

HI-FI CHOICE

SPECIAL EDITION

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the collection

IN-DEPTH REVIEWS OF THE WORLD'S FINEST HI-FI

THE COLLECTION 2004 £3.80
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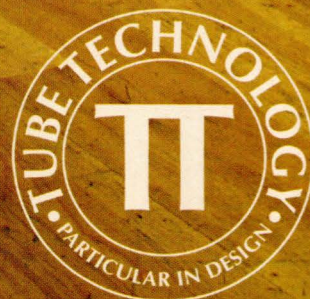
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At Tube Technology we are very passionate about musical reproduction. Our aim is to bring a 'live' performance into your home. Ultra-modern digital circuitry combined with exotic thermionic technology allows the listener to experience the true power and emotion that music conveys.

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HI-FI CHOICE

THE COLLECTION 2004 ISSUE 258

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WELCOME TO HI-FI CHOICE

To ensure you get the best information, opinion and advice, *Hi-Fi Choice* employs the most knowledgeable and experienced hi-fi writers in the business



"Music digs deep into our emotional core like no other art form. It touches the soul and makes grown men weep. Hi-fi is simply a means to a musical end – it provides the conduit for its energy and detail, delivers scale and space, ensures you get closer to the tone and impact of the original performance. It makes music seem more real and hence achieve its emotional goal. Quite simply, the music that moves you, moves you more." Tim Bower, Editor



ART DUDLEY

One of the most respected commentators on the American hi-fi scene, Art has written for numerous titles including *Hi-Fi Heretic*, *Sounds Like*, and *Listener*. Among other things, he is currently 'editor-at-large' of US journal *Stereophile*.



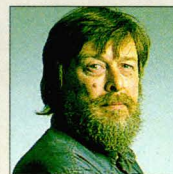
DAN GEORGE

Dan is a huge hi-fi nut whose dream came true when he became *HFC's* reviews editor. Armed with a bristling contacts book and a pair of razor-sharp ears, he ensures that only the most interesting products make it into *HFC*.



JASON KENNEDY

Jason previously edited *HFC*, but can now be found swanning about the wilds of Sussex indulging himself with the very best hi-fi money can buy. His own system is simply sensational (trust us) and his love of music knows no bounds.



PAUL MESSENGER

A former *HFC* editor, Paul has been writing about his beloved hi-fi hobby for nearly 30 years. In that time he has become one of the world's most respected sonic scribes and probably the UK's foremost loudspeaker reviewer.



RICHARD BLACK

Richard is a professional musician, an experienced recording engineer and a highly knowledgeable hi-fi analyst to boot. He has a particular knack for writing about complicated subjects in a comprehensible way – and he only writes for *HFC*.



ALVIN GOLD

Alvin cut his hi-fi teeth in retail, and has been writing about his obsession for more than 20 years. In that time he has contributed his encyclopaedic knowledge to almost every hi-fi periodical you can think of (and several more besides).



JIMMY HUGHES

Jimmy got 'into' hi-fi in the sixties and after ten years in retail his first article was published in 1979. He's an avid tinkerer and his 'firsts' include solid core cables and, er, listening to your speakers back to front – well, you can't win 'em all...



ALAN SIRCOM

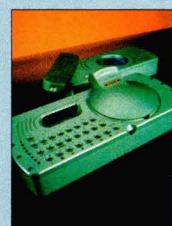
After a stint selling hi-fi, Alan began his journalistic career at *HFC* some 12 years ago. Now a successful freelancer, you too can benefit from his extensive hi-fi knowledge, from purist two-channel stereo to the latest multichannel gear.

ESTABLISHED 1975

HI-FI CHOICE is your essential guide to audio excellence in the home, from vinyl records to the latest digital music formats. For 29 years, our unique tests have brought you the most thorough and reliable hi-fi journal around. And our mix of cherry-picked kit, rigorous group tests and in-depth equipment reviews continues to ensure that **HFC** is the magazine you can trust. Published 13 times a year, it's the smarter hi-fi read...



HIGHLIGHTS INSIDE >>



the collection

This very special edition of *Hi-Fi Choice* is rather different from the norm. From p23 onwards, following our regular *AudioFile* news and views section, the entire issue is dedicated to the finest collection of high-end hi-fi ever assembled on these shores. This encompasses 44 in-depth product tests, some of which (the single-page reviews) are old favourites revisited, while others are reviewed here for the very first time. Enjoy!

SUPER NATURAL BEING

ensgaard laursen



HELICON 400*

Nature never ceases to amaze us! Whenever on the lookout for truly innovative solutions, nature constantly proves itself to be miles ahead of the technological ratrace – thus continuing to serve as an unlimited source of inspiration to us all: artists & engineers alike...

LOW COLORATION ENCLOSURE

Thick layers of lavishly polished lacquer emphasise the breathtaking beauty of our select natural Cherry or Rosenut veneered Helicon enclosures. From a performance perspective, the multiple layers of pressure-bonded fibreboard in combination with healthy internal bracing result in a virtually coloration-free enclosure. The solid, laminated hardwood front baffle simply underlines the fact that occasionally it *does* make sense to knock on wood.

* Optional 7.1 system available

SELECTED FEATURES

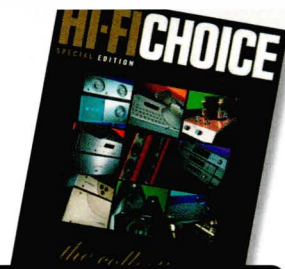
- ▶ Low loss
- ▶ Wide dispersion
- ▶ Ultra-fast drivers
- ▶ Time coherent
- ▶ Low coloration
- ▶ Amplifier optimised



www.dali.dk

IN ADMIRATION...

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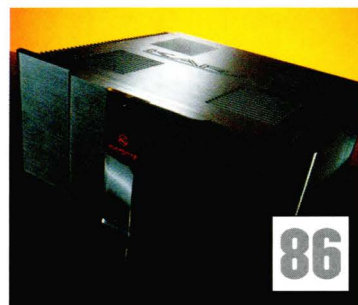
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"This amplifier can blow your house over but loses nothing from the music"

Your Guide to Hi-Fi and Home Cinema, January 2004, Stan Curtis



"Combining clarity with control is virtually a three word encapsulation of the KAV400xi"

Hi Fi Choice, November 2003, Alvin Gold



KAV400xi

"The new player not just delights with the still quite rare SACDs, it also knows how to please with CDs"

Audio, Germany, September 2003

"If I had to choose one SACD player, (regardless of price), I'd go for the Krell."

Stereophile, December 2003, Michael Fremer

"A unit capable of delivering performance at the very top in the reproduction of CD and SACD"

Audio Review, Italy, November 2003, Franco Guida

"The 'Standard' is a player with...guts"

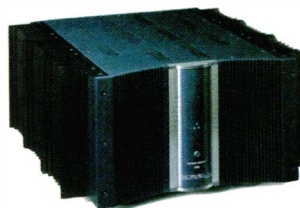
Diario de Noticias, Portugal, September 2003, JVH



SACD

KRELL'S ANGELS THE NEXT CHAPTER

From its arrival with a single power amplifier in 1980, Krell's exclusive product range has evolved into a total system concept. Because it is now recognised as the premier high-end audio and home theatre brand, Krell has been compelled to create the ultimate in audio-only and audio-video systems from front to back. Its range of amplification devices have been augmented over the years by CD transports, digital converters and audio/video processors. In 2004, the concept reaches fruition with the ascendancy of both definitive source components – the SACD Standard and the DVD Standard – and a range of loudspeakers suitable for pure music or multi-channel cinematic pleasure.

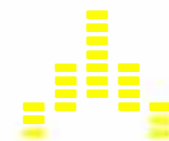


Krell FPB 700cx

"There's a timeless quality to all-round excellence, and the FPB 700cx has just that"

Hi Fi News, June 2003, Martin Colloms

Krell has also expanded its catalogue vertically, with the KAV and Showcase ranges for entry-level and mid-level systems, and the rare and exotic Reference Series for systems without limit. Regardless of the model, however, a component must attain the highest standards of sonic performance, ergonomic excellence, superior build quality and long-term dependability before its front panel is graced with the Krell badge. Krell - a premier high-end company by excellence.



absolutesounds Ltd.



TOWNSHEND AUDIO TA-565 UNIVERSAL DISC PLAYER



Take a look at hi-fi guru Max Townshend's new 'audiophile' universal disc player – a fully modified machine based on a Pioneer DV-565A chassis, designed specifically with high-end audio performance in mind. Max has 40 years of audio experience under his belt and his key mods include changing the integrated circuit amps, upgrading the critical resistors and capacitors, and providing separate power supplies for the audio stages and D/A converters.

Beneath the player a separate case contains the switching, mains filtering and external DC power supplies. All this luxurious aural indulgence resides on the latest version of Townshend's isolation platform, the justly renowned Seismic Sink. Max claims his latest baby is the best disc player at any price, and redefines the meaning of high-end digital audio. We can't wait to hear if he's right...

To find out more, see our exclusive in-depth review in the next edition of Hi-Fi Choice

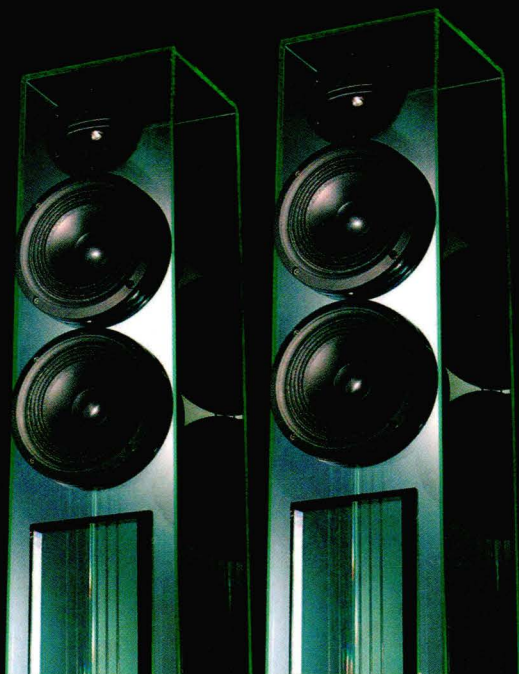
PRODUCT Townshend Audio TA-565

TYPE Universal disc player

PRICE £2,500

KEY FEATURES Modified Pioneer DV-565A universal DVD player • Plays DVD-Audio, DVD-Video, SACD, CD • Modifications include special power supply and integrated Seismic Sink isolation platform

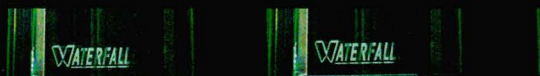
CONTACT ☎ 020 8979 2155
 🌐 www.townshendaudio.com



WATERFALL KRYSTA

Waterfall has made 'clear' that revisions to its transparent glass Krysta speaker range have resulted in significantly better performance. The French speaker brand, whose speciality is cabinets made from 6mm-thick glass, has introduced a new titanium dome tweeter designed specifically for its requirements. The tweeter joins a newly enhanced crossover in both the Victoria (pictured) and Iguascu floorstanders, which use drive units from fellow French firm Triangle.

Price Iguascu: £1,500 per pair, Victoria: £2,000 per pair **Due** September
 ☎ 020 8863 9117 🌐 www.bbg-av.com



SONY XDR-S1

Sony will be entering the DAB digital radio market for the first time in September with the launch of the XDR-S1 DAB table-top radio. The Japanese giant claims its new radio will "define the top end of the market" thanks to its extensive feature set, digital connectivity options and superior sound quality. In addition to standard DAB and AM/FM reception, the unit has L-band capability – useful in those European countries where this band is set to carry DAB stations, both now and in the future. You can also save scrolling radio data, such as website addresses and phone numbers for later use, and wake up to DAB with the alarm function.

Price £200 **Due** September
 ☎ 08705 111999 🌐 www.sony.co.uk



DENON AVR-2805

Hot on the heels of Denon's excellent £1,000 AVR-3805 multichannel receiver (see review, HFC 256) comes the new, lower priced AVR-2805, claimed by Denon to offer "a new price/performance benchmark". It replaces last year's AVR-2803 and comes with a microphone for automatic set-up and room EQ. It also sports the latest codecs and DSPs, and as usual Denon claims a musical performance that's much better than average for an AV product.

Price £700 **Due** Now
 ☎ 01234 741 200 🌐 www.denon.co.uk



PMC DB1+/TB2+/FB1+

PMC has introduced changes to three of its key domestic models, said to result in a wider off-axis dispersion, higher power handling and significantly lower distortion. The DB1+, TB2+ and FB1+ replace the original models and now feature the same 27mm soft dome tweeter used by PMC in more expensive models (and also the recently introduced GB1). PMC says the modifications give its entry-level speakers the same 'sonic imprint' as their bigger brothers – exhibiting high signal definition, extended frequency response and tonal consistency. The new tweeter has also enabled improvements to be made to the crossovers to give greater power handling.

Price DB1+: £625 per pair, TB2+: £795 per pair, FB1+: £1,625 per pair **Due** Now
 ☎ 0870 444 1044 🌐 www.pmc-speakers.com





ARCAM CD192

➤ Arcam's new upsampling CD player sits at the top of its entry-level DiVA range and promises market-leading technology and a host of design upgrades. In fact, the company's managing director Charlie Brennan goes as far as to say, "We don't know of a better sounding CD player... close to this price". Features include 24-bit/192kHz upsampling, four Wolfson DACs per channel and upgraded 'audiophile' components throughout. The upsampling techniques used are said to effectively 'upgrade' CD sound quality. **Price** £850 **Due** Now ☎ 01223 203200 🌐 www.arcam.co.uk



LEXICON RV-8

➤ American high-end AV specialist Lexicon has unveiled its new flagship multichannel receiver with independent zone monitoring, which provides control of audio and video sources in three room zones. The RV-8 sports eight configurable inputs, a radio tuner plus a 140-watt output across each of its eight channels.

Price £5,500 **Due** Now
☎ 01423 359054 🌐 www.lexicon.com



MARANTZ PM-11S1

➤ Marantz's dedication to two-channel audio continues with the latest addition to its upmarket Premium range. The PM-11S1 is a 100-watt integrated amp "built for audiophile purists" and designed to exploit the potential of high-resolution audio by offering greater channel separation and frequency response. Vinyl lovers are catered for with a high-quality phono stage and it's said to be able to drive difficult loads with its low impedance power supply and huge energy reserves.

Price £2,500 **Due** September
☎ 01753 680868 🌐 www.marantz.com

Soundbites

BLACK RHODIUM has a new £250 interconnect called the Opera that's specifically designed to exploit the Eichmann bullet plugs it uses. Bullet plugs use a small-diameter connector which is said to improve the audio signal by ensuring eddy currents and internal reflections are removed. The Opera uses a 0.9mm-diameter pure silver wire for best results. ☎ 01332 361390

SUPRA is the latest cable company to release a range of HDMI/DVI cables. It offers DVI to HDMI leads and adaptors, with proprietary HDMI connectors. Cables are available in lengths of up to 15 metres with prices starting at £40. ☎ 01622 664070

SLAPPA is a new name in CD storage systems. Its range includes a number of robust storage systems for music lovers on the move. Its latest product, the 360 Pro (£35) holds up to 360 discs in a hard-shell case with industrial strength zips and heavy-duty brass handles. The case is claimed to be impact, heat and water-resistant. 🌐 www.slappa.com

MARK LEVINSON is back in production after nearly a year's hiatus following the closure of the Madrigal factory. The first products including the new 320S preamp (£5,995) will be in the UK by the end of August. ☎ 01727 865488

ISOTEK has added two new products to its mains cleaning range. The new Gemini (£195) and Orion (£295) mains conditioners are part of the brand's new GII series, and replace the old MainLine model. Both units provide two individually filtered outlets to protect from mains spikes and surges, and come supplied with a 25-year guarantee. ☎ 01635 291357



LUMLEY LAMPROS CONCERT GRAND

➤ Lumley's enormous Concert Grand speaker has been designed to reproduce the dynamics and scale of an orchestra with concert-level sound performance. The British-made speaker boasts a complex custom driver array with four (count 'em) ribbon super-tweeters, four tweeters, four midrange units and a 30cm (12in) bass driver, with a further two full range drivers at the back.

Price £30,000 per pair **Due** Now
☎ 01892 539245 🌐 www.metropolis-music.com

The Insider

THIS MONTH, HFC TALKS TO...

RICARDO FRANASSOVICI

Job title: Company founder
Company: Absolute Sounds



What is the current state of the high-end market?

The market is split between the traditional two-channel audiophile, and the successful new entrepreneur, who seeks the finest luxury goods and is prepared to entrust his dealer to supply him with the ultimate AV.

Is multichannel selling better than two-channel?

In the UK high-end market, the split is approximately fifty-fifty.

Are there any trends emerging from high-end custom installations?

Yes, consumers are creating dedicated rooms incorporating audio, video, internet and lighting elements, all channelled through new ISP controllers.

What is the future for high-end music?

I believe it to be far greater than current market expectations. The search for ultimate sound reproduction will grow exponentially in line with the general demand for high quality product.

How do you think internet music downloads will affect our industry?

It is hard to foresee the true impact, but its introduction is certainly changing the way people store their music and the way the recording industry and musicians will perceive their rights in the future.

Hi-Fi Diary

SEPTEMBER

24-26 The Hi-Fi Show and AV Expo
Heathrow, London
020 8774 0847
London's established hi-fi show

OCTOBER

23-24 Home Entertainment Show
Manchester
01524 36991
Premier AV show in the northwest

NOVEMBER

5-7 What Hi-Fi Sound & Vision Show
Novotel London West Hotel
020 8267 8378
Second year for this new home cinema and hi-fi show

Can-tastic

Texas Instruments, makers of the Burr-Brown range of digital to analogue converters, has produced a high performance headphone driver that's designed to make the most of high-resolution formats. With both signal to noise and dynamic range exceeding 120dB, the TPA6120A2 is fully equipped to take advantage of SACD and DVD-Audio. It also has a phenomenal claimed slew rate of 1300V/ μ s, which in audio terms means that its transient response should be swift to say the least. TI's Eric Droge says the chip has "exceptional dynamics, detail and harmonic accuracy".

Designed for use in both professional audio equipment and domestic hi-fi, the TPA6120A2 has impressive driving power, being capable of driving nearly a volt into headphones with impedances up to 2k Ω . Enough to keep the deafest roadie entertained, whatever type of headphones he uses.

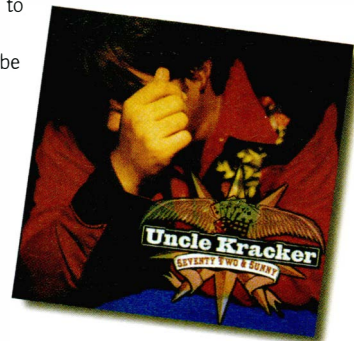


New disc method

SRS Labs has a new system for converting stereo music into surround sound. Circle Surround is an encode/decode system that can provide up to 6.1 channels of information from a two-channel source. Unlike Dolby's original Pro-Logic matrix system, CS provides full-bandwidth, discrete channels and can be transmitted via online streaming, FM radio and television broadcasting.

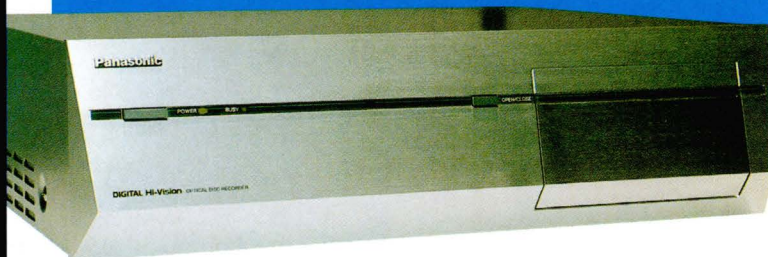
The first CDs with CS coding are *The Celtic Circle I and II*, produced by BMG Hong Kong for sale in China. In the US, Lava Records has used CS on Uncle Kracker's *Seventy Two & Sunny*.

The format has also found favour with radio broadcasters in China and Japan as well as TV channels in the US. It can be decoded by some existing matrix decoders but Circle Surround-equipped decoding chips can be found in the latest components from Marantz, Kenwood, Theta Digital and Accuphase, according to SRS.



Blu-ray recorders ahoy

Panasonic has entered the Blu-ray disc recorder market in Japan with a machine capable of recording up to 50GB of audio/video data onto single and dual layer discs. Blu-ray is one of several high-resolution video formats contending to replace DVD, with a 27GB per side recording capacity and a high-speed data transfer rate of 36Mbps. It will also record AAC 5.1 channel sound where this is available. Panasonic's DMR-E700BD is capable of recording up to four and a half hours of high-definition (HDTV) video (nine hours standard). It will go on sale in Japan for around £1,500, with rewritable 50GB blank discs at £40. At present there are no plans to sell the DMR-E700BD in the UK because there is no HDTV broadcasting to record – and even when it eventually becomes available it's unlikely that broadcasters will allow copying at this level of resolution. It's as yet unclear if Blu-ray will offer any benefits from a sound quality point of view but it is capable of storing multichannel soundtracks if they're broadcast.



Left: Panasonic's Blu-ray prototype from which the DMR-E700BD has evolved



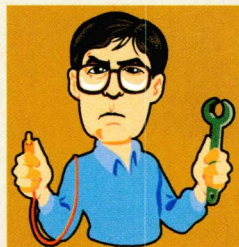
Copy wrapper

Specialist copy protection firm SunnComm has unveiled its latest weapon for the record industry's fight against file sharing. MediaMax Version 5 incorporates DRM (digital rights management) coding which allows users to transfer songs from a protected CD to their PCs and thence to a personal audio player (like Apple's iPod) without the DRM "wrapper" being disturbed. In other words, it stops the file being copied again, which is not the case with most existing systems. Until now it has been necessary to supply 'pre-protected' copies of each music track on a CD to achieve this, a system which has not always been successful in protecting the standard PCM (uncompressed CD audio) version.

MMS will also benefit SACD and DVD-Audio makers because as Sunncomm puts it, this "will eliminate any potential publisher royalty liability they might incur when a second, protected copy of every track is placed on the CD."

JIMMY'S TWEAKS #24

HANDY HINTS FROM JIMMY HUGHES – HI-FI'S SUPER TWEAKER



Take care of your ears (3)

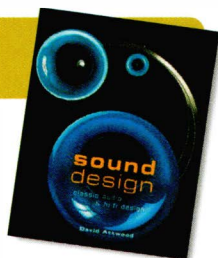
If you love good sound, suffering from bunged-up waxy ears can be hell. Invariably, one ear tends to be more bunged up than the other, which leads to a lop-sided stereo balance, and unpleasant 'pressure' effects. Somehow, being able to hear less well out of one ear is worse than being able to hear

badly out of both – it creates a sense of unbalance. In drastic cases the only answer is to have your ears syringed.

This is an uncomfortable experience, and needs to be undertaken by an experienced medical practitioner. But the difference afterwards is phenomenal. Although your hearing (for a few weeks at least) is a mite too sensitive, it soon adjusts. The simplest, least expensive way to upgrade your hi-fi!

TOP 10 HI-FI BOOKS...

- Sound Design: Classic Audio & Hi-Fi Design** David Attwood
- Audio And Hi-fi Handbook** Ian Sinclair
- The Complete Guide To High-End Audio** Keith Jarrett
- The LP Is Back** (Audio Amateur Press)
- Record Collector: Rare Record Price Guide** (Diamond publishing group)
- High Performance Loudspeakers** Martin Colloms
- The Audio Dictionary** Glenn D White
- How To Set Up And Fine Tune A Turntable** (Ringmat Developments)
- Digital Audio Technology** Jan Maes
- Home Theater For Dummies** Danny Briere



New Music

IN THE STUDIO

ARTISTS RECENTLY ABSENT FROM THE CUT AND THRUST OF SHOWBIZ HYPE DUE TO FINISHING THEIR LATEST ALBUMS



OASIS

Title: tbc

Release date: late 2004

Oasis have scrapped the album that was being produced by *Death In Vegas*, a rethink apparently occasioned by their lukewarm Glastonbury performance. "The moment has passed for that batch of songs. So it's back to the drawing board really. We've got to decide what kind of record we're going to do now, but hopefully it will be out by the end of the year," Noel Gallagher says.

ELVIS COSTELLO

Title: tbc

Release date: 20 Sept

Elvis Costello has been in Oxford, Mississippi with his band the Imposters. The new album is said to have a strong country flavour, with Emmylou Harris and Lucinda Williams on guest vocals, and pedal steel guitarist John McFee on several tracks. On the same day, Costello will also release *Il Sogno*, his first full-length orchestral work on the classical label, Deutsche Grammophon.

THE THRILLS

Title: *Let's Bottle Bohemia*

Release date: 13 September

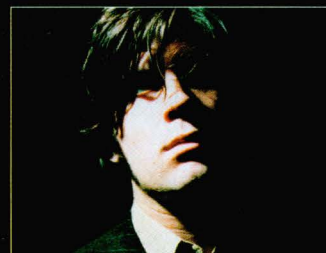
Dublin's The Thrills are in New York putting the finishing touches to their second album, produced by Dave Sardy. Reflecting their fixation with classic American rock, guests include REM's Peter Dinklage on guitar and mandolin and string arrangements by legendary Beach Boys collaborator Van Dyke Parks.

ED HARCOURT

Title: *Strangers*

Release date: 13 September

The most promising of the post-David Gray clutch of British troubadours,



Ed Harcourt returns with his third album. "There are a lot of love songs. I'm feeling much happier about life these days," Harcourt says. The dozen titles include *Born In The 70s*, *Kids (Rise From The Ashes)* and *Black Dress*.

EMBRACE

Title: tbc

Release date: September

Coldplay's Chris Martin has written a song for Embrace's fourth album. The other ten tracks were written by the band's Richard and Danny McNamara. "We've always loved Embrace and Danny is one of my best friends," Martin says. "When we wrote *Gravity* we thought it sounded like them, so I asked Danny if he wanted the song."

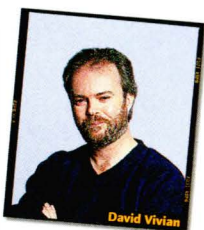
ALSO COMING SOON...

JAZZ/ CLASSICAL

Pierre Boulez Ravel: Bolero (Sep), **Oliver Latry** Midnight At Notre Dame (Sep), **Clare Teal** tbc (Oct), **Miles Davis** Seven Steps To Heaven (Oct)

DVD-AUDIO/ SACD

Carpenters The Singles: 1969-1981 (SACD, Sep), **Crystal Method** Legion Of Boom (DVD-A, Aug), **Jean-Michel Jarre** Aero (DVD-A, Aug), **Lionel Ritchie** Just For You (SACD, Aug), **Bryn Terfel** Mozart: Don Giovanni (SACD, Sep)



David Vivian

Because I got high

Is bigger always better, or just expensive?

The question isn't so much where does high-end start but where does it all end? Does it end at all or does the boat get pushed out so far it's set adrift on the tides of excess until it disappears off the edge of the radar?

The edge of sanity might be closer to the truth. I have just listened to a system – a simple stereo system mind you – worth in the region of £160,000. One hundred and sixty big ones. It doesn't matter how quickly you say it, that's a drastic strain on the plastic.

Let's see. A fine house with breathtaking views in north Wales could be yours for less. Or how about a perfectly decent Linn hi-fi with an Aston Martin Vanquish attached? You could even have a stab at owning all the

“I have just listened to a system – a simple stereo system mind you – worth £160,000.”

music in the world, or at least 202,531 MP3 tracks from the new iTunes Music Store.

That system. Audiomeca CD transport and Boulder 2020 DAC, Boulder 2010 preamp and two pairs of ECA monoblocks, Lumley Stratosphere turntable/Graham arm and Boulder 2009 phono stage. Then there's the Sequerra tuner and last, but very far from least, a pair of Lumley Lampros Concert Grand speakers (see *AudioFile*, p9), standing a strapping 1.8 metres tall, weighing 140 kilos each and costing a reassuringly expensive, but entirely proportionate, £30,000.

Who owns a system like this? Why, John Jefferies. Yeah, the 'Jefferies' in Jefferies Hi-Fi, the hi-fi shop he inherited from his dad that put Eastbourne on the audio map. The name will also be familiar to anyone who's had dealings with John's The Sounds Of Music stores in Tunbridge Wells or its sister business Metropolis Music, which imports and distributes such exotic hi-fi brands as Boulder, Balanced Audio Technology and Hovland,

along with John's own brand of loudspeakers and amplification, Lumley.

As you've probably guessed, John has a personal penchant for big systems. This one is absolutely huge, completely dominating the spacious (23x19 feet), purpose-built listening room in his pretty East Sussex cottage. But then, for John, high-end hi-fi isn't about tunes or tapping your feet in time, it's about scale and believability. “I believe that to experience great scale and believability in music, the size of the speaker and, indeed, the number and distribution of drive units is very important,” he said. Quite. The Concert Grand doesn't look like a speaker, it looks like a noise weapon. Thing is, it doesn't sound like a speaker, either. At least, none I've heard before. I came away from John's utterly shocked. So this was high-end. I guessed it might be better than 202,531 MP3s, but better than an Aston Vanquish?

David Vivian has been wallowing in gorgeous hi-fi and then describing its virtues/vices in Hi-Fi Choice since 1990



All together now

Digital convergence – coming, ready or not

It should have happened by now. Accented by a peculiar mating ritual (and I mean peculiar), digital convergence – a cross-breeding of specialised consumer electronics gear with your home computer – should have already occurred. That Denon amplifier? It should have an 802.11g antenna sticking off the back of it like a soldier saluting his flag. Canon GL2 digital video camera? Should be Ultrawideband-friendly by now. And, for gosh sakes, the 'Net-Tunes' technology from Onkyo? Should have jumped on the Wi-Fi bandwagon ages ago. But, no, it's not quite happening.

That's right, digital convergence is still a buzzword, not a reality. It's still too hard to get MP3 files from the den to the living room. Some of us have amassed a record-store's worth of music files, dropping them onto iPods and burning them to CD-ROM audio discs (as a back-up, mind you). We're more than ready for Sony and Marantz to add support for internet streaming from Napster and Real Rhapsody to their products.

Instead, we have to live with a bevy of bogus bridge-gappers such as the SMC EZ-Stream and Roku's almost-pro-level SoundBridge. Curiously, few of these 'digital media receivers (a separate deck that sits next to your amp and surround speakers) support such high-end (and commonplace) cabling standards as 'digital coaxial' and 'digital optical'. Even if you recorded your MP3 files in 192kbps, you can forget about moving them across a home network because most receivers only go to 92kbps and sometimes not even that high. Criminal!

So I was surprised to find out that D-Link DSM-320 (www.d-link.com) not only lets you stream the highest quality MP3 files from your computer, but knows what to do with them when they get there, by providing optical and coaxial ports to maintain the high fidelity stream across the channel.

The player also lets you stream video files over the standard 802.11g connection (as MPEG or AVI), listen to Radio@AOL, and even watch a digital photo slideshow on your television. The AOL radio feature is free for ▶

B

RETRO

HI-FI REVISITED

B&O BEOLIT 500 RADIO

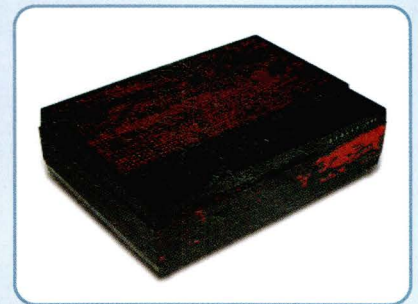


From 1965 to the present day, Bang & Olufsen has been known for some superb portable radios with technically elegant designs,

which set performance and usability standards that have rarely been approached by others. Perhaps the best of the bunch was the Beolit 500, which was introduced in 1966 for a little under £50, a princely sum in those days, and was finally laid to rest in 1975. By any standards it was a remarkable radio, both in its capabilities and in its limitations. It was limited to FM only, which was pretty much unprecedented at the time. In qualitative terms the loss of AM was not a significant issue, but it must have led to some interesting conversations across the shop counter.

