what it is. In a studio recording for instance what you have is a construct made largely on a computer, it might have original instruments on it but the end result is what the producer, engineer and mastering engineer create from those originals. The nearest thing there is to an absolute sound with most contemporary music is what the mastering engineer heard in his studio, a place that has pretty alien acoustics by domestic standards and uses monitors that are more like these ATCs than most domestic loudspeakers. So the scale of difference between the sound of recordings is the best way to differentiate audio components even if this is at odds with aspects of tonality or timing. And on this front this speaker is supreme, the degree of exposure is so great that you have to be very careful that you are not just discovering the limitations of the partnering source and preamp.

But with a Townshend Rock 7 turntable, Funk FXR tonearm and Van den Hul Condor cartridge extracting information from a slab of vinyl it's difficult not to get into the groove so to speak. The music shines through in no uncertain terms thanks in part to the ease with which these speakers can play at higher levels, classic Led Zeppelin always sounds good but it sounds a lot better when reproduced with an amp and speakers that are able to unleash it at the appropriate volume without struggling to do so. This not merely a headbangers speaker which is fortunate because I don't go in for that sort of thing so much these days, equally engrossing is the degree of realism they can impart to a fine acoustic recording like Keith Jarrett's Jasmine. Here the speaker's ability to reproduce piano comes into its own by placing Keith and Charlie (Haden not Watts) in the room, the piano's heavy structure providing a solid foundation for the music.

Imaging doesn't always seem like a strongpoint with these speakers but again it becomes apparent over time that a lot of material doesn't have pinpoint stereo information but that which does produces solid images that stretch both wide and deep. It's a recording thing again, a multitracked rock album from the seventies is not likely to have been made with this factor very high on the agenda but a contemporary jazz one delivers a precise image in the context of a vibrant sound.

They can also conjure up complete concert halls with LPs that in many respects sound ancient, Alfred Brendel's 1968 rendition of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 is a good example. Here the sense of the hall's scale is palpable, it's clearly an enormous space thanks to the low frequency extension and control of the loudspeakers. You cannot achieve this precision at low frequencies with a passive system, you may be able to produce a more refined sounding mid and top but there will always be the question of whether that refinement is a product of some smoothing factor in the amplifier, cable and loudspeaker.

These full scale monitors are from the warts and all school of transparency, there is no sweetener at all so if you like a clean, refined sound it will need to be delivered by the recording and source. This is the way that it should always be of course but rarely do pure hi-fi companies have the balls to deliver it with as little compromise as ATC. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Tweeter: 25mm soft dome

Midrange: ATC SM-150 s soft dome

Bass: 314mm SL doped paper

Active filters and overload protection.
6 year warranty.

Finish: any veneer to order

Max SPL : 115dB

Crossover Frequencies : 380Hz & 3.5kHz

Connectors : Male XLR

Filters : All active

Amplifier Output : 200w LF, 100w Mid,
50w HF

Cabinet Dimensions (HxWxD):

1070x397x560mm

Weight : 68kg

Price: £11,614 per pair

Manufacturer: ATC, Gypsy Lane, Aston
Down, Stroud, Gloucestershire. GL6 8HR.

URL: www.atcloudspeakers.co.uk

Tel: 01285 760561

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium Integrated Amplifier

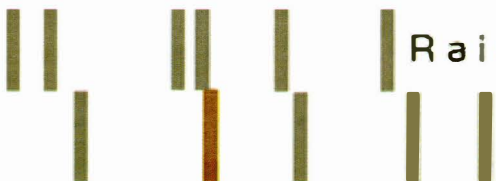
By Neil Gader

The ProLogue Premium Series is the latest collection of tube electronics from PrimaLuna. The lineup includes an integrated amplifier—the subject of this review—also a preamp, a stereo amplifier, and a 70W monoblock. Like all PrimaLuna electronics the ProLogue Premium has been designed in Germany and Holland and manufactured in China. For PrimaLuna, the Premium Series becomes the “tweener” line geared to bridge the performance/feature gap between the entry-level ProLogue and the more advanced and costlier DiaLogue.

The ProLogue Premium integrated outputs 35Wpc. It is based on the EL34 output tube (but KT88s, 6L6GCs, and a variety of others may be used) and runs exclusively in Ultralinear mode. Visually it mirrors the clean, contemporary design of the DiaLogue with its massive transformers to the rear, EL34 output tubes centerstage, and the 12AU7 valves nearest the front panel. Only two knobs—volume and input—bedeck the thick, narrow faceplate, with a multi-color lamp indicating power and mute.

Performance has been significantly upgraded over the ProLogue with refreshed front-end circuitry (optimized for the two 12AU7 tubes per channel) that, among other things, increases the synergy between the amp and a new optional moving-magnet phono stage. The new, larger, dual-mono power and output transformers have been modeled after those in the DiaLogue Series and fine-tuned with additional windings for improved control over challenging speaker loads. The ProLogue Premium also adds

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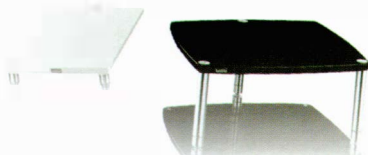
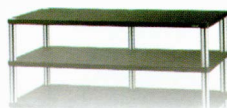


Jordan Acoustics



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NEW - Geometry Series by Wilson Benesch

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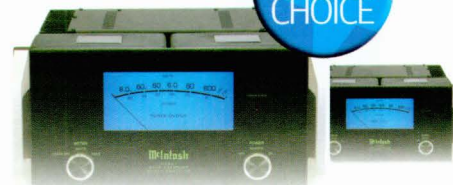
The Geometry Series is comprised of four amazing models:

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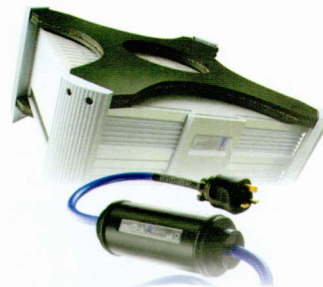


hi-finews
EDITOR'S
CHOICE

NEW - MC601 by McIntosh

" There was an immediate sensation apparent upon hearing this McIntosh combination, even from ice cold: that of true greatness in every sense of the word. "

Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News, May 2011



NEW - Super Titan & Syncro by Isotek

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. The ultimate high-current mains conditioner? **Unquestionably.**

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

Hi-Fi Piac, Hungary

a home-theater pass-through; a slender, full-function, anodized-aluminum remote is standard.

As with all PrimaLuna components, the ProLogue Premium integrated incorporates a great deal of hand-assembly and point-to-point wiring. Anyone who has taken a peek under the hood (I have) can see that these guys aren't kidding when they holler about the premium parts they use. There are ceramic tube sockets, Solen and Nichicon capacitors, WBT-style solid-core speaker terminals with 4- and 8-ohm taps, and an ALPS Blue Velvet volume control. Very nice.

The Prologue Premium wouldn't be a PrimaLuna if it weren't easy to use. This has been a large part of PL's mission from the beginning—demystifying the world of tubes and calming suspicions that valve electronics misbehave, are as capricious as your grandpa's old lawnmower, and, most importantly, need to cost a huge amount of money to be sonically satisfying. To put these fears to rest once and for all, Adaptive Auto Bias (AAB), where a single switch allows users to re-calibrate the amp after making the switch from the EL-34s to KT-88s or back again, is standard equipment. The circuit continuously monitors and adjusts each tube to run in its sweet spot. Rebiasing is a ritual that I, for one, won't miss.

The ProLogue Premium Series has more levels of protection than the secret service. There's a Bad Tube Indicator circuit that works in conjunction with the aforementioned AAB circuitry. If the tube goes bad a small LED lights up in front of the ailing valve and a relay opens, muting the amp and protecting it. When you replace the tube the relay closes automatically and the amplifier is back in operation. There's also the Power Transformer Protection circuit, which, in the event of power-transformer overheating, cuts primary power until the amp cools off and then resets. Finally there's the Output Transformer Protection circuit, which disables the output transformers in the event of massive tube failure or (gasp) user error.

Sonically, the Pro-Prem does not have the rosy, euphonic colorations of traditional triode or SET tubes. Which for me is all to the good. There is a

glimmer of romance and softness, but tonally it's a thoroughly contemporary tube amp that walks a mostly neutral line yet still flavors and seasons the lowest level details of music with an almost tender delicacy and a resolution that I associate with the best of both the solid-state and tube worlds. There's an inner light to images that I initially noted when I listened to Diana Krall's performance of "A Case of You" from *Live In Paris* [Verve]. Her voice has a lilt, a buoyancy, that I rarely hear on amps in this price range. To me it's the magic of dynamic nuance and low-level energy being retrieved—each note of her piano segues into the next with silken harmonic continuity. And there is a low-level cue during Sinatra's "Angel Eyes" that no other integrated amp has defined as well. It's just a very soft rhythmic tap of the snare in the far right channel. In the past I've heard it sound unrecognizable as a snare, but the quiet rattles of this distinctive drum didn't slip past the PrimaLuna.

Does the ProLogue Premium like to swing? Does it ever. Just listen to "I Hope Gabriel Likes My Music" from *Dick Hyman Swings All-Stars* [Reference Recordings] to hear the combination of micro-dynamics and transient detail that illuminates timbre, cymbal textures, and broadens the range of expression imparted by the soloists—from the brassy explosive bloom of the trumpet to the sweet slippery glide of the clarinet to the grit and texture of the sax. Their unique voices counter and balance one another in a mix that is portrayed with great vigor by this integrated amp.

Bass response is full, warm, and rounded, though not as controlled as that of a solid-state piece like the Perreux ▶





energy that seemed to swirl within the soundspace, providing a wetter acoustic rather than the

tinder-dry micro-detail I often

hear with transistor amps.

It's hard to walk away from this amp without being mightily impressed. PrimaLuna's latest effort goes to the heart of what the high end represents for many of us. Quality craftsmanship and great sonics? Of course. A fairly priced package? Sure. But, most importantly, the ProLogue Premium places the emphasis on ingredients that often elude more commonplace electronics—the liveliness and fluidity of the musical event. If you've been around as long as I have, then you know how hard it is to put a premium on that. +

Originally published in TAS issue 212

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium Integrated Amplifier

Power output: 35Wpc (40Wpc w/KT88s)

Inputs: Four RCA, one home-theater bypass

Dimensions: 14.5" x 8" x 15.5"

Weight: 46.3 lbs.

Price: £2,600

Manufactured by: PrimaLuna

URL: www.primaluna.nl

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)20 8971 3909

▶ Audiant 80i. However, PrimaLuna bass is in its own way equally natural. During the "Gabriel," the Pro-Prem conveys a ripeness and reverberant bloom to the opening tom-tom fill that make the instrument sound remarkably vigorous and authentic. The bloom and expansiveness of the organ pedal points were also noteworthy during the Rutter *Requiem*, although the amp couldn't quite resolve the fluttering tremolo on the track "Lux Aeterna."

At this juncture it's fair to point out that, when it comes to speaker-matching, there's a narrower performance sweetspot for lower-powered amps. Any and all will lose a share of transient liveliness and flatten dynamics with speakers of lower sensitivity. However, it was love at first sight for the ProLogue Premium and the newest Vienna Acoustics Mozart Grand SE loudspeaker (about 90dB sensitivity), which I will be reviewing in a forthcoming issue.

With vocals there was an almost subliminal presence shift that lightly lifted the upper register and harmonics of a vocalist forward, almost akin to a note having some extra wind at its back. I felt that during "Angel Eyes" the ProLogue added a bit more air and glow to the top of Sinatra's range. Like a spark of enhanced detail, in short bursts it was satisfying, but at other moments it made me aware of the artifice. For a voice as familiar as Sinatra's I didn't feel that it allowed for the most seamless integration of the singer's throat and chest resonances.

The most glorious aspect of the PrimaLuna was its huge soundstage and cavernous sense of dimensionality. I thought you needed 3-D glasses for this kind of experience. As I listened to the somber "Landscape" movement from Vaughan Williams' *Antartica* [Naxos], the soundstage broadened markedly, orchestral sections sweeping in like waves from deep in the venue. Delicate harp cues were cleanly reproduced, the ominous rumble from the timpani foreshadowing a leviathan organ about to engulf the orchestra. Truly stunning. I got the same impression of width and depth from a full chorus like the Turtle Creek Chorale in Rutter's *Requiem* [Reference Recordings]. A character trait of the ProLogue Premium was an underlying surfeit of resonance and harmonic

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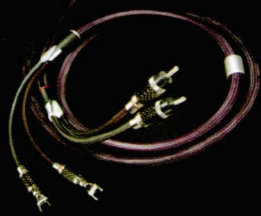
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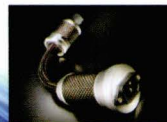
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Elipson Planet L loudspeaker

By Chris Binns

It seems to be a bit of a French thing, weirdly shaped and spherical loudspeakers. Cabasse have long been an advocate, and Epsilon have for many years been manufacturing products that are about as far as you can get from conventional rectangular or square boxes, the Planet is no exception.

At just under twelve inches in diameter it is compact, and due to its shape stands out as unconventional, which is not difficult given how aesthetically boring most of the competition is. At a time when mid market loudspeakers all seem to look and sound alarmingly similar, it is at least refreshing to have a product that is not afraid to be different.

The cabinet itself is moulded from a reinforced glass fibre resin, suitably thick to make what feels like a very inert and solid structure with an internal volume of about 10 litres, assuming my O level maths is correct. The high quality Lacquer is well finished and is available in black red or white, very 70's Habitat. The metal mesh grille is magnetically attached, personally I would like to see it available in black as well, and be warned that it dents quite easily. So, just before writing this piece I noticed the back page of a Sunday colour supplement with an advert for Roche Bobois - very cool furniture and a pair of red Elipsons in the photograph. Which means because of the way the Planet looks, there is always going to be a tendency for it to be judged as a bit of a novelty or a fashion product, and not taken seriously as a loudspeaker. Which would be missing the point.

Although they might not have had a particularly high profile in the UK, Elipson have been around for over seventy years, and in their native France have built up a quite a profile with strong connections to the broadcast and music industries. Strange looking speakers abound, particularly spherical ones, and somewhere in my past I recall a moody recording studio shot of Serge Gainsbourg with peculiar loudspeakers in the background - I'll bet they were Elipsons.

I understand the Planet is a resurrection of a previous design by the company, but the adherence to a spherical cabinet offers a number of advantages over more conventional shapes. The structure is inherently rigid and non resonant, and with no panels to speak of vibration will tend to cancel itself out. The absence of any parallel surfaces should also minimise internal reflection, although one could argue that actually the internal spherical space is still prone to a standing wave pattern,





just very different from a rectangular cabinet. The design is based around a nominal 6 1/2" co-axial drive unit comprising a treated paper cone for the bass and a 25mm soft dome tweeter, this looks to be of Seas origin. Crossover is formed from a second order filter for the bass and third order for the treble, component quality is fairly standard commercial grade constructed on a PCB. Input connections are via small but effective binding posts, above which is a small 3" deep port, internally there is a light amount of BAF damping against the cabinet wall.

