

HI-FI CHOICE

NEW LOOK

THE FINEST HI-FI MAGAZINE IN THE WORLD | JUNE 2002 | www.hifichoice.co.uk



SONY

EXCLUSIVE GROUP TEST
SERIOUS PLAYERS FOR MUSIC AND VIDEO



Why Sony's new £500 DVD/SACD spinner is **THE BEST DVD PLAYER EVER**

See review on page 35



SUPERIOR STEREO AMPS

We test six high-end models for sensational stereo sound



MISSION EXCLUSIVE

Why you must hear this new British speaker



UK FIRST WADIA'S SUPER CD PLAYER

Latest US machine blows away the competition

THE DIRECTORY

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Clarity ^{XXL}

XXL NEODYMIUM SPEAKERS

Velvet for the ears



Philips high-end Clarity headphones – HP890. Clarity speaker drivers combine powerful bass performance with crispness of detail and a frequency range of 8 - 28000 Hz, to deliver superb acoustic performance, further enhanced by the open ear-shell design. The sturdy self-adjusting headband and soft contoured ear-cushions ensure a secure, comfortable fit, so the HP890 really is 'velvet for your ears'. For further information call 020 8665 6350 or visit www.ce.philips.co.uk



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CONTRIBUTORS



Dan George *HFC's* own Mr Fixit answers your hi-fi conundrums in our Help section and road tests some of the very latest kit.



Jason Kennedy *HFC's* last editor compares and contrasts the virtues and otherwise of upmarket integrated amps.



Paul Messenger A former *HFC* editor and the nation's foremost loudspeaker scribe road tests Infinity's £10K Prelude.



Paul Miller is hi-fi's king of scientific lab testing. This month he checks out DVD players and stereo amps.



Alvin Gold polishes his glasses to check out the other use for DVD players – after a thorough aural examination of course.



David Vivian visits a man who has nothing better to spend his money on than extremely expensive hi-fi equipment.



Alan Sircom has been writing about hi-fi and home cinema for years. He lends an ear to our CD system on page six.

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intro



There are those who believe that DVD players have no place in a thoroughbred hi-fi magazine like *Hi-Fi Choice*. DVD, they say, is a video format, and has nothing to do with the quest for sonic truth. While I have a degree of sympathy for this puritanical idealism, and

acknowledge that most DVD players thus far have failed to make the grade on purist audio grounds, my patience fails when such views verge on stubborn Luddism.

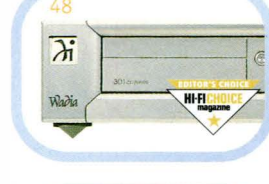
It's not because DVD happens to be the most rapidly adopted home entertainment format of all time, or even because new CD-only players are increasingly scarce commodities. It's because we live in a democratic world, and people are free to set their own priorities. If your sole passion is the best possible reproduction of music, you should consider spending as much as you're able to afford on a dedicated two-channel audio system, with a CD player (or turntable) as your primary source. But there's nothing wrong with also liking films, and seeking a comparable level of quality for them too.

In fact, the more serious types of DVD player (see page 26) are getting better at playing music, and an increasing number now feature compatibility with one or other of the high resolution multichannel formats – DVD-Audio or SACD. Sony's DVP-NS900 is a case in point – an exceptionally talented all-rounder for half a ton, which is why we've boldly called it “the best DVD player ever”.

Personally, I run two systems at home. The one in the bedroom is a two-channel music system, CD and vinyl-based. The other (in the living room) is a high-end multichannel system, created to play back multifarious digital formats from CD to SACD, DVD-Video to DVD-Audio. OK, I admit I'm greedy (and fortunate enough to edit a hi-fi mag). I still run a dedicated CD player in my multichannel system to get the most from my music – because it's always been my first love (though thankfully not my last). But the point is you're free to make your own choices. And if an all-singin', all-dancin', tea-makin' DVD player is the way you want to go, *HFC* will help you choose the best to buy – for your music as well as your video.

Tim Bownen, Editor

It doesn't take the sharpest of eyes to see that *Hi-Fi Choice* has gone through a major overhaul this month. We've been burning the midnight oil to bring you the new improved model, all part of our continual programme to ensure *HFC* stays ahead of the game. You'll see more improvements over the next few months and beyond, and I welcome your feedback on what you think we're doing right, and what you think we might be doing wrong. Because when all's said and done, it's your opinion that counts.



this month's star products

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THE COMPONENTS



Creek CD53 CD player £1,199

Alloy-fronted CD player based on Philips technology, sporting a CDM12 transport and an Analog Devices Delta Sigma chipset. Creek says it has attempted to lower jitter to the point where it outperforms much more costly two-box designs. And with a sound like this, who are we to disagree?



Creek 5350SE integrated amplifier £799

Shiny, beautifully made 85 watts per channel stereo integrated amplifier. A modular design, it can be fitted with an optional MM or MC phono stage. The MOSFET amplifier design is minimalist (no tone controls), but features speaker switching for two sets of speakers or easy bi-wiring.



Shahinian Compass loudspeakers £2,195

Distinctive two-way omnidirectional floor-standing speakers from a distinctive American omnidirectional loudspeaker manufacturer. It features a 25mm titanium dome tweeter and 166mm woofer. Needs a good amp to drive it, but can work with a good integrated.

CREEK CD53 | CREEK 5350SE | SHAHINIAN COMPASS

SYSTEM ADDICT

Each month we ask a dealer to recommend a dream system. Then we check it out...

You may recall that last month we ran a test of three CD systems, each one recommended by some of the country's leading hi-fi dealers. We received such a good response that we've decided to make this a regular feature, with a different dealer suggesting their dream CD, amp and speaker combo (often around the £3,000 mark) each time. This month, Infidelity of Kingston-upon-Thames suggested the system and Creek supplied the CD and amplifier, in the shape of the shiny £1,199 CD53 and £799 5350SE integrated amp. Designed for a US audience, the classy Philips-based one-bit Delta Sigma player and the 85 watt line-only (with optional phono) MOSFET-based amplifier didn't disappoint. In fact, the combination proved to be more than competent, working well with speakers far more expensive than usually get partnered with components of this price. But that would be spoiling the denouement.

The first pair of speakers in the frame were the £750 B&W CM2 'bookshelf' monitors, on B&W's own stands. These small, elegant monitors had a remarkably wide and lively sound, but lacked a bit of energy and oomph in the bass. So, these were soon swapped with the £800 Royd RR1s. These diminutive backwards-tilting floorstanders were smaller than the B&W's speaker stands, but produced a richer, deeper sound (though perhaps a touch uneven). They made the room seem bigger – the sound produced from these Smurf-sized speakers can be surprisingly epic.

Factor in the Chord interconnects and some NAC A5 speaker cables and we are in striking distance of the three grand mark. So that's it, job done. Well, not quite. Just as I started to put the elastic back round my notebook, another pair of speakers were put in the place of the Royds. "I'm not sure how this will sound," said Simon, Infidelity's proprietor, "but let's give it a go". Two minutes later those great little Royds were but a distant memory.

VERDICT
SOUND
★★★★★
FEATURES
★★★★☆
BUILD
★★★★☆
VALUE
★★★★★
£4,193

CONCLUSION
This minimalist system proves that less really is more. The omnidirectional Shahinian speakers are a perfect foil for the Creek electronics. Expensive, but worth it.

The ante was upped considerably by the inclusion of a pair of the £2,195 Shahinian Compass speakers. These distinctive omnidirectional floorstanders with a sloping diamond-shaped front baffle can just about be driven by a good quality integrated amp (Shahinian recommends Creek on its Website). They hadn't been used in a while and took about ten minutes of Mahler's *Symphony Of A Thousand* to come to life, but even from that first organ note, it was clear that we were in a very different league to the other speakers. The Shahinians had about an octave more bass than either of the others, and played with a fluidity and grace that made every track stay on the CD player longer. It passed the Led Zep test with honours – playing *BBC Sessions* tracks at a fair whack to see if you want to wince and turn it down or crank it up and play air guitar. We ended up running right past the end of *Communication Breakdown* and all the way through *Dazed And Confused*.

But it's not just big and loud music that worked with this system. We stuck on the classic Glenn Gould fifties recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. The piano possessed the sort of body and tone that a piano really has and although the tape hiss was still noticeable, the passion that made Gould the pre-eminent pianist of his generation comes through wonderfully and track upon track was played. All that passion and energy may shock those who like their hi-fi elegant, relaxing and beautiful and by pretty triode standards it may seem a bit rough edged. But those who listen to music instead of sounds will find this hard to better for the cash.

Nothing could faze Infidelity's Creek/Shahinian system, and while it was almost £1,200 more than the original budget, that extra cash was instantly justifiable. There was no going back to the three grand mark – this was money well spent. 🎧



CONTACTS

INFIDELITY, Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey
☎ 020 8943 3530
🌐 www.infidelity.co.uk

📞 Creek 020 8361 4133
📞 Pear Audio (Shahinian) 01665 830862

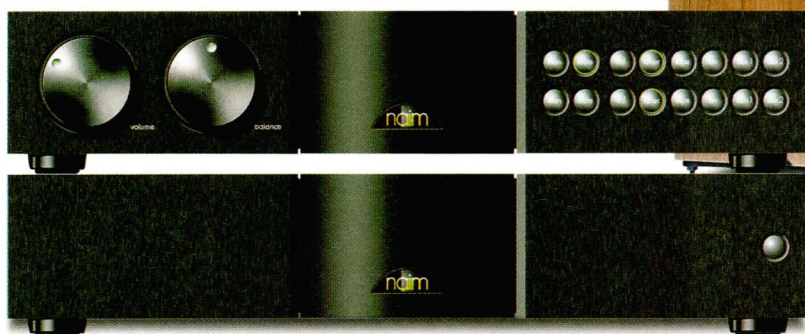
GOT THE NAC

NEW FLAGSHIP NAC 552 PREAMP TO PARTNER NAP 500

➤ Naim has launched a new reference preamplifier to partner the NAP 500 power amp launched last year. The new range-topping NAC 552 is priced at £11,750 and replaces the existing NAC 52 which reigned for twelve years. The new model features a split rail power supply which is housed in its own full-wick case and is claimed to eliminate noise. The fully suspended sub-chassis mount circuit boards help to minimise vibration to the sensitive electronics and the NAC 552 continues to use DIN connections across the six line inputs available.

Also new from Naim is the SL2, a curvy two-way floorstander that features aluminium mass damping on the internal cabinet walls. The SL2 uses a wide dispersion Scan-Speak tweeter which is mounted on a mechanically stable array and isolated from the rest of the cabinet. Available in a range of real wood finishes, the SL2 can be bought in active or passive versions at £4,895 and £4,995 respectively.

☎ Naim Audio Limited 01722 332266

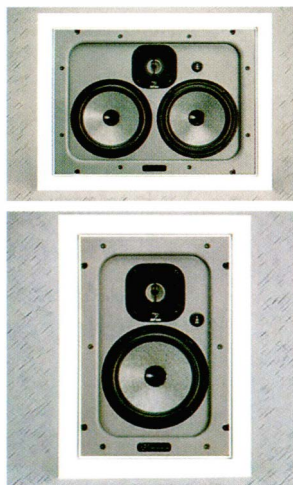


SOUNDS INVISIBLE

JMLAB LAUNCHES IN-WALL LOUDSPEAKER RANGE

➤ French speaker manufacturer JMLab has launched its first range of discreet in-wall models. The Cache 400 series comprises four models including a centre speaker and in-ceiling design. All have MDF sealed-enclosures that utilise JMLab's wide dispersion inverted dome tweeter and Focal's 'W' sandwich mid/bass cone – a fibreglass/foam composite. All use cast aluminium mounting brackets and feature paintable aluminium grilles. The Cache 400 series is available now with prices starting at £430.

☎ JMLab 0121 616 5126

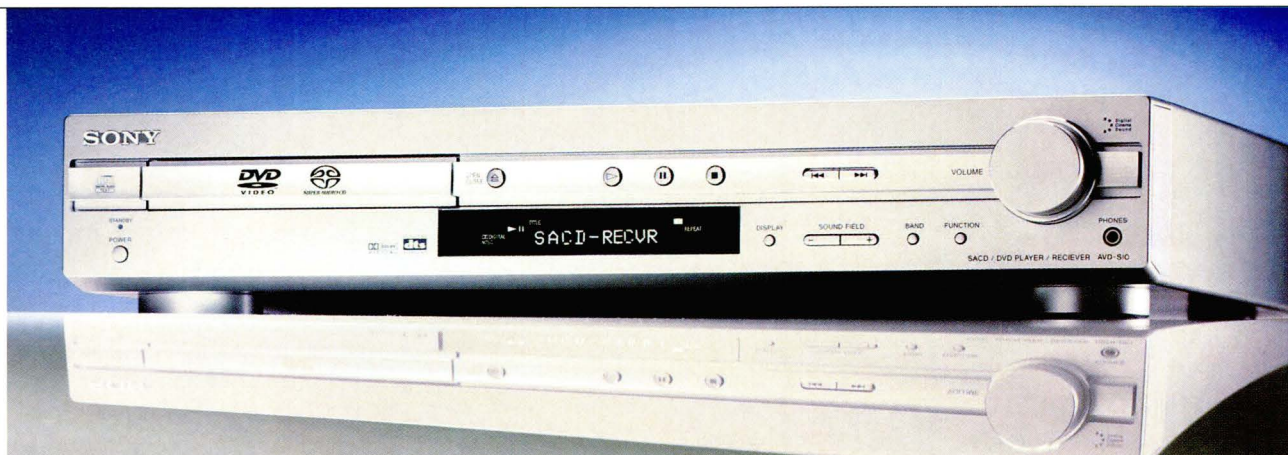


DAYS OF THUNDER

NEW UPSAMPLING CD PLAYER FROM TALK ELECTRONICS

➤ British amp specialist Talk Electronics has launched a new CD player that uses upsampling technology to offer greater levels of resolution. The £1,700 Thunder 3.1 player re-describes CD data to a 24-bit word length and then upsamples the data to 192kHz said to give around five times more information per second than a standard 16-bit/44.1kHz CD. The company claims the upsampled sound quality is equivalent to SACD or DVD-A. The player uses the Analog Devices AD1853 DAC and claims to offer low levels of jitter due to the asynchronous output that utilises separate clocking devices from the input. The Thunder 3.1 CD player is available now.

☎ Talk Electronics 01276 709966



SONY'S SACD SOLUTIONS

SONY LAUNCHES TWO NEW INTEGRATED DVD-VIDEO/SACD PACKAGES

⊕ Sony has launched two new integrated DVD systems with multichannel SACD playback. The AVD-S10 is an integrated DVD-Video and SACD receiver that offers a one-box solution to consumers wanting to choose their own loudspeakers. It offers DVD-V, CD, CD-R/RW and multichannel SACD playback and incorporates an RDS tuner and Sony's S-Master integrated 5x50 watt digital amplifier.

A new all-in-one package, the DAV-S400, also comes with a 40 watt 5.1 channel satellite speaker system. The DAV-S400 receiver will play DVD-V, CD and multichannel SACD formats and can decode Dolby Digital and DTS soundtracks. The AVD-S10 is available in June priced around £520, and the £450 DAV-S400 is in the shops now.

☎ Sony UK 08705 111999



MOVIE MUSCLE

YAMAHA'S NEW MULTICHANNEL AMPS

⊕ Yamaha has launched a new range of home cinema products including three new multichannel amps and four receivers. The flagship eight-channel DSP-AZ1 amplifier is compatible with every current movie sound format and boasts 24-bit/192kHz audio DACs and 44-bit Cinema DSP. The range also includes a choice of three one-box packages containing a DVD player, receiver and 5.1 channel speaker system.

Prices start at £290 for the RX-V430RDS receiver, rising to £2,000 for the DSP-AZ1 amplifier. All should be available in early June.

☎ Yamaha Electronics UK 01923 233166

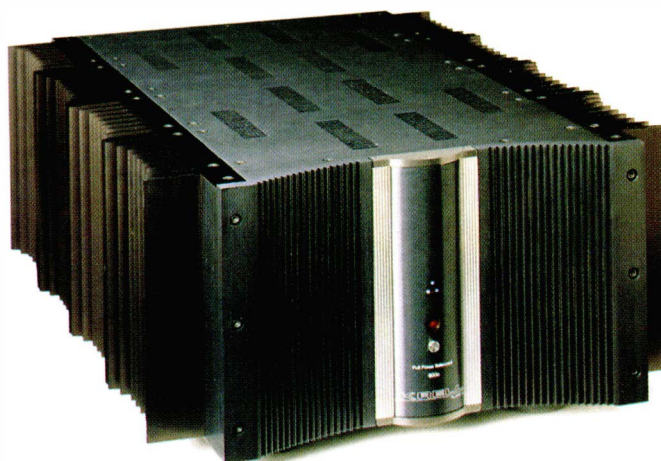
GO TO KRELL

NEW AMPLIFIER RANGE FROM HIGH-END AUDIO ENGINEERS

⊕ Krell has launched a new range of stereo power and monoblock amplifiers called the Full Power Balanced X Series. The stereo range comprises three power amplifiers rated from 300 watts to the most powerful Krell amplifier to date, the 700 watt FPB700cx. All X-series models are Class A designs sharing the same circuit topology featuring power supplies which double in size with each step-up in the range.

The new monaural amplifiers are descendants of Krell's Master Reference Amplifier and claim to offer unparalleled sonic performance in both stereo and multichannel applications. Prices start at £7,450 for the 350 watt FPB350mcx monoblock and £9,450 for the 300 watt stereo FPB300cx power amplifier.

☎ Absolute Sounds 020 8971 3909

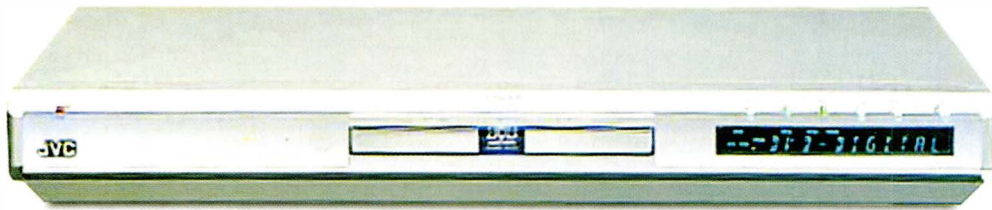


In brief

BLU-RAY is a new type of DVD disc that's destined to change the way we enjoy digital video. Nine of the world's leading manufacturers including Sony, Pioneer and Philips have agreed on a standard for the format that takes its name from the blue laser used. The discs hold 27GB of data per side with a 1,000-line resolution, compared to 4.7GB for standard DVD with its 500-line resolution.

PMC has launched a new slimline subwoofer that uses twin 165mm drivers driven by a 150 watt amplifier, based on a Bryston design. The TLE1 claims to provide a flat response down to 22Hz with extremely low distortion. The cabinet has a 20cm width and a 55cm depth making it easier to place than conventional subs. Expected retail is £1,450. ☎ 0870 444 1044

SENNHEISER'S improved Four Series open-backed headphones claim to offer higher levels of performance than their predecessors. The top of the range E50 HD 497 and the E40 HD 477 both feature replaceable parts and weigh in at only 130 grams. Two other models are expected soon with a retail price of under £30. ☎ 0800 652 5002



SLIMLINE TONIC

NEW DVD-AUDIO PLAYER FROM JVC BREAKS THE PRICE BARRIER

JVC has announced details of a new £300 DVD-Audio player. The XV-NA7 is a slimline machine that plays DVD-Audio, DVD-Video, CD, and VCD formats,

as well as MP3-encoded discs and CD-R/RW. Dolby Digital and DTS decoding is built in and the new player boasts S-Video and composite video outputs as well as RGB on

Scart. Sound is processed by a 24-bit/192kHz DAC and the player is expected in the shops this coming September.

☎ JVC UK 020 8450 3282

BLOCKS OF SOUND

MUSICAL FIDELITY'S POWERFUL AND FLEXIBLE POWER AMP SOLUTION

Musical Fidelity's new monoblock amp is designed specifically for multichannel applications. The M250 can be used next to loudspeakers and delivers 250 watts into an eight ohm load. The M250's circuit is the same as the Nu-Vista M3 amplifier's power stage but without choke regulation and is housed in non-resonant aluminium casework. It also boasts a sophisticated standby/turn-on configuration that senses any DC shift and will turn the unit on or off as instructed. The M250 is available now priced at £850 per unit.

☎ Musical Fidelity 020 8900 2866



MARANTZ AND DENON COME TOGETHER

TOP AUDIO/VIDEO BRANDS IN SURPRISE MERGER

Marantz Japan Inc and Denon Ltd are to merge. The surprise consolidation should complete by May 2002 and D&M Holdings Inc will succeed Marantz as a publicly-traded company on the Tokyo Stock Exchange. The new company will be split 70/30 between Denon and Marantz shareholders, respectively, giving Ripplewood Holdings LLC (which currently owns 98% of Denon) a 68.6% share and Royal Philips Electronics (Philips) a 14.7% stake. It's not yet clear how the merger will affect the 1,650 staff.

Integrating R&D, production, purchasing and financial control will give D&M Holdings a competitive edge, although the marketing and distribution of both brands is expected to remain separate, at least for the time being. As to the future, Marantz know-how could be in the driving seat as D&M Holdings will be based in Sagami City, Japan, the current HQ of Marantz, and Mr Tatsuo Kabumoto, chairman and CEO of Marantz, will be President and CEO of D&M Holdings.

In brief *Continued*

QED has introduced a new range of aerial cables to improve radio and TV performance. The new QED QUNEX Broadcast Receiver range uses silver-plated, oxygen-free copper conductors with custom-made gold-plated connectors, for a claimed superior sound and picture quality. The cables are available in 1.5 and 3.0 metre terminated lengths with a custom cable service on offer for longer runs. Prices start at £35. ☎ 01483 747474

SOUNDHOUSE MUSIC is a new monthly mail order catalogue that features over 1,000 titles each month. The catalogue covers all genres but the main focus so far is on guitar based rock. The Soundhouse Website features many albums that are close to deletion

and are therefore going cheap. www.soundhouse-music.co.uk ☎ 0800 093 0493

ICON AUDIO has recently launched a new valve amplifier at £600. The MC34 uses four EL34 output valves for a total power handling of 45 watts. The hand-wired class A amplifier has four line inputs and is finished with a 10mm aluminium front plate and transformer cover. ☎ 0116 244 0593

THE CHORD COMPANY has launched a high-end interconnect cable – the Signature RCA. The cable features single runs of heavily silver-plated oxygen-free copper surrounded with a Teflon wrap. The cable is fitted with low-mass silver-plated RCA plugs and uses a complex screening system



comprising three individual shields. The cable retails at £500. ☎ 01722 331674

CUSTOM SIGHT & SOUND has opened a new Red Rose Music showroom at its Epping store. Claimed to offer the most complete range of Red Rose products in the UK, the shop will also be home to Wadia Digital, Revox and Tact Audio. Visits to the new

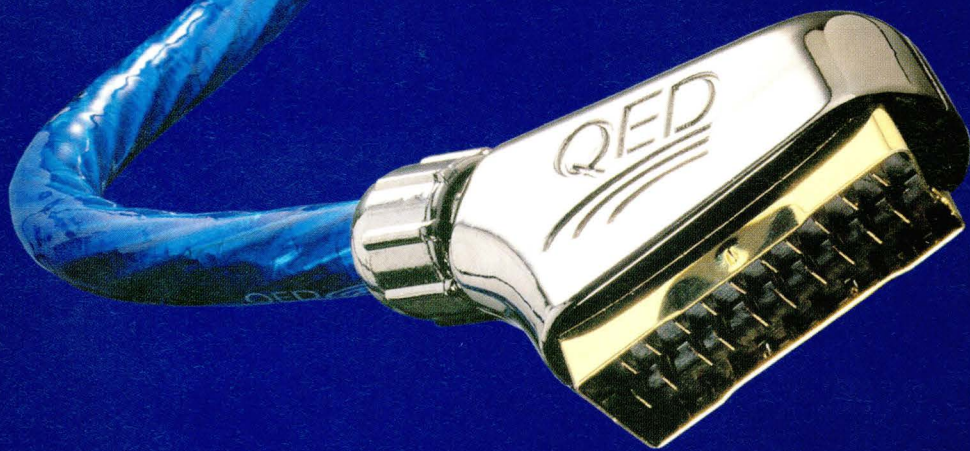
showroom (pictured) are strictly by appointment only. ☎ 01992 574343

TOSHIBA has launched three new DVD players in the UK, all featuring an Enhanced Audio Mode. Prices start at £160 for the SD-120E and all three models are available now. ☎ 08704 424 424

ERRATUM: The Marantz DV-12S1 DVD-Audio player featured in last month's Bristol Show Report is not compatible with SACD, as was reported. This was owing to incorrect information supplied by the manufacturer. However, *HFC* has secured an exclusive review of Marantz's first fully universal DVD-A/SACD player due shortly. The DV-12S1 is reviewed next month.

S Q A R T

DUAL SCREENED SILVER REFERENCE A/V INTERCONNECT



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TRANSPARENTLY

Established in the early 1970s, Rega Research has grown into one of British hi-fi's major players. But founder Roy Gandy has maintained a keen sense of individuality

The world According to Rega

INTERVIEW: Paul Messenger

Rega began nearly thirty years ago. Founder and patron Roy Gandy was working at Ford in Dagenham, Essex, and began by making and putting together bits of hi-fi equipment for friends and acquaintances on a part time basis. The business started to grow just as the job at Ford was changing, so in the mid 1970s Roy decided to do Rega full time.

The company now employs some 60 people in its two factories near Southend, as



well as providing plenty of work for various outside suppliers. Turntable manufacture formed the foundation, and is still an important part of the business, but Rega is now a full line manufacturer with its own electronics and speakers, and has always followed its own individualistic – some might say idiosyncratic – path.

These days, more and more British companies are focusing on design while 'outsourcing' actual manufacturing tasks. But that is not the Rega way.

RG: We see ourselves primarily as a manufacturing company, and enjoy doing manufacture as well as design work. Our overall philosophy is to try and get components produced outside, but then to do all the testing and assembly ourselves and in-house.

HFC: So you don't plan on moving your speaker making to China?

RG: No. There wouldn't be any point. We've checked it out of course, but we like making things, and doing it our way. Going overseas brings problems in achieving good overall quality, and cuts down on flexibility too. We couldn't continue producing our current speakers in such a way, because you have to design any product to suit the manufacturing conditions and methods available.

HFC: In the early days, was there a clash between general 1970s attitudes and Rega's more iconoclastic approach?

RG: In those days parameters like rumble, wow and flutter were supposed to define the

performance of a turntable. However, it simply hadn't occurred to me that different components wouldn't sound different. I was actually very surprised to discover that many people in the industry expected turntables, amplifiers and so on to sound much the same.

Past Glories

REGA PLANAR 3 TURNTABLE

Rega's core product has always been the Planar 3, the doyen of quality-on-a-budget vinyl turntables. Simple, smart yet sonically very effective, with clever use of materials (eg glass platter) throughout.

REGA RB300 TONEARM

A super-rigid tonearm at an exceptionally reasonable price, the RB300 and its derivatives transformed the performance and world of budget turntables in the mid-1980s.

REGA ELA LOUDSPEAKER

Hugely influential as one of the very first compact floorstanders – now an established feature of the speaker marketplace. It combines a tiny main driver with full transmission line loading.



Meanwhile, our electronics designer Terry Bateman grew up working alongside musicians, who would regularly ask him to tweak and change the sound of their amplifiers.

[Although Roy had always experimented with loudspeakers, the success of the Planar 3 and Planar 2 turntables occupied all the fledgling company's resources until well into the mid-1980s. During that first decade the UK market was very source-oriented, and unwilling to spend more than £100 on a pair of miniature standmount speakers. But things changed.]

RG: We felt our turntables deserved better quality speakers, so in the mid-1980s, with some initial help from Royd, we moved into speakers. The ELA was always a controversial speaker, accurate rather than euphonic, which lots of people loved, and lots of people hated too! We added electronic components about ten years ago, again with the aim of creating demand by offering a certain quality of product at a price that represents very good value.



From a one-man hobby, Rega has grown into one of the largest UK turntable manufacturers, employing 60 people in two factories in Southend and even diversifying into speakers, amps and CD players.



Industry Profile

“One can definitely see vinyl carrying on. In the foreseeable future both the software and hardware seem set to stay.”

HFC: How do you see the future?

RC: I don't!

HFC: You don't think there's a future for specialist hi-fi?

RC: That's not what I meant. There will be a future, but I just can't predict it. The way ahead is much less clear than it was 25 years ago. In those days, people could justifiably hold opinions about the future. When the digital thing first happened, there was plenty of controversy, and everyone could have an opinion. Now there's no real consensus about the future, among either the hardware or the software companies.


Crucially, the big manufacturers have a vested interest in promoting change rather than keeping the status quo. So they're pushing for change, but all in different directions. We have patent issues, commercial issues, copyright issues, and there's already redundancy amongst technology that's only ten years old. And there seems to be absolutely no agreed way forward whatsoever. On the contrary, the major companies are fighting each other.

HFC: Doesn't that suggest that CD and stereo – and even vinyl for that matter – still have a solid future?

RC: Vinyl is currently showing a big increase on a small market. At the recent Bristol show, the people selling vinyl all had big smiles on their faces. Some of the smaller turntable brands are making more machines than they've ever done before, and can't make enough to meet demand. For Rega, which must be one of the larger turntable makers these days, it's a stable and slightly growing market.


One can definitely see vinyl carrying on. In the foreseeable future both the software and hardware seem set to stay, and there's no problem with licensing, or obtaining the bits needed to

make the hardware, so there's no reason not to keep on making turntables.

However, when you look at the digital side of things, the market is in complete chaos. Nobody knows what's going to happen. At Rega we investigate all the possible new approaches. But all the results of these investigations suggest one would be very foolish to make any commitment to a specific future direction right now. 

Turn to page 52 for a review of Rega's latest flagship turntable – the P9.

You can contact Rega on:

 01702 333071

 www.rega.co.uk



Current Key Products

REGA PLANAR 25 TURNTABLE

Introduced to celebrate the company's 25th anniversary in 1998, this great looking turntable has a silky smooth sound with exceptional midband coherence. Practical and virtually foolproof, it should suit any system very well.

REGA ELA 2 LOUDSPEAKER

A recent major revision to the ELA preserves the original's basic configuration but in a more conventional and luxurious real wood enclosure, giving this established favourite a major new lease of life.

REGA JUPITER CD PLAYER

This upmarket top-loading CD player shares much with the Planet but uses more advanced and elaborate electronics, including dual differential DACs for the left and right channels, and seven separate power supplies.



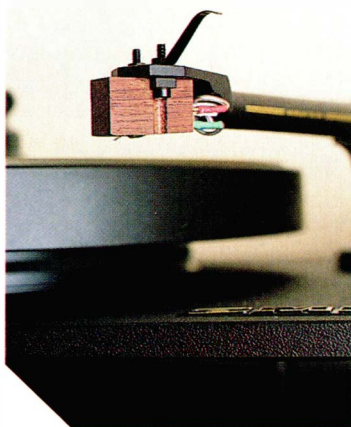


“Over a coffee in the dining room, Ken ticks off the system inventory. The total for the major audio pieces comes in at just under £65,000. That will balloon to well over £80K with the Meridians.”



David Vivian meets the man with the best part of £100K's worth of hi-fi in his spare bedroom. Only temporary mind – he's upgrading soon...

Power mad



Ken's kit: Muscular Chord amps nestle alongside serious digital source components from Sony, Marantz and Meridian (left). An SME 20/2 turntable caters for Ken's vinyl while B&W's awesome Nautilus 801 speakers deliver the front stereo channels (above and right).

At my suggestion, Ken Valentine is on the verge of giving himself some serious counselling. He agrees that he's the man for the job and that it's probably long overdue. But, well, what with Meridian's state-of-the-art 800/861 DVD-Audio player/surround processor arriving any day in exchange for the thick end of £20,000, it'll just have to wait.

Thing is, Ken has spent heroically in his quest for hi-fi nirvana and he isn't about to stop now. We're talking the sort of money big-time lottery winners might blow on a new Porsche 911 Turbo. So much, in fact, that when lumped with the wall-to-wall "software" that lines his music room (not just LPs and CDs but just about every media associated with hi-fi you can think of), he had real difficulty finding anyone to insure it. This worries me. Ken is an independent financial adviser. He's been in banking and insurance for 35 of his 50 years. He may not be rich by, say, David Beckham standards – though who knows if he'd chosen a different hobby? – but he does have some neat contacts. Still, I can see the problem.

Over a coffee in the dining room, Ken ticks off the system inventory. The total for the major audio pieces comes in at just under £65,000. That will balloon to well over £80K with the Meridians *in situ*. Their arrival should conclude what Ken calls "the current upgrading cycle", though I have a feeling my leg isn't being pulled when he says that the next cycle will be "very" expensive. So, for obvious reasons, we'll skip where Ken lives and move on to the second startling fact about his Emerson, Lake & Palmer tour juggernaut of a system.

It's shoehorned – all five speakers, 50-inch Pioneer plasma TV and 19 other electronic components – into the sort of bedroom a previously swung cat might come to hide. A particular set of domestic circumstances has deemed this "temporary" arrangement necessary and

Ken is the first to admit it isn't the optimum sonically. (Having a dedicated music/home cinema room in your *piéd à terre*, on the other hand, is very cool).

SCARY SPEAKERS

All I can tell you is that I'd never felt menaced by loudspeakers before, but until you've been eyeballed by a brace of B&W Nautilus 801s standing sentinel in the corners of a room just ten feet wide, you don't appreciate just quite how girthsome and, indeed, brutish they are. These barrel-chested behemoths almost meet mid-way. Then you notice you're surrounded by a gang of hardly less intimidating Nautilus multi-channel jobs – and, like the 801s, they're all pointing at this comfy chair in the middle of the room with brain-melting proximity. And do those

KEN'S KIT

- ▶ 50-inch Pioneer plasma screen, £8,500
 - ▶ 801 Nautilus speakers, £8,500
 - ▶ B&W HTM1 centre speaker, £1,600
 - ▶ B&W SPM1 rear speakers, £1,600
 - ▶ Cables and interconnects £2,000
 - ▶ Denon AD1, £2,000 (to be replaced by Meridian 861, £10,000)
 - ▶ Toshiba SD900 DVD-A player, £1,300 (to be replaced by Meridian 800, £10,000)
 - ▶ Echo Star satellite receiver, £900
 - ▶ Sky plus with hard disc, £300 plus subscription
 - ▶ Two Chord SMP-600 power amps (one mono driving HTM1 centre, other stereo driving two SPM1 rears), £4,400
 - ▶ Chord SMP-4000 amp, £8,500
 - ▶ JVC digital VCR, £1,000
 - ▶ Chord CPA-4000 preamp, £7,500
 - ▶ Sony 777ES SACD player, £1,800
 - ▶ Stax Signature valve "earspeakers", £1,200
 - ▶ Meridian 588, £1,950 (being taken back in part exchange against Meridian 800, £10,000)
 - ▶ Marantz CD recorder DR17, £1,200
 - ▶ Sony DAB tuner, £650
 - ▶ Sony MDS-JA30ES MiniDisc, £350
 - ▶ SME 20/2 turntable with refurbished Series V arm, £5,000
 - ▶ Koetsu Red Signature cartridge, £2,500
 - ▶ Chord phono stage, £2,000
- Total = £89,500**

☺ fortress-build Chord amps trailing wrist-thick speaker cables look at all cuddly? No they don't. I'm reminded of the scene from *Back To The Future* when Marty McFly plugs his guitar into Doc Brown's monster amp with its seven-foot speaker cone, hits a power chord and blows himself across the room. Whoah!! My fear exactly.

So it's intriguing to learn that in the bedroom next door Ken keeps his Les Paul copy and Marshall amp. "It goes even louder than the 801s," he grins. I'm beginning to understand.

Then Ken makes things clearer still. "I actually believe my interest in hi-fi is wanting The Beatles in my room. That's the ultimate. The Beatles are what turned me on to music in my teenage days." Ken even met his wife, Irene, through the Fab Four; she was the local secretary of The Beatles fan club in Sussex. And worked for B&W in Worthing. Fascinating symmetry and it's reinforced by Ken's love affair with 801s (he owned first generation 801s and 801Fs before the Nautilus incarnations). B&W's flagship speaker has a long association with Abbey Road studios where Lennon, McCartney and co cut their finest. Ken says he's got them because they're the best speakers he's ever heard – and he's heard absolutely everything – but I know better.

All right, so Ken is something of a Beatles completist, but his musical tastes are pretty diverse – from Bob Dylan to Pat Metheny and most points in-between. "The Beatles were the catalyst," he says. "That's what started it. Then my tastes broadened, via Mike Oldfield, to classical. I especially like Bartok's stuff, and Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart... whatever. The only thing I don't play is rap and reggae. No room in the collection for that." It's quite a collection, even so. In addition to his 4,000 LPs, Ken has about 3,000 CDs,

If Aladdin had been a hi-fi head, his cave might have looked something like this.



"The 801's 15-inch bass drivers and the Chord's limitless power thunder into the chair and wobble the walls Matrix-style."

350 DVDs, 30 SACDs and 18 DVD-As. Most recent CD purchase? *Chieftains Greatest Hits*.

BACK TO BASICS

But what about Ken's first hi-fi? B&W speakers of course (DM2s), paired with "some cheap A&R amplification". From there it was on to DM6s – "the funny Dalek-shaped ones" – with a Quad 44/405 pre-power combo. "Very warm-sounding amp," recalls Ken.

And the start, I suggest, of a chronic desire to upgrade. Yes and no. While Ken was getting his financial consultancy off the ground, hi-fi actually took a back seat. "For about eight years I didn't upgrade at all – apart from the CD player. I went from a Marantz CD94 to a Meridian 508. I think that's when I started to play golf. Although music was always in the house, the upgrade urge wasn't there. I felt I had a reasonably good system even then. There's never been a period I haven't listened to music.

"In those days I had a Pink Triangle PT Too with an SME Series V arm. I've still got my Koetsu. There have been two lots of Quad 405s, bi-wired and mono-bridged driving 801Fs. I added a DAC to the Marantz but I didn't think it improved the sound so I went back to the straight player."

By this time Ken's business had been running about eight years. Spare time was easing back into his life, which could mean only one thing. "The system was getting a little bit long in the tooth. Time to see what was available. I upgraded to a lot of Meridian equipment, changed the Quad 405 for two Meridian 505 monoblocks. They went with a 502 preamp, 508 (the old



18-bit CD player, which they upgraded to the 20-bit and then the 24-bit). It's one of the reasons I prefer British manufacturers, they look after you.

"The most recent spurt was about 18 months ago – the Nautilus 801s. I like big speakers. I've demmed KEFs, JBLs, listened to electrostatics. And I don't know whether it's because I was brought up with the B&W sound, but I love it. To a certain extent, that's the starting point for the hi-fi. Anyway, with the 801s, the Meridian power amps couldn't handle orchestras. So I then tried Krells, Mark Levinson and Chord. All were excellent but, in the end, I went for the Chords. I just thought they suited the speakers and gave me a super sound."

Read incredibly meaty and palpable – just how Ken likes it. There's barely time to scratch the surface of his formidable array of media but, for me, vinyl Beatles on the SME 20/SME Series V/Koetsu combo is the highlight, annihilating Eric Clapton on multi-channel DVD-A (a strangely artificial experience, though Ken reckons I'd warm to it). Then comes the perhaps inevitable bombing sequence from *Pearl Harbour* on DVD. Turned up loud. The combined forces of the 801's 15-inch bass drivers and the Chord's seemingly limitless power thunder into the chair and wobble the walls *Matrix*-style. No cinema ever sounded this loud, this visceral, this real.

"Do you think I need a subwoofer?" asks Ken with the rich irony of Michael Schumacher asking if he should invest in a bolt-on turbo kit for his F1 car. No Ken. Hang the financial soul-searching, too. Just wheel on those Meridians. ☺

Ken's dealer is Phase 3 HiFi in Worthing, Sussex.

☎ 01903 245577

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EDITOR'S CHOICE

HI-FI CHOICE
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"The end result is that rare hi-fi component whose physical presence simply recedes into the background leaving the listener joyfully enthralled in the music.

Rarely have I ever encountered such magical music-making in my many years of listening to audio equipment."

LISTENER magazine. December 2001.

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HI-FI CHOICE Reviews

▶ THE PAGE THAT TELLS YOU HOW AND WHY WE DO 'EM

How we do things

Since its inception in 1975, *Hi-Fi Choice* has become legendary for its thorough, no-nonsense reviews. Our combination of subjective listening tests and scientific measuring has ensured our position as the hi-fi magazine you can trust. Our pool of reviewers is the most highly qualified in the business, with more than 100 years of experience between them, and their passion for hi-fi knows no bounds.

Our philosophy

HFC is all about high performance. It's about high fidelity replay of entertainment media in the home, so you get the most enjoyable and realistic experience possible. Hi-fi has always been about music, but now other types of media have emerged which can also be played on hi-fi gear, and which similarly require genuine hi-fi performance to give of their best.

Our take on this is simple. If you want a high performance two-channel music system, perhaps CD or vinyl-based, we tell you the best kit to buy. If you'd prefer a multichannel, multiformat system that also plays newer surround sound music and video formats, we review these too – with a genuine hi-fi approach. And if there's a video element to a particular piece of kit, like a DVD player, you can be sure we'll talk about fidelity of vision as well as fidelity of sound – otherwise it's only half a review. Only *HFC* has this thorough and flexible approach to hi-fi. Because, in the end, we want to help you make the best choice you possibly can.

Group tests

Comparative testing is the cornerstone of *HFC*. It's the most effective way of judging which products are better than others, and so provide you with a reliable guide from which to make your shortlist. When we assemble groups of a particular product type we always strive to ensure that the most important new products are involved – in fact, you'll see more reviews of fresh new hi-fi products in an *HFC* group test than anywhere else.

Listening

You won't find more thorough group tests in any other magazine. The mainstay of our tests is the listening process, in which our highly experienced reviewers compare products by playing a wide range of music (and films, where appropriate). In addition, we often employ 'blind listening' panels of industry experts to provide an unsighted second opinion.

STAR RATINGS

★☆☆☆☆	Rubbish
★★☆☆☆	Something lacking
★★★☆☆	Average
★★★★☆	Very good
★★★★★	Exceptional

AWARD BADGES

HFC's Award Badges are legendary among the hi-fi fraternity. They are additional to the star ratings and are awarded only to the most deserving products in a test group.

Best Buy

The *Hi-Fi Choice* Best Buy badge is awarded to products that offer exceptional performance and value-for-money in a *Group Test*.

Recommended

Products that stand out in our *Group Tests* receive a Recommended badge. They may not offer quite such exceptional value-for-money as a Best Buy, or they may not be suitable for everyone, but their performance deserves strong consideration.

Editor's Choice

Products in the *Statements* section that really blow us away are eligible for a special *HFC* Award Badge. The coveted Editor's Choice Badge is reserved for high-end products of exceptional quality.

Measuring

These listening tests are augmented by scientific reports from the lab, conducted by our renowned Technical Editor, Paul Miller – hi-fi journalism's undisputed king of lab testing. He employs his own specifically designed equipment to pull apart every measurable parameter and explain its effect on a product's performance. No other magazine goes to such lengths to ensure test results are both thorough and accurate.

Solo reviews

In addition to group tests, each issue of *HFC* includes a collection of solo reviews representing the hottest hi-fi around.

Incoming

First tests of essential new gear. If it's hot and it's hi-fi, you'll read it here first.

Statements

In-depth reviews of the ultimate hi-fi products. High tech or simply high end, these are bold statements of hi-fi art.



20

Incoming

Up and coming gems including Mission's standout m51 speakers.



26

Group Test – DVD players

Eight machines from £300-£700 rated for sound *and* vision.



44

Statements

High-end heroes including the Rega P9 turntable and Wadia's 301 CD player.



58

Group Test – Stereo amps

Six integrated stereo amplifiers from £800-£2,400.



70

Buyer's Bible – Turntables

Your in-depth guide to vinyl, including a round-up of our favourite kit.

Incoming

➤ First tests of essential new kit plucked fresh from hi-fi's front line

★★★★★

Custom Design R/S300 loudspeaker stands £80

(plus £25 for top plates, £30 for bottom plates) **EXCLUSIVE**

➤ Custom Design called recently to tell us excitedly about a new inert steel it had discovered. 'Acoustic Steel' is claimed to have acoustic properties similar to wood, making it particularly good at absorbing vibration. Custom Design's independent tests on an R/S300 stand assert that mass-filled stands made with the new material reduced resonance by a factor of 100; something like a 40dB reduction against an ordinary undamped steel stand. The results prompted the full production of Acoustic Steel top and base plates which can be specified with any stand and bought by existing customers for around £15 a pair.

The 4mm thick Acoustic Steel plates have a sandwich appearance and offer

a very damped response to the knuckle rap test, similar to tapping lead. Using a trusty pair of Spendor BC1s the R/S300s gave a likeable performance with the regular plates, offering solid support that keeps the bass in check and allows the midrange to flow uninterrupted. A switch to the Acoustic Steel plates and the sound is even better, with a deeper, quicker bass and a more open midband. There's definitely a neutralising effect with the Acoustic Steel that zaps a lot of coloration, giving a far more natural sound. The R/S300 stand was recommended back in *HFC* 202 and this modification truly reinforces our endorsement. If you have Custom Design stands already, the Acoustic Steel plates offer a top value upgrade.

☎ Custom Design 0191 262 4646
 🌐 www.customdesign.co.uk



KEY FEATURES

- New 'Acoustic Steel' plates
- Available in a variety of heights
- Custom modifications available
- Choice of finishes
- Can be mass filled



★★★★★

KEF Q3 loudspeakers £400

KEY FEATURES

- 2-way bass reflex loudspeaker
- 165mm mid/bass driver
- 19mm aluminium dome tweeter
- 91dB sensitivity
- 8 ohm impedance
- Five year warranty
- Dimensions 24x32x78 (WxHxD)
- Black ash, maple or dark apple finish
- Magnetically shielded



KEF's two-way Q3 is the first of the new Q-series that we've seen so far. Every model in the new range features new UNI-Q drivers that place a 19mm tweeter (developed from the Reference HF unit) at the centre of the mid/bass cone. The cabinet is attractively rounded towards the back to avoid internal standing waves and is made using an elaborate laminate of MDF with a segmented core to increase rigidity. A pair of high quality speaker terminals complement a generally excellent

standard of build, fit and finish

The UNI-Q driver is intended to give a wide dispersion, so reducing sensitivity to room placement. In practice the speaker projects a solid 3D image with no toe-in and happily pumps out the lowest bass octaves from the front-firing reflex ports. Some room-induced mid-bass resonance was thwarted with the foam bungs supplied and apart from some midband nasality its performance is a joy.

The Q3 undoubtedly improves on its predecessor, the Q35.2. Most notable is the speed with which the speaker conveys music, with a very punchy midband that makes for an extremely musical performance. Vocals are a strong point, and the natural way in which it presents music means the Q3 stands out among £400 loudspeakers.

☎ KEF Audio 01622 672261

🌐 www.kef.com



Philips DVD-962SA SACD/DVD-Video player £399

Philips' SACD-1000 was the first multichannel SACD player. This new model brings that high-end technology to a more affordable level.

It's an SACD player that also supports DVD-Video, CD and CD-R/RW, with a dual laser transport mechanism. Your £400 nets you a fully specced machine with audiophile intent, and sports a host of worthwhile features like a switch-mode power supply. The on-board digital decoders can support

KEY FEATURES

- Also supports Video CD, CD-R/RW and CD
- Built-in Dolby Digital and SACD decoder
- PAL/NTSC
- Component video and S-Video outputs
- Scart socket
- Optical and electrical digital audio outputs
- 5.1 analogue audio outputs

SACD multichannel and Dolby Digital, but DTS outputs to a separate decoder.

The surround sound – both Dolby Digital and SACD – is seamless and extremely dynamic, capable of making sounds that have a holographic sense of space and an almost in-the-room palpability to vocals. An SACD version of Frankie Goes To Hollywood's *Welcome To The Pleasuredome* single-handedly justifies the format and is a tribute to the performance of the DVD-

962SA. By contrast, DVD-Video picture performance is unexceptional, but the sound it produces is excellent, both through the built-in decoders and the digital outputs. You find yourself looking round the room to see where the sounds come from. CD audio seems small-scale by comparison, but is still fast-paced, detailed and dynamic.

The only shortcoming is the occasionally obscure on-screen menus, which use too much shorthand – you have to consult the manual continually to understand what's going on. That aside, what's not to like about the Philips DVD-962SA? It's not that expensive and it makes excellent sounds.

Philips UK 0870 900 9070
www.philips.co.uk



Sony MZ-N707 Net MD Walkman personal MiniDisc recorder £200

Sony continues to do extremely well with sales of personal MiniDisc hardware and the new range of Net MD models launched this year will no doubt appeal to a whole new Internet-savvy generation.

The MZ-N707 is one of these Net MD products – you can connect it to a PC and transfer any MP3, WAV and WMA files you have into the ATRAC format that MiniDisc uses. Of course, you can also transfer files from the Internet and the whole procedure is taken care of with Sony's OpenMG Jukebox software. Hook up the player to a PC via the USB cable and the software allows you to rip CDs and convert to ATRAC as well as import files for conversion from your folders. You can also attach the supplied optical cable to a CD or DVD player and record music that way.

A host of electronic trickery is on board including MDLP, which allows a recording time of up to 320

minutes if desired, albeit at reduced quality. Another system called TYPE-R DSP claims to offer twice the signal processing capability of previous MiniDisc Walkmen to give a sound quality akin to full-size decks.

In playback terms the new MD is very good indeed. Despite ATRAC3's compression, a full-bodied sound is evident and CDs ripped at 132kbps are pretty impressive. By contrast, some of the converted files are a bit dodgy and previously compressed WMA files sound simply awful. But it's a great gadget all-in-all, sure to reel in a new generation of mobile music lovers, and if you've got a hard disc full of sounds it's a highly practical alternative to solid state memory-type MP3 personals.

Sony UK 08705 111999
www.sony.co.uk



KEY FEATURES

- Converts MP3, WMA and WAV files to ATRAC3
- Records using digital optical cable
- MDLP gives 320 mins recording
- TYPE-R DSP for high quality playback
- Remote control with LCD
- Storage/recharging cradle supplied
- Shock protection for jog-free playback
- OpenMG Jukebox software supplied

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★★★★★ **EXCLUSIVE**

Marantz DV6200 DVD player **£500**

➤ This is a pure DVD player – although it can cope with most kinds of CD (including HDCD), there is no support for SACD or DVD-Audio and there are no built-in digital decoders. But, except for the drab remote control, it looks the part with its expensive-looking front panel and subtle display.