An exclusively preset radio with no manual options, each of the five presets was tuned by its own thumbwheel control in the base of the set, which used a varicap diode front end. This was a novel technology, and it required an unusual high-voltage power source – 22.5 volts from a battery originally designed for valve (!) hearing aids. It supplemented no less than six D/HP2 size batteries which looked after the other circuits, though they could be bypassed by a nine-volt mains transformer. The presentation was unusual too. The Beolit 500 could be hung from a wall, or used laying down on a table top.

Internally, the Beolit was well endowed, with a substantial metal chassis and an impressive complement of components contributing to an unusually heavy design. The controls consisted of five large push buttons along one edge, and a rotary volume control. Pressing any preset button switched the radio on, and pressing the volume control switched it off, releasing the selected presets. There were some extra facilities too – an AFC switch (to prevent drifting) and a tone control. The Beolit 500 could even be used as an amplifier and speaker for a record player – only one-watt output though – or as an intercom when used in pairs. The internal amp and large SEAS loudspeaker drive unit produced a sound of surprising sophistication and stature.



“The internal amp and large SEAS speaker drive unit produced a sound of surprising sophistication.”

But 1966 was early days for this type of product, and there were problems, partly associated with the relatively primitive solid state technology deployed inside. My own family's Beolit 500 was extremely heavy on its batteries, and the early varicap tuner front end (which boasted the use of 'germanium transistors' no less) was marginal. In anything other than strong signal conditions, the B&O's design was inadequate for hiss and interference-free FM reception, even though the radio was strictly monaural, which demands a much lower input voltage. Heavily used Beolit 500s didn't withstand the ravages of time particularly well either. Eventually the controls tended to become noisy, and the complex mechanical interlocks for the preset buttons became troublesome.

In the period since the Beolit 500 bit the dust, few have attempted a portable radio anything like as purist or as ambitious as this model, a design that limits itself to the one waveband capable of high-grade sound quality, with an uncommonly elegant preset tuning mechanism and aesthetic design. For a brief but crucial moment in history, the Beolit 500 was the king of portables. In just about every respect, it left the Roberts, Murphys and other popular radios of the day looking clunky and sounding distinctly inferior. **HFC**

Alvin Gold

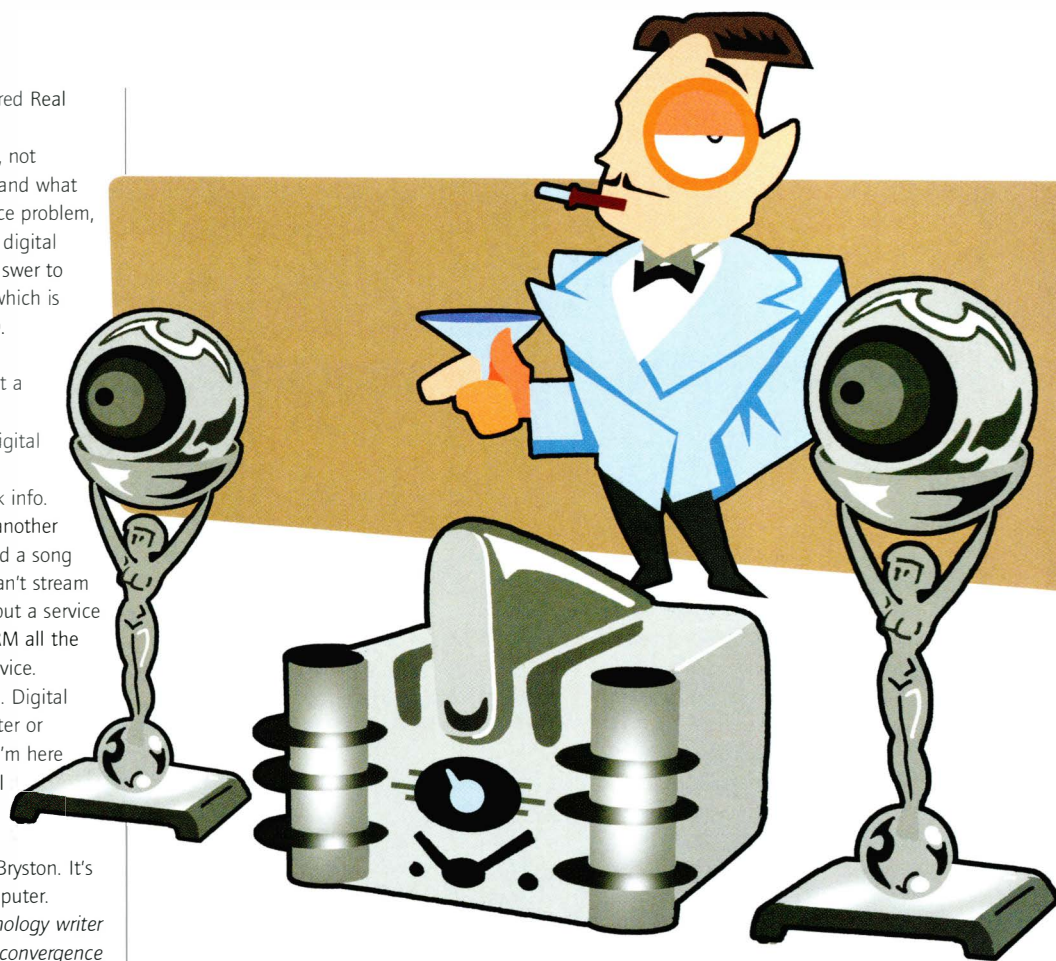
❑ AOL users. (I would have preferred Real Rhapsody streaming myself.)

Still, the D-Link is really bridging, not integrating. What I actually want, and what would solve this digital convergence problem, is universal compliance and better digital rights management. The partial answer to that is Intel's INMPR technology, which is supported by the D-Link DSM-320. Adding a UPnP port to a high-end receiver could allow you to connect a DMR or adapter directly (not as a bridge). The amp could read the digital stream and understand it as local content, giving you artist and track info.

Late this year, Microsoft will fix another digital hole. Today, if you download a song off Real.com as a WMA file, you can't stream the file over a wireless network – but a service pack to Windows will maintain DRM all the way to your digitally converged device.

So, anyway, that's what's coming. Digital convergence is on the way, for better or worse (but it will get better), and I'm here to keep an eye on both sides. Until then, listen for the chick-a chick-a dumb-dumb mating sound emanating from the back of your Bryston. It's trying to get a date with your computer.

John Brandon is a US-based technology writer with the inside track on digital convergence



“You and I approach the recorded arts as we would, say, a gallery full of interesting things, but the rich see it as more of a theme park...”

wash up on our shores it's mostly owing to their need to accumulate and display. You and I approach the recorded arts as we would, say, a gallery or museum full of interesting things; the very rich see it as more of a theme park: “Thank you for visiting Music Land, now please remember to visit the gift shop on your way out”. That the most expensive things in the shop are trophies should not be overlooked.

Which brings me to the here and now, here being the *Stereophile* magazine-sponsored Home Entertainment 2004 show at the New York's Hilton, and now being, well, now. What I have to tell you is this – trophy systems are a dying breed.

By my admittedly unscientific count, the number of crazy-expensive systems being demonstrated at the show was half of what it was at the last such event. Among the missing were Krell, Mark Levinson, Rockport, Nearfield (Pipedreams) and Burmester. However, no absence was more conspicuous than that of Wilson Audio, the Utah-based loudspeaker manufacturer that has arguably done more than any other to push the pricing

envelope – and has profited accordingly. Among showgoers, Wilson is also known for hyping its products with canned, rather than spontaneous, demonstrations only. At past shows there was no shortage of people willing to stand in line for half an hour or more to hear an expensive hi-fi – in the crowded halls of the Hilton, those lines went largely unmissed.

The real buzz at the show? The remarkably good, and remarkably affordable, S5e loudspeaker from Spondor. A lovely sounding new SET valve amp called the Silverline Moto. Cheap, musical tubed electronics from Tektron in Italy. An affordable monophonic phono cartridge from Benz. Alison Kraus on a Mobile Fidelity LP. News of further SACD conquests. And the long-awaited US debut of Cyrus.

I can only wonder: is the old boss dead and gone? Perhaps – and if so, I suspect the new one will be more Ché than Pinochet. As Fitzgerald also famously observed, “There are no second acts in American lives.”

Art Dudley has written for Hi-Fi Heretic, Sounds Like and Listener. He lives in the US and works as Stereophile's editor-at-large

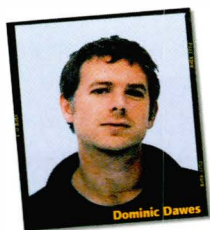


Gatsby's gone

Are the days of the trophy hi-fi numbered?

Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me.” So wrote F Scott Fitzgerald in the early 1920s – a time when, ironically or not, the concept of material wealth as an acceptable cultural determinant began to take hold here in the United States.

As far as very rich *audiophiles* are concerned, the differences are certainly huge – and I won't hesitate to flatter by suggesting that those differences reflect well on you and me and others of average means. There's no denying the appeal of marvellous toys, but most of us are in fact driven to home audio by a desire to get more out of the music recordings we already own, and to stimulate an abiding interest in buying and hearing more of same. By contrast, when the wealthy



Clarity begins at home

Are home servers doomed to hi-fi failure?

Technology never stops moving. And it's clear that one of the biggest trends in the next few years will be custom installations. Systems that are integrated into the physical fabric of the home like never before, that can feed music to any room from a central server; systems, in other words, that fit our vision of what life should be like in the 21st century.

The trend takes many forms – multiroom systems, pre-wired houses, even complete wireless systems.

But is all this falling over ourselves to get pre-wired going to sacrifice our crucial values of sound quality? Can the installation boom continue the traditions of high-fidelity music performance that we all dearly love?

Many would say not, and we should all have a healthy spoonful of scepticism when it comes to these 'smart home' technologies. We already know that the increased digitisation of music can lead to sound sacrifices that at times border on the blasphemous.

Sure, MP3 can make organising your music much more convenient (I know people who now talk only of 'playlists', never 'albums'). But however cute a system is, the idea of hearing compressed, tinny, digital music spitting from my lovely speakers makes my blood pressure higher than an MP3's bit rate.

However, some hi-fi manufacturers are responding to this future shock, by developing products that could combine the convenience of system/home integration with the demands of sonic purists like you and me.

Cyrus, for example, has created CyrusLink: a central 'Linkserver' sits in your hi-fi rack, and contains a hard drive on which all your music is stored. It then feeds your music wirelessly to up to six 'Linkport' units in other rooms.

Cyrus claims the sound quality is equal to its mid-fi products like the 6 and 8 CD players. While some are sceptical, it's true the CyrusLink system benefits sonically from being created by a company with years of experience focusing on sound quality.

So maybe it's not all bad. And besides, a host of other serious hi-fi manufacturers are getting in on the act – Denon (NS-100), Linn (Knekt Kivor) and Marantz (DH9300) all have music servers of this sort, just itching to give listeners the kind of control that could



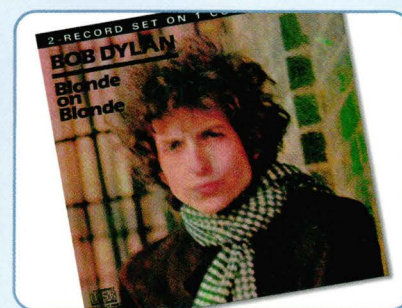
It was one of the strangest musical marriages in history. Having controversially 'gone electric' in 1965, Bob Dylan

had explosively become the hippest creature on the planet as he redefined rock 'n' roll with songs such as *Like A Rolling Stone*. But when in early 1966 he began trying to record a new album with his rock 'n' roll touring band the Hawks (soon to become The Band), the sessions left him dissatisfied. On the suggestion of his producer Bob Johnston, Dylan relocated to Nashville and Columbia's Music Row studio to record the album with the best sessioners that money could buy, including guitarists Wayne Moss and Jerry Kennedy, multi-instrumentalist Charlie McCoy, Joe South on bass, Kenny Buttrey on drums and blind pianist Hargus 'Pig' Robbins.

At the time it was an extraordinary move. With his corkscrew hair and modish clothes, Dylan was the epitome of New York bohemian chic. To these good ol' country boys from the backwoods of Tennessee, who were more accustomed to working with Jim Reeves, he resembled a creature from another planet. Yet out of the unique chemistry generated by this culture clash came one of the most radical albums of all time.

The Nashville cats Dylan employed were used to churning out formulaic country and western hits to order. They were astonished by his approach. Dylan thought nothing of keeping them waiting around in the studio all day and half the night on top union rates while he finished working on new songs. "They would be sitting there for maybe ten hours while he wrote," recalls Al Kooper, who played organ on the sessions. As he wanted to record the musicians playing live, Dylan also instructed the janitor to demolish with saw and sledgehammer the partitions that divided up the studio into individual sound booths.

"I thought the guy had blown a gasket, and we were basically humouring him," Buttrey later said. Charlie McCoy also wondered "what in the hell this guy was trying to pull." At one point they even got a ouija board to ask the spirit world to divine Dylan's purpose. They



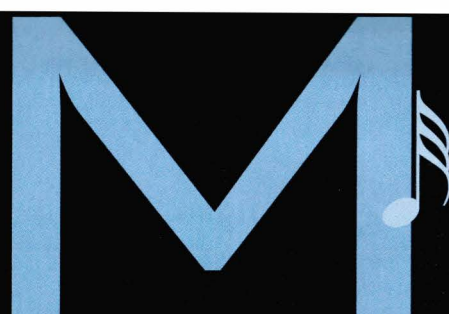
"This album took Dylan's work – and rock 'n' roll itself – to unimaginable new heights."

were even more baffled when he emerged from his marathon writing sessions with songs full of lines such as "the ghost of electricity howls in the bones of her face". They'd never come across lyrics like that working with Elvis Presley and Roy Orbison.

Yet confused as they were, when they were called upon they worked for their money. Given only the most sketchy outline of what Dylan wanted to do, they nevertheless cut long, complex epics such as *Visions Of Johanna* and *Sad Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands*, the album's two cornerstones, in single, perfect takes. On such tracks you can hear musicians used to playing-by-numbers being stretched beyond anything they've ever done before – and rising to the challenge.

During further sessions fitted in between tour dates over the next month, Dylan and his improbable Nashville crew refined what he called "that thin, wild, mercury sound, metallic and bright gold." Released as the first ever rock 'n' roll double album in May 1966, *Blonde On Blonde's* sophistication, power and lyricism took Dylan's art – and rock 'n' roll itself – to previously unimaginable new heights. It's since been released on SACD, which corrected the travesty of its original transition to CD during which it was sacrilegiously cut to allow it to fit on a single disc. **HFC**

Nigel Williamson



MUSO

CLASSIC ALBUMS

BOB DYLAN
BLONDE ON BLONDE



“Brit-fi used to be more focused on the lower end of the price scale – but this is changing.”

❏ make our houses fit for the future without ignoring the imperative to play music *well*.

So let's not ignore the trend: what we need is more serious hi-fi manufacturers to cater for the needs of the modern home while also making products that sound good. And if that happens, who knows? Soon we might all be sitting in our fully automated homes, wondering how we ever managed without central servers and wireless technology.

Dominic Dawes is a freelance writer and musician with a deep love of music and a corresponding passion for hi-fi



Steve Harris

Take the high end

Why British high end now looks the part

I began this column by trying to work out a definition of 'high end' in relation to hi-fi. It's a phrase we all use, but what does it actually mean? Does it mean high performance? Expensive? Or just a huge amount spent on the front panel?

Certainly, most British hi-fi doesn't fit into the last two categories but high performance seems to be the norm. Of course, some Brit products are better than others but even the lower priced ones generally deliver great value. British specialist hi-fi was traditionally more focused on the low to middle end of the price scale as Britain had the only budget audiophile market in the world – but things are changing.

Traditionally the local stuff has been a bit 'hair shirt' in the fit and finish department, with the argument that "all the money has been spent where it counts". But recently some of our favourite brands have realised that to compete more effectively in world markets, industrial design had to be improved.

The Brits are moving upmarket. Witness new products from Arcam, Linn, Meridian and Naim to mention a few, products that stand up to scrutiny the world over and are no longer cosmetically challenged. Loudspeakers from B&W, KEF and Mission, as examples, now have serious industrial design input, as do turntables from Avid and Loricraft.

Better fit and finish costs money and this must be reflected in the retail price but in general it is balanced by increased desirability. However, there will be a few customers who feel that those companies improving their cosmetic design have sold out their original ideals and move on to newer 'hair shirt' designs from other companies.

Manufacturing great hi-fi and AV products in the UK isn't easy. The legislation involved is

horrendous and getting worse. The CE mark, for example, is an indicator that the product conforms to all relevant regulations. This means safety, EMC – radiation of RF – and possibly the 'topple tests' for speakers. The WEE directive encompassing 'electrical and electronic waste' will come into force in 2006 and new ROHS regulations will effectively ban lead-based solder among other things.

So UK manufacturers are doing a fantastic job with products that do the job well – against the odds. But their real achievement is that they have moved on to keep up with a changing world marketplace without losing track of what the equipment is there for – to deliver a performance that is world-beating. That is 'high end'.

Steve Harris is chairman of hi-fi trade organisation the BFA (British Federation of Audio) and a former MD of Mordaunt-Short



Stuart M. Robinson

Disc denial

What has high-res ever done for us?

Without any doubt, both of today's high-resolution digital audio formats raise the bar in terms of fidelity – being able to listen to studio masters in almost identical

digital form on your home system was unthinkable just a few short years ago. Among 'audiophiles', one would think such potential would be welcomed with open arms, but the audiophile is sometimes a breed bogged down by endless technical arguments and prejudice, just the sort of thing that stifles the progression of the high-end rather than encourages it.

The first hurdles are the technical ones and usually revolve around SACD's noise shaping and DVD-Audio's watermarking. DSD, the coding system used by SACD, has a non-linear noise floor; across most of the audible band the signal-to-noise ratio is between 122dB (at 20Hz) and 110dB (at 20kHz), but at 50kHz performance is significantly compromised and a signal-to-noise ratio no better than 80dB can be achieved. Moreover, SACD players are required to have a 43dB per-octave roll-off filter before their analogue outputs to avoid high-amplitude, high-frequency noise from damaging downstream components. To the audiophile these numbers illustrate something bad is happening. He's not sure what exactly, but having rejected an amp with a THD of 0.00002% for one that boasts 0.00001%, nothing that measures so poorly will ever be allowed in his system.

For 24-bit DVD-Audio, with its linear 143dB signal-to-noise ratio to 96kHz, watermarking is the primary issue, a process whereby the captured audio is wantonly contaminated by the record company so they can trace the source of pirated discs. The fact that it's optional, usually completely inaudible and can also be applied to SACD doesn't lessen the DVD-Audiophile's pain – it's the principal!

The second problem both formats face is that of the fuddy-duddy mentality, notions such as multichannel being the spawn of the devil and display devices having no place within a system. Such prejudices blur the line between personal predilection and objective reasoning – you or I might prefer stereo to surround, but arguing that multichannel is nothing more than a gimmick demonstrates a lack of understanding for real acoustic spaces. Similarly, vinyl might be your favourite format, but believing it is more "accurate" than either DVD-Audio or SACD is misguided.

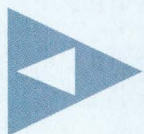
Today's high-res formats offer a wealth of possibilities for the audiophile, but he must be willing to keep an open mind. It will be impossible to convince the most draconian clicking and popping vinyl addict that DVD-A and SACD have anything worthwhile to offer, but for the rest of us, the promise of higher-resolution sources, multichannel sound and the ability to enjoy music in a whole new way should be welcomed with open arms.

Stuart M Robinson is editor and publisher of HighFidelityReview.com, a website dedicated to high-resolution digital sound

TECHNO

TECHNOLOGY EXPLORED

IT'S ALL IN
THE TIMING



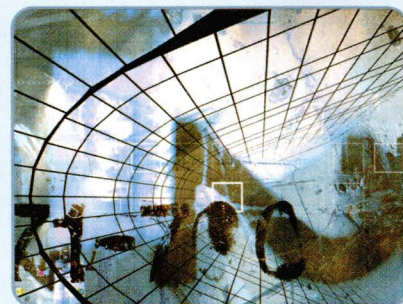
'Timing' is a much-used term in talking about hi-fi – and justifiably so. Most music is intrinsically rhythmic and indeed studies have shown

that we recognise familiar tunes more readily from their rhythm than from the melody alone with equal note values. But to what extent does audio reproduction equipment interfere with the natural timing of music, and how and why does it matter?

It's sometimes stated that the human ear is not sensitive to phase distortion. 'Phase distortion' basically means timing errors which cause some frequencies to be slightly delayed relative to others. That assertion is certainly false, as the following thought experiment will demonstrate. Filter an audio signal to remove the treble. Take the result and subtract it from the original so that a third signal is produced containing high frequencies alone. Adding the second and third signals together will reproduce the input, so we've not lost any information. Now record those second and third signals on two separate recorders, and then play them back but start one replay a second, or a minute, or a week, before the other. This produces only phase distortion, but its audibility is hardly a matter of conjecture. The signal will be subjectively wrecked.

So phase distortion is audible in extreme cases, and what's left is to determine the smallest amount that we can still hear. This isn't simple. The problem is that phase shift in analogue filters is near-inextricably linked with frequency response (amplitude) so it's hard to know which effect one is listening to. However, experiments with digital filters, which with care can be made to operate on amplitude and phase almost completely independently, suggest that under some circumstances we can hear phase shifts certainly below the millisecond level.

Where does phase distortion come from? As we've said, it is a byproduct of filtering processes. In a complicated analogue recording chain, there may be a dozen or more amplifying stages, each with finite bass and treble extension and associated phase



“Digital filtering can restore the phase to some extent, and help restore the ‘kick’ to recordings.”

shifts, which all add up. Using a simple tone control to compensate for the slight treble and bass loss won't restore the phase response, but careful use of digital filtering can restore the phase to some extent, given a few educated guesses about how far wrong it might be, and this can be particularly beneficial in restoring the 'kick' to recordings.

The other major source of phase distortion is the speaker. Due to the nature of sound radiation, some frequencies 'bounce around' before being launched at the listener and this can have a dramatic effect on their phase, even when frequency response appears flat. In fact, a very slightly bumpy amplitude response is often a telltale indicator of a seriously wobbly phase response. Could this be the more audible part of the problem?

It could, and increasing numbers of speaker designers are trying to do something about it. But beware. Just because a speaker has only one driver it's not necessarily phase perfect – Eclipse models, for instance, succeed as much because of their smooth shape as because there is only one driver. And manufacturers who claim improved phase response due to 'high speed' cables may be badly missing the point – differences there are several orders of magnitude lower than those due to diffraction and other loudspeaker maladies. **HFC**

Richard Black



ESSENTIALS



FURUTECH RD-2 CD DEMAGNETISER £200

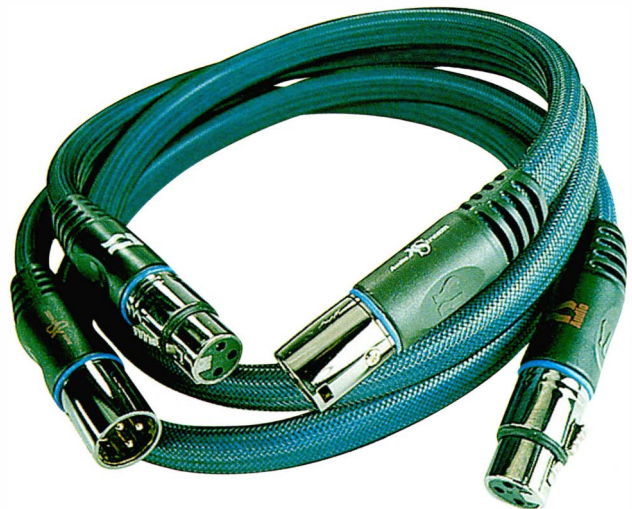
The premise behind this device seems fantastically improbable – that the ink on CDs can become magnetised, and that when that magnetism is rotated, as the disc plays, it can create electromagnetic signals within the CD player that interfere with the disc replay. Like all the best snake oil it's near-impossible to prove or disprove, not least because after treating a disc one can't 'untreat' it for further comparison. All the same, we gave it several tries with various discs and players, and found that positive results did seem to occur reliably with cheaper players – high-end two-box machines seem less bothered. There's a definite improvement in clarity and a general 'revitalising' of the sound that's frankly alarming in its extent. With treatment taking only 20 seconds per disc it's an easy tweak to apply and if you can suspend disbelief you'll find a worthwhile lift in performance.

☎ 0870 240 7228 🌐 www.choicebits.co.uk

PS AUDIO XSTREAM STATEMENT INTERCONNECT £291 (1M PAIR)

Compared with the plethora of RCA-terminated cables, balanced XLR-terminated ones are relatively rare. This is an upmarket example using two separate coaxial wires to carry the signal 'hot' and 'return', with ground being common. We've had mixed results with such a geometry in the past, but this one gives excellent results in most departments, with a slightly dark tone colour which doesn't detract from the excellent resolution and frequency extension. Benefits of balanced operation are not always apparent, but it convinced in tests and it seems a fine choice for high-res systems.

☎ 020 7435 1222 🌐 www.psaudio.com



MARIGO LABS STEALTH 3-D CD MAT £80

The price might seem high for what you get, but this is a rather high-tech device made from a composite material, including carbon fibre and Kevlar plus fine silver wires. The combination of materials is alleged to provide optimum mechanical damping of discs as well as cancellation of electrostatic fields due to static charges on the disc, while the green colour of the top surface should help absorb stray laser light (the bottom surface is black). We tried the disc both ways up and found that it does indeed give a slight improvement in detail and focus, more marked on cheaper CD players. Worth a try, though other, cheaper, mats seem to do much the same.

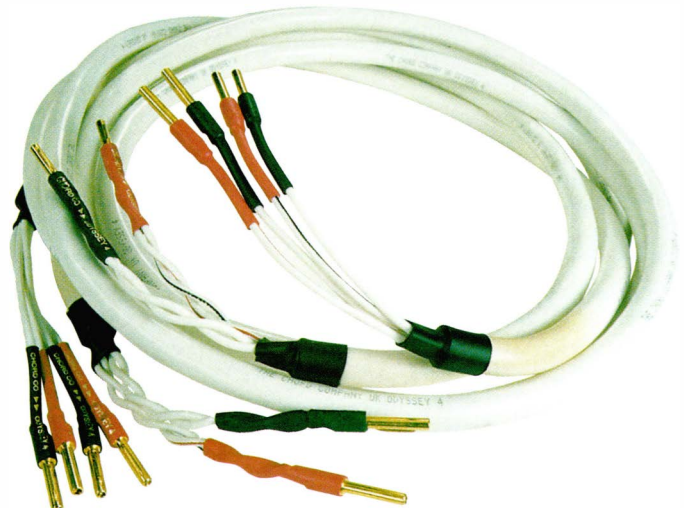
☎ 0870 240 7228 🌐 www.choicebits.co.uk



CHORD COMPANY ODYSSEY 4 SPEAKER CABLE £34 (PER METRE)

Sitting near the top of the Chord Co's range, this bi-wire design effectively doubles up on the standard Odyssey in a single jacket. Each of the four conductors is of silver-plated copper insulated with Teflon, paralleled in pairs at one end. It was tried in bi-wire mode and paralleled at both ends, and while that's a matter of taste the basic character of the cable seems consistent. It's admirably 'fast' and confident with great bass impact, though low-frequency extension may not be the greatest. Treble is clean and well defined, while imaging is precise but perhaps not quite as deep as some.

☎ 01980 625700 🌐 www.chord.co.uk





INCOGNITO ARM REWIRE FOR REGA ARMS £115

▶ Rega's famous RB250/300 tonearm is one of the great audio classics, but it has never carried particularly fancy cable. The Incognito kit offers a fix for that, with a complete wiring loom from cartridge to phono plugs made from high-quality materials. The 1.2m leads are of shielded twisted pair design and terminate in good-quality plugs. The ground wire is separate from the audio conductors and the whole affair is well made and highly practical, taking only minutes to fit. And the sound? A very clear improvement on the standard issue. A modified RB300 tested on a Pink Triangle and on a Garrard 401 showed consistently better detail resolution and solidity than an original version, with various cartridges. Noise seemed lower and in an awkward installation hum was definitely reduced.

☎ 01234 741152 🌐 www.britishaudio.co.uk



EBEN ACOUSTICS COLDRAY ISOLATION FEET £50

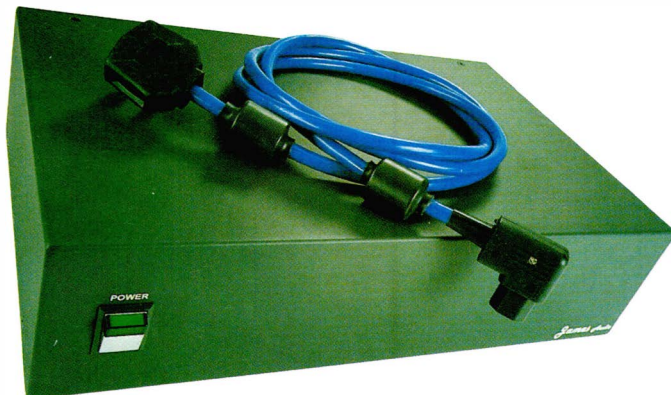
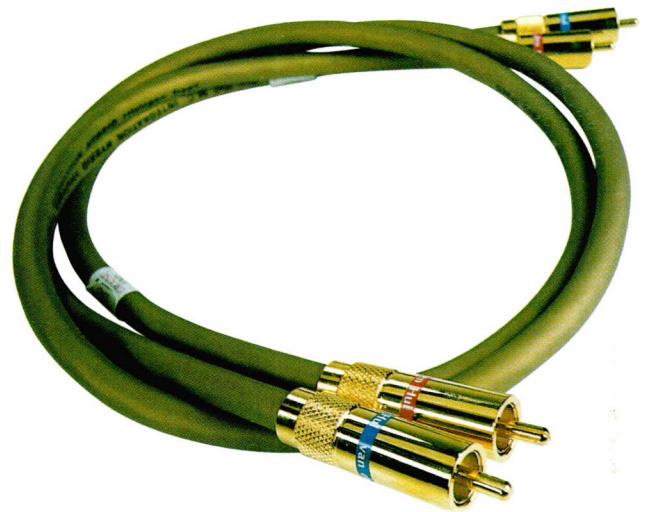
▶ Some feet aim to damp resonance, others prefer to exploit it somehow. These are of the latter kind. An aluminium cone with a small depression at its apex supports a steel ball, which in turn supports an outer (hollow) cone, also of aluminium. All this undamped metal is apparently tuned to "the frequencies violin designers look for". The result, not surprisingly, is typically a touch of coloration added to the sound, but it's extremely subtle and what one's more likely to notice is a particularly solid and clearly focused sound, slightly more upfront than with damping feet. It's not the sound for all tastes but it is worth a try, especially if your system tends towards the over-full and soft-sounding.