The Planet comes with a small aluminium ring to allow positioning on a table or shelf, as well as the option to hang the speaker there is also a dedicated stand and wall mounting bracket available, both of which bolt into a recess on the bottom of the speaker. The stands consist of a single tall pole on a very heavy circular base; there is no provision for spikes on this.

The co-axial alignment has been around for many years with a heritage that goes back to Tannoy, KEF reinvigorated the idea with their UniQ designs some twenty years ago when the development of small neodymium magnets allowed positioning of the tweeter within the voice coil of the bass unit. In theory this arrangement should present a more coherent waveform across

“But the good thing is, they are not a speaker that needs to be excessively driven to create excitement out of music.”

the frequency spectrum by getting closer to the ideal point source, but there are more complex mechanisms at work that complicate the situation in practice.

Tried in a number of different locations, the Planet is a relatively lively loudspeaker with a mildly forward balance, in contrast to the overly equalised ‘depressed’ sound that some smaller speakers exhibit in an attempt to impress. I will happily trade a bit of refinement for a sense of communication. As such, they benefit from being near a wall, but too close and the rear firing port becomes a little obvious. While there is a mild hint of coloration in the lower mid, they are mercifully free of the glutinous MDF character that afflicts so many boxes, and I think that this – coupled with the paper diaphragm – contributes to their sense of speed and musical dynamics. For a small speaker the Planets will play reasonably loud, but if the volume gets too high they start to lose definition and harden up, particularly with bass heavy material. But the good thing is, they are not a speaker that needs to be excessively driven to create excitement out of music. I spent a number of evenings listening to them running from a Radford STA25 power amp, (admittedly with upgraded silver wound transformers) and the results were sublime. Top end and mid sounded detailed and articulate, while the bass was rhythmic and tuneful as far as it went, hiding the slightly elastic quality of the bottom end typical of a medium sized valve amp.

Imaging and presentation (the things that small speakers should be good at) were quite precise, but benefited from careful positioning, and improved with the addition of cones under the stands. They are suitably open and revealing enough to easily expose differences thrown up by fine tuning throughout the system, and the use of superior cables cleared up a tendency toward a slight coarseness at the higher mid and top end.

The way that they responded to a high quality source and a bit of care made me wonder whether given a less salubrious environment they would hold

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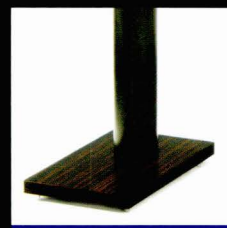
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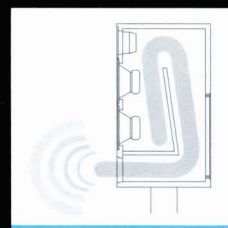
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▶ their own. But sat on the desktop and fed from iTunes via a Cyrus 8 integrated they really didn't sound bad, the saving grace being that they managed to convey that sense of energy and life with most of the material I listened to in this way. Interestingly, they also managed to maintain quite a clean and un-muddled bottom end in this less than ideal position, a feat which most box speakers fail to achieve by delivering one note bass in abundance.

As a result, I couldn't resist the temptation to take them into work with me to see how they might perform as near fields. I have to say that they looked very, very cool sat on top of an SSL mixing desk, and the little I heard suggests that it might be an interesting path to pursue at some stage in the future. Another day...

I guess a lot of people might dismiss the Planets as being a bit too 'out there' in the way they look. That's fair enough, but bear in mind that the visual appearance has come about through acoustic considerations rather than the other way round, and the result is a small speaker that hasn't forgotten that listening to music should be fun. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, bass reflex loudspeaker system

Drivers: Elipson 10mm soft dome tweeter, Elipson 650mm paper cone woofer

Crossover frequency: 3.8kHz

Frequency Range: 48Hz-20kHz (+/- 3dB)

Nominal impedance: 6 Ω

Sensitivity: 90 dB

Maximum music power: 60 Watts

Recommended amplifier power: 30-80 Watts

Terminal type: Silver-plated single wired

Internal wiring: 99.99% OFC

Dimensions (WxHxD): 29 x 29 x 29cm

Weight: 7kg

Available finishes: Black, red and white lacquer

Price: £600 per pair

Manufactured by:

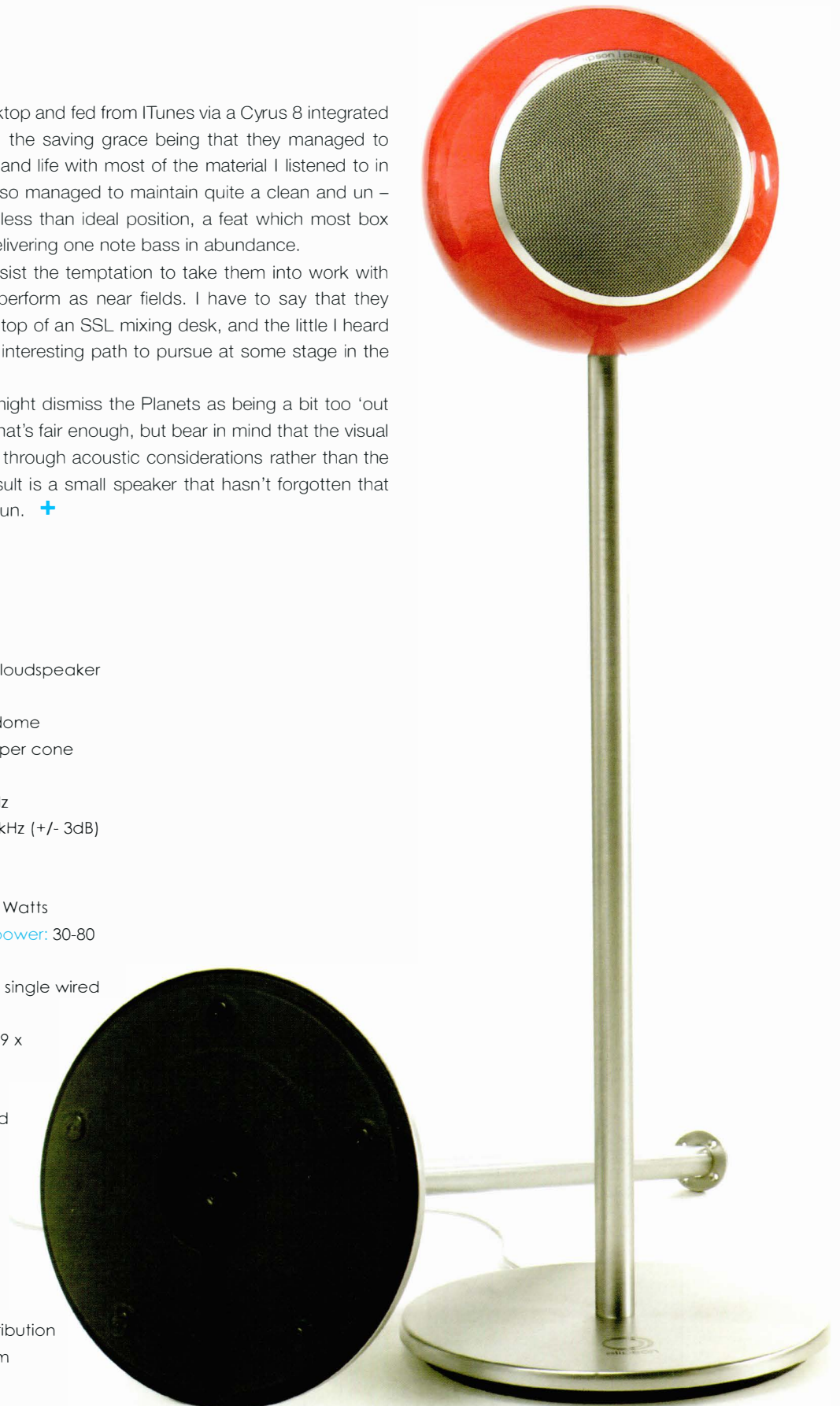
Elipson

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Mission 796se loudspeakers

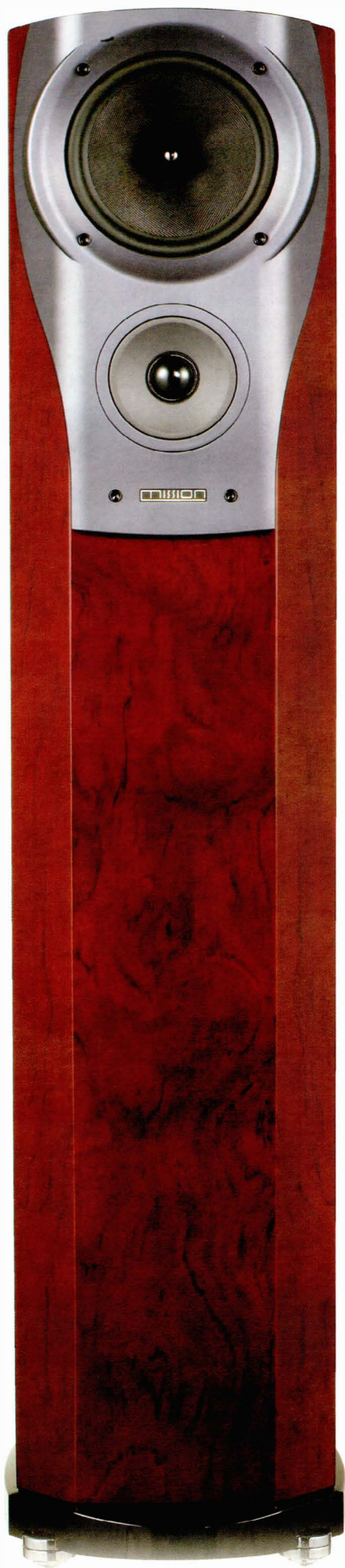
By Alvin Gold

If two words could be used to encapsulate the subject of this review, they would be slender and elegant and in this case these adjectives are not limited to the way they look, although of course this is an important part of the equation. There was a time when column speakers were invariably tall and blocky and too often frankly ugly structures, but the last decade has seen a quiet revolution in loudspeaker design, and Mission is one of the brands that has been leading the way. Students of history will recall that Mission was the company that introduced the column speaker with the influential 753 about 20 years ago.

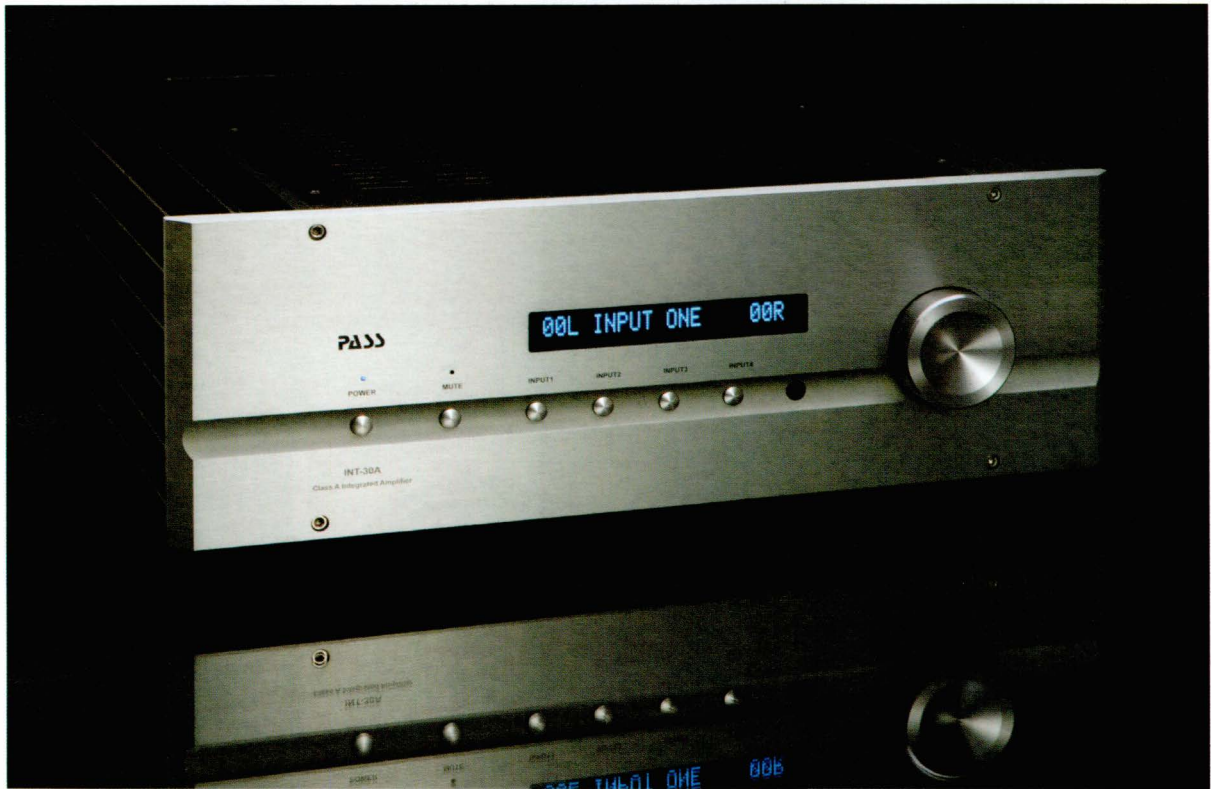
The genealogy of the 796se goes like this. It is the largest member of the 79se series (se here stands for sonically enhanced, not slender and elegant apparently). The Mission 79se Series replaces the plain vanilla 79 Series that was launched as long ago as 2008. It uses the same clever cabinet and some of the drive unit technologies that resulted in 'Design and Engineering Showcase Honours' for the range at CES, but it includes a number of improvements introduced by designer Peter Comeau, Director of Acoustic Design for Mission's parent company, IAG, who was intimately involved with the earlier British owned iteration of Mission with whom Peter became chief designer in the years after he left Heybrook, the company with which his name was once synonymous and with which he built his reputation as one of the world's leading loudspeaker designers. It was Peter who designed the original 79 series, whose main styling cues have been carried across largely intact to the sonically enhanced models.

As well as being famously slender and elegant, the larger members of the 79se series includes side firing bass units, a key factor reducing the width of the enclosures without skimping on the size of the bass units and hence bass response. The 796se also includes an inverted bass unit and tweeter, a feature that Mission has been using for many years. With the tweeter below the midrange unit, the larger unit can be kept further away from the muddling effect of reflections from the floor, which allows the designer to reduce the height of the enclosure while keeping the design listening axis (slightly above the midrange unit plane) high enough to suit normal domestic seating.