As is often the case with DVD players, accessing tracks is majestically slow. You could almost make a cup of tea between pressing the play button and

hearing any music. However, it's worth the wait; the sound is extremely good for a DVD player, even from CD – you'd have to buy a dedicated CD player to get better performance. It is extremely detailed, has above average dynamics and a holographic soundstage. It's not perfect – compared to a CD proper, it lacks the sort of temporal precision that's really needed for it to play something with an uptempo, racy beat – but for a DVD player spinning

KEY FEATURES

- Supports Video CD, CD-R/RW and CD, MP3 and HDCD
- PAL/NTSC
- Component video and S-Video outputs
- 2 Scart sockets
- Optical and electrical digital audio outputs

CD audio, it's up there with the best.

Paradoxically for a DVD player, its video performance is not in the same league. It makes a very bright and sharp picture, but offers little control over it. If you prefer a softer picture, pass the DV6200 by.

More people are buying a single disc player to cover both audio and video performance and this is one of the few that benefits the audio side. Unless your musical tastes begin and end with powerful dance music, the DV6200 is well worth a look.

☎ Marantz UK 01753 680868

🌐 www.marantz.com

★★★★★

Sennheiser HDC 451 headphones **£90**

➤ Sennheiser's recently price-reduced HDC 451 headphones incorporate something called NoiseGard technology, a noise cancellation system that reduces environmental background noise. The system was developed for the airline industry to help combat constant and potentially damaging cabin noise. NoiseGard electronically compensates for low-frequency noise by emitting 'anti-noise'; a phase-reversed signal that cancels out the original sound source.

The headphones use two AA batteries and the svelte power supply can easily be pocketed or clipped onto a belt. This will give you an impressive 80 hours of noise compensation and the cans still work as normal units if you run out of power. NoiseGard concentrates on low-frequency noise, meaning conversation is still audible – but you don't have to tell anyone if you don't want to!

A twin 3.5mm plug for aircraft use is supplied along with the standard 3.5 and 6.3mm jacks and the German-made cans look rather basic considering they cost £90. The anti-phase system claims to reduce low-frequency noise by a half and without it the cans are nothing special, but flick the NoiseGard switch and you transform them into real-world commuter kings. The huge increase in audibility means you can employ very low volumes with excellent clarity and detail.

For indoor hi-fi use conventional £90 cans can generally do more, but for this money you're unlikely to find anything more adept at playing music in a noisy environment. If you travel a lot and play music on the go, you owe it to yourself to test a pair.

☎ Sennheiser UK 0800 652 5002

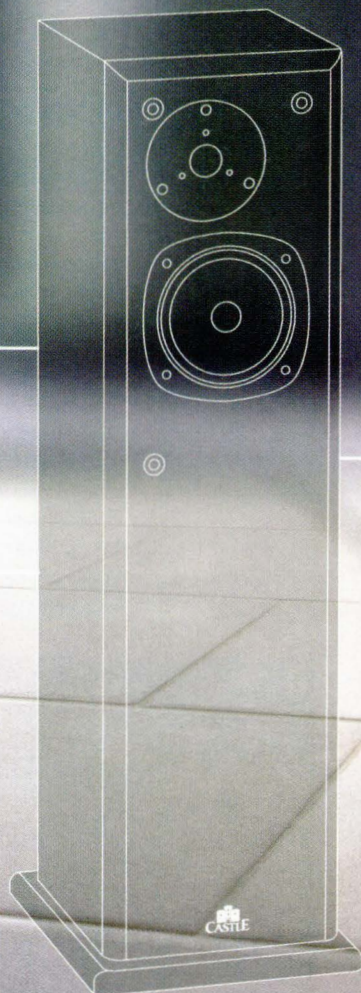
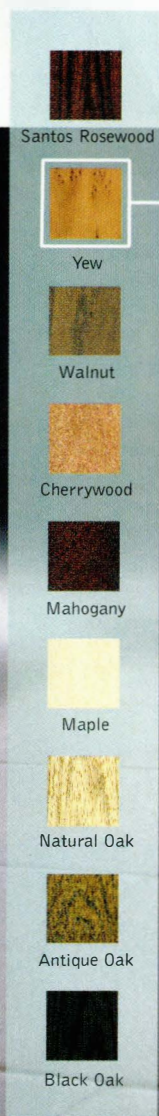
🌐 www.sennheiser.co.uk

KEY FEATURES

- NoiseGard active anti-noise technology
- Reduces background noise
- 80-hour battery life
- Open design
- Weighs 110 grams
- Includes aircraft jack plugs
- Can be used without power



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Pembroke: Yew veneer



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Onkyo DX-7333 CD player £200

One of the hidden joys of DVD's predominance is that you can now pick up an excellent CD player for a song (or at least the price of a couple of dozen CDs). The DX-7333 from Onkyo is a prime case in point; a CD player as good as this only costs £200.

Despite the low price, the player still sports a hefty chassis and a full metal jacket, a centre mounted CD drawer and some trick play modes (such as a 36-track memory that can introduce useful three second spaces for recording your own compilations). All this adds up to a player that looks and behaves in a

manner far more expensive than its price tag would suggest.

It sounds more expensive, too – finely detailed and precise, painting a decent sized soundstage with naturally recorded instruments without emphasising the hiss found on mostly-analogue recordings. The classic Kleiber recording of Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* has a sense of scale and majesty that befits the music perfectly. This should sound precise and open and the Onkyo portrays it with level of detail that sounds impressively sophisticated.

But it's not perfect. There is a distinct

KEY FEATURES

- One-bit D/A converter
- 36-track memory with space insert and reverse memory functions
- Optical and electrical digital audio outputs
- Headphone socket with independent volume control

lack of energy and drive, especially in dance music, where it rips some of the bounce out of *Echo And Bounce* by the Propellerheads. If you play lots of dance music, you may find it sounds clean but just a little dull.

Still, Onkyo has tried really hard to produce a high-end sound without high-end costs. For the most part, it works very well, too.

Jamo UK 01788 556777

www.jamo.co.uk



Mission m51 loudspeakers £300 EXCLUSIVE

Mission's new £300 m51 stand-mounter is the entry point to Mission's new middle-market m5 range; two sets of floorstanders, a centre, dipolar rears and a subwoofer complete the series. This is a rear-ported two-way design which will not tax your system, thanks to highish sensitivity (claimed at 87dB) and its ability to show the amplifier nominal impedance quoted at eight ohms. It features a new 150mm 'Paramid' glass composite mid/bass driver atop a 25mm microfibre dome tweeter. While most of the box is covered with a rosewood, beech or 'graphite black' veneer, the front panel is a cool moulded ABS affair, designed to look similar to Mission's recently introduced Pilastro flagship speakers, but without the expensive graphite loaded material.

Mission has always excelled at making good bookshelf designs and the m51 lives up to that rap sheet. Your first reaction will be, "how does Mission get that much bass out of such a small(ish) box?" But that bass is not at the expense

of midband finesse or clarity in the upper bass; the m51 provides a sound that is even-handed from top to bottom and enjoyable throughout.

Ultimately, this speaker is pointed more at the dynamic end of the spectrum. While it makes a good attempt at subtle Bach piano works or Nick Drake's delicate vocals, the m51 seems more at home portraying music with a bit of oomph and amplification.

These are not dry, sanitised speakers for wannabe musicologists; the Mission m51's play music with a lust for life, and so will you.

Mission 01480 423700

www.mission.co.uk



KEY FEATURES

- Rear port
- Magnetically shielded
- 10.3 litre volume
- 87dB efficiency
- 8 ohm nominal impedance
- 58Hz-20kHz claimed frequency response

MAIN REVIEWS – Alvin Gold | LAB REPORTS – Paul Miller

DVD PLAYERS

The latest high-tech models tested for music and video.

There was a time when music on digital disc could mean only one thing – compact disc. But now there is considerably more than one way of skinning the cat. You can still choose a CD player of course, and we continue to keep an ear out for them as they are released.

Increasingly however, DVD players are becoming the preferred one-stop shop, a means of playing CDs and DVD-Video discs too. But DVD also opens a range of new possibilities. Music is available on the DVD-Video with the sound recorded in Dolby Digital surround, and there are also recordings on CD-compatible discs or DVD-Videos coded with multichannel DTS. Others, usually called DAD, are coded in 24-bit/96kHz PCM high resolution stereo – and all can be played on a plain DVD-Video player, either using internal Dolby Digital or DTS processors, or an external multichannel amp.

DVD-Video players can also play ordinary CDs of course, but some DVD players now perform other roles too. Many of them also play DVD-Audio music discs, which offer 24/96 resolution over five channels, or still higher resolution

in two. Others play SACD, DVD-Audio's rival in the high resolution multichannel music stakes. This group test includes each of these breeds: pure DVD-Video players, DVD-Audio/Video players and SACD-compatible machines.

It's a democratic world. You can choose players for whichever of these disc types are most important to you. High quality dedicated CD players still tend to do the best job with ordinary compact discs, but DVD players are getting better in this respect. And you get to play other formats too.

This test is all about making rational choices on the evidence of how each type of player performs with each type of disc. It makes for an unusually complex test, involving comparisons with music in several different and mutually incompatible formats whose only real common factor is that they are all 12cm in diameter and play on DVD players of one kind or another. But we have not neglected the other reason for buying a DVD player, which is to play movies. Because guess what? DVD players don't just sound different, they also look different up there on the screen. ☉

ON TEST



DENON DVD-1600
£500



HARMAN KARDON DVD25
£449



NAD T531
£330



PANASONIC DVD-RA61
£400



PHILIPS DVD Q50
£300



SONY DVP-NS900V
£500



TOSHIBA SD-510E
£320



YAMAHA DVD-S1200
£700

EQUIPMENT USED

FOR MULTICHANNEL LISTENING

Bryston SP1 preamp/processor
Bryston 9B 5-channel power amp
B&W DM600 S3 speaker package

FOR STEREO LISTENING

Red Rose Affirmation amp
Red Rose Classic speakers

VIDEO

Philips 32PW8616 widescreen TV

AND ALSO

Nordost speaker cables, TAG McLaren analogue & digital interconnects, QED Scart cable

DISCS USED

COMPACT DISC

Holy Cole *Temptation*
Marc Cohn *Marc Cohn*
JS Bach *Brandenburg Concertos*
Taj Mahal *Never Like Before*

DVD-VIDEO FILMS

Gladiator, *Almost Famous*,
Traffic, *Terminator 2*

DVD-AUDIO MUSIC

Chie Ayado *Life*
Mendelssohn *Octet E Flat Major*
The Corrs *In Blue*
Beethoven *Piano Concerto No. 5*
Mahler *Symphony No. 10*
The Fabulous Thunderbirds *Live*
(also includes DTS 96:24)

SACD MUSIC

Mahler *Symphony No. 5*
McCoy Tyner with Stanley Clarke, Al Foster
Carl Orff *Carmina Burana*
Yuri Honing *Memory Lane*

DAD (24/96 DVD-VIDEO)

Dave's New Story *Sex Without Bodies*

DTS 5.1 COMPACT DISC

Sting *Brand New Day*

TANDBY-ON

PREV

NEXT

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DENON

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HP V.S.S.



ON / STANDBY
PHONES

PHONES LEVEL



MIN

MAX

REMOTE SENSOR

Panasonic

DVD AUDIO/VIDEO PLAYER

DVD-RA61

ADVANCED SURROUND

AUDIO ONLY

HP-V.S.S.-SP

≥10



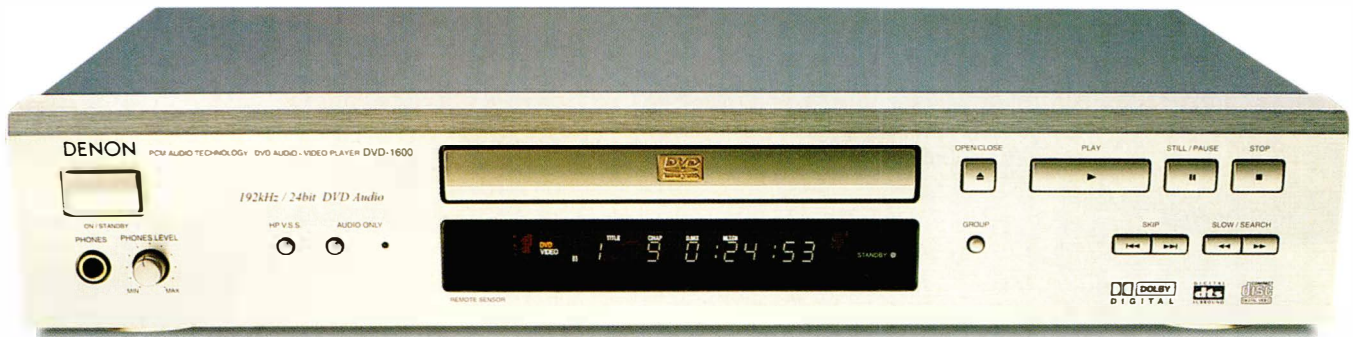
PHONES



MIN

MAX





DENON DVD-1600 £500

Denon UK 01753 888447 www.denon.com

DENON'S ENTRY-LEVEL DVD-AUDIO/VIDEO PLAYER IS NO MORE THAN COMPETENT

Denon was an early supporter of DVD-Audio and has produced a number of compatible models, some like this one based on core Panasonic technology. The latest and most affordable Denon DVD-Audio player to date, the DVD-1600 has the familiar and stylish champagne gold aluminium slab finish (it's also available in black), and boasts excellent controls and a display to match. It is a full feature design, with internal Dolby Digital and DTS decoders, Virtual and Headphone Virtual Surround Sound features, and the video DAC is a 54MHz ten-bit part. Playback of recordable CDs is supported, and MP3 compilations can also be played.

Two Scart sockets allow other components (VCRs for example) to be fed through to the TV when the Denon is not in use – useful for those with no spare Scart inputs on their TV. Scart also provides RGB, which offers slightly better picture quality than S-Video, and significantly better than composite. The controls accessible on the front panel include an audio-only switch to turn off all video processing, which helps to improve sound quality.

VERDICT	
SOUND	★★★★☆
PICTURE	★★★★☆
FEATURES	★★★★☆
VALUE	★★★★☆

A well engineered Panasonic-based DVD-A player, the DVD-1600 is strong on screen, but audio performance appears to have fallen foul of high jitter levels, which probably accounts for the undistinguished sound quality.

FORMAT CHECKLIST

DVD-VIDEO	✓
DVD-AUDIO	✓
CD	✓
SACD	✗
CD-R/RW	✓
DVD-RW	✗



PERFORMANCE
Visually a touch soft and grainy by the best standards, the Denon is nevertheless quite a classy performer on screen. It is free from obvious blocking and other gross artefacts, and the picture was in fact extremely watchable on the test Philips TV screen, the slight granularity paradoxically adding to the levels of detail in some scenes.

As a music player, however, the prognosis is less exciting, for which it is tempting to blame the high measured jitter levels. Holly Cole's album *Temptation*, which should be all space and subtlety, instead sounded rather cramped and airy, and subtle stereo cues were washed away, the result being undistinguished and lacking in the special quality that promotes involvement. Big orchestral recordings also sound rather untidy and instrumental strands are often subtly mused. Only mainstream chart-based material seems unaffected, blithely bulldozing its way through the acoustic gloom, but this after all is part of the job description. Recordings of this type are often purpose designed to punch their way through whatever they end up being

played on. The problem is that when used on something qualitatively better, they rarely have much more to offer.

Sadly the DVD-Audio material to hand does little to redress the balance. The player is tidy and smooth enough, but there is not much definition or bite, and little to say that here is a super-high resolution format that is capable of giving more than you can expect from compact disc. The Tacet Mendelssohn Octet recording that performed so well with some of the players failed to hit the right spot. There was nothing terribly wrong with the sound, but it lacked the complexity that makes it interesting through the best players, and dynamics seemed to have been rounded down a peg.

LAB REPORT

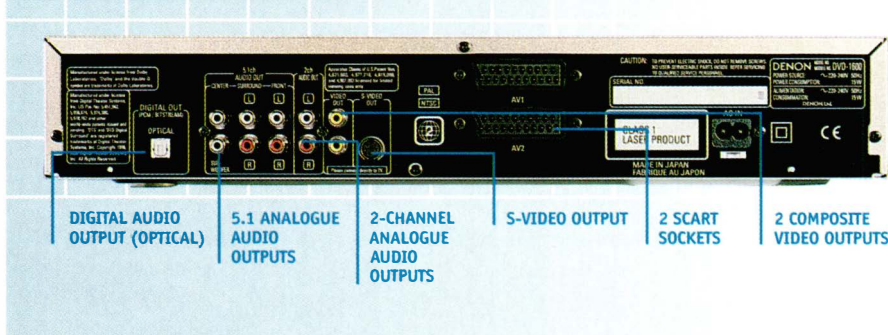
▶ The DVD-1600 borrows heavily from Panasonic's DVD-A technology, but the debilitating 3740psec of jitter puts this player closer to Panasonic's non-DVD-Audio DVD-RV41 than the DVD-RA61.

▶ The jitter is broadly independent of the 'Audio Only' facility (3550psec) or, indeed, which of the stereo or front L/R multichannel outputs (3460psec) is used. Clarity and stereo imagery are the victims of this type of distortion.

▶ Harmonic distortion increases slightly at the 2V peak output but hits a very low 0.0009% at -10dBfs (where there's more musical action), increasing to just 0.004% at 20kHz and 0.01% at 30-40kHz with DVD-A discs.

▶ The response is flat with CD/DVD-V material, showing a mere -0.1dB loss at 20kHz and -0.2dB at 30kHz in DVD-A mode. As far out as 80kHz – well beyond the range of hearing – it's just -2dB down with little or no ultrasonic noise to unsettle the partnering amplifier.

DETAIL – CONNECTIONS





HARMAN KARDON DVD25 £449

Harman UK 020 8731 4670 www.harmankardon.com

SUPERB SOUND QUALITY PUTS HK'S BABY OUT IN FRONT FOR CD FANS WHO ALSO LIKE FILMS

Harman Kardon is just beginning to feel its way back into the component high fidelity and home cinema market in the UK, and it is doing so with products that are sometimes a bit on the unusual side and occasionally genuinely innovative. Here is a good example. Although ostensibly just another sombre but unexceptional player, the DVD25 is distinguished by its use of a Wolfson Delta Sigma 24-bit/192kHz audio DAC. All very laudable, but the DVD25 looks to us like a 'disabled' DVD-Audio player – indeed, it recognises two-channel DVD-Audio recordings, and in one case it seemed to play a DVD-Audio disc, though this trick only worked with a single title, which may

LAB REPORT

▶ While the DVD25 marks progress over the DVD-10S (HFC 221) with a superior 113dB A-wtd S/N ratio and low 0.001% distortion at its 1.9V peak output, this is still a fairly basic player with no onboard DD/DTS decoder or compatibility with DVD-A.

▶ 24bit/192kHz-compatible DACs (WM8740) lift the performance of the two-channel audio stage. High frequency distortion is a low 0.004% at 20kHz/0dBfs while the digital filtering provides a good 100dB rejection of digital 'images'.

▶ Low-level linearity is true to +0.0/-0.2dB over a 90dB dynamic range and the response is far more uniform than that offered by HK's DVD-10S. Pre-emphasised discs are not properly decoded, however, with significant +/-3dB errors in response.

▶ Jitter is moderate but untidy at 500psec, while there are evidently other forms of interference at work (see *Conclusions from the Lab*).

indicate out of spec DVD-Audio mastering of the disc itself.

The other unusual feature is progressive scan, which is available from NTSC material through the component video output. This is potentially invaluable in providing a brighter picture with reduced line structure and motion artefacts for those lucky few with appropriate high-end display devices, but only using region-free NTSC material (usually music titles) or with Region 1 (US) software, with the player changed to the R1 setting – a simple handset tweak.

PERFORMANCE

Jitter levels could be described as being a little higher than ideal (though nowhere near as high as some of the other players in this group) but you would never know it from the listening results. These are frankly exceptional for a DVD player, and close to the standards expected of a good, comparably priced CD player. It is not that the player is more detailed than others. It is not significantly more dynamic and nor is its imagery noticeably better to any

VERDICT

SOUND



PICTURE



FEATURES



VALUE



A surprisingly good performance with music makes this DVD-Video model a viable replacement for a straight CD player, but it is slightly less impressive on screen.

FORMAT CHECKLIST

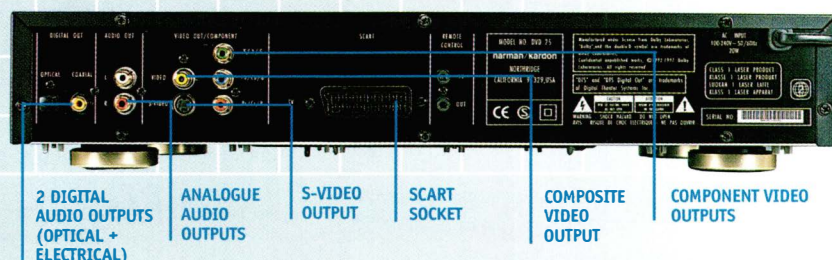
DVD-VIDEO	✓
DVD-AUDIO	✗
CD	✓
SACD	✗
CD-R/ RW	✓
DVD-RW	✗

degree. But it quite simply makes music better. Place a disc on the digital roundabout and it sings and dances where other players will merely go through the motions without bringing any significant excitement to the party. The Holly Cole test album showed what she was made of against a sparse but telling instrumental backdrop and an unusually affecting heartbeat motif in the opening track from *Temptation*, while *Sex Without Bodies* from Dave's True Story drove along with a very real degree of punch and without any obvious signs of harshness or an aggressive tonal balance.

It may excel at playing CDs, but as a DVD-Video player, the DVD25 leans towards the unexceptional end of the spectrum. Chroma (colour) noise levels are low, but the picture is nothing like as crisp and clean as the best in our group. The DVD25 is more than good enough to show the difference between a well mastered film and an ordinary one, but films like *Gladiator* suffer from rather unsubtle colour reproduction, especially in poorly lit scenes. Sonically however, it remains a strong contender with film soundtracks. ○



DETAIL – CONNECTIONS



▼ WHERE TO FIND US

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30 Crown Street

BRISTOL 0117 926 4975
65 Park Street

CARDIFF 029 2022 8565
134/136 Crwys Road

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173-175 London Road

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86/90 Boughton

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9 High Street

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Naim Audio Naim enjoyed a phenomenal six years of success with its slimline range and has recently redesigned each of the products to enhance their sound quality, appearance and flexibility. At the heart of the 5 series is the NAIT 5 integrated amplifier, all of its functions are controlled by a microprocessor that is only powered when interpreting a button push, remote control signal or volume control movement before returning to sleep mode. Maximum flexibility has been built into the NAIT 5 for easy system expansion with no loss of sound quality.



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Wilson Benesch has consistently developed products that captivate the hearts and minds of discerning audiophiles throughout the world. From turntables to tone-arms and in 1995 the A.C.T. One the Worlds first curved floor-standing loudspeaker. With its multi alloy baffles and advanced carbon fibre composite structures, it remains as contemporary and successful today as it was five years ago.



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Chord Electronics has become synonymous with outstanding performance. The companys range of products fulfils every stereo or multi-channel system requirement. Continual dedication to research and innovation, combined with excellence of build and sterling reliability have been rewarded by continued growth. Chord users include many of the most demanding customers in the audio world, both from professional and high-end customer domains.

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NAD T531 £330

☎ NAD 01908 319360 🌐 www.nadelectronics.com

A SIMPLE PLAYER FROM A RESPECTED HI-FI NAME, BUT CAN ITS REPLAY QUALITY JUSTIFY ITS HERITAGE?

A straight DVD-Video player with no DVD-Audio playback, the NAD T531 is described in NAD's literature as "a very full-featured player". Although this isn't strictly the case, the omissions are not for the most part the kind you'd miss to any great extent. There's no internal surround sound decoder for example, though it is none the worse for that: unwrapping a Dolby Digital or DTS soundtrack is always best done as late as possible, in other words, outside the player. The NAD is also one of a tiny (though steadily growing) number of players that won't play Video CD (VCD), but MP3 compilations on CD-R/RW can be used. The video DAC is a ten-bit device, and the picture tweaking options are fairly basic, extending to a 4x-16x zoom

LAB REPORT

▶ The basic performance of the player is sound enough with a slightly on the low side 1.9V peak output and fine 0.001% distortion.

▶ Distortion increases to 0.013% at 20Hz (bass) but just 0.0035% at 20kHz (treble). This player's frequency response is so flat that any 'wobbles' must be measured in hundredths of a dB!

▶ The in-built digital filtering offers an 80dB rejection of digital images but the jitter spectrum features an unusual pattern of peaks at multiples of 172.5Hz. This amounts to 550psec and extends out over 1kHz beyond the main signal.

▶ Slightly trickier to measure is the instability or modulation of its noise-floor, a form of interference that may well 'muddy' its sound more than the drop in S/N to 96dB might suggest.

VERDICT	
SOUND	★★★★★
PICTURE	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
VALUE	★★★★★

The NAD T531 is readily region hackable, but despite the claims it is not an adequate replacement for a respectable standard CD player, and it is only moderately successful in its DVD-Video role.

FORMAT CHECKLIST

DVD-VIDEO	✓
DVD-AUDIO	✗
CD	✗
SACD	✗
CD-R/RW	✓
DVD-RW	✓



and scroll feature. Perhaps the most useful facility is a very simple remote control hack that allows Region 1 (US standard) discs to be used. The component video outputs would come into their own in this case, but here they do not deliver progressive scan. Build quality is light, and the loader is noisy. The remote control is every bit as straightforward as the player, but it is a simple handset that cannot control other components.

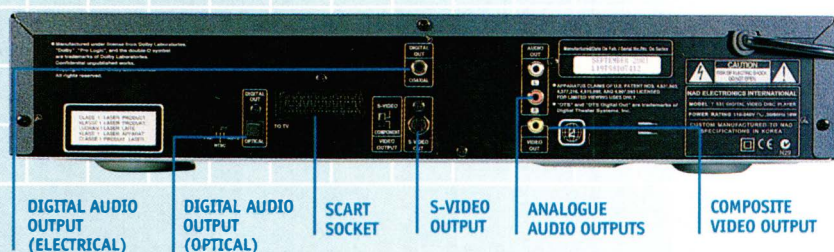
PERFORMANCE

This T531 has been described in some previous reviews as being a classic NAD rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul type product: simple, focused on the essentials and offering better than average performance. With all due respect, I'm afraid I don't see it this way. As a video player, it is straight off the middle shelf, better than you would have found at this price a year or so ago, and a lot better than the cheap supermarket brands, but no match for the current state of the art, even at this price level. Colour reproduction is certainly saturated in well lit scenes, with clean

highlights, but poorly lit areas suffer unsubtle, sometimes oversaturated colour, and overall results from the RGB and S-Video outputs are sometimes rather 'noisy'. This reveals itself as a low-level graininess that is superimposed on large, uniformly plain areas.

Musically, the NAD is simply not in the running with the best of this group. Generally, it sounds rather heavy-handed, lacking immediacy and focus from CD, and there is little real vitality or any coherent sense of space, while stereo imagery is oddly phasy (though not out of phase). The midband generally sounds reasonably incisive, so that voices, acoustic guitar and many other acoustic instruments are quite well handled, but a lack of air means rather dry acoustics, despite (or perhaps because of) the slow, heavy-handed bass. *Sex Without Bodies* by Dave's True Story failed to swing or seduce, and the whole effect was slow, even slurred. On the whole, the most satisfying results were from Dolby Digital or DTS video soundtracks which had been decoded by an external processor. ◻

DETAIL - CONNECTIONS





PANASONIC DVD-RA61 £399

Panasonic UK 08705 357357 www.panasonic.co.uk

LOOKS LOVELY, BUT WILL YOU LOVE ITS SOUND AS MUCH AS ITS VISION?

Panasonic's latest and most affordable DVD-Audio/Video player to date is a lightly built design, with a plastic fascia and a surfeit of front panel controls. One is a spring-loaded 'jog' control to access various slo-mo and fast scan picture modes. Pity the remote control is not so equipped. Connection possibilities include RGB-enabled twin Scarts, allowing loop-through connections, and separate two and six channel outputs, the latter not just for DVD-Audio, but also for the integral Dolby Digital and DTS decoder. Disc compatibility extends to DVD-R discs and MP3 compilations on recordable CD.

One unfortunate omission is an electrical digital output. It is possible to connect using the optical digital output, but this usually results in a subtly lower level of performance, due to timing uncertainties caused by dispersion through the optical interface and wire, and reduced flexibility, for example if a digital recorder is to be used. The on-board speaker set-up is also limiting, as is the way with such systems. The range of picture tweaking options is fairly

VERDICT
SOUND ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
PICTURE ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
FEATURES ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
VALUE ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Jitter appears to be the Achilles' heel of many Panasonic (and Panasonic-based) players, and there is certainly a link with lack-lustre sound quality. Happily, the pictures don't appear to suffer.

FORMAT CHECKLIST

DVD-VIDEO	✓
DVD-AUDIO	✓
CD	✓
SACD	✗
CD-R/RW	✓
DVD-RW	✗



standard, and the video circuits can be switched off if necessary.

PERFORMANCE

The DVD-RA61 doesn't suffer the occasional operational foibles that slightly mar the lower priced Toshiba SD-150E, such as locking up or not behaving properly when CD-R/RW discs are used. And it does read DTS discs, which perform well in this player. Sting's *Brand New Day*, for example, sounded clean and surprisingly refined for a lossy codec like DTS, and The Fabulous Thunderbirds *Live* album (DTS 96:24, but played back using the plain DTS decoder built into the player) sounded, well, like The Fabulous Thunderbirds.

But this is not a CD player most people would want to listen to for long, at least not by typical *HFC* readers who I suspect will find it rather vague and lifeless with anything but the simplest material. The wide open textures and colours of Holly Cole's *Temptation* sound fairly clean, clear and articulate, but denser, heavyweight recordings like the Denon Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 5, a fine 24/192 stereo DVD-Audio

recording, sounded like a not very good compact disc; lacking in dynamic range and resolution. And like some of the other compatible players, the DVD-RA61 is barely better with DVD-Audio than with CD, insofar as such judgements can be made without directly comparing identical recordings in the two formats.

But the Panasonic is a thoroughly likeable DVD-Video player. Its picture is clean and vivid, with minimal unwanted motion artefacts (some are unavoidable with interlace scan), and good colour reproduction, even in the deepest shadows. And this is how the Panasonic should be seen: not as a DVD-Audio player for enthusiasts, but as a DVD-Video player that happens to play DVD-Audio discs as well.

LAB REPORT

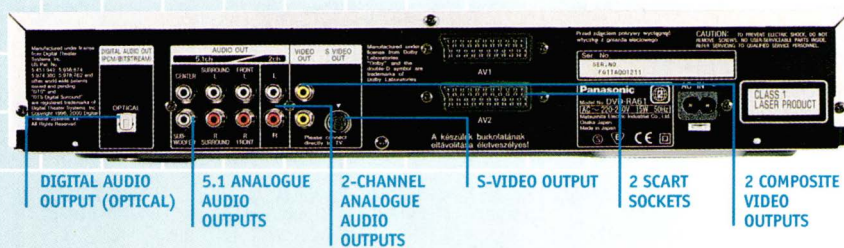
▶ In contrast with the Denon and Yamaha players (which rely heavily on Panasonic's parts list), Panasonic's own DVD-RA61 suffers a mere 150psec of jitter – over 20x less than its related competition!

▶ Although CD has a theoretical dynamic range of 96-98dB and DVD-A a whopping 145dB+, in practice it's the noise generated by the analogue electronics that sets the limit. The RA61's S/N figure of 102dB is in fact really no different from a conventional CD player.

▶ This player does enjoy a far wider frequency response with DVD-A software, however, that's just -0.15dB down at 30kHz and -2dB down at 80kHz.

▶ Distortion is a little asymmetric between channels and is as high as 0.004% over the top 30dB of its dynamic range. In absolute terms this is not high, of course, but relatively speaking it's higher than average.

DETAIL – CONNECTIONS





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PHILIPS DVD Q50 £300

Philips UK 0870 900 9070 www.philips.co.uk

A STYLISH LOOKING PLAYER, BUT PERFORMANCE IS A LITTLE LESS TASTY

Top of the current Philips designed mainstream DVD-Video range, the slimline DVD Q50 plays MP3 compilations and Video CDs, and has built-in DTS and Dolby Digital decoders. The unusual styling makes a refreshing change, with a tiny backlight LCD panel showing what's going on, or what action to take next (press 'play', for example, once the TOC has been read). For some this will be enough to make the player more approachable than others, but it could equally be accused of being patronising. Whatever your view, it is less informative than a conventional display unless the option of viewing the information on screen is taken up. Lack of front panel feedback makes the machine seem unresponsive at times, and parts of the on-screen menu system are terse in the extreme.

There are some useful picture preference options, and strong video-related features such as a smooth-acting picture scan. In other respects, the DVD Q50 is well endowed, even including a component video output, though it is not progressive

VERDICT

SOUND
☆☆☆☆

PICTURE
☆☆☆☆

FEATURES
☆☆☆☆

VALUE
☆☆☆☆

Ergonomics, which seem purpose designed to attract the non-technic buyer, are a mixed blessing, and this model is best seen as a straight DVD-Video player.

FORMAT CHECKLIST

DVD-VIDEO	✓
DVD-AUDIO	✗
CD	✓
SACD	✗
CD-R/RW	✓
DVD-RW	✗



scan-capable, but RGB is available via the Scart. Happily, Region 1 is available via a service mode, which can be accessed using the remote control.

PERFORMANCE

This is not a great CD player. It sounds soft and lacking in dynamics and focus. The bass is well integrated, however, but musically it lacks separation and air, and Philips has neglected to fit a video kill switch circuit, which might have helped. A perfectly good recording of Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* on Naxos sounded loose, almost as though the players were reading from different scores, and Holly Cole's *Temptation* album (which as it happens I first heard on a not much more expensive DVD-Video player) sounded opaque and earthbound.

The video circuits – monitored on a Philips TV by the way – offer some respite from the audio. There are some obvious motion artefacts and a build-up of video noise in moving scenes, plus the usual frame-related problems with moving verticals in material of video

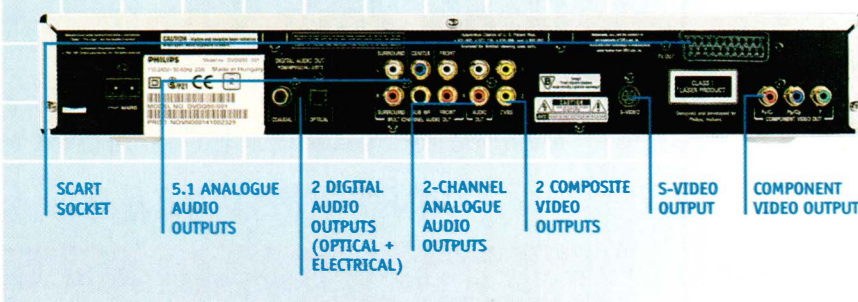
origin. But well mastered films like *Gladiator* offer rich, subtle colouring, with some loss of tonal differentiation in deep shadow areas and occasional MPEG-blocking. DTS music recordings reproduce well, with surprising subtlety and power when the occasion demands.

On the whole, at least with linear PCM audio on CD, this is a player that is going through its paces rather than serving the music. With recording after recording, the effect is underpowered and lacking conviction and discipline. Even the infectious if sometimes wayward enthusiasm of previous generations of Philips DVD players is lacking. One film, *Almost Famous*, which worked perfectly well in other players, failed to initiate play from the main menu. Hopefully this is a one-off. **D**

LAB REPORT

- ▶ Having learnt painful lessons in the past, the mere 220psec of data-related jitter marks the DVDQ50 as a thoughtfully-designed bit of kit, at least from the perspective of audio.
- ▶ Its output level is a little low at 1.8V but the S/N remains very respectable at 105dB. Resolution is equivalent to some 17 bits despite the slight +0.0/-0.7dB 'wobble' in linearity at -90dBfs.
- ▶ Distortion hits its minimum just below the peak output, with typically 0.002% at 0dBfs and 0.001% at -10dBfs, increasing to just 0.004% at 20kHz/0dBfs. This is low, by any stretch of the imagination.
- ▶ The digital filter scrubs away any images by a good 105dB, crosstalk holds to within -100dB from 20-20kHz and the response is almost ruler flat. Pre-emphasised CDs are not correctly decoded, however.

DETAIL – CONNECTIONS





SONY DVP-NS900V £500

Sony UK 0990 111999 www.sony.co.uk

OUTSTANDING SOUND AND VISION, AND SACD PLAYBACK TOO

Here is the one and only SACD player in this group, a unit that also plays DVD-Videos and (of course) CDs. It includes on-board Dolby Digital and DTS decoders, with speaker set-up and bass management. There are separate two and six channel analogue outputs, along with a component (non-progressive) output, though only for Region 1 (US) material, and there is no easy means of selecting regions other than the R2 (European) default.

An interesting question one might ask of Sony is whether they make any money on this model. It is significantly better turned out than others at the price, and this applies both to its simple, stylishly extruded aluminium

LAB REPORT

▶ Distortion caused by digital jitter of just 130psec is completely and utterly inaudible. This result is state-of-the-art for a top-notch CD player, let alone a CD/SACD/DVD hybrid.

▶ Because SACD encoding creates a considerable amount of ultrasonic noise which must be filtered away, this necessarily affects its extreme treble response which is more rolled-off than with DVD-A (-0.5dB at 20kHz, -3.8dB at 50kHz and -34dB at 100kHz).

▶ Noise within the audio band is very well controlled, however, and contributes to the player's very wide 108dB A-wtd S/N ratio. Taking into account its low-level linearity, this is equivalent to a resolution of nearly 18 bits.

▶ Importantly, distortion with this player remains low even at very low signal levels (0.004% at -30dBfs and 0.1% at -60dBfs) which can only preserve the purity of subtler musical detail.

fascia and the unusually well specified internal construction, which includes a number of high grade components. The Sony is also well equipped, even leaving SACD compatibility to one side, thanks to a wide range of picture tweaking options, and the video circuitry can be switched off when playing CDs or SACDs to maximise sound quality when video is not required. The remote control includes an internal code library for most makes of TVs, amps or receivers, and LCD labelling for a multi-function assignable control.

PERFORMANCE

The Sony arrived for review just as a new batch of discs in SACD and DVD-A formats turned up, but there were many more of the former than the latter, reflecting the depth of the respective catalogues. By default the Sony acted as the testing ground for the new discs – and some old ones too. It did an excellent job with some fine new jazz recordings. *McCoy Tyner With Stanley Clarke And Al Foster* – a DSD stereo recording from Telarc – was a particular

joy, the limpid, expressive playing fully revealed by the player. On an altogether grander scale, Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, also DSD and also on Telarc, but multichannel, rose to the occasion in a way that no CD in my experience is able to mirror.

SACD replay has a very slightly soft treble, giving the perceptibly laid-back quality noted with some previous Sony SACD players. The margin of advantage over CD is extremely obvious, but it is worth noting that the DVP-NS900 is a very decent CD player too. It's a little lacking in muscularity, but on the other hand it is clean, agile and detailed, with good soundstaging and a tuneful if slightly lightweight bass.

The Sony is no less impressive as a DVD-Video player. It has a strong range of picture conditioning facilities, but apart from occasional blocking after some scene transitions, none of them are needed to deliver the kind of results that few players around this price can rival, still less exceed. Its exceptional ability, which extends to both audio and video, earns a firm Best Buy. ◻

VERDICT

SOUND



PICTURE



FEATURES



VALUE



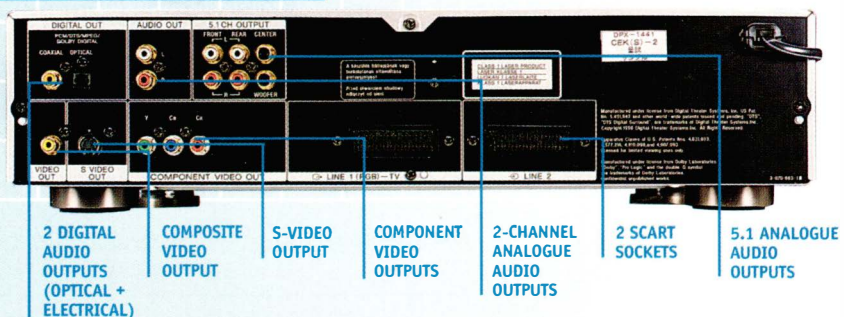
A good example of how hard Sony is pushing SACD, this DVD-Video/SACD player is extremely well built, and performs brilliantly, with a fine, expressive sounding SACD section delivering the *coup de grace*.

FORMAT CHECKLIST

DVD-VIDEO	✓
DVD-AUDIO	✗
CD	✓
SACD	✓
CD-R/ RW	✓
DVD-RW	✗



DETAIL – CONNECTIONS



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TOSHIBA SD-510E £320

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AN EXCELLENT VISUAL PERFORMANCE IS BACKED UP BY IMPRESSIVE DVD-AUDIO REPLAY

Toshiba builds on the strength of its successful existing DVD-Audio range with this new entry-level model. It is well endowed, even including progressive scan on its component output, applicable only to NTSC sources and component-equipped video displays. More relevant in the real world are the headline features: DVD-Audio is top of the list which also includes an internal Dolby Digital/MPEG decoder, but DTS cannot be decoded internally. On the other hand, the SD-510E is compatible with MP3 collections on CD-R/RW, and for CD replay, the audio section will correctly decode HDCD recordings. Rear panel furniture – all gold plated by the way – includes

separate two and six channel analogue outputs and twin Scarts. RGB is available as well as composite and S-Video, and digital outputs are available in optical and electrical flavours.

PERFORMANCE

Visual performance is strikingly good. The pictures the Toshiba generates are very sharp and clean, and motion artefacts other than those unavoidable with interlace scan are very well suppressed. Colour reproduction is equally impressive. But there was a little more graininess on screen than with some of the other players, almost certainly a quid quo pro for the unusual clarity of the picture, but it was never severe enough to constitute a problem.

Demonstrating perhaps that breeding runs true, the SD-150E doesn't disappoint musically either. CD reproduction is among the better models in the test, with good instrumental station, a real sense of air and space, and a propulsive, integrated if not always especially tuneful bass, though the tuned percussion on some of the Holly Cole tracks from *Temptation* were

handled with poise and sensitivity.

DVD-Audio recordings build on these strengths, consistently sounding livelier and more detailed than other DVD-Audio players in the group, though it would be hard to assert hand on heart that there was much of a qualitative gap between CD and DVD-Audio. You might not know which you were listening to, or that there was anything really special about DVD-A. But the Tacet recording of Mendelssohn's *Octet*, one of the few really interesting DVD-Audio discs on sale right now, bought a quality of reality and presence to chamber music that is simply not often found. Stereo imagery is somehow less interesting, less varied than with some of the others, but whether this is related to the jitter measurement is not easy to determine.

There were some minor operational gripes with this player. On a couple of occasions it locked up when the player had been left in pause mode, resolved by removing and replacing the mains plug. Additionally, it sometimes balked at playing visually unblemished CD-Rs which performed fine in other players.

VERDICT

SOUND



PICTURE



FEATURES



VALUE



Surely there is some irony in the fact that the best DVD-Audio performance in this test is posted by a player from a brand that has largely withdrawn from specialist audio.

FORMAT CHECKLIST

DVD-VIDEO	✓
DVD-AUDIO	✓
CD	✓
SACD	✗
CD-R/ RW	✓
DVD-RW	✗



LAB REPORT

There is some slight increase in distortion to 0.002% near the player's maximum output, but this quickly falls away to a minimum of 0.0007% (re. 1kHz/-10dBFs).

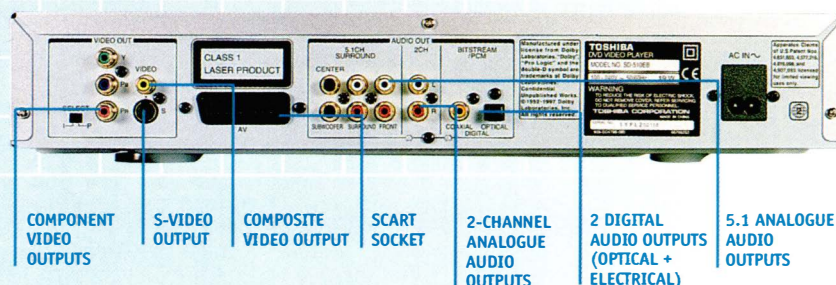
Very high treble distortion is minimal with DVD-Audio material (0.007% @ 30kHz/-20dBFs).

The response is actually flattest with pre-emphasised CDs, but ordinary discs are an inaudible -0.15dB down at 20kHz, rolling gently away to -0.35dB at 30kHz and -2.3dB at 80kHz with DVD-A.

Jitter is a little disappointing at 635psec and as the distortion is clustered quite close to the musical signal(s) itself. Any subjective impact will probably hit the bass region while 'clouding' the focus of stereo imagery.

Stereo separation is kept at a wide >100dB right across the audible range, indicating that Toshiba has taken time and effort over its analogue board layout.

DETAIL – CONNECTIONS



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	£1780.00

System 2

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YAMAHA DVD-S1200 £700

Yamaha UK 01923 233166 www.yamaha.co.uk

PRICEY PLAYER GIVES EXCELLENT VIDEO PERFORMANCE BUT ONLY AVERAGE AUDIO

Yamaha has turned to Panasonic for the basic core of the DVD-S1200, which has a broadly conventional specification that includes Dolby Digital and DTS decoders built inside the player. It's compatible with all of the normal disc types short of DVD-R discs recorded to the VR (Video Recorder) format – the type produced by Pioneer and others.

Although the headline feature is DVD-Audio, what sets the DVD-S1200 apart from many is the suite of features which address picture quality in one way or another. Included are video, block and mosquito noise reduction and something called 'Three-Dimensional' noise reduction, all of

LAB REPORT

Like the Denon player, this Yamaha model is also based on a Panasonic chassis. The A-wtd S/N ratio is comparable at 101dB but the superior digital filter offers a better 79dB rejection of digital 'images'.

Distortion is very low at 0.0009% at its peak 2V output and increases to a mere 0.0045% (-30dBfs) and 0.17% (-60dBfs) at lower (music) signal levels.

The player enjoys a flat response with CD (-0.2dB at 20kHz) that continues to -0.3dB at 30kHz (96kHz DVD) and -2.8dB at 80kHz (192kHz DVD-A).

With two-channel audio, there's nothing to choose between the performance of the DVD-S1200's mixed or main L/R outputs.

Jitter, however, remains the bugbear of Denon's player, this Yamaha player and Panasonic's cheaper DVD-RV41. At a whopping 3800pssec (main or mixed outputs) this will do the sound of the DVD-S1200 no favours whatsoever.

VERDICT	
SOUND	☆☆☆☆
PICTURE	☆☆☆☆
FEATURES	☆☆☆☆
VALUE	☆☆☆☆

The price looks a little steep for the performance on offer, but the DVD-S1200 is a respectable player that avoids the elephant traps that catch some of the other DVD-Audio players.

FORMAT CHECKLIST

DVD-VIDEO	✓
DVD-AUDIO	✓
CD	✓
SACD	✗
CD-R/RW	✗
DVD-RW	✗



which address various artefacts (blocking, motion artefacts and the like) that arise as side products of MPEG video encoding. The 12-bit 54MHz video processor is also a step up the evolutionary tree from many of its counterparts, and like other good players, Yamaha allows the video circuits to be switched off when not needed, for example when playing DVD-Audio discs.

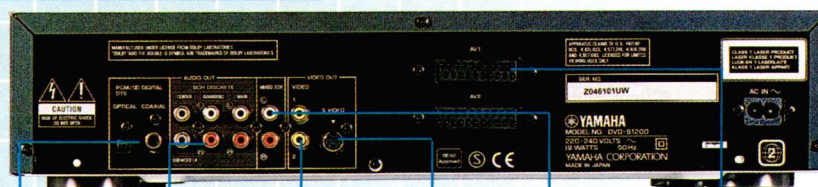
PERFORMANCE

In its CD playing role, the DVD-S1200 is a modestly clean and agile performer, with no obvious shortcomings, but no special talents either. A little grey by the best standards, and a touch heavy-handed in the bass and midband, the Yamaha makes an acceptable if unexceptional CD player, with rather flat imagery but a strong, almost in-your-face presence. The same fingerprints are all over the sound when playing DVD-Audio discs, but the overall standard did improve somewhat compared to CD, which is not always the case – not just because of any real deficiencies in the players, but also thanks to the indifferent standard of

much of the software on offer. The rather fine Mendelssohn *Octet* (Auryn Quartet on the Tacet label) sounds slightly opaque through this player, but it does have a dynamic integrity and a feeling of passion in the playing that go beyond what would be expected of compact disc, or at least all but a very tiny fraction of CDs. But this was one of the few high spots from a player that doesn't always deliver the best that DVD-Audio has to offer.

On the whole the Yamaha impresses most as a video player, thanks to strong on-screen performance which is notably free of artefacts, and which has excellent colour differentiation at both ends of the luminosity curve, and relative freedom from noise. Lossy audio codecs like DTS and Dolby Digital worked well, though a DTS 96:24 recording of The Fabulous Thunderbirds sounded anything but fabulous. In fairness I was not able to unwrap it in full DTS 96:24 as the player doesn't understand this jacked-up lossy codec, which is designed as a kind of poor man's DVD-Audio. Recommended as an excellent video player with high definition audio potential. ○

DETAIL – CONNECTIONS



2 DIGITAL AUDIO OUTPUTS (OPTICAL + ELECTRICAL)

5.1 ANALOGUE AUDIO OUTPUTS

2 COMPOSITE VIDEO OUTPUTS

S-VIDEO OUTPUT

2-CHANNEL ANALOGUE AUDIO OUTPUTS

2 SCART SOCKETS

DVD PLAYER CONCLUSIONS

Alvin Gold likes the hardware, but worries about the software

Our eight players have a wide range of abilities, and they are not always ranked in the order that might have been anticipated. Above all they do physically different, and sometimes mutually incompatible jobs. The clear winner on virtually all counts is the Sony DVP-NS900V, which is not just an excellent sounding

SACD player, supported by a wider (if still very limited) range of prerecorded material than the rival DVD-Audio format. It is also an unusually good DVD-Video player and a good CD player too, all beautifully packaged and priced.