☎ 0870 240 7228 🌐 www.choicebits.co.uk

VAN DEN HUL INTEGRATION INTERCONNECT £140 (0.8M PAIR)

▶ Mr van den Hul likes to cast his net wide when selecting materials for cables. He gave us carbon fibre audio wires, and now, with 'Fusion technology', he's introduced zinc, adding it to more familiar copper and silver and surrounding each conductor with Linear Structured Carbon. The idea is to preserve low-level detail by reducing the alleged detrimental effects of crystal boundaries. This remains unproven, and yet the sonic result, it must be said, is outstanding. There's an ease and naturalness to the sound that few cables – even among the wacky-prices stuff – can equal, and quite flawless tonal balance from top to bottom. Likewise, imaging is truly first-rate with very precise lateral placement and superb depth.

☎ 01235 511166 🌐 www.vandenhul.com



JAMES AUDIO FIDT6S POWER CONDITIONER £1,495

▶ This weighty unit comprises not just filtering components, feeding six output sockets, but also a large isolation transformer. Such a device has distinct advantages in cutting down common-mode interference, and as a side benefit completely eliminates DC. There shouldn't be any of that on the mains of course, but it sometimes appears and can upset mains transformers in various ways, including inducing an audible hum. A good isolation transformer will cope better, and this one seems very capable, neither humming nor distorting the mains waveform. The result, with a variety of equipment, proved to be a subtle but rewarding improvement in detail and general dynamic liveliness of the music.

☎ 01782 511035

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This latest technology is incorporated into the elegant Eyris range of home theatre loudspeakers. An Eyris iDP™ (Interactive Digital Programming) home theatre speaker system offers perfect matching to the listening environment through its built-in room equalisation capability.

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Welcome to

the collection

*T*he Collection was a concept born in the eighties, when *Hi-Fi Choice* first decided to assemble a special issue dedicated to the finest hi-fi in the world. Several annual editions ensued, creating a series much loved and fondly remembered by those with a penchant for the highest standards of music reproduction. But in publishing few things remain unchanged for long – while *Hi-Fi Choice* continued to evolve through the nineties, *The Collection* did not and the last edition was published in 1992.

But now it's back, and we're proud to relight this torch for hi-fi's highest performers once more. Throughout this very special edition you'll find no fewer than 44 complete reviews of some of the very best hi-fi components on the market today, conducted by the most experienced set of reviewers ever assembled. The result is a vast selection of state-of-the-art products from many of the world's top hi-fi designers, each one constructed in deliberate pursuit of the ultimate in sound reproduction.

So why now, in 2004, is *The Collection* reborn? Because as we sit on the cusp of something radically new, the doyens of hi-fi's high-end are facing their greatest ever challenge. The way home entertainment programming is delivered, stored and played back is changing, and the concept of the 'media server' will come to affect us all. And yet, there will always be those who demand the highest levels of performance and the high-end hi-fi community is responding by producing the most amazing range of dedicated components yet seen.

The results are fascinating. Original technologies like vinyl and valves remain in strong demand, with decades of refinement culminating in exquisite form and function. Then there are the digital dream machines, each one engineered to make the most of the format(s) it plays, from CD-only to high-performance, multichannel audio/video *tours de force*.

We feel no need to apologise for the considerable price tags featured throughout this issue; excellence has never come cheap. Like the finest watches or the most expressive motor cars, these finely tuned, supremely engineered examples of audio art simply ooze desirability. It's always great to dream, but if these top-end exhibits seem too far out of reach take solace: most of these manufacturers also produce more affordable gear, often featuring 'trickle-down' technologies derived from these flagship components. You'll find such products nestling within the pages of every other issue of *Hi-Fi Choice*...

As for us, there's only one problem with doing a special issue like *The Collection* – giving all the fabulous kit back when we've finished.

Tim Bown Editor



Chord Blu and DAC 64

Once all the rage, Chord brings the two-box CD transport and DAC concept back with a bang

PRICE: Blu: £4,195, DAC 64: £1,995 CONTACT: Chord Electronics Ltd, The Pumphouse, Bridge Court, Farleigh Court, East Farleigh, Kent ME16 9NB ☎ 01622 721444 🌐 www.chordelectronics.co.uk

I can truthfully say that Chord's DAC 64 was something I spent the last twenty years waiting for. For me, CD came of age with the DAC 64; it finally legitimised CD as a serious audiophile medium. Ever since the launch of CD in 1983, I'd looked for a player, DAC, or gizmo – anything! – that would finally lay to rest all the niggles and reservations I had about CD. But no joy.

Not that CD sounded bad – far from it. It's just that, having kept faith with vinyl, I knew CD had its limitations; it was good, but... Having been disappointed so many times, I'd sort of pushed the idea of a wonder product magically transforming CD to the back of my mind. To be honest, I felt CD's restrictions were inherent – due to its limited 16-bit 44.1kHz specification – and that this effectively capped its performance.

So, experiencing Chord's DAC 64 in the autumn of 2001 came as a revelation. CD's faults can be elusive. For all its sharpness and detail, CD can often sound curiously bland and lacking in subtlety and expressiveness. Nor is it good so far as timing is concerned. The DAC 64 changed all that. Suddenly, the music had depth and width, drive and dynamics, with something of that holographic three dimensionality you get from good vinyl.

There was an inner clarity and separation of parts I'd not experienced before. And the sound was bigger; not just louder, but larger in scale. Playing Randy Crawford's *Street Life*, I at last heard a sound off CD that approached the 12in single of this track for soundstaging and scale. Okay, it still wasn't *quite* as vivid and dimensional, but it stood comparison.

The DAC 64's secret weapon was something called WTA – Watts Time Aligned filter. This greatly reduced transient timing errors, improving clarity and fine detail. But the thing that really made the DAC 64 sing was its RAM buffer, which re-clocked the digital signal and virtually eliminated jitter. Sonically, this made the DAC 64 largely independent of its CD transport. Within reason you could use anything, and still get a great sound.

Terrific! Unfortunately, this created a teeny-weeny problem for Chord. How could they make an expensive transport that fully justified itself on sonic grounds? The answer turned out to be long, technically difficult and not cheap. And we have to say the results were well worth the effort. Partnered by Blu, the DAC 64 now sounds even better...

Unusually, Chord's Blu CD transport has separate left and right digital outputs. And it has upsampled outputs of either 88.2kHz or

176.4kHz. The original accepts 88.2kHz, but only the revised version works at 176.4kHz. Actually, results at 88.2kHz are extremely good – excellent by any yardstick – but the 176.4kHz option is that bit better again, and delivers optimum performance.

Although the DAC 64's RAM buffer can still be used with the Blu, now it's actually better to switch it out altogether – basically, the digital output of the Blu is so clean and jitter-free that it doesn't benefit from further processing. When used with the DAC 64's RAM buffer, the Blu sounds noticeably less special – more like an ordinary CD transport. You don't get quite such good separation and dynamics, nor is the soundstaging as three-dimensional.

SOUND QUALITY

But the trouble with hi-fi is – everything's relative. Having said wonderful things about the wonderful DAC 64, I'm now forced to say it sounds even more wonderfully wonderful partnered with the Blu. The improvement is surprisingly large – a bigger sound with increased dynamic contrasts, yet at the same time, even subtler and more finely detailed. In essence you're closer to the true sound of the original recordings. Wonderful!

Sonically, the results produced by Chord's Blu/DAC 64 really are quite remarkable. Previously, it always seemed to me that CD had a built-in glass ceiling – it promised great results, but always fell short, as though it were capped. Used together, the performance

“They're not cheap, but you're effectively transforming your entire CD collection.”

greatly exceeds what I once believed CD to be capable of. They're not cheap, but then by buying a Blu and DAC 64, you're effectively transforming your entire CD collection.

Probably because of its limited 20kHz bandwidth, and use of 'brickwall' filters, CD invariably lacks true openness; that smooth relaxed natural ease one gets with the best vinyl. Not so now. Chord's Blu/DAC 64 rewrites the book, with a supremely natural uncoloured sound that simply has to be experienced. Maybe its still not quite as effortlessly sweet and silky as a really good MC phono cartridge, but for many listeners the difference will be purely academic.

Perhaps the most immediately noticeable quality is its superbly deep and powerful bass performance. Put on a disc that (via lesser CD

players) sounds bright and thin, and nine times out of ten you'll experience a power and depth that was previously missing. Instead of voices and instruments seeming congested and 'flat' dynamically, you'll sense space, dimensionality, and separation. The treble is particularly clean and focused.

Don't be surprised if you start hearing detail never apparent before – bass lines that suddenly become audible, or voices that appear from nowhere. Actually, they were always there – it's just that you weren't given time to notice them. Because the Blu/DAC 64 sounds clearer, it's easier to listen to; your ears don't have to work so hard. The music sounds more coherent – listen to something new and unfamiliar, and you'll find it makes more sense – it's easier to comprehend.

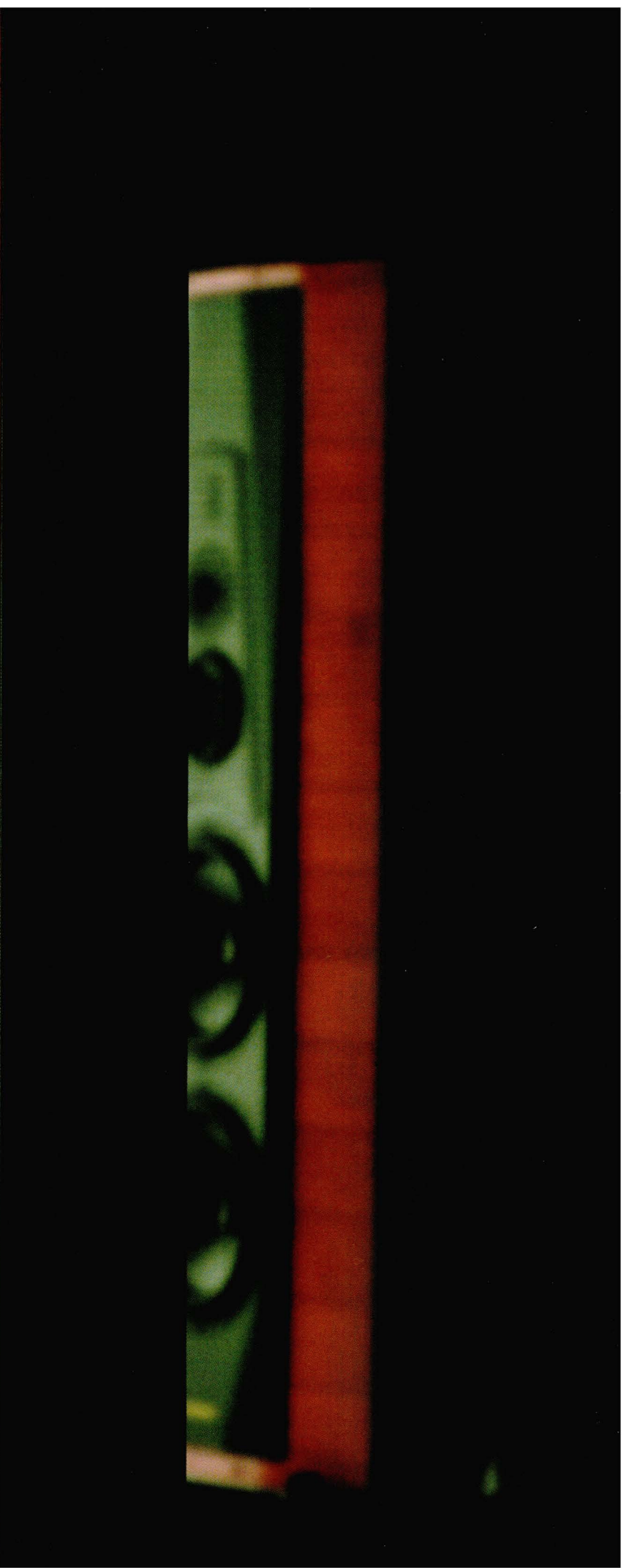
Also notice the apparent 'loudness' of the sound, its presence. CD often needs to be played at high-ish volume levels to create a sense of impact and presence. The Blu/DAC 64 is different – it sounds big without needing to be played loudly. The music has more body, extra weight, greater presence, increased power and projection. So... make sure you audition the Blu/DAC 64 at moderate volume levels – see how the music comes to meet you, how it projects without having to be played loudly.

Also notice the way the system images; how the Chord combo creates the impression of a realistically vivid, three-dimensional soundstage – one that has depth as well as width. Your very best recordings should sound

better than ever. But keep an ear out for those recordings that previously sounded disappointing. If your experiences tally with ours, you'll find many 'poor' recordings are transformed by the Blu/DAC 64 combination.

Ultimately that's what makes Chord's Blu/DAC 64 worth buying. It not only delivers the very highest standards of reproduction overall, it gives greater consistency. Not by making everything sound the same, but by ensuring you get the very best out of each and every disc. It highlights the best points, while making sure the negative aspects are not emphasised or exaggerated. It can't make a poor recording sound great, but it will make sure all its virtues are fully revealed. And often, that's all you need... HFC

Jimmy Hughes



Sonus Faber Stradivari Homage

This gorgeous statement product from Sonus Faber simply oozes style as well as radical thinking

PRICE: £22,000 per pair CONTACT: Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.sonusfaber.com

Long regarded as Italy's finest, Sonus Faber is a company with all the style, performance and flair one associates with that country's famous sports car marques, applying them instead to the world of hi-fi loudspeakers.

This top-end model has been keenly awaited for a number of years, its release held up by a painstaking development and refinement process. Unusual width is its most striking feature, which certainly makes for a very room dominating appearance, rather in the manner of a large panel-type electrostatic dipole.

Despite appearances however, this is a regular monopole design, the reason for the width being to provide an 'artificial wall' to load and control the midrange and treble radiation.

Viewed from above, the shape forms a wide ellipse, 65x25cm at the top, and it stands 138cm tall. It's beautifully presented and finished, made up of several contrasting sections and finishes. The core is constructed from a succession of horizontal strips of a lustrous grain-oriented 'crimson' real wood veneer, beautifully laid and deep-gloss lacquered. (A graphite finish option is available at extra cost.) The black central portion of the front, 29cm wide, accommodates the four drive units, and is covered by the clever transparent 'elastic band' grille. The outside edges are completed by shaped, rounded and tapered sections, wider at top and bottom than in the middle, finished in deep piano black lacquer.

The enclosure is mounted on a large, thick and heavy black steel plate, adding plenty of mass and creating a large and totally stable footprint. Chunky 8mm spikes floor-couple each speaker's very considerable 75kg weight, and can be adjusted for best image focus at the listening zone.

This a three-way design, using two bass drivers with 260mm frames and 190mm alloy cones, plus a 150mm midrange unit with 100mm loaded plastic cone, and a 33mm annular 'ring radiator' tweeter. The internal wiring and network use suitably exotic components, the crossover itself operating at 300Hz and 4kHz, and fed from a single terminal pair. Both bass and midrange drivers are separately enclosed and ported at the rear, while the mid/treble section of the front baffle is mechanically isolated from the main bass enclosure.

Our far-field averaged measurement gave a generous sensitivity of 91-92dB, although this is partly a consequence of an impedance that falls to a low 2.5 ohms around 750Hz. An

amp with good current reserves is therefore to be preferred, and valve amps might not make a good match. The in-room measurements look rather impressive, especially across the broad midband, where the whole zone from 70Hz up to 2.5kHz is remarkably flat and smooth. A modest presence notch at 3-4kHz (close to the crossover) should ensure the speaker avoids sounding aggressive, while the treble proper is again smooth and well judged. The bass end also looks well aligned, if a little strong below 60Hz in our 4.3x2.6x5.5m room. A bigger room might produce better results.

SOUND QUALITY

Happily, that mild low-bass excess by no means spoiled the delicious music making of this superb speaker. Indeed, if anything it's a positive, adding impressive weight and scale without any extra thickening, largely because the bass is qualitatively taut and free from overhang, with fine tonal discrimination.

Apart from being installed by a couple from Pinewood Music (a dealer experienced in products from UK distributor Absolute Sounds), who knew how to do so with optimum sonic performance and zero enclosure damage, the Stradivari didn't

A sense of rightness and order permeates the entire listening experience, as everything sounding properly in place – tonality, dynamic structures and stereo perspectives. And if the overall sound is a little laid back and restrained, that is almost certainly the sort of presentation that the overwhelming majority prefer. And it means you can wind up the volume as high as you like, and the speaker just gets louder, without tending to become aggressive. It's maybe not the obvious choice for hard driving rock and dance material, but classical and acoustic music shows its delicacy, sweetness and fine tonality to best advantage.

Cabinet coloration is clearly very low indeed, probably because the irregular shape and curved front panel successfully suppress standing waves, and in consequence there's virtually no 'boxiness'. Remarkably perhaps in view of the shape, the sound has great transparency, and stereo depth perspectives are very convincing, though the focus of specific instruments could perhaps be sharper. The sound distribution or dispersion of a loudspeaker has a major impact on the listening experience, and the Stradivari's shape creates a distribution pattern that's not only probably unique, but also one that steers a happy course between the opposite extremes.

"The Stradivari shows superb refinement and delicacy right across the audio band."

receive any special treatment. All too often, makers or distributors of exotic components insist on supplying complete systems, with the avowed intention of showing a component at its best. The consequence tends to create more confusion than enlightenment.

On this occasion no special amps, sources or cables were brought along, so the speakers were merely connected to our reference Naim NAC552/NAP500 amps, Naim CDS3 and Burmester 001 CD players, a Linn/Rega hybrid record player, Magnum Dynalab tuner and VertexAQ and Naim cabling. The results were very special indeed – all the more so because the rest of the system was entirely familiar.

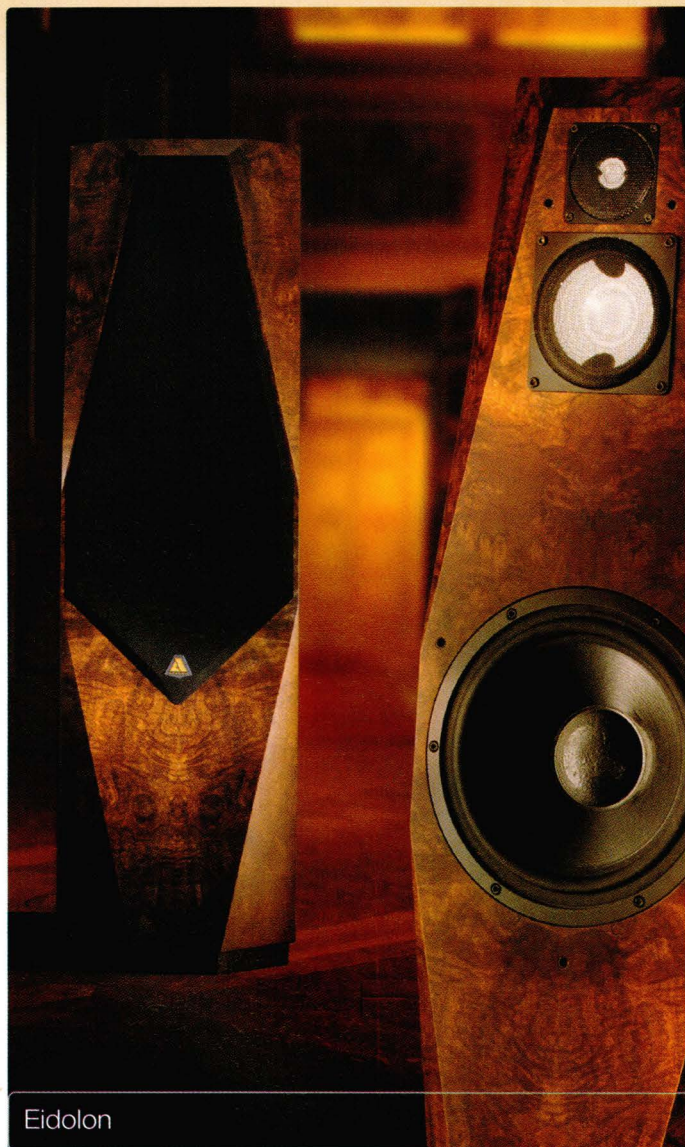
The first impression one gets is of a mild degree of understatement in the way this speaker goes about its business. That underlying character remains, but is quickly followed by the realisation that what one is hearing is an almost complete lack of 'nasties', with a balance and room drive that must be very close to the ideal.

Narrow speakers with very wide radiation include more of the listening room and help create an illusion of bringing the musicians into the room; while more directional designs like horns and dipole panels give a precise view onto the recording itself. Neither one nor the other, the Stradivari is perhaps the ideal compromise between the two.

Compromise is at the heart of loudspeaker design, and the specific choices made by the individual designer are even more crucial in a money-no-object design such as this. No design illustrates this better than the Stradivari Homage, which shows superb refinement and delicacy right across the audio band and through a very wide dynamic range. No one design will appeal equally to every listener, and this speaker may well be a little too gentle and laid back for some tastes. But that is also perhaps its greatest strength, as it delivers music with great subtlety and delicacy, without ever seeming to try too hard. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

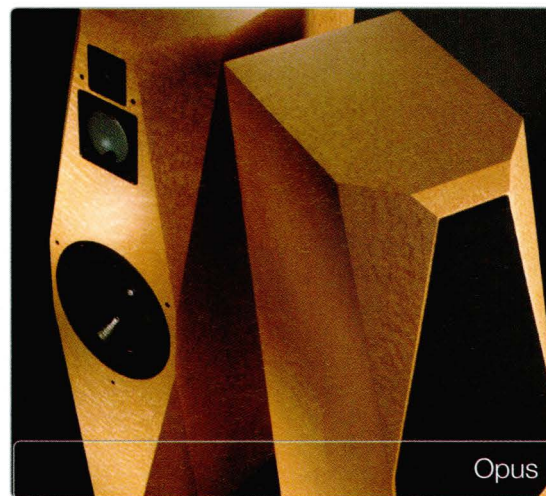
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Krell FPB 700cx

Krell's ultimate power amp rules in that special place where brawn, brains and overdrafts converge

PRICE: £14,998 CONTACT: Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.krellonline.com

The FPB prefix that is used for two ranges of Krell power amps stands for Full Power Balanced. In reality this translates into 'simply awesome'. The two ranges concerned consist of mono and stereo amplifiers with a common internal architecture, the FPB 700cx being the biggest and most powerful of the stereo models, sitting above the FPB 300cx and the FPB 400cx. The monoblocks consist of the FPB 750Mcx, FPB 450Mcx and the FPB 250Mcx – in each case the numerical designation represents output in watts when driving an eight-ohm load. The FPB 700cx then is the most powerful of the stereo models, and not far off the top monoblock for power yield, with all the packaging advantages that accrue from being built into one box rather than two. You may be surprised to know that FPB is not Krell's top of the line amplifier range. That distinction belongs to the Master series, of which it can truly be said that if you need to ask, you can't afford it.

But that epithet would be a pretty useful way of getting to grips with the FPB 700cx. Just consider – power output is 700 watts into eight ohms, doubling to 1.4kW into four ohms and again to 2.8kW with a two-ohm load from a massively endowed power supply which includes an 8kVA transformer. Weight is a back-breaking 81.8kg (which is more than 1.6 hundredweight if that helps), and it measures 48x26x65cm (WxHxD). But the most frightening statistic of all is the cost, which is just one pint of beer less than £15,000. In the delays before Halcro, this used to count as a lot of money. Of course, it's beautifully made and as solid as structurally reinforced houses, though I'm not so keen, practically speaking, on the unprotected heat exchanger fins that run front to back down both long sides.

But the FPB 700cx story is not just about awesome power and the ability to drive punishing loads (way below two ohms if it is called for). This is an amplifier of real sophistication. Turn the 700cx on, and the amplifier first tests the circuit connected to its speaker terminals, and adjusts itself accordingly, the process being tracked by the three front-panel LEDs. Balanced operation speaks for itself, but the Krell

also has a CAST II interface option, which uses current rather than voltage-mode transmission, complemented by internal current-mode gain topology and Sustained Plateau Bias III circuitry. The latter maintains Class A operation according to the Hall Effect sensing circuit's analysis of the audio signal, causing output bias voltage levels to be ramped up and (after a delay) down again as required by the musical envelope. The result is an amplifier which runs no hotter than a typical Class AB design. It is also unconditionally stable and fully protected against pretty much anything short of a direct nuclear strike.

“The real beauty of this amplifier is that it wields its power with such finesse.”

But this is an amplifier that is unflappable under all circumstances. It does big scale, heavy duty music brilliantly. It is virtually impossible to catch out, even with big current sinks like B&W's Nautilus 800 speakers. But the real beauty of this amplifier is that it wields its power with such finesse – it's not just a bass delivery engine. The whole frequency band is reproduced with real subtlety, and with an exquisite sense of fine detail, which is properly constrained and locked in place. Moreover it will work consistently at any volume level you choose. It has the inevitability and the clout of a steam engine, but even with the volume turned way down, it still somehow manages to sustain the musical tension, and nothing about the sound tonality, dynamics or anything else appears to change. In short, this is one of the very tiny number of truly great high-power, high-end power amplifiers – fit to form the beating heart of the most exhilarating of audio systems. **HFC**

Alvin Gold

See HFC 234 (November 2002) for our original review of this product



Burmester 001

Can the sound of Burmester's belt-drive CD player match its gorgeous look and feel?

PRICE: £9,000 CONTACT: Standesign Ltd, Unit D7, Heritage Business Park, Heritage Way, Gosport PO12 4BG ☎ 02392 501888 🌐 www.burmester.de

Burmester has been a true high-end brand in its home city of Berlin for more than 25 years, though it's less well represented in the UK. The company makes four ranges, each distinguished from the one below by an approximate doubling in price. The least expensive Rondo models cost about £2,500 per item, while the Basic Lines are around £5,000 each. Next comes the Top Line, including this 001, (around £10,000), and then the top-of-the-ladder Reference Line

at close to £20K. Incidentally, the 001 designation refers to the fact that this design was 'signed off' in January 2000 – all the Burmester components are identified by three numbers, denoting the year and month of their gestation.

The operation is still run by founder Dieter Burmester, but shareholders with major interests in German consumer electronics retail help provide the modern production facility in the heart of the city, giving easy

access to the high-class specialist engineering operations that have always been part of the Berlin industrial scene. Top-quality engineering is at the heart of the Burmester operation, as evidenced by the high-class chrome-plated fascias that are the company's trademark, a factory visit revealing that all the assembly and quality control is carried out under the most careful and clinical conditions.

It was this visit that first introduced the 001, a CD player of which Burmester is particularly

convincing involved Dieter going over to a stack of equipment and playing the same CD on first this 001 Top Line CD player and then its junior Basic Line 006 equivalent. Both players are apparently substantially similar, apart from the fact that the 006 uses a conventional disc drive, but the superiority of the 001 was immediately apparent in its dynamic expression and tautness of timing.

Burmester's explanation of why the belt-drive mechanism sounds better is simply that its ultra-precise bearing supports and spins the disc much more accurately than a regular 'bought in' disc drive, making it that much easier to read the disc data accurately.

An integrated one-box CD player, the 001 follows the company tradition of a gorgeous chrome-plated front panel with all the legends deeply engraved. It doesn't make for particularly easy reading, but does look very smart indeed. It's a top-loader, the disc drive mounted on a hefty alloy billet and hidden under a thick alloy cover that slides beautifully and closes firmly with a light magnetic tug.

The onboard DACs are doubled up in balanced pairs, incorporate upsampling to 96kHz/24-bit resolution, and may be

company's 948 power conditioner (a clever if costly unit that cleans and purifies the mains electricity supply) and the 032 integrated amp (see review, *HFC* 252). This combination went together hand-in-glove, and gave the opportunity to link the source and amplifier via the balanced connections provided on both, using the company's high-quality but exceedingly stiff Silver interconnects.

These two components duplicate essentially the same electronic volume control, so the 001 was switched to 'fixed' output mode. And the combination certainly worked very well, delivering an essentially very musical and muscular sound with a rich tonal palette, and a notably wide dynamic range with superior low-level resolution.

Photographic requirements meant that the 032 amp didn't stay too long, so much of the 001's auditioning was done with unbalanced connection and fixed output level to a Naim NAC 552 preamp, NAP 500 power amp and a whole variety of different loudspeakers, from the inexpensive up to the seriously exotic.

One can rabbit on about the way specific discs sound, but the much more powerful observation is that this player simply makes

“The lushness and richness of the 001 are what one tends to associate more with vinyl records than silver disc replay.”

accessed by any of the four external digital signal inputs. An optional 60-step electronic volume control allows the unit to operate as a full digital-to-analogue preamp, connected directly to a power amp. Digital outputs can feed an external DAC, and fixed or variable analogue outputs include two phono pairs plus one balanced XLR. Other features include a switchable analogue filter (linear or soft settings), plus switchable polarity. Carbon fibre springs are fitted into the feet, while the generous power supply arrangements include a 50 VA transformer, backed up by 64,000 μ F of filter capacitance.

One point of criticism is that although the remote handset works well enough, it's heavy and cumbersome for one-handed operation, with little button discrimination and small, difficult to read legends.

SOUND QUALITY

If the 001 had sounded excellent at that demonstration in Berlin, it didn't in the least disappoint when a sample subsequently arrived for review in a more familiar context. In fact more than one sample has now been tried over several months, showing fine consistency as well as quality, and setting an impressive benchmark for top-quality CD replay.

Initially the 001 came as part of a Burmester package which included the

one want to play CDs, more often and for longer. It's hard to put a finger on exactly why this is, but also impossible to argue with the basic observation. Perhaps it's the lushness and richness that the 001 brings to the party that is particularly persuasive, and more what one tends to associate with vinyl records than silver disc replay. The overall sound is essentially neutral, but notably powerful and punchy at the same time, with excellent timing and drive, and very clean, quiet backgrounds.

The remote handset might not be ergonomically virtuous, but the player itself is thoroughly satisfying to use because of the disc drive mechanism's splendid precision. It may not be musically relevant, but changing a disc does provide a certain tactile pleasure.

We preferred to use the 'linear' filter option, as the alternative 'soft' setting is just that, with a rather more obvious, though still very subtle, treble roll-off. Whichever, the top end here is sweet and kind, with no hint of harshness, though the 'linear' setting does supply the most fine detail.

The Burmester might not offer extra musical detail over the Naim CDS3 (see review, p36). But it has a welcoming friendliness, even a cuddly quality, that is very engaging and involving, always inviting one to slip in a new disc as soon as the previous one finishes. **HFC**

Paul Messenger



proud because it uses an unusual, made-in-house, high-precision belt-drive disc-spinning mechanism. Components for about twenty mechanisms were set out on the bench where these belt-drive assemblies are put together. Come Saturday, when the factory and surroundings are quiet, one expert comes in to put them all together. He has a particular feel for the tolerances involved, and actually enjoys sorting through the hundreds of combinations, dry-fitting as many as necessary to get the best possible fits. The true bearing tolerance is apparently better than 1/3,000th of a millimetre and even the manually placed disc clamp puck is selected to match the individual mechanism.

Why bother to go to all the trouble of building such an elaborate mechanism? Two reasons were offered. The first and most

conrad-johnson
Premier 18LS

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Premier 18LS and Premier 350SA

A valve amp company making one of the world's best transistor amplifiers? Surely some mistake?

PRICE: Premier 18LS: £3,795, Premier 350SA: £8,000 CONTACT: Audiofreaks Ltd, 15 Link Way, Ham, Richmond, Surrey TW10 7QT ☎ 020 8948 4153 🌐 www.conradjohnson.com

The Virginian amplification expert Conrad-Johnson is best-known for making some of the finest valve amps around. So, it would be easy to dismiss the company's solid state designs as somehow lacking 'cred'. Easy... but very, very wrong.