Other changes have also been introduced to the new models, including (but not limited to) drive unit improvements. The tweeter down reverts to the original 78 series Mission silk



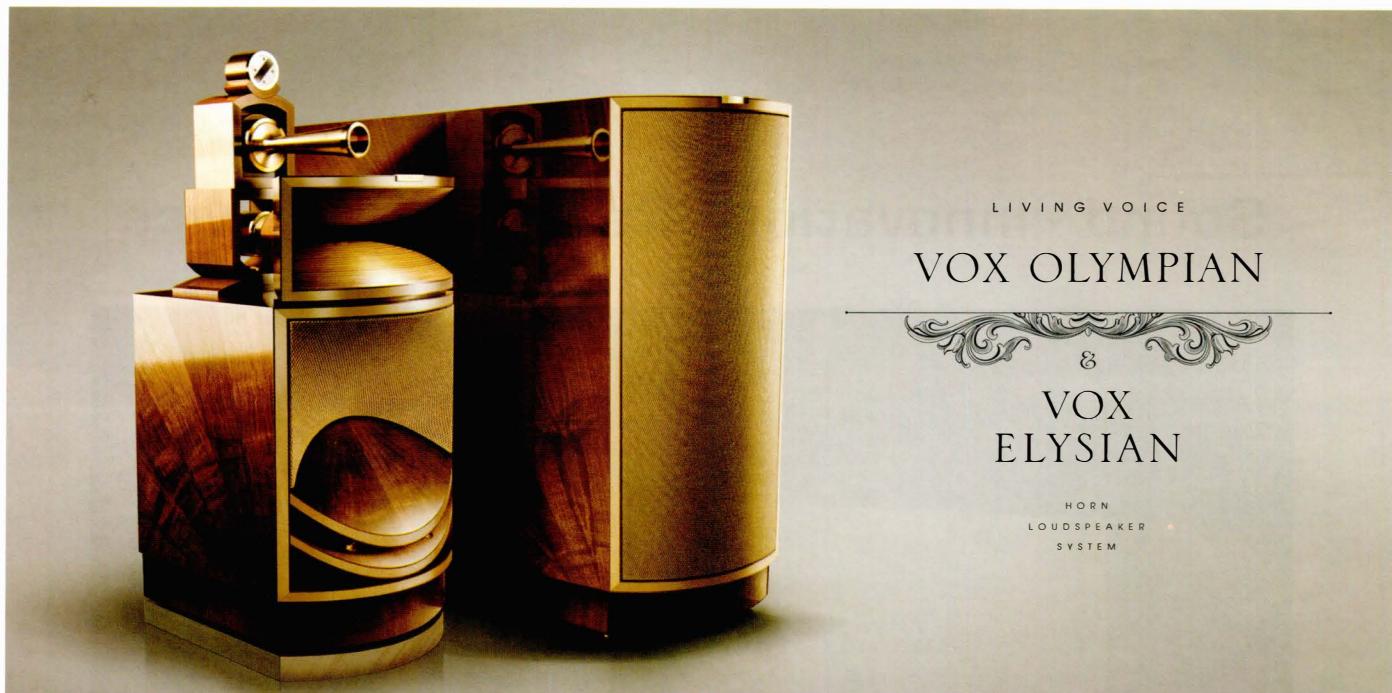
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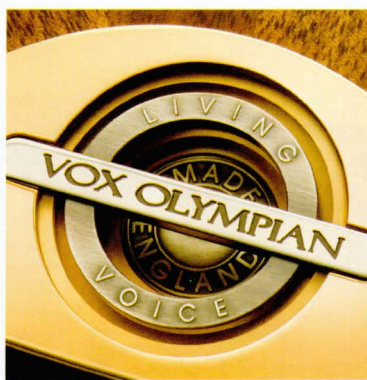
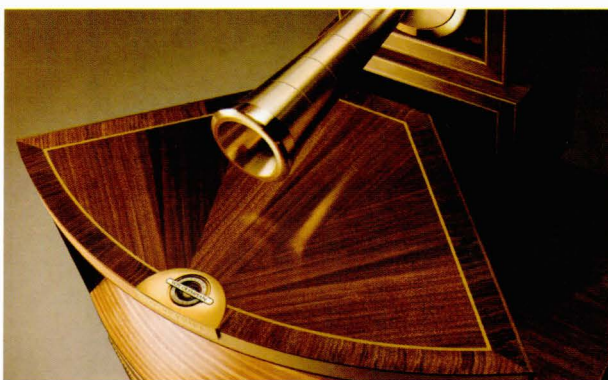
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LIVING VOICE

“The most immediately notable feature of the enclosure however is its smoothly rounded lines, and its organic shape, which helps it look unusually clean and modern.”

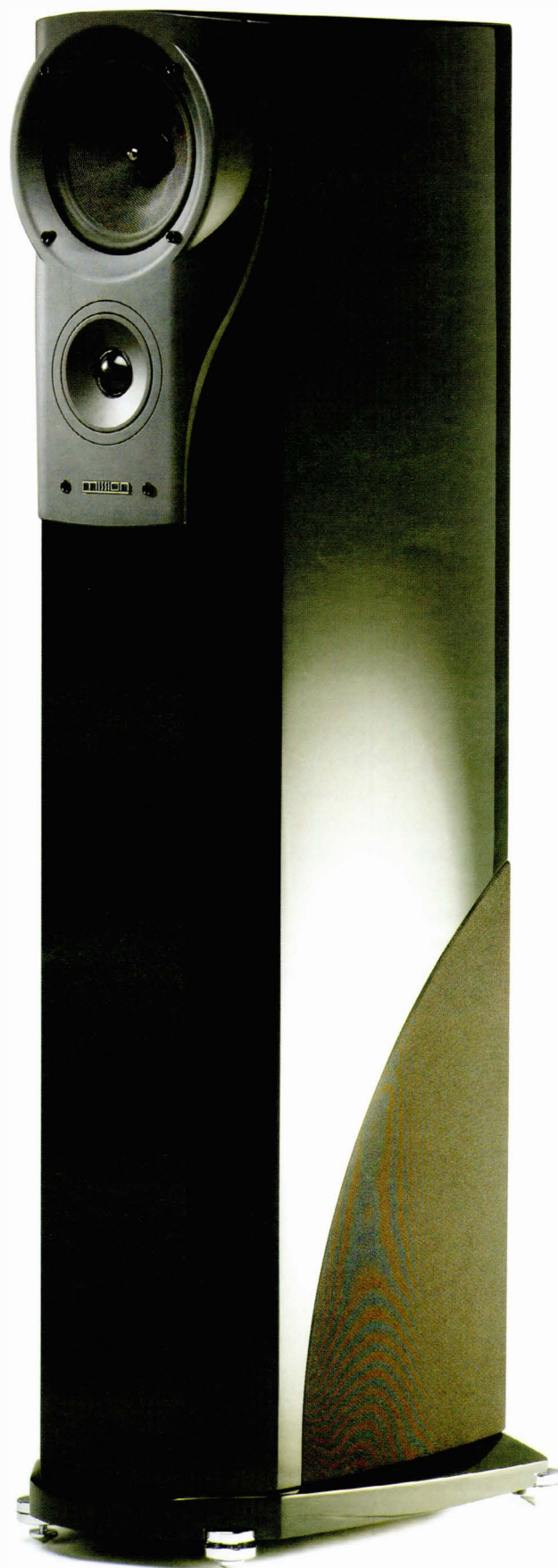
(actually textile) dome which is mounted on a mildly dished diecast waveguide which is said to enhance dispersion, allowing more than one listener at a time to hear a fully formed and consistent soundfield, retaining the mid/bass integration and improving phase response over the crossover region. The tweeter is mounted on an elastometer cushion (a damped layer) to enhance the detail and refinement of the unit.

The bass unit is further developed from the preceding range. The cone material is known as ‘Paramid’, using Aramid fibres (a material related to Nomex, which is notable for its use in circuit boards and transformers, and is made from synthetic polymers which are resin loaded and extensively cured to form, three dimensional structures which according to Mission are lighter and have tensile strength greater than steel by a factor of 5!

There are also changes built to the enclosure itself, which uses three different density layers of particle board laminated with RF activated resin damping layers to help absorb resonances which are mutually damped by adjacent layers. Each layer is tuned to a different discrete frequency (a similar idea is used by Cambridge Audio with their Performance loudspeaker range), which results in a very ‘dead’ enclosure largely free of the boxy colorations of a traditional enclosure. The most immediately notable feature of the enclosure however is its smoothly rounded lines, and its organic shape, which helps it look unusually clean and modern. According to Mission, internally the acoustic fibre filling the curved enclosure has been recalculated to maximize absorption at midrange frequencies, helping the asymmetric shape of the enclosure to reduce standing waves and reflected sound impact on the rear of the bass unit cone. Even the plinths show evidence of unusual attention to detail.

The final changes involve the new ‘perfect phase’ crossover which is designed to improve integration between the different units, traditionally one of the loudspeaker designers black arts.

The 796se is a three way, three driver rear vented bass reflex design with an official response ranging from 38Hz – 20kHz +/- 3dB from its 32 litre enclosure. Impedance is 8 Ohms nominally and power handling is said to extend to 200 Watts, though on our ▶

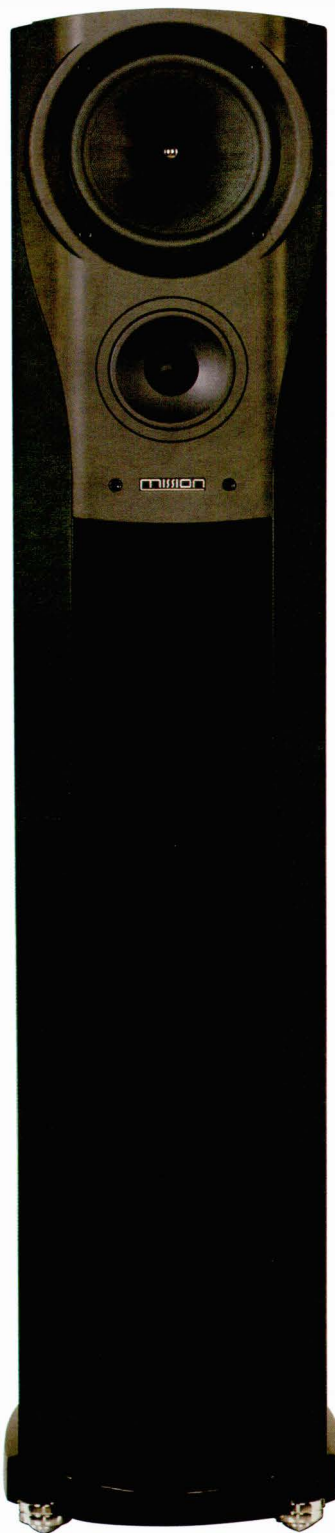


► assessment it is beginning to sound a little strained well before that point, and in typically absorbent mid side rooms you should not be looking at average sound pressure level greater than 92 – 94dB. The 796se is no powerhouse, and a healthy 100 Watt/channel amplifier will be an excellent match for this speaker in most cases.

Setup is unproblematic, The speakers should be toed in and can be oriented to that the bass units are pointing in or outwards, but except perhaps in very unusual acoustic surroundings, this model will sound best with the units facing inwards (ie towards each other), which will give the most solid and stable central image and reduced levels of reflections from nearby walls - but there is room for experiment here. Some space should be left behind the speakers to allow the reflex ports room to breathe. The terminal block is of good quality and supports single and biwiring options.

The 796se is an excellent loudspeaker, which is as easy on the ears as it is on the eyes, and which seems best suited to acoustic or relatively small scale music. You probably wouldn't choose it for high level use with heavy duty music, not specifically because of any power handling or bandwidth limitations but because the speaker has a slightly dry balance, and is limited in extension. It lacks the architectural solidity of a truly full size speaker. It is more of a compact speaker with some added bass reinforcement than a full bodied, wide range loudspeaker in its own right.

I used it to good effect with chamber music generally – that's my kind of poison – unaccompanied piano being a good example and with vocal material, especially solo singers accompanied by acoustic instruments, and it also worked particularly well with medium scale material like Brahms Alto Rhapsody. It even gave a good account of itself with densely scored works like the Strauss Alpine Symphony. Equally however it was out of its depth with the louder passages from Mahler 8, so the line should be drawn somewhere before that extreme.



Where the Mission did excel was in its ability to create a believable acoustic and sense of space from well-engineered recordings - Robert Silverman's Mozart Piano Sonatas engineered by Ray Kimber using his extraordinary IsoMike on SACD and Madeline Peyroux's eponymous album being cases in point. The Mission was never quite as physical sounding as the very best, but it was clearly very refined and natural, and on the whole it sounded clean, tactile and alive. Imagery was well delineated laterally, with a slightly foreshortened sense of depth in my room, probably because the tonal balance is slightly lean and dry, though this may not be the case in a smaller room. All in all, though, this is a highly accomplished and thoroughly listenable loudspeaker. one that shows plenty of evidence of great care in its fundamental design and voicing. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Mission 796se floor standing loudspeakers

Dimensions: 998(h) x 206(w) x 318(d)mm

Recommended amplifier power: 50 – 200 Watts

Sensitivity: 90dB

Frequency response: 38Hz – 20kHz

Price: £1,300 per pair

URL: www.mission.co.uk

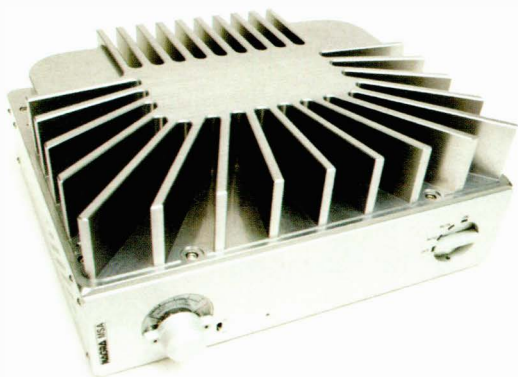
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Laurent Thorin on the new Nagra MSA amplifier – Haute Fidélité, January 2010

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Furutech ADL GT40 USB DAC

By Malcolm Steward

I could never see why there was any requirement for a USB input on a DAC. I do not tote my music collection around on a laptop. A lot of people do, though, it seems. However, when I decided to convert a raft of vinyl into FLAC to store on my NAS drives, making those albums available to anyone in the hi-fi equipped rooms in my house, the combination of laptop and a USB enabled DAC started to appeal. Especially a DAC with a reverse gear; one that can become an ADC at the push of a button...

Previously, the only USB DAC I had in my possession was the budget champion, the Cambridge DacMagic, although its designer still damned USB technology with the faintest of praise, suggesting you view it as a kind of last resort. Then an Arcam rDAC arrived. Its USB performance was a shade more refined but it still failed to light my fire: it was a little too pedestrian in the toe-tapping and dynamics department. Now, though, I have the fabulous, little £395 Alpha Design Labs GT40 USB DAC by Furutech parked on

“This nails its colours firmly to the mast by providing a USB connection not as an option or an extra but as its sole means of digital connection.”

one of my equipment tables. This nails its colours firmly to the mast by providing a USB connection not as an option or an extra but as its sole means of digital connection. To quote the instruction manual, “The GT40 has been designed... primarily for the playback of PC-based (and Mac-based) digital audio and for the conversion and recording of analog signal via USB to your PC”. To connect the 24-bits/96kHz-capable GT40 to my laptops I acquired a Furutech audiophile USB lead: the GT2, which will set you back £80 for an 0.6 metre length.