The other clear winners are the Toshiba SD-150E DVD-A/V player and the Harman Kardon DVD25,

which is a straight DVD-Video player. The Harman Kardon has received special attention to its audio stages, making this the best CD player of the group, and for anyone looking for a single disc spinner for music and films this has to be a powerful draw. The Toshiba is a pretty fair CD player too, but it excels as a DVD-Audio player, and

is easily the best of type in this test. There is also a delicious irony that it comes from a manufacturer that has long withdrawn from specialist audio in fields other than DVD. It's a fine video player too, second only to the Yamaha DVD-S1200, which in turn is inferior in its specialist audio role.

As well as delivering clear



DVD PLAYERS AT A GLANCE

Make Model	Denon DVD-1600	Harman Kardon DVD25	NAD T531	Panasonic DVD-RA61	Philips DVD Q50	Sony DVP-NS900V	Toshiba SD-510E	Yamaha DVD-S1200
Price	£500	£449	£330	£399	£300	£500	£320	£700
Sound	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★☆☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★☆☆
Features	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★
Build	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★☆☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆
Value	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★☆☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★☆☆
Conclusions	Classy to look at and to use, picture quality is good, but CD and DVD-A performance is a little soft and wayward.	Reasonable DVD-Video player is an excellent CD player, making this a good upgrade choice for buyers who put music first.	Standard Far Eastern DVD-Video player in NAD clothing fails to stir the juices.	A nice DVD-Video player cohabits with a relatively nondescript DVD-Audio section.	Designer DVD player with oddball ergonomics and lack-lustre audio performance, but video performance is fine.	A great all-rounder, and an excellent example of the current strengths of the SACD format.	Great DVD-Audio and Video performance from a slightly idiosyncratic player at a new low price point for Toshiba.	Clean, agile, sound quality, and decent, if unexciting DVD-Audio performance round off a good, if rather costly player.

LAB REPORT

Low distortion	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■
Low jitter	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■
Wide dynamic range	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■
Effective digital filter	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■
Overall rating	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■	■■■■■■■■■■



HINTS AND TIPS

- ⊗ If you have a choice, use the surround sound processor in the amplifier or receiver, rather than the one in the DVD player (except with DVD-A and SACD of course, where the option doesn't exist with today's hardware). The system set-up and bass management options are invariably more comprehensive, the digital processing is better, and the sound benefits because the analogue signal path is much shorter. Don't forget to use a good quality digital interconnect.
- ⊗ Don't set up the rear speakers and subwoofer at too high a level. Ideally neither should be obvious most of the time. This is partly a matter of personal taste of course, but incorrectly adjusted systems have a tendency to image inconsistently and can be tiring and amusical in the long term.

answers, this test also raises some questions. The obvious one is what benefit there is in the two high resolution formats, DVD-A and SACD, when it is so difficult to find anything worthwhile to listen to? Classical music on SACD is best represented, and jazz comes second, but rock/pop and related

genres come nowhere at present. It should also be said that, with the singular exception of the Harman Kardon, none of the models tested rivals good quality CD players for this legacy role, and even the Harman looks rather expensive if you overlook the added video functionality. Nevertheless, if this test highlights one paradigm shift, it is that DVD players are coming in from the cold as serious music devices. They no longer always represent second best.

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MULTICHANNEL AMPLIFIERS



DENON AVC-A10SE £1,399

One of the first serious (ie seriously good sounding) AV amps, with a full, contemporary feature set.

PIONEER VSA-AX10 £1,700

Currently the best sounding of all one-box amp/processors, with superb features, and excellent auto set-up and upgradeability built in.



YAMAHA DSP-AX1 £2,000

Yamaha's top of the line integrated amp is an elegant and effective communicator, with particularly strong DSP soundfield capabilities.

LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEMS

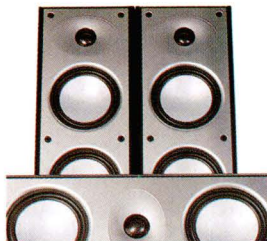


B&W DM600 S3 SYSTEM £1,200

As used in this test, this is a clean, agile, and well matched system in contemporary clothing, undemanding electrically and priced for the kill.

MARTIN LOGAN CINEMA PACKAGE £9,991

Sheer class. Transparency with wellie suits music as well as movies, but needs a first class system if it is to sing.



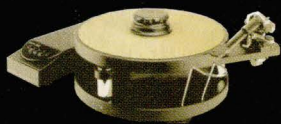
MORDAUNT-SHORT DECLARATION 500 £1,600

Semi-powered main speakers relieve load on system amplifier, and THX Select certification distinguishes this tidy, attractive system – available from Richer Sounds.

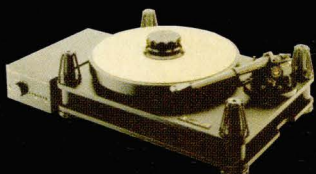
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Auditorium Avatar

Hi-Fi Plus *Editor's Choice*

Hi-Fi Plus *Product of the Year*

Hi-Fi Choice *Editor's Choice*

"The Avatar is a near perfect balance of size, bandwidth, efficiency and tonal refinement. Its slim lines and small footprint deliver a genuine 94db sensitivity, and excel when it comes to delivering the scale, vibrance and colour of the music. Its unobtrusive quality allows it to cut straight to the heart of a performance, unlocking the music trapped in the recording, whilst its refinement makes it equally at home with both basic and surprisingly expensive amplification."

Part exchanged and ex-dem clearance.

Sale New

Digital

Sugden Masterclass CD - new - boxed.

£1900 £2500

Wadia 860x - ex dem - boxed.

£4950 £7950

Analogue

Nottingham Analogue 'The Foot' - 12" carbon fibre tonearm - it's new and it's long.

£700 £1100

Helius Cyalene - beefcake tonearm, Victoria sponge sound.

£500 £1350

Loudspeakers

Living Voice Auditorium - walnut.

£900 £1500

Cadence DS - rosewood - give away.

£600 £1750

Klipsh LaScala - black - zippy horn.

£1750 £3500

Quad ELS63 - untidy bargain.

£390 £3000

Amplifiers

Border Patrol 300B SE - with new Western Electric valves -

£4000 £4500

light oak - the best SE available - New - excess stock.

£600 £1400

Art Audio VPS - valve line pre-amp.

£3500 £4700

Art Audio Diavolo - with 320B valves - chrome + gold -

£1500 £2650

line integrated - juicy.

£1350 £2250

Art Audio Concerto - 40w line integrated - black + chrome.

£800 £2000

Joule Electra - 2 box phono pre-amp.

£500 £1000

Linn Classic - CD, amp, tuner, thing.

£850 -

Cary '2A3' - 7 watt power amp. 1992

£550 -

Cary 5500 - line pre-amp. 1992

£950 £1750

Unison Mystery One PR+

Tube Technology MAC - phono pre-amp - fully refurbished

£900 £1400

by manufacturer - including Hovland film and foil capacitors.

Tube Technology line pre-amp with separate power supply -

£850 £1450

fully refurbished by manufacturer - including Hovland film and

foil capacitors and a stepped attenuator.

£550 -

Audio Innovations S. 500 integrated (+ phono) - 25w Class A

£600 -

Audio Innovations S. 700 line integrated - 25w class A

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The trouble with DVD

Paul Miller examines the sonic challenges that face DVD players

DVD players have an unenviable task – trying to satisfy the demands of both movie fans and audiophiles.

But let's be realistic. In most cases, sound quality plays second fiddle to picture quality because compromises are harder to conceal in a moving image than they are in both two and multichannel sound.

DVD players typically use compact switch-mode power supplies to support the added demands of both a DVD mechanism and video decoder, whereas a CD player will use a conventional linear supply. This brings down the cost of a DVD player very slightly, but it's still pretty unreasonable to expect a £400-£500 DVD player to sound as good as the best £400-£500 CD players.

TICK, TOCK...

Digital carriers, like CD and DVD, synchronise the flow and conversion of data through the player with reference to a fixed, stable master clock. Obviously, DVD players must deal with both digital video data and audio data, streams of 1s and 0s that beat to the tune of very different clocks. To save costs, it's becoming increasingly common for DVD players to derive their audio (CD) clock from the 27MHz MPEG video clock. There are even audio DACs available, designed for use in DVD players, that will run off this MPEG clock despite it bearing no relationship to the 11.3MHz and 16.9MHz references normally used in CD players.

Two methods of deriving an audio clock are possible. Either the incoming 44.1kHz data is sample-rate converted so that it's a multiple of the 27MHz clock or, more

commonly, the audio reference is extracted from the MPEG clock via a PLL (Phase Locked Loop). Using binary multipliers in the feedback loop of a

PLL actually gives a *division* in its output, from which the audio clock is derived.

IDEAL SIGNAL

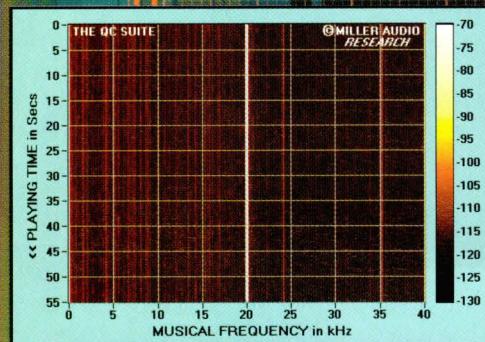
This is far from an ideal solution and, as examples from this and other DVD group tests have shown, audio may suffer in ways that are unlikely with conventional CD players. Fig 1 shows a 20kHz signal (a very high frequency tone) being played back through the Philips' DVD-Q50 from our group test for some 55 seconds. This is the white stripe in the middle of the image. The fact that there's very little noise, distortion or other digital rubbish accompanying this signal is good news for Philips. The Sony and Panasonic players also acquitted themselves in similar fashion, to the benefit of their sound quality.

BUDGET DRAWBACKS

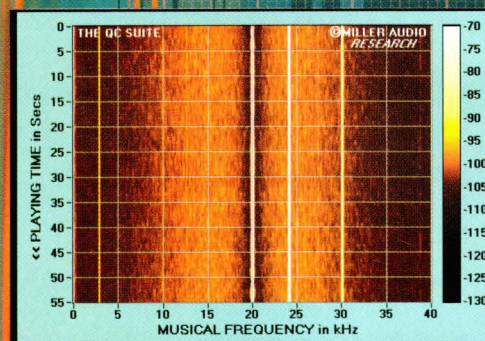
Fig 2 demonstrates two entirely unrelated phenomena from another DVD player – Onkyo's DV-S555, which didn't line up in our group. The bright white line to the right of our 20kHz tone (at 24.1kHz) is a digital 'image' that's incompletely removed by Onkyo's choice of digital filter while the symmetrical orange 'cloud' is a severe form of noise-like jitter. This sort of random noise is a typical by-product of a non-ideal PLL and will inevitably compromise its sound quality. While this effect is not uncommon in budget DVD players, you'll not see it (or hear it) in costlier players with discrete video and audio clocks. And you'll never experience it with a CD player.

UNPREDICTABLE JITTER

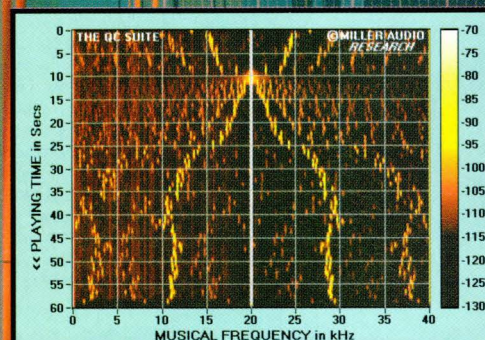
Another form of distortion peculiar to DVD, is revealed in Fig 3 from Harman's DVD25. Here, while the jitter distortion is discrete (rather than noise-like), it also varies across the disc so we can never quite predict what its sonic impact will be. However, as these bright spots of digitally-related distortion are unrelated to the music at hand, they are unlikely to have a positive impact!



1: A near-ideal solution, with the 20kHz tone revealed as a clean white line accompanied by very little extraneous interference.



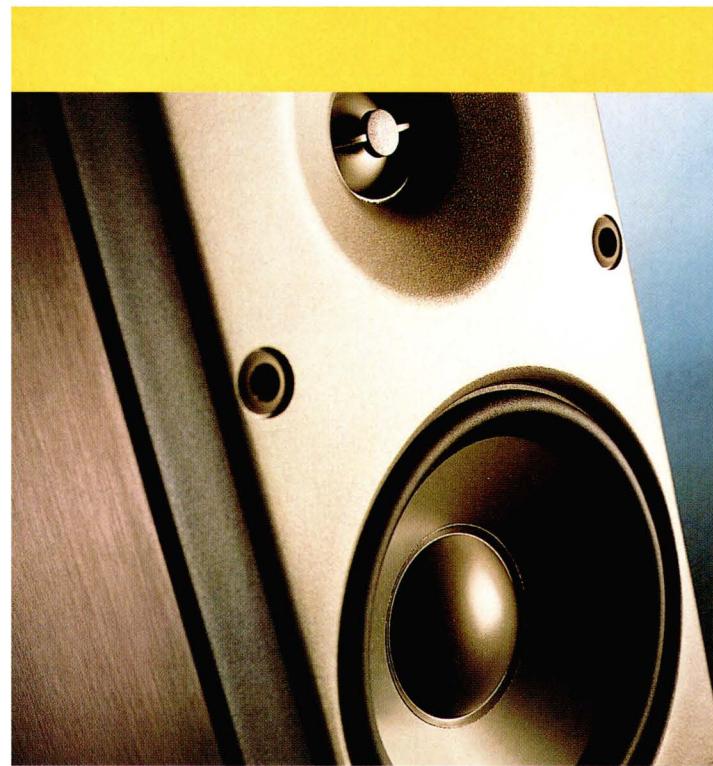
2: Poor digital filtering fails to remove a digital 'image' to the right of the 20kHz line while a noise-like jitter persists at higher and lower frequencies.



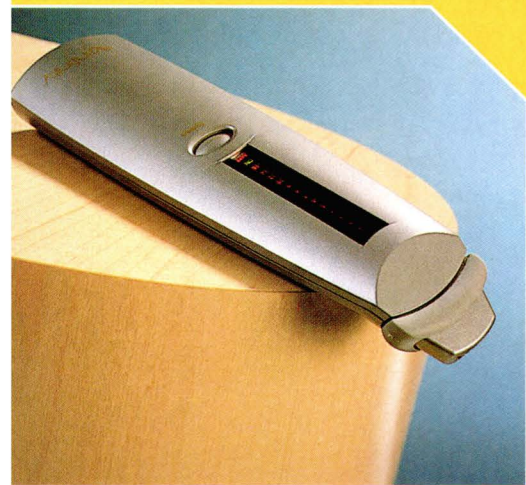
3: Jitter distortion is randomised in this example as the transport plays the first 60 seconds of a track.

HINTS AND TIPS

- ⊕ Treat your DVD player as you would a CD player – use good quality audio interconnects and avoid placing the unit near obvious sources of mechanical vibration, like a subwoofer.
- ⊕ Keeping both DVDs and CDs clean minimises the work done by error correction and concealment circuits in the player and can only improve both picture and sound quality.
- ⊕ Not all video outputs are created equal. Where possible, always use a player's component video output followed by an S-Type or, when desperate, its composite video connection.



“The Prelude is unique in a number of respects, and probably the most expensive speaker system Hi-Fi Choice has ever reviewed.”



The Prelude features two six-driver towers mounted on a brace of subwoofers. Unsurprisingly, twin bass bins mean plenty of kick in the nether regions. It also comes with a clever sound level meter, part of the RABOS bass optimisation system (left).



EXCLUSIVE

Room boom

Infinity's Prelude MTS is dramatically different from the norm, both in style and technology, with a clever feature to deal with room modes

A resolutely hi-tech US brand, Infinity has been part of the Harman group for more than a decade, carefully establishing a separate and distinct identity from its JBL stablemate. I first saw the flagship Prelude MTS speaker system at a European seminar at the back end of Y2K, wrote up its intriguing RABOS feature (see box below and *HFC* 210), and have been waiting for the chance to try them out at home ever since.

Unusual looking to say the very least, the Prelude is also unique in a number of respects, and probably the most expensive speaker system *Hi-Fi Choice* has ever reviewed. The MTS stands for Modular Theater System, indicating that this speaker system has as much to do with home cinema as hi-fi. For this review, however, we've combined two active subwoofers (£2,900 and £2,800 – one of them contains the RABOS system) with two tower modules (£1,700 each), and treated them strictly as a stereo replay system. For home cinema, one would probably add two more towers, plus a broadly similar centre/dialogue module.

I rather like the Prelude's styling, though others were less impressed by its unorthodox appearance. The cleverest bit is the slim front, especially in keeping the bass section with its attractively curved sides almost as slim as the towers, though I guess some might accuse the package of fussiness, or dislike the combination of cast alloy and real wood. Separate tower supports are also available, allowing the subwoofers to be placed wherever they might be most convenient if preferred.

They're very hefty built, the sub's 27kg providing a substantial foundation beneath the 15kg towers. An alloy strip across the front of the sub accommodates two 6mm spikes and confers good basic stability, but the foot at the back is less well fixed and doesn't do spikes at all, which seems like a regrettable oversight. All the drive units

VERDICT

INFINITY PRELUDE MTS Modular speaker system, tested as stereo pair
£9,700.00 inc. stand and wall brackets

▲ Slim stylish and elegant sub/sat combo has great bass weight and power, superb neutrality and vanishingly low coloration.

▼ Very pricey, some lack of energy around sub/sat crossover, giving a slightly 'cold' overall impression and some lack of mid-bass punch.

CONCLUSION

Sounds very clean and neutral with great bass weight, but it's pricey and lacks some punch and warmth.

KEY FEATURES

▶ RABOS Room-Adaptive Bass Optimisation System

▶ CMMD Ceramic Metal Matrix driver diaphragms throughout

▶ Active (powered) subwoofer section

▶ Die-cast tower enclosures

have CMMDs – ceramic metal matrix diaphragms. These promise great stiffness by deep-anodising aluminium alloy to create a 'sandwich', with a ceramic oxide skin on each side of the alloy filling.

The subwoofer consists of a 12-inch (305mm) frame bass driver with a 220mm diameter diaphragm, mounted in a sealed, wood veneered enclosure and driven by a built-in 850 watt amplifier. Calibrated level and RABOS controls are neatly mounted on the shaped alloy front (which acts as a heatsink), while the socketry and a bass mode selector switch are round the back.

The sealed tower section is all alloy, and feels very rigid and well damped. It has four upper-bass drivers, each with 95mm diameter diaphragms, arranged as a line source above and below the

ABOS – ROOM-ADAPTIVE BASS OPTIMISATION SYSTEM

All domestic listening rooms create standing waves at low frequencies, as a function of their basic dimensions and sound absorption characteristics. These in turn can lead to uneven bass, with a tendency to 'thicken' or 'boom' at certain frequencies when excited by a loudspeaker that delves deeply into the bass region.

However, every room is different, so dealing with the problem is difficult. The first task is to identify the standing wave peaks present in the listening zone and, with the assistance of the comprehensive instruction set, figure out which of these is likely to be the most pernicious. Infinity supplies a test CD and accurate sound level meter to accomplish this, and while the process might be quite complex and time consuming, it is undoubtedly effective.

The final stage of the process is to get rid of the unwanted peak, nulling it by applying a very precisely calibrated adjustable parametric notch filter. Again it's a slightly tricky process, but once accomplished you can use the test CD and level meter just to check the hopefully much smoother bass that results.

EXCLUSIVE

Digital daydream

EDITOR'S CHOICE

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

At long last Wadia has produced the 'entry level' CD player that it announced two years ago. So the question is: was the 301 worth the wait?

When it emerged in 1988 with an outrageously expensive digital to analogue (DAC) converter (Digimaster 2000 Decoding Computer), Wadia was the first all-digital high-end company on the planet. Since then it's built itself an enviable reputation for producing some of the best CD players available. You might remember the Wadia 16 for instance, the first one-box player to seriously undermine the transport and DAC ethos that pervaded the high-end in the mid-nineties. But something went wrong on the financial side and in 2000 the company went into liquidation. Fortunately it was resurrected later the same year when the Digital Imaging Corporation combined its own and Wadia's assets to form Audio Video Research. At the same time it announced replacements for the range-topping 860x player and the more affordable 830 (reviewed in *HFC* issue 183). The latter has been transformed into the Wadia 301 you see before you.

The new numbering indicates that it is the first in a new series of components which we're told will all inhabit the same elaborate casework. A good thing too – if this case was purely for one product it would represent most of the factory price. It's a very tasty bit of machining and the tooling costs will need a bit of distribution. Lets hope we don't have to wait another two years for its first sibling.

As is the Wadia way, the 301 is not your average CD player in terms of its functionality. Most obvious is the digital volume control, a function that can never be fully bypassed as it's built into the chip at the heart of the machine. This is because you are encouraged to use the 301 as a preamp as well, plugging it directly into a power amp and cutting out a whole tier of circuitry and cabling not to mention an analogue volume control. The drawback is that you can only feed digital sources into it and those inputs are themselves an optional extra. But if you don't use analogue sources or wouldn't mind digitising them with a Wadia A-to-D convertor, there are

VERDICT

**WADIA 301
CD player**
£3,650

- ▶ You won't be able to stop playing discs because they sound so much better than they did.
- ▶ But sometimes it's good to eat, sleep, go out etc. The display is so poor you can't read it in daylight.

CONCLUSION

Revelatory player that gives new insight into everything it plays but sounds so much better without a preamp that those with multiple sources will be constantly switching interconnects. In other words, yes, the 301 was worth the wait.

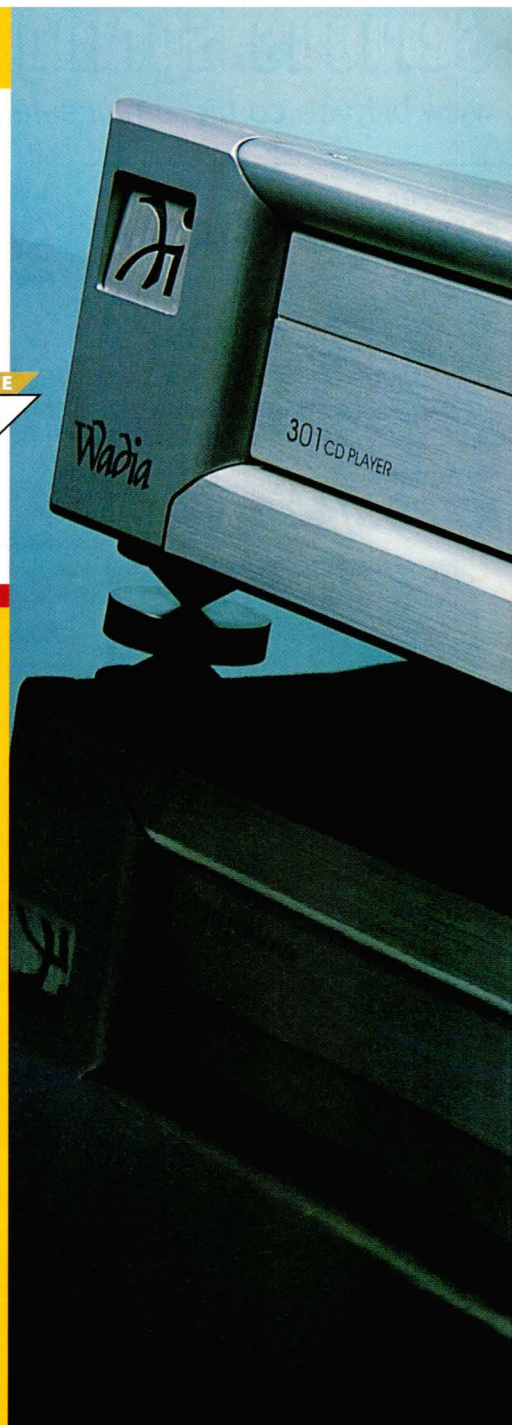
KEY FEATURES

- ▶ High quality digital volume control
- ▶ Balanced and single-ended analogue outputs
- ▶ Optical and coaxial digital outputs
- ▶ Variable output level
- ▶ Upgradeable to digital preamp operation

DIGITAL VOLUME CONTROL

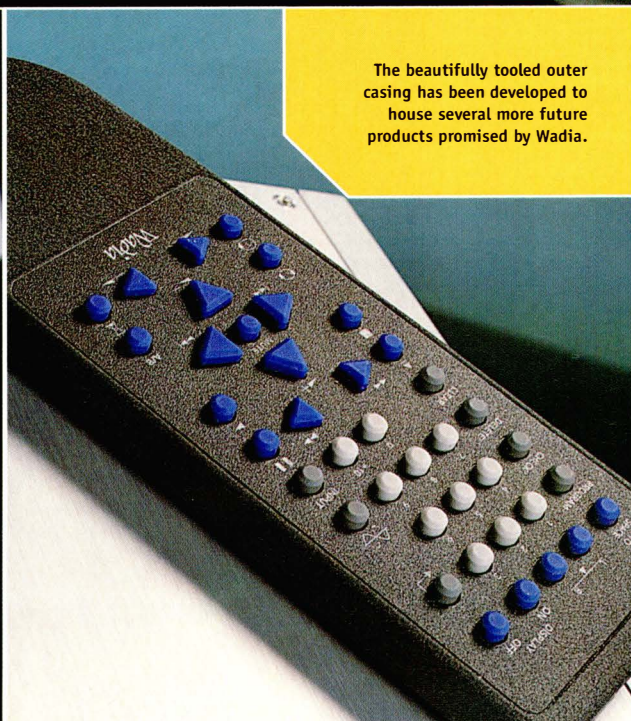
The theoretical advantage of an onboard digital volume control is that it cuts out the need for an additional preamp, so you can just plug your source straight into a power amp and away you go. By cutting out a link in the chain you reduce the potential for interference and sonic coloration, but unfortunately, the majority of digital volume controls are generally not very impressive in sound quality terms because they reduce volume by reducing the number of bits used to actually describe the signal itself.

Wadia's digital volume control gets around the worst aspects of this problem by increasing the number of bits representing the signal to 21 or 22 through filtering and resolution enhancement. This means that five or six bits can be 'lost' without actually directly affecting the signal, equating to 36dB of attenuation (loss of volume). Of course, you lose the advantages conferred by the resolution enhancement process, but compared to the noise and sonic degradation introduced by the majority of analogue volume pots this is trifling. Wadia goes so far as to suggest that many discs on the market have less than 14-bit resolution and that even at the -50dB level its digital volume control maintains this level of resolution.



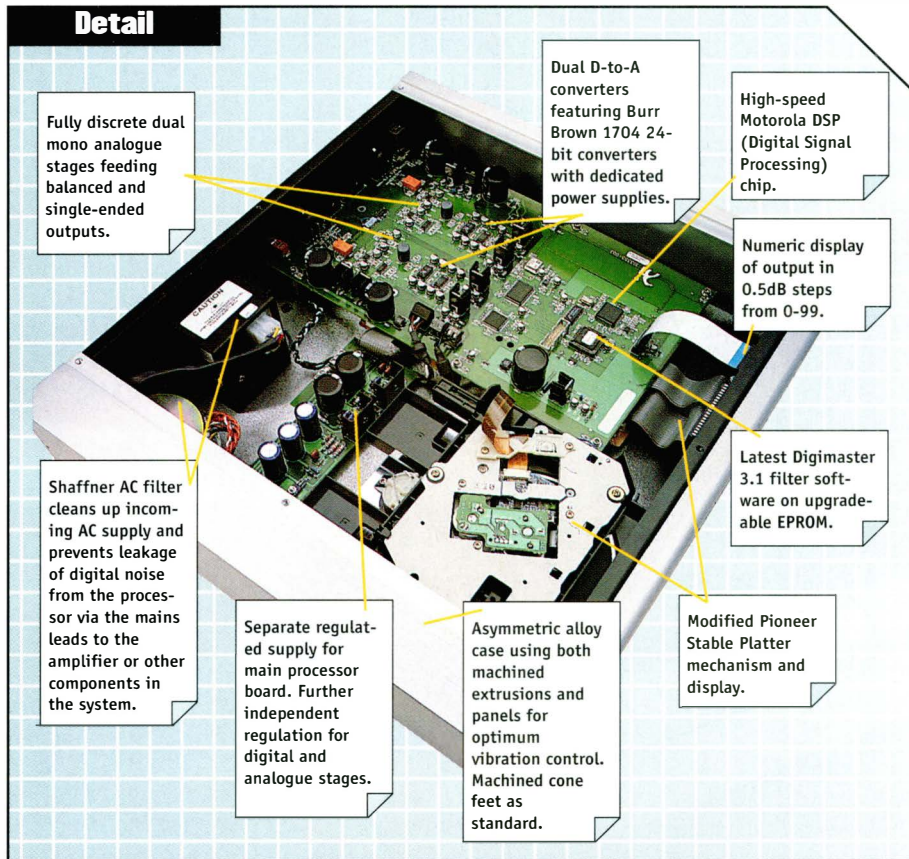


"The digital volume control can never be fully bypassed as it's built into the chip at the heart of the machine."



The beautifully tooled outer casing has been developed to house several more future products promised by Wadia.





“Once you’ve heard your discs this way it’s very, very hard to go back to normal life.”

more colourful. In Direct-Connect mode, as Wadia describes the preamp-less approach, the 301 has a lot of the qualities of the 861’s predecessors and once you’ve heard your discs this way it’s very, very hard to go back to normal life. I was happy listening to the player through the whole system but then I made the switch to ‘di’ and writing this got a whole lot harder. When your CD collection suddenly sounds twice as good as usual the last thing you want to do is concentrate on a review!

So how does it sound? Words like real, convincing, engrossing and addictive describe the effect but the sound depends on the disc. Bass is not merely deep and powerful but it has genuine colour and texture, the double bass opening on EST’s *Good Morning Susie Soho* disc is so rich and vibrant the instrument could be in the room. The soundfield on David Thomas and Two Pale Boys’ *Surf’s Up* is incredibly rich and atmospheric, providing a sonic landscape into which Thomas paints Edward Hopperesque scenes. There’s a lot of colour and subtlety on CDs that few players uncover and most barely hint at, so when one comes along and sets out the full picture it’s quite disarming. It’s difficult to listen to the player when you’re distracted by the music, and that is surely what this hi-fi deal is supposed to be all about.

The reason why the 301 can do this comes down to the hi-fi fundamentals that it does so convincingly. It times with a subtlety and coherence that brings complex pieces to life and imbues more straightforward ones with a definition that’s rarely encountered with CD. Its high frequencies are uncannily natural for the medium, they seem extended but never display the thinness and grain that is so common. But its forté is dynamics, the ability to trace the level of every note within the musical whole accurately. This is a Wadia speciality and in the 301 it is available at a realistic price. ☺

☎ Musical Design Co 01992 573030
 🌐 www.wadia.com



ALSO CONSIDER

Now that the Marantz CD7 has sold through the only real competition comes from higher up the price scale.

NAIM CDSII £5,900
 If timing is your bag then this is the benchmark to beat – it even works in non-Naim systems.

MARANTZ SA-1 £5,000
 An SACD player that is hard to beat with CDs too, but getting hold of one might be difficult.

WADIA 861 £7,950
 The 301’s big brother does everything that little bit better than most – if you want the best, this is it.

☺ significant sonic advantages.

It also explains the little dip switches on the back panel. These can be used to adjust the player’s maximum output level in four stages between a minimum of half a volt via the single-ended outputs (phono sockets) to four volts from the balanced outputs. This is necessary for you to be able to use the top quarter of the player’s volume range (indicated at 64-99). Below 64 the player is reducing the number of bits used to describe the signal and compromising sound quality as a result (see digital volume control box out). If you need to use a preamp or have an integrated amp, Wadia recommends that the output level be left on maximum (99). Of course, if your amp isn’t remote controlled the 301 adds that feature for CD replay at least.

PERFORMANCE

Having what on this occasion turned out to be an inconvenient combination of high sensitivity speakers and a relatively

high gain, balanced input power amp, I was not able to use the 301 in its ‘direct injection’ mode (well, the player does have ‘di’ engraved on its fascia!) as extensively as I would have liked to. With a lot of discs it got too loud if the player’s output was pushed much above 62, but even in that compromised state the extra dynamics to be had by bypassing the preamp is not in the least bit subtle. The sheer energy that gets through when an interconnect and a top-flight preamplifier is taken out of the loop has to be heard to be believed. Amp designers regularly bemoan the limitations of analogue volume controls and this phenomenon makes clear why.

However, as analogue sources are fundamental to my listening enjoyment the majority of the review period was passed using a preamp in line, and it didn’t stop the player from impressing. Far from it – this is an excellent player. If I hadn’t heard its big brother, the 861, the superlatives would have been even

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Vinyl Excellence

Rega has just improved its top turntable/tonearm combo with the brand new 'ultimate' RB1000 tonearm



Rega is best known for budget and mid-price gear, but this turntable/tonearm combo is the company's most expensive product by a comfortable margin. And while £2,248 is far from outrageous by turntable standards, there's no denying it promises state-of-the-art performance, with unusual features and very radical thinking too.

This P9 is based closely on its Planar 9 predecessor, but is also a significant step forward in a number of respects, many of which come down to further tonearm refinement. This is now designated an RB1000 (as distinct from its RB900 predecessor) and carries a £1,000 price tag – much more than other RB-series tonearms (see box, below).

Like all Regas, the turntable is a solid plinth (rather than subchassis). So it's delightfully firm, while offering only modest environmental isolation (wall shelf mounting is preferred). In fact there are inner and outer plinths, the former a deliberately low density fibreboard which acts as the mounting for all the important bits – motor, platter main bearing, tonearm and feet – while the latter is an attractive hardwood 'picture frame', scalloped out to keep the mass down.

Solid construction means it's vital to minimise motor vibration, and this is

REGA'S RB1000 TONE ARM

Rega's RB-series tonearms have found themselves on many high quality turntables over the past fifteen or so years. All of them use a single casting from headshell to bearing housing, which ensures magnificent inherent structural integrity. The RB1000 variant fitted here differs from its cheaper brethren in a number of ways. For example, it's finished in bare metal throughout, and replaces a number of peripheral plastic mouldings (such as that for the magnetic bias compensation) with more rigid metal fabrications.

Most important, however, is that the ball-race bearings are specially selected for the tightest possible tolerances – around one micron in practice – from among all those used throughout the RB-series.

VERDICT

Rega P9 Vinyl turntable/tonearm combo
£2,248

Great pace and drive with sparkling detail, yet also exceptionally easy to set up and use, and free from any 'tweaky' baggage.

Balance is studiously neutral, hence a little dry and lacking something of the romantic warmth some associate with vinyl.

CONCLUSION

The P9 combines magnificent musical coherence with an uncanny ability to avoid the 'mechanical' qualities of vinyl replay, in a commendably fuss-free package.

KEY FEATURES

- ▶ Belt drive
- ▶ Electronic 33.3/45rpm speeds (quartz-referenced)
- ▶ Massive outboard power supply
- ▶ Aluminium oxide platter
- ▶ Tightly toleranced tonearm bearings
- ▶ Hardwood plinth

done by means of a large and elaborate outboard power supply, which delivers carefully phase-adjusted voltage and current to the motor coils in such a way as to null any vibration. One of Rega's party tricks is to let visitors hold a vibrating motor, and then 'tune-out' the vibration by tweaking the supply presets. For the P9, each power supply is individually adjusted to match the specific motor fitted, and able to provide fine 33.3rpm and 45rpm speed adjustment.

A turntable platter is a complex set of compromises, where the need for high rotational inertia has to be balanced against the desire to minimise bearing friction, noise and wear. Unusually, the P9 has a white platter, made from aluminium oxide – a very hard, stiff and dense ceramic that's very difficult to work, and is also used for the nose cones of rockets. This is moulded to be thicker at the edge than the centre to boost inertia, is covered in a thin felt mat and sits on a metal sub-platter, driven by two belts.

PERFORMANCE

The silky-smooth mechanical feel of this tonearm somehow translates itself into a

sound quality that's notably different from the vinyl norm. Vinyl remains my own 'most favoured' format, sonically preferable to CD when available, but I'm neither blind nor deaf to its limitations and inadequacies: while it usually sounds more delicate, musical and natural than CD, it also tends to sound more untidy and scrappy, probably as a consequence of the mechanical nature of the replay process. Using the P9, however, somehow seems to remove much of these 'rude mechanicals' from the performance.

The superior sweetness, integration and control of the top end was instantly obvious, in the way Tom Waits' gruff and close-miked vocals on *Rain Dogs* simply sounded cleaner, more natural and all-of-a-piece than usual. Surface noise on this oft-played, well-worn disc was by no means suppressed, but did seem more detached and better separated from the music than usual.

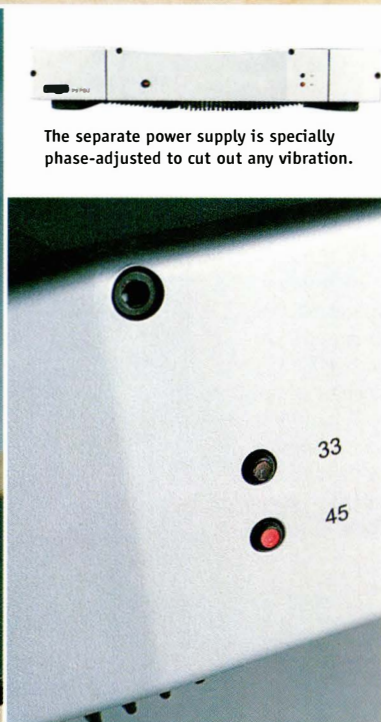
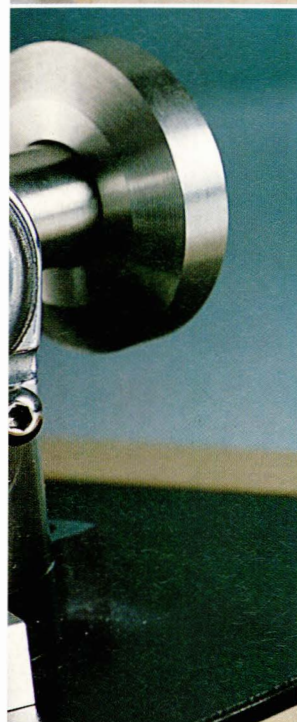
The same went for classical music, such as a Percy Grainger orchestral selection, where again surface noise was discreet, and brass instruments possessed an uncanny sweetness and unusual realism. Stereo images were beautifully formed

"Vinyl remains my own 'most favoured' format, sonically preferable to CD when available."





The P9 features two plinths: an outer rosewood one for show, and an inner low-density fibreboard one to which the important parts are attached.



The separate power supply is specially phase-adjusted to cut out any vibration.

with fine depth and precise focus.

While the P9 showed itself well able to deliver the musical content with considerable coherence and precision, its overall sound balance is a little dry and lacking in warmth. However, there's no lack of bass power, as I quickly discovered when giving Leftfield a spin, followed by The Prodigy's awesome *Poison*, both of which showed considerable bass weight, depth and impressive dexterity.

I had to order and wait for a vinyl version of The Chemical Brothers' new *Come With Us*, but it was well worth it, as the black disc sounds considerably more musically coherent and intelligible than its silver alternative, especially when played on the P9. This turntable won't romanticise your recordings, but it will lay them bare, whatever your taste in

music, with precision, accuracy and great powers of seduction. ☺

☎ Rega 01702 333071 🌐 www.rega.co.uk

ALSO CONSIDER

LINN LP12 £1,150

The classic reference turntable and still the one to which many aspire. Some feel it's over 'characterful' but others adore its musicality.

ROXSAN XERXES X £1,300

Revamped a few years back, this was Roksan's answer to the LP12 and another vinyl classic. A new version is on its way...

SME MODEL 10A £3,333

A superbly built, elegant and extremely capable design that comes with Series V/309 hybrid arm.

MICHELL ORBE SE £1,725

A beautiful high-end design from the maker of the Gyrodec. An essentially neutral balance and a fine sense of rhythm.

Music maestro

Italy's Audio Analogue offers a CD player and amp which harnesses the raw power of a Raging Bull with the tender heart of a Cinema Paradiso. Welcome to La Dolce Vita

VERDICT

AUDIO ANALOGUE MAESTRO Integrated amplifier
£2,600

Massive power, will drive any load without compromise. Fabulous casework that's hard to beat for the money.

Spade connections, colossal weight and power requires good support and ventilation.

CONCLUSION
Big, smooth and silky sound with oodles of power that's always willing to entertain.

KEY FEATURES

- 150 watts continuous power
- Switchable MM/MC phono stage
- Massively engineered chassis
- Preamp output
- Five line inputs
- Beautifully tooled remote control

Madonna's chest once carried the legend 'Italians do it better' well before Audio Analogue had even started. Maestro consists of the two gargantuan pieces of hi-fi which sit at the top of the tree in Audio Analogue's current electronics line-up, which is an impressive statement considering the firm's mere seven-year history. The Maestros are two colossal feats of engineering, reeking of class and flaunting their jaw-dropping beauty to the world wrapped in the kind of casework that us Brits could only dream of for the money.

The pair were conceived by Audio Analogue partner and hi-fi retailer Claudio Bertini, who has spent many hours dissecting and modifying the Krells and Mark Levinsons of this world. This quest for refinement drove the man to take Audio Analogue into the high end.

The Maestro CD player has sex appeal on the outside and plenty of specs-appeal under the hood. Described as both a CD player and a digital signal processor, the Maestro can be switched to accept inputs from a variety of digital sources such as DVD, to make full use of

its upsampling ability. The Maestro offers true 24-Bit/96kHz upsampling via a pair of prestigious Analog Devices DACs.

A host of high-quality componentry and a Philips transport side with two large 750VA toroidal transformers, one of which is used exclusively for the analogue section with an impressive nine regulators managing the power supply for optimum performance. This wealth of serious componentry is treated to a 3mm-thick steel chassis that endeavours to isolate power supplies from sensitive electronics.

From the outside the Maestro CD looks fabulous. It has a very generous 20mm aluminium fascia sided by a satin black counterplate, with a sleek layout that just oozes Italian style. The only aesthetic downside is a fairly generic and frankly boring-looking remote.

Meanwhile, the CD player's mammoth amp counterpart is one mother of a lump. It still has a certain style, but its immense proportions will almost certainly dominate any equipment you dare to place in its vicinity and the whopping great volume control only enforces the perception of serious power.

The Maestro integrated amp is a pre/power pairing mounted in a massively engineered chassis that would almost certainly cost a lot more if it was produced in the UK.

The huge power stage within features eight 250 watt bipolar devices, for a continuous power output of 150 watts per channel and a total power handling of 2,000 watts. The phono stage is switchable internally to MC from its MM default and round the back there are balanced input connections using XLR, but only one pair of speaker terminals per channel that insist upon Euro-friendly spade connections. In contrast to the CD player, the remote control is a work of art and something you'll want to keep on display. It's a beautifully crafted and very solid unit that appears to have been machined from a solid billet of aluminium. Nice.

VERDICT

AUDIO ANALOGUE MAESTRO CD player
£1,500

Stunning build quality with silky smooth presentation. Can be used as a processor for other digital sources.

Won't grab you by the lapels with rock and orchestral music.

CONCLUSION
Beautifully crafted upsampling CD player employing some tasty components that uncovers plenty of detail without ever becoming fatiguing.

KEY FEATURES

- Analog Devices AD1855 DAC
- Crystal Semiconductors CS8420
- Maestro Digital Audio Processor digital input
- Four line inputs
- MM/MC phono stage
- Preamp output

TECHNOLOGY

The Maestro CD player is also described as a Digital Audio Processor, one of few CD players around at present touting processor status. In essence, the CD player can take a digital input from an external source like a DVD player, and so make use of its high quality D-to-A conversion.

With the Maestro CD processor it is possible to listen to an internal or an external signal by means of a pushbutton in the front panel. In addition to this feature a special loop option is available to allow the signal from the CD transport to be digitally processed before being sent to the D/A converter. This means that digital equalizers, reverb or delay units, or electronics to correct the loudspeaker response can be used in order to modify a system's performance.

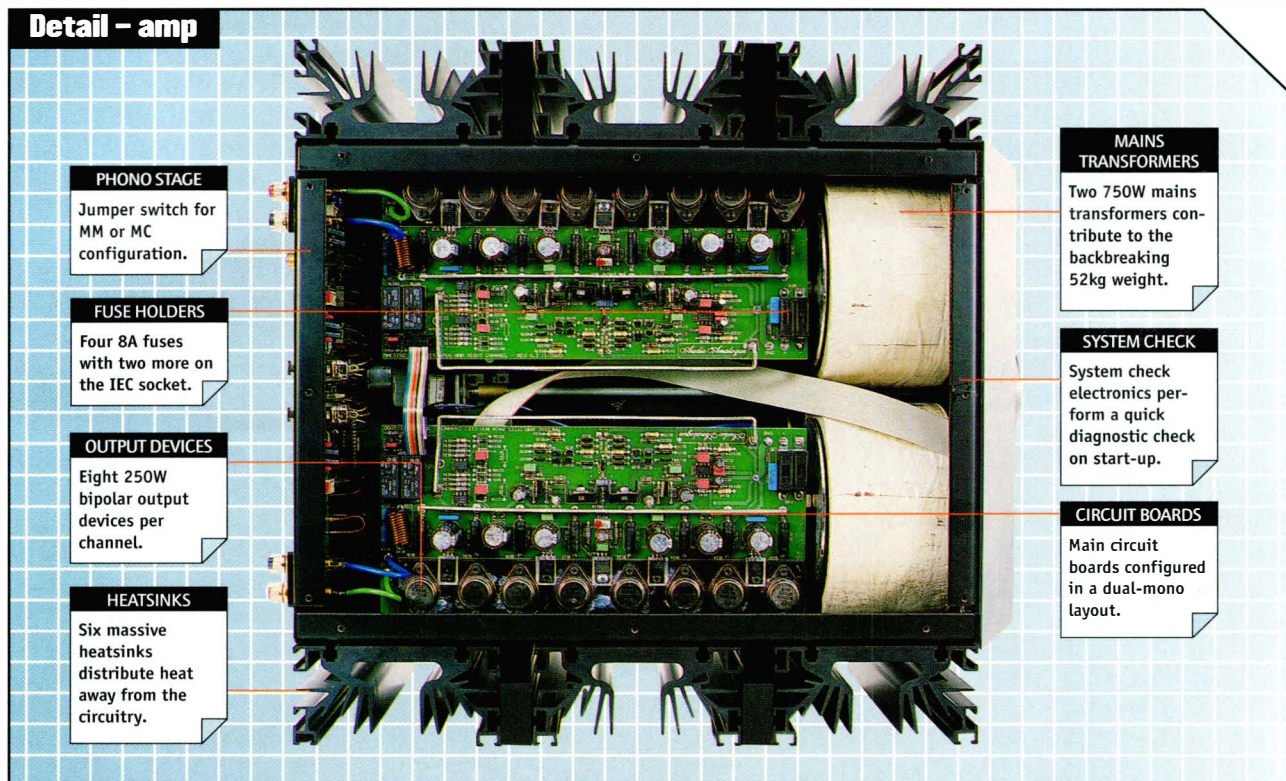




“The Maestro amp’s immense proportions will dominate any equipment you dare to place in its vicinity.”

Compare the carefully crafted aluminium style statement that is the amplifier remote on the right with the car boot sale reject that serves as the CD remote (left).





Detail – amp

- PHONO STAGE**
Jumper switch for MM or MC configuration.
- FUSE HOLDERS**
Four 8A fuses with two more on the IEC socket.
- OUTPUT DEVICES**
Eight 250W bipolar output devices per channel.
- HEATSINKS**
Six massive heatsinks distribute heat away from the circuitry.

- MAINS TRANSFORMERS**
Two 750W mains transformers contribute to the backbreaking 52kg weight.
- SYSTEM CHECK**
System check electronics perform a quick diagnostic check on start-up.
- CIRCUIT BOARDS**
Main circuit boards configured in a dual-mono layout.

“150 watts of continuous power results in effortless control of demanding bass – throw your lowest octaves at it, and it will come back with solid, well-defined, chest-beaters.”

PERFORMANCE

Two hundred hours run-in is the recommendation for the amplifier and once run-in under normal circumstances, things get hot after only thirty minutes powered up. Linked up with Townshend Isolda interconnects the Italian stallions got off to a flying start. The amplifier houses the most generous 150 watts I've come across – that's 150 watts of continuous power that results in effortless control of demanding bass work. Throw your lowest octaves at it and it will come back with solid, well-defined chest-beaters guaranteed to bring smiles. Couple this with a lightning-fast delivery of LF transients and you are witness to one of the best integrated amplifiers around for sheer quality of bass. It delivers the most solid and broad soundstage you could desire, with an impressively natural balance that combines a silky-smooth midband with just enough attack to capture the drama in the music. Reminiscent of the Musical Fidelity NuVista M3 only with slightly less power, the Maestro amp is incredibly well controlled and capable of serious grip – the extremely deep bass lines on Eryka Badu's *Baduism* are conveyed with depth, authority and effortless control. Perhaps

there's a little too much warmth at times, washing over guitar strings a touch during audition, but as a pairing the two Maestro components are mostly hard to fault. Indeed, while Holst's *The Planets* may be in danger of overfamiliarity, this combo was able to generate renewed excitement, scale and depth from the huge orchestral sound. And despite the Maestro's smooth character, all of the midband attack was accurately preserved with fatigue never becoming a problem.

The CD player retains the same grace and composed delivery that the mighty amplifier displays, and its upsampling capability means the maximum amount of information is pulled from the disc. The CD player's forte is its ability to uncover lots of detail and then feed it through in a manner that lays everything bare. This may not suit all tastes and trying to capture the electric energy of the Rolling Stones *Can't You Hear Me Knocking?* proved trickier than usual, and prompted an abrupt cranking of the volume in an attempt to capture the full impact. The Audio Analogue sound is far from forward – a blast with one of Naim's CD players, for example, gives rock a flavour that's arguably more interesting and certainly more upfront.