In fact, the Premier 18LS line-level preamp and Premier 350SA power amp are two of the best examples of amplification you'll find. In another fact, the latter is arguably the best power amp C-J has ever produced, regardless of underlying technology.

The Premier 18LS is a FET-based (Field Effect Transistor) design, using the C-J standard of no negative feedback in the circuit. Though it measures well, it doesn't possess the vanishingly small levels of distortion found in circuits that introduce negative feedback. Zero feedback also produces a slightly noisier circuit. But here the sonic advantages outweigh the technical shortcomings; the circuit sounds notably fast and dynamic as a result. Most of the distortion and noise inherent to no-feedback designs are said to be overcome by C-J's proprietary auto-linear gain blocks, which "achieve low distortion with zero loop feedback by exploiting the symmetrical distortion properties of 'n' and 'p-channel' FETs", according to the sales blurb.

The preamp has five line inputs, two loops (for home cinema processors, equalisers or tape systems) and one set of preamp outputs. Everything is wired single-ended, so there's no XLR balanced circuitry within. Nor is there a power switch – the preamp is powered up throughout. This means chopping and changing cables must be handled with care; you can send a thump through the system if you treat the amp with less than the upmost respect. The remote is worthy of note though – it's a billet of solid alloy and feels expensive.

There is a common style to both products, with the golden finish and scooped groove on the thick front panel. The buttons and three black discs on the front of the 18LS (two for the volume LED read-out for left and right channels, another below to disguise the remote eye), along with the array of LEDs for source and status display and the series of little silvery push buttons give it a classic appeal.

The Premier 350SA power amp has less to play with, just a big button and corresponding LED, but has even smarter lines. It also has a bigger case and runs warmer than the preamp (still cool after several days), but features the

same zero feedback design as the 18LS. It also sports FETs, but this time C-J has used a curious hybrid design, with FETs in the voltage gain stage and bipolar transistors in the output stages. The logic goes like this: FETs work well in voltage gain settings (such as preamps and input stages of power amps) because they have the linearity of valves. Bipolars, in contrast, deliver a lower output impedance than FETs, making them ideal for the sort of speaker control required in a power amp. And, with 350 watts into eight ohms (albeit at one per cent THD – total harmonic distortion), that's a lot of control. Once again, the Premier 350SA is a single-ended design, with no balanced input and only a pair of multi-way speaker terminals at the rear. It also uses a 20A IEC mains cable – although this plugs directly into standard mains, the odd IEC socket makes using aftermarket mains leads difficult.

The two products share more than just zero feedback. Both use high-quality power supplies and the highest quality components within. Both invert phase, so the two should cancel one another out, so the speaker terminals will be wired normally (red to red,

transistor design. It retains the typical C-J sweetness and warmth but without roll-off of the top end and doesn't appear euphonic or artificial. There is some wonderful layering to the soundstage and a vice-like grip over any music, all of which help to ram home the performance of the preamp.

And what does that mean in real terms? It means this combination is so damn musical that you just let the music play. Highlighting a single piece of music to demonstrate what the C-J duo does, however, is difficult in the extreme. In a single listening session, the tastes got catholic and nothing phased the duo. Bach begat Radiohead, Radiohead begat Bowie, Bowie begat Television, Television begat Damien Rice, Damien Rice begat Thelonious Monk, Thelonious Monk begat Sibelius, Sibelius begat Tom Waits... and so on, *ad infinitum*. Removing listener fatigue entirely makes the listening sessions supremely satisfying – and they stretch for hours on end.

Caveats are few, trivial and depend largely on the sources and speakers used in the system. Used with too-efficient speakers that cannot handle this level of power delivery, the

“Both these amplifiers sound supremely detailed, focused and very, very musical.”

black to black). It's worth remembering though, that using either amp with a phase-correct product will require a switch in speaker polarity (red to black, black to red), and with a pair of products of this level, it's worth experimenting with phase anyway.

SOUND QUALITY

These amps represent one of the finest duos in audio today. The two sound supremely detailed, focused and very, very musical. Some may say they're not the most exciting sounding components around, but this entirely misses the C-J point; this is music for the long term, not just for a few minutes of audio fireworks. Neither product lets the side down – the preamplifier is dynamic and focused, the power amplifier bold, powerful and satisfying.

While the preamp is magnificent on its own, it's the power amp that is the real star of the show. It somehow manages to combine the rich refinement of a good valve power amp with the speed and bottom-end heft of a fine

amps produce a hardening of the midrange and upper registers. This happens because the amps are so clean sounding, you tend to turn up the volume and the speaker cones begin to panic. Similarly, use the 18LS with anything less than outstanding digital sources and the overall performance suffers accordingly. The C-J combo is nice enough to its surroundings as to make the best of a bad job, but it is also honest enough to make those failings in other products all the more prevalent.

That has to be one of the best descriptions of true high-end equipment; a product so good that the only negatives are reflections of the limitations of other products in the system. And, according to that criterion, the Premier 18LS and Premier 350SA are among the finest high-end products around. People should stop thinking of C-J as a 'valve' company – it makes amplifiers and uses the best components for the best job. Valves or transistors, it knows how to do it right. **HFC**

Alan Sircom



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JBL K2 S9800

This defiantly different 20 grand monster has awesome sonic capabilities

PRICE: £20,000 per pair CONTACT: Harman Consumer UK, 6 Elstree Gate, Elstree Way, Borehamwood, Herts WD6 1JD ☎ 020 8731 4670 🌐 www.jbl.com

Originally developed for the Japanese home market, JBL's K2 S9800 is certainly very different from the speakers normally encountered in Europe or the USA, though one can trace its ancestry in JBL's past 'classics' going all the way back to 1938.

Even though construction and finish is impeccable, the type and size of the drive units does much to determine a size and shape which is certainly unfashionably wide, tall and unavoidably intrusive. The enclosure is irregularly shaped and built from a mixture of 25mm MDF and Sonoglass resin. Our samples came in a classy if rather funereal high-gloss dark charcoal grey with black highlights – light grey is an option.

It's essentially a giant two-way (bolstered by an extra super-tweeter that comes in just above 10kHz), and all three drivers are very unusual. The bass and lower mid (to 800Hz) is handled by a port-loaded 380mm driver with paper pulp cone, foam surround and Alnico magnet. A notably complex motor assembly ensures exceptional self-damping. A 90x50 degree bi-radial flare horn driver with 76mm beryllium dome compression driver takes over from 800Hz up to 10kHz. The super-tweeter has a 25mm beryllium diaphragm, horn-loaded by a 30x60 degree bi-radial horn. JBL has pioneered the recent use of beryllium diaphragms, a metal which is incredibly difficult to work, but has a very high stiffness-to-density ratio.

The crossover has high-power air-cored inductors, and uniquely (and very cleverly) uses a 9V PP9 battery to pre-bias the twinned capacitors, improving their linearity and avoiding 'crossover' distortions. Pre-sets allow very subtle adjustments to the balance.

“Some might find the K2 too ruthlessly revealing, and prefer something more restrained.”

First reactions were very positive. All speakers involve a collection of compromises, and the K2 is no exception, but when it comes to adding up the pluses and subtracting the minuses, this speaker is massively in credit. It's exceptionally neutral and well balanced, and while that isn't a totally essential requirement, it definitely helps.

Kept well clear of walls, the bass is full without becoming overbearing, and is also beautifully agile and free from overhang. It might not be the last word in grip or drive, but it knows how to carry a tune, and remains clean and clear, even and unflappable, even when being asked to play excessively loud.

Its best trick, however, is the way it handles microdynamics – the tiny low-level detailing that conveys the subtle texture of massed orchestral strings or provides clues to the size of a choir or auditorium, and makes audience applause sound creepily realistic – even when the speaker is playing very quietly indeed. A Radio 3 broadcast of Esa-Pekka Salonen and the LA Philharmonic playing Beethoven's *Ninth* generated a totally gripping dynamic tension from the very first bars.

Some might find this speaker a little too ruthlessly revealing, preferring something a little more laid back and restrained. Certainly it does have some aggressive tendencies, especially when it's being worked hard, and it takes no prisoners among poor quality software, sources or amps. But its ability to 'suck in' the listener, and create involvement in even unfamiliar material is, in this listener's experience, unparalleled, and might well have something to do with choosing



drive units that allow the crossover to be moved two octaves lower than usual, and therefore well clear of the presence zone.

By focusing the sound, horns deliver their sound through a relatively narrow angle of dispersion/distribution. This increases the ratio of direct to room-reflected sound reaching the listener, more so than one encounters with conventional direct radiator designs, which in turn contributes to the very precise imaging, alongside fine phase coherence, impressive transparency and convincing depth perspectives. The two drivers covering the top half of the audio band are both set slightly above seated ear level, adding attractive extra height.

The K2 may be unconventional, with unfashionable size and shape too. But it has strong historical precedent, delivers thoroughly impressive measurements, and sounds absolutely wonderful too. It's a shame the high price will put it beyond most people's reach. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

See HFC 235 (December 2002) for our original review of this product



Naim CDS3 and XPS2

Naim's latest 'two-box-one-box' flagship CD player offers improved style and refinement

PRICE: CDS3: £4,875, XPS2: £2,369 CONTACT: Naim Audio Ltd, Southampton Road, Salisbury SP1 2LN ☎ 01722 332266 🌐 www.naim-audio.com

Most players handle CD replay in a single unit, but as one moves upmarket the two-box solution starts to become an alternative, housing the disc drive mechanism in one unit and the digital-to-analogue conversion (DAC) electronics in the other. Salisbury-based Naim Audio, however, has always done things its own way. When its first CD player, the CDS, came to market in 1991, the two-box package housed both disc drive and DAC in the same unit, while the other was just an outboard power supply, keeping mains voltages and transformers well away from the player proper,

while feeding a number of separate low voltage supplies to the player via a hefty multi-way connector. It was certainly an unusual – possibly then unique – approach among CD players, but not exactly without precedent, since Naim's top preamps and tuner had long followed a similar approach.

The CDS II/XPS succeeded the CDS in the late 1990s, and that in turn has been replaced by this CDS3/XPS2 combo, featuring the latest 'trptych' styling and chunky alloy casework. Although Naim has produced less costly single-box players along the way, these have usually been upgradeable via external power

supplies, while the top-of-the-line CDS-series has always stuck to a two-box format.

A CDS3 must therefore be used alongside an XPS2 power supply, though said supply unit is not restricted to this application. We first encountered an XPS2 as an optional upgrade to Naim's one-box CDX2 player (see review, *HFC* 238), and while it made an appropriately worthwhile improvement to that player, it produced an even more substantial upgrade when used to power a CDS II player in place of the latter's original XPS supply. A CDX2 or CDS II owner can therefore upgrade either to a CDS3 in two stages, each providing

Naim's own circuitry amplifies and filters the transport output before it is processed by the Philips SAA7324 servo microprocessor, while performance is further enhanced by keeping the digital electronics in a quiet environment, well away from electrically 'noisy' components like the transformer.

The CDS3 incorporates a number of other interesting features. The player sits on three hard feet, and incorporates the separately spring-decoupled main circuit board and disc-drive mechanism, set up by two sets of transit screws. The central, top-loading Philips VAM1250 disc drive mechanism is mounted on an inert platform, suspended by a wire and leaf spring suspension that's carefully tuned to take account of the motor torques. A lightweight magnetic puck grips the disc firmly without increasing the low rotational inertia, and all relevant surfaces have a light-absorbing coating.

Operationally, the CDS3 makes no attempt to do more than the basics, but does them very capably, while deliberately avoiding the potentially distracting frills often found on upmarket CD players. Six rather small illuminated buttons with tiny lettering control the basic disc drive functions, while a simple lightweight, easy-to-hold system handset does the remote controlling, and adds repeat and programme play plus display options. And although this player follows Naim tradition with no digital output, the company has

change could even be described as Naim's most cost-effective upgrade!

However, the cable change was really just the *hors d'oeuvre* compared with the substituting of the actual power supply, which unequivocally showed that the older CDS II still had a comfortable performance advantage over the less costly CDX2, as well as illustrating what a crucial role power supply management plays in the total sound of a component.

Some months passed before a CDS3 became available, so there was some pent-up anticipation as the CDS II was disconnected and removed, and the CDS3 connected in its place. However, past experience has shown that Naim CD players take the best part of a week to get properly warmed up and stabilised, so the fact that it immediately showed its superiority, especially in terms of superior resolution and a wider dynamic range through the lower midband, was impressive. At the same time, it has to be admitted that the differences between the two players seemed rather less than the improvement that the new power supply had brought to the party.

As the first week elapsed, so the CDS3 steadily sweetened up and continued to assert its authority over its predecessor. When the player arrived, its output had been configured for the phono sockets, so these were used initially. However, a dealer tip-off

“It immediately showed its superiority, especially in superior resolution and a wider dynamic range through the lower midband.”

bowed to market demands by fitting a pair of phono sockets alongside its preferred five-pin DIN signal output – a Flash handset is required to select which output is active.

SOUND QUALITY

Our CDS3 actually arrived in stages. First there was a CDX2 review to do, back in *HFC* 238, and this was carried out both with and without adding the massive external XPS2 power supply, which gave a clear and obvious upgrade in sound quality when it was used in place of the player's smaller and less elaborate internal supplies.

A CDS II two-box player was also in regular use at the time, using the earlier XPS outboard supply, and it was interesting to use the then brand-new XPS2 supply with the older player. Indeed, following a tip-off, the first action was to substitute the new hawser-like Burndy connecting cable for its predecessor, as Naim had improved the way this was made up. Even changing new-for-old here brought a worthwhile improvement in delicacy and detailing. In fact, this cable

led me to select the DIN output instead, and this did indeed seem to lift the sound a little further – admittedly in the context of a DIN-equipped Naim preamp. Quite why this should be so is open to speculation, but perhaps the common earth path, or even the fact that all three conductors are carried within the same sheath, have some influence. A further surprise came when I placed the CDS3 on top of a VertexAQ Kinabalu granite support platform, as the sound again improved, with superior 'air' and 'space', despite the player's elaborate spring-decoupling.

Well settled in, the CDS3 stands tall as a genuinely great CD player. Above all, its truly excellent top-end openness, delicacy and transparency brings a naturalness to CD replay that takes it remarkably close to the strengths of vinyl. The consequence is to make CD listening significantly more interesting and involving than it was before, so that the choice of which software format to buy becomes altogether less critical. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

a significant advance in sound quality, first by adding an XPS2, and then adding the CDS3 player itself at some stage in the future.

There's another reason why Naim prefers to keep its disc drive and DAC in the same box, and the clue will be seen on the back, or rather by what isn't on the back. In addition to a regular analogue stereo signal output, the overwhelming majority of CD players carry digital outputs, using the standardised S/PDIF protocol for transferring digital data, for use with an external DAC. There's no such digital output on a Naim CD player because the company believes that this S/PDIF link corrupts the timing of the music and so degrades performance. By avoiding using this standardised universal interface, and keeping disc drive and DACs close together, Naim can implement much faster proprietary data transfer from transport to DAC and ensure the digital signals only travel a few millimetres, for superior time domain accuracy.



Audio Research

Reference 2 MkII and VM220

New monoblocks and a reference-grade preamp from one of the world's finest valve amp specialists

PRICE: Reference 2 MkII: £10,498, VM220: £9,000 (£4,500 each) CONTACT: Absolute Sounds Ltd, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.audioresearch.com

Sometimes, no amount of room on the page is enough to do a product justice.

In the case of the Audio Research Reference 2 MkII and the VM220 monoblocks, we could take up the whole damn mag with words and still hardly scratch the surface of just how good this amp system is.

The Reference 2 MkII is a large, complex, remote controllable line-only preamplifier with

the sort of distortion-free specification sheet that most transistor preamps would struggle to match. It features both balanced and single-ended signal handling (and – unusually – it's comfortable with feet in both camps simultaneously) and its circuit board complement is arranged vertically, like plug-in daughter cards on a computer motherboard. Whereas most line-only tube preamps might

have one or two valves in the circuit, the Audio Research has eight – half a dozen high-spec 6H30 tubes, plus a 5AR4 and a 6L6GC in the power supply. Every aspect has been considered for the purposes of maximising sound quality – volume and balance are effectively rotating switches that adjust the volume (or balance) upwards or downwards in single steps, 125 in total, and there are

isn't a great deal of functionality to the VM220 – each monoblock has just a power switch and LED on the front and a balanced/single-ended switch on the back panel. They take up a lot of floor space and run hot, but they do deliver 200 watts.

This combination must hold some kind of record for the largest soundstage in Christendom. Whatever speakers you own, they will be transformed under the influence of the Audio Research rig. Speakers will sound larger and better controlled, with a wider, deeper and – yes – even taller soundstage than you had ever imagined.

Then there's the detail. You better have a seriously good source component and the best cables you can think of in support. Because if you don't, these amps will make mincemeat of the rest of your system, laying bare every flaw and blemish. But, partner this amp combo accordingly (it does cost nigh on £20,000, remember – consider a player of at least the calibre of Audio Research's own CD3 and high-quality wire of a commensurate quality) and the detail off the disc is remarkable.

SOUND QUALITY

There's a term in valve technology that's used all the time in guitar playing circles but hardly ever heard in relation to hi-fi, and that's 'creamy'. This Audio Research partnership is creamy sounding. Not necessarily warm like cheaper valve designs and not steely like some transistor-based kit. Instead it is extremely smooth and, well, creamy.

It also makes bass like a transistor thumper. How deep? From a pair Sonus Faber Cremonas playing the *Gorillaz vs Spacemonkeyz* album it was deep enough to make ripples in my coffee cup, à la *Jurassic Park*, an octave deeper than

justice to the likes of Biber's *Mystery Sonatas* and other early music. Less impassioned, viscerally organic amplifiers turn this into noodling on period instruments – here it sounds like a quintet of players slowly building the *New Testament* in musical form.

Even badly recorded or badly transferred music comes across brilliantly. Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book* may be one of the best records of the 1970s, but the transfer to CD leaves much to be desired. None of that is glossed over via this amp system – the flat drums, the splashy cymbals, the recessed horn section and the bass guitar that sounds like it's being played in a room filled floor to ceiling with old socks – yet the combo manages to keep the sound funky and make the transgressions more forgivable. Besides, it gets through the remaster mush and digs out the most precocious talent of his generation. It's so good, you start to wish Stevie's talent didn't turn out to have a sell-by date.

What this manages to do is drag you into the music like few other amps can. Background music is a tough call on this combo – you sit forward discovering what your music can do, and even at low levels the tonal balance is unchanged and ideal. So, no matter how background the sounds, you will find yourself being drawn into the music. This can be quite disconcerting when trying to define the music within deeply ambient stuff like *Music For Airports* by Brian Eno, for example.

The balance between preamplifier and power amplifier is just about perfect. The preamplifier adds a touch of warmth and the power amps bring zest to the party. Both are consummate detail hounds and their natures perfectly complement one another. Taken individually, both are surprisingly similar in performance

“Controlled and musical bass, with harmonic structure down to where your bowels ache.”

controls for almost everything a preamp might do, all replicated on the remote control.

The brand new VM220s are a departure from existing Audio Research mono power amplifiers and from a design standpoint look more like models such as the VT55. The amplifiers are open-chassis affairs (a valve cage is available as an optional extra, although there is the feeling that the cage must be supplied to maintain compliance with European standards). Running both balanced and single-ended, the large chassis has two massive transformers sited at the back, plus four 6N1P double triodes in the input stage and four 6550 tubes in the output section. At the rear of the chassis, behind the array of large capacitors, are speaker output tapings for four, eight and sixteen ohms, a balanced and single-ended input and biasing controls for all valves. There

usual. But this isn't simply bass boom, it's controlled and musical, with harmonic structure right down to where your bowels ache. This bass, it should be noted, also comes with that walk-in space and the sort of midband that will play anything with delicate aplomb.

Damien Rice's album sounded little short of wonderful on test, with the rim shots and violins taking on a real-world dynamism and weight. There's an almost intangible feedback on the end of the first chorus of *Delicate* as the strings and guitar trail off. It's almost like an error on the recording, but here it's given due weight and attention. Surprisingly, this only enhances the sense of performance and adds to the pathos of the recording.

The amps are also extremely competent at turning music from a series of converted digits into a living, breathing entity – there is a sense of musical flow that is a necessity to do

terms. Perhaps the VM220s would be most ideally suited to the cheaper LS25 preamp (which is a closer physical, sonic and financial match to the monoblocks). But the sheer correctness of the Reference 2 MkII can raise the bar on any power amplifier and here it makes the VM220s sing sweetly.

Just how good ultimately is the Audio Research kit? It's about the best justification for capitalism to have come out of the US of A in many years. Some amp systems make you dream of lottery wins – this one forces you to redefine your economic outlook and draw up ways of being more successful. Think of it as the audio benchmark of success, like being driven to work in your own Bentley or owning a wardrobe of suits from Anderson & Shepherd. You own Audio Research, especially kit at this lofty level... you've *arrived*. **HFC**

Alan Sircom



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Neat Ultimatum MF9

Tall, slim and handsome, Neat's top model has an unusual collection of drivers

PRICE: £8,995 per pair (high-gloss finishes £1,000 extra) CONTACT: Neat Acoustics, Unit 1, Stainton Grove Ind Est, Barnard Castle, Co Durham DL12 8UJ ☎ 01833 631021 🌐 www.neat.co.uk

Durham-based Neat Acoustics is best known for its tiny two-way Petite, but by way of contrast its tall and slim Ultimatum MF9 is probably among the largest speakers most readers will be willing to accommodate. It stands 1.5m tall and, given that the seated head is normally about a metre off the floor, it will tend to loom over the listener, even though the front view is a fashionably slim 22cm.

Handsome best describes a speaker which is certainly good-looking, but in a rather severe way. A choice of various real-wood veneers decorate the sides and back, but a matt charcoal front panel gives it a serious, sober sort of look, whether or not the 'stocking mask' cloth grille is used. A proper and exceptionally hefty plinth, carved from thick black steel, adds mass, stability and elegance in spades, with four large chrome bosses to accommodate very serious spikes.

Everything about this speaker is substantial, the total weight adding up to 66kg. The enclosure is birch plywood, subdivided into seven separate cavities that provide substantial internal bracing. The driver-mounting front and top panels both incorporate a polyethylene

'sandwich' construction to dampen vibration. Although no fewer than nine drivers are used, the crossover network is actually a very simple five-element affair, because the speaker itself follows a relatively simple two-and-a-half-way configuration (plus super-tweeters).

How come nine drive units? Five are on the front panel – four 165mm drivers flanking an inverted-dome tweeter. Two disc-shaped ribbon-type tweeters fire up from the top surface, and there are two more 165mm units inside. In a 'double d'Appolito' arrangement, all four 6.5-inchers deliver the bass, top and bottom ones rolling off early so that just the inner two carry on through the midband to meet that central tweeter. The bass-only drivers are each backed up by a hidden identical driver, operating in isobaric acoustic series in large ported sub-enclosures.

“This ‘garbage in, garbage out’ honesty isn’t for everyone, but it’s what hi-fi should be about.”

In-room measurements show an impressive smoothness and neutrality overall, and a bass region that's exceptionally even and well extended by any standards. Best results, however, were found with the speakers kept well clear of nearby walls.

The most obvious sonic 'character' is that the treble here is just a little stronger than average. This may or may not appeal, but it certainly makes for a very explicit and detailed sound, even when the system is being played at very low levels.

A hallmark of the very best speakers is that they highlight and communicate the essential differences between alternative sources and even recordings. In this regard the Ultimatum MF9 turns out to be a very good speaker indeed – it has an uncanny ability, borne presumably of its fine neutrality, simply to get out of the way and let the musical messages come through unimpeded and unobstructed. There's no tendency to 'bland out' the material it's being fed. This 'garbage in, garbage out' honesty won't always please everyone, but it's really what high fidelity ought to be about, and it ensures that when the source and/or the recording quality is top notch, the musical enjoyment will be maximised.

Qualitatively, the bass end is quite superb. Very few speakers can match its ability to deliver genuinely deep in-room bass without muddying things up with excessive and thumpy midbass. The bonus here is that the bass is also exceptionally agile and lively, cabinet coloration is vanishingly low, and the speaker showed little tendency to excite the suspended floor of the listening room. The contribution of those top-mounted super-tweeters is very subtle, though probably worthwhile for that little bit of extra air and delicacy.

Over several weeks, respect for this speaker continued to grow throughout our test period. Few can match the way it combines the coherence and communication skills of a simple two-way, with most of the advantages of a much larger design. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

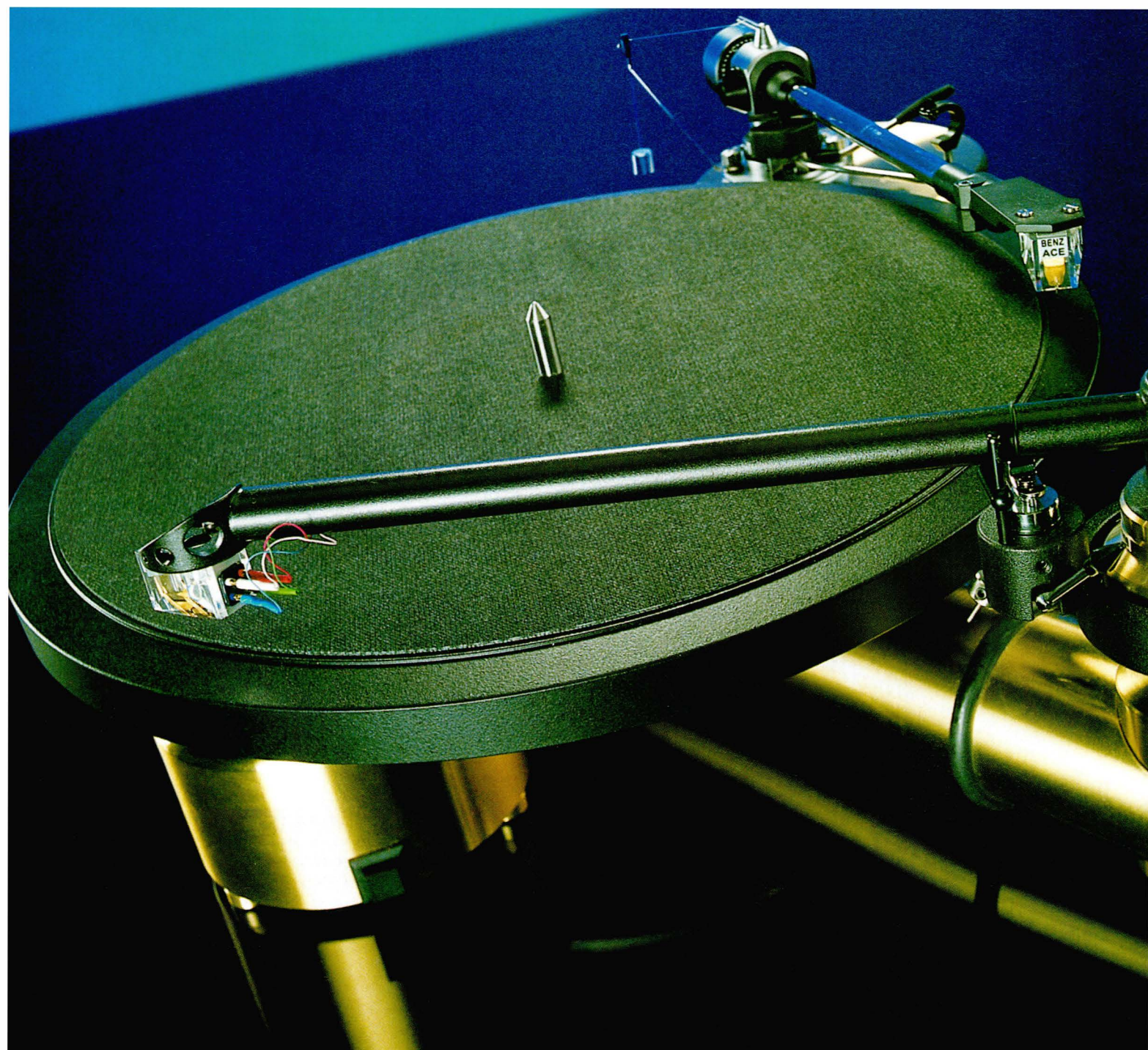
See HFC 226 (April 2002) for our original review of this product

MAKING IT MULTICHANNEL

For high-end surround sound, try this: Neat Ultimatum MF9 (front L/R), Neat Ultimatum MSC (centre channel), Neat Ultimatum MFS (rear L/R).

TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £14,695





Kuzma Stabi SD

This deck's unusual dual-arm arrangement offers two record players for (almost) the price of one

PRICE: £1,800 (with Stogi S arm – second arm/cartridges extra) CONTACT: Audiofreaks Ltd, 15 Link Way, Ham, Richmond, Surrey TW10 7QT ☎ 020 8948 4153 🌐 www.kuzma.si

This is a rather extraordinary turntable, in that it allows the user to fit not one but two tonearms. This means you can specify two different arms, and two different cartridges too if you wish, to give you a choice of 'sounds'. With most turntables this would be impossible, but at the behest of UK distributor Audiofreaks, Kuzma took the basic Stabi S deck and extended one of the brass outrigger tubes so that it could accept an optional second arm, hence the Stabi SD – 'D' for 'double'.

The deck is a paragon of simplicity. Excluding the arm, it has just four main parts – platter, subplatter, T-bar (including bearing assembly and tonearm outrigger) and an entirely separate motor housing. Simple doesn't mean shoddy, though. The brass T-bar assembly alone weighs more than most CD players. Plinthless, the Kuzma appears smaller than most, and requires a good, solid wooden support to deliver its best sound (it's not overly location-sensitive, however). There is nothing

exceptional to the design – it's not an inverted bearing, the platter is mid-mass, the DC motor is well-housed but otherwise standard. And that is why the Kuzma is such a success – turntables are as much about spinning round and round and round as they are about great sound. Too many people have been caught out by the superb-sounding turntable that breaks down every week or two – the Stabi SD sounds good straight from the box, and stays good sounding, whether one tonearm is used, or two.

Speaking of solid engineering... our review sample came with a second tonearm made by SME, an addition which Audiofreaks recommends for the Stabi SD as an interesting sonic contrast to the standard Kuzma arm. The new 'entry-level' Series M2 (£585) is a straight arm-tubed tonearm that resembles classic S-shaped SME arms like the 3009. The resemblance is only skin deep though – it's a thoroughly modern arm with the latest high-performance ball-race gimbal bearings (no more knife edge bearings like those in the 3000 series) and ideal for most cartridges, especially medium to low compliance models. The magnesium headshell is removable and there is an optional damping trough for those trying to play music on über-springy surfaces.

rock-solid build must make it one of the best value turntables around, regardless of price.

That solidity extends to the sound of the Kuzma Stogi S arm – it has an architectural quality not commonly expected from unipivot designs. It paints with broad, bold, colourful strokes, with a big powerful bass and the sort of dynamic range that could wake the dead. In many ways it's the perfect partner with the Stabi SD; there's a slight roll-off of the upper registers, but the edge-of-your-seat excitement and dynamic scale combines wonderfully with the honesty and solidity of the turntable.

The SME arm's principle character is detailed and refined. It's a cerebral performer, perfect for digging out the detail in the grooves and portraying it without favouring a specific end of the spectrum. However, it's not

“It won't out-sound the big money high-end decks, but then this player costs less than the power supply of many such products.”