The GT40 converter, which Furutech describes as ‘seriously-shielded’, uses a low-latency USB 2.0 ASIO (Audio Stream Input/Output) audio driver that plays and records at up to 96 kHz. ASIO bypasses the normal audio path from an application through layers of intermediary Windows operating system software, so that the application connects directly to the sound card hardware. This is Good news. The Furutech design includes a headphone amplifier and a moving ▶

- ▶ coil/moving magnet phono-stage, which you can switch to perform as a line-level input, squished into its compact enclosure. This enables you to add your vinyl collection or tape recordings alongside your CD-rips, downloads and any other music stored on your computer. It also facilitates the use of the line-level output of an external phono stage to optimise the performance of any high quality moving coil cartridge. When ripping vinyl you need every last dB of noise floor that you can get. What is more, I did not especially want to leave my carefully configured Naim Superline sitting silently and pointlessly guzzling electricity when it could be put to good use. The GT40 is designed to operate from an external power supply because Furutech considers that while regular USB DACs do not need one, any that operates at a higher resolution requires one to offer satisfactory performance. The supplied

“The detail was particularly remarkable for the subtle manner in which it was so clearly revealed: it may have been obvious but there was nothing obvious about the way in which it was presented.”

supply is one of those far-eastern, parts-bin, wall-warts of the sort that can radiate garbage into the mains in particular. If you encounter such problems or if you are, like me, paranoid about switched mode supplies, around £20 will buy you a suitable, non-switching, regulated analogue supply from Maplins or a similar store that will replace it. (There is nothing intrinsically wrong with switched mode power supplies but their application is normally tuned for charging mobile phones and not high-end audio. The noise they generate is rarely a consideration, while squeezing their cost by another penny is usually a major concern.) The small number of connections makes hooking up the GT40 a breeze. Select the appropriate input with the MC/MM/Line slider control and connect the turntable (or external phono stage) with a pair of RCA phono terminated leads. Connect the Output sockets to your pre-amplifier for monitoring – or, preferably, when recording vinyl, connect a set of headphones to the front panel jack. Finally connect the USB socket to your computer with a high quality USB Type A-Type B lead and you are set to go. There is one button on the fascia that controls the signal direction in the GT40: when depressed it routes digitised music to the USB outlet for recording; when in the ‘out’ position it sends signals from your computer to the DAC and on to your headphones or pre-amplifier by way of the level control.

While writing this piece I happened across what looked like a very well-organized piece of vinyl acquisition software by Acoustica called Spin it Again, which retails at \$34.95 (about £22 at the time of writing). I had tried a few similar programs, which for a variety of reasons had failed to satisfy me. Spin it Again, however, was a step in front of most. It even has a metadata look-up facility wherein you type in the artist and album name, and the software hunts down the track names and lengths etc., from an internet database, which saves you having to enter them manually – in the majority of cases. It also helps the program divide the lengthy recorded file into individual tracks, which can save some time. The program does not have the depth or complexity of Audacity, being wizard-driven and appearing to be aimed more at the casual user rather than the rabid audiophile, but it does the job and functions smoothly with the GT40. (The software uses the bi-directionality of the device to record and then play back during editing of the recording.) It records up to 24-bit/192kHz WAVs but I stuck to 24-bit/96kHz WAVs, which I then converted to 24/96 FLACs for storage on my NAS drives. 24/96 is the maximum sample rate that the GT40 will handle. Sounds from my USB 2.0-equipped Acer and Toshiba laptops – played using Media Monkey software – lived up to the claims in ADL’s literature for a sound that is “smooth, detailed, impeccable and very musical.” I fed the output from the GT40 into my active system pre-amplifier. The detail was particularly remarkable for the subtle manner in which it was so clearly revealed: it may have been obvious but there was nothing obvious about the way in which it was presented. Details in the back of the mix, for example, were plainly audible while remaining firmly behind other layers in the arrangement. The ripped sound retained the natural dynamics and persuasive timing of my record playing system as well as presenting the rich instrumental texture of tracks like John Hiatt’s Drive South. In this song, Hiatt tunes his guitar to a banjo-

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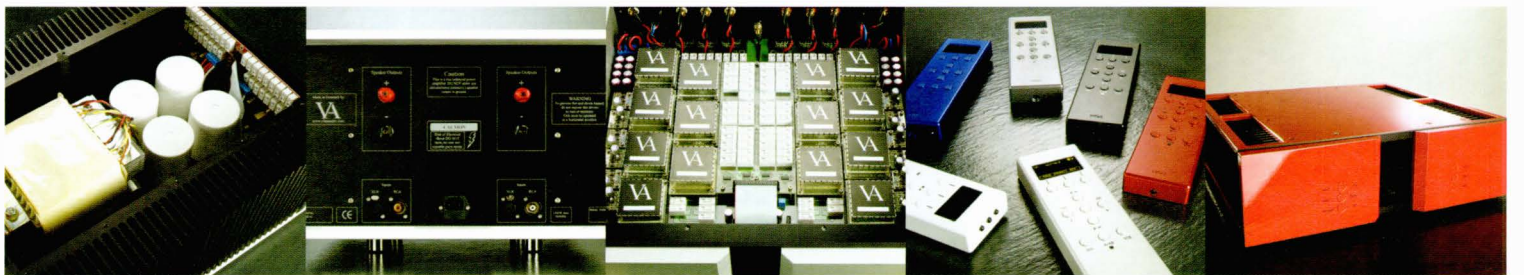
Stefan Gawlik - I-fidelity.net

"It is a real shame that Burmester don't have a current UK outlet where you could hear the CD 089 but that will hopefully change very soon."

Chris Thomas - HiFi+

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esque dropped-G, which gives the song an interesting quality especially when he plays alongside Sonny Landreth's acoustic slide guitar. Hiatt's droning open strings resonate very agreeably with the timbre of Landreth's instrument. The vivid dynamics and precise timing of the song can be attributed to the DAC's preservation of leading edges and its low noise floor. The DAC also rendered his voice with equal feeling and accuracy, and impressed listeners with its articulation and communicative qualities. Furutech clearly acknowledges that hi-fi is about enjoying music and not just about numbers and measurements. That much is evident as soon as you have the GT40 set up just-so, by which I mean wired with better cables than the standard USB types that come with computer peripherals. Arguments rage about whether a nominally digital cable can influence the performance of an audio system but I am in no doubt that the Furutech GT2 is significantly more convincing and realistic in its presentation than the standard cheapie cables – especially those equipped with Ferrite rings, which do nothing to retain the true vitality of a musical performance. Music sounds temporally more persuasive and crisply defined – with more natural leading edges and decays – through the GT2. The standard cable sounds tolerable, but once you have auditioned the Furutech alongside it, it simply no longer passes muster. It lacks finesse and sounds distinctly lethargic in comparison to the GT2. All things considered, the Furutech Alpha Design Labs GT40 USB DAC in conjunction with the GT2 USB interconnect looks to be the inexpensive but nonetheless ideal audiophile quality choice for anyone who wants to digitize their vinyl – at up to 24-bit/96kHz – and then play it back from their computer either through their hi-fi system or a pair of headphones. It certainly managed to do justice to my Well Tempered Amadeus GTa, Dynavector XX-2 and Naim Superline setup. Amusingly, in this burgeoning age of computerized, networked music, the prime requirement can still be a top quality turntable, arm, and cartridge! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Alpha Designs Labs (by Furutech) GT40 USB DAC/ADC

Maximum resolution: 24-bits/96kHz

Analogue input: MM/MC cartridge and line-level phono sockets

Digital input/output: Type B USB 2.0 connector

Audio output: line level through RCA-phono sockets

Headphone output: 3.5mm jack socket (manufacturer suggests 16 ohm to 300 ohm impedance headphones)

Dimensions: (H x W x D) 6.5 x 15 x 12 cm

Weight: 0.78 kg

Price £395

Manufacturer: Furutech

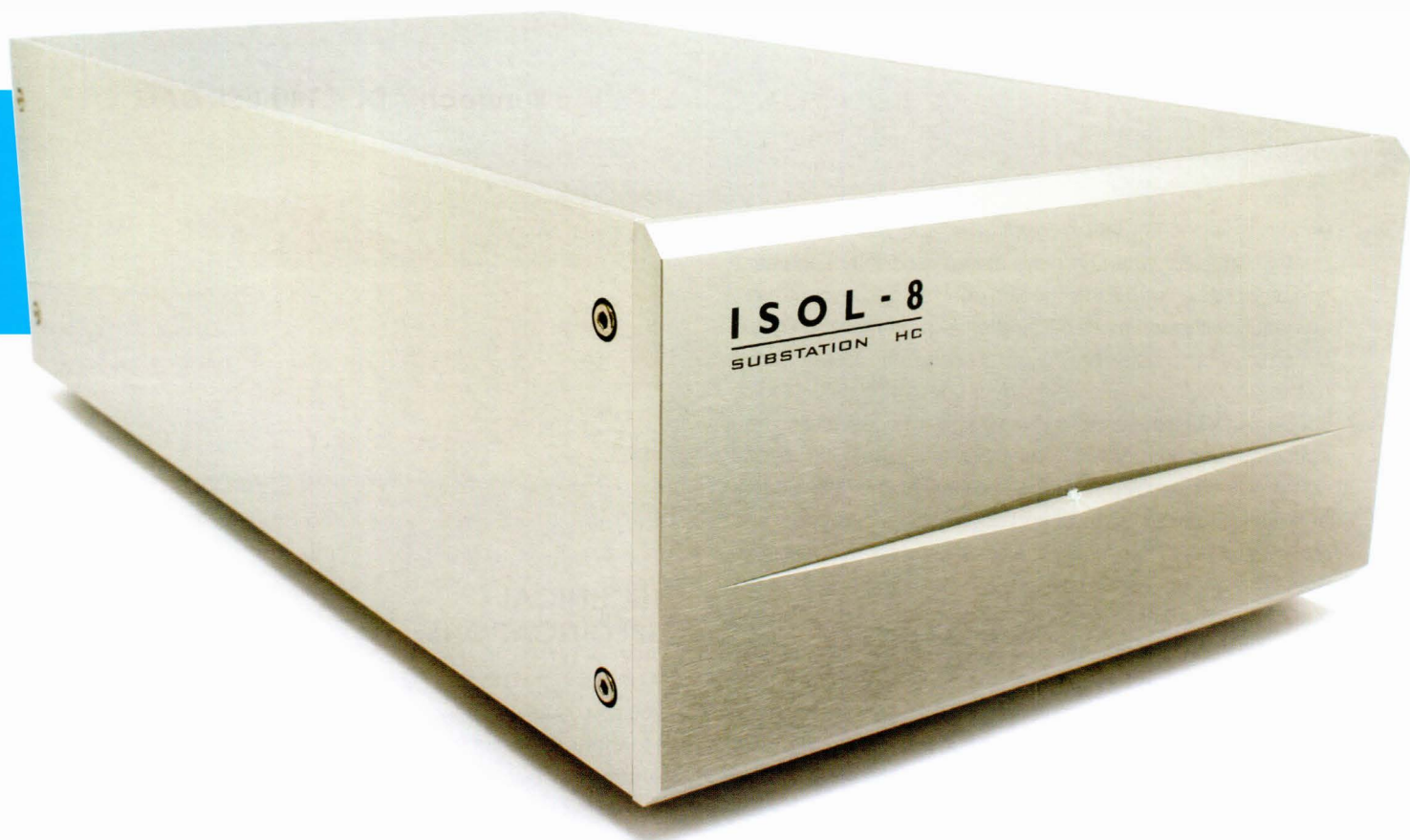
URL: www.furutech.com

Distributor (UK): Sound Foundations

URL: www.soundfoundations.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1276 501392





EQUIPMENT REVIEW

ISOL-8 Substation LC and HC power conditioners

By Alan Sircom

ISOL-8 is one of the country's foremost power conditioning experts. The SubStation Vogue tested last year was one of the best power conditioners we had heard, but the LC and HC raise the game still further. The two – that notionally replace the Vogue – takes the basic concept, sprinkles in some DC blocking and makes it modular. In the process, it makes the SubStation LC and HC two of the must own audiophile devices for 2011.

The two devices look similar, especially from the front, but perform very different functions and are built from the ground up unlike. As the names suggest, the LC (or 'low current') is destined for relatively low-demand sources, such as CD players, preamps

and integrated amps. It has four IP54-grade protected 13A sockets – good for keeping dust and prying little fingers at bay – and a Neutrik power socket for input. It starts with a DC-blocking circuit (used elsewhere in the ISOL-8 range in the PowerLine Axis). Essentially, this corrects the commonly unmatched peak AC voltages creating a DC component on the mains, caused by the power supplies of other devices behaving inappropriately with the mains. The Axis circuit rebalances the AC waveform by eliminating the DC offset. That in itself can do wonders, removing audible hum from power transformers inside components and drastically lowering the noise floor of analogue electronics. Each output is effectively isolated from the others, by ISOL-8's own 'transmodal' filter circuit, which includes both common and differential mode filtration (essentially one set of inductors for common mode filtration and a set of capacitors and another set of inductors for differential mode). In other words, short of a series of galvanically-isolated mains regenerators for each component, you would struggle to get cleaner power than this.

Technically, all the HC (high current) does is halve the number of sockets available (two instead of four) and double

the current delivery to each of those sockets (16A instead of 8A in the LC). Of course, saying that is easy, doing it is far harder and the higher rating involves a lot more capacitance, more copper foil in the inductors, a higher spec Axis circuit and effectively doubles the weight of the LC. But the concept (DC-blocking, followed by a lot of filtering) remains the same. There are four obvious advantages to separating the two sections out. Physically separating them bestows an extra grade of isolation, although in fairness the SubStation Vogue itself was pretty much the gold standard of isolation between high and low current pathways. Next, it means those with a system comprising CD player and integrated amp (for example) can benefit from the DC blocking and filtering of the LC without the additional weight (and expense) inherent in the HC section. Third, it allows you to grow your power conditioning solution in stages as an when they become important and finally it means those who have the sources and preamps in one part of the room and the power amp in another don't have to traipse long power cables around the room. Given the potentially huge cost of some power cables, that's a bonus.

But do they work? Oh yes! Not only do they work, but they work in a surprisingly uniform and consistent manner. Plug the SubStation between the wall and your equipment and the most immediate point is things just sound quieter; physically (if your system has any transformer hum, be prepared to say goodbye to it) and sonically (it's as if the noise floor of the system just fell away). This is not a subtle difference, but paradoxically, it's one of those things you tend not to notice directly. It's the kind of improvement that makes you pick out a component as sounding 'right' even if you can't put your finger on why it's 'right'.