But the Maestro CD isn't about forward attack, it's more about articulate reproduction of tonal accuracy and to this end, it makes a stronger bond with its partnering amplifier than perhaps it might when integrated into an existing system. As a pair, they go together like coffee and cream – their collective strengths give an authoritative and solid signature that delivers your beloved music with a naturalness that's hard to dislike. The musical detail the CD player presents to the amplifier is projected with genuine gusto and you can hear a long way into a very deep and wide soundstage. It's a very appealing package overall, both in terms of sonics and sheer visual beauty. ☺

☎ UKD 01753 652669
🌐 www.audioanalogue.com

ALSO CONSIDER

- PHILIPS SACD-1000 SACD PLAYER £1,300**
Plays multichannel SACD, DVD-Video and CDs with aplomb.
- PRIMARE D30.2 CD PLAYER £1,499**
High resolution player and HFC test favourite.
- SONY SCD333-ES SACD PLAYER £1,200**
Excellent CD performance from Sony with added multichannel SACD ability.
- MUSICAL FIDELITY NUVISTA M3 SUPER INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER £3,000**
Macho looks and an equally macho 275 watts makes this hybrid NuVista valve engine a real heavyweight contender.
- ATC SIA2-150 AMPLIFIER £1,984**
Dynamic, open and detailed with studio roots and an impressive 150 watts on tap.

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MAIN REVIEWS – Jason Kennedy | LAB REPORTS – Paul Miller

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

Upmarket integrations are a serious alternative to the two-box route

If they started to drug test integrated amplifiers some of the models we've gathered for this test would be on shaky ground – there's a clear whiff of steroids about them. The integrated used to be a starter amp, something you got to get your system off the ground before moving on to a pre/power combo, but something has changed and integrated designs are getting beefier and more sophisticated by the year. We decided to see what this new breed has to offer and gathered together half a dozen high-class contenders for the purpose.

Some of you may be wondering what's wrong with the regular integrated that you've got in your system, or more specifically what you can expect to get in return for shelling out twice as much or more on a more ambitious design. The most obvious reason for upgrading your amp used to be power and though budget models now deliver a lot more than they used to there are still several good reasons for having a bigger engine under the bonnet. It will control speakers better for one thing, and encourage them to reach deeper into the bass without distortion. Distortion is the key word with amps – the better they are the less you have to put up with and as a result the more tangible and coherent the music

sounds. You may have found that some of your discs sound a lot better than the majority and you probably assume that this is because they are superior recordings. That's one reason, but a better amplifier will even out the difference and enable you to hear the best in more of your collection. Bad recordings clearly exist but they aren't as prevalent as you might think and a good amplifier reveals as much.

Another question is: why go for a big integrated when a pre/power offers similar quality with greater upgradeability? Well, value is the short answer. The casing of an amplifier represents a fare chunk of its cost so if you're buying two boxes you're getting less expensive electronics than if you only buy one. There's also practicality – one box usually takes up less space and all its operations can be controlled from the remote. Power amps don't have remotes so powering them up and down has to be done on foot.

An integrated is no bar to upgrading either. Most are designed for bi-amping (adding a second matching power amp) and some are designed to be incorporated into a surround system.

So if you're after better sound, don't discount big integrations – they offer a lot of advantages and good ones have the potential to sound awesome. ☉

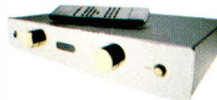
ON TEST



ARCAM FMJ A32
£1,100



ATC SIA2-150
£2,375



CYMBAL CA3
£999



MARANTZ PM14 MKII KI
£2,000



TAG MCLAREN 60IRV SL
£1,000



UNISON RESEARCH UNICO I
£800

EQUIPMENT USED

Sony SCD-555ES
SACD player
SME 20A/vdH
Grasshopper/Tom Evans
Groove record player
Living Voice Avatar
OBX-R speakers
Cyrus CLS50 speakers
Townshend Seismic equipment and speaker supports
Townshend Cryogenic, Living Voice and Kimber cables
Canary CA-608 amplifier

MUSIC USED

Missy Elliot – *Miss E... So Addictive* (CD)
Nils Petter Molvær – *Khmer* (CD)
Paul Halley – *Sacred Feast* (SACD)
Esbjörn Svensson Trio – *Good Morning Susie Soho* (CD)
Turin Brakes – *The Optimist* LP (vinyl)





ARCAM FMJ A32

£1,100 ☎ Arcam 01223 203200 🌐 www.arcam.co.uk

ARCAM'S FLAGSHIP IS SUBTLE AND SOPHISTICATED

The latest in the FMJ range, the A32 is also the most ambitious, not to mention most expensive, stereo amp that Arcam produces. Taking the Diva A85 as its starting point this 100 watts per channel design uses full DC coupling and is built using surface mount components and a hefty mains transformer.

This is by far the most flexible amp in the group and has lots of facilities that you wouldn't discover by reading the legends on the front panel. But the existence of up/down arrows indicates that there is software inside which can adjust the usual parameters like tone and balance alongside a host of other features that are less common. Take for instance the volume resolution which comes in three flavours: standard, fine and reference and indicates the steps jumped for every click of the control (reference gives you half dB steps with a record level-style display, -32dB being louder than -36dB). Another handy one is the ability to adjust input sensitivity so you avoid alarming jumps in volume when switching sources. Processor

VERDICT

SOUND
★★★★☆

FEATURES
★★★★★

BUILD
★★★★☆

VALUE
★★★★★

An extremely flexible new Arcam with a more refined and subtle sound than we've found with the brand's previous integrations – and they weren't too shabby either. Excellent value, a Best Buy in fact.

- KEY FEATURES**
- REMOTE CONTROL ✓
 - TONE CONTROLS ✓
 - PHONO INPUT ✓
 - LINE INPUTS 5
 - TAPE LOOPS 2



mode even allows you to adjust the gain of the amplifier so that it can be easily incorporated into a multichannel system without loss of stereo quality, a feature we have not previously encountered on any other amp.

PERFORMANCE

The A32 proved something of a hit on audition, its sound being in a similar style and league to the Marantz at nearly half the price. While not as dynamically or timbrally realistic as the PM-14 it's relaxed yet detailed and highly convincing. At first it seems a little smooth – nothing is reaching out to grab your attention – but it's not long before all sorts of qualities begin to shine through.

High frequencies are particularly well served, with air and life accompanying the fundamental notes, and giving the performance some real colour. There's also a great sense of detail, the reverb that producer Timbaland has added to the voices on *Miss E...* is distinctly there and the quality of cymbal work on the EST stands out in a natural yet distinct

fashion. Next to the bigger amps there is a little softening of bass power and kick drums could kick a little more.

The A32 certainly delivers the goods though. Its bass, which is by no means restrained or under-powered is always tuneful, and the word "groove" often appeared in our notes.

If anything this Arcam is a little shy. Its qualities are subtle ones that take a while to become apparent, but move on to a lesser amp and you know it straight away. This has genuine finesse and in many respects represents the best value in this extremely competitive collection of amps. Ⓞ

LAB REPORT

▶ Delivering a healthy 2x115W into 8ohm and 2x160W into 4ohm, the A32 accelerates clear of the other amps in our test with a dynamic output of 165W, 288W, 446W (15A) and a full 538W (23.2A) into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm, respectively.

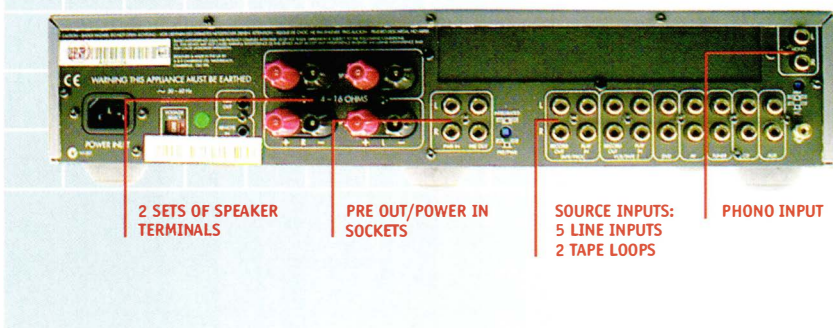
▶ The logic-controlled volume control accurately adjusts the A32's output in 0.5dB steps over a full 70dB range with a maximum error of +0.35dB (at -70dB) and a channel balance true to 0.2dB.

▶ There is some slight evidence of crossover distortion which reduces from 0.008% at just 0.1W to just 0.002% at 10W/8ohm, though the increase to 0.035% at 20kHz will have greater subjective impact.

▶ The response is flat at HF but has a very mild subsonic boost of +0.25dB at 10Hz.

▶ The S/N ratio is spot-on the industry average at 84.6dB, though the 0.12ohm output impedance is just a little higher than expected.

DETAIL – CONNECTIONS





ATC SIA2-150

£2,375 ☎ ATC 01285 7605610 🌐 www.atc.gb.net

PRO SPEAKER EXPERTS PRODUCE A STRIPPED DOWN TREAT OF AN AMP

ATC is best known for the active loudspeakers it makes for both the professional and domestic markets, but given that it builds amps for these speakers it was inevitable that the company would eventually get round to producing separate amps like this chunky integrated.

Weighing in at 24kg, ATC has taken the opposite approach to Marantz with this design – it's the sort of product that the phrase 'hair-shirt' could have been created for. Well almost, its one concession to ease of use is a remote. But the basic four line inputs and volume control suggest a no-pussyfooting approach to the serious business of hi-fi

amplification. The back panel doesn't reveal a great deal more, just a tape loop and some tasty speaker terminals.

The case is very nicely executed – not as pretty as the Marantz but it's equally as well made and if the pro aesthetic appeals this will certainly be your cup of tea. The extensive heatsinking down each flank is not for decoration, you could fry an egg on this 150 watt brute (if you wanted to). Seriously though, it certainly produces more heat than any of the other amps in this group, but then again it also produces more power.

PERFORMANCE

ATC's active loudspeakers are extremely gritty and revealing designs with buckets of power and considerable transparency, albeit with a balance that errs on the incisive. The SIA2-150 is inevitably much the same in character, a warts and all amp that takes no prisoners in its quest for the musical truth.

The sound it produces varies dramatically with the music – if the recording is a great one you get a great sound. If it's not, you hear it. But it's less a case

of good and bad recordings than different ones. Take one of Frank Zappa's *You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore* CDs, these are compilations of live recordings from different locations using varied recorders and at different stages in his career. You'd expect to hear a change between a two track analogue recording in 1974 and a multitrack digital recording from ten years later but many amps play this down. Not the ATC. It positively revels in the variations of venue ambience and recording quality.

If anything it suggests that despite the protestations of analogue lovers (like me) modern recordings are in fact better than older ones.

The way it maintains musical tension is also extremely engaging, the drama and energy that the musician has felt is there in full effect. It has tremendous musical integrity and encourages you to listen and listen until you're totally exhausted. It might be a bit intense for some and won't gloss over the limitations of aggressive source components, but put a high quality signal in and you'll get it all back with interest. 🎧

VERDICT

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



A no-nonsense powerhouse with remarkable transparency and musical integrity. Could be too gritty for some and won't forgive poor recordings, but the truth has a price.

KEY FEATURES

REMOTE CONTROL	✓
TONE CONTROLS	✗
PHONO INPUT	✗
LINE INPUTS	4
TAPE LOOPS	1



LAB REPORT

▶ A real powerhouse that maintains in excess of 2x150W/8ohm and 2x200W/4ohm at all frequencies with 210W, 335W, 300W and 165W available into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic conditions. Conservative current-limiting restricts its max output to around 13A.

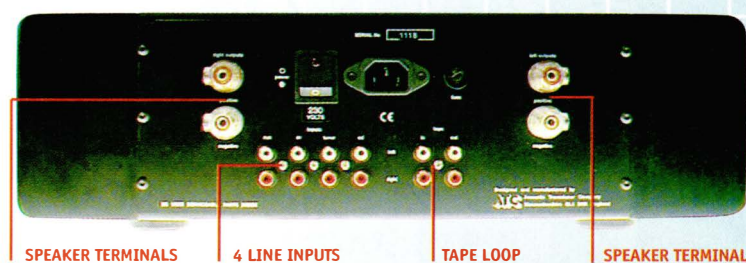
▶ At the 11-12 o'clock volume position (0dBW re. 500mV in), the amplifier's 0.7dB channel balance error remains high. Better volume pot selection by ATC would improve this.

▶ The S/N ratio is very high, but at 90.2dB (left) and 93.0dB (right), still differs between channels as does the +33mV and +14mV DC offset.

▶ The response shows a rare bass roll-off of -0.75dB at 20Hz while the mid and extreme treble are flat.

▶ Distortion is very low at around 0.001% right across the power bandwidth, increasing to a mere 0.01% at 20kHz, again almost regardless of output. This consistent behaviour is ideal.

DETAIL – CONNECTIONS



SPEAKER TERMINALS

4 LINE INPUTS

TAPE LOOP

SPEAKER TERMINALS

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CYMBOL CA3

£999 ☎ Cymbol UK 01256 381569 🌐 www.cymbol-hifi.co.uk

LOW PROFILE AMP VETERAN'S BABY LOVES BASS – SO LONG AS IT'S LOUD

Hampshire-based Cymbol Electronics maintains a distinctly supine profile by the standards of much of the competition gathered here, but it has been building audio electronics for some years now and has its roots in the Onix brand that made its mark in the eighties. It was also the first company to get a DAB tuner into production, but its limited marketing power meant that Arcam managed to steal a march in terms of media profile and is usually given credit for this.

Cymbol makes two integrateds, two CD players, a pre/power and a DAB tuner in the distinctive chrome and gold plated style you see before you. It certainly makes a change from

anodised aluminium and has more than a hint of the Teuton about it, although this is a fully British operation with the aforementioned base in Hampshire and manufacturing in Cambridge.

The CA3 is specified as a 60 watt design and comes with the usual dearth of features that is favoured for the sake of sound quality, its sole concession to facility being a system remote. The back panel is run of the mill save for a preamp output which would be useful if bi-amping were to be undertaken – assuming the Cymbol power amp is a precise match of course.

PERFORMANCE

The CA3 puts in a spirited performance whatever type of music you ask it to amplify. It's snappy, groovy and occasionally downright chewy. The Cymbol clearly loves interesting bass lines and those found on the EST track are right up its sonorous alley. It might be emphasising the fundamentals at the expense of finer detail but the overall effect is most engaging.

It deals with piano in rather convincing fashion too, providing a

sharp but full sound that leaves you in no doubt about the authenticity of the instrument. I found myself wondering if all this enthusiasm might wear off after a while and leave a rather fatiguing effect in its wake but Cymbol seems to have got the balance right with the CA3 – just enough energy to hold your interest without wearing you out.

Next to dearer alternatives in the group there's some loss of low level detail, it doesn't present nuances as clearly as it might but neither is it deaf to variety in the software. The transition from regular CD to SACD is pronounced, even if the low frequency resolve that gives the sense of scale to the venue is not fully defined. There are similarities in style with the Unison Research but whereas that has an open, relaxed balance the CA3 leans on the leading edges and adds some precision to the picture.

Timing is clearly the Cymbol's forté. It's a key factor in musical enjoyment and there are many who feel it's more important than absolute transparency. We wouldn't go that far but it would be churlish to deny this amp's appeal. **D**

VERDICT

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



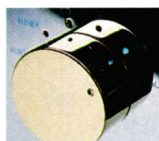
VALUE



What it lacks in power and low level resolution it makes up for in enthusiasm and musicality. This amp manages to draw you into the music and keep you listening but is better off with relaxed sources and efficient speakers.

KEY FEATURES

- REMOTE CONTROL ✓
- TONE CONTROLS ✗
- PHONO INPUT ✗
- LINE INPUTS 5
- TAPE LOOPS 1



LAB REPORT

▶ The 2x55W/8ohm continuous power output just fails to meet Cymbol's 60W specification through midrange frequencies, but does increase to a modest 68W, 120W, 185W (9.6A) and 97W (9.8A) into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic conditions.

▶ Stereo separation is quite poor, particularly at very high frequencies where the crosstalk from one channel to another amounts to some -27dB (re 20kHz).

▶ The A-wtd S/N ratio is also below average at just 80.5dB though, as this is a 'white' noise rather than hum, its subjective effect can be euphonic rather than irritating.

▶ Distortion climbs progressively with increasing frequency rather than power output, amounting to around 0.006% at 20kHz to around 0.02% at 1kHz and a high 0.28% at 20kHz. In our sample, distortion was also twice as high on the left as the right channel.

DETAIL – CONNECTIONS



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SAVE £250



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- AEGIS 1 BEECH
- AEGIS CENTRE BLACK ASH

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WAS £650 NOW **SCOOP PRICE £349**

WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION

Aegis 1 - Awarded ★★★★★ in 'What Hi-Fi' October 1998 described as 'Crisp, dynamic and thoroughly involving'

WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION

Aegis 2 - Awarded ★★★★★ in 'What Hi-Fi' April 2000 described as 'Extremely enjoyable and informative speakers, and a must listen at the price'

WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION

Aegis 3 - Awarded ★★★★★ in 'What Hi-Fi' October 1999 described as 'Upbeat and lively'

HOME CINEMA CHOICE

Aegis Centre was part of a system that received ★★★★★ review in 'Home Cinema Choice' May 2000

HOME CINEMA CHOICE

Aegis Compact were part of a system that received a ★★★★★ review in 'Home Cinema Choice' May 2000

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MARANTZ PM-14 MKII KI

£2,000 ☎ Marantz UK 01753 680868 🌐 www.marantz.com

CHARACTERISTICALLY DISTINCTIVE AND FULLY-SPECCED HEAVYWEIGHT

You only have to glance at the PM-14 to realise that it's a gorgeous piece of kit – it just oozes class. Weighing in at 23kg and packing a rated 100 watts per side this Japanese-built beauty is no lightweight, but it's no brute either. The champagne gold finish and delicate temperature meter give it a sophistication that's denied its competitors.

It is, as you might imagine, well endowed. The back panel features five line inputs, two tape loops and a phono vinyl input for both MM and MC cartridges, something of a rarity on integrated amps these days. There is also one pair of balanced inputs

LAB REPORT

▶ While the 2x160W/8ohm and 2x250W/4ohm output of the PM-14mkII puts it in the same class as ATC's amplifier, it remains more tolerant of difficult speakers with some 200W, 365W, 405W (14.3A) and 250W (15.8A) available under dynamic conditions into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads.

▶ In 'Source Direct' mode, its S/N ratio is a creditable 88.3dB while the overall gain (or amplification factor) is a little above average at +40.8dB.

▶ Distortion is low and increases very gently with frequency from 0.002% at 20Hz to 0.004% at 4kHz and 0.012% at 20kHz. There is a very slight increase in distortion at low power (0.0025% from 0.001%), but any crossover effects will be inaudible.

▶ Output impedance increases from 0.07ohm to 0.1ohm at 20kHz which may influence the overall response with low impedance speakers.

VERDICT

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



Mercedes-like build quality and comprehensive facilities, not to mention a gorgeous remote make this KI Signature a highly desirable amp. It could be a touch more transparent but remains eminently listenable.

KEY FEATURES

- REMOTE CONTROL ✓
- TONE CONTROLS ✓
- PHONO INPUT ✓
- LINE INPUTS 5
- TAPE LOOPS 2



labelled CD should your player have the requisite outputs. The PM-14 has two sets of classY WBT speaker terminals which might make bi-wiring easier, and one pair of system connectors for full Marantz systems.

On the front panel it's nice to see a separate record selector with an off position and fully defeatable tone controls alongside a full-size headphone jack and speaker selector switch.

Inside the die-cast chassis there is a lot of copper plate in evidence, this is designed to protect sensitive components like the HDAMs, that Marantz uses in preference to op-amps, from stray RF interference.

PERFORMANCE

This, the biggest of the Marantz integrats, works rather nicely with Living Voice speakers. Their transparency highlights the richness and clarity of the amplifier and the combination makes for a very convincing sound. Essentially neutral, this amp reveals the life and subtlety of the music in equal measure. Musicality is high on the

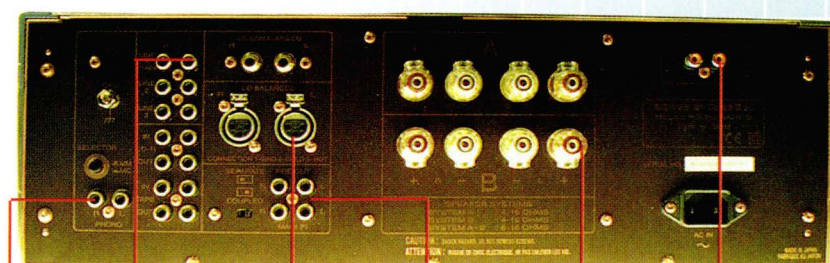
agenda too but not at the expense of the more specific hi-fi virtues.

Imaging is particularly well defined, the sense of a large acoustic on the SACD choral work is very strong as you might hope with an ecclesiastical venue and you certainly get to hear right into it. The benefit of this ethereal quality is that there's more space for notes and they have a greater solidity.

While not as transparent as the ATC, this Marantz certainly isn't opaque. Its sense of poise and control is palpable yet you don't get the impression of electronics at work. Its silky smooth presentation removes any suggestion of such intrusiveness.

If anything, what the PM-14 KI lacks is a sense of exuberance – it never really lets the music fly in the way that some of its competitors can. On the other hand the goal of any hi-fi component is to stay out of the picture and let the music talk and in this respect it's pretty fine, yet I can't help thinking that if Ken Ishiwata (as in KI) had stripped some of the facilities away more veils might be lifted. Ⓞ

DETAIL - CONNECTIONS



PHONO INPUT

SOURCE INPUTS:
4 LINE INPUTS
2 TAPE LOOPS

BALANCED
INPUT

PRE OUT/POWER
IN SOCKETS

2 SETS OF
SPEAKER
TERMINALS

REMOTE CONTROL
SOCKETS



TAG MCLAREN 60iRV SL

£1,000 TAG McLaren 0800 7838007 www.tagmclarenaudio.com

CAN TM'S RACING HERITAGE LIFT THIS F3 INTEGRATED ONTO THE PODIUM?

When HFC's editor and I went to visit TAG McLaren's swanky Huntingdon HQ last year we got the impression that the future for its F3 products, such as this integrated, was less than rosy and that the saucier F2 and F1 designs would be taking over. But it's good to see this last vestige of the brand's roots still has a place in the range.

The TAG McLaren 60iRv sl is a neat and compact amp with a staid front panel that does little to suggest the sophistication under the bonnet. But there are a few clues in the legends on the 'fourth knob' – this is the one that changes the entire function of the amp, from simple integrated to preamp only, pre-power for bi-amping and pre-power AV for incorporating a separate surround sound processor. There's no power amp only option, but this can be achieved by using the appropriate sockets on the back panel.

Socketry is abundant on this slim unit. There are two pairs of (BFA) speaker terminals for bi-wiring and three tape loops alongside two preamp outputs,

VERDICT
SOUND ★★★★☆
FEATURES ★★★★☆
BUILD ★★★★☆
VALUE ★★★★☆

While not the sweetest amp in the group the TAG is enthusiastic and coherent in equal measure, it concedes little in terms of power delivery and has decent timing to boot. All it lacks is charm.

KEY FEATURES

- REMOTE CONTROL ✓
- tone controls ✗
- PHONO INPUT ✗
- LINE INPUTS 3
- TAPE LOOPS 3



an unusual configuration that's designed for maximum flexibility. A remote control completes the package but as it's a system type and the graphics are rather subtle, finding the volume buttons takes some practice. But persevere, stout-hearted reader, for they are most definitely there!

PERFORMANCE

The TAG McLaren 60iRv sl made a good impression on its first foray into the listening arena. It picks out each instrument's character within the mix, revealing the differences in timbre between them and presenting the whole in an extremely coherent manner. With the piano and electric bass on the EST recording for instance, it really gets inside the often complex interplay between the instruments.

It's precise too, delivering the Gaudeamus SACD track with poise, revelling in the way the music opens out when you move from the CD to the SACD layer of the disc. Low level detail also seems well served which gives a greater sense of intelligibility with the

massed choral voices of this piece.

The heavy Nils Petter Molvaer piece doesn't suit it quite as well however. This track can easily become overbearing if an amp lacks lightness of touch, and the TAG is if anything a bit more gung-ho than that. The Missy Elliott selection suffers from a lack of high frequency clarity and it is apparent that the TAG McLaren is a little wanting when it comes to sparkle if not enthusiasm.

With the Cyrus CLS50 speakers in tow the 60iRv sl produces a coherent and better balanced performance that, while dynamically restrained, is clearly better matched (than our Living Voices) in tonal terms. ○

LAB REPORT

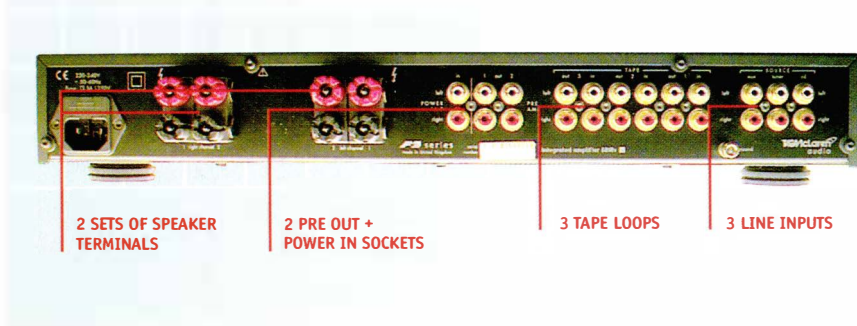
▶ Easily exceeding its modest 60/95W 8/4ohm spec, the 60iRv delivers a continuous 2x85W/130W or, under dynamic conditions, a full 115W, 205W, 340W (13A) into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads despite being limited to 65W (8A) into 1ohm through electronic protection.

▶ Distortion is very low at typically 0.001-0.002% from bass through midrange right up to its rated power output. As the effect of feedback diminishes, distortion does increase very slightly to 0.01% at 20kHz.

▶ The output impedance is low at around 0.04ohm and the response gently tailored at -0.5dB (20kHz) and -1dB (30kHz). The amp should perform consistently with a wide variety of speakers.

▶ At 85.0dB, the A-wtd S/N ratio is spot-on the industry average while the mere +/- 1mV DC offsets and excellent >90dB mid-band channel separation are rather better.

DETAIL - CONNECTIONS





UNISON RESEARCH UNICO I

£800 📞 UKD 01753 652669 🌐 www.unisonresearch.com

SWEET SOUNDING TRANSISTOR AMP FROM THE ITALIAN VALVE MAESTROS

Italian amplifier specialist Unison Research has traditionally centred its efforts on valve-powered designs distinguished by the use of solid walnut fillets in the casework. The Unico i may not have any wood about its person but the cute little remote makes up for it.

The Unico i is about as simple as integrated amps get, with one control for volume and another for source selection. There's not even a power button, that can be found around the back by the mains inlet, implying that it will perform best if left permanently powered up. The rated power output is "approx 100 watts" from a purportedly Class A MOSFET output stage. It seems unlikely from the operating temperature

that the Unico i is a totally Class A design but coming from a valve amp specialist where such operational modes are popular, it presumably delivers the first few watts that way.

The Unico i's rear panel features two sets of chunky binding posts for bi-wiring, while one of its sets of inputs is marked aux/phono. A separate plug in MM/MC phono stage costing £90 can be added when you buy or at a later stage. That walnut remote only controls volume by the way but because it's an RF (radio frequency) rather than infrared type it will work whichever way it's pointed, and even in the next room.

PERFORMANCE

The Unison Research does indeed have qualities that one associates with valve amplification: it's open, relaxed and remarkably musical. It reproduced the EST track *Good Morning Susie Soho* with pluck and energy, adding a halo of liveliness to the music that makes it all the more enjoyable. It seems a little characterful and the subtle percussion sound is more ethereal and phasy than

usual but it's not inconceivable that this is a deliberate studio effect. It could alternatively be a weird type of distortion. Either way it works musically.

It deals with the more audiophile sensibilities of the choral SACD equally appealingly, possibly better. Here the cavernous acoustic of the venue is reproduced in a convincing fashion with the voices inside it rendered equally well. It doesn't quite have the timbral qualities that one gets with a decent valve amp and neither can it really imitate the breed's remarkable dynamic qualities, but it gets pretty close.

Missy Elliott's opening number reveals a sweetness to the highs that few of the competitors in this group approach and if the bass isn't quite as bone crunching as it could be there's an awful lot to listen to in the midband. The low end limitations are clearer with the heavyweight underpinnings of Nils Petter Molvaer – these don't have the shudder and weight that others reach. But on the other hand the lightness that the Unison brings to the party makes the track a lot more enjoyable. 📍

VERDICT

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



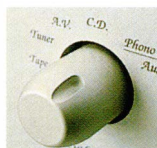
VALUE



A transistor amp trying to sound like a valve amp could be a bad idea but this Unison comes close and makes for a highly musical experience that will charm all save the bass freak.

KEY FEATURES

REMOTE CONTROL	✓
TONE CONTROLS	✗
PHONO INPUT	OPT
LINE INPUTS	4
TAPE LOOPS	1



LAB REPORT

▶ The Unico's response is very flat into an 8ohm resistor but its high 0.25-0.35ohm output impedance means the practical system response will vary according to the impedance trend of the attached speaker (rolling-off the treble).

▶ Distortion is moderate at typically 0.1% (re 10W) but increases still further to 0.65% at 20kHz into 8ohm and with decreasing load impedance. Strangely, distortion actually decreases with increasing power, reaching 0.03% at 100W.

▶ Low frequency noise limits the overall A-wtd S/N ratio to a relatively poor 73.5dB, further 'colouring' the sound of this amplifier.

▶ Power output just meets the 100W spec at bass and midrange frequencies but is only 2x90W at 20kHz even with a 1% distortion limit. Under dynamic conditions, the Unico offers 149W, 145W, 75W (6A) and 42W (6A) into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm.

DETAIL – CONNECTIONS



2 SETS OF SPEAKER TERMINALS

TAPE LOOP

4 LINE INPUTS (PHONO INPUT OPTIONAL)

AMPLIFIER CONCLUSIONS

Jason Kennedy gets very excited about the state of the latest crop of upmarket amplifiers

What a lovely bunch of amplifiers! No really, they are all very good. So picking the winners wasn't easy and it came down to the finest of margins, something you can't hope to distil into marks out of five. Even Olympic ice skating judges get more leeway than that. A lot more. So don't just look at the stars, read

the nitty gritty too, because even though there is a pecking order, the stars can't hope to show it.

The strongest contender was ATC's chunky SIA2-150 which bars no holds in its quest to get the music out to the loudspeakers. Some systems might find its warts-and-all presentation a little too revealing, but you can't blame an

amplifier for its transparency.

The big Marantz is a gorgeous thing with a sound to match its champagne finish. It does transparency with a smooth, almost creamy flavour that lets spades of detail through but in a gentle fashion. It's more forgiving too and is probably less system sensitive than the ATC.

Unison Research's first foray into non-valve amplification turned out to be a charmer – not perhaps as neutral as some but highly engaging and musical.

Arcam's A32 is a bit special. It sounds informative and refined, and is also flexible – you can use it as part of a multiroom system with the appropriate expansion module,



AMPLIFIERS AT A GLANCE

Make Model	Arcam FMJ A32	ATC SIA2-150	Cymbol CA3	Marantz PM14 MkII KI	TAG McLaren 60iRv sl	Unison Research Unico i
Price	£1,100	£2,375	£999	£2,000	£1,000	£800
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	Remarkably flexible and well featured with excellent sound quality for the price.	Starkly revealing powerhouse that eats most integrateds for breakfast.	Great sense of timing and good all-round coherence with plenty of get up and go.	Sophisticated and well equipped with a refined and relaxed sound quality that's hard to resist.	Highly coherent and solid sound with a slightly loud balance and plenty of features.	Open, engaging sound from an Italian charmer with limited bass power but plenty of spirit.

LAB REPORT

Dynamic power output	■■■■■□□□□	■■■■■■■□□	■■□□□□□□□	■■■■■■■□□□	■■■■□□□□□□	■■■■□□□□□□
Speaker load tolerance	■■■■■■■□□	■■■■■■■□□□	■■■■□□□□□□	■■■■■■■□□□	■■■■■■■□□□□	■■■■□□□□□□
Audible distortion	■■■■■■■□□□	■■■■■■■■■□□	■■■■■■■□□□□	■■■■■■■□□□□	■■■■■■■□□□□	■■■■□□□□□□
Noise	■■■■■■■□□□	■■■■■■■■■□□	■■■■■■■□□□□	■■■■■■■□□□□	■■■■■■■□□□□	■■□□□□□□□□
Overall rating	■■■■■■■□□□	■■■■■■■■■□□	■■■■□□□□□□	■■■■■■■□□□□	■■■■■■■□□□□	■■□□□□□□□□



HINTS AND TIPS

Amplifiers are surprisingly sensitive things despite their power and bulk and a little care taken with siting and ancillaries will be rewarded with improved results every time.

⊕ Avoid stacking amps if possible and if that's not possible, put them at the top of the pile. But in the case of bigger amps like these that's not really an option, these need a dedicated shelf, preferably on a hi-fi equipment support such as those recommended in our Directory (p112).

⊕ Use the best cables you can afford – they really do make a difference. Ask your retailer for recommendations and check out our Directory (p97).

⊕ Avoid overlapping mains and signal cables.

⊕ Use a dedicated mains spur if possible or get an RF-filtered mains distributor if not. The cleaner the mains, the better the sound.

⊕ If possible, leave your amp permanently on. Alternatively, turn it on at least 15 minutes before listening. Warm amps sound best.

or stick to its particular forté as a straight down the line stereo amp.

The TAG and Cymbol are also fine amps and in a less competitive group might have won accolades. Both are keen and controlled and if your system needs pepping up they're well worth a listen.

It's good to see that even audiophile amplifiers all come with

remote control these days and nice to see more facilities, especially when sound quality has not been compromised. Anyone thinking about taking the surround sound plunge would do well to look more closely at amps that make the switchover more painless. But most gratifying is the overall standard – it's simply excellent.

Try them with these

CD PLAYERS



CYRUS CD7Q £1,150

The best Cyrus player to date has a refined and expressive sound that will be fully appreciated with amps of this quality.

ARCAM CD23T £1,150

An obvious choice for the Arcam but no less suitable for the other recommendations, this is both highly compatible and refined.



EXPOSURE 2010 £600

The 2010's smooth and physical balance should work well with any of these amps but it's a particularly great match for the Unison Research.

LOUDSPEAKERS

LIVING VOICE AUDITORIUM £1,500

Brother to the reference Avatar OBX-R, this is a dynamic and enthusiastic performer that will help these amps bring music to life.

B&W N802 £6,000

Yes, really. Both of the more expensive amps have the power and quality to work with a great loudspeaker like the 802, so why not?

PMC FB1 £1,275

Another very competent floorstander with considerably more grunt than the Auditorium and which will suit the more powerful amps.



Turntables

Getting the most from your vinyl and our favourite kit to play it on

The idea that a rock being dragged across a piece of plastic still represents the pinnacle of domestic analogue entertainment is pretty crazy, but that's what record players do and the results can be very fine indeed. More precisely, a very fine diamond stylus traces minute variations in a vinyl groove and the vibration that this creates is turned into a tiny electrical signal that can be amplified into a wall of sound. The degree of sophistication that now goes into the modern turntable makes it a feat of engineering excellence.

The turntable is the primary analogue source available to the music lover. Cassette's inferior audio quality means it has been usurped by CD-R and MiniDisc and FM tuners rarely see a signal that fulfils their sonic potential. Record players on the other hand offer the digital revolution some serious competition when it comes to sound quality. And with the explosion in interest in DJing there's no shortage of vinyl in the 'record' shops. Even a fairly modest record player can turn musical tricks that most CD players struggle to emulate. Some call it vinyl warmth but in reality it's more a lack of digital hardness that makes the format so engaging. True, the software requires a bit more care but even a knackered LP is more playable than a badly scratched CD.

Record players are made of three, perhaps four, fundamental parts. The turntable is the plinth and platter that incorporates the motor and any suspension. A tonearm sits on the turntable and allows the cartridge to trace the vinyl groove by pivoting or in some instances parallel tracking over the record. The cartridge contains the means of turning the mechanical movement of the groove wall into an electrical signal.

An increasingly popular fourth element is an amplifier that's dedicated to the delicate job of amplifying and equalising the cartridge's rather insubstantial output. This is called a phono stage and can be found in some integrated amplifiers and preamps but is increasingly purchased separately for use with line-only (ie non-phono compatible) amps.

How to get the best from your turntable

⊕ Place it on a supporting surface that is level and rigid. Whenever possible use a dedicated hi-fi support and preferably one that offers some kind of isolation.

⊕ Arrange the signal cable so that it doesn't cross any mains cables on its way to the amp or phono stage.

⊕ Place phono stages away from components with mains transformers inside.

⊕ If you encounter hum problems experiment with earthing between turntable and phono stage and/or amplifier. Always use shielded cables, preferably with anti-RF clamps at the phono stage or amp end.

⊕ Keep the stylus clean by gently blowing off fluff and using a specialist cleaner such as the Lyra SPT.

⊕ Buy loads of records.





“Record players offer the digital revolution some serious competition when it comes to sound quality. And with the explosion in interest in DJing there’s no shortage of vinyl in the ‘record’ shops.”

Lego for audiophiles

▣ The modular element of record players, the way in which different turntables, arms and cartridges can be mixed and matched means the dedicated enthusiast can spend hours tweaking his or her deck. This is still an option but there are usually standard choices to make the job easier – most of the decks we’ve listed come with a tonearm for example. Cartridge choice is broader but for the novice at least we recommend following a dealer’s suggestions. Auditioning cartridges is a slow and laborious business that few dealers can be persuaded to indulge in.

There are two types of cartridge: moving magnet (MM) and moving coil (MC). With a few exceptions, the latter outperforms the less expensive former. But as MCs produce a lower output they require better quality amplification to be heard at their best. As a general rule MCs offer a broader bandwidth, greater dynamics and more detail but the

better MMs do most things well enough to distract you from your CD collection (if not turn you into a raving vinyl evangelist).

Cartridge set-up is a specialist job and one which we don’t have the space to describe here, and so is best left to the dealer who supplies your turntable. If that’s not an option, scour the internet for hints and tips (there are features on www.audiophilia.com and www.audioasylum.com) and follow the cartridge maker’s instructions.

Phono stages also play a part in the end result and you’d be surprised how much better even a modest record player will sound with a decent model. Phono stages often accommodate both MM and MC cartridges but some are dedicated and if you’re committed to one type of cartridge then the unswitched variety will give best results. Valve amp users with an MM input available tend to use step-up transformers with MC cartridges, an approach that can yield excellent results.

Variations on the theme

▣ There are fundamentally two types of turntable: suspended and solid. The latter, of which the Rega P2 is a classic example, is the simplest and consists of a solid plinth that supports the motor, bearing/platter and tonearm. Suspended decks incorporate some form of de-coupling or suspension so that the bearing/platter and tonearm are isolated from energy created by the motor and vibration coming through the table or shelf that supports the deck. The degree of suspension can vary quite significantly from bouncy springs (Audio Note TT1) to fairly stiff synthetic rubber (SME Model 10). The majority of serious turntables use some form of suspension because this is the best way that’s been found of isolating the stylus/groove

interface from vibration.

Setting up a suspended deck varies from model to model and is best left up to the dealer who, preferably, will do the job in your listening/living room. Solid turntables are a lot simpler; just make sure the platter’s level and you’re away. Unsurprisingly, a good spirit level is pretty fundamental to turntable set-up and we’d recommend the circular type that fits over the spindle.

Turntables used to differ in the way that the platter is driven – direct drive or belt drive – but nowadays only DJ-oriented decks have direct drive, belt drive being the preferred approach for high fidelity. This is because it decouples the motor (a source of vibration) from the platter, which should be as mechanically quiet as possible. ●

Michell Gyro SE

£829 Turntable



A deck that has more than earned the sobriquet 'legend in its own lifetime', the latest incarnation of the Gyro is a pared-down variant called the Spider Edition or SE. The removal of full acrylic lid and base makes the price more competitive and the deck more sexy. This is a fully suspended design which 'floats' on springs to keep its acrylic platter away from any potential speaker-induced vibrations. An optional power supply upgrade is available should you wish to enhance performance in future. Build and finish are first class.

Although it doesn't have an entirely neutral balance the sound of this deck is beguiling. Bass is a little heavy but maintains agility and anything rhythmic has a real danceable quality. Treble is clean and open making for highly enjoyable long-term listening. It serves all music types well but if anything seems best suited to rock, providing a driving, rip-roaring sound.

Michell Engineering 020 8953 0771



Rega P2

£198 Turntable and arm



Successor to one of the most popular budget turntables of the last twenty years, the Planar 2, the P2 is a slightly modified version with more similarities than differences. The emphasis is firmly on producing the best engineering for the price – frills such as speed switching and automatic cueing are replaced with a high quality tonearm and solidly reliable design. Speed change can be achieved manually (lift off the platter and slip the belt onto a different sized pulley).

The P2 is designed to give you the most musical bang for your buck and it certainly delivers. It's sheer liveliness makes it the perfect partner for pop and dance music but doesn't do it any harm with more sophisticated material. While it's not the most subtle of record players it is still considerably better than much of the competition – just add Rega's Bias cartridge for full-on vinyl nirvana (or Bliss, or XTC or Heaven 17...).

Rega 01702 333071



Audio Note AN-TT1/ARM 1

£594 Turntable and arm



The TT1 brings together a number of design preferences in a turntable which comes optionally fitted with either of two Rega-based tonearms that are fully re-wired by Audio Note.

The overall outline bears a marked resemblance to the late Systemdek IIX and features an acrylic platter and hub alongside notably free-floating spring suspension. The latter affords great isolation but makes cueing up tracks without the arm lift relatively tricky – don't even think about scratching on this!

A turntable at this price has no right sounding this good or involving. Auditioned with an Audio Note IQ1 cartridge, the TT1 delivers a beautifully open, coherent sound with impressively wide dynamic range and bandwidth. It does lack a little bottom-end weight and warmth, and the perceived balance is consequently dry and a little 'forward', but the midband's openness and dynamic vividness is quite exceptional, giving voices great expression, power and subtlety.

Audio Note 01273 220511



Linn LP12

£1,150 Turntable



The turntable that turned the hi-fi world on its head in the seventies is still revered by many today. There have been numerous revisions and upgrades but the real wood plinth, alloy platter and long armboard reveal that the fundamentals have not changed. This is a spring suspended design for which Linn makes not only tonearms and cartridges but phono stages as well.

The key to the LP12's success is its timing qualities – there are more dynamic and more substantial sounding turntables but few which match it in this crucial respect. Timing is a critical element in music reproduction and if it's done well you certainly know it. The LP12 is also capable in all other respects of course, and very few owners have been able to make a painless transition to CD. You have been warned!

☎ Linn Products 0141 307 7777



NAD 533

£220 Turntable, arm and cartridge



Almost identical to the Rega P2 and made by Rega for NAD, the 533 comes ready fitted with a modest, Goldring-sourced moving magnet cartridge. A budget turntable oriented towards performance rather than convenience, there's little in the way of frills, but critical components like the platter and tonearm bearings maintain very close engineering tolerances. As with the P2, speed change involves moving the drive belt from one pulley to another.

This NAD has a pleasing overall coherence which is pretty effective at getting the musical message across, even if the presentation is a trifle crude. The top end seems a little lacking in ultimate extension and transparency, and there are some slightly aggressive tendencies a little lower down. The overall impression is of a sound which is a little small in scale and dynamic range, but which keeps all the most important bits hanging together. And it always remains cheerfully communicative, swinging along with enthusiasm – an excellent budget buy.

☎ Lenbrook UK 01908 319360

SME Model 10A

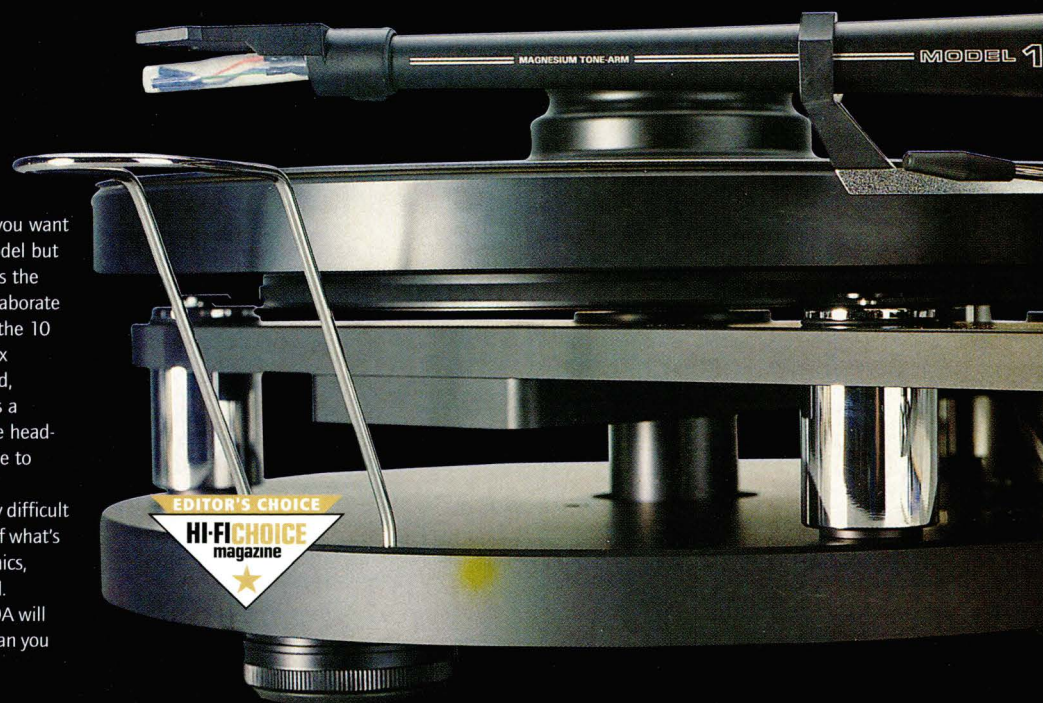
£3,411 Turntable and arm



SME turntables and arms are legendary, their engineering and finish second to none, and if you want the best look no further. The 10 is the base model but incorporates the same quality of components as the £12,000 30/2A, which is a larger and more elaborate affair. Because of its relatively stiff suspension the 10 appreciates a well isolated support. The A suffix indicates that the matching tonearm is included, another superb piece of engineering that offers a degree of flexibility through its interchangeable headshell. The Model 10 is the only serious turntable to offer platter braking on switch-off.

Detecting the character of this turntable is very difficult because it has so little. Basically you hear more of what's on your records, wider bandwidth, greater dynamics, more solid imaging and layer upon layer of detail. Equipped with a first rate cartridge the Model 10A will tell you more about the music on your records than you thought hi-fi was capable of.

☎ SME 01903 814321



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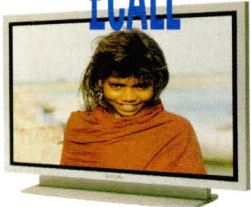
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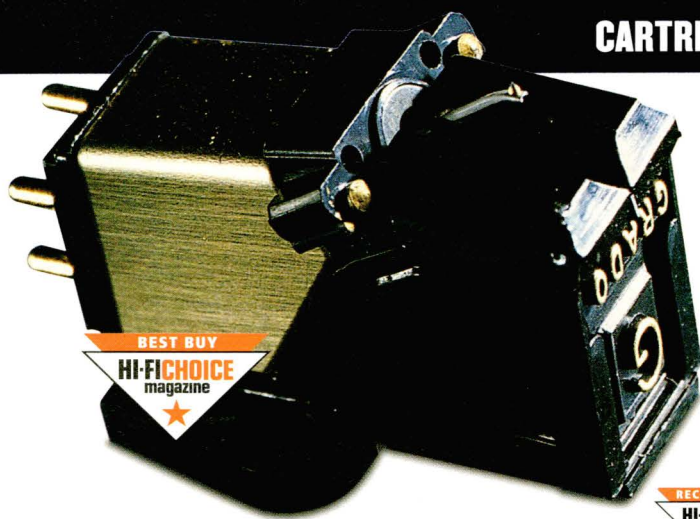
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We will beat any advertised price



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BEST BUY
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Grado Prestige Gold

£149 MM cartridge

★★★★★

The American Grado design uses moving iron rather than a moving magnet but its output is similarly high and will work with an MM input. The Prestige Gold is sweeter than most MMs – it's lively and detailed but never edgy, and it doesn't over-emphasise leading edges. It's extremely easy to live with and comfortably communicative. It doesn't ram feisty music in your face but maintains a lively character. It's likely to work well in a great many systems.

Grado 01284 701101

Van den Hul Grasshopper GLA III

£1,999 MC cartridge

★★★★★

If you really want to hear your vinyl at its best and you have a top-notch turntable and phono stage this is the tool for the job. The Grasshopper is a hand-built moving coil cartridge featuring gold coils and alnico magnets (a ferromagnetic material known for its high degree of magnetic intensity) that extracts not only the detail from the groove but the soul of the music as well. Nothing else quite matches it in terms of dynamics, transparency and power, and it virtually eliminates surface noise on old vinyl.

Van den Hul 01236 420199

RECOMMENDED
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Audio Technica AT110E

£29 MM cartridge

★★★★★

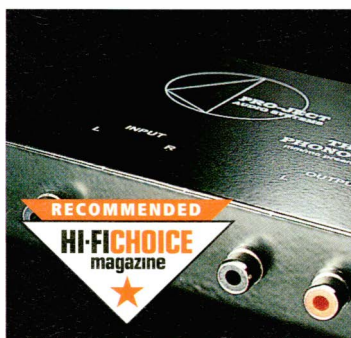
Audio Technica has always made good value cartridges and the bargain basement AT110E is no exception. A moving magnet with replaceable stylus, this is suitable for a wide variety of turntables and is easy to set up.

Performance is impressive for the price. There is some coloration but the sound is remarkably clean and there is plenty of detail. Bass is assured and there's bounce and sparkle in the midrange with only a hint of hardness when the going gets tough.

Audio Technica 0113 277 1441



BEST BUY
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



RECOMMENDED
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Pro-ject Phono Box

£40 MM/MC phono stage

★★★★★

Remarkably flexible for the price, this Pro-ject can cope with MM and MC cartridges and offers impedance adjustment for the latter as well. Component and build quality are unremarkable but if your amp has no phono input this is the least expensive way to enjoy vinyl.

Sonically it's modestly capable with no glaring colorations but you'll get a lot more detail out of most of the dearer alternatives. We wouldn't recommend it for MC cartridges.

Henley Designs 01235 511166



RECOMMENDED
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

Tom Evans Audio Design Microgroove Plus

£700 MC phono stage

★★★★★

This upgraded version of the £400 standard unit incorporates Evans' Lithos power supply regulation and should suit the vast majority of moving coil cartridges.