To complete our review package, both the Kuzma and SME arms were loaded up with Benz-Micro ACE cartridges (£395 apiece), ACE being an acronym for 'Advanced Cartridge Engineering'. It's essentially a low-cost version of the company's Glider cartridge, a hand-made moving coil design on an alloy frame and housed in an acrylic body like the Benz Ruby. It's available in three different output levels – we had two identical 0.8mV medium output models, instantly recognisable thanks to the clear and gold body.

But let's get one thing clear – this isn't a comparison between two arms on the same turntable. The difference between the two is one of character, not performance. And besides, the two complement one another. Given the choice, I would select exactly this layout (two arms, same cartridge, on one turntable) as both arms offer a sound that is distinctly different, yet equally viable.

SOUND QUALITY

But we are running away with ourselves. Let's start with the Kuzma Stabi SD turntable in isolation. It manages to combine the solidity of a high-mass deck with the speed and the transparency of a low-mass design. It even captures the easy dynamic range and boppy rhythm of a good suspended turntable design like the Linn Sondek. It's one of those extremely neutral, consistently enjoyable turntables that seem to transcend price categories and would not sound out of place in a budget setting, nor set against some seriously high-end gear. No, it won't out-sound the big money high-end decks (remember though, the player costs less than the power supply of many of those products) but its combination of well-judged musicality and

so detailed that it ceases to be musically entertaining – the Series M2 manages to keep the sound exciting and detailed in one. In many respects, used carefully, this manages to bring the sort of absolute fidelity of an SME V tonearm down to less rarefied price levels, and the arm is the perfect foil for those seeking refinement on a Michell Gyrodec, for example, where the full-on SME IV or V would be, to nick a quote from Shakespeare, "to gild refined gold".

Even the Benz cartridge is a little star. Forget that, the cartridge is a magnificent performer, managing to weave a web of refinement and detail right across the board. At a price where most MC cartridges give you just a taste of what high-end needles can do, this serves up a banquet. As with the Kuzma – and, to a different extent, the SME – it isn't going to see off a cartridge costing five times as much, but it has that magical musicality that means you never feel shortchanged by the ACE.

The great and dreadful thing with this deck is that it gives you options you never thought of before. Every record gets played twice; once with the SME arm, and then again with the Kuzma. Then it gets played one more, on the arm that best suits the record. I found an almost perfect 50:50 split, a split independent of genre, too. One recording – *UForb* by the Orb – made this perfectly clear; the first disc was best through the SME and the second sounded wonderful through the Kuzma. But the very best recordings sounded remarkable on both arms, precipitating playing the same tracks twice in quick succession.

In short, you are spoiled for choice – and in a way, this extraordinary two-armed turntable doubles your record collection! **HFC**

Alan Sircom

Of course, Kuzma already has its own, very decent tonearm for the Stabi S or SD – the Kuzma Stogi S. The last time we looked at the Stabi S/Stogi combination, this was a very different arm design. The 'new' Stogi S is a unipivot arm, but unlike any other. It's superbly engineered and sits within an integrated bath of silicon goo (akin to a Well-Tempered arm). This means that the lead-out wires run direct from cartridge tag to phono stage, as they exit from the top of the bearing instead of through the base (as with the Naim Aro arm).

All that spindly insubstantiality found in most unipivot designs is missing here. This is the unipivot Isambard Kingdom Brunel would have made – the arm tube stands high of the record surface and the headshell appears almost upside down, unconventional perhaps but actually good, solid engineering.

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One of the grand old names of hi-fi, these days Bang & Olufsen is better known for its upmarket audio, video and multi-room 'lifestyle' products than purist hi-fi. However, this innovative new speaker shows that the company still has plenty of good ideas, as well as some determination to get back on the serious hi-fi map.

It's an expensive speaker, selling for a very substantial £10,000 per pair. But for that you get much more than just a pair of speakers, since each unit is equipped with 2,500 watts of amplification, plus some very clever digital signal processing.

The striking conical styling owes something to the Dalek school of industrial design, yet actually adheres closely to form-follows-function principles, allowing, for example, an enormous 380mm downward-firing bass driver to be mounted in the base. It's actually a four-way, four-driver design, with a 165mm unit for upper bass/lower midrange, a 78mm fabric-dome for upper midrange, and an 18mm fabric-dome tweeter, all actively driven by built-in power amps.

One unique feature is to fire the mid and top drivers upwards against clever elliptical 'acoustic lenses'. This maintains phase while focusing their output into restricted vertical and horizontal 'windows', to deliver superior stereo image definition virtually irrespective of where the speakers are sited. Another clever technique automatically measures and then uses digital signal processing (DSP) to equalise the bass output variations caused by speaker/room-mode interactions.

The speaker can be fed with either analogue or digital inputs, and a B&O remote handset is needed to go from standby to operational mode. The electronics include a built-in remote volume control that can be bypassed if connected to an 'audiophile' hi-fi system, as we did here.

Room measurements showed a frequency balance in the listening zone that was very smooth and even through the mid and treble. The bass balance was well ordered and reasonably smooth too, though there was evidence of room mode reinforcement and cancellation.

Once up and running, the first and lasting impression was that this speaker gave exceptionally precise and detailed stereo imaging, indicating that the innovative 'lens' system really does work. Furthermore, there seems to be no obvious attendant down-side, as the second impression was of its superbly even-handed neutrality. Coloration is exceptionally low throughout the audio band, and this speaker is unquestionably among the most neutral on the market.

“The lasting impression was that this speaker gave exceptionally precise and detailed imaging.”

Its cleverest trick, however, is simply the way it seems to 'disappear', acoustically speaking. One simply isn't aware of the location of the speakers themselves – only of the precisely detailed and well focused soundstage, with all the instruments and voices of a recording portrayed with unusually natural perspectives and proportions.

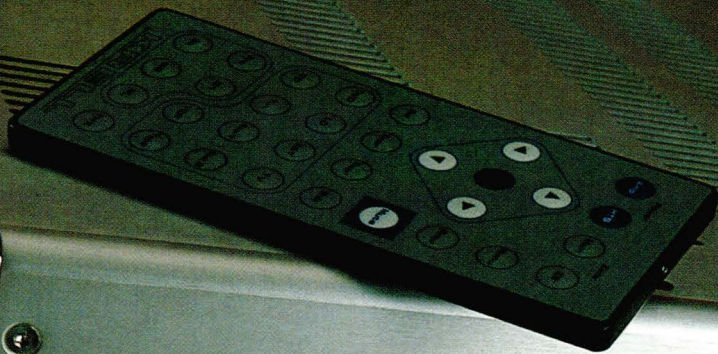
The bass is just about as good as it gets, delivering magnificent weight and power whenever required, while avoiding any thump or thickening effects. Even a notorious 'thumper' like Wyclef Jean's *Carnival* comes through crisp, clean – and very, very loud indeed. There's none of the 'woody' or 'boxy' colour often associated with large conventional enclosures, and there were little if any aggressive tendencies, even when playing the system at very high levels.



While the acoustic performance is impeccable, the sound is perhaps just a little too polite. It doesn't quite match the spine-tingling capabilities of more audiophile-oriented systems, or reveal the distinctive characters of our various sources to such an obvious extent. Rather, its strengths lie more in understatement and discretion than in drama and tension: in its uncanny ability to 'disappear' sonically from the proceedings, leaving just the sound of music hanging in the air. Massive loudness capabilities and plenty of deep bass slam indicate a potential party animal, whose sonic excellence should be fully and consistently realised irrespective of the room in which it is used. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

See HFC 244 (August 2003) for our original review of this product



DVD LD SAT VCR TV
CD TUNER AUX1 AUX2 TAPE/VCR2 ZONE

Home Theater Standard
VOLUME 016
DTS NEO:6 MUSIC

PRE AMP STEREO
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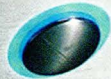
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Krell HTS 7.1 and TAS

Two-channel Krell performance from a multichannel amp system – this is high-end AV for audiophiles

PRICE: Krell HTS 7.1: £8,998, Krell TAS: £8,498 CONTACT: Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.krellonline.com

Collectively grouped under the HEAT (High End Audio Theater) acronym, these two products belong to Krell's KAV Series, complete with distinctive casework featuring six flat alloy panels and four machined end caps, with smoothly rounded edges (the SACD player reviewed on p97 is from the same range). There are two HEAT AV processors – the entry-level Showcase and the Home Theater Standard (HTS), which is a modular design. Then there are three versions of the entry-level Showcase multichannel power amps with five, six or seven channels. Finally, there's the more ambitious five-channel Theater Amplifier Standard, the other half of the HTS 7.1/TAS pair tested here.

At first sight the HTS 7.1 processor looks very like the Showcase, but the view from the back, or lifting the lid, shows that it is constructed as a number of easily removable daughterboards that engage with a motherboard, PC style. The HTS has already been upgraded once in the past, with the improvements retrofittable for existing owners, and the same may happen in the future, but there is also a firmware upgrade route through the RS232 interface, which could be bought into play, perhaps to add Dolby Pro Logic IIx for example.

Upgradeability aside, the HTS is a well equipped processor, but the real story is of quality rather than quantity. If it wasn't, then the current stratum of flagship one-box amplifiers from Denon, Pioneer and others would eat the Krell for breakfast with their i.Link, DenonLink and (imminently) HDMI digital interfaces, powerful DSP and (in some cases) auto set-up features.

The HTS 7.1 is a THX Ultra-certified processor/preamp, with THX processing that can be switched in and out. THX Ultra2 is not formally included, but the subwoofer channel is supported by software that has much of the functionality of THX Ultra2 boundary compensation, as well as meeting THX Ultra2 requirements with broadcast-quality, high-definition-compatible video switching. Similarly, the TAS power amp far exceeds THX Ultra2 requirements for voltage and current delivery. Surround processing is available to THX Surround EX, Dolby Digital 5.1, Dolby Digital EX, DTS6.1 ES and Dolby Pro Logic II standards, but there are omissions, Pro Logic IIx and DTS 96:24 being the most notable. The HTS 7.1 is particularly well equipped for multi-room operation, and the broadcast quality video switching section can handle PAL and NTSC video, progressive or interlace.

Processor set-up is very flexible. Each of the physical analogue and digital inputs on the rear panel can be assigned to any named input (such as CD or DVD), each of which has its own menu which allows just about any parameter to be programmed on a per-input basis. A limited but still useful form of manually adjusted room equalisation is part of the design. Each input can be set with its own preferred decoding mode (DTS, for example), but all available alternatives that can be used for the input source type selected can be toggled through on the Mode 2 button.

The key to making sense of these two is to understand what they are designed to do. On one level they deliver typical Krell-type audio attributes in multichannel. But Krell already has the Showcase processor/power amp pairing which offers comparable functionality, and a similar power amp package, albeit with a lower power output. The bigger overlap is between the two processors, so where does the higher price Home Theatre Standard slot in?

The main difference is that the HTS has better support for multiroom systems, and seems to have been designed from the ground up as a solid starting point for a custom install and/or multiroom set-up, probably using an external controller – the small handset has the

problems encountered when setting up the processor, which is far from intuitive. Practice makes perfect of course, and when the arcane logic is understood, set-up can be achieved rapidly, taking advantage of the unusual architectural flexibility of the design.

The Krell is easy enough to use, but the very tiny press buttons that populate the front panel won't be to everyone's taste. The only significant problem, however, concerns the volume control, whose limited number of steps means rather large volume gaps, especially at the low-volume end of the range.

SOUND QUALITY

Sonically, the Krell pairing is immaculate. Individually and collectively, the Krell sound is entirely consistent with other KAV series components, which by the way is rather different in character to the heavy-duty Class A range. The principal qualities are speed, refinement and detail. The bass is deep and pure, but it has the sting of a bee – it's really, really quick, and when required, the sonic tension dissipates as rapidly as it comes. The effect is homogenous, and with the one caveat about the volume control, which is not really acceptable for a product in this price category, performance is fully up to Krell's

“The bass is deep and pure, but it has the sting of a bee – it's really, really quick.”

look and feel of a get-you-started device. The modular construction, combined with full documentation in the developer's manual, speaks of a system that can be kept abreast of developments. It's true that the Showcase is similarly documented, but its support for multiroom custom install is less extensive, and its hard-wired internals are less well adapted to being upgraded over the years.

A similar argument cannot be advanced for the power amplifier, but the high-current 200-watt per channel (eight ohms) output, which doubles into four ohms, is almost never likely to be stressed, where the smaller Showcase models might fall into that trap with changing circumstances. Another incidental advantage of the Krell TAS is that unlike a number of other well-known amps designed for custom installation, it is convection-cooled, and therefore runs silently as long as proper ventilation recommendations are observed.

The performance of the two components is very strong, but that's not to downplay the

two-channel audio equipment. With the relevant bypasses selected, the HTS 7.1 is an audiophile standard preamp, and the TAS power amp is essentially the equal of Krell's KAV-2250, which is praise indeed.

Spatial processing is good, but no better than the smattering of high-class integrated amps and receivers, notably the Denon AVC-A1SR 'A' and the Pioneer VSA-AX10i-S, and perhaps the top-end Yamahas too. The Krell's personality is of a slightly clipped feel, and compared to others it images with exquisite precision, but sometimes seems to underplay what might be described as generalised ambience.

As an all-in package, however, the Krell is hard to fault. Okay, it's not the easiest to install, but Krell's dealer network can help you with that, and the overall bias towards pure, unadulterated high-fidelity virtues is surely just what the HFC doctor ordered. Finally, on past form, construction and reliability are likely to be completely bullet-proof. **HFC**

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Roksan describes the combination of turntable, arm and cartridge as a precision instrument designed to measure groove displacement against time, and the company has always approached turntable design as an exercise in meticulous engineering. The key ideas that the company introduced in its first-ever product, the Xerxes turntable, have been retained and elaborated in the flagship TMS (Touraj Moghaddam Signature), and now in the TMS2, which was introduced about a year ago, more than a decade after the original TMS. For our test it came with the Artimez arm and Shiraz low-output MC cartridge, both top-of-the-line components from the Roksan range, which add £1,000 and £1,250 respectively to the cost quoted above. As an all-in package, the TMS2/Artimez/Shiraz player costs £9,750.

Not cheap then, so what do you get? Well the obvious point – and for this reason we won't dwell on it – is that you get a stunning looking player, every sample of which is unique due to the way the flecked external finish is produced. More substantively, like all worthwhile engineering projects, the materials used have been very carefully thought through. The two parts of the platter are an interference fit, and so essentially self damping. The design of the subplatter includes a label recess, and a thin felt mat is all that is needed to complete the job.

Next, the bearing is truly special. The critical parts are made by a Welsh supplier of space-going gyroscopes to a hardness, precision and surface finish said to be virtually unattainable otherwise. But the basic design of the ultra-slim, self-aligning and centring single-point bearing with its captive ball is unchanged in its fundamentals from the Xerxes. The power supply has been improved too, and now inhabits a full-width box that may be conveniently stored on a shelf under the player.

Let's not get embroiled in the 'is vinyl better than CD' argument. It all depends on what you mean by better, which is not a cop-out, just a simple statement of fact. But all the fundamentals are here. Basics first.

Pitch stability is first class. There is no audible slowing under load, which for vinyl means through heavily modulated passages, and nothing that can be audibly identified as wow or flutter (low and high rate speed variations), though there will of course be measurable artefacts. Next, the player is very quiet – unusually so. Surface noise is well suppressed and on the whole is quickly ignored, and there is no noticeable motor

“Roksan has always approached turntable design as an exercise in meticulous engineering.”

breakthrough mechanically or electrically. Unless the record is in a real state, surface noise simply doesn't intrude. The TMS2 is also good at dealing with footfall noise, as long as the supporting structure remains steady. The well damped suspension is biased towards stability in practical circumstances rather than ultimate rejection of external noise under ideal ones, but it performs well here too.

And it sounds good – very good. Like all really capable components, it knows just when to let the music sing out, and when to apply the brakes. Notes start and stop quickly, with no noticeable bell-like overtones. Some may even find the TMS too lean and dry for their tastes, but this is surely no more than a demonstration of the player's excellent discipline. Yet bass performance is very powerful. When the occasion demands there is no holding back, and ultimately it is this responsiveness and almost understated control that marks the TMS2 out as a true state-of-the-art record player. **HFC**

Alvin Gold

See HFC 246 (October 2003) for our original review of this product



Wilson Audio System 7

The world's 'best-selling high-end speaker' was revamped recently. Just a face-lift or a major change?

PRICE: WATT 7: £10,550, Puppy 7: £11,940 CONTACT: Absolute Sounds Ltd, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.wilsonaudio.com

When you consider that the Wilson System 7 – which costs more than twenty grand all-told – is now third from top in a range of six stereo speakers (the latest X-2 Alexandria flagship costs more than a Mercedes SL55 AMG Cabriolet with all the trimmings), you begin to think the company deserves the label of high-end super success story. And it really is a success story, with thousands of Wilson speaker systems sold.

The Wilson WATT/Puppy speaker system (the WATT being the mid/treble cabinet, sitting on the Puppy passive subwoofer) has been around for some time, with the first Wilson Audio Tiny Tot (hence WATT) appearing 18 years ago. It has undergone substantial changes since 1986, not least the addition of the Puppy, introduced in 1988.

But last year's move to the new 'System 7' was one of the most significant, with a host changes from previous WATT/Puppy iterations. The WATT retains the 25mm inverted Focal tweeter and 175mm ScanSpeak carbon fibre bass/mid unit, but the cabinet, cabinet material, cross-bracing, crossover and method of integrating WATT to Puppy have all been altered. The Puppy is even more radically changed, with two new 200mm Dynaudio bass units replacing the original ones used for 14 years. As with the WATT, the cabinet, its construction, materials used and crossover are changed. Two entirely different composite substances are used to form the cabinets – a ceramic/methacrylate compound for the WATT enclosure and an acrylic/phenolic mix for the Puppy cabinet.

As you might expect from a speaker that costs as much as a four-year-old Porsche Boxster, its physical dimensions are heroic. It's 113cm tall, has a 32x49cm footprint and weighs in at a healthy 77kg – each! Yet, for all this solidity, it's a surprisingly easy speaker to drive – a 92dB sensitivity and a four-ohm impedance make this a speaker that can be driven by a seven-watt triode amp if needed. The upper limit is more open-ended – you could use this with nigh-on a kilowatt of power without strain. Do not confuse 'easy' with 'cheap', however – the WATT/Puppy combination demands an extremely expensive set of components to feed it. You could happily make a pair of these Wilsons the cheapest part of the system and still not exhaust their potential. The System 7 works well with classic high-end Americana, like the Krell components and Transparent Audio cable we used for our test, but the other usual high-end suspects work wonders, too.

Placement is crucial for the Wilson ethos. You need a large room with lots of listening space, not to mention installation by a Wilson-trained expert. The speakers need room to breathe, from both side and rear walls, and demand a good three metres in between. Toe-in is also important, and with 77kg speakers armed with the sort of spikes that could punch through tank armour, this is best left in the hands of the experts!

SOUND QUALITY

Some have suggested that the WATT/Puppy combination is almost bass-light. This surely comes from people who haven't heard the system, or have only heard it playing delicate, airy hi-fi tunes at polite listening levels with low-powered triode amps. Stick a few hundred watts up its speaker terminals and pump it full of dub reggae and a different opinion is formed. Instead of light, airy bass you get to shake off any comestibles passing through the lower intestines in record time. It's rated at delivering volume down to 21Hz with sound pressure levels getting close to 120dB in-room. All of which gives the sort of power delivery that is not far short of a PA system.

But if this is a PA system, it's the PA that God uses. There is a reason why this speaker system is so successful, a reason why a substantial number of the more well-heeled hi-fi reviewers around the world use – or have used – Wilson

to stomach, but when a speaker is this communicative, with a lot of oomph behind it, it can turn in the sort of rhythmic properties of even the most nobby-head speaker, but with all the high-end trimmings to boot. As with an top-notch kit, plucking a particularly memorable disc out of the ones listened to is an exercise in futility – they all sound good. That said, Damien Rice's 'O' CD took on a sense of reality that was uncanny. It sounded exactly as if he was in the room.

Perhaps the toughest job in audio is weaning yourself off the Wilson sound, if you lack the space or the moolah to buy a pair. Listening to almost any speaker system – unless it is similarly up there with the best you can buy – is like listening to a badly tuned clock radio after a few hours of 'Wilsonsound'. Our sonic memory fades, fortunately, but the Wilson experience lives long in the mind... and listening to more down-to-earth speaker systems is a severe disappointment for some time to come. Almost everything else seems to lack *something*.

Previous iterations of Wilson WATT/Puppy speakers have been the ultimate listening tool for the hi-fi reviewer – they make every component in the system reveal all their properties, good or ill. Trouble is, that can make for very uncomfortable listening, entailing a never-ending quest for the ultimate upgrade. A similar level of analysis is

“It has the sort of power of a PA system, but if this is a PA, it's the PA that God uses.”

speakers. The System 7 sounds fantastic, with effortless dynamic range, detail and soundstaging. It's one of the few products that is so good that the limitations exist outside of the product itself – if this speaker is below par, blame something else.

American reviews have a series of terms seldom seen in British magazines, like 'microdynamics' and 'inner detail'. Perhaps the reason for the lack of terminology is that they don't exist in most lower level British speakers. The System 7 can portray subtle microdynamic events with ease, with the sort of inner detailing that leaves you knowing all there is to know about any recording played. The soundstaging is as good as the disc, the player and the amp can muster, with width, depth and even height information. And, most importantly, it can carry a tune, too. The flat-earthers of this parish may find this hard

on tap with the System 7, yet it doesn't seem to make the listening process so analytical that it becomes hard to enjoy the music playing in the process.

Eighteen years is a long time at the pinnacle of loudspeaker technology and Wilson has had its share of challengers in those years. Yet, people always come back to Wilson WATT/Puppy. It remains an important benchmark for what a high-end speaker can do – and proof that, for the music lover, the effect can be positively life-changing. **HFC**

Alan Sircom

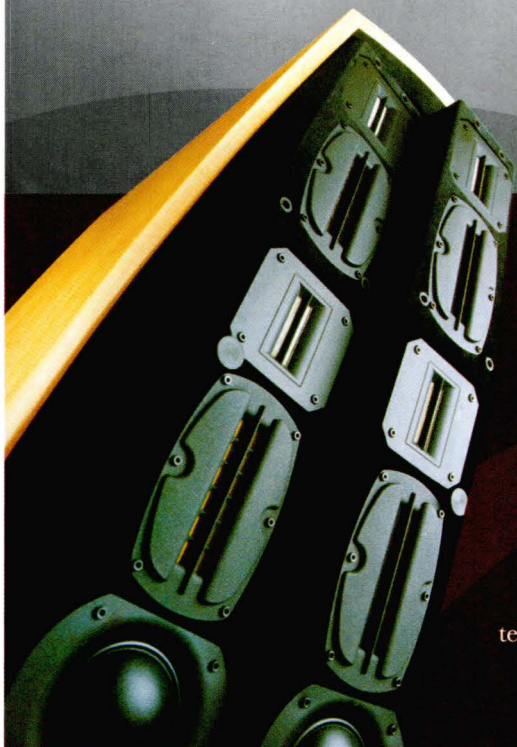
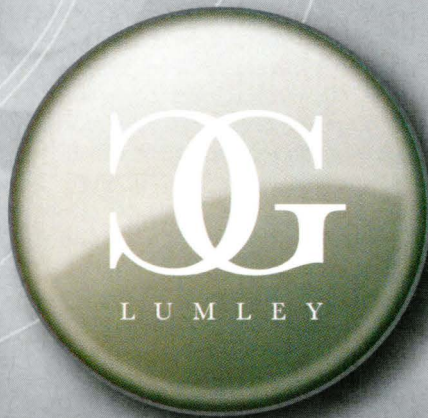
MAKING IT MULTICHANNEL

For high-end surround sound, try this: Wilson System 7 (front L/R), Wilson WATCH Centre Channel, Wilson WATCH Wall Mount Speaker (rear L/R), Wilson WATCH Dog (subwoofer). **TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £44,925**



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www.metropolis-music.co.uk

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Chapter Preface and II+

When is a digital amplifier not a digital amplifier? We get to the bottom of the Chapter conundrum

PRICE: Preface: £4,300, II+: £5,500 CONTACT: Henley Designs Ltd, Unit 11, Moorbrook, Southmead Industrial Park, Didcot, Oxfordshire OX11 7HP ☎ 01235 511166 🌐 www.chapteraudio.com

Founded in 1999, Chapter Audio started out with a power amp that looked exactly like the II+ yet featured analogue technology throughout. Since then it has seen the introduction of a Class D output stage. There's also now a Preface preamp to match, and the two make for compelling listening.

The II+ is a fully balanced 300-watt stereo amplifier with the sort of heatsinking associated with much less powerful designs. It's also quite compact, which has been achieved by using a switch-mode power supply. The cool running is thanks to the Class D factor, yet this is not a conventional digital amplifier – it is a hybrid of digital and analogue technology. All the initial gain stages are analogue and the Class D section forms the final output stage.

The Preface preamp is no less an example of leading-edge design that uses top-quality branded components, custom-made mains transformers and a full-immersion gold-type printed circuit board, incorporating surface-mount precision resistors. Another notable variation from the norm is the inclusion of a volume pot which uses a series of precision resistors and relays. You change level with a remote or the infinitely rotating knob which is acceleration-sensitive.

The fascia has only the amp's name inscribed upon it, with all the user information on the small dot matrix display. This will let you access a number of parameters: volume, input selection and balance, plus some unusual ones such as balanced or single-ended output and phase inversion among others. Input mapping means you can name all your inputs to match the connected sources.

SOUND QUALITY

Whatever the Chapters are doing, or not doing, the end result is unusually convincing. After a while it becomes clear that you can actually hear more of the fundamentals, so things like low-level vocal samples make sense for a change. It comes down to two hi-fi parameters – timing and level resolution. Both seem unusually accurate here. Whatever you play, be it Chopin nocturnes or the

high-speed electronic excursions of Cornelius, the leading edges are always spot on. The timing, while not thrust at you, gives the music an entirely convincing ebb and flow. We played several albums that are not usually engaging and found them strangely captivating – Anouar Brahem's *Barzakh* for instance often seems to lack variety, but through the Chapters we were drawn in and fully engaged by the playing and the emotion behind it. With a good ECM recording like this you also get plenty of harmonic detail and reverb – these amps are certainly not dry-sounding. On the less subtle side, Eminem's pace is picked up perfectly, bringing back the magic in his delivery that is so elusive.

“The timing, while not thrust at you, gives the music an entirely convincing ebb and flow.”

The level resolution is most obvious when playing a number of different albums. Several can be compressed and lacking in level variation and thus sound a bit lacklustre, yet when a wideband one comes along you know all about it – this being the point when you wish the remote would change volume more swiftly!

Transparency is also unusually high albeit in a natural, relaxed way. Some electronics emphasise the treble slightly to achieve this but the Chapter pairing merely lets more of the music through, revealing details and sounds that are usually masked or lacking in distinction. They also get the message across in no uncertain terms: put on Aarvo Pärt's *Tabula Rasa* for instance and the intensity of emotion, the power behind the composition is awesome. If music is about bringing us closer to the soul of the artist then these amps are doing it properly. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

See HFC 249 (Awards 2003) for our original review of these products



Standby Display Phase DC-Emphasis

PWR
dB0
44.1 kHz
dCS Elgar plus
Reference Digital to Analogue Audio Processor
180

Input Mute Volume/Balance

Power Clock Frequency Dither
Step

PWR
STEP
44.1 kHz
dCS Verona
Master Clock
DTH
EXT

Menu
Select

Power b/w M/A

PWR
180
44.1 kHz
dCS Verdi La Scala
Up-sampling SACD Transport
DTH
EXT
180

Menu
Select
Step

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0
Mute Power Standby
Mute Power Standby

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0
Mute Power Standby
Mute Power Standby

dCS

dCS

dCS Verdi La Scala, Elgar, Verona

Few CD players come in three boxes, but then this could be the best digital audio player in the world

PRICE: Verdi La Scala: £9,499, Elgar: £9,499, Verona: £3,999 CONTACT: dCS Ltd, Mull House, Great Chesterford Court, Great Chesterford, Saffron Walden CB10 1PF ☎ 01799 531999 🌐 www.dcsLtd.co.uk

Three large boxes were required to deliver the separate components of this beast – the Verdi La Scala SACD/CD transport, the Elgar Plus DAC and the unconventional newcomer to dCS's slow-changing range, the Verona 'master clock'.

The idea of using a master clock is not new in the recording studio environment, where a multitude of digital components may be connected together. If each decided on its own idea of 44.1 kHz (or 48, or whatever) sampling rate they would never quite agree, so in best-practice installations each device is slaved to a master clock that sets the whole lot in accurate synchronism. In a domestic environment this may seem unnecessary, but bear in mind the bugbear of jitter. A single-wire digital connection is far from ideal, and many manufacturers offer the option of a clock connection from DAC back to transport to eliminate synchronisation problems and significantly reduce jitter. The separate master clock extends this concept to any number of devices, including multiple sources, upsamplers and the like.

The Verona also improves absolute accuracy to a claimed 1ppm, which doesn't really signify in audio terms but is nice to know – if that's not good enough you can synchronise the Verona, in turn, to a GPS clock for accuracy of a few seconds every million years or something. Isn't science wonderful?

The Verdi La Scala is the engine room of the combination, a fully-featured SACD transport which automatically upsamples CDs to DSD format before sending the data out via IEEE 1394 ('FireWire') – other digital outputs carry straight CD data, downconverted in the case of SACD replay. The Elgar Plus can receive all of these and is of course compatible with every digital format known to man, from 32kHz to 192kHz and all bit depths, on all connector types. It can also send and receive word clock sync signals, and its fine-resolution volume and balance control allows elimination of an analogue preamp in all-digital systems. It's only stereo, though – no SACD surround as yet.

Naturally, all this kit is built to a standard above reproach with such deluxe niceties as really solid, wobble-free rotary controls and positive action pushbuttons. The potentially bewildering features are easily accessed via a simple menu structure, aided by lengthy but well-written instruction manuals. Actually, we suspect many users will have the units installed and set up by the dealer and simply ignore the options, but if you want to try them they're not hard to master.

Prior to the test, our expectations were mixed. On the one hand, superb quality sound was promised by dCS's reputation and our own previous experience. On the other hand, has the envelope really been pushed any further – and can the cost in any way be justified?

SOUND QUALITY

Apparently the answer to both those questions is yes. These units really do seem to be able to extract more information from the digits than we had previously heard, even on the most familiar test tracks. There are a couple of slight riders to that, though, which we'll dispose of at once. First, for CD-only replay, the Elgar needs little or no assistance. We could hardly resist trying it with a very ornery CD player as a transport and performance was already superb – the Verdi La Scala adds just the merest smidgin of extra refinement but, to be frank, the doubling in cost is hard to justify. Second, in a CD context the Verona is strictly in the category of dotting i's – indeed, not so much dotting them as perfecting the profile of the dot. Again, a small lift but no dramatic change.

However, no cheap transport will play SACDs through the Elgar as the 1394 digital interface is encoded, and what we're really looking at

reproduction, even wringing more life and presence out of relatively wretched recordings. Just think of all those hi-fi buzzwords – resolution, extension, authority etc – and rest assured that these dCS babies have them in spades. No, dammit, in truckloads!

The qualities heard with SACDs are pretty much evident with CDs too and indeed we'd be pushed to think of half a dozen CD replay alternatives that can come within spitting distance at best. We tried various connection, filter and upsampling options and not surprisingly they made small differences, but the important thing is that at no time did performance fall below the very highest standards. It's particularly gratifying to note that some of the best sounds we heard came from recordings made with dCS analogue-to-digital converters, the end-to-end transparency of the system reviving memories of the recording sessions like few other music reproduction experiences we've had.