The more direct improvements are increased detail and a more expansive, more three-dimensional and more separated soundstage. These are more immediate 'stand up and take notice' improvements. John Rutter's Requiem highlights this perfectly; it's a good recording anyway, but there's more of a sense of the live ambience of the hall and it gives more of that ability to pick out individual singers in the choir better than before. In short, the SubStations act to make a good high-end system sound like a better high-end system, and it does that regardless of the quality of the high-end system it feeds. Notice that I've not tried to differentiate between LC and HC here, because that consistency extends to both. What applies to the LC on sources and integrated amps, applies directly to the HC and honking great power amps. What does change is the stance toward using power conditioning on power amps; usually these devices get short shrift when it comes to clean power, but some of this comes down to current demands and conditioner placement. Both of which are resolved here.

Despite the almost unilateral praise, there's limits to all this. There's no point whatsoever using the LC with a turntable, although those decks that use a laptop switch-mode supply to power their motors are potentially undermining the mains for the rest of the sources, and using the LC on other devices will help enormously. In addition, the more energy you put into getting the mains sorted prior to the point where the SubStations are used (those with dedicated mains spurs and beyond, for example), the less you seem to need a SubStation and those who are pursuing a very specific sound that doesn't focus on the detail and soundstaging may find they are improving aspects of performance they don't want improved at the expense of things they seek in their musical portrayal. This could be likened to a guitarist praising the sound of a particular effect pedal, and finding a way of improving the sound of their guitar in general, but undermining that specific effect. Whether that's a trade-off or a deal-breaker, depends on your viewpoint.

For my own standing, the LC (and HC) take already good products that point toward the high-end and high-endify them still further. That enhanced

detail, clarity, better separation and space round the instruments and that almost spooky quiet they bring to backgrounds, is like doubling the cost of every component in the system. I understand that not all systems benefit from such enhancements (the Naim UnitiQute, for example, lost a lot of its character in the process), but those that do benefit, really shine with the SubStations in place. As it's also a power conditioning system that can grow with your system, it's an obvious choice. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Number of available outlets: 2 on LC, 4 on HC

Power outlets: Protected 13A (Schuko and 15A for EU and US)

Maximum continuous Current: 8 Amps RMS for LC 16Amps RMS for HC

Protection: Rear panel circuit breaker

Dimensions (WxHxD): 23.2x13.5x42cm

Weight: 5.8kg (LC), 10.9kg (HC)

Finish: Aluminium alloy chassis and panels, silver or black

Price: £1,899 (LC), £1,999 (HC)

Manufacturer: ISOL-8

URL: www.isol-8.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)20 8856 8856



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Arcam rDAC kw digital converter

By Alan Sircom

Back in issue 76, we looked at the Arcam rDAC, one of the most highly anticipated digital converters out there. With its dCS-licensed asynchronous USB input, Wolfson 8741 chipset and all-round ease of use, the rDAC was the toast of 2010. This year brings the kw version, 'kw' standing for 'KLEER wireless', KLEER being a made-for-audio specific wi-fi standard that allows lossless audio data transmission from computer (or iDevice) to DAC.

The rDAC kw looks identical to the basic rDAC from the front; the only external difference being a small wi-fi aerial socket on the back plate, plus a black 802.11-style aerial

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Arcam rDAC kw digital converter

Inputs:

- 1x Optical SPDIF (Toslink socket)
- 1x Coaxial SPDIF (Gold plated socket)
- 1x USB
- 1x KLEER Wireless

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

Price: £375

rWave USB dongle £80

rWand iDevice dongle £70

Manufacturer: Arcam Ltd

URL: www.arcam.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1223 203203



that screws into the thing. You then need to add a dongle; either the rWave USB or rWand for iPod/iPhone/iPad devices, supplied separately.

The former allows you to connect any recent Windows or Mac desktop, laptop or notebook computer, with a range roughly equivalent to 801.11b (up to 50m), while the rWand streams music direct from your iDevice over a shorter (max 10m) range. In reality, I found the rWave connected from tens of metres away along the horizon, but struggled to lock to a signal from a room two floors above the rDAC in a late Victorian property (in fairness, a 802.11g wi-fi router suffers in the same setting). The rWand is best used in the same or adjacent room as the rDAC, which is pretty much what it's intended for.

The rWave effectively simply extends the asynchronous USB connection without the need for cables or having a computer in the listening room (using a tablet in the listening room to control the computer elsewhere). It works by clicking the 'associate' button on the dongle (when fed from a computer) and then pressing and holding the source selector button on the top of the elegant rDAC. When the light goes green, you are ready to rOck. Does it sound different to a wired connection? Not really. If you have both side by side and spend the next few days listening intently comparing and contrasting, you'll probably hear a difference... and personally I think KLEER has the edge, simply because of the advantages of having the spinning disc drives in another room.

On the other hand, rWand also has an ace up its sleeve. I had some friends over during the test, and ended up with five people armed with iPhones, two iPods and my own iPad. The rWand was passed from person to person as and when they wanted to play DJ entirely seamlessly and effortlessly. Aside from showing up just how many people compress their music and how that can sound through a good system (a little flat and slightly 'burbly'), it's amazing how natural and how immediate this connection was and how it makes the music-listening process fun once more.

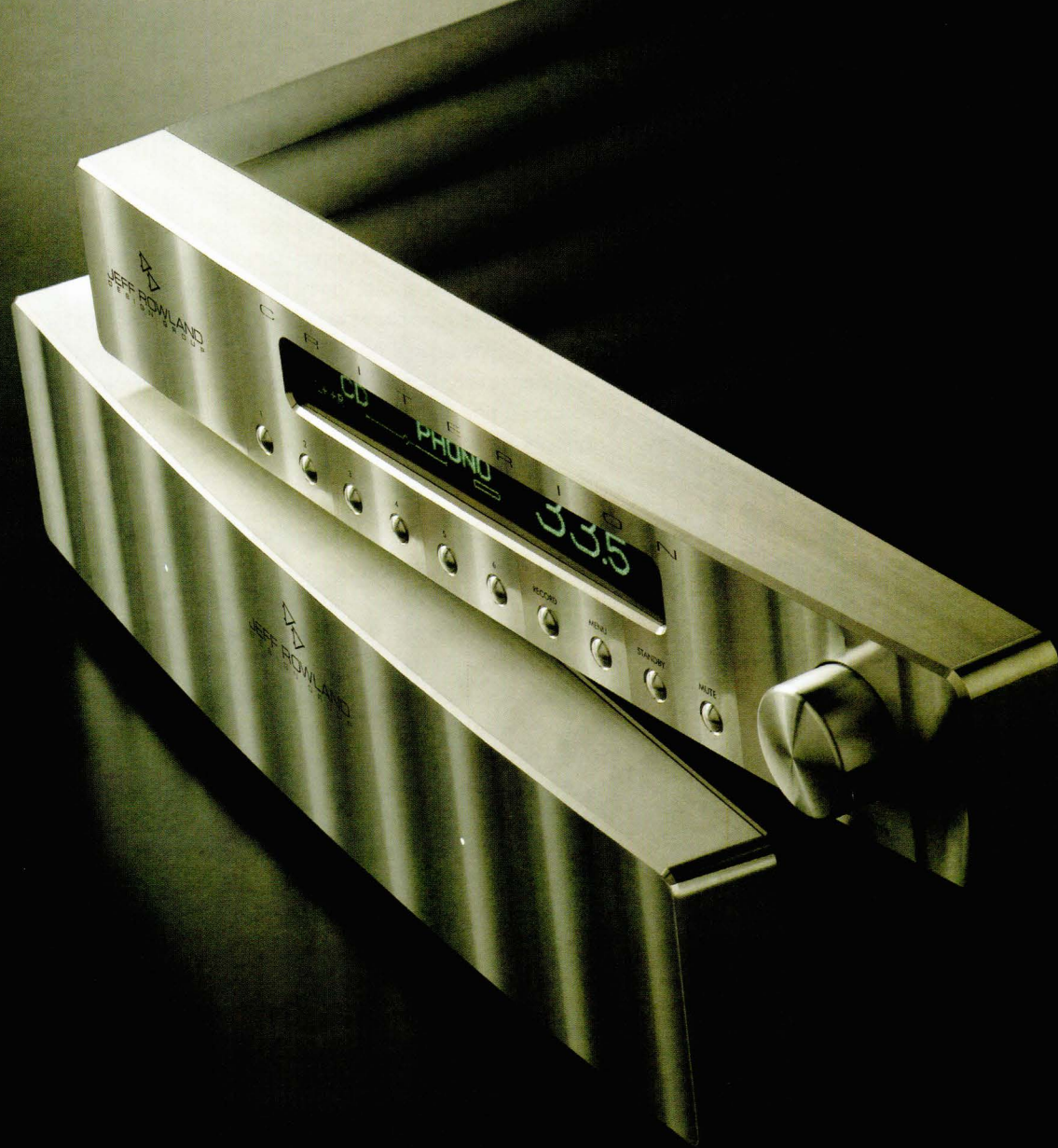
I've found myself returning to the original rDAC time and again, when using it with computers. The same didn't apply with anything with a coax or Toslink connector, where the rDAC seems to blunt and soften leading edges compared to the USB. But fortunately, the KLEER connection sides with the wired USB input and sounds excellent. That it also sounds excellent at a distance without the need for wires or a safety net really makes it a KLEER buy. +





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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Klipsch Image X10i In-Ear Headphone/Headset

By Chris Martens

Klipsch first entered the headphone market roughly three years ago and the very first model I tried was the firm's original, flagship Image in-ear headphone. When the review samples arrived, the tiny 'phones seemed almost impossibly small and light, but I soon discovered that they delivered a big, well-focused sound and were amazingly comfortable. I was so impressed by the performance of the Images that I nominated them for a Golden Ear award in our sister publication, *The Absolute Sound*. In the years since, that original Image model has been renamed as the Image X10 and it has given rise to an entire Klipsch product family of lower-priced Image models.

Now, however, Klipsch has updated the Image X10 model by giving it a tiny, inline remote control/microphone module geared to address the needs of iPod and iPhone owners, thus creating the new Klipsch Image X10i. Interestingly,

despite its newfound iPod/iPhone-compatible features, the X10i carries the exact same list price as its predecessors: £200.

As was the case with the original Image and Image X10, the X10i uses a single, full-range "balanced micro driver" (i.e., a balanced armature-type driver)—a design approach that the X10i shares in common with other high performance in-ear headphones such as the

Etymotic Research ER-4P and the Monster Cable Turbine Pro Copper Edition. I wanted to try the Image X10i, partly to see how its sound compared with the original 2007 Image model as well as with other modern day competitors. I also wanted to check out the X10i's 3-button remote control/mic system, which is based on an Apple chip and promises a wide array of functions—especially when used with the iPhone 3GS/4 or the latest generation iPod nano, classic, iPod touch or iPad.

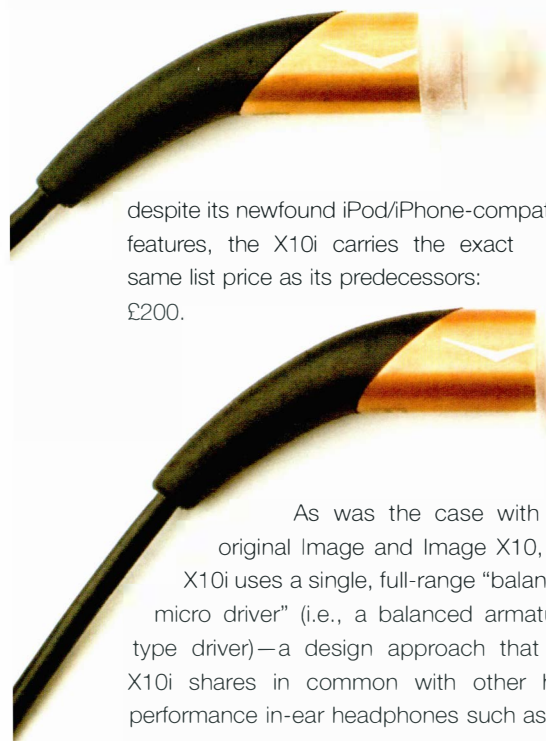
Given the X10i's diminutive size, you might think it would produce a tiny, restrained or "petite" sound, but exactly the opposite is the case. The X10i produces a big, smooth, full-bodied sound with generally ample bass and excellent natural clarity, though it is not the last word in absolute bass or treble extension (at least not relative to the strongest competitors now on the market). More so than many in-ear headphones, however, the X10i possesses a certain effortless richness that makes its sound immediately accessible and easy to enjoy for hours at a time.

Tonal balance is nearly neutral, though some might find it just slightly tilted toward the "warmth" end of the audio spectrum. There is little if any of the midrange forwardness you might hear in, say, Klipsch's Image S4i; instead, the X10i's midrange is evenly balanced and offers fine levels of detail and focus—qualities that, in my experience, are hallmarks of well-executed single balanced armature designs.

Important note: for best bass response, try the following adjustment tip that Klipsch recommends. Insert the X10i's (using the eartip size that best fits you), then gently rotate the headphone body (and eartip) left and right a few degrees and then slightly pull it backward just a bit. This technique helps the eartips flare out in your ear canal to achieve a comfortable, airtight seal—and with it, optimal bass response.

Unlike many of the headsets Playback has tested, the X10i (like the S4i) does not place its in-line microphone on either the left or right earpiece cable, but rather provides a 360 degree mic in a central position on the headphone yoke where the left and right earpiece cable join. This is a superior place to put the microphone and, as Klipsch points out (and I verified in my user tests), it means you don't need to "talk down" into the mic. During test phone calls, call recipients reported that I sounded much more like myself with the X10i in use than when using my iPhone's normal mic or other headsets I had tested in the past.

I've alluded to the fact that the X10i's single balanced-armature design gives it desirable qualities of focus and sonic purity. To hear those qualities in action, try listening to the Yo-Yo Ma performance of Massenet's *Méditation* from Thaïs ▶



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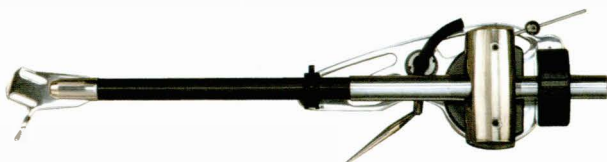
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► [The Essential Yo-Yo Ma, Sony]. Listen closely to Ma's bowing changes and especially to his beautiful dynamic swells, and you'll discover that the X10i gives you a vibrant, highly detailed and yet never cold or analytical-sounding presentation of the performance. Through the X10i's, Ma's cello sounds like a cello (not—as some earphones tend to make it sound—like a viola), with a rich, golden, woody tonality that's full of energy and life. Capturing the warmth of music is one of the things the X10i does best.