There's no question that this is a very capable unit. It has great assurance with any music, terrific insight and a chameleon-like way of adapting to the character required: commanding with reggae bass, airy and agile with string quartets and excellent on everything in-between.

Tom Evans Audio Design 01443 833570

Creek OBH-8SE

£160 MM phono stage

★★★★★

You won't have trouble fitting this tiny beastie onto your rack, but size matters little with phono stages and this moving magnet-only device is packed with good quality components. There are no adjustment options but gain is not too high and headroom adequate.

This is a very enjoyable unit to listen to, with a highly neutral character, low subjective noise and a generally relaxed nature which makes for very good listener involvement.

Creek 020 8361 4133



RECOMMENDED
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine

FORUM HELP

TROUBLE WITH THE RIG? LOST IN THE UPGRADE JUNGLE? FEAR NOT, DAN GEORGE IS HERE TO GUIDE YOU TO SONIC SAFE HAVEN

Write to us with your hi-fi queries:

Forum: Help

Hi-Fi Choice

99 Baker Street

London W1U 6FP

Or e-mail:

dan.george@futurenet.co.uk

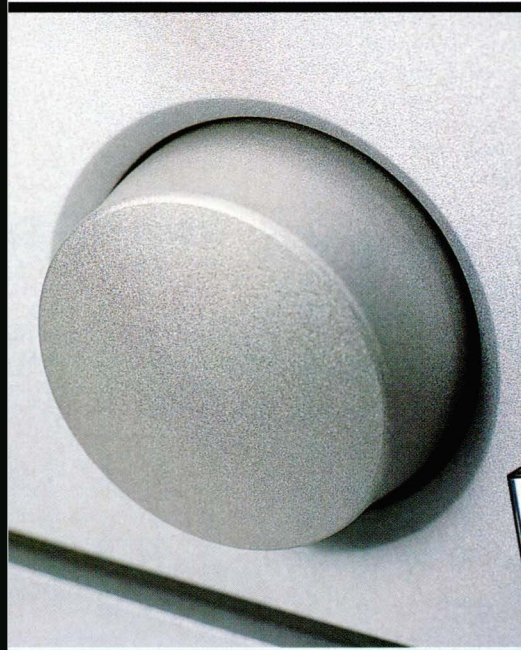
LEAD ME ON

The accessories manufacturer Russ Andrews claims that the sensitivity of the CD input on many amplifiers is too high for the common two-volt output from CD players. Russ Andrews sells attenuated leads to reduce the CD voltage to match amplifier inputs. Do you agree with this?

Jim Thorpe, via e-mail

The use of attenuated leads depends largely on what equipment you have, specifically the input sensitivity of your preamp. Russ

Andrews has compiled specifications of hundreds of machines and will offer advice on interconnects based on your specific kit. The use of attenuated leads in some cases should improve the signal to noise ratio and control at low listening levels, but Russ will advise on each individual case.



STAND AND DELIVER

I have a Linn Axis/Akito turntable and I am currently in the market for a free-standing rack with either one or two tiers. What supports would you recommend I use?

Mr. M Watkins, via e-mail

Atacama makes a very good modular rack called the Equinox which can be bought in a variety of heights, with the base unit selling for £140 and further shelving costing £70 per level. For a more costly alternative try Mana – some people swear by their sonic effect.



Atacama Equinox

LOUD AND PROUD

When I turn up the volume to more than 50 per cent (12 o'clock) clipping and heavy distortion occurs. Is this normal with my system or there is something wrong?

Slavko Kriznjak, via e-mail

This is quite normal behaviour for an amplifier in distress. Clipping, which is often heard as distortion is a result of an overdriven amp. So turn the volume down and avoid taking things past the 12 o'clock position, which should be considered the absolute maximum with pretty much any amp. If you're unhappy with the volume levels, audition a more powerful amplifier!



PMC FB1

BOXSTER

I have a Rega Planet, Creek 5350SE and Acoustic Energy 109s and although I love the bass weight, warmth and cohesion of the 109s, they lack a bit of sparkle and sound a bit boxy. I'm interested in the PMC FB1 and the Neat Elite. What would you recommend for a room 17ft long by 10ft wide?

Mr. J. Straker, via e-mail

Both speakers you mention are real performers and worthy of a side-by-side comparison, but to truly deliver the sparkle you require and the bass weight you say you love, we'd go for the FB1 which is a fantastic loudspeaker. We loved its bass performance when we tested it in *HFC 204* and it sure is a punchy and entertaining performer.



Arcam Alpha 9

ALPHA UPGRADE

I have an Arcam Alpha 8SE CD player, Alpha 9 and power amp with B&W 601s. Would it be better to change the speakers for something more in line with the rest of the system or upgrade the CD player to Alpha 9 spec? Would changing the speaker cable and amp/CD power cables be a more cost-effective way of doing it?

Michael Devlin, via e-mail

Changing your loudspeakers will give the most dramatic change in your system's sound, and small changes in balance and resolution can be had by upgrading cables and interconnects. Changing your CD to Alpha 9 specification which is a ring DAC upgrade at £350, should offer an overall improvement in resolution, but you would probably enjoy more significant gains by spending the cash on loudspeakers. For an inexpensive solution, it's perhaps worth trying some new speaker cables from the listings in our Directory and your dealer should be able to help you choose a cable to make the improvements you desire.

DENTED PRIDE

I currently own a pair of Sony SS-U501 speakers, but unfortunately I have managed to dent one of the lower cones on one of the speakers. What's the best or cheapest way of obtaining a replacement bass speaker unit?

Rich Lawrence, via e-mail

We contacted Sony who said that drivers are no longer available for the product, so if you can't easily remove the driver and push it out you will have to replace the speakers. If you are desperate, you could try and find a suitable replacement driver from Maplin although we wouldn't recommend it. Otherwise, scour our Directory for a suitably priced alternative.



Monitor Audio ASW100

15 INCHER

I have a Teac 500 Reference amp, CD player and tuner, with Mission 773e speakers.

I am

looking to change the amp to a multichannel model, but I'm unsure about which subwoofer to buy. Do you have any suggestions?

Carl Rivett, via e-mail

Adding a new speaker usually requires getting a good tonal match with existing equipment, but this is less important with a sub. Some of our favourites at *Hi-Fi Choice* include the entry-level Monitor Audio ASW100 at £300 and the excellent REL Q50 at £375. If they're too costly, consider Paradigm's PDR-10 at £150, available at Richer Sounds.

MONSTER MASH?

I currently have a Monster interconnect between my Denon AVC-A10SE and Velodyne CT120 and I'm not sure that the subwoofer is totally under control. Can you suggest a good subwoofer interconnect cable?

Ashoke Banerjee, via e-mail



Townshend Isolda

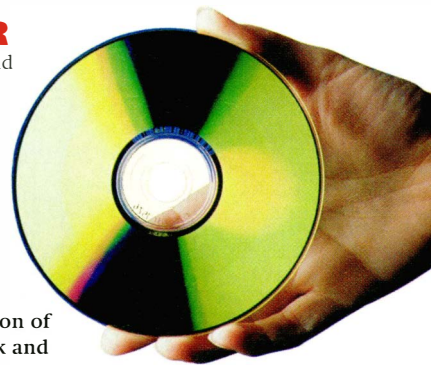
One of our favourite interconnects for bass is the excellent Townshend Isolda cable. Although not cheap at £300 for a metre pair, it's hard to beat and will serve you well for many years.

HAPPY SHOPPER

Where in the UK I can buy SACD and DVD-Audio discs?

Dave Manning, via e-mail

High-resolution discs are slowly filtering through to the shops. Tower Records and HMV have a small selection of discs with a slightly better offering of SACD titles. On the internet, amazon.co.uk stocks a fair selection of discs along with - www.hmv.co.uk and www.towerrecords.co.uk. Also try www.vivante.co.uk, and www.sonymusic.com for a wide selection of SACDs.





PRO-JECT Debut II Turntable £114.95

"The original Debut turntable romped away with a Product of the Year Award in 1999, and the MKII version continues the extremely good work. It's a simple affair, that's easy to set up, but don't let the price fool you - it sounds a whole

lot more expensive than that. This is a fine turntable, and it clearly reveals the benefits of listening to vinyl, with a rich and detailed soundstage, and a good dynamic response.

It's available in six funky colours, so you should find one to suit your decor, and at just a smidge over £100, you can have no excuse not to keep that old vinyl collection in employment for a good few years yet."

★★★★★ What Hi-Fi? Awards 2000

Selected outlets are Project Turntable Centres. Colour Options are available at additional cost



Turntables & Tuners

Arcam DiVA T51 Tuner	£279.95
Denon TU260L MKII Tuner.....	£109.95
Linn LP12/Basik/Akito Turntable	£1749.95
Marantz ST4000 Tuner.....	£129.95
Michell Gyro SE/RB300 Turntable	£1017.95
Project Debut Phono Turntable.....	£144.95
Sony STD777ES FM/DAB Tuner	£429.95
Videologic DRX-601E DAB Tuner.....	£279.95

MUSICAL FIDELITY A3 Series

A3 CD Player £799.95 A3 Amplifier £849.95

A3 CD Player "OK, so not everyone will be drawn to the styling, but when it comes to turning on the sonic fireworks, few players come even close at this price... A class act and a worthy winner."

A3 Amplifier "The A3 does a wonderful trick of conveying a great romantic sweep of music while at the same time delivering as much internal detail as anyone could possibly want... This is an amplifier capable of performing well beyond its price. We guarantee you won't be disappointed." ★★★★★ What Hi-Fi? Awards 2000



CD Players

Arcam DiVA CD62T.....	£349.95
Arcam DiVA CD92T.....	£849.95
Arcam FMJ CD23T.....	£1149.95
Denon DCD485	£139.95
Linn Genki.....	£994.95
Linn Ikemi.....	£1949.95
Marantz CD4000.....	£99.95
Marantz CD6000Ki Signature.....	£449.95
Musical Fidelity NuVista 3D.....	£2999.95
Roksan Caspian MKII	£994.95
Roksan Kandy.....	£544.95
Rotel RCD1070.....	£499.95
Sony CDPXE570	£119.95



DM601S3 Speakers £249.95

"Ultimately it's the 601 S3s' lack of any weakness that makes them so special. Their talent is so widespread that most of the competition is left reeling. Detail, resolution, dynamics, insight... everything is present and correct, and these speakers rate highly in every area.

What more can we say? These new B&Ws are a terrific buy. The price rise over their predecessors pits them against tougher rivals, but on this showing B&W has little to worry about. Unlike the competition."

★★★★★ What Hi-Fi? January 2002



Recorder Selection

Marantz DR6000 CD-RW.....	£349.95
Pioneer PDR609 CD-RW.....	£199.95
Sony MDS-JE770 MiniDisc.....	£229.95
Yamaha KX393 Cassette Deck.....	£119.95
Yamaha KX580SE Cassette Deck.....	£199.95

Please Note: Some products may not be available at all outlets. Advertisement valid until at least 8th May 2002, E&OE.



more entertaining



Amplifier Selection

Arcam DIVA A65 Plus Amplifier	£349.95
Arcam DIVA A75 Plus Amplifier	£449.95
Arcam FMJ A32 Amplifier	£1099.95
Cyrus ACA7.5 Pre Amplifier	£699.95
Cyrus Smart Power Amplifier	£549.95
Denon PMA355 Amplifier	£229.95
Linn Kolektor Pre Amplifier	£494.95
Linn LK85 Power Amplifier	£494.95
Marantz PM4200 Amplifier	£159.95
Musical Fidelity A300 Amplifier	£1399.95
Musical Fidelity NuVista Amplifier	£2974.95
Roksan Caspian MKII Amplifier	£894.95
Roksan Kandy Amplifier	£544.95
Rotel RA931/II Amplifier	£189.95



ARCAM

DiVA CD72T CD Player **£429.95**

DiVA A85 Integrated Amplifier **£749.95**

DIVA CD72 "The CD72 will have you jumping out of your seat from the very first notes. Both powerful and punchy, it delivers every ounce of air and detail present from detailed midrange to smooth, singing treble. Sometimes a product comes along that sets new standards..." ★★★★★ **What Hi-Fi? Awards 2001**

DIVA A85 "You'll have realised by now that we rather like this amp. It took us completely by surprise, and further strengthens Arcam's already impressive product range... The A85 is superb, and we can't wait to put it up against its peer in a group test." ★★★★★ **What Hi-Fi? March 2001**



MONITOR AUDIO Silver 8i Speakers **£699.95**

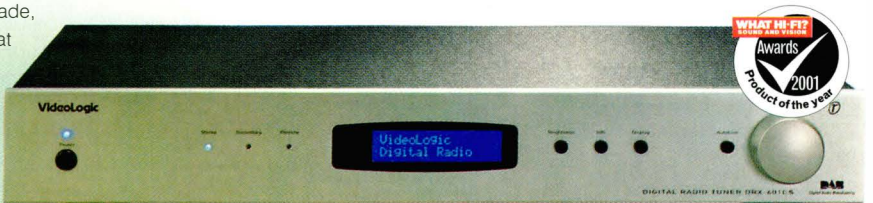
"No other speaker in this test can match the Monitor Audios when it comes to delivering seismic basslines with sofa rattling power and weight. That this part of the spectrum also enjoys plenty of speed and control confirms the Silver 8is' position as bass kings... A great speaker needs more than simply great bass, however, and the Silver 8is do far more than merely thump. With the likes of Curtis Mayfield's 'Move On Up', they produce a sound of such verve that it becomes hard to sit still... They produce music with plenty of excitement - but don't forget the subtleties too. Add excellent build and an easy load and these Monitor Audios make a formidable case for themselves." ★★★★★ **What Hi-Fi? April 2001**

Videologic

DRX-601ES Digital Tuner **£329.95**

"New name, new format, new winner: the Videologic story is as simple as that. The £299 DRX-601E digital tuner came out of nowhere to establish the firm as a major player in the digital tuner market. With this upgrade, Videologic goes one step further: it's still a DRX-601E at heart, but quite apart from the sleek silver styling and sexy blue LEDs it now has a better, white-on-blue display, and what the company calls 'Psycho-acoustic Compensation' - a form of signal processing designed to make the tuner sound less digital.

And it works: the DRX-601ES has a presentation that's rich, clean and extremely informative. Bass is big and powerful, while the midband and treble are well controlled. The style alone would justify the slight price rise; the sound quality makes it a Product of the Year." ★★★★★ **What Hi-Fi? Awards 2001**





CYRUS

CD7 CD Player £799.95
7 Integrated Amplifier £699.95

Cyrus 7 CD "This player is just as convincing with thundering orchestral strings and brass, making a great job of Bernstein's recording of Mahler's Symphony No 5 and it has the definition to unravel the instrumental strands in the Kronos Quartet's disc of Phillip Glass string quartets... It's that that makes it special - and this is a very special player indeed."
 ★★★★★ What Hi-Fi? November 1999

Cyrus 7 Amplifier "This is a fabulous amplifier. It's fast, punchy and has bags of power on tap but crucially delivers huge sackfuls of subtlety when the music requires. Some of the other amplifiers in this group may be better with particular genres of music but as an all-rounder it takes some beating." ★★★★★ What Hi-Fi? November 1999

MISSION

78 Series

782 bases its performance on a 165mm Nomex bass unit fitted to a reflex enclosure ensuring excellent low frequency extension from a graceful and compact cabinet. The **783** houses a larger 200mm bass unit with massive motor system, capable of floor shaking, yet tightly controlled low frequency extension. Both use Keraform midrange drivers for outstanding clarity and midrange detail coupled to superb dynamic range together with Mission's silk dome tweeter.

The **780** and **781** are the pinnacle of Mission's research into creating a three dimensional soundstage, extensive bandwidth and dynamic range from the smallest possible cabinet dimensions. The **780** is massive in its sonic capabilities. Its 130mm Keraform bass unit is carefully matched to a novel reflex enclosure for full bodied bass extension, the qualities of Keraform produce a dynamic and ultra detailed midrange. In the **781** a 165mm Keraform driver takes advantage of a larger cabinet to extend bass performance and increase efficiency whilst maintaining that superb midband transparency and finely detailed treble.

780 "Versatile and with a sound that works well with a wide variety of hi-fi kit, these speakers were worthy of this title last year, and this year have achieved the tough task of making it the double."

★★★★★ What Hi-Fi? Awards 2001



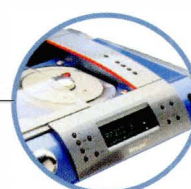
Speaker Selection

Acoustic Energy AE1 Series II.....	£699.95
B&W CDM 1NT.....	£749.95
B&W CDM 7NT.....	£1249.95
B&W DM303.....	£179.95
B&W DM603 S3.....	£599.95
Cyrus CLS70 (Black).....	£799.95
KEF Cresta 2.....	£119.95
Linn Katan (Maple).....	£634.95
Linn Ninka (Maple).....	£894.95
Mission 780.....	£299.95
Mission M71.....	£119.95
Monitor Audio Gold Reference 10.....	£799.95
Monitor Audio Gold Reference 20.....	£1499.95
Ruark Epilogue II.....	£344.95
Wharfedale Diamond 8.1.....	£99.95



Q3 Speakers £399.95

Like its award-winning predecessor, the floorstanding Q3 offers exceptional value for money. With the new Ferrofluid-cooled metal dome neodymium tweeter derived from the Reference Series unit, the coincident source 160 mm (6.5") Uni-Q driver creates a spacious and intricate sound image throughout the room, and bass extension from the large front-firing port is accurately controlled to preserve the clarity of the midrange. KEF's unique bracing system increases cabinet rigidity to minimize distortion, and the sophisticated crossovers are connected directly to the bi-wire terminals for optimum signal integrity.



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System Selection

- Cyrus** Quattro Ex Power Amplifier & Speakers . **£849.95**
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- Yamaha** Planocraft E150 Inc Speakers **£249.95**



LINN

Classik Music System **£999.95**

The Classik Music System is an alternative to the sound and looks of mass market compact systems. Designed to be useful throughout the home, the Classik is simple and stylish with all the advanced features needed to satisfy the most demanding hi-fi enthusiast or discriminating music lover.

"Since the Scottish company added a tuner to the amp/CD player, mouths have gaped even wider in appreciation. The addition of colour options panders to the public's taste for kit to match their interior design, but it doesn't just look lovely in the lounge: the Classik sounds simply marvellous. Boasting fine impact and drive, it retains its grip even as it thumps out rock and dance tracks. Ask it to play quiet acoustic music and its smooth, liquid presentation impresses still further. The Classik offers the performance you'd expect from high quality separates in one lovely package - this is a very superior product." ★★★★★ What Hi-Fi? Awards 2001



TEAC Reference 300 System **£549.95**

"Teac's Reference 300 system is an absolute belter. The company's Reference series has won lots of awards and many admirers in the past, and the 300 range at £200 less than the bigger 500 series, is no disappointment. Your £600 buys you everything but speakers: an amplifier, tuner, CD player and cassette deck... As beautifully built as we've come to expect from Teac, this system delivers the goods with style." ★★★★★ What Hi-Fi? Awards 2001

DENON

D-M30 CD Receiver **£229.95** SC-M50 Speakers **£69.95**

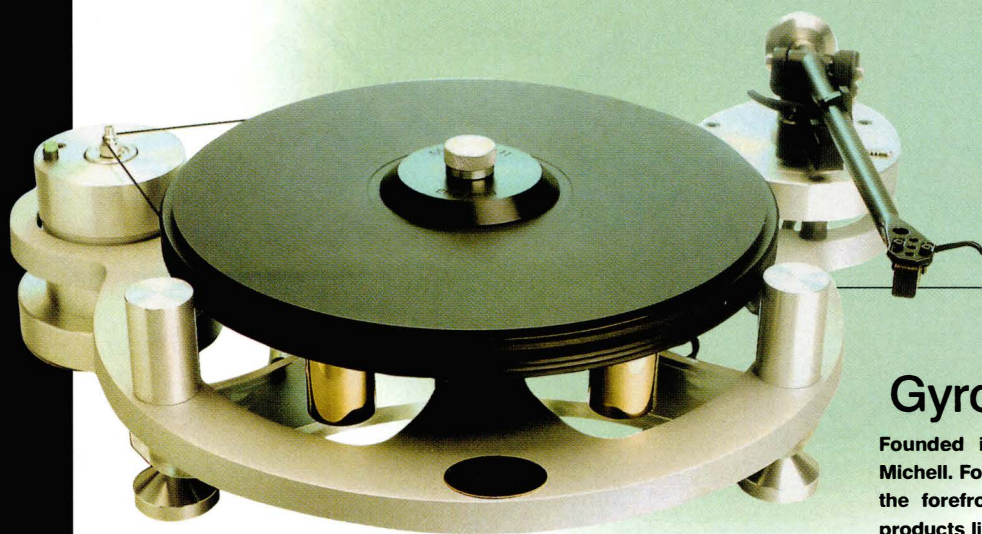
"Denon's gorgeous D-M30 has a fine pedigree - and a record of success. Its forebear the D-M3 kept impressing us with its balance of good looks and great sound, winning two What Hi-Fi? Awards on the trot. Now the latest generation takes home a Product of the Year gong two years in a row. On its own merits, too, as this is much more than a rehash of the D-M3. Upgraded audio circuitry, improved power supply and the Mission-designed speakers all improve the package. The sound is superb, well-balanced and weighty... It's a big system in a very cute box." ★★★★★ What Hi-Fi? Awards 2001

Optional Recorders:

CDR-M30 CD-RW Recorder • DMD-M30 MiniDisc Recorder • DRR-M30 Cassette Deck

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J A Michell Gyro SE Turntable **£1017.95**

Founded in Borehamwood by mechanical engineer John Michell. For over thirty years, Michell Engineering have been at the forefront of quality audio, with world-wide appreciated products like the GyroDec and Orbe Turntables.

In the early eighties, the revolutionary GyroDec Turntable, with its elegant and effective suspension system, was introduced. The Gyro SE is a smaller and cheaper package that retains the classy sound of the GyroDec and can be upgraded to the full GyroDec specification by adding a plinth and dustcover. **Price includes Rega RB300 Tone Arm**

"The beautifully engineered Gyro SE not only looks the part but has a wonderfully clean and fluid sound." **★★★★★ What Hi-Fi? July 1999**



LINN

Genki CD Player **£994.95** Majik Line Amplifier **£694.95**

Genki "Tempting though it is to think of Genki as a Glaswegian word, it's actually Japanese, and the nearest definitions we could find involve vitality, vigour and spirit. And used as adjectives, these words go a long way towards describing the sound of the Genki, which always manages to communicate the music first and foremost, and let the rest of the hi-fi thing look after itself.

It's a very well-thought-out player, too, from its clear and simple control layout to the provision of four sets of analogue outputs, two at fixed level, and two with level control. Completing the package is a 24-bit Burr-Brown DAC and Pacific Microsonics HDCD filter. Few owners will worry about all that stuff, however, as they'll be too busy enjoying the way Genki plays music, its purity of tone and sense of drama on Mozart's Don Giovanni being a fine example of its talent. By any standards this is a superb player, and not just one for the army of Linn enthusiasts." **★★★★★ What Hi-Fi? March 2000**

Majik The Linn Majik is a sophisticated control amplifier complete with on-board stereo power amplifiers. A core entry-level product for powerful and flexible control of hi-fi, video or multi-room installations. "Sneaky" add-on modules expand its functions. It can accommodate many source components. The Majik is available in two versions: The 'Phono' version has five line-level inputs and one Moving Magnet phono input and the 'Line-level' version has six line-level inputs.



A limited edition of 500

Musical Fidelity has enough nuvistor tubes to build 500 Nu-Vista 3Ds and also to hold a spare set for every unit. (The limited edition Nu-Vista preamp, power amp and integrated are proving to be remarkably reliable, with a tube failure rate of about 0.1%). Music lovers don't need SACD technology, they just need a better CD player. Now a lucky few will be able to own the Nu-Vista 3D compact disc player. Out of the total production of 500, 265 are allocated for sale in England, and of these, 97 have already been reserved.

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Nu Vista 3D CD Player **£2999.95**

"It's hard to put your finger on exactly why and how the 3D CD Player turns in such a performance and to a certain extent it's a pointless exercise: it just does. OK, so at three grand it's a serious financial commitment, but if you're after a CD player to last 'til you take your final breath it could well fit the bill. Get a move on, though, numbers are limited to just five hundred and they'll sell, believe me. Simply get a listen to one and go back to your reference player - all will be revealed." **HI-FI World October 2001**



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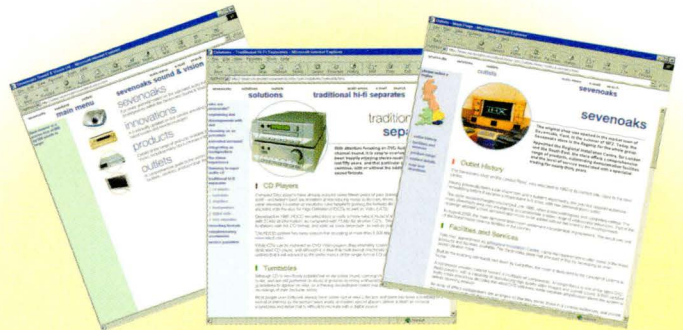
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With over forty outlets nationwide, the Sevenoaks Sound & Vision group stock and display a wide range of products. As technology delivers improvements in performance, so individual models and product ranges are changed or superseded. The preceding models are made available at a reduced price, for clearance. Visit our Website for an up-to-date list of the clearance stock, listed by outlet, within the Sevenoaks Sound and Vision group.

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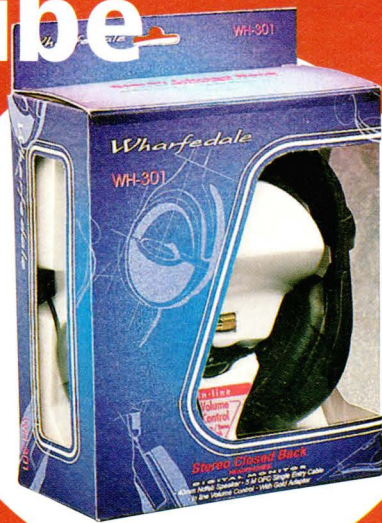
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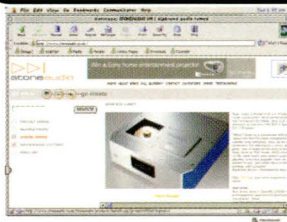
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WANTED

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BUYING TIPS

Buying second-hand can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product engineered down to a price. Do some research on which brands and products have a good service back-up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a second-hand hi-fi dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty. So it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. Products such as speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amplifiers, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be troublesome – have a proper dem, and judge the seller as well as the goods!

THE DIRECTORY

THE *HI-FI CHOICE* DIRECTORY ROUNDS UP OVER 1,000 PRODUCTS REVIEWED IN PAST ISSUES. HERE YOU'LL FIND OUR OPINIONS ON THE BEST HI-FI COMPONENTS, ALONG WITH GUIDANCE ON HOW TO ASSEMBLE THEM INTO FIRST-CLASS HI-FI SYSTEMS.

THE ART OF SYSTEM BUILDING

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT BRINGING TOGETHER AN IMPRESSIVE HI-FI SYSTEM? IT GOES A LITTLE LIKE THIS...

When it comes to putting together a great separates system, identifying decent individual components is fundamental, but it isn't the whole story. There is the business of system synergy to consider, which put simply means how well your components gel as a whole. The degree to which this can affect the end result tends to increase with price, thus budget components are relatively immune (a competitively priced Best Buy disc player, amp and loudspeaker pairing of almost any hue will combine to make a good system). When considering a purchase it's always good practice to listen to alternatives. It's the only way you can learn what different components sound like and find out which ones appeal to you.

So once you have shortlisted some components, the next step is to track down a knowledgeable dealer to take you through the options available. As well as getting the basic hardware right there is the question of which cables to use; should you stick with what comes in the box or pay extra for interconnects and speakers leads? We firmly believe that cables make a worthwhile difference, but if you are sceptical, any dealer should be able to demonstrate this for you.

And don't skimp on supports. The temptation is to use any old shelf or sideboard for system and speakers, but it's worth the outlay for speaker stands and proper system support.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

WIRING UP A SYSTEM IS REALLY QUITE STRAIGHT-FORWARD IF YOU FOLLOW A FEW BASIC GUIDELINES.

- When bi-wiring (see glossary) with speaker cable you will sometimes need to connect two plugs to one socket on the amp. If the amp has a binding post connection you can usually put one plug through the hole that goes across the post and one in the end. If this is not possible you may need to use spade connectors or have both pairs of cables soldered into single plugs at the amp end.
- If a cable has an indication of directionality, ie if there are arrows on the casing, use these with regard to the way the signal travels. If there are no arrows you can try it both ways and see if you hear a difference or just route the signal in the direction of the writing on the cable jacket.
- In multichannel AV systems you may have the option of routing video signals via the amp, or bypassing it. The former option gives easiest functionality if you use several sources, but by bypassing you are removing a switch and connection which should improve quality.
- Try to avoid laying mains cables across or beside signal cables as the field they produce can have a negative effect.
- Try to keep all cable runs as short as possible (unless you use Naim, in which case refer to manufacturer's recommendations).

AWARD TAGS

Whenever *HFC* reviews a group of like components we have the opportunity to give the best products a Best Buy or Recommended Award. Best Buys are considered to offer an excellent standard of performance at an attractive price. Recommended products are first-class components losing out to Best Buy status only because of a higher price or less competitive overall sound quality.

A third Award, the Editor's Choice, is reserved for those products reviewed solo in the high-end *Statements* section. An EC is awarded where the Editor is convinced that a product offers an outstanding level of performance.



GLOSSARY

5.1-CHANNEL AUDIO: Six discrete channels, typically front left and right, centre, surround left and right, and LFE (Low Frequency Effects) for a subwoofer.

BALANCE: Most loudspeakers have a characteristic frequency balance resulting from emphasising parts of the audio range and/or de-emphasising others.

BASS: The lowest three octaves of the audio band – hence 'low bass' refers to the bottom octave (20-40Hz); 'mid-bass' the middle octave (40-80Hz); and 'upper bass' the 80-160Hz octave.

BI-AMP: (sometimes tri-amp): Loudspeakers equipped with separate access terminals to each drive unit can be driven by separate (matching) power amplifiers for each driver.

BI-WIRE: (sometimes tri-wire): Loudspeakers with separate access terminals to each driver can be driven by separate cable runs between the amp and each driver.

CD-R: Recordable CD that cannot be erased, though discs that have not been completely filled can have tracks added until the disc is finalised.

CD-RW: Re-writable or re-recordable CD, incompatible with older CD players.

CLASS A: Operation of an amplifying stage or device in which current always flows, as opposed to Class B, where some of the devices are effectively turned off some of the time. Class A tends to give lower distortion.

CLASS AB: Most practical amps operate in Class A for the first fraction of a watt and Class B thereafter.

CLIPPING: An amplifier's output waveform is 'clipped' if the volume is advanced too far and no more 'volts' are available to sustain ever-increasing power levels. Distortion increases dramatically at this point.

CLOCK: Any electronic oscillator that is used to generate a timing reference signal.

CROSSOVER: A simple electrical network which divides the full bandwidth signal received from the power amplifier, apportioning appropriate parts of the spectrum to the various drive units.

DAC OR DIGITAL-TO-ANALOGUE CONVERTER: The stage in any digital component at which incoming digital data is used to reconstruct a recognisable analogue (music) waveform.

DOLBY DIGITAL DD (AC3): A compressed (10:1) digital audio format that typically contains five or more entirely discrete channels, eg 7.1 EX where discrete side channels are used.

DOLBY PRO-LOGIC, DPL: Forerunner to DD that 'steers' information to the front L/R, centre and mono surround channels via an analogue matrix.

DRIVE UNIT/DRIVER: A transducer which converts electrical energy into acoustic energy, eg bass driver, tweeter.

DSP OR DIGITAL SIGNAL PROCESSOR: Integrated circuit that handles the decoding of digital audio streams. In 5.1 processors it separates the left from right and front from rear while managing the various bass options.

DTS OR DIGITAL THEATRE SOUND: Competitor to Dolby Digital with a reduced 4:1 compression ratio that, ostensibly, promises higher quality.

DVD-A: High-resolution variant on DVD offering up to 192kHz bandwidth and 24-bit dynamic range, discs are compatible with standard DVD players.

ELECTRICAL DIGITAL: Any digital connection that uses an electrical cable rather than optical. Includes the balanced (AES/EBU) interface.

FILTERS: Filters are intrinsic to digital audio, both analogue and digital. These are often very sophisticated in design, and in total they probably have rather more to do with the 'personality' of CD player sound than most other factors.

FINALISE (CD-R): The process of copying the Table of Contents from its temporary area on CD-R and CD-RW to the final position where it will be recognised by ordinary CD players.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: The range of frequencies, from low to high, which a loudspeaker will reproduce.

IMPEDANCE: With speakers, the complex electrical load that a loudspeaker presents to the amplifier which is driving it.

JITTER: An insidious distortion specific to digital audio caused by the clock, used to regulate the conversion of data into analogue audio, being imprecise.

LINE LEVEL: Practically every modern source component (except phono cartridges) gives an output in the region of 1-2V, referred to as 'line level'. It follows that all inputs labelled 'CD', 'tuner', 'aux' or 'tape' are designed for this input level and thus interchangeable.

LOSSLESS COMPRESSION: A method of reducing the number of data bits (density) without corrupting the original description of the musical signal.

LOSSY COMPRESSION: Reduction in data density by recourse to a psycho-acoustical model that predicts what is, and what is not, 'audible' within a sequence of music.

MIDRANGE: The middle three or so octaves of the audio band, where the ear is most sensitive, covering the approximate frequency span from 160Hz up to 3kHz.

NETWORK: see Crossover.

OUTPUT IMPEDANCE: A measure of resistance to alternating current, a source with low output impedance (say, below 100 ohms or so) helps ensure compatibility with most amplifiers, even when using long or unusual interconnect cables. A high impedance, especially in conjunction with an amplifier with a low input impedance (some are as low as eight kOhms, although the standard is 47 kOhms) can result in audible treble losses.

PLL OR PHASE-LOCKED LOOP: A technique by which a clock of defined characteristics is used to generate a new clock at a different frequency from the original, helping to stabilise the signal.

PRESENCE: Critical section of the audio band at the point where midrange and treble meet.

QUANTISATION NOISE: A form of distortion or noise resulting from errors in the description of the musical signal by the digital code.

SACD: High-resolution music-only format developed by Sony/Philips – offers 100kHz bandwidth without digital filtering and its associated ills.

SAMPLE RATE: The rate at which the musical waveform is sliced up into discrete chunks. For CD this is 44.1kHz or once every 0.023msec. DVD will also support 48kHz and 96kHz.

SENSITIVITY: The relative loudness that a speaker generates for a specific voltage input. Expressed in decibels per watt (dB/W).

THX: Standards system for home cinema set-ups which includes amplifier power and speaker dispersion characteristics. THX Ultra is more stringent than THX Select.

TOSLINK: The proprietary name given by Toshiba to the optical fibre signal transmission system it invented for consumer applications.

TRANSISTOR/MOSFET: the two main types of power semiconductor used in solid state amplifier output stages.

TREBLE: High frequencies, the top end of the audio band, eg above 3kHz.

TWEETER: Treble driver.

TWO/THREE-WAY: Loudspeaker crossovers split the signal into two or three frequency bands, a 2-way speaker can have more than two drive units.

WATTS (PER CHANNEL): the watt is the unit of electrical power and the WPC rating is the maximum average undistorted power that an amp can deliver to a typical speaker. However, speaker sensitivity variations can make more difference than amplifier output.

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AMPLIFIERS



SPECIFICATIONS

STEREO AMPLIFIERS – INTEGRATED

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
	Affordable Valve Co. EL34	650	A real bargain on the face of it, but the sound is oh so soft, warm and old-valve. Too much of a good thing	4					40	202
	Arcam Diva A65	380	Easy on the ear remote control amp, but not especially powerful	5			●	●	40	217
BB	Arcam Diva A75 Plus	450	Quick, lively and well presented amplifier, bass is sharper and more tuneful than its predecessor	5	●		●	●	50	224
BB	Arcam Diva A85	750	Much enhanced design topology give a more hard hitting, engaging sound than previous Arcams	7			●	●	85	214
BB	Arcam FMJ A22	1,000	Powerful, articulate, and expandable into a home cinema or multiroom amp/controller	7			●	●	100	201
EC	ATC SIA2-150	1,984	An impressive sounding integrated amp with a dynamic, open and detailed sound	4			●		150	192
	Aria 52	1,000	Glamorously packaged valve amp produces a real eyes closed, feet up kind of sound	4					12	190
	Audio Analogue Puccini	450	Superbly finished, the entry-level Audio Analogue performs way out of its class	5	●	●			40	175
	Audio Analogue Puccini SE	595	Upgraded, more powerful Puccini is disappointingly sluggish and curiously lacking in musical vitality	5	●	●			40	181
R	AVI 52000MI	999	Fine, detailed amplifier with excellent timing and strong control of a wide range of loudspeaker loads	5			●		100	175
	Bryston B60R	1,249	Great build, but the lazy bass and opaque treble bracket an articulate midband. Comes with 20 year guarantee	5			●	●	60	175
R	Cambridge Audio A500RC	200	Solid value, decent build and a surfeit of watts make this an attractive proposition, but it can sound slightly loose	6			●		50	196
R	Canary Audio CA-608	1,495	If you value the grand scheme of things and appreciate a bit of dynamic vigour this could be the amp for you	4					24	202
	Chord CPM 3300	5,495	Very powerful yet compact amp with rather complex ergonomics and transparent sound. Oh, and a lovely blue glow	5			●		220	214
R	Copland CSA 28	1,249	Elegant Scandinavian cool, abundantly detailed if somewhat system dependent	5	●		●	●	60	189
	Copland CTA 402	1,698	A unusually flexible valve amp with an attractive and textured sound	5	●		●		35	193
	CR Developments CR324	569	Solid and capable on paper, this is a bit of a blunt instrument when let loose on the music	5					150	181
	Cymbal CA1	499	Lacklustre amplifier tends to underperform with complex material. Best with straightforward compact loudspeakers	6					40	178
R	Creek 4330	279	Diminutive but classy amp will drive anything, and can be specified in various configurations	4	●				40	192
	Creek 4330SE	499	Somewhat perplexing, though always interesting, miniature audiophile amplifier, needs careful system matching	5			●		50	208
	Creek 5350SE	799	Smooth, open and articulate sound and quality build, but bass is a tad heavy handed	6			●	●	85	214
R	Cyrus 5	500	A enjoyable amp that is assured and unflappable, although detail is unremarkable	7			●	●	45	205
R	Cyrus 7	700	Welcome return to form for the Cyrus stable: this is the best sounding audio brick around	6			●	●	60	196
	Denon PMA-255UK	140	Great beer-budget buy, with everything necessary for basic but decent high fidelity operation	5			●	●	30	208
	Denon PMA-355UK	230	Detailed, but rather inexpressive sound which doesn't quite live up to the claims.	5	●		●	●	50	217
R	Denon PMA-1500R	500	Recommended for its outrageous power, especially with problem speakers	5	●		●	●	70	181
R	Densen Beat B-100 MkII	650	High 'air guitar' factor, and can punch above its weight, but check it will complement your system	5			●		60	175
	Exposure 2010	599	Neatly turned out amplifier, with mainstream appeal but bland with it	6			●		50	214
	Electrocompaniet EC1-3	1,000	Basically good, but too many rough edges to warrant recommendation	6			●		75	201
	Ezo Aria HE	449	Quick, detailed but aggressive and sometimes coarse sounding amp. Beautifully turned out, though	5				●	40	208
	Graaf Venticinque	1,790	Smart and practical, but it just never seems to shine sonically	6					25	202
	Holfi Audis Signature	750	A 'no-feedback' circuit giving outstanding resolution, but significant load dependency	4	●				65	181
	Kenwood KAF-3010R	180	Plenty of twiddly bits yet weak on inputs, and basically good, but somewhat uneven sound quality	4	●				70	186
R	Kenwood KAF-3030R	250	Kenwood's best amplifier for some years has a lean bass but excellent mid and treble.	5	●		●	●	50	217
	Krell KAV-500i	5,000	More at home in background listening/home cinema applications than out-and-out audio maniac set-ups	5			●		250	192
	Linn Majik	845	Slightly rough and ready power amp modules, but capable preamp that can be expanded into a multiroom system	5	●		●	●	33	214
	Lundahl Mag Amp	1,735	Unusual valve/magnetic amp hybrid with relaxed balance and good timbre	5					23	196
	Marantz PM-6010 OSE	229	Good starter amplifier, with characteristic smooth, low key delivery	5	●		●	●	50	196
	Marantz PM7000	300	Lots of power for the price, but detail and subtlety seem to have been sacrificed	6	●		●	●	115	205
	Marantz PM6010 OSE KI Sig	400	Well-made, but somewhat ill-balanced amplifier that doesn't slot into most systems comfortably	6	●		●	●	50	208
R	Marantz PM8200	599	Warm, solid and likeable sound, with the occasional flash of steel when under pressure	5	●		●	●	60	224
	Marantz PM-17 Mk II	999	Big, bold, but over-fruity balance – the 'fat uncontroller' as one put it	6	●	●	●	●	60	214
	Marantz PM-17 KI-Signature	1,300	Full feature audiophile amp where the end results don't quite justify the fantastic ingredients	6	●	●	●	●	60	189
	Mark Levinson No383	5,500	Extremely versatile design that thinks and acts like a serious pre/power. Sounds superb	5			●		100	212
	McIntosh MA6900	4,650	Heavyweight design from a classic brand that makes a very easy to listen to sound and will drive almost anything	7			●	●	200	227
	Monrio Asty	400	Engaging, but ill-disciplined, even OTT amplifier with unpredictable system compatibility	5					55	178
R	Musical Fidelity X-A2	500	A chip off the old block; sounds very similar to the X-A1 and XA-100R	6					75	208
	Musical Fidelity A3	849	Similar to the XA-100R internally, and a little too relaxed for some	5		●	●		85	196
	MVL A2	970	Curiously designed, and curious sounding amplifier with Sound Sentinel circuits to address perceived weaknesses	9	●			●	100	201
	Myryad T-40	400	The T-40 is a well built and sensible, but needs more dynamics and finesse	6	●		●	●	50	192
R	Myryad MI120	600	Well styled, well built: a good, even-tempered amplifier, although it can sound rather brittle	6			●	●	60	175
	Myryad MI 240	1,500	Big and powerful integrated amp sounds clean and neutral if a bit short on musical tautness and dynamic tension	8	OPT	OPT		●	120	216
BB	NAD C320	200	Excellent budget amp from the maker of the seminal 3020 offers better clarity and neutrality and good build	6			●	●	40	186
R	NAD C340	270	A classic NAD amplifier copes with any speaker, delivers plenty of power, and does so with calm decorum	6	●		●	●	50	192
	NAD C350	300	A typical NAD: refined, warm tonality, adequate detail, and a strong power yield	7			●	●	60	208
BB	NAD C370	450	Flexible, ultra-high power integrated amplifier delivers a real punch, but is not without finesse.	6	●		●	●	120	217
	NAD 5300	1,900	Substantial integrated with loads of power and some finesse, slightly bass-strong	5			●		100	189
R	Naim Nait 5	800	As always with the Nait, less is more, and the Nait 5's 30 watts seem to go a lot further with some sources	5					30	214
	OperaAida	795	Low power (in practice) minimalist integrated amp, but the mahogany wings don't help it to fly	5	●	●			60	201
	Pathos Classic One	995	Unusual looks and even more unusual electronic design, but compromised musical potential	5			●		55	202
X	Pioneer A-407R	230	Clean, consistent, finely detailed sound, good finish and (mainly) good build	5	●		●	●	45	186
R	Pioneer A-607R	300	Lively, articulate amp with plenty of drive and a hint of brightness	5	●		●	●	60	192
	Plinius 8100	1,450	Slightly rough and ready, but plenty of balls from this stripped down antipodean.	6			●		100	214
R	Præcisa Acustica Sonoro	1,800	It is not often that transistor amplifiers are made to sound so palpably valve-like	5					100	189
R	Primare A10	500	Beautifully made, smooth and easy sounding, and though not overtly detailed or dynamic, is well organised musically	6			●	●	50	208
X	Primare A20 MkII	799	Everything except packaging has changed in Mk II version: but ballsier model has lost none of its refinement	5			●		70	181
BB	Primare A30.1	1,500	Smooth, detailed singing quality, elegant appearance, and healthy power yield	6			●		100	214
	Red Rose Music M5	8,000	Sophisticated integrated valve amp with powerful, refined sound and beautiful build	4					45	219
	Red Rose Music Passion	2,999	Basically equipped amp from Mark Levinson that has speed and power if not the last ounce of resolve	5				●	100	226
	Restek Fantasy II	1,499	Muscular, but ultimately rather strident amplifier which needs careful system matching	6			●		100	189
R	Roksan Kandy KA-1	475	Power with control, barely compromised by a small degree of dryness	6	●		●	●	120	205
R	Roksan Caspian	795	Mainstream Roksan line level amp works well under most circumstances	6			●		70	201
BB	Rotel RA-931 MkII	189	Simple, non-remote amp majors on clarity and transparency, without sounding over-analytical	4	●			●	35	208
BB	Rotel RA-971 MkII	275	Improved RA971 is a chip off the old block: bags of power, but with added precision and clarity	6				●	60	196
	Rotel RA-972	400	Better in the treble than the bass, which is a little too rounded and woolly	6			●	●	90	205
	Rotel RA-1070	1,000	Well equipped powerhouse has features designed to support multiroom operation, but sonically it lacks subtlety	7	●		●	●	100	224
	Sharp SM-SX1	3,300	Jewel-like 1-bit digital amplifier with limited power reserves but offering glimpses of sonic magic	5					50	211

STEREO AMPLIFIERS – INTEGRATED (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MIM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
	Sharp SM-SX100	10,000	The world's first stable, 1-bit digital amplifier is a technological milestone that should go from strength to strength	n/a					110	200
	Sony TA-FB940R	300	Technically innovative amplifier fails to cut the mustard with complex material		●	●	●	●	70	208
BB	Sugden A21a	899	This single-ended, Class A transistor amp has exquisite resolving ability and presence – an authentic classic	5	●	●			25	224
	T+A PA-1220R	1,445	Unique presentation and feature set, but sometimes rather relentless sound quality	7			●	●	100	189
	Tact Millennium MkII	7,000	This digital class D amplifier represents a bold declaration on the future expansion of digital audio in the home	n/a			●		150	194
	TAG McLaren 60i	500	Clean, slightly antiseptic sound from this beautifully turned out entry level Audiolab 8000LX replacement	6				●	60	189
	TAG McLaren 60iRv	1,000	Looks, feels and sounds better than the Audiolab it supersedes. Smooth, open, refined but lacks body and drive	6			●	●	60	184
	Talk Electronics Cyclone 1	550	Much improved build quality and silver finish, but the sound lacks physicality and can sound strained	6			●	●	65	196
	Talk Electronics Storm 2	650	Crisp, clean, well defined sound, arguably lacking warmth, but a good midrange purchase overall	6			●	●	50	175
R	Talk Electronics Cyclone 2.1	850	Not as clear or as lively as some, but essentially musical, and upgradeable for multichannel audio purposes	6			●	●	100	224
	Teac A-E2000	180	Has the potential to cause significant damage in the budget amp sector once the wrinkles are ironed out	6					50	195
	Technics SU-A808	300	Intriguing amplifier, with abundant detail but dynamically rather flat	6	●		●	●	55	196
	Thule IA60B	700	Dry, edgy and glassy sounding amplifier, though the balanced input may appeal to some	6			●		60	214
R	Token Audio K50	350	Stainless steel finish, others available. Sound is warm and attractive, though a little undynamic	5					50	186
	Tube Technology Unisig Sig	2,400	A very attractive product which combines many classic valve attributes to good effect	5	●				30	202
	Unison Research Aria SR1	1,250	Drop dead gorgeous looks from this valve/MOS hybrid, but sonically it is lumpy and awkward, with poor definition, albeit with good image scale	5			●		80	224
	Yamaha AX-496	240	Lacklustre, if well equipped and powerful, amplifier shows some improvements over previous amps, but not enough	6			●	●	85	208
	Yamaha AX-596	300	Clean, agile and lean this amplifier isn't. Bold and powerful, however, it certainly is	5	●		●	●	100	217
R	YBA Intégré	1,550	Careful system matching is essential, but this is definitely one of the good guys	6			●		50	214