There is just one definable drawback. In common with far too many disc replay machines right across the price spectrum, there is a slight mechanical noise from the Verdi La Scala, a high-pitched hiss – at times almost registering on the ear as a whistle – which listened for in isolation can be hard to

“What we're really looking at here is probably the world's best SACD player.”

hear is probably the world's best SACD player. What's more, the Verona seems more obviously beneficial in this setting, improving noticeably on the Elgar's internal wordclock generator. With well recorded discs, the results are truly special, the sound taking on a spaciousness and depth that's rare indeed and a pleasure to hear in any kind of musical material. There's such a sense of ease about everything, a natural presentation that makes it clear just how synthetic most hi-fi can be.

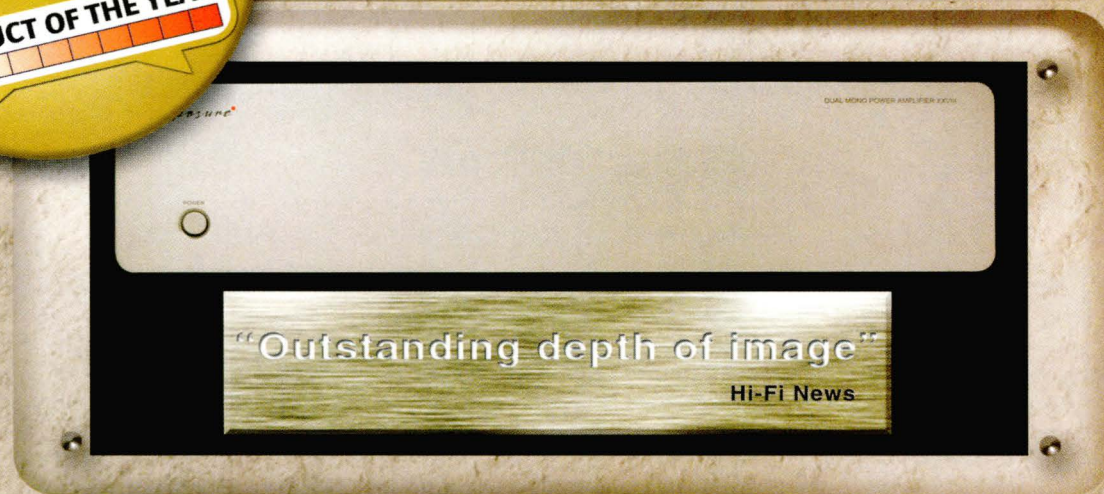
Remarkably, this is apparent even with very modest partnering equipment. On arrival, the combo was quickly plugged up to ensure it basically functioned, and it was plumbed through a temporary system of lower total cost than the Verona alone. All the same, its qualities were immediately apparent compared with the resident (unpretentious but very capable) CD player. Walls fell back, images expanded, sound just, well, took wing. It's hard to describe objectively quite how this system manages to remove vestiges of mechanical

hear but which paradoxically can become positively intrusive in certain kinds of music, even at distances of two or three metres. Covering the transport with a blanket cut the level significantly and this simple experiment at least confirmed that said hiss has very little effect on the overall sonic presentation. All the same, it would be nice to be properly rid of it. In electronic terms there's nothing we can criticise, as the performance of the various components in every way we could think of to test was pretty much at the resolution limit of our instruments.

As a minimum, you can expect an astonishing degree of naturalism: that the sound can be tweaked even a fraction higher with the Verona, and tuned to taste with filtering options, simply adds to the rock-solid build quality, peerless technical performance and general pride of ownership as yet more reasons to lust after these understated boxes. It doesn't get much better than this. **HFC**

Richard Black

Winners Breed Winners



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B&W Nautilus 800

The massive 800 takes B&W Nautilus performance one step beyond

PRICE: £11,000 per pair (Nautilus 800), £16,000 per pair (Signature 800) CONTACT: B&W Loudspeakers Ltd, Dale Road, Worthing, West Sussex BN11 2BH ☎ 01903 221500 # www.bwspeakers.com

B&W's innovative range of high-end Nautilus models has been astonishingly successful for a seriously upmarket speaker range. However, the company didn't rest on its laurels, and three years after the original launch, it supplemented those initial models with a new and even higher-end Nautilus/Signature 800 model.

Nautilus 800 and Signature 800 are effectively identical in sonic and technical performance, but the £11,000 Nautilus version comes clothed in a regular high-quality real-wood veneer, whereas the £16,000 Signature spends extra days in the cabinet shop receiving a luxurious 'tiger's eye' or 'bird's eye' finish (as pictured).

The 800 uses the same 'head' assembly as the less costly 801 and 802 models, but in place of the 801's 380mm bass driver, or the 802's twin-200mm, this 800 splits the difference by equipping its bass enclosure with a pair of 250mm drivers. Crucially, each of these bass drivers has the same magnet and motor system as that used in the 801's single unit, so there's plenty of extra 'shove' and 'grip' here, as well as a daunting total weight of 125kg.

The speaker is built onto a large metal plinth that houses a heavily over-engineered crossover network, stuffed with components specially sourced for this 'flagship' model. The bass enclosure is Flowport-loaded through its base, mostly curved (to spread internal standing waves), and heavily reinforced by B&W's Matrix honeycomb.

“The first impression was of a remarkably pin-sharp, tightly focused central image.”

On top of this sits the 'teardrop' midrange enclosure, mechanically decoupled from the bass section and housing a 'free edge' surround midrange driver, with a 140mm Kevlar cone and skeletal frame. The tweeter has a 25mm aluminium dome, and sits in its own decoupled tube on top of the 'teardrop'. Both have been improved for the 800, the midrange with a thicker top plate to improve linearity, and an alloy central 'bullet'. The tweeter has a silver-coated pole-piece, to minimise nonlinearities, and an aluminium voice coil former to extend the bandwidth beyond 30kHz.

Far-field in-room measurements show prodigious bass extension, but more worrying is a significant 10dB suck-out centred on 65Hz. The midrange proper is beautifully flat and smooth, from 85Hz up to 1.5kHz, but above that there's about 3dB lack of output through the presence zone (2-5kHz).

The first impression after connecting these speakers was how remarkably good they were at creating a pin-sharp, tightly focused central image. A further impression was that the sound wasn't all that 'bassy'. That was a mistake, but an understandable one – the 800 actually has ample bass, but because it's so free from resonant overhang, it sounds much cleaner and lighter than one might expect.

There is a slight lack of punch, but over-exuberant and resonant mid-bass is a curse of too many speakers. Finding one that's free from this is an education and a relief, and if it doesn't quite match the quality of full-range horn bass, it's right up there with the very best that regular direct radiator bass can offer.

B&W organised a comparative dem of the 800, 801 and 802 during a visit to the company's Steyning labs, and the superiority of the newer 800 was very obvious indeed, most notably in its significantly



superior dynamic range, alongside a clear and substantial reduction in 'timesmear' compared to the earlier Nautilus models.

The 800 is simply enormous fun. The 801 had sounded a little 'heavy' and rather too laid back under our conditions, but such criticisms simply don't apply with the 800, which is altogether livelier and 'faster' than its predecessor. One thing it doesn't do is paint a romantic view of the music. It tells it like it is, with a sometimes uncomfortable accuracy that makes no attempt to glamorise any recording inadequacies. The question is, can you handle this much honesty – and this much fun? **HFC**

Paul Messenger

See HFC 231 (Summer 2002) for our original review of this product

MAKING IT MULTICHANNEL

For high-end surround sound, try this: B&W Nautilus 800 (front L/R), B&W Nautilus HTM1 (centre channel), B&W Nautilus SCM1 (rear L/R). **TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £14,000**



Linn Klimax Kontrol and Klimax Chakra 500 Twin

Linn's new flagship stereo amp pairing looks a million dollars – but does it sound so luxurious?

PRICE: Klimax Kontrol: £6,000, Klimax Chakra 500 Twin: £4,500 CONTACT: Linn Products Ltd, Glasgow Road, Waterfoot, Eaglesham, Glasgow G76 0EQ ☎ 0141 307 7777 🌐 www.linn.co.uk

Linn Products dances to the beat of a different drum – in all the right ways. When other hi-fi companies produce flagship products the size and weight of a car engine, Linn's range-topping Klimax Kontrol preamp and Klimax Chakra 500 Twin stereo amp are slim and elegant.

There are some products that are so self-evidently well designed that they transcend

the normal parameters of style within a field. These two Linn components are both that sort of product. Both are about the size and shape of a 10in thin crust pizza box, except with big chrome feet. The case is hewn from a billet of alloy and feels even better than it looks – and it looks pretty good. The curved display panel of the Kontrol is echoed in the smaller chrome display button on the front and the

vents on the top of the Chakra (it follows the original lines of the company's Sondek CD12 flagship CD spinner, and is continued in the Klimax 500 Solo monoblock amp, but looks very different from the rest of the Linn range).

In 2002, the Klimax Kontrol finally replaced the long-standing Linn Kairn preamp at the top of the stereo preamp tree. Given that the Kairn was approaching its teenage years, it looked

Of Doom supplied. Of course, delving into menus by pressing volume buttons and the like means set-up is impossible without the manual. A part of the product's ultimate performance is the company's extremely short signal paths, the built-in Brilliant noise-free switch-mode power supply that is now finding its way into many Linn boxes, and even the aluminium case itself. The high-tech, highly configurable nature of the Klimax Kontrol is extended in the two RS232C connections at the back, for computer control by AMX or Crestron systems.

Power amps are usually more basic than preamps. Not so with the new Klimax Chakra 500 Twin, which replaces the original Klimax Twin. This is an extremely complex design, with

There is a directness to the presentation that is typically Linn... only more so. It's like the music is squirted straight into the ears with unbelievable speed and focus. The speakers and cables are almost immaterial – you are one with the music in a more direct manner. There is a dryness to the sound that seems to strip out the overhang from most other amplifiers to such an extent that it makes most hi-fi seem flabby and flaccid by comparison. This becomes especially noticeable in smaller-scale music, like the sparse recording of Tom Waits' *Rain Dogs*. In fairness it does push towards this end of the musical spectrum; the typical close-miked classical sound is not suited for the martini-dry

“If you like a tight and accurate sound, chock full of detail and yet essentially musical, the Klimax components are among the best.”

a combination of a spine of monolithic chips coupled with an array of bipolar transistors – the heart of the Chakra design. Essentially, the monolithic chips generate the linearity and sound quality, while the bipolars provide the heft required to deliver 100 watts into eight ohms. This also doubles to 200 watts for a four-ohm load, a sure sign of a good power supply feeding the output stage and once again Linn has used a switch-mode design. It is switchable between balanced and single-ended inputs and is either supplied with conventional 4mm banana posts or Neutrik Speakon connectors for more professional settings. According to Linn, the Klimax Chakra 500 Twin can reach from 5.3Hz-37kHz (not as impressive as the Kontrol's 2.3Hz-200kHz frequency response, but still good enough for DVD-Audio, SACD and hardcore organ nutters) and is unconditionally stable into any speaker load.

SOUND QUALITY

Linn's different drum approach extends beyond the build, the style and the technology – it's sonically different, too. The normal hi-fi sensitivities of soundstaging and dynamics are important here, but not so important as might be expected. Now, this is a curious caveat – they are not as important to you, the listener, through the Linn duo. It's not that it underplays these aspects, you just don't find them significant – it's like not missing the electric guitars at a classical concert. Any listening notes one might make simply skip over things like soundstaging and dynamic range, yet curiously the soundstage is wide and holographic and the dynamics free and exciting. The Telarc Rachmaninov *Symphonic Dances* presents a rollercoaster ride through the power of the orchestra, but instead of basking in the energy of the recording, you simply sit back and listen to the music.

Linn Klimax presentation. There is depth and potency to the sound, as with many other high-end amp systems; but stripped of any overhang, it seems like Tom himself is leering into your living room. Disconcerting!

Elsewhere in this special *The Collection* edition of *HFC* there are amplifiers delivering hundreds of watts of power (indeed, the bigger brother of one model – the Karan on p86 – delivers 1.4kW). So, it would be understandable to imagine the Klimax duo running out of puff. But nothing could be further from the truth. It is one of the loudest, tightest and best controlled combinations to be found within these pages, grabbing hold of any speaker and keeping it in absolute check. If you like a tight, precise and accurate sound, chock full of detail and yet essentially musical, the Klimax components are among the best products money can buy.

It's a sound entirely free from grain and, despite some who might suggest that Linn's switch-mode power supply has an effect, it is so subtle that only those looking for it will find it. In other words, the switch-mode power supply adds or subtracts very little sonically – what you hear is as much your bias as the power supply itself.

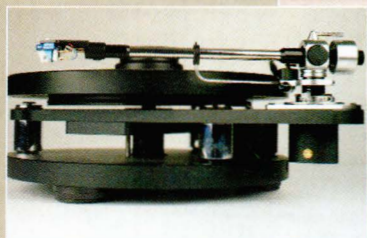
That said, this is a sound that will polarise listeners. Some – those more enamoured with 'conventional' hi-fi sounds – will dislike the dryness and possibly misread its directness as a lack of air and space. Personally, I find it a welcome relief from the sluggish, uninspired sound of many other hi-fi components. These days Linn is often likened to B&O for the elegance of its product line, but the Klimax kit eclipses even that. It has Porsche elegance and speed combined with Apple polish and the reputation of Rolex. You don't just buy the Klimax kit, you buy the dream too. **HFC**

Alan Sircom

and sounded decidedly out of place in the New World (of Linn) Order. With just one balanced and three single-ended inputs on tap, along with one set of balanced and single-ended outputs, this isn't the most far-reaching design around, but it is one of the most configurable. As you run through the comprehensive manual, you get to configure the input type, name, volume offset, balance offset and unity gain (this last makes home cinema more addressable, though the preamp is pretty much as stereo as they come, Knekt multi-room controls notwithstanding). You can adjust start-up source, start-up, default and maximum volume... pretty much everything you could think of except for largely academic options like shifting absolute phase. All of this can be controlled by pressing different combinations of the six buttons on the front panel, or by pressing buttons on the Hammerhead Remote

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Beauhorn B2.2 Revelation

With a good valve amp, this curious looking horn speaker is a remarkable success

PRICE: £3,984 per pair CONTACT: Songlines, Fourteen Acre Lane, Three Oaks, Hastings, East Sussex TN35 4NB ☎ 01424 813888 🌐 www.beuhorn.com

A giant 'figure 2' seems a strange shape for a speaker, but then, this is a strange, or at any rate unusual, design. It features just a single 'full range' driver loaded on the rear by a large horn, and this means they operate to quite different rules from regular box speakers. Where conventional speaker enclosures merely contain the rearward radiation from the main drive unit, a horn uses the enclosure as an 'acoustic amplifier', a little in the manner of a megaphone.

As such they require complex cabinetwork in order to form the tapering horn, and also considerable bulk (in order to maintain the horn loading well down into the bass region). The plus side is a dramatic increase in sensitivity over regular direct radiating designs.

Horns were particularly relevant in the very early days of hi-fi, when their high sensitivity compensated for the very low power available from the amplifiers of the era. The recent revival of interest in valve amps, especially of the low-power, single-ended variety, has reawakened interest in suitable partnering speakers – like horns.

The painted enclosures of the B2 series were designed to be less costly than the veneered Virtuoso models, and the B2.2 Revelation comes with a VibraPlinth foam-filled isolation platform for a smidgeon under £4,000 per pair. The solitary driver feeds direct sound from the front to the listener, while the horn loading is applied only to the rear. Opting for a small 130mm-frame driver with a tiny 85mm fibrous paper cone and a pleated, doped fabric surround keeps the total bulk within bounds. Filleted in order to form the outer curve, the enclosure is fabricated from 19mm MDF. It measures 34x120x75cm, but looks rather smaller because it's not a rectangular box.

Midband sensitivity measures a very high 97-98dB, and the impedance is easy to drive too, confirming its good match for valve amps. The price is paid in bass output, which only really reaches down to around 80Hz, and the extreme top is a bit limited too.

Connecting a pair of full-range horns always comes as a shock. The first reaction is usually to recoil at the quite obvious boxy colorations, followed by a reaction against the lack of serious deep bass, both of which make a strong contrast with more conventional speakers.

Once the ears have had time to adjust however, a second, more positive reaction kicks in. This speaker might not play it by regular hi-fi rules, but what it unflinchingly delivers is an immensely detailed and involving musical experience – one that simply drags you into each and every performance and goads you into searching out old and familiar discs for fresh, new insights.

“It might not play by the rules, but it delivers a detailed and involving musical experience.”

Just why is impossible to pin down, although a number of factors have relevance and may play a part. It might have something to do with the way it emphasizes the midband; it might be because there's no crossover; it might be because the amplifier has so much less work to do; it might be because a horn controls and damps the drive unit cone.

However, the cause is much less important than the effect, and it doesn't take long to forget about the hi-fi and simply get deeply involved in the music, thanks to the astonishing sense of realism that comes courtesy of tight midband time-coherence alongside dynamic contrasts that simply sound more 'right' and 'real' than those

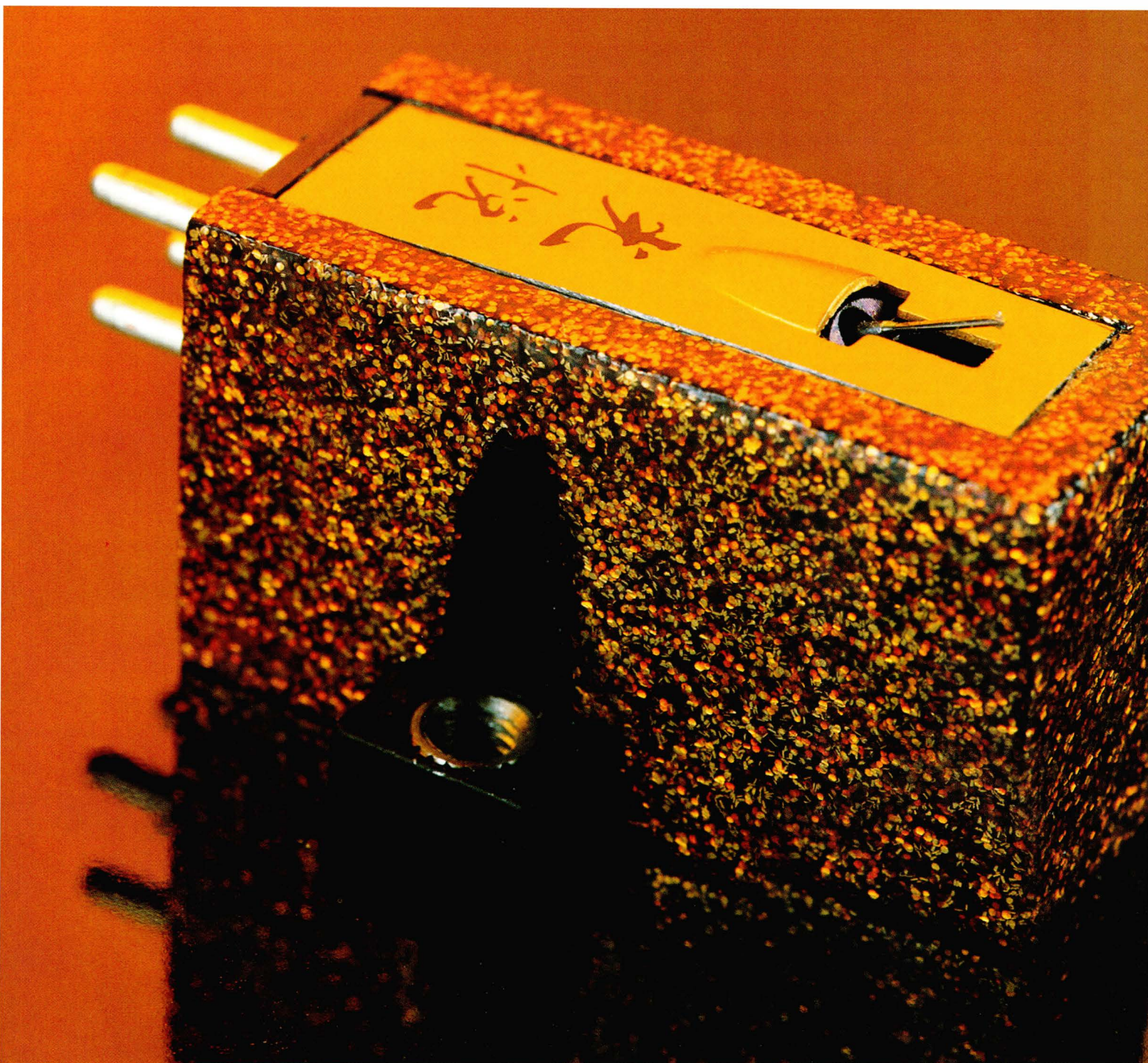


produced by more conventional speakers. Small combo jazz, blues or classical material is particularly well served, as is any recording which heavily features human voice, though the bass limitations do become more obvious with heavier rock and dance tracks.

This B2.2 is a little less extreme than some horn designs, but this is probably all to the good. It's more restrained and laid back than examples using Lowther drivers, and therefore less edge-of-your-seat exciting. But it is very well balanced, and smoother overall. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

See HFC 244 (August 2003) for our original review of this product



Koetsu Urushi Gold

This high-end phono cartridge has it all – breathtaking subtlety, power, dynamics and fine detail

PRICE: £2,799 CONTACT: Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Rd, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.absolutesounds.com

Right from the start, Koetsu has always been an enigmatic company. Its founder, Yosiaki Sugano (1907-2002) was a remarkable man – artist, musician, swordsman and calligrapher, not to mention business executive. His great inspiration was the 17th Century artist Honami Koetsu (1558-1637). So when Sugano's thoughts turned to the manufacture of high quality pick-up cartridges in the late 1970s, he chose the name of his hero for that of his company.

To say Sugano took a low-key approach to marketing would be an understatement. So far as I know, the company has never advertised its products or produced any sales literature. The cartridges are simply yet elegantly presented in a plain wooden box. In the higher priced models, attractive exotic materials are used – from the lacquered Urushi finish, to the use of natural gemstones.

Whether by intention or not, Yosiaki Sugano achieved mythical status in hi-fi circles.

Indeed, he used to joke that his 'death' had been erroneously reported no less than three times! It became part of the Sugano legend; the image of a quiet infinitely patient little old man, steeped in ancient wisdom, slowly and painstakingly creating magical-sounding pick-up cartridges by hand.

Doubtless the truth was somewhat more prosaic. But there was something magical about the sound of a Koetsu – something that went beyond science. Of course,

The Koetsu Urushi Gold, meanwhile, still carries a premium price tag and will set you back a cool £2,799. For that you get a plain but attractive wooden box with a moving coil pick-up cartridge in it. Now it might not look like much for your hard-earned bucks, but the fact is, it can transform your entire LP collection. It's as simple as that.

SOUND QUALITY

Beautiful to look at, with flakes of real gold suspended in a rich red-lacquered body, the Koetsu Urushi Gold has some remarkable sonic qualities. The first is its extraordinary sharpness and focus. The music sounds very tactile and immediate – percussive instruments have crisp attack, and there's an impressive sense of presence. Yet at the same time, the music has a smooth, refined, relaxed quality.

Killer sharp it might be, but not at the expense of warmth, sweetness, or integration. It gives a gorgeously rich presentation, but actually it's a deceptively beguiling sort of sound – smooth and open-sounding, with a very natural tonal balance, but crisp, focused, and highly detailed.

Bass is firm and powerful, solid and deep, fluid and articulate. The midband is open and velvety, with a lovely natural delicacy. And the

Where LP betters CD is in areas like subtlety, openness and the ability to produce a powerful, strongly projected holographic sound without needing to be played loudly. There's a depth and dimensionality with the Urushi Gold that even the best CD players cannot quite match. Voices and instruments have more air and space around them, ensuring excellent clarity and detail.

It's a highly responsive and engaging cartridge, one that magically conveys the living spirit and drama of the music. Actually, this has long been a hallmark of Koetsu cartridges. And it's certainly true of the Urushi Gold. Some of the older Koetsu cartridges produced a rich luxuriant tonality; sumptuous, and warmly resonant, but not perhaps strictly accurate.

The Urushi Gold retains a certain warmth and spacious richness, yet sounds convincingly natural and unexaggerated into the bargain – neutral and very true to life. Absolute accuracy is very hard to pin down – unless you have inside knowledge of how a particular LP was recorded and mastered, it's impossible to say if the sound you hear is truly accurate.

For this reason, the term 'authentic' is perhaps more applicable. Ultimately all that matters is whether or not the music convinces and involves the listener. If the spirit of the

“It's a highly responsive and engaging cartridge, one that magically conveys the living spirit and drama of the music.”

treble sounds sharp and extended, yet clean and unexaggerated – not a hint of edginess.

It's like having an open window on the music – revealing and detailed, yet also flattering and kind. Surface noise is very, very low, as though the stylus tip were magically riding in the cleanest, quietest part of the groove. The net result is vivid, sharply-focused music set against a clean, quiet backdrop.

It's this ability to encompass extremes that gives the Urushi Gold its special magic. Put on a jazz trio and what impresses is the crispness of the snare drum or cymbals next to the warm resonance of the double bass and the liquid smoothness of the piano. Each instrument is allowed to be itself. That's the secret.

One of the principle attractions of CD is its reliability – you know you can listen to it secure in the knowledge that the sound won't distort or break up, or suddenly be ruined by noise. Indeed, for many, this security is more important than absolute sound quality. LP can never achieve CD's near-total reliability, but it can often get surprisingly close.

In this respect, listening to the Urushi Gold you could be forgiven for mistakenly thinking that you were listening to a CD player of exceptional quality. There's a comparable air of total unflappability about it.

music and performance is conveyed, then that's it, job done. The Urushi is exceptionally involving and totally convincing. Of course, it's vivid and tactile – like all Koetsu cartridges, its sound is properly colourful and vibrant.

But at the same time, there's no sense of exaggeration or coloration, and it sounds very pure and natural, for all it's red-blooded assertive qualities. It's the proverbial iron fist in a velvet glove – smooth and beguiling, yet full of unexpected detail and impact. It won't hold back, yet it won't bludgeon you either.

It's not that the Urushi Gold is hiding faults or smoothing over blemishes. On the contrary, it's that faults and limitations in the recording are not being exaggerated by similar faults and limitations in the cartridge. And yes, there's a bit of 'black magic' making its way into the mix too – a certain indefinable 'something'...

It's a lot of money, of course – a fabulous sum to pay for a phono cartridge. But Koetsus have an exceptionally long working life. I've personally known owners who've gotten five years' use from their Koetsu, without replacing the stylus. And that's real use, every night of the week. Once you hear the results, the price falls into perspective – it's an expensive bargain! **HFC**

Jimmy Hughes

precision engineering and the choice of the best materials was vital too. But Sugano brought something extra to the mix. Call it art, call it alchemy, it's the ability to produce results that vastly exceed than the sum of the parts.

Koetsu were almost certainly the first cartridge manufacturer to employ gemstones for the body housing – originally Onyx. This not only resulted in a beautiful appearance, it ensured the cosmetic uniqueness of each cartridge. More recently, Koetsu produced a cartridge body hand-carved from a block of solid jade – the Jade Platinum. Top model in the range is the enticingly dubbed Tiger Eye Platinum Diamond. Don't ask the price or you'll be identified as a gutter-dwelling cheapskate who clearly lacks the wherewithal for such an exclusive device.

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Provo, Utah's hi-fi artisans, the speaker builders of Wilson Audio, have now been at the top of the high-end tree for three decades. Recent recognition of their achievements tells us that complacency has yet to affect David A. Wilson's enthusiasm. As if challenged by rave reviews and countless awards, David has launched a new flagship to supplant the legendary WAMM – surely the longest-running, true high-end speaker design of all time. The Alexandria has already been acknowledged as the greatest cost-no-object speaker available today. Its sister speakers in the WATCH range achieve the ultimate in home theatre sound playback.

As the Alexandria paves the way for new and exciting advances in music reproduction, so, too, does the Wilson WATT Puppy System 7 remain the benchmark for consumers who desire compact speakers that demonstrate zero compromise. It is with great pleasure we note that the WATT Puppy, closing in on 20 years of production, was awarded the honour of High End Product of the Year 2003 by Hi-Fi News. Now that's what we call provenance.



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Naim NAC 552 and NAP 500

The top pre/power combo from Britain's most successful specialist amplifier maker

PRICE: NAC 552: £12,100, NAP 500: £11,875 CONTACT: Naim Audio Ltd, Southampton Road, Salisbury SP1 2LN ☎ 01722 332266 🌐 www.naim-audio.com

The NAC 552 and NAP 500 are Naim's recently introduced top-of-the-line stereo pre and power amps respectively, and represent the company's latest styling, latest power transistors, latest power supplies and the latest thinking on sound quality. Both components consist of two units, one containing the transformers and multiple regulators, the other the actual signal circuitry. Both use substantial hawser-like multi-way connecting cables to deliver the requisite power to the various stages of the pre and power amps – the 552 has some 18 separate supply feeds, while the 500 uses 12.

Also supplied are the core interconnects between pre and power amp – a curious combination of four-pin DIN and twin-XLR, while another DIN lead carries the display power to the preamp. The speaker terminals consist of just a pair of 4mm sockets for each channel – matching plugs are supplied, and the dealer is expected to make up appropriate lengths of Naim's NACA5 speaker cable. Alternatives may of course be used, though not high-capacitance, low-inductance types.

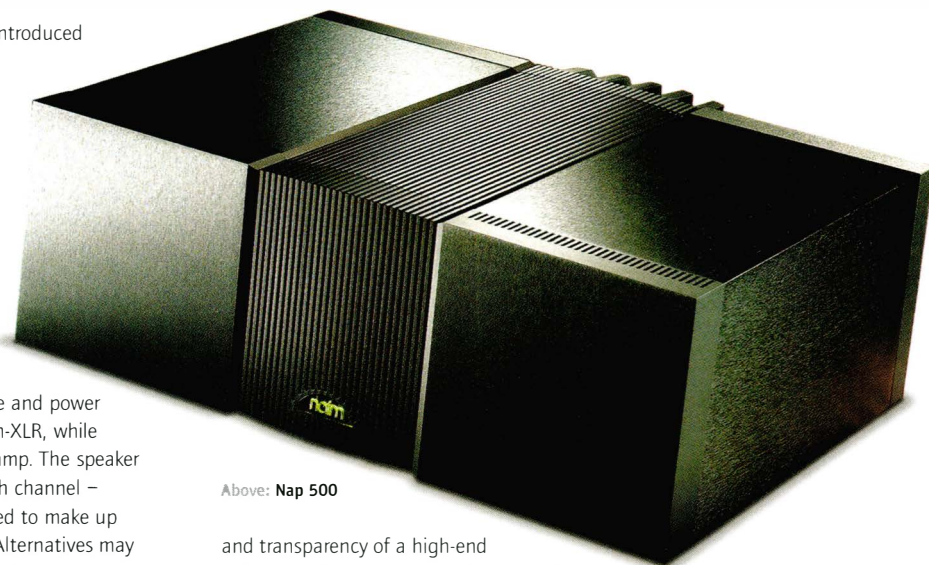
Naim still sticks to a matt near-black finish throughout for its very solid and chunky casework. Discrete green illumination highlights the selected buttons and the logo, and shows the settings of the two rotary knobs. Fascias follow a 'tryptich' styling motif, while a massive cast alloy heatsink occupies the rear panel of the NAP 500 to maintain good short-term thermal stability.