The X10i also does a good job with bass instruments, as you can verify by putting on a tracks such as "The Lesson" or "Sifu" from bassist Victor Wooten's *Palmystery* [Heads Up]. On either track, you'll hear much (though perhaps not quite all) of the depth of Wooten's electric bass and the even deeper "thwup" of occasional kick drum accents. But perhaps even more importantly, you'll hear plenty of delicate mid- and upper-bass details, including the distinct, harmonically rich, "ringing" sound of Wooten's round-wound bass guitar strings on sustained notes, plus the sure-handed intricacy of his fingering techniques. While a few competing in-ear phones (e.g., the Sennheiser IE 8 and Monster Turbine Pro Copper Editions) can go a bit lower and with greater authority, the X10i's mid-bass articulation is exemplary.

Finally, it is worthwhile to try a track that is rich in high frequency details and reverberant information to see what the X10i can do. A good example would be Imogen Heap's "Bad Body Double" from *Eclipse* [RCA]. Imogen

Heap's voice is very closely mic'd on this track, and varying degrees of reverb and other processing tricks are selectively applied, giving the song a decidedly flamboyant, techno edge. Here, the X10i rewards the listener with excellent midrange detail, though it misses out on just a touch of the high-frequency reverberant information that can, under ideal circumstances, make this track so special.

The X10i come with three sets (S, M, L) of single-flange oval eartips, a pair (S/M) of double-flange oval eartips, a clothing clip, a cleaning tool, an airline adapter, and mini-jack-to-phone-jack adapter, and a magnetic clasp-equipped leather carrying pouch.

Klipsch's oval eartips are the most comfortable Playback has ever tested. Guest listeners often commented that the Klipsch's were night/day different from and better than competing in-ear headphones in terms of ease of insertion and long-term comfort.

One thing I did notice is that the shape of Klipsch's oval eartip design appears to have changed just a bit relative to the original 2007 version (the earlier models were slightly shallower but also more widely flared than the 2010 versions). Personally, I found the original 2007 shape gave a slightly better in-ear seal, though the 2010 design gives an even more "weightless" feel in the ear canal. Even so, I'd like to see Klipsch bring back the more widely flared shape because it made for superior noise isolation and better bass.

The Image X10i is a true flagship-class in-ear headphone that is incredibly small and comfortable, yet that offers a big, full-bodied sound with very good levels of detail and sonic purity. While some of today's top in-ear models may narrowly edge the X10i in terms of absolute sonic performance, few can match its all around mix of convenience, comfort, versatility and sound quality. The X10i also makes a fine headset/remote control for owners of contemporary iPhones and iPods. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Klipsch X10i headset/in-ear headphone

Frequency response: 5Hz – 19kHz

Weight: 10.5 grams

Sensitivity: 110 dB SPL/mW

Impedance: 50 ohms

Warranty: Two years, parts and labour

Price: £200

KLIPSCH GROUP, INC.

URL: www.klipsch.co.uk

Tel: 08450 800 578



Crystal Cables Standard Diamond Cables

By Alan Sircom

Crystal exposes the notion that bigger is better when it comes to hi-fi cables. Most of Crystal Cables are routinely small, slim and elegant, silver designs that sound excellent right across the frequency spectrum, so that slice of folklore about bass weight being related to cable thickness is nonsense, too.

Standard Diamond is the latest Crystal Cable range. It's replacing the Standard range, but retains the annealed silver/gold cable. This means ultra-thin solid core conductors, helically wound with Kapton insulators, a silver shield and finally wrapped in a Teflon sheath. The net result is a cable about as thick as a bass guitar string. It's finished off with a quality phono plug in the interconnect but black plastic mains plugs and sockets (the more stratospheric cables have Furutech connectors). The CrystalSpeak speaker cables have a screw-in connector at each end of the cable, allowing the user to change their terminations, or even potentially add extra length to the wire should it need be. The interconnect and speaker cable are precisely the same size, while the power chords simply braid more cables into one bigger lead.

AS TESTED:

2x3m CrystalSpeak Standard Diamond
£4,419

2x1.5m CrystalConnect Standard
Diamond £1,278

1m CrystalConnect Standard Diamond
power cord £871

Manufactured by: Crystal Cable

URL: www.crystalcable.com

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)20 8971 3909



Crystal claims the thin layout and the silver-gold cable is effectively a zero distortion design, with no cross-talk or microphony issues, and very low induction. Crystal also suggests this is down to focusing on limiting current-domain distortion instead of the voltage-domain issues worked on by most cable manufacturers.

The net result of this is a cable system that does wonders. It seems to raise the game of good audio into the high-end stakes, while not holding back truly high-end equipment. The big thing of the Crystal system is a sense of order it bestows on music. The precision, detail and dynamics of your system are not impeded in any way, but the way these elements are tied together make a huge difference and this is where the Crystal Standard Diamond cables shine. It's a very clean sound with a spring in its step in the upper registers and a lot of midrange charm, too; which perhaps is why it has become something of a darling with the valve amp fraternity.

It's very much a cable system, though. You should consider the cables to be a complete front-to-back solution. There's a sense of cool, calm that the cables bestow upon the system that doesn't quite gel when used in tandem with other cables. It doesn't sound bad when used as the one and only Crystal cable, but the focus you get when you Crystalise your whole system makes ultimately a lot more sense.

There's one more element that isn't covered here, the Bridge Diamond cable. This brings the low distortion sound of Crystal to any other cable, without undermining the sound of the cable you originally chose. But more on that in a later issue...

Finally, it's worth noting that when you invest in cables, packaging is important too. If you bought an expensive watch, you'd feel a little hard done by if it turned up in a plastic bag, and similarly Crystal makes the whole buying decision seem that bit better justified thanks to some extraordinarily classy packaging. The cable sits in a velvet bag, inside a box inside another box, and authentication cards and documentation 'case candy' all adds to the cachet in no small amount. This Crystal then is an all round package that is highly recommended for those who want to make their system sing as one. +

Audience AU24e interconnects and speaker cables

By Alan Sircom

Many of the best-loved wires can deliver revelatory changes to the system sound but this can also tend toward highly distinctive cables with a strong character that can influence the overall sound of the system. As a consequence, they are loved by some and hated by others. The flipside to this is cables that are designed to have almost no intrinsic character of their own. These don't get as strong a set of reactions from listeners, and don't get shouted about as much. The Audience AU24e interconnects and speaker cables are this second kind of cable, the neutral kind that gets under your skin over time.

The cables – both interconnect and speaker cable – are thin and flexible and worthy alternatives to the 'thick as a baby's arm' type wires. They are constructed from high-purity OHNO copper monocrystal conductors with simple polypropylene

insulation, a cross-linked polyethylene jacket and a braided outer sheath. The cables are supplied ready terminated and boxed... no off the reel cable layouts. There is a standard AU24 as well as the special 'e' edition, which adds about 20% to the basic AU24 price. Trouble is, not having tried the AU24 and Audience being tight-lipped about what goes on in the 'e'ification process (the sheath and terminations are very different, apparently), I don't know precisely whether that 20% premium gives 20% better sound. All I know is these AU24e cables are about as honest as cables get.

The Audience cables are not designed to work with the kind of components that rely on cables to enhance the sound of the system. The equipment needs to be of the best quality and extremely well matched to benefit from the Audience effect. At this point, they just let the equipment do its job properly, unimpeded by the cable itself. It's only when you hear this happening do you realise how genuinely rare such a scenario really is. There's a sense of level-headedness to the sound, which demands level-headed system design, but delivers the unvarnished, unimpeded truth. This really isn't easy to express without experiencing the effect directly, which is why the old 'lifting a veil' cliché existed. Perhaps the best way is to liken it to the way LS3/5a, Quad ESL-57s or DNM cable perform... you get that jaw-dropping midrange clarity that makes speech and instruments so much more intelligible, but sooner or later you start wishing for frequency extremes. The Audience cable 'sound' is that jaw-dropping midrange, but with the frequency extremes.

Well, almost – the construction of the AU24e cables can undermine the performance in our RF-polluted world. Living in the big city, where I can find at least 15 wi-fi networks and dozens of mobiles polling their nearest cell mast, the sound can be foreshortened, almost shut in (especially at higher listening levels) and not as nuanced during the busy evening hours. Granted, I discovered this by putting the cable through the worst-case scenario (powered up iPad resting on the cables, which were connected to the wireless Arcam rDAC), and in many systems all you'll get is the natural sense of balance these cables bring. Better shielding would help, but possibly the cure is worse than the disease.

The AU24e cables more than stand their ground in a hugely contended market. In a system where balance is key, you could easily prefer these over any other cable out there, whatever the cost. If you want a cable system that strips away the artifice, Audience deserves an, er, audience. +

AS TESTED:

3m pair AU24e loudspeaker cables £1,595

1m pair AU24e interconnect cables £72

Manufactured by: Audience

URL: www.audience-av.com

Distributed by: High End Cable

URL: www.highendcable.co.uk

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**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.

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Jonathan Carr, Lyra Designer



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- Lyra Connoisseur 4.0 phono & line stage**
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- Lyra Titan MC Cartridge**
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- Lyra Skala MC Cartridge**
- Product of the Year 2007 & Legacy Award.
- Lyra Erodion MC Step-Up**
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UK Lyra distributor: Symmetry - www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Please visit www.lyraaudio.com for a full list of distributors from other countries.



Dynamique Audio Maya, Halo and Summit

By Alan Sircom

Dynamique Audio is that rare thing in today's audio world; a UK-based start-up company. Started just this year, the company designs and builds a broad range of sold-direct cables in all guises. We looked at three of them, in the middle-to-upper region of the portfolio; the Maya interconnect, the Halo speaker cable and Summit power cord.

There's a real belt and braces approach by this new cable fabber. The conductors are PTFE insulated pure silver (silver-plated copper for the earth cable in Summit), with an air dielectric, no shielding (save for a non-metallic braid) and quality WBT Nextgen or – in the power cord – Furutech connectors. Instead of consistent cable geometry throughout the range, Dynamique has gone for 'best case' geometries for each application; a triple-balanced helical array in the signal cables (twisted in the Halo speaker

cable) and helical inner core array in the power cords. The cables also have anti-resonance dampers; one per cable for interconnects and power cords, one per end on the speaker cables. Fit and finish on all the designs is slick and professional, although typographically speaking, the array of different fonts across all those dampers is a design no-no.

The way Dynamique sells these cables is equally 'belt and braces' in approach. They are sold direct and through a select range of online and bricks and mortar dealers, and even distributors. To be up and running this slick, this fast shows Dynamique lives up to the name!

Dynamique gives each cable a 24 to 48 hour burn-in before supply, but suggests the process finishes at home. It also states directionality occurs at this final stage, as the cable effectively 'imprints' itself to your system. Despite risking opening a rift in the space-time continuum, I recklessly swapped the cable direction mid-way through the review and everything sounded just as good as it did the other way up.

Forget the claims and the design; a product should be judged by its performance alone. There is a common sound to the Dynamique Audio range. Every cable brought out deep and powerful bass, with a broadly neutral midrange, a silken sheen to the upper mids and fine soundstaging. In general, this soundstaging is well placed, although the sense of scale does receive some magnification through the speaker cables; just the thing to increase soundstage size with small speakers, perhaps? It's also very well extended, although not to the point of exaggeration and, as you might expect, a dynamic sound too. Despite the commonality of the sound, this isn't the sort of cable that demands a complete front-to-back solution; so old-school cable upgrades are possible without having to sack one complete cable system for another. It is at its best with a full-Dynamique rig, but perfectly comfortable in the process of changeover.

Of the three cables, the loudspeaker cable made the greatest change to the sound, then interconnect and finally the power lead, but this was a close call. And some care should be taken in combining these cables in a system; too bright a system and that silken sheen will make the upper mids overlit, but not bright enough will leave the system sounding almost rolled off.

As a newcomer, this is a brilliant rollout of quality products from the get-go. There are brands that have been making cables for years that don't have this kind of consistency and neutral midrange. Dynamique roques! +

AS TESTED:

Halo speaker cables
(2.5m terminated pair) £1,690
Maya analogue interconnects
(1m RCA pair) £865
Summit power cord
(1m, 13A-10A IEC) £895

Manufactured by: Dynamique Audio

URL: www.dynamiqueaudio.com

Tel: +44 (0)7786 310910

music matters

By Alan Sircom

LAST ISSUE, I INTRODUCED THE XTZ ROOM ANALYZER AS A WAY TO JUDGE JUST HOW GOOD – OR HOW BAD – YOUR ROOM CAN BE.

This time, I was planning to show examples of both good and bad rooms, except now that’s coming later. Problem is, you have got to know what to look for before you can spot what’s right or wrong with a room.

When playing audio in enclosed spaces, the space interacts with the audio system. The way it interacts comes down to the three ‘R’s – resonance, reflection and reverberation.

Resonance is the action of a system oscillating at certain frequencies. A fine example of this oscillation in action is the tuning fork. Hit the fork and it will make a relatively quiet sound (typically 440Hz, or A above middle C), but press its base onto a table top and that sound is louder, because the table top is resonating along with the fork. The vibrations from the tuning fork travel as waves along the length of the table top like ripples in a pond, bouncing back off the edges of the table top. And, also like ripples in a pond, there will be points on the surface of the pond where the original wave meets the reflected wave from the pond’s sides, causing the height of those ripples to increase or decrease accordingly. These quickly appear in consistent places (assuming the pond is of uniform shape) and these peaks and troughs are known as ‘standing waves’.

“Not only does reverberation undermine clarity of speech articulation, it can also radically change to tonality of a sound, because the higher frequencies can tend to fade faster than the lower ones.”

Tuning forks and ponds aside, working with the formula $\lambda = v/f$ (where λ stands for wavelength, v is phase speed – in this case the speed of sound at around 343m/s – and f is the frequency in Hz), you soon discover that the wavelengths of frequencies from about 70-200Hz are all very close to the length, width and even height of a typical living room. Put simply, if your room is 11’3” wide and you play a note at 100Hz, there will be resonance. You will also find that along that 11’3” wall, at some points the 100Hz tone will be louder, and some nodes they will be cancelled almost completely... those standing waves again. This also explains why so many rooms have an overabundance of bass, because the wavelength of frequencies in that region often relate to the room length.

Fortunately, above 200Hz, the wavelength (about 1.7m) is no longer going to prove long enough to set off the room

itself, but suddenly you begin to experience problems with the sounds bouncing off walls and ceilings and arriving at almost the same time as the direct sound. Typically, the problems are at their worst as the sound propagates out in all directions from the loudspeaker and hits walls, floors and ceilings in the room between the front baffle of the drive units and your ears, but there are also reflections from bouncing off the wall behind you and even the wall behind the speaker to contend with. Where resonance typically causes problems with bass, reflection issues tend to undermine the imaging and (occasionally) tonal balance.

Then, there’s reverberation to contend with. Reverb is what happens when the reflected sound continues to reach your ears ‘long after’ the direct sound has faded away. Long after in most home settings is anything longer than about 50 milliseconds. Realistically, the reverberation simply trails on and on, simply decaying to a point of inaudibility, and the room’s reverberation time is measured at a point where it drops to 60dB below the original sound. Not only does reverberation undermine clarity of speech articulation, it can also radically change to tonality of a sound, because the higher frequencies can tend to fade faster than the lower ones.