STEREO AMPLIFIERS – PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MIM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
	Amp Flux System 2	3,000	Three-box affair with a clean, spacious sound and plenty of slam. A touch steely, but undeniably potent	5			●	●	50	187
	Alchemist Kraken APD7A/8A II	1,098	Unusual looks and unusual sound too, rather rough and lacking detail						55	187
R	Arcam Alpha 9C/10P	1,000	Well specified and flexible preamp with sound only just lacking in greatness	6			●	●	100	187
BB	Arcam Alpha 9P	400	Clear, colourful and well-disciplined, the Arcam is a strong all-rounder that can compete with conviction	1					60	165
BB	Arcam A85 int & P85 pwr	1,249	Well thought through integrated/power amp combo won't suit all systems, but delivers classic A-85 virtues with others, plus extra gravitas and range	7			●	●	85	225
R	Arcam FMJ A32/P35	1,899.80	One of the few correctly matched integrated/power combinations, the sound has real gravitas and sophistication	7	●	●		●	100	227
EC	ATC CA2	750	Stripped down version of ATC's range topper delivers considerable transparency and bandwidth. Excellent value	5			●			221
	Audio Analogue Bellini/Donizetti	1,155	Curious pre/power amplifier has a number of objective and subjective character traits that make it difficult to recommend	5	●	●			60	225
	Audio Note M Zero/P Zero	998	Neat shoe box-size components. Able to impart music with real life and soul when partnered with P Zero power amps	5					8	191
R	AudioNote M2Phono/P2SE	3,198	Wonderfully natural and inviting sound with great warmth and drama, but limited loudness capability	4	●				18	216
EC	Audio Research LS25 /VT100	12,199	This is not so much a fine valve amp, as a fine amplifier, full stop (LS25 MkII/VT100 MkII)	6	●		●		100	216
EC	AVI S2000M	2,348	This preamp/monoblock pairing does most things very well and images better than most	5			●		150	221
EC	Border Patrol 300B SE	3,995	Single ended valve power amp with passion, grace and fire, and plenty of grunt to boot	1					8.5	186
	Bow Technologies Warlock/Walrus	6,490	Heavyweight dual mono pairing with superb build and rich, refined sound	5			●		150	216
R	Bryston BP20/3B-ST	2,850	Recommended for pretty much any demanding application	8			●	●	120	212
	Cary CAD 2A3SE	1,575	Monoblock valve power amp. Low power but gives delightful speed, coherence and transparency	1					5	196
	Chord SPM-4000	8,500	Sound is as stylish as its appearance is bold. Probably one of the best amps you are likely to hear	1					410	202
BB	Creek P43R/A52SE	949	Excellent sound, remote control operation and upgrade options from fine value preamp	6			●	●	100	187
BB	Creek P43R/A43	1,050	Great value and a podium performance earning a best buy	6			●		140	212
	Crimson 610C/620D	775	Limited in what it does, the Crimson combo has real precision, veve and timing within those limits. Preamp is due to be replaced shortly	4	●	●			55	225
	Crimson 620C	875	Not entirely satisfactory power amp which has dynamic strengths, but underachieves when the volume is raised	1					50	181
R	Crimson CS610/CS630	1,250	Good, clear sound, including a decent phono stage, but flexibility is limited. Slimline monoblocks with grunt and finesse	3	●	●			100	187
BB	Croft Vitali/Series 5C	2,000	Oddball retro style and ergonomics, but truly magical voice coherence and projection, great transparency	3	●				30	216
	Cyrus Power	498	Detail and midband clarity and stand-out qualities. Smooth and refined with most types of music but bass-soft	1					50	183
R	Cyrus aCA7.5/Smart Power	1,250	Great for classical, jazz, and existing Cyrus owners	7				●	60	212
	Cyrus aCA7.5/PSX-R/aPA7	2,950	Very stylish four-box modular system, slight forwardness delivers oodles of clarity and detail	7			●	●	150	216
	Densen Beat B-200	1,000	A versatile preamp with a high 'air-guitar' factor and Densen's characteristic styling	6	●	●				191
R	Densen B-300	800	Expensive but highly musical. Colourful and warm sound with strong timing and listener involvement	1					100	183
R	Densen Beat 200/300	1,985	Classy jet black cast boxes pack plenty of punch with good total musical coherence (remote £300 extra)	6	OPT		OPT		100	216
BB	Electrocompaniet EC4.7/120DMB	3,448	Bulky Norwegian combo has wonderful broad-band transparency, wide dynamic range and fine musical tension	6			●		120	216
	Exposure 2010 I/2010 P	1,098	Interesting match of integrated and more powerful power amp is not as sure footed or as dynamically consistent as some rivals	6			●		75	225
EC	Gamut D200	2,995	Single MOSFET pair per side gives tremendous resolution and dynamics (balanced inputs). Formerly Sirius	1					200	183
EC	Levinson No380/No334	9,490	Preamp/amplifier combines precision and warmth with unusual configurability, power has refinement, authority and transparency to spare	6			●		125	195
	LFD Mistral Linestage/Power	898	Strong ergonomics, generally decent sound, but a little lacking in detail	6					60	165
	Linn Kolektor/LK85	990	Beautifully turned out machine, yet slightly bland, aimed at an all-Linn system	9	●	●			62	212
	Marantz PM-17 Mk II/SM-17	1,699	Flexible, beautifully made and as smooth as silk, but ultimately the combination fails to build on the unaided PM-17 II in biamp mode	6	●	●	●	●	60	225
	Mitchell Orca/Alecto mono	3,600	Line-level design with a gorgeous remote and focused, spacious sound	1			●		100	187
R	Moth 30 Series Monoblocks	879	Demonstrated solid balance and proved adept at delivering vital musical qualities	6					100	155
	Moth 30 Active LS/60 Stereo	948	Excellent-sounding ultra-simple miniature preamp, power amp lacks finesse and control, however	4					60	165
	Muse Model Three	1,990	Natural sounding tranny preamp with useful audiophile features. Works beautifully with 160W power amp	5			●			166
	Musical Fidelity X-P100	800	Good long-term listening prospects; detailed and a little fruitiness	6			●			200
	Musical Fidelity NuVista 300	3,300	Powerful smooth sound with tremendous bass extension. Capacity to fulfil the demands of the most dynamic material	1					350	199
	Myrrad MA120	450	Based on MI120 integrated – see latter for comments, but sounds significantly better when bi-amped with MI120	1					60	165
R	Myrrad MP100/MA240	1,600	Smart finish and impeccable manners, smooth, clean performance	6			●	●	120	212
R	NAD Silverline S100/S200	2,000	Beautifully built kit that sounds as good as it looks with heaps of power	7			●	●	200	200
EC	Naim NAC112/NAP150	1,375	Clean, clever simplicity, plus a very well balanced sound that's much sweeter than earlier Naims	6			●		50	213
	Naim NAC112/NAP150/FLATCAP 2	1,850	Adding a FLATCAP 2 brings a very worthwhile sonic upgrade to the basic NAC112/NAP150 combo	6			●	●	50	213
	Naim NAC102/NAP180	2,122	More of a 'character act' than a neutral reproduction system, majors on excitement at the expense of subtlety	6			●		60	200
EC	Naim NAP500	10,000	Wonderful neutrality, bandwidth and dynamic range, plus Naim's traditional leading edge definition	1					140	208
R	Primare A30.1/A30.2	2,699	Powerful, smooth, but slightly uneven performance in some combinations, but excellent control and separation in others	6			●		100	225
	Quad QC-twenty four/II-forty	4,000	A classic valve amplifier in circuitry and sound, but with modern ingredients and gorgeous retro styling	7					40	213
R	Roksan Caspian Power	595	Excels musically and in conventional hi-fi terms. A power amp for people with long-term satisfaction in mind	1					70	183
	Rotel RC-971	150	Low price is offset by rather coarse sound quality with certain types of music	5						178
	Rotel RC-1090/RB-1090	2,650	Prodigious powerful pre/power combination with a wide range of inputs, but not ideally subtle or uncoloured	7	●	●	●	●	380	225
BB	Rothwell Indus/Rubicon	1,488	Quirky valve combo with passive pre-amp has a lovely neutrality and consistency across a wide dynamic range	6					10	216
	Samuel Johnson pca100	1,800	Stylish wood and metal fascia – precise, clean sound with an emphasis on leading edges	6			●	●		201

LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
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STEREO AMPLIFIERS – PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
	TAG McLaren PA20R/125M	1,500	Clean, detailed sound but limited thrill power	6			●	●	145	184
	TAG McLaren PA20R/100P	1,699	A blast from TAG McLaren's past highlights how far the brand has developed	6			●	●	100	225
	Talk Hurricane 2L/Tornado 2	1,249	Design of integrity which gets to the heart, if not the soul, of the music	6					65	165
	Technics SU-C3000	2,997	Price includes SE-A3000. Supremely clean and even sounding combo, though it could be more musically involving	5	●					188
	Technics SU-C1010	300	Although the sound's basically all there, it's arguable that a good integrated offers more, for less	6	●		●			200
	Thule Spirit PA100	600	More successful than matching preamp: sound is gutsy and lively, and generally clean	1					100	187
	Thule Spirit PR150B/PA150B	1,600	The limitations in the sonic performance mean that the competition has more to offer	6					150	212
	Unison Research S8	2,950	Outrageous Italian styling and an equally melodramatic sound, with splendid voice projection and tension	5			VOL		24	216

PHONO STAGES

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
	Clearaudio Symphono	740	Slightly inconsistent balance mars the performance of this lively performer			●				201
R	Creek OBH-9	160	A neat little unit with an essentially neutral and listenable character			●				189
	Cyrus aEQ7/PSX-R	826	Very hi-tech product which tends too much towards smoothness except at climaxes, which can be rough		●	●				189
	Denzen DP-Drive/DP-02	350	Quite unusual design in many ways: sound is mostly good but never quite shakes off a 'synthetic' quality			●				189
R	Electrocompaniet ECP-1	495	An excellent phono amp that combines well-rounded balance with detail and low noise		●					189
BB	Moth 30 Series Phono	249	Fine sound all round, with any kind of music, from this bargain phono stage			●				189
	NAD PP-1	40	A basic phono stage that does its job rather coarsely: a bit bass-shy too		●	●				189
R	Pass Labs XOno	2,995	Not absolutely neutral, but the overall result is so beguiling it's hard to resist		●	●				201
R	Primare R-20	500	Fights a little shy of densely scored music, but generally an enjoyable and neutral performer		●	●				201
S	Pro-Ject Phono Box	40	Moving-coil compatibility is a dubious extra in a way, but MM performance is acceptable at this giveaway price		●	●				201
R	QED Discsaver DS-1	35	It's cheap, it's cheerful, it's OK – perfectly adequate for use with a phono-less integrated, though not very refined		●	●				189
	Roksan Artaxerxes X/DS1.5	1,150	Delicate and well balanced, slightly congested at climaxes. Power supply expensive, but runs two Roksan components		●	●				189
R	Tom Evans The Groove	1,800	Plenty of detail, excellent imaging and almost flawlessly neutral: a good choice for information retrieval off any LP			●				201

AMPLIFIERS



MULTICHANNEL AMPLIFIERS

LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
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STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Arcam AVR100	800	A solid sounding and well-engineered A/V amp with an affordable price tag. Good with music and well suited to smaller rooms	6			●	●	70	215
R	Arcam Alpha 10 DAVE/10P	2,500	Packed with a diversity of electronics that against engineering odds sounds extremely good	5			●	●	110	198
BB	Arcam FMJ A22 DAVE/P25	2,850	Powerful, authoritative, great stereo, excellent home cinema – what more could you want?	7			●	●	100	210
EC	Bryston SP1/9B THX	7,100	Stripped back 5.1 channel processor/amp combo reaches genuine audiophile heights. Currently lacks 5.1 input for DVD-A/SACD	6			●	●	120	219
	Cyrus AV5	1,000	Few processors are as adept with music. An effective multichannel solution for music fans	4			●	●	N/A	201
	Cyrus AV5/SmartPower	2,650	Refined, detailed and attractive, but ultimately lacking in balls	3			●	●	60	210
	Denon AVR-1602	350	Low-cost home cinema amplifiers don't usually set out to excite, and this one is no exception. Listenable, but dull	6			●	●	80	223
R	Denon AVR-3300	800	Not as powerful as Denon claims, but nonetheless capable of impressive high-fidelity multichannel sound	4			●	●	75	198
BB	Denon AVC-A1SE	2,500	A powerful, articulate 7.1-channel integrated amp, loaded with features and equally at home with music and film soundtracks	12	●		●	●	170	215
BB	Harman/Kardon AVR5000	600	Complex and capable home cinema receiver features automatic setup, HDCD and excellent interconnection possibilities	8			●	●	70	223
	JVC-RX-8012R	400	Undistinguished home cinema receiver with USB in, and modestly satisfying sound at lowish power levels	9	●		●	●	100	223
	Kenwood KRF-X9050D	399	There are some benefits from THX Select processing in home cinema mode, but musically this is a rather mechanical, unengaging performer	7	●		●	●	100	223
	Kenwood KRF-V7773D	800	Bold, detailed presentation, but there are some technical limitations and a slightly mannered quality, especially with music	10	●		●	●	120	210
	Kenwood KRF-V9993D	1,300	Complex amp that rocks with home cinema but loses out with music	7	●		●	●	110	215
	Lexicon MC12 Pro	9,000	Balanced output equipped behemoth of a 12 channel processor that does everything you can imagine and more	12			●	●	N/A	227
R	Marantz SR5200	400	Marantz provides undemanding but broadly satisfying listening from a well engineered, near budget home cinema receiver	8			●	●	90	223
BB	Marantz SR-5000	500	Something of a rough diamond, but a powerful and entertaining package	5			●	●	105	198
BB	Marantz SR-7000	700	Excellent at the price, and almost equally effective with two-channel music and multichannel AV	9			●	●	100	210
	Marantz SR-14EX Mk2	3,250	A weighty beast, with 7.1 processing but only five channels of amplification as standard. Highly capable with both music and movies, but rather costly all-in-all	8			●	●	140	215
R	Myryad MDP500/MA240/MA360	3,799	Superb three-box, five-channel A/V amplifier. Great with movies and beats most multichannel amps hands down with music	9			●	●	120	215
BB	NAD T761	650	First rate home cinema amplifier that sounds more powerful than its specifications imply, and competes with specialist stereo amplifiers	9			●	●	80	223
	NAD S170/S250	5,700	Flexible and fine sounding THX Ultra processor/five-channel power amp combo with great timing	9			●	●	125	225
	Nakamichi AV-10	1,000	A very powerful AV receiver that's easy to install and set-up with a civilised and subtle performance	4			●	●	140	198
R	Onkyo TX-DS595	450	Unexciting but generally competent home cinema amplifier has some strong ergonomic features	7	●		●	●	70	223
	Onkyo TX-DS787	900	Obstructive ergonomics and messy sound undermine basically well-equipped receiver	7	●		●	●	100	217
R	Onkyo TX-DS989	2,500	Authority personified, excellent AV signal processing, but sound quality a tad unsubtle	9	●		●	●	160	210
	Pioneer VSX-D810S	450	Thin, raw sounding AV receiver fails to stir the right nerve endings, but is materially fair value	7			●	●	100	223
	Pioneer VSA-E08	1,300	THX circuitry gives home cinema material a boost, but this is not an obvious first choice for music	10	●		●	●	100	210
	Primare P30/A30.5	3,700	No 5.1 channel input for DVD-A/SACD but capable of almost uncomfortable realism with real solidity and drive	8			●	●	120	210
R	Roksan DSP/5 ch amp/VSU	2,440	Clean, powerful stereo expanded seamlessly, if without distinction, to 5.1 channels	4			●	●	80	210
	Rotel RSX-972	1,000	Not the brightest tool in the Rotel toolbox, and pricing is surely rather optimistic too	8			●	●	75	217
R	Rotel RSP-976/RMB-1075	1,700	A potent and enjoyable two-box beast that gets to the heart of both music and movie sound	8			●	●	120	215
R	Rotel RSP-985/RPB-985 MkII	2,400	The hugely versatile processor is the weaker subjective link in this otherwise impressive combo	3			●	●	130	198
R	Sony STR-B1070	600	Technical intriguing AV receiver which succeeds in extracting detail and space from recordings that sounded coarse and unexpansive elsewhere	10	●		●	●	100	223
	Sony TA-E9000ES/N9000ES	2,300	Big, gold, powerful and remarkably versatile but fails to cut the sonic mustard	5			●	●	110	198
R	Sony VA777ES	1,500	Smart circuitry gives this model unusual precision and transparency, and it is a fine all rounder	9			●	●	100	210
EC	TAG McLaren AV32R EX	2,749	A flexible A/V processor, unusually good with music. Would form the heart of a top-class multichannel system in standard or 7-channel 'EX' form	6			●	●	N/A	215
	Technics DX-950	279	Ultra-low cost home cinema receiver is impressively equipped for the price, but musically it lacks grace and air	5	●		●	●	100	223
	Technics SA-DA10	500	Lower mid-market AV amp has all the right ingredients, but fails to stir the soul	5	●		●	●	80	210
	Technics SE-A1010/SU-C1010 x3	1,350	A preamp plus three stereo amps provide a six-channel A/V solution without complex processing. Visually stunning but low on grunt and detail	6			●	●	70	215
	Yamaha RX-V1000RDS	800	Solid mainstream performer is more convincing as home cinema amplifier than for multichannel music	8	●		●	●	100	217

CABLES



SPECIFICATIONS

ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS (PRICES PER TERMINATED METRE PAIR)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	Acoustic Precision Eikos	89	Not entirely neutral: probably best suited to upbeat music. Very stiff construction	•	•	•	•	•			188
R	Acoustic Research Master	70	Decent performance all round and good interference rejection	•	•	•	•	•			224
	Audioquest Sidewinder	40	Suppresses the sound. At this price it's a disappointment	•	•	•	•	•			211
R	Audioquest Coral	99	Slightly forward imaging hardly detracts from its excellent tonal qualities and detail	•	•	•	•	•			200
R	Cable Talk Advanced 3	35	Good sound and great detail, but a slight brashness in the treble	•	•	•	•	•			211
	Cable Talk Professional 3	75	Plenty of bass, but suffers rather from congestion	•	•	•	•	•			224
	Cambridge Pacific	30	Lacks subtlety and bass impact but is otherwise quite serviceable for the price	•	•	•	•	•			176
	Cambridge Silver Spirit 60	100	Good bass but a lack of detail and differentiation of instruments	•	•	•	•	•			188
R	Chord Calypso	30	Informative, clear sound at a decent price	•	•	•	•	•			211
	Chord Cobra 2	50	Good, strong sound with full-bodied music, less happy with smaller forces	•	•	•	•	•			176
	Chord Chameleon 2	90	Deep bass is fine but despite that the sound can be a bit hard and lacking body and resonance	•	•	•	•	•			188
	Chord Silver Siren	75	Dry and undynamic, though tonal balance is good	•	•	•	•	•			224
R	DNM Reson	40	Seemed a little harsh in the test system, but can work well and should be tried	•	•	•	•	•			200
BB	Ecosse The Composer	30	A high degree of realism and delicacy, and a fantastic price	•	•	•	•	•			211
R	Ecosse Reference Diva	100	Very good performance in all areas, with particularly fine, tuneful, bass	•	•	•	•	•			224
	Goertz M1 Interconnect	145	Soft sound lacking in bite, with excessive and plummy bass (NB sample used in review was only 0.5m)	•	•	•	•	•			176
	Insert Audio IC100 MkII	47	Mostly good sound is let down by pervasive dryness	•	•	•	•	•			176
R	Insert Audio Image 5.1	85	Very good detail and imaging: perhaps a touch bass-light	•	•	•	•	•			200
BB	Ixos Gamma Audition II	30	Detailed and neutral, with just a hint of pleasant mellowness	•	•	•	•	•			211
	Ixos Gamma 1001	70	Nice and dynamic, and bass is good, but treble disappoints and it can become rough	•	•	•	•	•			224
	Ixos Gamma 1002	39	Lumpy bass, grainy treble, and poor integration. Nice colour, though	•	•	•	•	•			176
	Ixos 1000	90	Nothing badly wrong, just a little bit bland and outshone by others at the price	•	•	•	•	•			200
	Kimber Crystal-Cu	5	Disappointing beside other Kimber products: great bass, but suffers from dryness	•	•	•	•	•			224
BB	Kimber PBJ	68	Assured sound, solid and natural bass and clear treble — excellent performance all round	•	•	•	•	•			188
R	Kimber Hero	110	Slight roughness detracts from some music; seems well suited to rock and jazz. Lively and detailed	•	•	•	•	•			176
BB	Monster Interlink 400 Mk2	70	Really lively and enjoyable sound	•	•	•	•	•			224
	Neotech NA110B5	100	Balance is OK, but detail could and should be better	•	•	•	•	•			224
R	Nordost Solar Wind	85	Good tone and dynamics, with just occasionally a touch of bass-lightness in busy music	•	•	•	•	•			188
R	Nordost Blue Heaven	145	Very good bass and only slightly grainy treble add up to a well integrated, natural-sounding cable	•	•	•	•	•			176
	Precious Metals S535	50	Extended bass, but dry character suits electronic music better than acoustic	•	•	•	•	•			188
	Profigold PGA301 MkII	40	Mellow and well rounded, but can seem a little heavy	•	•	•	•	•			211
	Profigold PGA4201	5	No pretensions, but sound is perfectly listenable with fair detail and extension	•	•	•	•	•			211
R	Prowire VHQ	10	This crisp cable lacks a little refinement, but it's great for the price	•	•	•	•	•			211
R	Prowire Silver	60	A good cable in every way, with just the occasional hint of coloration and coarseness	•	•	•	•	•			176
R	QED Qunex 1	20	Well balanced, and easily rivals more expensive cables	•	•	•	•	•			211
BB	QED Qnect 2	30	Very well balanced, refined and detailed, this is everything a good cable should be, and excellent value	•	•	•	•	•			176
R	QED Qnect 45	70	Some coloration and roughness in the midrange and treble, but bass is gratifyingly solid	•	•	•	•	•			188
R	QED Qnex Silver Spiral	90	A great cable for lovers of big sounds	•	•	•	•	•			200
	Reference CS1	75	A moderate performer, with a little coloration and a tendency to lose bass at climaxes	•	•	•	•	•			188
R	SonicLink Black	49	Nickel-plated copper with a slight dryness in the bass and a hint of treble roll-off don't compromise integration	•	•	•	•	•			176
R	SonicLink Message (Lilac)	60	Some dryness can affect transient sounds, though tone is generally good, especially in the bass	•	•	•	•	•			188
	Sonic Link 5G Voices	95	Bass reach is splendid, though there's some coloration: scores highly for emotional impact	•	•	•	•	•			224
	SonicLink Violet	95	Better bass than treble — a little dry in the upper octaves	•	•	•	•	•			200
R	Straight Wire Chorus	40	A very confident cable with good bass, though perhaps a shade of treble loss	•	•	•	•	•			176
R	Straight Wire Sonata	80	Tonal balance favours lower frequencies but despite this it's a very listenable cable	•	•	•	•	•			188
	Straight Wire Encore II	100	Slightly variable bass performance is a weakness in this otherwise capable cable	•	•	•	•	•			200
BB	Supra EFF-ISL	80	Excellent sound in all areas — nothing to criticise	•	•	•	•	•			188
R	Tara Labs Prism 22	64	Mild tendency to plumminess offsets some hardness in complex music with mixed results	•	•	•	•	•			188
	Tara Labs Prism 55-i	195	Good with laid-back music, but seems lazy with more exciting material	•	•	•	•	•			200
BB	TCI Viper	55	Fine performance in all areas: just the smallest hint of sibilance. Very good value	•	•	•	•	•			200
	van den Hul The Bay C5	39	Terrific detail, nice balance — a great cable	•	•	•	•	•			224
BB	van den Hul PBS	50	A highly neutral cable with fine dynamic and rhythmic performance too — excellent	•	•	•	•	•			188
R	van den Hul D102 MkIII HB	80	A fine cable, but the competition has crept up and it no longer leads the pack	•	•	•	•	•			200
R	Vivanco Prowire SHQ	30	Good performance all round with just a hint of bass congestion — very good value	•	•	•	•	•			224

Connections



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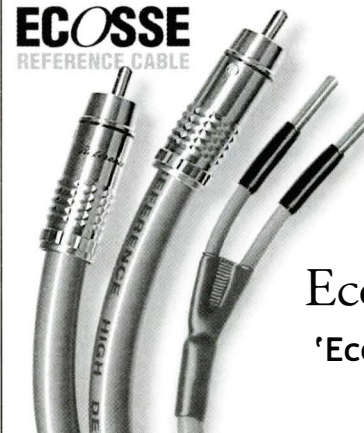
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DIGITAL INTERCONNECTS (PRICES PER TERMINATED METRE PAIR)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Audioquest Digital One	35	A neutral and capable cable that adds little or no character to the sound		•		•	•		F	207
	Chord Optilink	40	Beautifully made, but performance is practically indistinguishable from other, cheaper, Toslink leads							O	207
	Ixos 1051-100	39.95	Plenty of bass, and detail seems good, but there's a loss of involvement		•		•	•		F	207
BB	QED Qunex P75	25	A superbly capable interconnect that's highly detailed and well balanced		•		•	•		F	207
R	Ross OP004	19.99	Sounds much like most other Toslink leads: slightly lacking detail, but good value							O	207
	SonicLink Digital Optical	30	Possibly slightly more detailed than other opticals, but still no match for a decent electrical digital link							O	207
	Straight Wire Info-Link	300	A good cable, but bass seems a little light and detail suffers a little at climaxes		•		•		•	F	207
R	van den Hul Optocoupler	49.95	Noticeably has the edge over other optical leads, but still second best to electrical types							O	207

LOUDSPEAKER CABLES (PRICES PER METRE LENGTH)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	ALR Jordan QMM	5	Generally neutral, if sometimes bass-shy, but not very communicative	•					•		183
	Audioquest Slate	15	Capable across the board, with just the smallest degree of dryness, but very listenable	•			•	•			203
R	Bandridge LC7409	4	Detailed and up-beat cable. A bit too steely for classical strings				•	•			157
R	Black Rhodium Aero Space S130x2	76	Great kick in the bass, but the treble can sound dry and recessed. Price for 1m terminated pair	•			•	•			227
R	Cable Talk Talk 3.1	2.25	Quite well-balanced but tends to lose bass lines in complex music	•			•	•			168
	Cable Talk Talk 4.1	4.25	Smooth and cultured sound that lacks fine detail and is a bit too restrained	•			•	•			157
	Cable Talk Flat 2	5	Rather unexciting sound, with variable bass and dry voices	•			•	•			203
	Cable Talk Concert 2.1	8	Can make stereo images recede, and favours the upper bass	•			•	•			192
	DNM LSC350	6.95	Majors on midband and lower treble lucidity at the expense of bass and extreme treble extension	•			•	•			168
R	Chord Company Odyssey	17	Relatively vice-free cable with good detail throughout the range and generally neutral bass	•			•	•			192
	Chord Company Rumour 2	10	Performance is listenable enough but fails to excel in any area	•			•	•			203
BB	DNM LSCB500	12	High impedance can influence the treble response, but this was a winner on sound per pound. Bi-wire	•			•	•			133
	Ecosse Reference CS-2.15	5.75	Stereo and rhythm are good, but persistent dryness detracts significantly	•			•	•			215
R	Ecosse Reference MS2.3	23	Favours excitement over refinement: can be slightly bass-shy, but plenty of life. Price for 1m terminated pair	•			•	•			227
R	Electrofluidics Monolith 2020	45	Excellent bass extension and very fine performance elsewhere – one of the best cables available all round	•			•	•			203
R	Goertz M2	32	Remarkably detailed, smooth, neutral and with excellent bass; check amplifier compatibility	•			•	•			168
BB	Ixos Gamma 6003	2.99	A little midrange dryness, but bass is among the best at this price, strong and consistent	•			•	•			203
R	Ixos Gamma 6006	5	Bass is better than treble, which can become spitty and sibilant – though only slightly	•			•	•			192
BB	Kimber 8VS	108	Beautifully full, open and transparent sound right across the board. Price for 1m terminated pair	•			•	•			227
BB	Kimber 4PR	4.90	Considering the price, this cable's very slight dryness is forgivable when everything else is so right	•	•		•	•			192
R	Kimber 4VS	8.50	A good mix of virtues including particularly fine bass	•			•	•			183
R	Kimber 4TC	18.80	A well-balanced cable with good performance in all areas	•			•	•			168
BB	Kimber 8TC	348	Very capable in all areas, particularly good at imaging and with firm bass. Price for 5m terminated pair	•			•	•			203
	Linn K20	4	Seems to work best with lively, unobtrusive music – can be dry and edgy	•			•	•			183
	Monster Cable Z1	12.50	Slightly bass-rich balance, and could do with a bit more detail	•			•	•			215
	Monster Z2 Reference	240	Basically competent but never outstanding, and suffers some bass muddle. Price for 3m terminated pair	•			•	•			227
	Nordost Flatline Gold II	9.50	Exciting sound but a bit too 'in-yer-face', and bass is not always even	•			•	•			192
	Ortofon SPK100	3	Grey-sounding — strips instruments of their natural richness and resonance. A bit bass-shy, too	•			•	•			133
R	Ortofon SPK200	4.99	Good strong bass and fair detail, only slightly marred by a little dryness	•			•	•			183
R	Ortofon SPK300	8	Tremendously open and atmospheric, with robust, full-blooded bass – if slightly bright at times	•			•	•			133
	Precious Metals SL102	10	Unusual construction gives rather strained sound, only really cheering up with simple musical textures	•			•	•			183
	Profigold Silverflex LC8258	4	A pretty-looking cable that does little to offend but is let down by some congestion	•			•	•			203
	Prowire Out of Sight	1.99	Special-purpose cable for laying under carpets etc. Fair sound across the board	•			•	•			203
	Puresonic 7845	1.95	Big, weighty sound – but too messy and bloated for its own good	•			•	•			183
	QED Original	2.50	Despite high-tech design and excellent Air-Loc plugs, its music-making failed to gel	•			•	•			157
BB	QED Silver Anniversary	5	A few minor flaws but overall performance is very assured for this price	•			•	•			192




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LOUDSPEAKER CABLES (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	QED Profile 4x4	9	Good midrange and treble balance, but bass is rather slack and detail not outstanding								168
R	QED Profile Silver 12	15	Very slightly laid-back, but good tone and detail – wears its achievements lightly	●		●		●			215
	QED Genesis Silver Spiral	30	Commendable bass, with a little dryness and mildly compromised imaging: good, but not the best at its price	●							203
	SonicLink S300	18	Happiest with simple music; tends to smudge detail in complex pieces	●		●		●			168
R	SonicLink AST50	1.95	It may look like bell-wire, but AST50 sounds detailed, ordered and balanced			●		●			157
R	SonicLink AST75	2.95	Unusual materials and rather unusual performance too, strong on excitement and with plenty of bass			●		●			203
R	SonicLink AST150	3.95	Slightly plummy bass and a useful way of holding musical strands together			●		●			157
	SonicLink AST200x2	5.95	At its best with exciting music, this cable seems shy of subtler details	●		●		●			192
BB	SonicLink Rebel	7.50	Plenty of bass, but without sacrificing upper frequency clarity or dynamics	●		●		●			215
	Straight Wire Duo	3	Not so subtle and lacking some detail, but sound is consistent with level and musical style			●		●			203
	Straight Wire Rhythm	6	Its major flaw seems to be woolly and indistinct bass, which pervades most types of music			●		●			192
BB	Straight Wire Quartet	8	A good all-rounder with full tone, clear detail and natural ambience			●		●			183
	Supra Classic 6.0	4.95	It's all there, but a persistent lack of detail seriously mars the view	●		●		●			215
R	Supra Ply 3.4	6.95	Clean sound which stays together well at high levels, with full bass – perhaps a touch of treble restriction	●		●		●			183
R	Supra Ply 3.4/5	7.95	Good in all areas with rich bass and just a touch of treble roughness	●		●		●			203
	Supra Octopower 25	77.98	Very low losses over long runs, but essentially sound is lacklustre – sluggish bass and hard treble. Price for 1m terminated pair	●		●		●			227
R	Tara Labs Klara	2.95	A good budget cable with an even spread of virtues – and very minor vices – across the board	●		●		●			183
R	Tara Labs Prism Nexa	9.95	Slight tonal softness affects both bass and treble, but the overall sound is very listenable	●		●		●			215
	Tara Labs RSC Prime 500	36	More suited to melodious music than anything with bite and drive, with only moderate detail	●		●	●	●			203
	TCI Python	7.99	No single major sin, but detail is not outstanding and rhythm isn't always completely solid	●		●		●			203
R	Townshend Isolda	50	Superb sound all round, and amplifier compatibility enhanced by included stabilising inductor	●		●	●	●			203
R	van den Hul The Snowline	5.49	A hint of high-end civilisation with a few rough edges and a slightly warm balance	●		●		●			215
	van den Hul Royal Jade	10.99	Lots of technology, but sound suffers from dryness and woolly bass	●		●		●			203
R	van den Hul D-352 Hybrid	84	Can be a touch dry, and bass is not massively extended, but mid and treble are pleasantly airy and detailed. Price for 1m terminated pair	●		●		●			227
	XLO Pro 600	16.50	Decent bass and good treble, but sounds confused with densely-scored music	●		●		●			215

MAINS CABLES AND CONDITIONERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS								
R	Audiolinx Blue Max	100	Expensive, but good value considering the improvement offered					●	●	PLT	218
	Audio Note AN-MP	99	A noticeable improvement on standard mains cable, but not as great as others					●	●		218
	Audiosource bbc	48	Very good value, extremely sharp detailing – maybe too sharp					●	●	PLT	218
BB	Audusa Eupen CSA	48	Reasonable cost, outstanding performance and a strong recommendation					●		●	218
	Clearaudio Accurate Power Gen	1,090	Compact and beautifully finished unit that offers positive sonic benefits that justify the price								206
	GTA PHY-HP board	299	Oozing style and quality, the board generates an extremely natural and truthful sound								206
R	LAT AC-2	99	Excellent clarity, music sounds clean and easy to follow – enthusiastic recommendation		●	●		●			218
R	Lynwood Electronics Mega Power	295	Reasonable price model that improves focus while producing a sweet, tight and clean bass								206
	Maplin Bowthorpe ASC 431	50	Excellent mains purifying abilities – including other equipment used elsewhere in the house (Maplin code B184F)					●	●		218
	Olson Sound Fantastic	80	Reasonable price, superior build quality – all in all, a bit of a bargain					●	●		218
R	PS Audio Power Plant	1,200	Power Plant improves the cleanliness and separation of individual voices and instruments, giving an impressive 3-D quality								206
R	Russ Andrews Kimber Power Kord	50	Impressively detailed and crisp, choice of connectors can make even more difference					●	●		218
R	Russ Andrews Kimber Power Block	350	Improved version that elevates music to a cleaner and more three-dimensional experience with greater stereo imagery								206
	Russ Andrews The Purifier	250	More ambitious version of the Silencer that gives a cleaner, quieter background, allowing more low level detail								206
BB	Russ Andrews Silencer	40	A cost effect solution to noise-free mains supply that reduces 'hash' without losing brilliance and immediacy								206
	SonicLink SG Power	80	Bright, open and detailed with sweet and natural treble frequencies					●	●	PLT	218
	SonicLink S-Gold mains	225	Delivers a clean incisive sound with excellent detail, clarity and with no increase in noise								206
R	Synergistic Res. Master Coupler	238	Absolutely outstanding performance, but extremely expensive					●	●		218
R	Trichord Research Powerblock500	300	Isolation transformer that bolsters clarity, openness and gives an increased refinement making for a purer and natural sound								206

CASSETTE DECKS



SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	DOLBY C	DOLBY S	DOLBY BX PRO	3-HEAD	TWIN DECK	AUTO REVERSE	AUTO CALIBRATION	ADJUSTABLE BIAS	ISSUE NUMBER
BB	JVC TD-R472	200	Excellent auto-reverse deck which doesn't suffer the usual disadvantages and is very sharply priced			●			●		●	158
R	Kenwood KX-W6080	200	Modestly decent-sounding twin deck, with some transport instability and ragged bass	●		●		●	●		●	171
	Marantz SD455	170	Works well as a single deck, especially on replay, but dubbing at high/low speed compromises sound			●						184
	NAD 613	230	Rough and ready, but enjoyable sound, though marred by mechanical motor noise	●		●					●	158
	NAD 616	300	Twin deck with basic features. No Dolby setting memory, transport is too unstable for audiophile use			●		●	●			171
	Nakamichi DR-10	800	An ergonomic oddity, but one of the last of the great cassette decks. Worth considering against MD			●					●	195
R	Onkyo K-611	460	Cute drawer-loading mini-size component with three heads and dual capstan transport	●		●					●	146
R	Pioneer CT-S5505	250	Great features, good with cheap low bias tapes, but slightly synthetic sound quality			●					●	164
	Pioneer CT-W806DR	300	Had it not been for the iffy transport quality, this sophisticated twin would have been Recommended			●		●	●		●	171
	Teac V-1050	180	One of the cheapest three-head machines around, but it shows in very 'thick' sound			●					●	184
BB	Technics RS-AZ6	200	For those who can't afford the RS-AZ7; clarity over the widest bandwidth thanks to AZ thin-film head			●	●				●	164
R	Technics RS-AZ7	270	Thin-film head gives a solid, almost CD-like bass and midrange. A clear advance in state-of-the-art			●					●	158
R	Yamaha KX-5805E	250	Subtle, engaging and transparent deck, with a lightweight tonality, but stability and strong detail	●	●	●					●	171



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IN THIS ISSUE...

May's edition features a roundup of all the latest 15 and 20inch LCD televisions available. We get up close with JVC's awesome DLA-G150HT projector and our Mega Test rates the best multi-region DVD players under £250. As always, we round up all the best brand-new kit about to hit the shelves in our regular news and Power Up sections.

PLUS...

Find out how censorship and progressive scan work in our two in-depth features, and take a look at the very latest DVD releases from Regions One and Two.

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CD PLAYERS



SPECIFICATIONS

ONE-BOX CD PLAYERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	AS/RSBU ELEC DIG OUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	ST OPT DIG OUT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	VARIABLE OUTPUT	MULTI-DISC	SACD COMPATIBILITY	ISSUE NUMBER
	Advantage CD15	3,995	A CD player of some stature – what it lacks in dynamics it makes up for in subtlety and flow	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	193
	Alchemist Kraken	1,249	Distinctive looking player likely to suit a Alchemist system, but will result in variable results elsewhere	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	190
R	Alchemist Nexus APD32A	597	Refined treble, constrained yet capable bass and attractive all-round presentation	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	169
	Anthem CD1	1,595	Unusual combination of high-end player, complete with HDCD, and changer. Good, but noisy	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	178
BB	Arcam Alpha 7SE	300	Sharper, clearer Alpha 7 SE, and more affordable than before	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	207
	Arcam CD72	400	Easy going, slightly soft-centred reworking of Alpha 7 in new, svelter DIVA clothing	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	212
	Arcam CD92	850	High resolution player needs a touch of spit and polish to be completely convincing	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	212
R	Arcam FMJ CD23T	1,150	Refined FMJ series player now boasts CD-RW and CD Text compatibility	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	226
	Arcam Alpha CD23T	1,150	Refined FMJ series player now boasts CD-RW and CD Text compatibility	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	225
	Audio Analogue Paganini	750	Basically good, but sometimes heavy-handed player	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	191
	Audio Note AN-CD1	600	Easy on the ear, and for a valve player, easy on the pocket, but a bit Radio 2-flavoured	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	188
	Audio Note AN-CD2	999	High output impedance makes performance unduly system-fussy	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	195
	AVI Series 21 MC4	999	Solid, if not stolid player designed for a long lifetime, and musically proficient, if lacking in airs and graces	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	226
R	AVI S2000MC Reference	1,399	Lean, dry, high resolution player, built to outlast most of us. A fine performer in a sympathetic system	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	169
	Balanced Audio Tech VK-D5	3,995	A valve-infused player with a big and engaging sound. Lacks a little subtlety	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	194
	Cambridge Audio D100	120	Hard, clanky and coloured sounding, and with suspect control logic	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	200
BB	Cambridge Audio D500	200	Clean and highly articulate player wears well in extended use	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	202
R	Cambridge Audio D500 SE	200	A really lively sounding player with good detail but just a hint of dryness	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	217
R	Copland CDA 266	1,199	Simple yet elegant design is unexpectedly sophisticated under the skin, and effective in execution	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	176
	Copland CDA 289	1,898	Beautifully built and musically enjoyable. Lacks some precision, but still among the best below £2,000	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	194
R	Creek CD53	1,199	Fine, assured and well built player – balanced outputs too	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	226
R	Cymbal CDP12	1,299	Clean, detailed and airy HDCD-equipped player with minimalist trappings	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	176
R	Cyrus dAD1.5	395	Improved dAD1 variant has improved digital filter for a more natural, easy on the ear quality	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	191
R	Cyrus CD7	800	New Cyrus player has strong all-round attributes to match its good looks	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	212
BB	Cyrus CD7Q	1,150	Refined and expressive addition to the top of the Cyrus range, builds on the qualities of the lesser models	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	226
R	Denon DCD-435	130	Good low cost player, and a step up from the DCD-425, its predecessor	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	191
R	Denon DCD-655	180	Fine, slightly soft-edged budget player, and a good ameliorative for aggressive, edgy systems	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	200
R	Denon DCD-835	230	Refined sound with terrific bass extension. Some slight coloration	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	217
	Denon DCD-1550AR	350	Disappointing bland and ploddy sound from an immaculately constructed, high-tech player	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	179
	Densen B-400	1,280	Bold, purposeful sound, but lacks subtlety, and has some ergonomic flaws	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	212
	Docet-Lector CDPO.5T	999	Valve powered CD player lacks resolving power, though it musters considerable physical presence	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	226
BB	Exposure 2010	599	Smooth, restrained but warm and physical balance from this well turned out and well priced player	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	226
	EZO Fog Stage 3	1,170	Curious player is difficult to drive, and has sound quality that both enchants and sometimes confounds	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	212
R	Kenwood DVF-3030	180	Solid CD player with straightforward features	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	207
R	Linn Genki	995	Explicit, rather bright sounding player with strong multi-room appeal	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	212
	Marantz CD5000	150	Well equipped budget player sounds thin and rough at times	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	202
	Marantz CC3000	150	Ragged sounding multisc player, but it is cheap and well-equipped	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	204
BB	Marantz CD6000	250	Great package with all mod cons, and eminently listenable too	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	207
BB	Marantz CD6000 OSE LE	300	Detailed, well rounded, at home in any musical context – a real bargain	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	217
BB	Marantz CD6000 KI Signature	500	Excellent all rounder, a well-appointed, good-value package	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	212
R	Marantz CD-17 MkII	800	Sophisticated player with a short but attractive feature set, and a new-found bounce in its step	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	206
R	Marantz CD17 Mk II KI Sig	1,200	Fabulously built player adds musical integrity to an already impressive basic model (the CD17 Mk II)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	226
R	Marantz CD-7	3,500	A superbly designed CD player, both inside and out. Precise and dramatic in equal measure	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	194
	Marantz SA1251	3,500	Highly refined and beautifully built multichannel SA & DVD-V player that doesn't quite match Sony's best	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	223
EC	Marantz SA-1	5,000	The brand's first SACD player is a stunning machine that's equally as strong with conventional CD	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	208
R	Meracrus Tanto	1,395	Believable tonal colours and textures, refinement takes preference over dynamics – but it's not cheap	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	169
BB	Meridian 506	1,100	Revised 506 includes MSR remote and a new D/A chip, which makes it livelier and more detailed	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	176
	Meridian 588	2,100	Not the most immediately striking CD player, but its neutrality and timing prove beguiling	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	225
	Monrio Asty	695	Well built player has solid, propulsive sound quality that deteriorates towards HF	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	200
	Musical Fidelity X-RAY	799	Brilliantly packaged and clean but slightly antiseptic sounding player	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	184
BB	Musical Fidelity A3 CD	800	Excellent player has few faults apart from a slight loss of EHF detail	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	200
	Myryad MCD 600	1,299	Abundance of detail and resolution from this 'Super DAC' CD player	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	220
R	NAD C520	170	Significantly improved entry level NAD is smooth and dynamic, if slightly dull	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	202
	NAD C521	200	Good timing and excitement, but not good at holding the listener's attention	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	217
	NAD 523	250	Lacklustre musical presentation was disappointing on test; so was the absence of a digital output	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	204
	NAD C540	330	Not cheap, and disc handling is pedestrian at best, but the C540 is smooth & elegant with just a hint of aggression	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	200
R	NAD Silverline S500	1,100	It sounds as good as it looks, which is notably refined and easy on the ear	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	195
R	Naim Audio CD5	1,125	Recommended subject to addition, a dynamic machine, yet some physical minuses	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	212
EC	Naim NACDSII/XPS	5,625	Brings you the Naim sound, but for once doesn't have to rely on Naim ancillaries to get the results	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	188
R	Nakamichi MB-10	400	Jewel of a multi-disc player, with crisp sound and superb fuss-free compact packaging	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	204
R	Onkyo DX-7222	150	Competitive following recent price cut, and on the whole a strong performer musically	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	200
	Onkyo DX-7511	300	Earthbound mid-price CD player fails to excite	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	207
	Parasound C/DP-1000	499	Comes on like a high end player, but ultimately sounds a bit weak and soft-centred	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	184
BB	Philips SACD-1000	1,300	Not quite a universal disc player, but it does SACD multi-channel, DVD-Video and CD to a universally high standard	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	220
	Pioneer PD-5507	200	Low cost Legato Link implementation sounds gentle but slightly muddled	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	191
	Primare D20	799	Well presented player doesn't quite cut the mustard, though it performs promisingly	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	188
BB	Primare D30.2	1,499	Superb high resolution player gives a strong taste of musical structure and physicality	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	226
	Revox Exception E426	2,250	Very stylish with a light, agile sound that extends superbly and has fine timing	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	182
	Roksan Kandy	475	Slightly old-fashioned sound quality player available in various colour schemes	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	200
	Roksan Caspian	895	Improved Caspian (retested for 2001) is still a bold, dynamic player, but rather more subtle and expressive	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	212
	Rotel RCD-951	300	Disappointing chopped-down RCD-971 – buy the original	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	191
BB	Rotel RCD-971	450	Odd disc handling logic, but bold, detailed and refined sound make this a must	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	184
R	Rotel RCD-1070	525	Though technically sound and well equipped, the Rotel failed to generate much excitement or involvement	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	226

ONE-BOX CD PLAYERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	AES/EBU ELEC DIG OUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	ST OPT DIG OUT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	VARIABLE OUTPUT	MULTI-DISC	SACD COMPATIBILITY	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Rotel RCD-991	825	Strong midrange player with switchable dither levels to provide some system tweaking ability	●	●								212
	Sherwood CD1	1,100	A very neutral, even-handed sounding player with a rather flat, lifeless sound. Beautiful construction	●		●							163
	Sharp DX-SX1	2,700	Stylish player with a slightly forward but extremely nimble sound. Connects to matching digital amp via dedicated umbilical						●	●	●		211
R	Sony CDP-XE330	100	Unrefined, but lively, detailed and highly affordable			●				●			202
	Sony CDP-XE530	140	Well-equipped, but raw, scrappy sounding player lacks depth and weight			●			●	●			200
BB	Sony CDP-XB930E	300	Yet another first rate UK optimised player with all the bells and whistles	●		●							195
R	Sony DVP-NS700V	400	Outrageously good value for money DVD-VISA player, though SACD replay quality trails the audio-only Sony SCD-XB770ES	●		●						●	220
BB	Sony SCD-XB770UK	400	Expressive and expansive player in the best SACD tradition, but CD replay is disappointingly lacklustre	●		●						●	220
EC	Sony SCD-333ES	1,200	Entry-level high-end multichannel SA player is excellent with both CD and the new format, but particularly impressive in surround	●		●						●	224
BB	Sony SCD-555ES	1,200	Fabulously built with superb sound using both CD and Super Audio software, you'll be hard pressed to find a better CD player at the price	●		●						●	213
EC	Sony SCD-XA777ES	2,300	Superb multichannel player that set the benchmark for the format at its launch	●		●			●			●	223
EC	Sony SCD-1	3,500	The first SACD player sounds fabulous but it's a slow operator and doesn't support multichannel	●		●			●			●	194
	Talk Electronics Thunder 1.1	649	Attractively turned out, with bare bones features (though the power supply can be augmented), the Thunder 1.1 gave equivocal results on test										226
	T+A CD1210R	1,185	Intriguing player with rather pushy basic sound, but has switchable digital filters	●		●							188
	Talk Electronics Thunder 1	550	Entry level upgradeable Talk Electronics player sounds slightly muted										200
	Talk Electronics Thunder 2	699	Fine player, slightly lacking in dynamics, but readily, if expensively upgradable in various ways										191
R	Talk Electronics Thunder 3	1,000	Clean, fast, and the availability of a complete upgrade path makes this a good long term proposition										195
R	TAG McLaren CD20R	1,249	Dry and unatmospheric, but plenty of presence – recommended with caution	●									188
	Teac VRDS-9	700	Well-presented. This Teac is crisp, yet shallow, and inconsistent in sound quality and partnering skills	●		●				●			176
	Teac VRDS-25x	1,000	Excellent, individualistic player with bold, colourful sound, but test sample had iffy CD-R compatibility	●		●			●	●			195
	Technics SL-PG390	90	It's very cheap. Very, very cheap			●							202
	Technics SL-P57	200	Strong, but ultimately rather opaque and hard-sounding, high tech CD player	●	●				●				207
R	Technics SL-MC7	300	Maximum storage capacity for a minimum price, and presentable sound too (multidis)			●				●	●		204
	Thule Spirit CD100	600	Definitely a try before you buy machine, but the bass and mid are excellent	●									188
	Trichord Genesis	549	Breathed-on Pioneer is warm and mellifluous, but ultimately lacks drive and authority	●					●	●			169
	Trichord Revelation	799	Well-ordered and clean sound that may be a little too refined for some, images well	●					●				166
	Tube Technology Fusion MkII	1,350	Improvements over the original model but still remains too inconsistent for its own good	●		●		●					206
	Tube Technology Fulcrum	2,800	An imaginative two-box player with a smooth sound that lacks some lustre	●	●	●							194
	Yamaha CDX-596	230	Well-priced and attractive-sounding, this player can read CD-RW	●		●				●	●		207
	Yamaha CDX-496	180	A rather splashy and approximate sound, further hampered by mechanical noise	●		●				●	●		217
	Yamaha CD-X993	400	A bit of a lush, though the sound is singularly free of grain, and equipment levels are strong	●		●				●	●		184
	YBA Spécial	695	There is nothing here to justify the pricing or the high-end parentage. Avoid	●		●							195

CD TRANSPORTS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	AES/EBU ELEC DIG OUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	ST OPT DIG OUT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	VARIABLE OUTPUT	MULTI-DISC	SACD COMPATIBILITY	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Audio Note CDT Zero	550	Although ominously esoteric on paper, it's smooth, open and easy on the ear in practice (Tested with DAC1)	●	●								212
	Linn Karik	1,850	Based on early Linn transport, the Karik is dry but very positive, detailed and engrossing	●		●							144
	Roksan Attessa ATT-DP3	1,295	Not the most detailed or refined but capable of sounding exciting with the right material			●							162
	Theta Carmen	3,299	A well equipped and extremely upgradable CD/DVD transport. Right now, the finest of its type										203
	Theta Data Basic II	2,397	Uses a Philips CDM9 Pro mechanism and works a treat with more lively DACs										130
	Thorens TCD2000	999	Lively presentation not helped by rather loose bass and splashy treble. (Tested with TDA 2000 DAC)	●		●							162
R	Trichord Digital Turntable	699	Very detailed, precise, controlled yet involving; a first-rank performer	●		●							162

DACS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	AES/EBU ELEC DIG OUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	ST OPT DIG OUT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	VARIABLE OUTPUT	MULTI-DISC	SACD COMPATIBILITY	ISSUE NUMBER
	Alchemist TS-D-1	300	24/96-equipped DAC sounds tidy but a little shut-in with both 16-bit CDs and 24-bit/96kHz DVDs										187
	Audio Note DAC Zero	369	Neat valve-equipped DAC sounds smooth and fluid in the right system. (Tested with CDT Zero transport)										191
R	Audio Note DAC Zero1x	750	Although ominously esoteric on paper, it's smooth, open and easy on the ear in practice (Tested with CDT Zero)										212
	Audio Note DAC 5	18,500	Astonishingly natural and realistic in the right system, the only problem being the extravagant price										203
	Chord DAC 64	1,900	Beautifully encased converter with variable input buffering but inconvenient input socketry and a sound that doesn't quite match the looks						●				225
EC	dCS Delius	5,000	State-of-the-art resolution with considerably greater flexibility than anything else, hard to beat	●					●	●		●	227
	dCS Purcell	3,500	The first upsampler on the market adds significant depth and increased bass resolve with a suitable DAC	●	●							●	207