The NAC 552 is part preamp, part computer, which increases the functionality and flexibility, at some cost in complexity. A 'split-rail' power supply minimises noise and improves dynamic range, and internal circuit boards are spring-decoupled from vibration. There's full remote control operation of course, via the appropriately named Flash remote handset.

There are nine stereo inputs in toto, all single-ended and operating at line level only. Any six may be selected from six five-pin DINs, two phono pairs, and one special DIN (explicitly intended to connect and supply power to Naim's Stageline or Prefix outboard vinyl replay stages, or its Headline headphone amp). Naim's power amps stick to single power transistors, but each channel here uses two power amp stages operating in 'bridged' mode. The end result has a claimed power output of 140 watts per channel (eight ohms).

SOUND QUALITY

The strength of this pre/power amp combo lies more in its musical communication skills than its sound quality *per se*. There's plenty of detail, extending well out to the frequency extremes and covering a wide dynamic range, but it doesn't have quite the midband delicacy



Above: Nap 500

and transparency of a high-end valve amp, for example, nor the top-end sweetness and subtlety of the switch-mode-supplied solid-staters.

Where the Naim combo really scores is in the way it keeps the sound top-to-bottom time-coherent, and avoids emphasising any part of the spectrum. The bass might have a little less sheer weight than some, but its drive, momentum, speed and timing are superb, and that has a lot to do with the ease of communication here.

“This is an amp that does just what you want, while drawing very little attention to itself.”

The sound remains unmistakably solid state, giving fine neutrality alongside some opacity, without the warmer and more romantic qualities of tube-powered devices. It might be just a little too matter-of-fact for some tastes, but its real strength is its neutrality, and the way it just gets out of the way and lets maximum musical information through. Although there's no built-in phono stage here, using the 552 to power a Naim Prefix phono stage in place of a HiCap supply brought a very obvious improvement.

This is a 'fit-and-forget' amp pairing – one that does just what you want it to, while drawing very little attention to itself. Characterless is a word that springs to mind, though ultimately, it does have a slight 'forwardness' and a mildly 'shiny' quality, which actually works very well with the slightly opposite character found in the majority of loudspeakers. The essentially neutral and well behaved sound quality might be unexceptional by high-end standards, but arguably more important is that this Naim amp combo is more than a match for the competition in its ability to communicate the essential subtlety and emotion of the musical messages. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

See HFC 233 (October 2002) and HFC 208

(December 2000) for our original reviews of these products



Above: Nac 552



Triangle Magellan

The flagship model from French firm Triangle is one of the tallest and most elaborate speakers around

PRICE: £19,995 per pair CONTACT: UKD, 23 Richings Way, Iwer, Bucks SL0 9DA ☎ 01753 652669 @ www.triangle-fr.com

There aren't many speakers that stand more than two metres tall, that come in three separate sections, and use no fewer than eight drive units. This one is Triangle's best shot at an 'ultimate speaker'.

The Magellan takes Triangle's philosophy, technology and engineering know-how to its logical conclusion. At 2.18m, it's almost a floor-to-ceiling affair, and therefore inevitably looms over seated listeners, so it's just as well the front looks reasonably slim, thanks to the use of multiple 160mm bass drivers.

Monolithic is hardly an appropriate description of a speaker that comes in three sections, but it's still the first word that springs to mind. However, Triangle has done a terrific job in view of the dimensional constraints, creating interest and aiding the acoustics with convex sides, and dressing the whole thing in a beautiful dark burr walnut veneer.

Despite the profusion of drive units, this is basically a three-way design, combining two reflex-loaded bass modules, each with twin 160mm drivers, mounted above and below a somewhat smaller mid/treble module which would itself be considered large for a standmount. Although the 'three-box' construction was presumably dictated by shipping practicalities, there may well also be an advantage in mechanically spike-decoupling the three enclosures from one another.

With four widely spaced bass drivers plus a couple of ports stretching the full height of the enclosure, the bass is certainly generated from a well distributed source, and this should help deliver a relatively even room-drive.

The mid and treble section is also doubled up, so that a second midrange driver and tweeter are mounted on the back of each module. This 'bi-polar' technique will increase the amount of room-reflected sound reaching the listeners. Triangle calls this its DPS (Dynamic Pulse System) principle, and claims it gives a better room balance and a more natural all-round sound.

All the cone drivers use exponential long-fibre pulp paper cones, which Triangle firmly believes remains the best material. The bass drivers use an S-shaped surround profile and a high-power magnet system, while the midrange driver has a pleated, latex-damped fabric surround, a powerful motor and a wooden central pole-piece 'bullet'.

The tweeter is even more unusual in being horn-loaded. Without this horn the titanium dome achieves a sensitivity of 91 dB, but adding the horn raises it to 98dB, while also controlling the directivity and time-aligning

the voice coil with that of the midrange driver. One reason behind the use of a horn is apparently because its mouth more closely matches the midrange cone, which is claimed to improve the transition between the two.

The modules are electrically connected by heavy copper bus-bars, clamped by some large screw terminals. These are fine using bare wires or spades, but are so wide around where they tighten they foul on the shafts of some 4mm plugs before secure contact can be made. Four pairs of terminals are fitted, primarily to link up the modules, the amplifier normally just connecting to one of these pairs (the lower pair on the mid/treble module) which is quite high off the ground.

“It takes Triangle’s philosophy, technology and engineering to its logical conclusion.”

The crossover network uses top quality components, including Triangle's Silver Ghost internal wiring, achieving acoustic fourth-order filters to maintain phase coherence. The whole speaker is mounted on a hefty damped steel plinth, with a suitably stable tripod support, including a single front-centre cone to provide a mechanical earth.

The far-field in-room traces confirm a very high 94dB sensitivity, an impressive figure especially as bass output is ample down to 20Hz, though the impedance hovers around a low three ohms through much of the midband.

The overall in-room frequency balance looks very well judged, and reasonably even for such a high sensitivity design, though there are one or two departures from strict neutrality. The broad midband is well balanced but somewhat uneven, and a little forward at 1-2kHz. The tweeter shows a prominent 18kHz peak, though that may only be audible to younger ears.

SOUND QUALITY

Sited in free space, the bass is warm and full, but a little short of output between 60-90Hz. Some experimentation with siting would probably be worthwhile, in theory at least, though the bulk, size and 80kg total weight does make this rather difficult in practice.

Sonically speaking, this is a truly exciting and invigorating speaker. The very positive first impression was of an exceptionally vivid and expressive performance, accompanied by magnificent headroom, splendid bass weight and scale, and a fine freedom from strain.

It's not always a comfortable sound, mind you, and is more likely to confront and challenge the listener than worm its way into the affections through restraint and understatement. There is character here, and a measure of midband coloration too it must be acknowledged, with a slightly 'cuppy' effect on voices. But there's little if any 'boxiness' – with full-scale orchestral material, these speakers have a remarkable ability to 'disappear' from the scene, acoustically speaking. The unusual disposition of the multiple drive units is most effective in filling the room with sound, without in any way seeming to dilute the natural precision and perspectives of the stereo image.

One soon adjusts to this speaker's modicum of 'personality', as the excellent timing and the punchy, dynamic excitement sucks one into the music. Many loudspeakers add a degree of time-smear when reproducing music, blunting the musically vital leading edges and diluting information about how an instrument is being played. The biggest strength of this Triangle lies in its almost Rehdeko-like ability to define these subtle but important transients, bringing a natural realism to the party that more than compensates for its modest colorations.

One couldn't call this a particularly 'sweet' sounding speaker, in that it makes no attempt to sugar whatever pill the rest of the system or program material supplies. This is above all an honest transducer, not only revealing the contrasting characters of our various sources and recordings, but also very clearly showing up the results of changing either system components or connecting cables. A number of such changes were made during the course of this review, and the Magellans unequivocally told it like it was, with neither fear nor favour.

One might query the considerable bulk and price of this enormous loudspeaker, but there's no denying its exceptional all-round quality, combining brilliant dynamic expression with fine neutrality, full bandwidth, wide dynamic range and superior room drive. The good news for those daunted by this particular Magellan is that Triangle has just announced a junior Magellan Concerto model – a single-box affair with two-thirds the content at half the price. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

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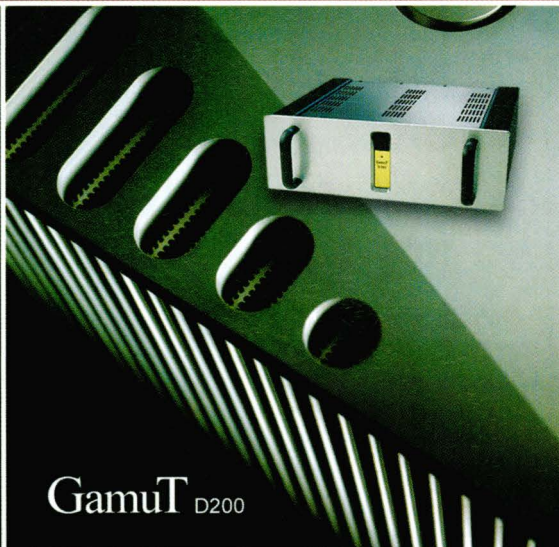
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Cabasse

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Meridian 800 V3 and 861 V3

No SACD playback, but for DVD-Audio, DVD-Video and CD this 'reference-grade' pairing is top-notch

PRICE: 800: £10,295 (basic), 861: £8,190 (basic) CONTACT: Meridian Audio Ltd, Stonehill, Stukeley Meadows, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire PE29 6EX ☎ 01480 445678 🌐 www.meridian-audio.com

One can describe the 800 and 861 as two large, hefty and beautifully crafted black-and-lacquer-finished components, but 'component' isn't quite the right word for devices which have more in common with computers than hi-fi's traditional 'black box'.

Modular hardware construction and card-based electronics lie at the heart. You don't 'buy' one of these and then figure out how to connect it up. Instead you 'specify' each according to your particular requirements, which provides the flexibility to change things later if you want to, or if new technology comes around. Software updates are also available via internet downloads.

However, don't use the internet to buy it on the cheap – a trained and experienced dealer is essential, first in planning the system, and subsequently carrying out the installation. Once this is done, however, the whole thing is a joy to use, thanks to a nicely laid out (if bulky) 'table top' remote control, and a degree of built-in 'intelligence'.

The 800 is the source component, and usually comes with a single CD-ROM-type drive mounted in one of two drive bays. It's primarily intended to replay CD and DVD (both Video and Audio) optical discs to the highest possible standards, and can also handle CD-R, Video CD, CVCD, MP3 and DVD-R, but not, significantly, SACD (hence, it is not described as a 'universal' player). It can be used alone (that is, without the 861), feeding Meridian's DSP speaker systems directly, and offers considerable flexibility in configuring both inputs and outputs. Version 3 features greatly enhanced digital processing power, uses 48-bit internal resolution, and upsamples all the various formats to 24-bit/96kHz.

The 861 takes the signal and control data from the 800, and performs the necessary digital processing to generate the multichannel surround soundfields. There's a cornucopia of choice, though cycling through all 14 DSP modes takes a while, and is apt to breed indecision. Version 3 has again dramatically increased the processing power, and the volume control cleverly combines analogue and digital techniques, to avoid the disadvantages of both.

Most Meridian customers are likely to combine an 800/861 combo with the company's DSP/active loudspeakers, with built-in power amps, and this makes plenty of sense, though in our tests a Meridian DSP5000 centre and a pair of DSP33 surrounds were added to a regular audiophile stereo system – and to very good effect too.

Meridian's individual approach to ergonomics can prove a tad confusing at first, but one soon gets used to it and discovers it makes very good sense. This combo thinks for itself, whatever optical disc format you choose to play. For CD replay, for example, the 861 was set up to use stereo/direct when the CD input was selected, but automatically chose Trifield surround if the DVD input was selected.

DVD-Audio might be this combo's 'glamour' music format, but in practice it'll probably spend most of its musical time replaying regular stereo material. And while it does a very fine job of straight stereo

playback, the Trifield processing mode proves an excellent way of handling regular stereo material. Its action is very subtle, adding just enough synthesised surround channel info to remove the slightly 'boxy' quality of the normal listening room, and just enough centre-front to nail down the front soundstage stability and focus.

An equally pleasant surprise is just how good DVD-Audio sounds through this Meridian system. Some commentators have criticised the sound of DVD-A, but perhaps they've never heard it played the Meridian way, as the best discs are exceptionally engrossing and entertaining, with great delicacy and transparency.

“Some people have criticised DVD-Audio, but perhaps they've not heard it the Meridian way.”

Movie reproduction is equally well handled, DVD-Video discs delivering fine picture quality, as well as a superior rendition of the soundtrack, thanks to the upsampling. Off-air stereo movies prove an engrossing experience too, via the Dolby Pro-Logic II Movie mode.

In the final analysis, the Meridian combo doesn't quite match the delicacy, transparency and tension of a true high-end stereo-only system in straight stereo mode. But the strength of these components is their ability to create surround sound experiences that arguably transcend mere stereophony, and take domestic sound reproduction to a new level of enjoyment and involvement. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

See HFC 230 (August 2002) for our original review of these products





Border Patrol Control Unit and S20

If you thought triode valves were the impressionists of the amplifier world, it's time to meet a realist...

PRICE: Control Unit: £2,750, S20: £6,600 CONTACT: Border Patrol, 249 Swindon Rd, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL51 9HZ ☎ 01242 717171 🌐 www.borderpatrol.net

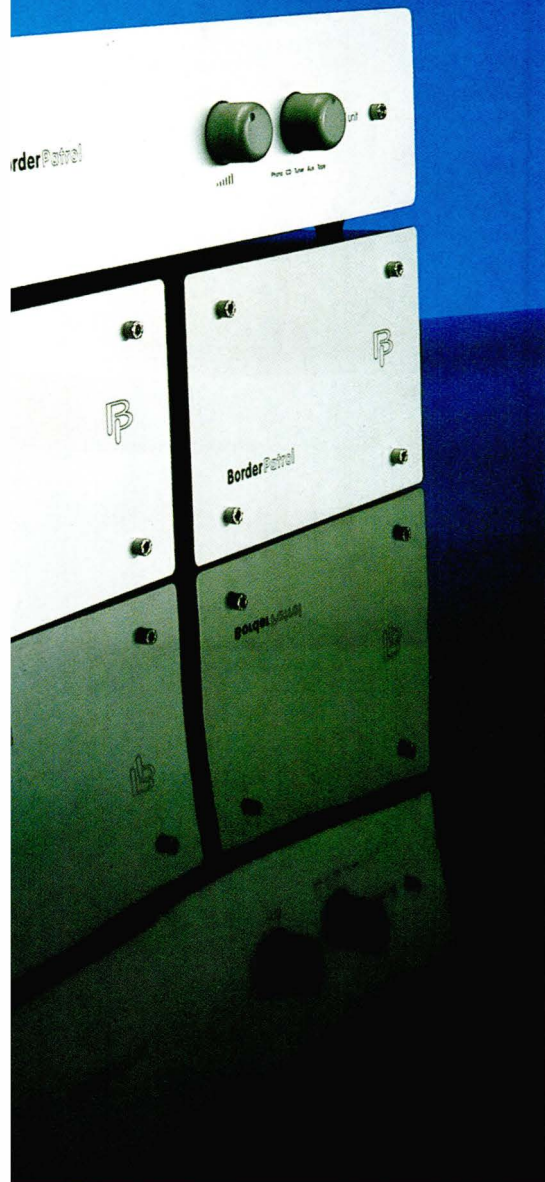
Border Patrol seems like a reasonable enough name for a valve amp manufacturer these days, but twelve years ago when the name was used for a rather unusual green valve power amp (with PX4 output tubes) made by then Audio Innovations employee Guy Sargeant it was a source of some amusement. It was also dubbed the Big Ten, another humorous reference to the fact that it produced nine

watts but one which backfired when Guy's employers heard about it, whence the name reverted to BT for big trouble!

That green amp has been lost in the mists of audiophile time but the name has lived on thanks to the efforts of one-time Audio Innovations retailer Gary Dews. Gary made his first Border Patrol in 1993 but the brand didn't come of age until the first silk screened models in 1997. Since then BP has produced

a number of variations on the power amp theme as well as some of the meatiest external power supplies in the valve kingdom. These will shortly be joined by the first BP preamp or Control Unit as it's dubbed, a design which not surprisingly uses a similar power supply arrangement to the big amps.

A quick look around the BP website will reveal that there are numerous ways to use the popular 300B triode output tubes that



and the amp itself are powered up with a single switch. Less conveniently this switch is located behind one of the supplies and as this baby runs very warm indeed you won't feel inclined to leave it on all the time unless the central heating has packed up.

The matching Control Unit preamp is actually a prototype – full production units are expected in September and will bear an LED to indicate power on. It uses a 5687 triode valve in anode follower configuration with no negative feedback, the circuitry being fully hardwired as in the S20. The power supply is valve-rectified with choke input filtering. A 24-step attenuator is used to control volume and is combined with a five-input selector for the line inputs around the back. These are joined by a tape output and two pre-outs.

SOUND QUALITY

We used the Border Patrol combo with Living Voice Avatar OBX-R speakers, a combination that works well because of the decent sensitivity of the speakers and a similar approach to sound reproduction. By which we mean that both brands value dynamics and timbral resolve as the highest of high-fidelity virtues. If you can get these two things right

words all of the time. This is a fluid and revealing amp that combines a delicacy that lets you hear microdynamics clearly with an ability to swing real energy when it's required. At the end of the day, 18 watts is still 18 watts and you don't get the power that a similarly priced transistor design can offer, but the way tracks like Deep Purple's *Never Before* pump with energy and colour is extremely beguiling, and even if you push the level hard, the way it clips is actually rather nice with material like this. When a tranny amp clips, the distortion produced is pretty offensive; a valve design on the other hand can actually sound quite good, which is why many electric guitar players still prefer valves in their amps.

The Border Patrols are also very strong when it comes to producing three-dimensional notes in a soundstage that is as deep as they come. The sampled and treated sounds on Four Tet's *Rounds* are positively solid yet never static, and the way that Kieren Hebden uses reverb and declining level to slowly pull the music away from the listener as track one fades out is extremely well put with the BP pair. This quality also applies to the recreation of acoustic space. This is not one of those

“The majority of SET amps sound lame next to the Border Patrol – this is a triode amp for those reared on transistor bass.”

everything else seems to fall into place; timing for instance is very good – this is a nimble amplifier that keeps up with everything you throw at it. It reminds you of why Quicksilver was such a good name for a valve amp brand. What you get alongside the speed is rather unvalve-like bass – those two power supplies are damn 'stiff' as they say in the trade, and allow the essentially low-power output valves to deliver some serious grunt.

Because this is SET grunt it reveals all the colour and shape of bass notes in a tuneful and dynamic fashion. The majority of SET amps sound distinctly lame next to the Border Patrol – this is a triode amp for those reared on transistor bass. Stick on some Outkast tunes and you'll know all about the instrumentation, recording and processing of the sounds used to produce the bass – the low synth bass on the track *Love Hater* being a good example.

Another atypical aspect of this amp is its response – valves are famous for having a glorious midband and a tendency to emphasise this above all else. The S20, while phenomenally transparent in the midband, has a remarkably flat response. You don't miss out on the frequency extremes with it – this is truly a wide-band amplifier.

The midband is proper SET stuff though; voices are superb and you can hear all the

blowsy valve amps that makes everything enormous – it's a precisely focused device. But when something comes along with height information such as a track from Bugge Wesseltoft's *Film ing*, where there is the twitter of birds sitting way above the groove, all is clear. What's more, the resolution of small sounds is so good that you can precisely identify what the sources for all those sounds are – sparrows methinks.

The track *Clear Spot* from Captain Beefheart's album of the same name has colour, life, energy and gorgeously 'phat' bass with no apparent shortage of grunt in the BP's capable hands. It's a lovely, meaty sound which majors on 'grin factor' and Don van Vliet's elastic blues work a treat with this level of attention to timing and energy. Technically speaking, valve amps produce odd-order harmonic distortion, but if this is distortion – bring it on.

These Border Patrol amps are impressively well built, attention to detail is high and you get the impression that, valves aside, they would give more than a lifetime's service. This combined with their glorious energy, drive and resolve makes them superb value and a sure-fire way to get right to the heart of your music collection. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

feature on most of its designs. There are SETs (single-ended triodes) with one output tube per channel and so-called push-pull versions with four output tubes which are technically, but not necessarily sonically, superior to the parallel single-ended arrangement which is found on the S20.

The S20 is a fully hardwired, all-triode, 18-watt Class A design. It uses an input driver valve that has high gain, low impedance and high transconductance. The latter in simple terms indicates sensitivity but used to be referred to as the 'goodness factor', greater sensitivity being A Good Thing in almost all high fidelity components. Another good thing you need in any amp is a decent power supply, and the S20, being dual mono all the way back to the mains sockets, has two very hefty supplies feeding the requisite voltages to the amplifier via meaty multi-pin connectors. Quite conveniently both supplies

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LOUDSPEAKERS

Audio Physic, ATC, Avalon, JM Labs, Konus Audio, Pen Audio, Proac, Peak Consult, Martin Logan, REL, Sonus Faber, Velodyne, Verity Audio.

CABLES / SUPPORTS / ACCESSORIES

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TURNTABLES / CARTRIDGES

Avid, Benz Micro, Dynavector, Koetsu, Kuzma, Lyra, Michell, Rega, Roksan, RS Labs, SME, Triplanar, VPI.

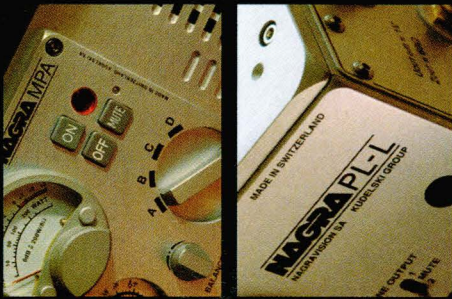


NAGRA

The Nagra PL-L is a Pure Class A vacuum tube line preamplifier, designed to provide the highest quality of audio performance in an ultra-high-resolution audio system. The jewel-like machined anodized aluminum case features input source selection, balance and volume level controls, as well as a precision moduliometer for system level matching.

The Nagra MPA uses a PFC power supply, a highly specialized DC/DC converter configuration which is designed to draw only sinusoidal current without spikes and deliver 2 x 250 Watts into 8 Ohms with AC supplies between 94 VAC to 264 VAC. The result is an abundance of pure, natural, uncontaminated power for the most uncompromised reproduction of music, caring for each pianissimo with apropos refinement and delivering every crescendo with supreme gusto. No less than what nature would have prescribed itself.

True Flexibility with Absolute Performance.



47 LABORATORY

For some it's Zen. For others, radical. Call it what you will, but at the end of the track, it's all about trusting your ears. About letting the simplicity of design, the energy and flow of the music carry you away. Small in size, big on sound, and more music than mere audio jewels, 47 Lab distills technology down to its simplest, purest form. And when you listen you'll know that this path - your path - is the one to follow. Why?

Because designer Junji Kimura preserves the life of the music. There are no compromises. No unnecessary flash. No B.S. Just dynamic, unadulterated music.

Radical?

Maybe.



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Stradivari system, 3 way, elliptical design, virtual 2 π radiation symbiotic tuning system.

Acoustic enclosure-multilayer, constrained-mode damping, elliptically shaped enclosure formed using hand selected wood layers, quality-graded and oriented for carefully optimized resonance control, substructural ribs are strategically placed for absolute rejection of spurious vibrations.

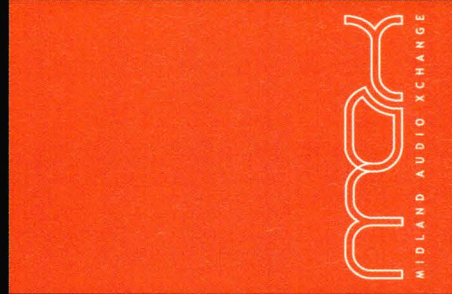
Available in Graphite and Stradivari's crimson.



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DCS Verona Masterclock The ultimate clocking solution for multibox dCS applications Calibrated to better than 1 part per million accuracy Synchronise up to 5 units with (BNC) word clock interfaces Standard clocking frequencies: 44.1 or 48kHz Works with all dCS consumer products fitted with word clock input Demonstration essential call now to book your appointment.

DCS Verdi LaScala is the latest solution to costly 2 box scenarios in the dCS family, it uses the same High quality dual laser mechanism as the Verdi Low jitter on-board clock Clock sync function with dCS Elgar Plus and dCS Delius D/A converters DSD digital output via IEEE1394 interface using CD or Super Audio CD material 16 bit 44.1Ks/s output via AES interface.



Tannoy Dimension TD12

A serious dual concentric driver and super-tweeter in a delicious art deco enclosure

PRICE: £6,500 per pair CONTACT: Tannoy Ltd, Rosehall Industrial Estate, Coatbridge, Scotland ML5 4TF ☎ 01236 420199 🌐 www.tannoy.com

It was 1948 when Tannoy first introduced the famous Dual Concentric drive unit that lies at the heart of this large and heftily built loudspeaker. Essentially synonymous with the Tannoy brand, many thousands of these drivers have now been made, in various sizes and for various different applications, but this Dimension TD12 with its big 300mm unit is definitely among the most interesting.

The largest of three Dimension series models, it's a bulky beast to be sure, but there's really no way of avoiding that if you're going to use a 300mm main driver as the starting point. To mount such a large driver at seated ear height necessitates a wide and tall loudspeaker, and to reflex-load such a large driver properly also requires a capacious enclosure – 130 litres in this case.

Clever art deco-inspired styling, combining an unusual mixture of real wood, stainless steel and black velvet, does its bit to help make the bulk more acceptable. With a total weight of 49kg, the box is made up from thick birch ply covered in a top-quality cherry real wood veneer, while the tilted top and base, as well as the strong front-to-rear tapering will help avoid the parallel faces that create focused standing waves.

It's essentially a two-way design, the bass/mid cone crossing over to a horn-loaded tweeter that fires through a 'tulip waveguide' in the middle of the main cone (hence dual concentric). This driver is built on a substantial cast chassis, with traditional paper bass/mid cone, and an impregnated cloth surround. This core driver is then augmented by an additional top-mounted super-tweeter operating close to and beyond the limits of human hearing.

“Settle down into your armchair and you'll be rewarded with a beautifully constructed image.”

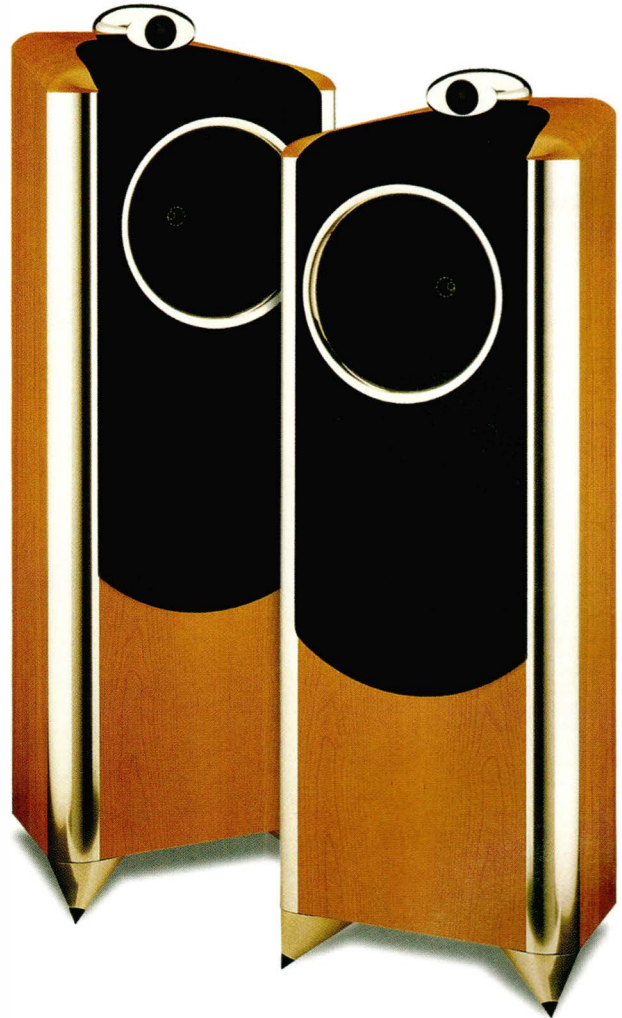
The crossover point is at a low 1.1kHz, and the terminal block has five WBT socket/binder terminals, four of them providing bi-wire/amp access while the fifth earths the main driver frame back to the amp ground. Tannoy sources its own Reference five-conductor cable.

Measurements confirm a generous 92dB sensitivity rating, alongside a reasonably benign amp load. The overall balance is unusually flat through the upper midrange and treble, while the bass is both warm and rich yet free from midbass boom, with decent ultimate extension. That unusually flat and smooth mid-to-treble is immediately audible in its openness and neutrality. This is especially noticeable with speech, helping to maintain fine intelligibility even at whisper-quiet levels.

The bass is authoritative and free from colour and overhang, showing seriously impressive powers of analysis with the complex textures and figures found on modern dance material. The horn-loaded treble brings its own special quality, with superb headroom and freedom from strain that's particularly obvious when punching out ensemble brass. The super-tweeter plays its part too, sweetening and opening up the top end in its own subtly seductive way.

This is very much a 'sit down and listen' speaker. Settle down into your favourite armchair, carefully positioned on the stereo sweet-spot, and you'll be rewarded with a beautifully constructed and precise image with generous weight and scale, and a wide dynamic range.

The mid and top end are quite directional, beaming the sound towards the listening zone but distributing much less in other



directions, so that the amount of room-reflected sound is rather less than with the usual baffle-mounted dome tweeter. As a result, you get a more precise, accurate and detailed 'window' onto the actual recording session, but less tendency to create the impression that the musicians have joined you in your listening room. As a tool for monitoring your recorded music, it's hard to argue with the superiority of Tannoy's approach, but hi-fi is a broad enough church to embrace various philosophies of music presentation, and there's no absolute 'right' or 'wrong'. It's just a matter of personal taste and preferences.

Although any cables may be used, Tannoy's special (if costly) Reference cable makes a fine match, with good transparency and low coloration. Exceptionally accurate, neutral, transparent and involving, the TD12 has the all-round magnificence that befits a genuine state-of-the-art contender. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

See HFC 225 (March 2002) for our original review of this product

MAKING IT MULTICHANNEL

For high-end surround sound, try this: Tannoy Dimension TD12 (front L/R), Tannoy Dimension TDC (centre channel), Tannoy Dimension TDB (rear L/R), Tannoy Dimension TDSUB (subwoofer)

TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £18,250



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Arcam FMJ C30 7.1 and P1

Searching for a multichannel solution with audiophile sound quality? Try this tower of power for size

PRICE: C30 plus 7.1 board: £1,500, P1 (x7): £7,700 (£1,100 each) CONTACT: Arcam, Denny Industrial Estate, Pembroke Avenue, Waterbeach, Cambridge CB5 9QR ☎ 01223 203203 🌐 www.arcam.co.uk

As multichannel audio-cum-home cinema solutions go, this one is quite unusual, and is likely to be of particular interest to the audiophile born and bred on good quality stereo vinyl records and CDs. Conversely, if you're already immersed in conventional home cinema equipment, you may wonder where the controls and facilities have gone, and why it needs eight boxes to make it tick.