Finally, there’s ‘flutter echo’. This is a peculiar ringing sound caused when a sound bounces between two hard parallel surfaces, typically along the top part of the walls of a room. Although related to reverberation, this can sometimes plague a room with even an otherwise good reverberation time in all other cases. It’s normally heard in empty rooms and bathrooms and – left untreated – can ruin an otherwise good sound, but in many domestic rooms, the process of domesticating them (as in putting in soft furnishings) can minimise this. It’s also why audio people walk round a prospective listening room clapping to themselves.

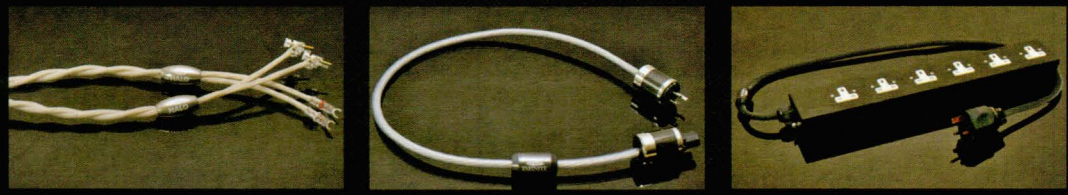
So, next we learn how to detect and calculate potential room problems. +

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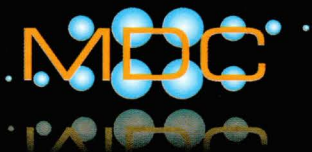


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MUSIC INTERVIEW

Spin Doctors *By Jason Kennedy*

Spin Doctors of the musical rather than political variety are not as big as they once were but the band is confident that having sold 10 million copies of their debut in the early nineties, the fan base will be there to support a rather unusual tour this May. *Pocket Full of Kryptonite* was the album that made Spin Doctors a household name in 1992/3, the singles *Two Princes* and *Little Miss Can't Be Wrong* were major hits in the MTV era and ensured that even if you don't remember the titles the chances are you will have heard the songs.

The Spin Doctors came out of New York in the late eighties and in their early years were part of the jam band scene alongside the likes of Blues Traveller and Phish. Their music is bluesy rock with a strong funk element that makes comparisons with the Red Hot Chilly Peppers inevitable on some tracks, and like that band their strength is hooky grooves.

This May the band will be celebrating the 20th anniversary of *Pocket Full of Kryptonite* by playing the entire album at seven venues across the UK. Although the band has had its ups and downs over the last 20 years, including line-up changes and a brief break up, the current Spin Doctors are the same ones that made the original album with Chris Barron on vocals, Eric Schenkman on guitar, Aaron Comess on drums and bass player Mark White. They have made four albums since *Kryptonite* with 2005's *Nice Talking to Me* signalling a return to the studio for the original line-up. I talked to Aaron Comess about the forthcoming tour. ▶

► **JK: You don't often hear of bands touring an album, whose idea was it to do this?**

AC: Initially there was interest from Sony to put together a 20th anniversary edition of the record. We kind of came up with the idea from that, the record's really great so it would be fun to go out and play it from top to bottom. It's something we've never done and we love the music, it's going to be a ball to come out and play these songs from start to finish. It's been a very positive thing, we're playing this music that has a lot of great memories, it's something that reached a lot of people and something that we feel totally holds up well.

JK: Will you be playing it as it's recorded or in more extended form?

AC: We've always kept things a little bit loose when we play live, it really just depends on the songs. Some of our songs have pretty set arrangements and we play pretty close to the same every time while other songs lend themselves to stretching out a little bit. Some of the songs on this record do lend themselves to that, there's definitely tracks that we'll be stretching out on.

JK: So no ten minute drum solos then?

AC: Maybe a three minute drum solo!

JK: Will you only be playing 'Kryptonite' or will there be more recent material as well?

AC: It's pretty much going to be that album but on the European edition of Pocket Full of Kryptonite we had three bonus tracks that weren't included in the rest of the world. So our plan is to do the full record with those three bonus tracks as well, if people want more we'll give them more but it's a good length set.

JK: How long is the album?

AC: The album itself is about maybe 50 minutes but if we stretch it out a bit it takes it to an hour and then the other three songs, all in it's going to be about an hour and a half.

JK: I notice that the band has had its share of ups and downs over the years but you are now back to line-up that made the original album.

AC: Yeah, it's the same four guys, we went through a period of time when we had a couple of different guys coming in and out and then the band split up altogether for a while. We've been back with the original guys now for a while, it's great. There would definitely be no interest in us doing this if it wasn't the original guys, the four of us created it together. The fact that we're all here, healthy and alive and playing great is really all the more reason to come out and celebrate.

JK: Will you be touring the album in the US as well?

AC: We are going to be doing it in the States in the fall, but coming over to England will be the first time we've done it.

JK: Have you had to rehearse the songs?

AC: About Half the songs we know well because we've played them thousands of times but there's some other stuff that we've played a little bit over the years but haven't necessarily been regulars in the set. So we got together for a couple of days last month and rehearsed which we rarely do (laughs), we were going to call it the 20th anniversary rehearsal too! It was great, the music felt really fresh and it was really fun to play some of those other deeper cuts.

JK: Will the 20th anniversary release of 'Kryptonite' be a remix or just a remaster?

AC: It'll be a remaster along with a whole additional disc of other material like B-sides, some unreleased tracks, demos and live stuff. We're in the process of compiling that all right now.

It'll probably come out sometime around the end of the summer but it worked out scheduling wise for us to come over and do this now.

JK: You have an area on your site where fans can share torrents of live material, I know that the Grateful Dead did this but it's pretty unusual.

AC: We've always had an open policy with people, allowing them to tape the shows, there was a lot of that going on particularly in the early days of the band. There's still is a little bit, not quite as much but we've always encouraged it. I feel that the more music you can get out there the better. When we did it back then people were like what the hell are you doing, nobody gave out free music then. Obviously now everybody just gets everything for free anyway, ►



UK TOUR DATES

12/5/11 Thursday Liverpool, o2 academy
13/5/11 Friday Glasgow, The Ferry
14/5/11 Saturday Kendal, Brewery Arts Centre
15/5/11 Sunday London, Jazz Café
17/5/11 Tuesday Manchester, Band On The Wall
18/5/11 Wednesday Leamington Spa, The Assembly
19/5/11 Thursday Milton Keynes, The Stables

we're not going to lose that. I think in the big picture it really isn't helpful stopping this sort of thing because it's all about making your fans happy and getting good music out there, and it all kinda works together in the end. If they enjoy what you do they're gonna come out to see a show.

JK: It's been a long time since you released a live album is it possible that one might emerge from this tour?

AC: There's been some talk about it, we're recording some of the shows. We're actually going to record the Manchester show and we'll probably record some of the shows we do here in the states. It's definitely possible. I think it would be really fun to get a live recording of this thing and put it out, we probably will do on some level.

JK: Do you have a good sound system at home or do you leave that to the studio?

AC: I have a really nice sound system at home, I have an Audible Illusions L2 preamp, I have Audio Physics speakers which are really amazing, I just got a new power amp but I can't remember which one it is. I got the system about ten years ago and its held up amazingly well, I'm a big fan of listening to music sounding good. It's interesting because I'm at a point where I don't know what to do because the whole hi-fi thing is in a weird place. Everybody's downloading all this stuff from iTunes now and MP3s are obviously not the same quality as CDs are. I've downloaded 80% of the records that I bought over the last 10 years and put them on my iPhone but I have the problem that when I plug my iPhone into my stereo it sounds like crap. What does a the person that really enjoys hi-fi sound do? I'm actually thinking about just getting a turntable and buying like my favourite 100 records on vinyl.

JK: Are you looking forward to the tour?

AC: We've always had a great time playing over in the UK, everybody there has been big supporters of the band, we're excited to come back over and play and I'm looking forward to having some good tandoori chicken while I'm there. +

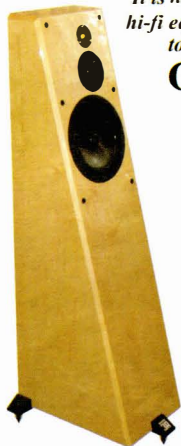


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record reviews

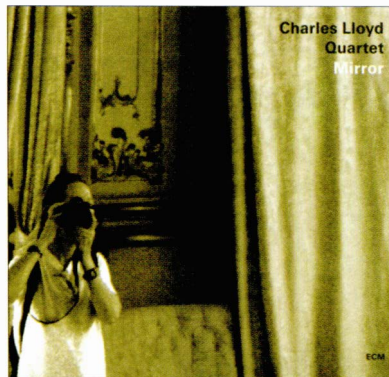
How To Read Them

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:
 Contemporary – Jason Kennedy
 Audiophile – Dennis D. Davis
 Classical – Richard S. Foster

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Charles Lloyd Quartet Mirror

ECM

Charles Lloyd is a saxophonist of some repute. He has naturally mellowed since those heady days but retains an edge that many of his generation have lost. Mirror is his first studio album with the quartet of Jason Moran on piano, Eric Harland on drums and Reuben Rogers on double bass, a young and immensely skilful group that provides the energy behind Lloyd's sophistication.

The album features two tunes by Monk; Ruby, My Dear and Monk's Mood alongside four Lloyd originals and a number of standards of which Brian Wilson's Caroline, No is apparently an unusual choice, but not when you learn that Lloyd played flute on The Beach Boys' Surf's Up. There are some fine renditions of traditional tunes too, in particular Go Down Moses which has a rousing climax and the Water is Wide where the players make the most of the spaces within the tune. There are freer tracks for the more adventurous listener but the better tunes bring out Lloyd's ability to reach out across the jazz divide to an audience that's versed in crossovers styles. One that he helped to create back in his heyday.

The recording, made on the west coast, is very strong on tone and image solidity, and there is a bit more warmth to the sound than you get with ECM's European productions.



Chick Corea Return to Forever

ECM

Return to Forever the group was one of the foremost exponents of jazz-rock and enjoyed considerable mainstream success in the mid seventies. It's genesis however was this Chick Corea album from 1972 which features Stanley Clarke on bass, Airtio Moreira on percussion, Flora Purim on vocals and Joe Farrell on flute and sax alongside Corea himself on electric piano. The music they made was a fusion but of latin and jazz styles which creates a much lighter and melodic style than the band which spawned Romantic Warrior.

The standard of playing is extremely strong from all quarters with Farrell contributing some mercurial flute on side two's Sometime Ago-La Fiesta which runs to over 23 minutes. There is something slightly ethereal about the music overall, it's light and transcendent and a little hard to grasp but easy to float away with. Its key quality is that it combines sophisticated playing without attention grabbing antics, a mature work that puts the music first. In many respects this is typical of what became the ECM style of combining musicians from different schools to see what they can conjure up. The sound is very clean and open for its age but could do with a bit more bottom end, there are no heavy bass sounds on here but you can tell that bandwidth is limited.



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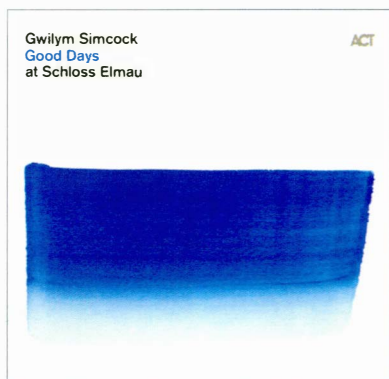


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Gwilym Simcock
Good Days at Schloss Elmau
 ACT

Welsh pianist Gwilym Simcock was feted as a prodigy when he arrived on the scene a few years ago, the BBC gave him two awards and fellow artists including Chick Corea say all the right things about him. He plays French horn and has accompanied Dave Holland and is a regular member of Bill Bruford's Earthworks. Good Days... is his third solo album and the first for ACT which must be rather pleased to have bagged him, as the name suggests it was recorded in schloss Elmau in the Bavarian alps, a place whose classical traditions resonate with Simcock's questing improvisations.

His playing has something of the Jarrett about it but not enough for the two to be confused, Simcock's British roots tend to override any tendency toward the blues. He is a precise and dynamic musician, one whom you feel has a pretty good idea of where he is going before he starts and sometimes you feel he could afford to let go a little. His virtuosity is stunning, a fact made clear on Wake Up Call, a muscular and dynamic piece that follows the 12 minute epic Can We Still Be Friends (a Simcock original rather than Rundgren).

The recording errs on the forward side, there is plenty of power and dynamics but it could do with a bit of warmth, it's not aggressive but the acoustic is on the cool side.



Various artists
Ninja Tune XX vol 1 & 2
 Ninja Tune

Ninja Tune the label started by Coldcut 20 years ago is celebrating its anniversary in style. Apart from the gigs, exhibitions and remixes there is a lavish box set containing six CDs, six 7inch singles and a book among other goodies. For those without a spare £100 there is a pair of two disc volumes which give you a pretty good idea of where this iconic label is at in 2010 and some notion of how it got there.

The emphasis is naturally on the contemporary but there are classics here as well, a remix of Coldcut's Timber and another of Fink's This Is The Thing. These sit alongside contributions by artists on Ninja's urban imprint Big Dada and all manner of mixes and rare cuts. Inevitably some of the most intriguing have been saved for the box-set but there is much to enjoy and explore. Volume has will appeal to those like myself who enjoyed the label's 90s output, one disc at least has a goodly amount of acoustic material and features such favourites as the Cinematic Orchestra and Jaga Jazzist.

Sound quality is not what this about rather it's a fascinating insight into contemporary (mostly) British music from a label with a genuinely open outlook.



Verner Pohjola
Aurora
 ACT

Verner Pohjola comes from Finland where his father is a well established double bass player and his brother a trombonist, he chose the trumpet although drums would have seemed a more logical family trio choice. But Pohjola's role model is Miles Davis so the muted horn is his instrument and he has done well with it, this album's original release won a Finnish Grammy or Emma in 2009. Which is probably why ACT records picked it up for wider distribution and some lush artwork – it's paint BTW. Pohjola's father and brother feature on the album alongside a line-up that includes two other bass players, three drummers and the Meta4 string quartet. The sound is more organic/less pristine than an ECM but has much in common thanks to excellent clarity and dynamics.

It's hard not to be distracted by the sound on here, Pohjola's production is brimming with life and he uses depth extremely well. His playing is distinctly Miles-esque but more often you are distracted by the drums which are particularly muscular on tracks like For Three, an eleven minute epic. Elsewhere things are more subtle but many of the eight tracks build to a climax after a calm start, often euphorically at that. It might be cold up there but that doesn't make the music cool.