DVD PLAYERS



SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	AES/EBU ELEC DIG OUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	ST OPT DIG OUT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	VARIABLE OUTPUT	MULTI-DISC	DVD-A COMPATIBILITY	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Arcam Diva DV88	1,000	A DVD-Video player built with non-obsolescence in mind, but picture quality exceeds musical quality as a CD player	●		●							213
	Arcam FMJ DV27	1,600	Spirited CD performance and a great DVD-V upgrade path			●							219
BB	Denon DVD-1000	300	Fine, stripped down player concentrates on the essentials, and scores a direct hit	●		●							216
R	Denon DVD-1500	400	Colourful and engaging (if lightweight) sound, with excellent picture quality	●		●				●			207
BB	Denon DVD-2800	750	First-rate all-rounder, this is a gimmick-free design that is well-built and offers good CD and DVD sound quality and finely resolved pictures	●		●							221
R	Denon DVD-3300	1,000	Sometimes slightly inconsistent and strident sounding in all modes of use, but it pulls a little more off disc too	●		●						●	213
R	Encore DV-450	200	Superb value for money, though mainly of interest to the videophile on a shoestring	●		●				●			207
	Harman/Kardon DVD10	299	Bulky DVD-Video player with unexciting picture quality, and promising but ultimately unexceptional CD replay performance	●		●							221
	Hitachi DVP-705	380	Mild mannered player works best with Radio 2 music, and gives clean, well-endowed picture quality to match, along with sharp pricing	●	●	●							216
	Integra research RD-V1	2,700	Refined in use and on audition, but a lack of resolving power and an unbalanced feature set militate against this model	●		●						●	220

DVD PLAYERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ISSUE NUMBER	DVD-A COMPATIBILITY	MULTI-DISC	VARIABLE OUTPUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	BAL. ANALOGUE OUT	ST OPT DIG OUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	ASX/EBU ELEC DIG OUT	ELEC DIG OUTPUT
	JVC XV-542	250	Unreprocessing DVD-V player fails to excite with DVD material, or as a surrogate CD player	221									
R	JVC XV-SA725L	350	Fantastic value for money from a player which makes good music with DVD-Audio and CD alike	220									
	JVC XV-D723GD	500	Convincing DVD-Audio player that is ultimately let down by poor CD performance	206									
	Kenwood DVF-R9030	899	The first multi-disc DVD-Audio player is physically large and ergonomically obstructive, but it is a smooth, slick operator	213									
	Marantz DV4100	399	The DV4100 is a DVD-Video player for videophiles, but don't put the CD player out to pasture just yet	221									
EC	Meridian DVDS96	2,350	Very classy player with DVD-A upgrade potential, one of the few that is also a superb CD player	218									
	NAD T-550	500	Soft-centred but likeable player in the classic NAD mould	202									
	Nakamichi DVD-10s	600	Well engineered, but lacklustre specifications, moderate performance – and overpriced	216									
	Onkyo DV-5939	1,999	Superb build, plenty of features, but more convincing as a video player than an audio one	220									
	Panasonic DVD-RV41	300	Well presented DVD-Video player has an attractive, but far from high resolution sound, and picture quality also lacks definition	221									
	Panasonic DVD-RA71	449	Well priced, but rather slack sounding with DVD-A material, but CD sounds OK, and DVD-V is excellent	220									
	Panasonic DVD-A360E	580	Powerful equipment, and unthrottled digital output notwithstanding, sound quality is modest at best	198									
	Panasonic DVD-A7EB	699	Chopped down Technics DVD-A10 retains most of the flagship's headline features with well balanced, but less refined and less articulate sound	213									
R	Philips DVD-712	200	Rough and ready looking DVD-Video player turns out to be well equipped, and an unexpectedly vital performer, on screen and via loudspeakers	221									
R	Philips DVD957	400	Slightly ill-disciplined, but a bold, enthusiastic player which engages even if it doesn't always convince	216									
R	Philips DVD960	530	DVD-V player has strong sound quality and good, though slightly washed out, pictures	207									
R	Pioneer DV-545	330	Stylish and well-equipped slimline DVD-Video player is an extremely attractive all rounder	221									
BB	Pioneer DV-636D	400	Bold, dynamic and detailed sounding player, with slightly simplified video feature set, sharper pricing and A1 pictures to match	216									
	Pioneer DV-646A	530	One of the first DVD-RW compatible DVD-Audio players is informative but not the sweetest sounding machine around	220									
R	Pioneer DV-939A	1,200	Fine player with near state of the art video performance and attractive, easy on the ear music making, from CD and DVD-Audio alike	213									
EC	Pioneer DV-747A	899	UK's first Universal player, compatible with DVD-A and SACD as well as DVD-V and CD. Remarkably good with every format	226									
	Primare V10	700	Beautifully presented DVD-video player gives superb picture quality and so-so CD replay	221									
R	Primare V20	1,000	Elegant and well built DVD performer that possesses a strong picture quality and decent CD player	206									
	Rotel RDV-995	700	Bold, sometimes aggressive sounding player needs RGB output to bring picture quality up to scratch	216									
	Sanyo DVD1500	219	Compact, low cost player is a quite strong video performer, but lacks the wherewithal to succeed as a surrogate CD player	216									
BB	Sony DVP-NS400D	300	Midrange DVD-Video player has some interesting features that enhance picture quality and usability	221									
	Sony Art Couture DVP-5435	350	Looks to die for and decent on-screen results, but sound is flat and grey	216									
	Sony DVP-CX850D	600	Lacklustre sound quality is a disappointment, but the price is appealing for a 200-disc DVD player	204									
	Sony DVD-S9000ES	1,200	First DVD machine to play SACD has a 'Lexus' sound style that never really gets its hands dirty	210									
	TAG McLaren DVD32R	3,995	A tour-de-force of engineering, albeit with matching price tag. But picture quality is second to none	212									
	T+A DVD 1210R	1,699	Ergonomically a mess, but detailed, dynamic and emphatic, though there is no guarantee of a DVD-audio upgrade path	213									
	Technics DVD-A10	899	Well built, early generation DVD-A player with full on-board DVD-Video decoding and a more than workmanlike sound	213									
	Thompson DTH-4500	229	DVD-V player comes with an excellent multi-component remote control, but fails to deliver the goods, with bland sound to match the iffy visuals	221									
	Theta DaVID	4,650	A top-notch CD transport, that also plays DVD-Video discs well. Pricey for a DVD transport, but worth it	191									
	Toshiba SD500E	599	OK DVD-Video player, but lacklustre with music, especially when reproducing high resolution DVD-Audio material	213									
BB	Toshiba SD900E	1,299	Top class DVD-Video player and also a superb DVD-Video player; in this context pricing is competitive	213									
	T+A DVD-1210R	1,699	Ergonomically a mess, but detailed, dynamic and emphatic, though there is no guarantee of a DVD-Audio upgrade path	213									

DIGITAL RECORDERS



SPECIFICATIONS

CD RECORDERS (CD-R/RW), MINIDISC (MD), HARD DISC (HD)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ISSUE NUMBER	DECKS	FORMAT	OPTICAL IN/OUTPUTS	ELEC IN/OUTPUTS
	Audio ReQuest ARQ1	568	Full size separate containing a CD player and hard disc recorder. Sign of things to come?	223	2	CD/HD		
R	Denon CDR-1000	400	Straightforward but attractive single CD-R/RW deck is a respectable player and recorder, though some midband congestion was noted when recording	218	1	CD-R(W)		
	Denon CDR-1500	449	Ultra high jitter takes the sparkle out of an otherwise attractive dual disc CD-R/RW burner	218	1	CD-R(W)		
	Harman/Kardon CDR-20	499	High jitter player makes quite good recordings that sound less good when played back internally, especially when using the internal record capable transport	218	1	CD-R(W)		
	Harman/Kardon CDR 30	590	Well built copier capable of good recordings but playback quality is indistinct and the asking price high	223	2	CD-R(W)		
	Hitachi DV-W1E	520	Combination CD-R/RW and DVD player has excellent ergonomics, but tends to sound rather opaque	218	1	CD-R(W)		
	Imerge M1000	3,300+	One-box hard disc solution for multi-room installations. Stores 100s of CDs with web-interface but sound is uninspiring. Single-room S1000 also available	223	2	CD/HD		
	JVC XM-448	220	A hidden keyboard is a great idea, but musically it sounds rather cool and strident	205	1	MD		
	JVC XL-R5000	450	Flexible, rattly build, and attractive sound, but it's a little expensive compared to other rivals	205	1	CD-R(W)		
	Kenwood DMF-5020	250	It may be high-tech but nothing conceals the caricatured sound	205	1	MD		
X	Kenwood DMF-9020	500	One of the best MD decks yet for sound quality, and the first to make titling a practical proposition	191	1	MD		
	LG ADR-620	350	A powerfully equipped machine with useful multi-room capabilities, but sound quality is rough and ready	205	1	CD-R(W)		
BB	Marantz DR6000	400	Classy CD-R/RW recorder is also a classy CD player, in contrast to most CD recorders	218	1	CD-R(W)		
R	Marantz DR-17	1,500	Highly recommended, but with a jitter problem that, resolved, would improve sound quality	205	1	CD-R(W)		
	Onkyo MD-121	450	Mid-sized deck that sounds slightly coloured at times, though immediate and lively	177	1	MD		
	Philips CDR 600	230	Low cost Philips machine makes great recordings but playback is poor and the controls a mite fiddly	223	1	CD-R(W)		
BB	Philips CDR951	380	An improvement on previous models, it delivers the musical goods in some style	205	1	CD-R(W)		
K	Philips CDR785	350	Ragged play quality, but a good record performance from this well equipped, well priced CD-R/RW deck	218	1	CD-R(W)		
X	Pioneer MJ-D508	200	Well equipped but musically sleep inducing player that receives its Recommendation due to price	205	1	MD		
BB	Pioneer PDR-609	280	Classy single deck CD-R/RW burner is also a good if characterful player	218	1	CD-R(W)		
K	Pioneer PDR-W839	350	Good quality twin CD burner makes recordings that can be hard to distinguish from the original. Good value too	218	1	CD-R(W)		
K	Pioneer PDR-W739	400	Flexible multi-disc that has everything including respectable sound and pricing	205	1	CD-R(W)		
BB	Sony MDS-JE770	260	Smartly attired, packed with features and capable of recordings closer in quality to CD-R than MD's detractors might think	223	1	MD		
	Sony MXD-D40	330	One half CD player, the other half MD recorder. Functions well enough but CD playback is weak	223	2	CD/MD		
K	Sony MDS-JA555ES	650	Powerful demonstration of Sony's proficiency, it delivers the best MD can offer	205	1	MD		
	Sony MDS-JA333ES	650	Serious build, serious features, serious sound. Maybe high-end MD isn't such a peculiar idea after all – but would you pay £650?	223	1	MD		
	TEAC RW-800	350	Capable recording tool, but a little rough and ready as a player	205	1	CD-R(W)		
	Yamaha CDR-D561	449	Twin CD-R/RW burner makes solid, believable discs, but is priced higher than equivalent models from elsewhere	218	1	CD-R(W)		
X	Yamaha CDR-HD1000	700	CD recorder and hard drive in one – save your music to hard disc, edit then dump to CD-R for MiniDisc style flexibility	223a	2	CD-R(W)/HD		

HEADPHONES



SPECIFICATIONS

HEADPHONES

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELECTROSTATIC	SUPRA-AURAL	CIRCUMAURAL	OPEN BACK	CLOSED BACK	MASS (g)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	3.5mm JACK ADAPTOR	ISSUE NUMBER
	AKG K44	20	Lively, enjoyable and remarkably detailed: a bargain						190	32		219
R	AKG K100	36	Leather clad groover with bags of power and clarity, for a respectable asking price						190	100		205
	AKG 301	70	Big 'phones with even and detailed sound but lacks sufficient bass weight						230	100		194
	AKG K 240 DF	100	Inoffensive 'phones that are very laid back, if lacking in grunt						240	600		186
R	Audio Technica ATH-D40fs	100	Detailed and involving sound with a professional 'studio' quality appeal						250	66		194
R	Audio Technica ATH-M40	120	Incredible detail and honesty from these classically designed studio 'phones						250	60		186
	Beyer DT331	65	Clear and extremely detailed sound with rather thin bass						210	40		194
	Beyer DT431	81	Nice looking 'phones that may not be the best players on the field, but will always give 100 per cent						210	40		186
	Beyer DT531	105	Average performer from an established player. Lacks punch and bite						245	250		205
R	Beyer DT511	106	Superb midband clarity and speed slightly at odds with soft bass. Even so, high tingle factor						200	250		172
	Beyer DT831	140	These provide silky, smooth textures in abundance and we're not just talking about the velvet ear pads				1/2		295	250		186
	Grado SR-40	45	Cheap and nasty appearance largely redeemed by cheerful, up-beat sound. Very comfortable						120	32		172
EC	Grado SR-60	79	For sheer musical enjoyment these are hard to beat. Retro styling may not be to everyone's taste						200	32		194
R	Grado SR-125	150	What these 'phones lack in style they make up for ten-fold in musical quality						200	32		186
R	Grado SR-225	200	Warm, darkly-coloured tonally and ultimately lacking in clarity, but true to the spirit of the music						200	32		163
	Grado SR-325	300	Elegant sound across the frequency spectrum; let down by old fashioned ear-piece design						200	32		205
	JVC HA-G77	40	Too coloured for general recommendation, and lacking detail						260	32		219
	JVC HA-W60	49	Remarkable lack of interference and hiss ameliorates adequate sound of this cordless design						165	VR		172
R	JVC HA-W200RF	75	Distinct lack of hiss from these FM cordless 'phones ensures that detail and depth are easily heard						280	20,000		186
R	JVC HA-DX3	200	Great headphone with a rich bass, careful midrange and high comfort factor						340	90		205
	Koss TD/80	50	Oodles of bass but with a recessed midband; tiresome on the head with prolonged wearing						250	60		194
	Koss R/200	80	Basic sound is OK, but sensitivity is too low to be useful. Features stereo width control						210	60		219
	Koss R/100	100	Rather cheap looking 'phones that supply good detail but are severely lacking in midrange excitement						215	60		186
	Precide Ergo Model 2	140	Still has much of the spaciousness of the Float from which it is derived, but coarse mid/top						380	100		163
R	Philips HP890	66	A remarkably sophisticated and very comfortable headphone						330	32		219
	Philips HP910	80	Ergonomically good but suffers from a muffled midrange and overexerted bass						247	32		205
	Sennheiser HD570 Symphony	90	A little lightweight in sound, and prone to sibilance – but detailed, and comfortable to wear						210	64		219
R	Sennheiser HD 545	125	Fine all-rounder that takes all styles of music in its stride. Ear-clamping headband						255	150		172
	Sennheiser HD590	160	Assured and confident player with very low colouration and great comfort						270	120		205
R	Sony MDR-CD480	40	Generally neutral and nicely detailed: comfortable too						250	40		219
	Sony MDR-V700DJ	100	Great looking fold-away 'phones with exceptional build quality. Kickin' bass						300	24		194
	Sony MDR-CD 2000	200	Large pads make for sweaty listening. Pure mid-tones, but weightless bass						300	32		205
	Technics RP-F500	40	Just too bright for general recommendation, though they play along with gusto						225	40		219
EC	Technics RP-F800	50	Comfortable budget model that sounds sublime with great dynamics						160	40		205
	Technics RP-DJ1200	130	Functional design with head-pulping bass and muggy tonal balance. Good job they're sweat-proof						230	32		172
R	Stax System II	400	Luxury option at its price, but the sound delivery is five star quality all the way						295	50		205
	Stax Lambda Nova Basic	395	Refined, articulate, yet with real presence – and a notable bargain by electrostatic standards						347	N/A		163
	Vivanco SR322	30	Weak design and uncomfortable, but redeems itself with substantial sound quality						248	32		205
R	Vivanco SR222S	30	Not that subtle, but high fun factor compensates						250	32		219
	Vivanco Cyberwave FMH3000	40	The only cordless 'phone to offer genuine walkabout freedom, but sounds like a cheap FM tuner						210	FM		172
	Vivanco IR5800	50	Consistently musical infrared design. Doesn't reach for sonic heights so hiss can be forgiven				1/2		226	VR		172
R	Vivanco SR950	80	Cuddly feel and sound make these an enjoyable pair of 'phones						252	32		194
	Vivanco FM7980	80	A fair amount of whine and crackle detracts from 'phones which are otherwise very listenable						280	9,000		186
	Vivanco FM8180	99	Well thought-out features and a better than average sound are, at times, marred by intrusive hiss						240	9,000		186

LOUDSPEAKERS



SPECIFICATIONS

STEREO SPEAKERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/M)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
	Acoustic Energy Aegis Evo One	180	An unusually classy and sophisticated performer for the price; laid-back sound and good looks too	19, 36, 24		86	6	30			226
	Acoustic Energy Aesprit 300	400	Chunky real-wood stand-mount sounds big, smooth and shiny, but also dynamically limited	21, 40, 30		86	6	24			227
	Acoustic Energy Aesprit 309	700	Real wood heavyweight with fine neutrality and dynamic range; could have more brio	21,98,30		90	5	23			224
	ALR Entry 2	250	Metal cone standmount has a generous performance envelope, but sound quality was controversial	20,33,29		90	4	22			201
	ALR Jordan Note 3	1,000	Very substantial, with tuneable ABR for better room matching. Sounds good but could be more neutral	24,5,37,32		89	5	30			211
	ALR Jordan Note 7	2,500	A beguiling Anglo-German collaboration delivers metal-cone precision with fine dynamic range	25,107,32		92	4	25			196
R	AR S20	150	Classic standmount might not have the most dynamic sound around, but it's an honest and effective musical communicator	20,37,28		90	4	28			215
	AR 15	275	Neat and chunky wall/standmount certainly knows how to rock and roll, less convincing on the delicate stuff	22,37,22		90	4	45			207
	Arcaydis AKF	299	Budget compact real wood floorstander lacks some warmth; could be better finished	17, 77, 21		88	5	38			221
R	Arcaydis Concept 2	1,199	Solid oak floorstander is a little lazy sounding, but is well balanced and smooth with modest coloration	19,90,26		86	7	25			211
	ATC SCM10	1,000	A compact speaker with good transparency but lightweight bass	18,38,25,5		80	8	65			192
	ATC T16	1,750	Compact active 'home studio monitor' in colourful cast box, with considerable loudness potential	27,45,33		A	A	45			214
R	ATC SCM20 SL	2,051	Not too transparent but has great dynamic grip and bass to die for. Needs a powerful amp	24,44,33		84	5	65			219
EC	ATC SCM10A	1,299	Stylish, active power houses with plenty of subtlety when required (balanced connection only)	23,39,31		A	A	45			221
EC	ATC SCM50A SL	7,020	350 watts of power combine with superb drive units and a 48kg cabinet to provide alarming resolution	35,71,6,48		A	A	38			218
	ATC SCM70A SL	10,500	Stylish aluminium casework disguises dynamic grip, tracking and precision that equals the very best	127,40,46		A	A	20			205
R	Audio Note AZ One	449	A fine partner for low power valve amps, it delivers music with great gusto and enthusiasm, but also more than its fair share of coloration	23,83,29		92	6	30			215

STEREO SPEAKERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE (WxHxD) (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/W/M)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Audio Note AN-E/D	1,520	This classic large standmount might have throwback aesthetics, but it delivers an exceptional all-round sound	36,79,28	●	92	4	20	●	●	204
R	Audio Note AN-J/SpE	1,675	Retro styling but a vigorous and dynamic performer that creates fine musical tension	33,58,5,245	●	90	5	38	●	●	219
R	Audiovector C2	799	Elegant two-and-a-half-way has a big, full bandwidth sound, but midband seemed a little underdeveloped	19,106,27	●	90	4	20	●	●	190
R	Audiovector M2	1,399	High-class, smooth and slightly laid-back performer has driving bass. It's upgradable, too	20,102,30	●	89	4	22	●	●	180
R	AVI NuNeutron	500	A smooth and subtle though pricey sub-miniature, albeit with the inevitable limitations of the breed	14,27,23	●	86	4	50	●	●	190
R	AVI Biggatron Red Spot	559	Good bass coherence and timing, but the lean and decidedly forward balance won't be to every taste	19,5,37,30	●	88	7	30	●	●	211
	AVI Positron	899	This 'mini-floorstander' is capable of great precision and delicacy, but in a rather small-scale way	17,5,74,245	●	85	6	40	●	●	174
EC	B&W DM303	180	Chunky looking and lively sounding, with deep bass, a fine midband, and a restrained top end	20,33,23	●	88	4	23	●	●	226
EC	B&W 602.53	300	Large lively standmount with fine bass and low box colour; comprehensively vindicates a timeless formula	23,49,29	●	89	3	22	●	●	224
	B&W DM602.5 53	400	Pretty floorstander sounds rather laid back and lacks the agility of its stand-mount stablemates	20,5,88,29	●	89	4	38	●	●	227
R	B&W CDM-1NT	750	An uncommonly stylish and sonically self-effacing standmount that should be very easy to live with	22,40,29	●	89	7	30	●	●	208
	B&W CM4	900	Beautifully styled trend-setting floorstander has a big but rather dull sound	20,91,29	●	91	3	35	●	●	219
	B&W CDM-7NT	1,250	A very classy floorstander, in sound as well as looks, with fine bass drive, authority and overall neutrality	22,95,29	●	90	6	20	●	●	208
R	B&W Nautilus 805	1,400	A small-sounding loudspeaker dynamically, but very stylish, clean and 'unboxy', delivering loads of detail	24,42,31	●	89	12	28	●	●	199
	B&W Nautilus 803	3,500	Classy looking three-way with impressively deep bass, wide dynamic range and a laid-back balance	29,108,42	●	89	3	20	●	●	210
	B&W Nautilus 804	2,500	The prettiest Nautilus has tremendous clarity and imaging but lacks the welly of bigger models	24,101,5,24,5	●	89	8	38	●	●	200
EC	B&W Nautilus 802	6,000	Outstanding example of the high-tech speaker builder's art, needs real power but gives real sound	39,111,55	●	91	8	34	●	●	183
R	B&W Nautilus 801	8,500	The 801 is a magnificent loudspeaker in nearly every respect, but it is one that likes to play loud	52,111,69	●	91	8	34	●	●	186
R	Blueroom Minipod	£249	Blobular styling aside, it's hard not to fall for the Minipod's openness, expression and detail	18,34,17	●	91	4	50	●	●	225
R	BC Acoustique Araxe	1,300	Neat compact floorstander is a very lively communicator, if a little short on deep bass grunt	21,92,30	●	94	3	40	●	●	204
R	Cabasse Farella 400	950	Exciting but very upfront-and-in-her-face sound. High sensitivity, fine build and good dynamic drive	26,92,32	●	92	5	28	●	●	180
	Carsson OA52.2	1,500	Ultra-discreet design integrates cleverly with the listening room. Impressively unboxy, but sounds a bit thin	41,54,37	●	90	8	20	●	●	195
R	Castle Richmond	250	Tiny real-wood miniature has a lightweight but very coherent sound, a bit in-her-face but plenty of fun	17,33,20	●	90	5	50	●	●	201
R	Castle Durham 3	399	A very attractive near-miniature wall-mount with a lively and communicative disposition – lots of fun	19,37,22	●	90	5	45	●	●	227
	Castle Stirling	730	Handsomely veneered compact floorstander with expressive dynamic vigour, but a little hard and unforgiving too	20,88,24	●	90	6	28	●	●	224
	Castle Harlech 52	1,000	Improved Harlech is slightly aggressive, but lots of fun, and very good-looking too	20,96,33	●	89	6	50	●	●	219
R	Celestion A Compact	600	Provided the room isn't too large and your tastes not too heavy, this is a charming little number	17,24,21	●	90	3	45	●	●	193
	Celestion A1	899	Rich, warm and laid-back, but a true quality sound; lovely build	24,41,35	●	88	6	25	●	●	164
R	Celestion A2	1,500	Full-scale, big sound from ultra-elegant floorstander. Smooth and slightly laid back presentation	24,93,39	●	89	6	22	●	●	180
	Chario Syntar 100	249	Pretty with a pleasantly easygoing balance, but not the most communicative or exciting sound around	18,32,27	●	87	6	45	●	●	170
R	Chario Hiper 1000	300	Classy-looking standmount has a sweet, easygoing sound with fine midband voicing	18,35,28	●	87	4	45	●	●	187
	Chario Constellation Lynx	550	Beautiful near-miniature is let down by a midband too laid-back for its own good	20,36,26	●	87	3	40	●	●	190
	Chario Academie Millennium 1	1,399	Pretty but pricey, with a smooth even balance but limited dynamic expression	21,37,31	●	87	4	42	●	●	219
EC	Chario Academie Millennium 2	2,100	Price includes stands. A showy speaker that lives up to its own hype	22,53,35	●	90	4	55	●	●	190
	Cyrus CL570	800	Wonderfully striking styling, but presence is very laid back; likes playing loud	22,33,32	●	87	8	40	●	●	211
	Cyrus Icon	2,500	First high-end NXT speaker with huge omni-directional soundstage. But they have limited dynamics and unusual imaging	34,125,29	●	84	8	18	●	●	216
	Dali 606	400	A big bruiser at a tempting price. Sounds refined and polite, but also packs some punch	22,97,32	●	91	4	25	●	●	174
	Dali Royal Menuet MkII	429	Classy sub-miniature with a beautiful box and fine ingredients, but a little lacking in subtlety and excitement	16,26,18	●	87	3	50	●	●	190
	Dali 8008	540	Deep bass and high sensitivity from a large vinyl-clad floorstander which could have more transparency and tension	25,5,101,35	●	93	4	22	●	●	224
R	Dali Noble	1,059	Easy on the eye and the ear but unerringly musical. Some might prefer harder-hitting dynamics and bass	18,117,23	●	89	4	41	●	●	225
R	Dali Evidence 870	1,249	A real heavyweight, sonically and physically, and good for movies as well as music	24,5,106,36	●	93	2.5	20	●	●	204
	Dali Grand Coupe	1,333	Big sounding standmount with laid-back but clean and informative sound	23,41,29	●	85	5	45	●	●	219
	Dynaudio Audience 42	400	Expensive for a vinyl-covered miniature, but an aristocrat amongst the breed. Is there a better small speaker around for the price?	17,28,5,24	●	87	4	40	●	●	215
	Dynaudio Audience 72	1,100	Very competent in most respects, but doesn't quite grab the attention; could be more communicative	20,97,26	●	89	3	20	●	●	211
R	Dynaudio Contour 1.3 MkII	1,198	Stand-out performer among compact standmounts; neutral, with fine punch and dynamic range	20,38,29	●	88	3.5	45	●	●	219
R	Dynaudio Contour 1.8 MkII	1,842	Wonderful voice-band delicacy and loads of deep bass from a very elegant and compact box	21,95,29	●	85	4	20	●	●	167
	Elac CL102 II	599	Chunky floorstander with classy drivers has a neutral, slightly 'shiny' character, and could have more punch	20,95,28	●	88	9	23	●	●	199
	Elac CL 310i Jet	800	It's pricey, and you can buy better performance for the money. Small speaker, good sound	12,3,20,8,28,2	●	86	4	42	●	●	191
R	Elac CL 330 Jet	2,500	Arguably the most 'technical'-looking speaker in the world. Design matched by an equally explicit and dynamic sound	18,28,35	●	88	4	40	●	●	225
	Eltax Liberty 3+	150	Bright, bassy, laid-back and attractively evenhanded, but dynamically challenged. Big box for your dosh	20,5,38,34	●	86	4	25	●	●	187
	Eltax Linear Response	249	A curiously dumpty shape, but smooth, laid-back performer is easy on the ears, with fine tonal accuracy	25,35,32	●	85	4	40	●	●	177
	Eltax Chroma Front	300	Gorgeous shiny styling package at an ultra-competitive price, suffers from an excess of rather flabby bass	19,98,28	●	87	4	25	●	●	201
R	Energy e:XL 25	400	Neat slimline design delivers a fine all-round performance for the price, but could sound smoother	15,87,31	●	90	4	25	●	●	201
	Energy Veritas 2.2	1,295	Luxury three-way standmount has unusual features, and a very clean, laid-back sound with good bass	46,22,33	●	88	4	25	●	●	223

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STEREO SPEAKERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dBW)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Excel 202A	1,795	Very pro-styling, a compact active monitor in BBC tradition – neutral, unboxy and laid-back	15,21.5,36		A	A	25	●	●	214
BB	Epos M12	499	Retains the beguiling midband coherence that made the ES12 such a favourite. A genuine class act, sonically and aesthetically	20,38,26		86	7	40	●	●	215
	Genelec HT206	1,400	Baby active monitor goes very loud for its size. Very neutral but a tad boxy	20,31,24		A	A	40	●	●	214
R	Heybrook Prima 2	159	Great openness, speed and timing. Sounds fresh and vital, though sometimes lacks scale and weight	20,29,18		87	6	50	●	●	179
	Heybrook HB1	180	Good value but an uneven performer, the HB1 provides plenty of fun with the volume turned well up	21,38,25		88	3	50	●	●	207
BB	Heybrook Heylette	200	Attractive traditional-style near-miniature with classy main driver now has fine overall balance to match	19,5,30,22		88	4	45	●	●	187
BB	Heybrook Optima	259	A dumpy ugly duckling with a heart of gold. Deserves a better tweeter, but communicates well	22,88,29		94	4	30	●	●	193
BB	Heybrook Heylios	269	Classically styled standmount has a fine balance of smoothness and dynamics, plus real wood veneer	23,5,36,27		89	6	25	●	●	201
	Heybrook Ultima	649	Has the bass wallop to justify its dual hi-fi/home cinema roles, but doesn't excite	22,97,29		89	6	45	●	●	174
R	Heybrook Duet	750	Looks slightly old-fashioned, sounds a bit coloured but its fine timing and liveliness serve music well	23,43,30		88	11	27	●	●	199
	Heybrook Octet	1,800	Good-looking but pricey floorstander with novel drivers and a fine ceramic-enclosure midband	24,97,31		90	6	25	●	●	180
BB	Infinity Alpha 30	300	Some sharpness and nasality, but fine musical literacy plus a good measure of dynamic expression adds up to a great value floorstander	22,86,29		89	4	30	●	●	215
	Infinity Alpha 40	500	Cool hi-tech looks and drivers, but sounds closer to competent than emotionally engrossing	22,92,33		89	4	20	●	●	224
	Jamo E800	200	Nicely voiced, open midband but bottom end is a bit strong and amorphous	17,5,33,29		87	3	30	●	●	207
Z	Jamo E 850	300	A tad bright perhaps, but a cleverly conceived and good-looking speaker at a very reasonable price	17,5,87,34		86	5	30	●	●	224
	Jamo A410PDD	£650	Clean-edged and space-efficient solution with neat wall-mount sub for anyone who wants to move into decent 5.1 channel sound	Various		N/A	5	35	●	●	225
	Jamo D830	1,400	Dynamically exciting and communicative, but lacks both smoothness and neutrality. Pricey too	24,5,38,32		88	5	30	●	●	211
BB	JBL T1200	400	Very substantial standmount knows how to rock and roll, but can sound uncouth on more delicate material	21,41,30		92	5	40	●	●	193
	JBL Xti 80	579	Big and good looking three-way goes loud with beefy bass delivery, but lacks coherence and lightness of touch	23, 100,32		89	4	28	●	●	227
	JBL SVA1500	700	A distinctive Pro-style bi-radial horn tweeter, with a fun sound, enlivened by a juicy bass thump	17,5,51,31		86	8	40	●	●	174
R	JBL SVA 2100	1,250	Monstrously large and brutish styling, goes very loud as well as deep. Fine focus but some boxiness	37,114,52		91	8	<20	●	●	180
	JBL LX70	550	Bassmeister supreme, shame the rest doesn't match up. Fine sensitivity but an itchy, scratchy treble	26,5,94,30		91	4	33	●	●	183
BB	JBL Xti40	500	Real wood and a cute shape, with a punchy driving bass, and a restrained overall balance	23,82,31		88	6	40	●	●	210
BB	JMLab Chorus 715	529	A fine all-rounder, this compact floorstander is lively and well balanced with good dynamic drive and grip	20, 94, 28		90	4	22	●	●	227
R	JMLab Cobalt 816	860	A little lean, cool and bright, but has righteous dynamic expression and lively communication skills	22,99,29		90	3	22	●	●	224
R	JMLab Electra 905	1,200	Compact but massively engineered, delivers a very classy sound with exceptional dynamic range	23,5,47,28		90	4	40	●	●	204
BB	JMLab Cobalt 826	1,229	Big three-way French floorstander is lively, informative and mostly neutral, if a tad bright	22,103,34		91	3	35	●	●	219
EC	JMLab Micro Utopia	2,749	Superb top-of-the-line standmount with magnificent powers of analysis and communication; no deep bass	26,43,41		89	3	50	●	●	220
R	JMLab Mezzo Utopia	7,250	Looks good and sounds even better. A genuinely big speaker with fantastic coherence	35,115,47		92	4	30	●	●	186
	JPW 201	150	Looks very sharp with shiny silver front and clever grille, but sound is a bit small and midband coloured	15,5, 26, 24		86	4.5	45	●	●	226
	KEF Cresta 2	149	A good-looking value package but sonically disappointing, and no match for the Q15	20,5,37,24		91	4	40	●	●	195
R	KEF Reference One-Two	1,200	Limited low bass but bags of headroom. Coherent and lively sound, but could be more transparent	22,5,87,35		89	3	40	●	●	211
	KEF RDM Three	1,500	Definitely a speaker aimed at long-term satisfaction rather than immediate impressiveness. Nice	24,100,27		90	4	40	●	●	189
	KEF Reference Model 2	1,599	Classy, large floorstander that has massive headroom and clean mid-to-treble, but limited deep bass	23,103,34		89	4	30	●	●	167
R	Keswick Audio Torino	999	Good value, lively contender with distinctive styling. Goes loud and deep but could be smoother	26, 93,28		90	4	20	●	●	167
R	Linn Kan	295	Great bass discrimination from size, ensuring a very informative, if slightly shut-in experience	19,31,19		86	4	45	●	●	187
R	Linn Katan Aktiv/LK140	2,325	Too small to have much grunt or loudness, but bright top is very sweet, clean and detailed	17,34,23		A	A	40	●	●	214
BB	Living Voice Auditorium	1,500	Pretty, compact floorstander has wonderful coherence, high sensitivity and fine dynamic integrity	21,5,98,29		91	4	25	●	●	180
BB	Living Voice Avatar	2,500	Dynamic and highly resolved yet physically discreet design with a relaxed balance	21,5,104,27		91	8	40	●	●	218
EC	Living Voice Avatar OBX-R	4,000	Discreet but extremely fine design with external crossover and an affinity with great amps and sources	21,5,104,27		89	8	45	●	●	196
	Magnat Vintage 320	350	Loads of speaker for your money, but the sound is thick, heavy and lacking in presence and authority	25,102,30		90	4	20	●	●	201
	Magnat Vector 77	450	Tall, dark and a lot of speaker for the money. Beautiful balance, but lacking in subtlety and transparency	22,115,29		89	5	30	●	●	183
	Magnat Vintage 710	800	Very competent but didn't particularly stand out; distinctive styling and slightly shiny sound	20-27,42,32		90	5	25	●	●	211
R	Magnat Vintage 720	1,200	Slightly crude in some respects but lots of heart, fine scale, decent dynamic coherence and integrity	29,113,32		88	4	20	●	●	180
	Martin-Logan Prodigy	8,967	Combines the finesse of an electrostatic with the grunt of cleverly engineered cone bass to good effect	42,179,71		91	4	28	●	●	204
BB	Meridian M33	1,495	Compact active wallmount packs remarkable dynamic vigour into a very discreet package	15,38,22		A	A	45	●	●	214
	Mirage FRX7	550	Neat slim floorstander has a heavy, laid-back balance, probably better suited to movie than music reproduction	17,5,95,32		90	4	25	●	●	204
	Mirage OM-5	3,000	A meaty model that goes loud without distortion, digs deep with aplomb and creates plenty of depth of image	133,30,42		90	6	22	●	●	206
	Mirage OM-10-1	2,000	Tall black omni-bi-pole has plenty of bounce and dynamic vigour, but is more room sensitive than most	23,118,30		88	4	20	●	●	210
R	Mission 700	130	A lot of speaker for the money. Good bass weight and extension and goes loud with ease	18,34,26		87	8	40	●	●	179
R	Mission 771e	200	Beautifully styled miniature has a delightfully voiced midband, and real wood finish too	17,31,22		86	6	45	●	●	207
R	Mission M71	130	Neat looking and very discreet sounding at a very nice price; experiment for best placement	17, 29, 28		88	4.6	40	●	●	226
BB	Mission M73	200	Sharply priced and good-looking floorstander. Dynamics are a little limp, but it has a good overall balance. Excellent value for money	20,87,5,31		88	3	25	●	●	215
	Mission 780	299	Gorgeous miniature has a fine midband and clean, bright treble, slightly odd bottom end	16,5,28,27		86	6	40	●	●	201
	Mission M74	300	Lots of speaker for the money, and a big, weighty sound, but a bit bright and also dynamically weak	20, 97, 33		90	5	25	●	●	197
R	Mission 773e	400	Beautifully designed slim floorstander could be more neutral but still delivers an all-round entertaining sound	17,5,88,26		92	4	30	●	●	223
R	Mission 774	500	Gorgeous floorstander is an entertaining communicator, despite some balance oddities (bright treble)	18,95,31		90	4	40	●	●	183
R	Mission 782	699	Ultra-compact floorstander has a glorious midband and slightly odd bass. Good communication skills	16,5,82,28		86	9.5	25	●	●	199
R	Mission 775e	800	Lots of speaker for the money, and musically involving too, if a little short on serious weight and authority	23,115,30		93	3	25	●	●	204
	Mission 783	1,000	Plenty of bass weight, and a clean, articulate midrange, but the two don't quite seem to gel	20,5,97,33		87	5	20	●	●	211
BB	Monitor Audio Bronze 2	180	A real corker, which combines solid material value for money with a fine all-round sonic performance	18,5,35,27		89	3	30	●	●	207
R	Monitor Audio Bronze 3	270	Very similar to the Bronze 2, though not necessarily better. Good value with better dynamic expression than most of its ilk	18,5,87,24		90	3	30	●	●	215
	Monitor Audio Silver 5i	450	Great-looking, sharply-priced real wood floorstander, but bottom end lacks drive and tension	20,81,21		87	5	30	●	●	210
	Monitor Audio GR20	1,500	Solid and confident design with all metal drivers and neutral if slightly uninspiring sound	20,92,5, 30		89	6	30	●	●	212
	Mordaunt-Short MS902	200	Gorgeous metal-finished budget standmount has a shiny sound to match its looks	18,31,25		87	4	45	●	●	207
BB	Naim Intro	660	Great dynamic range and info retrieval, but thin, lacks warmth	24,89,27		89	6	30	●	●	164
R	Naim Credo	1,060	Involving sound, but rather forward and cold. Good clarity, but some coloration and a lack of richness	24,89,30		88	8	28	●	●	180
EC	Naim NBL	6,648	Elegant, large floorstander is exceptionally informative with an awesome dynamic range and dry, forward balance	29,116,47		89	4	20	●	●	200
	Neat Critique 2	445	Contemporary standmount has a clean, crisp sound with lovely natural midband voicing	22,32,24		86	6	50	●	●	183
BB	Neat Mystique Mk2	575	This elegant package delivers a fine overall sound quality; some might find the top end too insistent	20,86,18		85	6	23	●	●	177
R	Neat Neat Petite III	845	The treble is peaky, but this is still one of the most coherent and communicative miniatures around	20,30,5,20		86	5	30	●	●	211
R	Neat Elite	1,195	A highly entertaining all-rounder, has a planar tweeter that sounds sweet, if not particularly smooth	20,88,18		88.5	6	25	●	●	195
EC	Neat Ultimatum MF9	8,500	Superb musical communicator with splendidly deep and agile bass and fine open neutrality	22, 150, 40		88	6	20	●	●	226
BB	NHT Super Zero	200	If tiny size is top priority, the Super Zero is worth considering. It looks nice and sounds articulate, but it definitely needs a subwoofer	14,23,14		84	8	100	●	●	215
BB	NHT Super One	250	A fine compromise between size and performance, sensitivity and hence loudness capability is modest	18,5,29,5,23		85	8	30	●	●	170
BB	NHT 1.5	400	This compact standmount sounds much bigger than it has any right to. Good timing and communication skills	18,42,26		85	6	40	●	●	177
R	NHT Super Two	550	Black and shiny compact three-way floorstander has marvellously even balance and good coherence	18,5,100,26		87	8.5	25	●	●	199
	Oheocha D2-Iso-5	2,500	Radical aluminium pawn-shaped cabinets combine with multiple drivers to make a subtle and refined sound	37,94,37		89	8	30	●	●	217

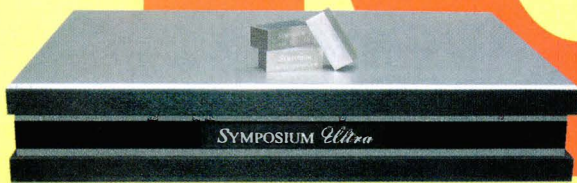
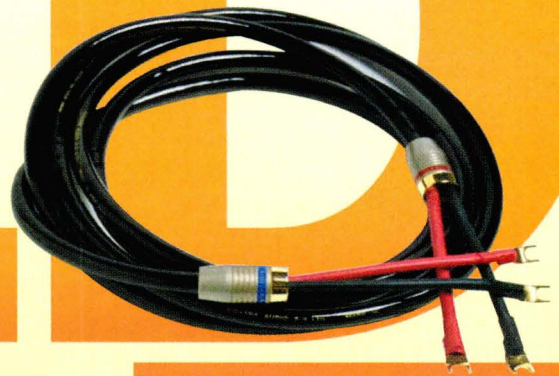
STEREO SPEAKERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE (WxHxD) (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/W)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
	Opera Prima	495	Good-looking hardwood enclosure, plus fine mid and treble, but less satisfactory bass	19,34,31	●	90	4	40	●	●	190
	Opera SP-1	525	SPTs make a strong case for serious hi-fi with curves. U-shaped back does wonders for the appearance, sound is clear, crisp and detailed	16,29,23	●	86	8	50	●	●	225
	PMC TB2	700	A worthy and prettier successor to the TB1, which sets a high standard in its size/type class for neutrality and transparency	20,40,5,31	●	88	8	30	●	●	211
	PMC LB1	999	Still fully competitive eight years after our original review, this genuine compact monitor is now a modern classic	17,5,53,26	●	87	6.5	40	●	●	199
	PMC FB1	1,275	Handsome floorstander has the lively coherence of a simple two-way alongside impressive bass weight and extension	20,105,31	●	88	6	20	●	●	204
	PMC AML1	3,700	Sparkling active Pro monitor with serious attitude: 'in yer face' balance, with great dynamics	20,40,32	●	A	A	25	●	●	214
	ProAc Tablette 2000 Sig.	899	Beautifully veneered compact standmount is classically balanced, if a little on the bright side of neutral	19,36,26	●	87	6	30	●	●	204
	ProAc Studio 125	1,000	Pretty if pricey compact floorstander with a beautifully natural and neutral midband, and some bass thump	20,94,28	●	87	8	28	●	●	192
	ProAc Reponse 1.5	1,790	Gorgeous but pricey floorstander has lovely midband voicing but limited bandwidth resolution	19,98,25	●	86	7	35	●	●	219
	QLN Signature	1,000	Attractive pyramidal standmount with heavy, laid-back balance but remarkably unboxy sound	27,37,36	●	83	4	25	●	●	167
	Quad ESL-989	4,600	A very 'different' speaker experience, with magnificent midband transparency and imaging, but limited loudness capability	67,134,32	●	83	3	38	●	●	213
	Red Rose Music R3	3,500	Compact two-way with lovely veneer and ribbon tweeter: probably the most sophisticated small speaker out there	20,40,5,26	●	87	4	46	●	●	219
	Rega Jura	450	Beely sounding, chunky floorstander sounds very 'direct coupled' to the music, if a touch 'boom'n'tizz'	22,5,92,5,26	●	90	5	25	●	●	193
	Rega ELA Mk II	498	Pretty smooth, the latest incarnation has a superb midband and excellent communicative skills	30,80,20	●	87	8	40	●	●	139
	Royd Revalation RR2	1,199	Pretty little floorstander delivers genuinely deep bass without 'thump', lovely clean, open midband too	19,89,18	●	85	4	20	●	●	221
	Roksan Ojan 3X	995	Innovative low-line, two-way floorstander with decoupled tweeter; great bass and fine dynamic range	28,79,46	●	84	8	20	●	●	167
	Ruark Epilogue	269	Beautifully finished miniature with a lively balance and plenty of charm; best suited to smaller rooms	17,29,23	●	87	8	47	●	●	183
	Ruark Prologue One R	949	Strikingly contemporary compact floorstander is well voiced but a little lean in overall balance	17,5,93,28	●	88	5	25	●	●	204
	Ruark CL20	1,650	This punchy rock'n'roller has plenty of drive and enthusiasm, but can sound aggressive	23,93,34	●	90	5	38	●	●	219
	Ruark Excalibur	7,000	A big, handsome speaker with a big, laid-back but open sound, rocking bass and loads of headroom	30,125,53	●	90	4	30	●	●	186
	Sequence 400	300	Very affordable pseudo panel offers flexible design options and acceptable sound. Limited bass, though, and doesn't like playing loud	25,100,7	●	86	8	45	●	●	225
	Snell K.5	795	Classy AV-ready standmount is very solidly engineered. Sound is neutral but lacks excitement	22,46,30	●	87	6	25	●	●	190
	Snell E.5 Mk2	1,520	Large floorstander has serious deep bass extension, and also a delicate midband with low coloration	22,109,30	●	89	4	20	●	●	211
	Snell XA75ps	4,500	Active bass floorstander with marvellous mid coherence, slightly suspect bass integration	28,117,50	●	91	6	25	●	●	194
	Soliloquy SM 2A3	1,095	Fine match in balance, coherence, transparency and speed. Intended for use with Cary CAD 2A3SE	35,5,19,30	●	91	8	45	●	●	196
	Sonus Faber Concertino	599	A beautifully neutral loudspeaker in a beautiful Italian suit of clothes. Classy, if quite pricey	21,32,29	●	87	5	30	●	●	193
	Sonus Faber Grand Piano Home	1,589	Classy walnut n'leather floorstander with fine engineering and lovely midband voicing	23,5,29,108	●	90	3	25	●	●	214
	Sony SS-LAS00ED	340	Versatile metal miniaturs with integral stands. Given a little more bass and a slightly less excitable treble, they'd be hard to resist	17,25,19	●	89	4	55	●	●	225
	South Coast Speakers Lancelot	895	Pretty compact standmount has nice ribbon tweeter but sounds a bit soft and lacks dynamic vigour	19,36,26	●	84	8	45	●	●	199
	Spendor S3	600	Beautifully voiced and unboxy sub-miniature lacks some dynamic and loudness capabilities. Best suited to small rooms	16,530,5,21	●	82	6	30	●	●	224
	Spendor SP2/3e	1,295	Large stand-mount is polite to a fault, but has beautiful 'hear-through' transparency – a genuine classic	28,55,33	●	88	8	50	●	●	219
	Spendor S9	2,500	Meaty three way with superb bass and explicit mid – one for detail fans	24,99,8,38	●	90	8	37	●	●	223
	Syn Factory U-Vola	1,480	Hefty oval shaped speakers designed to be hung from the ceiling. Sound is tight and detailed but also a little flat	21,42,21	●	86	8	45	●	●	225
	TAG McLaren F1	15,000	Oddball aesthetics with accurate, unflappable, controlled and consistent sonic neutrality	40,127,48	●	87	8	25	●	●	202
	Tannoy Dimension TD10	5,000	Extremely competent and rhythmic speaker, a futureproof supertweeter and detail to die for	35,101,37	●	91	6	38	●	●	215
	Tannoy Dimension TD12	6,500	Art Deco-inspired style plus magnificent headroom and genuine monitoring neutrality – a tour de force	42,126,41	●	92	2.5	23	●	●	225
	Tannoy Kingdom 12	6,000	Something of a throwback, but great fun, with fine dynamics and authority, but a tricky amp load	54,106,46	●	92	3	28	●	●	213
	Tannoy mX1	120	Smooth and very well behaved but a bit dull and unexciting; makes a good surround speaker	16,5,30,22	●	87	4.5	40	●	●	226
	Tannoy mX2	150	Surprisingly refined considering its very modest price: very communicative with outstanding midband delicacy	18,5,33,25	●	89	4	45	●	●	207
	Tannoy Revolution R1	200	Pretty little mini-monitor is smooth, well mannered and polite to a fault, lacks dynamic expression	17,30,22	●	86	4	30	●	●	187
	Tannoy mX3	230	A great all-round compromise at a very modest price, combining good looks with fine midband voicing	18,5,87,26	●	90	5	40	●	●	201
	Tannoy mX4	350	Pretty 2.5-way has a clean and unboxy sound with respectable transparency, but lacks the dynamic grip and drive to make music really involving	18,5,96,26	●	89	3	20	●	●	215
	Tannoy Revolution R2	350	Bargain price real wood floorstander is beautifully voiced and very even-handed, if a tad laid-back	17,94,24	●	90	4	20	●	●	193
	Tannoy Revolution R3	550	Handsome real wood floorstander does a decent job, but lacks the evenness of its smaller R2 brother	18,5,103,28	●	89	8.5	28	●	●	199
	Tannoy Eyriss 1	599	Pricey but very cute wall-mount miniature; oddball but has marvellous midband subtlety and delicacy	17,35,26	●	88	6	40	●	●	227
	Tannoy ST-100	1,200	This add-on supertweeter adds a subtle and delicate effect while also broadening the soundstage, but at a price	15,10,5,6	●	95	8	N/A	●	●	206
	T+A Talis TL53	1,799	Super slim and beautifully engineered metal towers deliver effortlessly musical results with superb imaging. Great marriage of style and sonics	15,130,17	●	90	4	30	●	●	225
	Triangle Cometes	359	Communicative standmount has great midband dynamics, but the very bright top end might be intrusive	22,40,29	●	91	4	42	●	●	193
	Triangle Zephyr II	599	Loads of fun. Dramatic dynamics and righteous timing will give any hi-fi system a wake-up call	22,94,29	●	91	4	25	●	●	190
	Triangle Antal XS	875	Ugly duckling has a rather tasty sound, with plenty of vigour and excitement	22,108,30	●	92	3	40	●	●	219
	Veritas H3	6,000	Loads of fun with wonderful dynamic and temporal integrity from horn-loaded Lowther drivers	30,110,47	●	104	4	50	●	●	191
	Vienna Acoustics Mozart	1,500	Gorgeous slimline floorstander sounds very laid-back but very charming, and musically literate	17,97,30	●	88	7.5	25	●	●	199
	Waterfall Victoria	1,500	Glass enclosures go with absolutely any decor. The Victorias make music in a confident and involving way, too, though bass is detached	21,100,21	●	90	4	45	●	●	225
	Wharfedale Diamond 8.2	150	Sonically a bit crude and in yer face, but neat styling and plenty of speaker for your money	21,36,5,25	●	86	4	30	●	●	226
	Wilson benesch Discovery	5,500	Innovative three-way with built-in stand, combines great subtlety with weight and headroom	23,47,38	●	●	6	45	●	●	212
	Wilson benesch Bishop	20,000	Deep and even bass sets new standards for cleanliness and clarity; lovely open midband too	23,161,561	●	89	4	520	●	●	189
	Wharfedale Diamond 7.2	140	A good-hearted, lively and up-front performer that's a little lacking in subtlety and smoothness	19,29,5,23	●	88	4	45	●	●	169
	Wdale Diamond 7.2 Anniversary	200	Lively and exuberant, but a tad untidy with it; can sound a bit cold and hard	19,29,5,24	●	88	4	40	●	●	187
	Wharfedale Pacific PI-20	350	Good material value and a decent fun factor, though a somewhat wayward balance compromises neutrality	22,95,28	●	87	4	25	●	●	214
	Wharfedale Pacific PI40	500	A lot of speaker for the money, but bass is unruly, even in a large-sized room. The smaller PI30 might give a better bottom-end balance	22,113,36	●	89	3	25	●	●	225
	Zingali Overture 25	1,975	Gorgeous, pricey, imposing standmount has a horn tweeter of great delicacy. Impressively weighty	30,57,38	●	90	8	25	●	●	195

SUBWOOFERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE (WxHxD) (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/W)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
	Acoustic Energy Aesprit 308	650	Tuneful and dynamic sound with music or movies from this compact sub which comes with handy infrared remote control	41,37,29,5	●	A	●	35	●	●	225
	Castle Classic 8	800	Adequate performance, but misses the mark at the price	●	●	A	●	20	●	●	225
	Jamo D8SUB	950	Pretty but pricey, the D8SUB packs plenty of punch (for movie fans), but doesn't delve deep enough for music replay	45,5,41,45,5	●	A	●	30	●	●	210
	M&K MX70	795	Cutely compact and entertaining too, but lacks the ultimate extension to justify its high price	37,32,30	●	A	●	25	●	●	210
	M&K MX700	1,595	Fine dynamic sound with music or movies. Compact unit but expensive and short on features	●	●	A	●	●	●	●	225
	Monitor Audio ASW100	300	For the price this compact subwoofer performed well	32,32,34	●	A	●	27	●	●	225
	Paradigm PDR-10	150	Not much grip, drive or authority, but it doesn't get in the way and it is very cheap	34,5,36,42	●	A	●	25	●	●	210
	Polk PSW430	400	A lot of subwoofer for your money, but lacks deep grunt and is more movie than music oriented	38,5,45,46	●	A	●	25	●	●	210
	REL Storm III	900	Excellent sub with powerful, detailed and deep bass. Comprehensive facilities, including flexible filter adjustment	41,5,62,33	●	A	●	18	●	●	225
	REL Q400E	1,000	A class system, and good for movies, but has a tendency to thicken textures and add a bit too much 'thump' to music	39,42,43	●	A	●	16	●	●	217
	REL Stadium III	1,500	It's a bulky piece of furniture but offers superior filtering as well as an ability to delve deep into the bass nether regions	59,56,39	●	A	●	16	●	●	217
	REL Strata III	800	A little more bottom octave might have been preferable, but in terms of agility and coherence this is a fine hi-fi subwoofer	42,52,33	●	A	●	20	●	●	210

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SUBWOOFERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE (WHxHD) (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/W)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
R	REL Q50	375	This good-looking if bulky sub does the business with impressive flexibility and sonic self-effacement	42,53,31	●	A	20				210
R	Ruark Log-Rhythm	775	Adds weight and scale with commendable discretion, making a positive contribution to the whole musical exposition	43,43,43	●	A	<20				210
RE	Ruark CL300	2,000	Shows what a good subwoofer can do: controlled, detailed and dynamic. A delight with music and movies alike	60,52,5,40	●	A					225
R	Soliloquy S10	1,050	Pretty subwoofer, cosmetically matching SM 2A3 speakers, pricey and mid-bass a bit strong	51,30,5,46	●	A	25				196

SATELLITE & SUBWOOFER SYSTEMS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE (WHxHD) (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/W)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
R	AE Aego2	300	Not quite a serious hi-fi speaker system, but a seriously fun type product for all that (19x35x27cm sub)	7,10,9		A	n/a	45	●		218
R	Bandor Trident II	776	Loudness is limited, but overall sound is impressively homogeneous and coherent (31x46x31cm sub)	12,13,10-12		83	6	25	●		218
R	Boston Micro 90	650	Lacks warmth but the midband is smooth and impressively evenhanded (37x36x39cm sub)	10,17,14		88	4	28	●		218
R	Cabasse Jupiter/lo	1,230	A sub/sat combo that really competes with proper stereo speakers. Striking styling and stereo imaging (40x43x41cm sub)	15 diam		94	2	30	●		218
R	KEF KMS2002	499	Looks the business, but lacks deep bass and the presence/treble is also too restrained (32x36x32cm sub)	13,23,14		85	3	45	●		218
R	Mission FS2	450	Intriguing NXT speaker technology has minimal visual impact, and lacks dynamic precision (32x47x25cm sub)	13,5,28,4,5		86	6	40	●		218
R	NHT Super Zero/Sub One	1,000	Decent enough, but not the prettiest nor the best value around for music replay – one for movie fans (40x41x42cm sub)	14,23,14		84	8	30	●		218
H	Ruark Vita 100	900	Not the cheapest sub/sat, but certainly one of the most accomplished, sonically and visually (30x42x30cm sub)	11,20,17		86	6	40	●		218

LOUDSPEAKERS

SPECIFICATIONS

MULTICHANNEL SPEAKERS & PACKAGES

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE (WHxHD) (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/W)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
BB	Acoustic Energy Aegis Three	350	High value floorstander has deep and even bass and a smooth neutrality thereafter	19,90,25	●	90	5	22	●		198
R	Acoustic Energy Aesprit pkg	1,230	Could sound more exciting, but imaging, solidity and neutrality all impressive. Poor centre magnetic shielding	var	var	90	5	23	var	var	224
R	B&W LCR6	349	Large, gutsy standmount intended for all-round AV use delivers fine performance as a stereo pair too	20,5,55,32		90	5	20	●		198
BB	B&W 600 S3 package	900	Unquestionably delivers the sonic goods. Decent size, high quality drivers in standmount enclosures still make sense, whatever the prevailing fashion	var	var	89	3	22	●		224
R	B&W Nautilus package	6,500	This classy, laid-back package is arguably too good for current programming. Very bulky centre speaker	var	var	n/a	3	20		●	210
R	Castle package	1,199	Lovely real wood veneers. Sound has fine dynamic drive and expression, but can sound a little hard	var	var	85-90	6	28		●	224
R	Dali Blue system	1,007	Incorporates some interesting ideas, and decent value for money too, but a rather movie-oriented package	var	var	88-93	4	22	var	var	224
R	Definitive Technology BP2X	595	Pricey but effective bi-polar surround speaker, with unusually high sensitivity	23,37,15		94	4	120		●	198
R	Definitive Technology BP2004	1,700	Pricey bi-polar floorstander has a fine midband, let down by its built-in powered subwoofer	19,104,31	●	91	5	28		●	198
R	Dynaudio LRC 120	439	Slim centre and front standmount, has an evenhanded but rather laid-back balance but lacks drive	16,5,57,31		89	5	25		●	198
R	Infinity Alpha package	833	Distinctive high tech styling, fine build and advanced drivers. Sounds thoroughly competent, but didn't excel	var	var	84-89	4	20		●	224
R	Jamo EB package	775	A tad bright for some tastes, and without quite the grip and drive to make the most of multichannel material	var	var	86	5	30	●		224
R	Jamo Concert package	2,500	Lovely main speakers sonically overshadow the centre, while surrounds are a bit obvious too	var	var	n/a	5	30		●	210
BB	JBL Xti-series package	1,190	Hexagonal boxes all round, this package has decent authority and all round tension	var	var	n/a	5	40		●	210
R	JMLab Cobalt package	1,707	A little lean and bright, but with righteous dynamic expression and lively communication skills	var	var	88-90	3	22	●		224
R	KEF Q-series package	880	Cleverly designed, vinyl-finished UniQ package packs a goodly thump but centre and surrounds stand out	var	var	n/a	3	25		●	210
R	Martin Logan system	9,991	Stunning electrostatic-based multichannel package, as adept with stereo music as it is with surround sound	var	var	89	4	20	●		227
R	Mirage OM-series package	2,000	Big black and bouncy package with omni fronts has plenty of vigour but some coloration	var	var	n/a	4	20		var	210
R	Mission 77DS	199	Neat flush-mount surround speaker has no bass but a smooth midband and nicely restrained treble	34,26,12		92	4	120		●	198
R	Mission M package	480	A very inexpensive and good looking system, but the surround bits are better suited to movies than music	var	var	88	4	25	var	var	224
R	Mission Cinema 8 package	1,400	Beautifully styled and cleverly designed package, but could have more grunt and drive for the price	var	var	n/a	4	30		●	210
R	Polk RTE 1000p	1,300	Tall elegant tower with built-in powered bass 'subwoofer' that needs using with discretion. Bright but engaging	20,110,35	●	91	4	25		●	198
R	Monitor Audio Silver series	1,000	Great-looking conventionally styled package lacks something in dynamic drive and tension	var	var	n/a	4	30		●	210
R	Mordaunt-Short Declaration 500	1,600	Good value vinyl THX Select package with Power Towers. Good authority but must be 5.1-connected	var	n/a	n/a	3	25		●	210
R	PMC FB1/TB2 package	2,485	Classy if bulky and pricey package has good transparency, coherence and weight	var	var	n/a	6	20		●	210
R	Rega Jural/Ara/Senta	938	Classy real wood package does a good all-round job, but sounds bright and might have more surround weight	var	var	n/a	4	25		●	210
R	Spendor package	1,630	Ultra-tinies lack some dynamic and loudness capabilities, but beautiful voicing and freedom from boxiness; best suited to smaller rooms	var	var	82-86	6	30		●	224
BB	Tannoy mXAV4 package	500	Lacks grunt, grip and authority, but smooth and refined with seamless surround coherence	var	var	n/a	4	20		●	210
BB	Tannoy Saturn S6LCR	400	A punchy compact standmount based on a serious cast-frame, pro-style dual-concentric driver	21,38,29		89	6	25		●	198
BB	Tannoy Saturn S6	500	Fine value vinyl floorstander offers plenty of genuine grunt and real dynamic tension	21,89,29	●	91	4	20	●		198
R	Wharfedale Pacific package	700	Plenty of loudspeaker for the money. Balance is somewhat wayward but unquestionably entertaining	var	var	87	3	25	●		224

CENTRE CHANNEL SPEAKERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE (WHxHD) (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (dB/W)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Acoustic Energy Aegis Centre	140	Good value centre-front speaker but a tad shut in and with a slightly obvious top end (price per speaker)	46,17,20		89	5	50	●		198
R	B&W Nautilus HTM 1	1,500	Very bulky for a centre speaker, though very capable too – a little less laid back than its siblings	76,37,30		89	4	30		●	210
R	Castle Keep	250	Substantial centre-front speaker based on Harlechs drivers but with rather brighter voicing	48,17,29		88	8	45	●		198
R	Definitive Technology CLR2002	595	Pricey, but undoubtedly one of the better centre-front speakers around, with fine timing and open voicing	55,5,17,5,31		90	4	40	●		198
R	Jamo Concert Center	550	A decent balance match but lacks the class and grip of the Concert 8s, and is bulky and pricey too	55,22,30		87	5	100		●	210
BB	JBL Xti10C	200	An elegant, cleverly designed centre and a good match for the 40s. Better value than most too	51,19,5,27		88	5	50		●	210
R	KEF Q95C	200	This artfully designed UniQ centre looks much better than most on top of the TV set	40,17,17		89	3	120		●	210
R	Mirage OM-C2	600	Large but discreet omni-bi-pole matches OM-10-1 well but lacks tight focus, and seems expensive	64,18,5,31		88	4	50		●	210
R	Mission 77C	199	A good centre-front match for 77-series, the triple tweeter might be a curiosity, but voicing is very good	42,17,21		91	4	100		●	198
R	Mission 78C	350	Makes a good visual and sonic match for the 782, but quite pricey by comparison, given the ingredients	45,17,19		86	3	100		●	210
R	Monitor Audio Silver Centre 10i	300	Neat and good-looking partner to the Silver 5is, but a little more forward, and quite expensive too	50,17,21		87	4	100		●	210
R	Mordaunt-Short MS 504	200	Smart yet discreet and a good match for the 502. Sounds clean and expressive, and is well priced	50,19,20		88	3	120		●	210
R	PMC TB2/MC	325	This bulky centre speaker is quite pricey, but it combines good transparency with some authority	40,20,31		87	6	50		●	210
R	Polk CS 1000p	999	Monstrously large and heavy centre-front speaker, presumably for those with monstrous intentions	87,22,35		92	4	25	●		198
R	Rega Senta	185	The very compact Senta is sensibly priced, a bit bright maybe, but articulate and expressive	32,16,21		89	4	120		●	210
BB	Tannoy mXC	100	Could be more exciting, but a very impressive centre speaker at an unusually reasonable price	42,16,21		88	4	120		●	210
BB	Tannoy Saturn S6C	200	A punchy compact standmount based on a serious cast-frame, pro-style dual-concentric driver	38,21,29		89	6	25	●		198

PERSONAL / INTERNET

PERSONAL STEREOS

SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	STORAGE FORMAT	RECORDING	IN-LINE REMOTE	CODEC	PC CONNECTION	STANDARD CAPACITY	ISSUE NUMBER
	Aiwa HS-PX307	30	So-so sound but an impressive features roster. Decent value overall	Cassette		●				204
R	Aiwa AM-HX50	180	Neat play-back only personal with an impressively full-bodied sound, though short on detail	MiniDisc		●				204
	JVC XL-PG31	60	'Challenging' looks and frankly unpleasant sound add up to a player that's best avoided	CD						216
	JVC XM-R700SL	250	The most expensive player here, but its in-yr-face sound and slab-like, heavy design make its value questionable	MiniDisc	●	●				216
R	Kenwood DPC-X517	100	Clean, funky bass makes for an exciting sound; an attractive proposition, if you can stomach the looks	CD						216
R	Panasonic RQ-SX71	70	A sleek aluminium body, decent sound and superb features	Cassette		●				204
	Panasonic RQ-SX91	80	A super-slick personal for well-heeled cassette users. Sound is rather bright	Cassette		●				204
R	Panasonic SJ-MR220	180	The smallest MD recorder in the world, at the time of writing. Lacks some oomph but fully featured and good value	MiniDisc	●	●				223
	Panasonic SJ-MR100	250	Well built and nicely appointed, though performance is unremarkable at the price	MiniDisc	●	●				204
R	Philips ACT7582	115	A splash-proof body and an entertaining sound – the perfect CD personal for holiday japes	CD						204
R	Sharp MD-MT877H	230	Pleasantly up-front sounding player in a sexy little package, well worth your attention if you like that kind of thing	MiniDisc	●	●				216
R	Sharp MD-MT888H	230	An MD personal that's packed with features and delivers a powerful, involving sound	MiniDisc	●	●				223
	Sony WM-EX404	35	Super-stylish but sonically flawed, with particularly uncomfortable earphones	Cassette						204
BB	Sony D-EJ925	150	Beautiful design matched with a beguiling sound – a clear Best Buy	CD		●				216
BB	Sony MZ-G750	200	Light, simple to use, and with a relaxed and enjoyable sound, and with a tuner too!	MiniDisc	●	●				216
BB	Sony MZ-R91	250	A petite and sexy beast with good sound and excellent facilities	MiniDisc	●	●				204
R	Sony MZ-R900	250	Gorgeous little MD personal with a well-balanced sound. Makes great recordings but lacks a little punch	MiniDisc	●	●				223

INTERNET AUDIO

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	STORAGE FORMAT	RECORDING	IN-LINE REMOTE	CODEC	PC CONNECTION	STANDARD CAPACITY	ISSUE NUMBER
	Aiwa MM-VX100	130	Aiwa's expertise in the personal stereo field is visible, but performance is only average	Solid State	●	●	MP3	PRL	32MB	204
BB	Creative Labs Digital Jukebox	349	Smartly designed high-capacity portable with storage for over 1,000 tracks	Hard Drive	●		Agnostic	USB	5.7GB	208
R	DigMedia Music Store	350	Innovative CD/hard drive combo with optional solid state portable. MP3 with or without a computer	CD/HD			MP3	USB	5.4GB	208
R	Intel Pocket Concert	171	Big, substantial sound and large 128Mb built-in memory, but no expansion slots	Solid State	●		MP3/WMA	USB	128MB	223
	JazPiper MV32P	125	First wave player that looks good but sounds bright. Includes voice recording and phone book features	Solid State	●		MP3	PRL	32MB	195
	LG MF-PD360	130	Good-looking and temptingly affordable, but features and performance are nothing special	Solid State	●		MP3	USB	32MB	208
	LG AH-FD770	200	Cassette and solid state personal in one – novel idea, poor execution	SS/Cass	●	●	MP3	PRL	32MB	204
	Logix Ezzone	219	Novell MP3 player that uses lomega Click! discs for storage. Chunky but quite effective, and discs are much cheaper than memory cards	Click! Discs	●		MP3/WMA	USB	40MB	213
R	Neo-25	420	Sparsely equipped but efficient hard drive portable with an exceptionally high potential capacity. Average in the sound department	Hard Drive			MP3	USB	10GB	213
	Philips eXpansion EXP401	150	Neat little personal that plays 8cm CD-R discs, two-thirds the size of regular CDs. Use your computer's CD writer to burn on MP3s	Mini-CD		●	MP3/AAC	USB	223	223
R	Philips eXpansion EXP103	190	The best MP3-CD personal, at least at the time of writing... An effective solution for MP3 on the move	CD			MP3			213
	Philips Rush SA126	250	Sound is a little thin and wishy-washy, and the fiddly controls and lack of remote make it difficult to use	Solid State	●		MP3	USB/PRL	64MB	216
R	Pine D'Music	120	Good build, solid sound and a voice recording mode make this a good first-time buy	Solid State	●		MP3	PRL	32MB	195
	Pontis SP504	158	Not the best aesthetically, but exceptionally good MP3 sound	Solid State	●		MP3	USB	32MB	204
R	Rio 500	190	Well featured and a strong performer, though new generation Rios have now arrived	Solid State	●		MP3	USB	64MB	195
R	Rio 600	169	Neat design, strong future-proofing, good features and sound. Only its memory lets it down	Solid State	●		Agnostic	USB	32MB	208
R	Rio 800	300	If you're interested in solid state, this player's great sound and ease of use make it worth a look	Solid State	●	●	Agnostic	USB	64MB	216
R	Samsung Yepp YP-305	200	Tiny MP3 player with a solid, punchy sound. Some limitations but a cool design	Solid State	●		MP3	USB	64MB	223
	Sony SSP-PD7	250	Cute but pricey with limited supplied memory, but sound is good and it's one of the first to employ AAC coding	Solid State	●		MP3/AAC	USB	32MB	213
	Schneider MPMan F20	99	The world's first MP3 personal. Basic but still good value	Solid State	●		MP3	PRL	32MB	195
	Smart Portable MP3 Disc Player	119	CD personal that also plays MP3 tracks burnt onto CD-R discs	CD			MP3			208
	Sony NW-MS7	249	A gorgeous little personal using Sony's Memory Stick storage. Good but pricey	Solid State	●		MP3/ATRAC3	USB	64MB	208
	Sony NW-MS9	300	It's got size and simplicity on its side, but it's up-front, boomy sound is significantly below par	Solid State	●		MP3/ATRAC3	USB	64MB	216
R	Sony MDC-PC3	350	A MiniDisc deck which hooks to a PC. Introduces cheap and flexible MD media to the world of MP3	MiniDisc	●		MP3/ATRAC	USB	223	213
R	Thomson Lyra Personal Jukebox	300	Neat portable with a big 10Gb capacity – enough for 1000s of MP3 tracks. Some control foibles but sounds good	Hard Disc	●		MP3/MP3Pro	USB	10GB	223

RECORD PLAYERS

TURNTABLES

SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	MANUAL	AUTO	SEMI-AUTO	SPEEDS	EXTERNAL PSU SUSP SUBCHASSIS	SUPPLIED WITH ARM	SUPPLIED WITH CART	ISSUE NUMBER
BB	Audio Note TT1/ARM1	594	Simple and unpretentious, it delivers a real taste of true high-end performance at an affordable price	●			33/45	●	●	●	203
EC	Avid Acutus	4,995	Extremely capable design with no apparent shortcomings, don't sell your vinyl 'til you've heard it on this!	●			33/45	●	●		194
	Clearaudio Reference	3,990	Opulent beast tested with Souther TQ-1 arm. Tends to gloss over detail, but can sound bold	●			33/45				144
R	DNM Rota 2	5,600	Tonally slightly bleached, but extracts detail like few others. Works well on its own table	●			33/45		●	●	144
R	Dual CS415-2	160	No denying it's cheap and cheerful, but it does what it's paid for happily enough		●		33/45			●	214
	Dual CS 455.1	220	Neat record player with automatic convenience (and 78rpm), but doesn't match simpler manual rivals sonically		●		33/45/78		●	●	203
R	Dual 505-4 UK	250	Consistent sounding and well isolated turntable. It is slightly lacking in oomph			●	33/45		●	●	103
R	Kuzma Stabi/PS	1,950	Solid oak plinth; sound is very clear, detailed and extended	●			33/45		●	●	91
R	Linn LP12 Basic	1,100	Trails the full LP12 significantly, but pace, rhythm, timing etc. still top rank				33	●			103
R	Linn LP12 Lingo	1,750	The classic reference is improved by the Lingo, but charming character remains	●			33/45		●		91
	Moth Alamo	285	Basically a Rega P2 with a Perspex platter: doesn't seem to justify the price difference	●			33/45				214
BB	Michell Orbe SE	1,725	A superb turntable, able to mix it with the best at virtually any price	●			33/45		●		192
BB	NAD 533	220	Sonically a little crude, but musically satisfying results at a very modest price	●			33/45		●	●	203
BB	Notts Analogue Spacedeck/Arm	750	No frills, just a first-rate, outstandingly natural-sounding deck that will last forever	●			33/45		●	●	159

TURNTABLES (CONTINUED)			MANUAL	AUTO	SEMI-AUTO	SPEEDS	SUSP SUBCHASSIS	EXTERNAL PSU	SUPPLIED WITH ARM	SUPPLIED WITH CABT	ISSUE NUMBER
STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS								
BB	Pro-ject 2	300	Remarkably effective at the price, with decent timing and a generally well defined sound		●		33/45			●	164
	Pro-ject Classic Cherry	450	A great-looking turntable with a generous and dynamic sound, but lacks something in overall coherence		●		33/45		●		203
	Pro-ject Perspective	750	Flexible facilities and competitive package, but performance of turntable alone is behind the best		●		33/45	●			192
R	Pro-ject 6/Sumiko	850	Don't think of this as a deck with a good arm, but as a scaled-down Oracle Delphi — it's that good		●		33/45	●	●		138
BB	Rega P2	198	Updated Planar 2: just as much fun as ever and now even better value as the competition falls away		●		33/45			●	214
R	Rega P3	298	Updated Planar 3, building on the strengths of the P2 with added subtlety and detail		●		33/45			●	214
BB	Rega Planar 25	619	Great-looking turntable has a silky smooth sound with exceptional midband coherence		●		33/45		●		203
BB	Reson RS1	600	Supplied set up and ready-tuned, this unconventional deck is packed with midband detail		●		33/45		●	●	159
R	Roksan Radius 3/Tabriz zi	890	Elegant-looking turntable with a tidy, ordered sound. Bright and breezy if a shade lightweight		●		33/45	●			159
EC	SME Model 10A	3,333	Elegant and extremely capable design with Series W309 hybrid arm, superbly built		●		33/45	●	●	●	195
EC	SME Model 20.2A	4,863	Beautifully built, extremely neutral damped and suspended deck with superb sound. Inc V arm		●		33/45/78	●	●	●	186
BB	Thorens TD166 VI/UK/RB	400	Refined, solid sound with well-focused imagery; suitable for use with good MM/MC budget cartridges		●		33/45	●		●	103
	Thorens TD146 VI	550	Tonearm not quite up to turntable's potential; this semi-auto is much pricier than manual TD166		●		33/45	●	●	●	203
	Thorens TD2001	700	Balances convenience and sound well, but deck lacks detail and bass could be better controlled		●		33/45	●		●	159
R	VPI HW19 Junior	650	A notably large and handsome turntable with good sound quality and considerable upgrade potential		●		33/45	●	●	●	203
R	Well Tempered Record Player	850	Intriguing and challenging. Musically not ideal, but its limpid quality and lack of artificiality set standards		●		33/45	●	●	●	136
EC	Well Tempered Reference	5,500	Superb mechanical stability and unflappability result in a clean reproduction		●		33/45	●	●	●	205

CARTRIDGES			MM	MC	REPLACEABLE STYLUS	OUTPUT (mV)	MASS (g)	ISSUE NUMBER	
STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS						
EC	Allaerts MC1B	1,295	Highly capable and entertaining Belgian cartridge that warrants the finest turntable and phono stage you can afford			●	0.5	203	
BB	Audio Technica AT110E	28	Excellent performance for the price, with little more than some mild coloration and a touch of hardness at high levels		●		4.5	6	214
	Audio Technica AT-OC9ML	330	A well-finished cartridge with a sound that's smoothly detailed, but also rather unexciting			●	0.4	8	192
BB	Clearaudio Signature	1,495	A great all-round performer with fine dynamic vitality and a seductive midband intimacy			●	0.55	11.5	175
	Denon DL103	100	Good performance in bass and good 'life' is seriously let down by its spherical stylus which kills subtle detail			●	0.1	6	103
BB	Denon DL304	200	Uncoloured, detailed, tracks superbly. Top notch altogether, and a bargain at the price			●			103
R	Dynavector DV-20X L	299	Articulate-sounding, with impressive treble resolve, though lightweight at times. Needs a high-quality turntable and arm			●	0.25	8.6	192
	Dynavector Karat 17D2 mk2	450	Clean and controlled sound with taut, tuneful bass. Detailed and musically cogent			●	0.15	5.3	158
R	Dynavector XX-1L	998	Very clear, very detailed; a response lift around 20kHz seems to do no harm			●	0.25	12	84
R	Dynavector Te-Kaitora	1,698	A real smoothie, but pricey. Worth checking out for its delicate laid-back transparency and low needle-talk			●	0.25	8.5	175
EC	Dynavector DRT XV-1	2,500	Capable of conjuring one of the most tactile, three dimensional sound stages on the vinyl planet. Extremely entertaining			●	0.3	13	208
	Goldring 1006	70	Disappointing sound, marred chiefly by persistent harshness which affects all but very quiet music		●		6.5	7	214
R	Goldring 1012GX	79	Slightly harsh but plenty of life and detail. Some high frequency coloration apparent		●		6.5	7	85
R	Goldring 1022GX	99	As with 1012, a touch harsh; detail and transient purity improved		●		6.5	7	85
R	Goldring Eroica LX	110	Not the most subtle cartridge in the world: can sound edgy at times, but lively and informative		●	●	0.5	8	84
	Goldring 1042	120	Not terribly subtle, and not such good value alongside 1012 and 1022. Quite lively, though		●		6.5	6	91
	Goldring Elite	220	The basics are right, and it will cheerfully tackle any source material, but its sound is not the cleanest			●	0.5	8	103
	Goldring Excel VX	525	Good bass drive but dull and imprecise higher up. An old-fashioned sound that falls short of the true high end			●	0.45	8	175
R	Grado Prestige Black	49	Capable of admirable detail and treble extension, with good bass and ambience too		●		4	6	214
BB	Grado Prestige Gold	149	Rich-sounding with an unusually refined top-end for a moving magnet-type cartridge		●		4	6	158
	Grado Reference	995	Loads of tracking headroom but treble is limited. A prospect for mid-oriented valve amp users		●		1.7	6.5	175
	London Decca S Gold	399	Immediate and detailed, but coloured and nonlinear, with a questionable effect on records		●		5.0	6	84
	Lyra Lydian Beta	599	A thoroughly enjoyable cartridge — smooth, agile and dynamic in character			●	0.5	8	192
R	Lyra Lydian	649	Superbly capable all-round musical performer that improves markedly when its body cover is removed			●	0.3	7	158
EC	Lyra Helikon	1095	Highly capable and highly neutral, this is a cartridge for all seasons, albeit fussy about vinyl quality		●		0.5	8	215
	Lyra Parnassus D.C.t	1,895	A real little jewel of a cartridge, with many good qualities, but handicapped by a rather too obvious treble peak		●	●	0.22	10.5	175
BB	Ortofon 510/P	38	For the price, a good blend of virtues — weight, clarity and neutrality		●		3.0	5	85
R	Ortofon MC3 Turbo	130	Bright, cheerful and bouncy, but unsubtle — take it as it comes			●	3.3	4	103
BB	Ortofon MC15 Super II	130	A good all-rounder, with outstanding resolution, if slightly bright and close-up			●	0.35	7	103
	Ortofon MC25E	180	An excellent upgrade for a mid-price turntable			●	0.5	11	139
	Ortofon MC25FL	250	A bit too stark and honest, but faithful to what's on the LP			●	0.5	11	139
BB	Ortofon MC 10 Supreme	300	A full and cultured-sounding cartridge, with collective attributes far outweighing its shortcomings			●	0.5	10.7	192
	Ortofon MC30 Supreme	525	Highly detailed and even-sounding cartridge that has a special affinity with female vocal recordings			●	0.5	10.7	158
BB	Ortofon Rohmann	1,000	A class act in nearly every respect, with fine groove security and a very smooth and even-handed sound			●	0.25	8.5	175
R	Ortofon MC3000II	1,100	A real ear-opener. Nothing to criticise anywhere — one of the very best			●	0.12	10	84
	Ortofon MC5000	1,500	Limited tracking ability, bright and forward sound, but good stereo			●	0.12	10	91
	Rega Bias	42	Can sound a little hard and lacking bloom, though often exciting			●	5	4	214
R	Rega Elys	85	Clearly superior to the Bias, the Elys is more detailed, accurate and convincing		●		5.0	5	67
R	Reson Recca	250	If you're after a high-quality moving magnet cartridge, they don't get much better than this		●		6.5	6.3	192
R	Roksan Corus Black	130	Recognisably related to the Corus Blue, but smoother and more civilised		●	●	6.5	5	91
BB	Sumiko Blue Point Special	250	A no-nonsense performer with engaging musical properties — one of the best around for less than £300			●	2.5	9	192
R	van den Hul MM-1	250	If woody midrange could be tamed, imaging and security would pull it through		●		5.5	6	103
	van den Hul DDT-II	600	Outstanding stereo imaging and neutral balance are appealing, but rhythmically the DDT-II is a bit lazy			●	0.35	7.6	158
R	van den Hul MC-10	750	A neutral, balanced performer, gives fine depth and focus and a firm, extended bass			●	0.4	6	60
R	van den Hul MC-One	900	This extends all the positive qualities of the 10, but adds greater authority and scale — worth all the extra money			●	0.4	6	60
R	van den Hul MC-Two	1,200	MC-Two rewards with a highly detailed yet fluid and musically convincing portrayal			●	0.4	6	72
R	van den Hul Frog	1,500	Seems to control/suppress surface noise better than its rivals. This delicate and subtle performer has great charm			●	0.65	7	175
R	van den Hul G' hopper IIIGLA	2,800	Undoubtedly one of the finest cartridges available. It has tremendous bandwidth, energy and finesse			●	0.4	6	122
R	Wilson benesch Matrix	786	Extraordinarily well balanced cartridge: neutral and detailed yet lively and rhythmically assertive			●	0.58	6	158
R	Wilson benesch Carbon	1,573	Carbon fibre body contributes to a delightfully clean and open midrange, and a quick, lively and coherent sound			●	0.45	7	175

TONEARMS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	EFFECTIVE MASS	PARALLEL TRACKING	PIVOTED	UNI-PIVOT	EFFECTIVE LENGTH (cm)	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Kuzma Stogi Ref	1,250	Large, solid and well made arm, gives exceptionally clear sound with just a hint of brightness	High		●			79
R	Linn Ekos	1,500	Superb, state-of-the-art design which builds significantly on predecessor's strengths	Med		●		229	67
BB	Rega RB250	109	The ultimate budget arm? Refined, sweet, detailed and natural	Low		●		237	60
BB	Rega RB300	174	Despite its modest price it sets exceptional standards and could be used on many high-end turntables	Low		●		237	60
R	Roksan Tabriz Basic	350	Targeted at the Xerxes, this is a good alternative to the Rega arm in many cases – a touch bright though	Low		●		240	91
R	SME Series IV	983	Superb engineering and finish with a finely balanced sound, impressive stereo focus and low coloration	Low		●		233	60
R	SME Series V	1,461	Excellent in all respects, this arm arguably sets the standards for pivoted arms, regardless of price	Low		●		233	60

STANDS & SUPPORTS

EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS

SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	HEIGHT	TOP PLATE SIZE (cm)	FILLABLE	WEIDED	NUMBER OF SHELVES	SHELF TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Aavik C4	200	Attractive wood finish stand with a very large footprint but sound is a little coloured	77	47			4	MDF	206
R	Aavik Furniture A4	350	Good sound and stylish Scandinavian looks at an affordable price	80.5	47			4	Wood	193
R	Apollo Symphony	245	Simple steel and glass stand which majors in excitement factor but lacks precision	73	46.5		●	4	Glass	206
R	Apollo Soprano	275	Uninspiring looks and sonic performance that can be beaten at this price	68.5	45.5			4	Glass	193
R	Apollo Mezzo Soprano	340	Heavyweight contender packing a big sonic punch. Looks cool, but can contribute a bit of character	68.5	53.5, 44			4	Glass	217
R	Atacama Europa	240	Stylish, expandable modular design with agreeable full-bodied sound – great value	67	48.6			4	Wood	193
R	Atacama Equinox	280	Stable, modular design with style. Excellent bass transients and a fresh design concept	81	50, 50		●	4	Glass	217
BB	Audiophile Furniture Base	615	Price is justified by its earth-shattering sonic abilities – a worthy upgrade	82	43			4	MDF	193
R	Avid Isoshelf	1,100	An enthusiast's equipment support stand free from coloration if a little fiddly to set up	87.5	48			5	MDF	193
BB	Clearlight Audio RDC Aspekt	550	Stunning neutrality and detail from a well damped design. Its performance makes the price tag seem rather good value	75	53.5, 45			4	MDF	217
R	Custom design E'lite E4	250	Fairly laid back for a glass/steel rack. Just loses out sonically to the competition	51	62, 51			4	Glass	217
R	Custom Design Aspect650	270	Smart looks and practical thanks to adjustable shelves. Sound is fair with some loss of detail	66	46		●	4	Glass	206
R	Elemental Audio Isotube X4	849	A hefty stand that demonstrates just how much difference a good support can make	90	49		●	4	Glass	193
R	Kestrel Furniture Nightingale	495	Well engineered furniture quality rack with thoughtful extras. Large with pleasing but not winning performance	91	62.5, 53.5			5	Wood	217
R	Mana 4-tier	500	The ultimate statement in steel and glass; adds resonance in a way you'll love or hate	87	45		●	4	Glass	206
R	Projekt Furniture A4	215	An elegant support stand that blends in to any home environment with a laid-back sound	56	48			4	Wood	193
R	Quadraspire Q4	280	Simple but modestly effective and very attractive	52	49			4	MDF	206
R	Quadraspire Q4 Reference	480	Excellent performance from the school of wobbly racks. Natural sounding and plenty of detail	51.5	49, 39.5			4	Wood	217
R	Sonus System Elite	330	Rather ugly and seems to offer little over and above cheaper steel and glass stands	68	50		●	4	Glass	206
R	Sound Organisation Z545	160	Budget price and great looks make this a great value stand	73	46		●	4	Glass	193
R	Sound Organisation Z560	195	Excellent value rack, 5 shelves too! Well balanced and under £200	92	50, 40			5	Glass	217
R	Soundstyle XS100	270	Less character than other similar strands, but sound is somewhat short on transparency	72.5	49.5		●	4	Glass	206
R	Soundstyle Radius SR100	280	Stylish looks and a smooth sound	63.5	49.5		●	4	Glass	193
BB	Standesign Design 4	190	An all-in-one support at a budget price with good sonic performance	88.5	50.8		●	4	Glass	193
BB	Towshend Seismic Sink Stand	900	Serious resolution and stunning isolation from air decoupled self levelling design. If you have the cash, buy one	61	53, 39.5			4	MDF	217

SPEAKER STANDS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	HEIGHT	TOP PLATE SIZE (cm)	FILLABLE	WEIDED	NUMBER OF SHELVES	SHELF TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Alphason Akros II 60D	79	Good-looking, well-equipped with decent ingredients. Evenhanded but lacks dynamic enthusiasm	62	16.5		●			220
R	Alphason HDS	85	A reasonable stand with a smooth but rather bland sound balance. Good finish options	45-60	15.5, 15.5		●			189
R	Apollo Olympus	75	A popular stand and a decent performer, but unremarkable by today's standards	40-60	15, 12.5		●			189
R	Apollo A4/6	82	A pretty and robust design that sonically fails to stand out from the crowd	51, 40, 51	18		●			202
BB	Atacama Nexus 6	50	An excellent all-round performer and a genuine hi-fi bargain	60, 50	14.5, 18		●			202
R	Atacama R724	150	Atacama uses its market strength to deliver a superbly appointed product at a very reasonable price	60	15, 17		●	●		189
R	Atacama R724/Atabite	250	Good basic engineering plus plenty of mass results in a fine-sounding stand at its price	61	16, 21.5		●	●		220
R	Cyrus CL550 stand	200	Unusual combination of style and performance, and a definite contender in the right environment	64	17, 19					220
R	Custom Design R/S300 MkII	100	A solid stand improving on the original with better focus and detail	61, 56, 51	16.5, 18		●			202
R	Elemental Isotube S2se	599	Stands of distinction, able to free the speaker's sound from its box in a way budget stands simply can't	61	23, 27		●	●		189
R	Gale t60	70	Neither the least expensive nor the prettiest, and the sound is undistinguished too	63	16.5		●			220
R	Green Apple Diamond Bevel	225	Sounds soft, gentle and somewhat dulled at the top, but takes top honours for style	61	15					220
R	hne Cableway	399	Looks great, sounds great, so start saving! Clean, sweet and neutrality is exceptional with orchestral material	63	17, 20		●			220
R	JPW HS1	120	A purposeful stand, a touch dry-sounding but particularly strong with bass. Great for rock and dance music	61	19, 21		●			189
BB	Kudos S50	115	Formidable bass with real authority, and a wide dynamic range across a broad bandwidth	61	15, 20		●			220
R	Mana Sound Base	175	The Sound Base plinth simply improves the sound of every speaker placed on it	8	29, 32					202
R	Mission Stance	100	Detailed and open but needs a firm foundation to give its best	60	19, 15		●			202
R	Mission Stancette	60	Smart styling and finish combined with a very low price. Sounds OK considering	60	16.5, 22		●			220
R	Mordant-Short Atlas	90	Shiny silver Atlas looks great, but sound doesn't transcend the very basic engineering	53	17.5		●			220
BB	Partington A-4	119	An oddball stand with a sound that's sheer class. More open and focused than most of the competition	50-100	19, 22		●	●		189
R	Partington Dreadnought	100	Fully welded high class engineering gives a very clean, open sound at a sharp price	61	17, 15		●	●		220
R	Partington Dreadnought Ult.	299	Super heavyweight stand that is an open window to the speaker placed on it	63	20.5, 23.5		●			202
R	Quadraspire QS speaker stand	150	Styled to match the company's equipment racks, a very decent sounding stand at a fair price	62	14					220
R	Russ Andrews Torlyte	599	Subtle and musical-sounding stands, though a touch more 'pizzazz' is need for Recommendation at this price	61	33.5, 24					189
R	Sonus Systems Excel	110	Strong performance when filled with sand but design flaws let it down	65, 45	20, 22.5		●			202
R	Sound Organisation Z522	95	Very hefty build for the price helps deliver a solid sound with good authority and drive	60	16		●			220
R	Sound Organisation Z524	69	A coherent-sounding stand with particular strengths in the midband, though quality drops at the frequency extremes	61	16, 17					189
R	Sound Style Select	95	OK but not as good as its cheaper brother the Z522	59	16, 17		●			202
R	Target HM60	106	A solid and well-built stand laid-back to the point of coma	40-70	16.5, 19		●			202
R	Towshend Seismic Sink	499	Unique inflatable plinth that works well with decent floorstanders as well as standmounted speakers	4	38, 48					202

TUNERS

ANALOGUE TUNERS



SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	WAVEBANDS	PRESETS	RDS	REMOTE CONTROL	SIG. STRENGTH METER	ROT. TUNING KNOB	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Cambridge T500	180	Very capable tuner suited to good and less good reception conditions	FM,M,L	64			●	●	193
R	Creek T43	399	Quality UK-made tuner offering classy sound in all areas at a very fair price	FM,M,L	64		●	●	●	193
R	Cyrus FM7.5	400	Beautifully made and presented, with sound that's a small but worthwhile advance over budget models	FM	7			●	●	211
BB	Denon TU-260L II	130	The return of the all-time favourite, now enhanced with RDS and sounding as fine as ever	FM,M,L	40	●				193
R	Denon TU-1500RD	250	A well balanced and clean sound with good bass and treble extension	FM,M	40	●			●	184
	Magnum Dynalab FT11	499	All-analogue tuner: receives weak or tightly packed stations but loses out on noise and sonic neutrality	FM	3			●	●	184
BB	Harman Kardon TU940	179	Good sound and particularly good signal recovery under tricky reception conditions	FM, M	30	●			●	221
	Leak Trough Line - GTA	300	A renovated classic with a style all of its own coupled with an emotive and gutsy performance	FM	0			●	●	206
	Linn Pekin	545	Smart and high-tech tuner which integrates well with Linn systems but offers less appealing performance out of that context	FM, M	80		●	●		211
R	Linn Kremlin	2,600	Controversially good sound at a very high price	FM	80		●	●		142
	Marantz ST-17	600	Great looks, but sound let down by opaqueness due to pilot-tone breakthrough	FM, M, L	60	●			●	221
BB	Marantz ST-48	120	A classic budget model which manages a performance only just behind much more expensive models	FM,M	60	●				184
BB	Marantz ST6000	180	Another budget killer from Marantz, with sound well above its class and useful features	FM, M, L	90	●		●		211
R	Myryad T-30	400	Attractive product that produces attractive sounds too: capable of very musical performance with a good aerial	FM	29		●	●		193
	Myryad T-10	530	A very smart unit which works well and offers good rhythmic drive and vitality, albeit at a price	FM	20			●	●	184
	NAD C440	200	Rather polite sound, a little vague at times, that seldom offends but never excites	FM,M	30	●				193
	Pioneer F-504RDS	250	Cable-friendly with advanced RDS and excellent RF performance; slightly disappointing sound	FM,M	40	●		●	●	166
	Roksan Caspian	595	Neat fascia with great ergonomics, but sound is not really any better than models at half the price	FM	50		●		●	184
	Sony ST-SE500	140	A lot of features for the money, but sound lacks detail and has some coloration	FM,ML	30			●	●	193
	Roksan Kandy KT-1	375	Well made but sound is a bit lacklustre and lags behind some budget models	FM, M, L			●			211
	Rotel RT-935AX	160	Good ergonomics and sound quality at a realistic price, but limited features and RF selectivity	FM,M	20					166
R	Sony ST-SE570	130	Good honest budget tuner: loads of features, just a trifle bland	FM, M, L	30	●		●	●	221
	Sony ST-SA3ES	250	Clean, lean presentation but needs a quality aerial to perform at its best	FM,M,L	30	●		●	●	157
R	Sony STS-B920S	180	A little hiss and image compression don't detract from the clean performance of this feature-packed tuner	FM,ML	30	●		●	●	184
	Thorens TRT2000	499	Not exactly neutral sounding, but nonetheless makes listening fun	FM,M	59	●	●	●	●	157

DIGITAL TUNERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	WAVEBANDS	PRESETS	RDS	REMOTE CONTROL	SIG. STRENGTH METER	ROT. TUNING KNOB	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Arcam Alpha 10 DRT	800	The first DAB tuner and arguably still the best, but the system's still not perfect	DAB	7	●	●	●	●	199
R	Arcam DT-81	650	A very smart and polished DAB performer	DAB	16	●	●	●	●	221
	Arcam FMJ DT26	1,000	Metal-cased version of the Alpha 10 DAB, not so competitive now DAB prices are dropping	DAB	7	●	●	●	●	211
	Cymbol C-DAB 1	1,000	The first 'high-end' DAB tuner, although format is the ultimate limitation. Gorgeous finish	DAB	8	●	●	●		199
	Psion Wavefinder	299	Bizarre-looking DAB tuner that requires a powerful PC to operate – great gadget, sound variable	DAB		●	●	●		211
	Radi DAB-606	199	Nice price, odd product. Awful to use and sounds rather gutless	DAB	30	●	●	●		221
	Sony ST-D777ES	550	Smart and useful with DAB and FM in one box, but neither band really shines	DAB, FM, M, L	99	●	●	●	●	211
R	Technics ST-GT1000	500	Handy tuner that combines DAB, FM and AM in one unit and substantially lowers the price bar for DAB entry	DAB,FM,M	97	●	●	●	●	199
BB	VideoLogic DRX-601E	300	Cheapest DAB tuner to date, and concedes little if anything to dearer models	DAB	10	●	●	●	●	211
	Videologic DRX-601ES	349	Tweaked version of 601E with modified frequency response: a matter of taste	DAB	10	●	●	●	●	221



Sound Fantastic



Olsons new *Sound Fantastic* range of units are specifically designed for both the home and professional hi-fi audio markets.

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Something for everyone in our Statements section next month. Avid's new £3.5k Volvere Sequel turntable tracks the grooves of our reviewer's vinyl and Musical Fidelity's new CD Pre²⁴ does two jobs in one box – CD playback and preamplification. Meanwhile, Pioneer's range-topping VSA-AX10 amp lends its weight to CD, DVD-A and SACD music, as well as films.

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Top of the shops

Jimmy Hughes has those 'new three grand system and it still sounds better in the record shop' blues

Ever been in a record shop and heard something unfamiliar playing that was so captivating you ended up buying it? Only, when you got the disc home and listened, it didn't seem nearly so special or interesting. It's certainly happened to me. Sometimes, the gap between what I thought I heard in the shop and what I experienced at home was so great, I seriously wondered if I'd come home with the same piece of music...

What is it about record shops? Most have mid-fi systems that miraculously produce highly engaging music. Perhaps browsing through the stock distracts your conscious mind, leaving your brain free to absorb the new and unfamiliar. Or possibly it's the loudspeaker placement – usually high up near the ceiling, or under the counter! – creating a smooth integrated even spread of sound. Whatever the reason, I'm always highly receptive to new music in record shops.

On a more serious level, how quickly you're able to assimilate new and unfamiliar material is the ultimate litmus test of how intelligible and accessible your hi-fi system makes music sound. Faced with (say) a dozen or so new songs from your favourite (or not so favourite) band or singer, how long does it take before you know each one by heart?

If it takes five or six hearings before things start to penetrate your bones, chances are your system isn't doing its job properly. Either that, or the music's lousy! True, some pieces grow on you slowly. But I firmly believe that if the performance is good, and the sound communicates the commitment and intensity of the playing, you'll get the musical message first time.

LIVE AND DIRECT

Even with long, difficult and complex classical works this is so. Although it might take many hearings before you truly know the music by heart, a direct experience is possible first time. I once saw André Previn conduct Roy Harris's third symphony with the LSO in the mid 1970s, and the impact was seismic and overwhelming. I'd read about Harris's third,



“What is it about record shops? Most of them seem to have mid-fi systems that miraculously manage to produce highly engaging music.”

but had never heard it.


Usually, with new and fairly difficult works, I'd need several goes before understanding it. But not this time; Previn forcibly conveyed the music's sweep and granite-like power. And in the process, the orchestra became a living, breathing entity. I sat there stunned. It was more like witnessing a force of nature than listening to music.

Harris' Third (premiered in 1939) once enjoyed considerable celebrity in America. Its lofty seriousness chimed with the anxious troubled mood of the time, and seemed to offer hope for the future. Though rarely played today, the work was heard frequently during the war years. And I fully understand why. You know the Real Thing when you hear it.

Of course I immediately got a recording of the work to get to know it better. But, after experiencing it live, the effect was nothing like as powerful. I could still remember many of the episodes that impressed in the concert hall.

But on record, Harris's bold strokes seemed pale and diluted. The notes were there, but not the life force behind them.

That was 25 years ago, and ever since I've periodically returned to the piece via recordings hoping to experience something seismic and overwhelming. It's getting better, but there's still some way to go. Despite having played the work many times on LP and CD, I still feel I only ever understood and experienced Harris's third once - that first time, live at the Royal Festival Hall.

It's difficult to say why the music fails to make its full impact in a recording when other similar large scale symphonic works sound highly impressive under similar sonic constraints. It's as though there's an added dimension live that isn't replicated at home. Alas, the choice is clear – hear the work live, or listen to it at a record shop! 

Jimmy Hughes has been writing about his search for the perfect system for decades.

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