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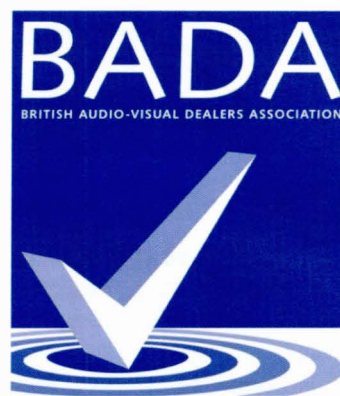
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Frank Sinatra

Concert Sinatra
Mobile Fidelity/Reprise

180g

When Frank Sinatra left Capitol and opened his own record label he released a few dozen albums on Reprise over the next couple decades. This 1963 release is one of the best. Despite the title, this is a studio recording of Frank reworking show tunes. The Concert title derives from the fact that Nelson Riddle is conducting an enormous orchestra. Show Tunes Sinatra or Really Big Band Sinatra might have been more accurate, but less catchy. In the event, Nelson's arrangements are lush and Sinatra's delivery and interpretation near the peak of his powers. Like some of the famous Mercury Living Presence recordings, this concert was recorded to 35mm tape, and the recording job is outstanding. This is a big symphonic sound and Frank expands to fill it. The music is Rogers and Hammerstein, not string quartet, and the recording suits the material. Sinatra's voice has perhaps never been captured so well. While the original Reprise vinyl was quite nice, it can't stand up to the super mastering job of Mobile Fidelity's Rob LoVerde who has crafted a sonic masterpiece. This is not recorded sound that would impress in MP3 format, but when everything is done right, and it is here, it's wild again, beguiled again. You'll be bewitched, if not bothered and bewildered.

RECORDING



MUSIC



Jackie McLean

Destination Out!
Music Matter/Blue Note 84165

45rpm

Sometimes you don't hear a record for so long that when you go back to it you are surprised at how good it is and marvel at how you could have forgotten about it. Such was my shock when I put on this new mastering of Destination Out. Grachan Moncur III's sultry trombone playing, Roy Haynes' snap crackle drum and cymbal work, Bobby Hutcherson textural vibes, Larry Ridley's sure bass and of course McLean's alto add up to chamber jazz to match anything by my hero Eric Dolphy, who was clearly being channeled here. Four vinyl sides and four songs, with plenty of time to spread out. This LP belongs up there in my pantheon of favorite Blue Notes along with Out To Lunch and a few others. The sound is simply remarkable. Listen to Love and Hate, and if this isn't one of the most luscious sounding recordings of a jazz group on record, I'm missing out on something. Each instrument hangs in space and vibrates in every dimension. And unlike some of Van Gelder's stereo recordings, nothing here leaves me thinking that it might have sounded better in mono. Maybe Kevin Gray put some new capacitors in his mastering console. Maybe Rudy's recording set up was a little better than usual. Or maybe the moon and stars were in alignment, but this one is Out there! McLean's best Blue Note, in remarkable sound.

RECORDING



MUSIC



Keith Jarrett

The Köln Concert
ECM

180g

You don't often get a re-release on a bygone format by ECM but this must be its most successful and enduring title, its Tubular Bells in many ways, and it's great to have it on heavy vinyl for the first time. Made in 1975 by a still be-afroed Jarrett it features one of the least appealing sounding pianos in the jazz oeuvre, yet the playing reaches heights that few artists ever achieve. When Jarrett is in the zone he is undoubtedly acting as a conduit to a higher plane, at its best the work on here takes you to places that only music, the highest art form, can hope to do.

Jarrett had reached the apex of his abilities by this time and plays in a stream of consciousness style that is at its most transcendental in the first part. In many ways the performance peaks early but the second part, which stretches over three sides, also has some fine examples of musical beauty, part IIb is particularly good. Jarrett has renounced long improvisations like these in order to focus his energies in relatively short bursts, but there is a lot to enjoy in the blues and boogie woogie driven vamps that carry him from one moment of inspiration to the next here.

The 180g treatment reins in the clangy sound of the piano and gives better stereo depth than standard pressings, equally importantly it's pristine.

RECORDING



MUSIC

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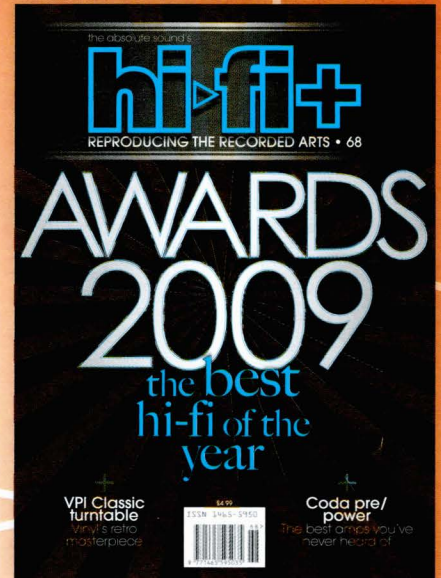
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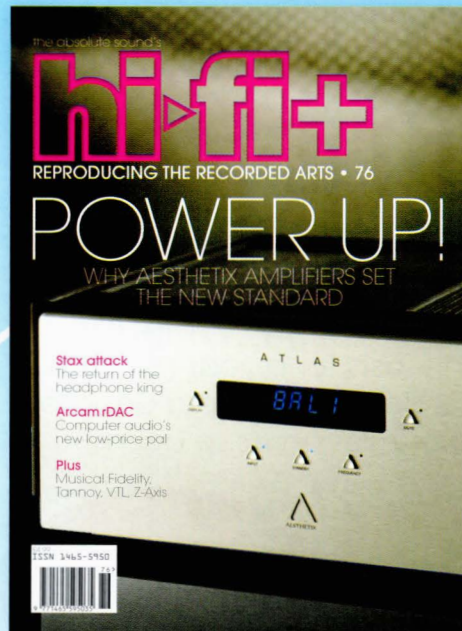
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Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 4 (Op.58) No. 5 (Op.73, "Emperor") 180g

Yegheny Sudbin, piano with Osmo Vanska conducting the Minnesota Orchestra

Bis SACD 1758

This is the first release in an intended project of all five concertos and Sudbin brings his own imagination to bear in these here. The orchestra echoes his warm approach and what we have here are performances more in line with the Romantic period rather than looking back to the Classicism of the 18th century.

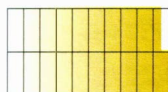
These are wonderful performances with the recording quality that provides great definition of detail and an approach to phrasing that does not fail to delight the listener.

The Fifth Concerto opening movement shows a performer and performance that has something new say about this all too familiar music that marks the personal stamp of Sudbin.

Finally, if you are unfamiliar with Vanska and the Minnesota performances of the Nine Beethoven Symphonies, you owe it to yourself to test the waters with any disc you can find. They are all superb readings with outstanding sound quality. That continues with this disc and I do hope you will add this to your collection. It is really very special.

www.bis.se

RECORDING
MUSIC



Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op.36; Overture 'Romeo and Juliet' SA 5.1

The Russian National Orchestra conducted by Mikhail Pletnev

PentaTone PTC 5186384

This marks the first in a new Tchaikovsky Symphony Cycle for PentaTone from Mikhail Pletnev and the RNO. Pletnev recorded the cycle for Deutsche Grammophon in 1996 and for this symphony the timings for this performance of the 4th are a little slower and offer a greater appreciation for the magic Tchaikovsky has wrought. For this session, Pletnev's seating of the orchestra is somewhat different (violins placed left and right of the conductor) and this lets the inner instrumental lines of both selections to be clearly heard. The sound quality Polyhymnia engineer Erdo Groot and his associates create the probably the best sound quality of any Tchaikovsky 4th I am aware of.

While others may enjoy different performances, I move this performance (both interpretation and sound quality) to the head of the class. It appears that Pletnev has rethought his previous 4th and here has created a tight, very insightful reading that is sure to please even the most discerning collectors of this great composer.

Most highly recommended.

www.pentatonemusic.com

RECORDING
MUSIC



Russian Cello Sonatas: Rachmaninov, Borodin, Shostakovich 180g

Alexander Chaushian, cello; Yegheny Sudbin, piano

Bis 1858

The works on this disc were composed between 1860 and 1930 and hail from a momentous period of Russian music. One of my personal favorites, the Rachmaninov Sonata in G is given a wonderfully romantic reading. This is the first time I've heard Chaushian's cello and he is quite formidable. Sudbin as you already know is a favorite pianist of mine and these two individuals were meant to play together. The sound quality offered us by the engineers is exemplary. Recorded at St. Georges' in Bristol, England, the ambient information in this recording puts the listener right in the hall with the artists. This is a very intimate recording with an excellent job by producer and sound engineer Jens Braun.

The Borodin Sonata was inspired by a theme from Bach's sonata for violin in G minor which. This alone is a surprising inspiration from a totally "un-Russian" source. This is a warm and entertaining composition to be sure.

The Shostakovich is given a splendid reading by the artists. This is a rousing work with strong romantic overtones. Highest recommendation.

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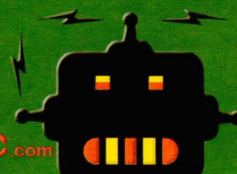
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Rickie Lee Jones – Flying Cowboys

every home should have one

By Jason Kennedy

RICKIE LEE JONES' EPONYMOUS DEBUT IS A GREAT ALBUM, BUT IT'S NOT ALONE. Her fourth, *Flying Cowboys*, came 10 years after in 1989, by which time she had married French musician Pascal Nabet-Meyer (who co-wrote four of the 11 songs on this album) and gave birth to her daughter Charlotte. So it's perhaps unsurprising that the album is happy, romantic and often nostalgic, with plenty of references to western themes.

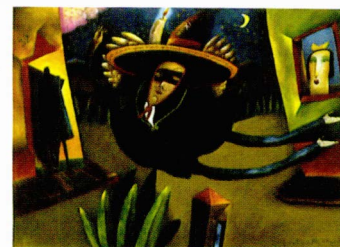
Flying Cowboys was produced by Walter Becker, who brings a polish and richness to the sound of this album that you won't find elsewhere in her canon. Jones was impressed with his work with Steely Dan. The sound quality and arrangements are extremely fine; 'west coast luxe' about sums it up.

The album produced one single in the track *Satellites* which has a very catchy and percussive chorus backed by some beautiful sinuous bass playing from Neil Stubenhaus who can be heard on several tracks. It's Jones' voice that remains the main pull on this as with all the tracks, here the vocal has been recorded twice and the two are not the same but interplayed to superb effect. There is quite a bit of this sophisticated double tracking throughout the album, sometimes filling out the sound and at others providing a dislocated reflection of it. The singing is fluid and elastic, occasionally pushing its limits but always charming, some pieces have a clear nasal inflection but this doesn't get in the way of her appeal. It's the imperfections that give Jones a vulnerability that is at the same time a strength and this enhances the strength of emotional communication she is able to get onto the record. Neither is she afraid to bend the rules, on *Ghost Train* Jones summons up the spirit of John Lee Hooker for a pared down blues where the lyrics rise and fall in level and the voice and electric guitar provide all but the background.

Another standout track is *Rodeo Girl*, which is appealingly spacious in its production having been cut a couple years before the rest of the album by drummer Chris Dickie. He programmed the drums on it but RLJ plays all the instruments and conjures up a world that has a dream like quality thanks to the ethereal sound-scape and her pure, sensual voice. This contrasts with the title track and others where a whole phalanx of top notch session players create a rich and effortless backdrop for Jones to express her imagination, one that is even richer than the music itself.

In many ways *Flying Cowboys* feels like the peak of Rickie Lee Jones' recording career, her voice is superb and the quality of musicianship without peer, there are few albums that match its combination of sound and musical charm. +

Rickie Lee Jones



Flying Cowboys

RICKIE LEE JONES – FLYING COWBOYS

Recorded: 1988

Released: September 1989

Producer: Walter Becker

Track Listing

- "The Horses" (Becker, Jones) – 4:47
- "Just My Baby" (Jones, Nabet-Meyer) – 4:44
- "Ghetto of My Mind" (Jones, Nabet-Meyer) – 6:12
- "Rodeo Girl" (Jones) – 4:50
- "Satellites" (Jones) – 4:54
- "Ghost Train" (Jones) – 4:16
- "Flying Cowboys" (Bernardi, Jones, Nabet-Meyer) – 5:02
- "Don't Let the Sun Catch You Crying" (Chadwick, Maguire, Marsden, Marsden) – 4:13
- "Love Is Gonna Bring Us Back Alive" (Jones, Nabet-Meyer) – 4:51
- "Away from the Sky" (Jones) – 5:30
- "Atlas' Marker" (Jones) – 5:58

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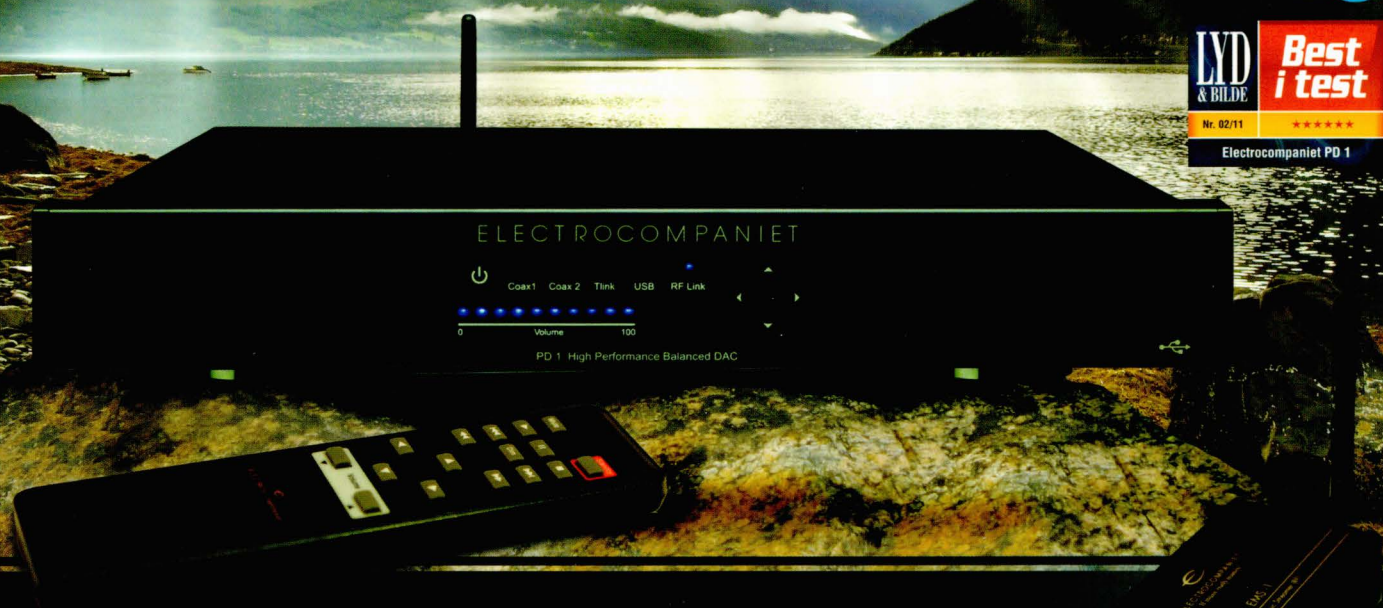
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