Well let's see. The components are from Arcam's top-end FMJ series, and as such feature high quality alloy fascia extrusions, damped alloy metalwork and beefy power supplies. This package consists of seven high-power monoblocks delivering 185 watts apiece – the most powerful amp, and the only monoblock, Arcam has ever produced – and a controller which starts life as the C30 stereo preamp, but which here includes an optional 7.1-channel input board. In this form it functions as a hybrid stereo/multichannel preamp, and can handle five line-level stereo inputs, two tape decks, two 7.1 channel inputs and a switchable gain MM/MC phono input, though it is possible to make this input revert to line-level use. Outputs are available in single-ended form (two and 7.1 channels), and balanced (two channels only), but all internal signal processing is single-ended, and unless you use very long interconnects, it's best to stick with standard single-ended connections.

The fascia control set is entirely logic-based, and backed by Arcam's firmware suite which adjusts display, brightness, tone, mute, start-up volume, volume control resolution and display type, input level normalisation, display text entry and more. Tone controls are available globally, or can be set on a per-input basis, which helps deal with tonal imbalances affecting individual source components. There is also a processor mode, which allows the volume of a stereo C30 to be set by an external processor. More relevant to this application of the C30 with the 7.1-channel input board is that the input sensitivity of individual channels can be adjusted, providing a simple form of speaker management.

The P1 power amps are based on the power amp section of the A32 integrated amp, but with four output devices per channel instead of two and a larger power supply and heat sinks to suit. Each has a balanced input and a loop-through output, plus a gain setting switch to match other Arcam power amps.

The Arcam approach has a great deal of built-in flexibility, and some rather obvious limitations. Chief among the latter is that there is no video circuitry. The Arcam system is

a strictly audio design. This won't cause any problems for SACD users of course, and DVD-Audio can generally be used without a video monitor, though this may add complications with menu selections with some discs. But video sources can still be connected directly to a video display or TV, bypassing the amplification entirely, and with systems with limited numbers of video sources this is generally preferred on performance grounds.

The other obvious restriction is that it doesn't include any surround sound processing. No Dolby Digital, no DTS, no DSP, nothing at all, zero, zilch. Again, not an issue with high-resolution multichannel audio, but it does mean that for home cinema use an external processor or more likely a DVD player with built-in Dolby and DTS processors will be required. Most DVD players have only limited internal soundfield processing (no Dolby EX/DTS ES for example) and it's not always of the finest quality, but Arcam's own players are an exception, at least on the second count.

“The system sounds bigger and more crisply resolved than most home cinema amps.”

But the Arcam range is nothing if it is not flexible. There is no reason why the same power amp complement could not alternatively be used with Arcam's AV8, a fully-featured, high-performance AV processor-cum-preamp, which matches electrically and aesthetically, and which also includes video switching. There are other choices too, including single-box three-channel and five-channel power amps. Note that the C30 preamp in its baseline version is a stereo unit, which can be upgraded to multichannel at any time at a cost that corresponds to the difference in retail price between the two. You could start with a stereo system, then upgrade the preamp with the 7.1 board and add the extra channels of power amplification at a time dictated by your own requirements and budget. And when you're fully on board you will have a system that is not weighed down with facilities that detract from sound quality in any way. This is a high fidelity multichannel/home cinema amp system that's as good as the current range of Arcam FMJ stereo equipment.

And that's very good indeed. The measure of the Arcam's success is a measure of the relative failure of full-on home cinema equipment when it is weighed down by video and digital circuitry. But we knew this anyway, for example

by the often quite radical improvements in sound quality that result when using the video bypasses on home cinema amplifiers and receivers. But the Arcam goes one step further. Video circuits may interfere with the audio signal to an extent even when they're switched off if they are not completely isolated from the audio circuits. That is not an issue here, of course, and further you are not paying for superfluous circuits that you will not use.

SOUND QUALITY

Be that as it may, the Arcam system was a delight from the beginning. The bass is deep and solid, and there is no hint that power sags when the volume is turned high. In practice the Arcam system was capable of going louder than was required even with the noisiest and most hard-hitting soundtracks available, which included *Gladiator*, *Black Hawk Down* and *Kill Bill*, using the Dolby and DTS decoders in a Denon DVD-A11 player. In each case bass-rich effects were often shockingly real.

At the other frequency extreme, and indeed through the midband, the Arcam package has an unusual freshness and vitality. It is very clean and well presented, and this is aided by very quiet gain stages which help cast the detail of the source in sharp relief. The Arcam system sounds bigger and more crisply resolved than most home cinema amplifiers, meeting its nemesis only with high-end designs like the Krell HTS and TAS (see review, p46).

But the chief quality that the Arcam package brings to the party is its supreme sense of control. The P1 is among the most vivid of all Arcam amps, some of whose previous designs have sounded a little cool and pedestrian. Its discipline and even-handedness, and the way sound quality and voicing remain consistent irrespective of volume levels, make the system sound very transparent, even when driving difficult speakers like the B&W Nautilus set used for our test. The need for the full 7.1 channels supplied for this review is debatable, given the current lack of players with anything more than 5.1-channel processing on board, but there's no denying that this is one of the most ear-pleasing, genuinely 'hi-fi' and downright musical multichannel amp systems money can buy. HFC

Alvin Gold

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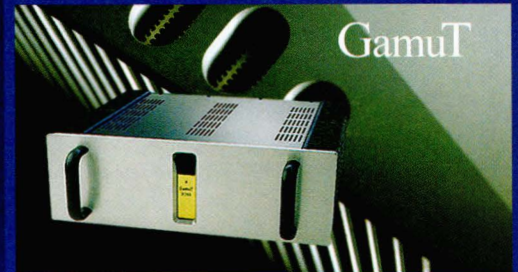
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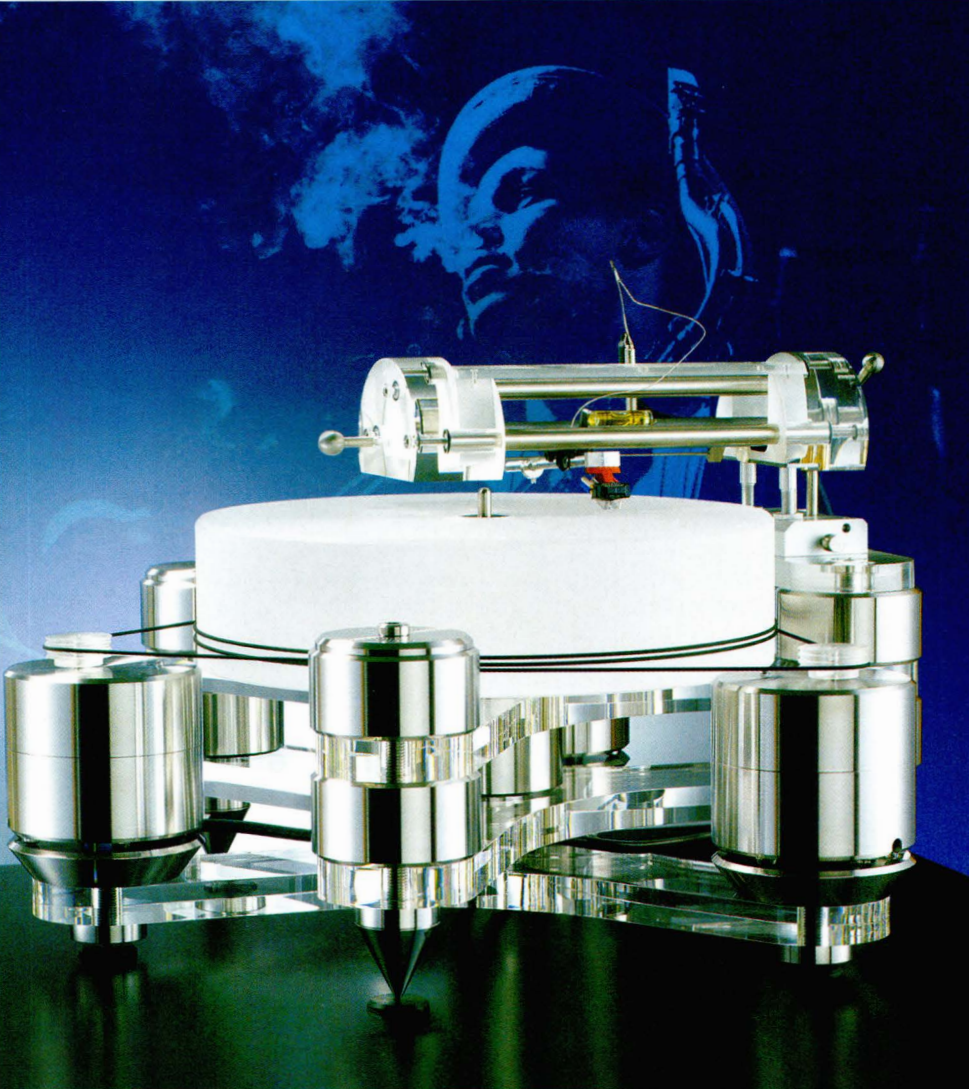
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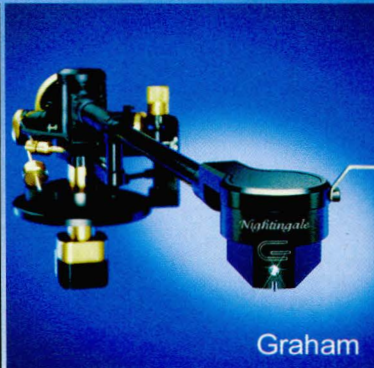
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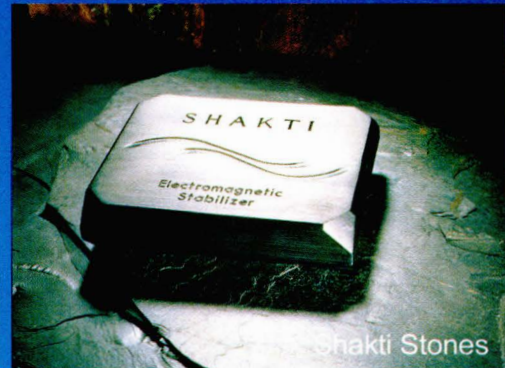
Stello



Graham



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Shakti Stones

SME Model 20/2A

Unpretentious it may be, but this turntable will tell you more about what's actually in those grooves

PRICE: £5,537 CONTACT: SME Limited, Mill Road, Steyning, West Sussex BN44 3CY ☎ 01903 814321 🌐 www.sme.ltd.uk

SME has an image problem. Despite making what are among the finest turntables and tonearms available to the vinyl enthusiast and music lover, the brand's image is rather conservative – this is most definitely not the male jewellery that the high end thrives on. This is largely because it keeps its models in production for extended periods – some of the tonearms in the range have been made since the seventies and the two bigger turntables are more than ten years old. It's a brand that makes things so well in the first place that there is no need to refine or tweak them a couple of years on, something which end users find very reassuring but which is a marketing disaster.

As a reviewer who uses an SME Model 20 and shifts it about on a regular basis I appreciate the reliability and ease of use that this turntable and its superb Series V tonearm offer. Literally no other record player that we have reviewed has the build quality that Steyning's finest engineers manage to achieve.

The Model 20/2A turntable is a variation on the original Model 20 brought about in 1995 by CE certification regulations, though the only thing to change was the power supply. It features hydraulically damped suspension and is built around two aluminium plates, the top one supporting the platter, on its heavily damped bearing, and the tonearm. The motor sits on the lower slab and there's the option of fine-adjusting its two main speeds (78rpm is also offered but not variable). This is a substantial turntable in mass if not size, and SME keeps the plinth as compact as is practical to limit the potential for resonance, so it's easy to site and works well on most decent supports and brackets.

The 'A' suffix means that this turntable is equipped with the remarkable Series V arm, a one-piece cast magnesium design which is delightfully easy to set up using the supplied gauge. It comes with all the tools you need for the job as well as a removable arm cable made with van den Hul wire.

With a van den Hul Colibri cartridge onboard this is a neutral and revealing turntable with few peers and near Nirvana-like suppression of ego. Some criticise its lack of excitement or speed but as our original review pointed out "it's not 'boppy', it does not 'boogie', it isn't 'fast' nor does it exhibit outrageous 'dynamics'." In other words these characteristics are not apparent in the turntable – if they are on the vinyl you will hear them in a form that's totally unsullied. You can rely on this SME to tell you what's in the groove without adding anything of its own, and that, let's face it, is what high fidelity is all about.

So Led Zeppelin sounded as if there were twice the number of musicians that there were thanks to the multilayered guitar tracks of Jimmy Page. Steely Dan sounded sophisticated and yet possessed an edge that marks them out as great musicians and composers, and Bugge Wesseltoft pushed the boundaries of jazz out to places that are positively accessible to all. In fact, everything you

play on it sounds more like itself, especially if you dispense with the substantial screw-down clamp and associated spacer.

Having used this turntable for years I know that all you have to do to make it sound better is to get hold of a better cartridge, amplifier or pair of loudspeakers. Every time you do this you hear more of the music in the groove – it's a highly gratifying product in that respect

“If you are genuinely more interested in music than hardware, this is a bargain.”

and in the ten years I have used it there has only been one turntable that made me want to trade up. That's one out of at least a dozen decks of a similar price or more. Even then the ease of use factor brought me back to the 20/2A.

If you are genuinely more interested in music than hardware, this is a bargain. The quality of build is superb, the quality of sound is better still and if you want genuine analogue satisfaction look no further. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

See HFC 186 (January 1999) for our original review of this product





Audio Note Ongaku

One of the most famous names in valve amp history is reborn with a fresh new design

PRICE: £29,500 (first ten only) CONTACT: Audio Note (UK) Ltd, 25 Montefiore Road, Hove, East Sussex BN3 1RD ☎ 01273 220511 🌐 www.audiote.co.uk

With a shock of recognition, I stumbled across this amp at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas last January. Recognition because I had the great pleasure of reviewing the original Audio Note Ongaku back in the late 1980s, and the shape of the original was mirrored in this new amp, though its dimensions appeared to have grown. Shock because the Ongaku was manufactured by Hiroyasu Kondo of Audio Note Japan when I first made its acquaintance, and imported by Audio Note (UK). This original design remains available on these shores, under the Kondo brand name, through UK distributor Definitive Audio. But the UK rights to the Audio Note brand name were acquired by the Audio Note (UK) company some years ago, allegedly along with the Ongaku name itself. This new Ongaku, apparently a spiritual successor to the original product (though differing internally) is made by Audio Note (UK).

Some products have retro credentials plastered onto a modern core, rather like applying paint to a door. Others are retro down to their core, and this is one of the latter. The circuit architecture is about as venerable and unadulterated as they come. A low-power (25-watt) stereo integrated amp with four line inputs, the Ongaku is a single-ended Class A design which runs as hot as Hades, and in which virtually every wire is pure silver, including the windings of the two massive output transformers, the hardwired circuit, even the phono input and speaker sockets. The only exception is the mains power transformer.

There are differences between the new Audio Note Ongaku and the earlier design. One of my memories of the original was of the top panel with its protruding transformer blocks, whose sightlines were all ever so slightly out of kilter. If ever an amp screamed 'home made' this was it. The new one is free of such idiosyncrasies, both looking and feeling solidly put together.

Internally things have changed too. The original had four gain stages (6072A input, 5687 anode follower – cathode follower driver, 211/VT4-C output stage), but Audio Note has replaced the "weak sounding" cathode follower with a more linear driver transformer built in-house. In their own words, "the extraordinary output transformers yield substantial improvements over the old amp at a price not normally associated with the Ongaku name" (despite the 'special offer' price of £29,500 for the first ten after the on-sale date in September, a price of £39,500 thereafter would still be considered high cost

in most circles). There are further improvements to the power supply and to the drive transformers; even the mains transformer has been changed, with nickel steel added to the core laminations (45 per cent grain-oriented silicon steel, 55 per cent nickel), a construction that allows greater permeability, which is a measure of how well the core 'conducts' a magnetic field, and which is inversely proportional (more or less) to flux leakage.

Some basics: the main output valve is the antique-looking 211 directly heated triode, which was originally developed as a transmitter valve back in 1924 in the thoriated version used here. Thoriated filaments are stronger and longer lasting than the non-thoriated kind, which dates back to around 1919, and perhaps earlier. Oh, and the reason that the new amplifier looks bigger than the original is because the first few Ongakus from the 1980s were indeed smaller, and the one I reviewed must have been from that batch.

SOUND QUALITY

I once read that listening to the (original) Ongaku is to be hooked like a junkie, or words to that effect, and hearing this new Ongaku it's hard to disagree. Perhaps this isn't quite the most accurate or transparent amplifier around. Even at this price there are things 'wrong' with the Ongaku, which only distantly approaches perfection, and from an unusual direction. But despite all this, the latest Audio Note Ongaku is musically compelling in a way that is almost unheard of elsewhere, and somehow the limitations just seem to fade into the background.

“The Audio Note Ongaku sounds like poetry in motion – to hear it is to fall under its spell.”

The Ongaku brings the kind of qualities that help make you forget you're listening to an electronic simulacrum. When Satchmo plays or Ella sings, they're right there in the room.

With the carefully mis-tuned sensibilities of a professional audio critic, the sound of the Ongaku has unmistakably valve-like qualities. I accept that when I wrote about the original, I may have said just the opposite, but that's progress for you. With 21st Century ears I have to concede that the Ongaku is coloured, but not in the way that valve amps are often said to be coloured. It is not vague and woolly. It doesn't appear to have lots of benign even-order distortion, it is not cosy or warm

sounding. In areas like clarity, the Ongaku is up there with all but the very best solid state, those in the Krell and Halcro class for example.

What may surprise those used to the stereotypes of valve amps is that the Ongaku has extraordinary dynamic behaviour. Although its maximum loudness is constrained by the modest power rating, within those limits there is no holding back. This is best demonstrated by what is sometimes described under the heading of microdynamics, by which is meant the often very subtle discrimination between similar instruments and voices. You can hear this in symphonic works, where individual violins can be heard in much the same way you hear it live, and without the usual smudging and coarsening of textures you get with complex material though most amplifiers. The Ongaku keeps the threads separate even when pushed quite hard. But it also goes loud without apparent restraint or change in sound.

And in case you think that the modest power rating doesn't amount to much, again you're in for a surprise. In terms of load sensitivity, and despite having only a single, nominally eight-ohm output tag on its output transformers, the Ongaku appears to be oblivious of the differences between easy and difficult loads. Better still, it generates a very generous output in practice even with moderately insensitive speakers, and seems capable of being overdriven without the usual problems that afflict solid state designs when they're pushed just over the edge. Stick with speakers in the 88-89dB/W/m class or higher, and in most rooms you should have plenty of power on tap. In practice, any dealer selling amps in this class

will allow a home trial against suitable surety, so you will be able to confirm this for yourself.

The Ongaku may or may not be the best of its kind. But I know it is easily the best I have spent any time with – the best single-ended Class A valve amp, that is, which is a very different animal from a Krell or a Halcro, with quite distinctive pluses and minuses. It's like poetry in motion – to hear it is to fall under its spell. But just in case you go away from this review convinced there is nothing here for you, Audio Note is scheduled to release two lower-cost siblings for the Ongaku this year. Anyway, sometimes it's good to dream... **HFC**

Alvin Gold

where **Sight**

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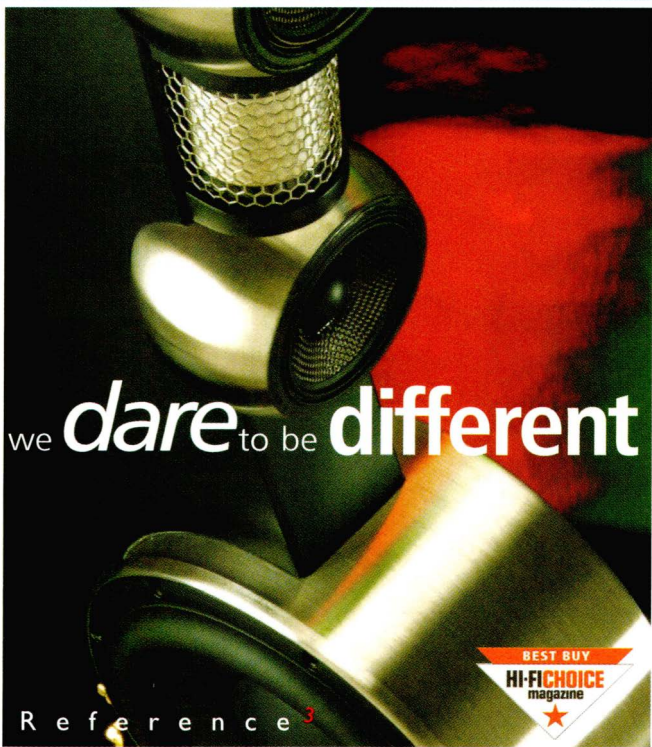
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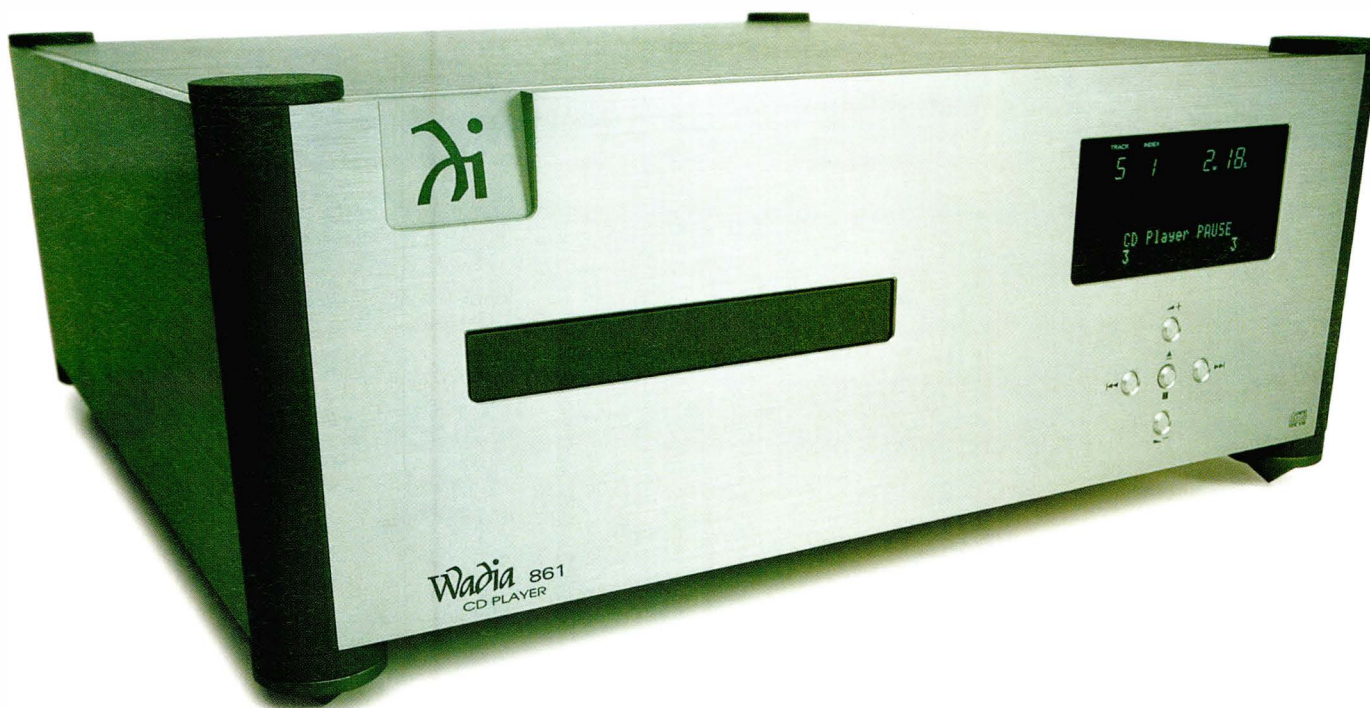
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Wadia 861se

Is Wadia's 861se the best single-box CD player in the world ever? It just might be...

PRICE: £9,999 CONTACT: MDC, PO box 4146, Epping, Essex CM16 6HJ ☎ 01992 573030 🌐 www.wadia.com

Wadia has done more than most to give the single-box CD player credibility. Its first player, the Wadia 6, was created in 1992, a time when a single-box player was considered not worthy of a high-end price tag. But at £4,500 it certainly had that and sound quality to match, and as the 12 integrated Wadia players that followed have proved, there is no reason for the one-box approach to be lacking in ability.

The new 'special edition' 861se is the ultimate Wadia single-box player. You can tell as much by the price or merely by trying to pick it up – it weighs nearly 22kg. The 'se' factor adds about £1,600 to the price of the next model down, and what you pay for is a new version of the TEAC VRDS transport mechanism that Wadia favours. This uses a combination of aluminium and brass to create a 'turntable' for the disc that is designed to reduce noise and has been stained green to absorb stray laser light. The bridge that braces the transport is built out of machined aluminium and has a carbon tooled steel plate topping it off. The stuff of overkill perhaps, but not without reason.

The 861se's case is built from thick aluminium slabs joined by corner pillars, a design that's a little slower than most to get into, which you may need to do if you connect the player directly to your power amplifier and take advantage of its digital preamplifier. The 24-bit volume control has a 50dB range (divided into half dB increments) but if you run the output below an indicated 65 you are compromising sound quality. To get around this it's possible to adjust maximum output to suit your power amp and speakers.

The 861se follows Wadia form and is a very purposeful, solid and muscular sounding player – bass notes, for example, have a weight and power to them which no other CD player in our experience can emulate. So distinctive is this that one occasionally wonders whether it's a characteristic of the player itself, but the degree of articulation and three dimensionality of bass notes would suggest that it's actually revealing more of the bass that's there on the disc. The low-end is so solid you don't get quite as nimble a sound as some alternatives can

offer but this could well be because they do not deliver the full weight of bass notes and therefore make life that bit easier for themselves.

The treble is also unusually full-bodied, and the high notes seem to have just as much depth and realism as low ones. This is an area where few CD players are truly successful, but the Wadia proves an exception to this rule. The treble is slightly smoother or darker than some alternatives, but if you want to play long and hard its more forgiving of less than clean recordings. It's a sound that's particularly fruitful for those of us with broad and varied CD collections, putting in a rock-solid performance with all genres and recording types.

“Bass notes have a weight and power to them which no other CD player can emulate.”

Another strongpoint of this Wadia is its resolving power – whatever you put in its comfortably solid disc drawer you are guaranteed to hear stuff that other players skim over. Remarkably, on test it revealed all of the minutiae that make up the rock concrete riches of Radiohead's *Hail To The Thief* disc. Layer upon layer of sounds and noises could be distinguished with ease, as could the treatments used to make those sounds, so that dense passages became intelligible and the songs seemed more interesting as a result. Take track four, *Backdrifts* – this has a second tier of soundscaping behind the main theme of the tune that is normally unclear, but on the Wadia it was rich and vivid.

This player shows just how much may be wrung from the humble CD, given the appropriate wherewithal. It begs the question: who needs high-res SACD or DVD-Audio if you can afford a player like this? **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

See HFC 256 (August 2004) for our original review of this product



Focal-JMlab Grande Utopia Be

It was meant to be the best a hi-fi man can get, regardless of price or practicality. And perhaps it is...

PRICE: £50,000 per pair CONTACT: Focal-JMlab UK Ltd, Lonsdale House, 52 Blucher Street, Birmingham B1 1QU ☎ 0845 660 2680 🌐 www.focal-fr.com

It was always intended as the finest speaker Focal-JMlab knew how to make, irrespective of practicality, cost or size. It was never meant to sell in big numbers, or perhaps even to make a profit, but in the event it has done better than predicted, especially in the US. It was first intended as a flag-waving exercise, to show just what the company could do when it pulled out all the stops. But it was also intended as a showcase for technologies which would then be trickled down to inform the more affordable ranges which are Focal-JMlab's bread and butter. It has served both purposes well. The Grande Utopia Be was a slow burner, widely trailed before it finally took its first public bow, but when it did, it moved Focal-JMlab's status internationally onto a new plane.

The most immediate problem on test was its 210kg weight, which, combined with its size, 50x174x78cm (WxHxD), meant that six people were required to get them up the steps to the test room. It is a four-way design using five drive units, each of which inhabits its own enclosure which is joined to its neighbours only by the side panels. The heavy duty 38cm bass driver, which operates only from 50Hz down to the lower 16Hz (-6dB) response limit, is port-loaded by a large forward-facing slot near ground level, where it benefits from boundary reinforcement. The next unit up the band, covering the range from 50Hz to 250Hz, is fitted to the top sub-enclosure, where its response shape will be least modified by boundary effects. The core of the speaker, however, consists of the three small central drivers, the beryllium tweeter and the two flanking 165mm midrange units. This central d'Appolito array is time-aligned, restricting vertical off-axis radiation, and helping the speaker act as a single-point source on the preferred listening axis.

All but the tweeter use variations of W-cone technology, in which a lightweight structural aerospace foam core is sandwiched between layers of glass fibre, with the number of layers and the thickness of the inner core varied according to application.

But the real head-turner is the inverted dome tweeter, which is almost certainly the most sophisticated (and costly) dome unit currently available. The dome is beryllium, which is unusual, but what's unique is the process used to reduce its thickness from the normal 40 microns in which it is supplied, to around 25 microns. At this thickness, the dome is light enough to respond up to around 40kHz (-3dB) without any need for a separate

super-tweeter, and down to the 2.5kHz crossover point and below. But the main reason for using beryllium is related to its superb internal damping, which helps deal with internal resonances. The inverted construction allowed a small-diameter voice coil to be mounted inside the external dome diameter, reducing moving mass further, but power handling is maintained by using a powerful high-flux rare earth magnet system in which neodymium, which would normally be specified for the role, is partially replaced by samarium cobalt. This material will resist the partial demagnetisation that occurs at an appreciable fraction of the Curie temperature, a temperature that for neodymium is well within the operating range of the tweeter.

“It was always intended as the finest speaker Focal-JMlab knew how to make.”

There is much more to tell about the Grande Utopia Be. For example the fact that it is made completely in-house, which means the drive units, crossovers and also the enclosures. The cabinets are truly prodigious affairs, extremely solid and well damped with an internal metal frame in the base adding reinforcement, and acting as anchor points for the specially designed mounting spikes. The standard of finish, in a choice of three veneers for the side panels and slate grey elsewhere (the wonderfully figured burr ash Avante Garde option would be our choice), is nothing less than magnificent.

SOUND QUALITY

The Grande Utopia Be makes a very strong initial impression, but it is uncompromisingly big, like having a pair of small wardrobes in your listening room. A very large room is essential – and larger still is even better! But with a sensitivity of 92dB, a nominal impedance of eight ohms (five ohms minimum) and a power rating of 500 watts, you could get away with a really good 100-watt amp – but the operative word here is 'good'. Although it doesn't unduly punish inadequate peripherals it certainly won't conceal any shortcomings. With a hint of warmth in its character in our 10x4m listening room, which was not really big enough to do it full justice, the Grande Utopia Be remains one of the most transparent speakers we've ever encountered, and its way of elucidating differences between amps turned out to be a revelation.

It is simply not possible to do more than hint at the flavour of the sound of this speaker in cold hard print. This is not because it is beyond reproach – in the test room, the bass was balanced a little warm and rich thanks to boundary reinforcement from the side walls, and to an extent the relatively low ceiling. More noticeably, the very wide baffles combined with the Utopia Be's naturally broad dispersion led to some smearing of detail and lack of stereo focus at the listening ranges imposed by the test room dimensions. This can be addressed with sound-absorbing panels on the side walls, placed where similarly positioned mirrors show reflections of the tweeter from the listening position. We also got the chance to try the speaker at a

purpose-built demonstration room at Focal-JMlab's Saint Etienne headquarters, from which it quickly became apparent which qualities were inherent to the speaker, and which were contributed by the room.

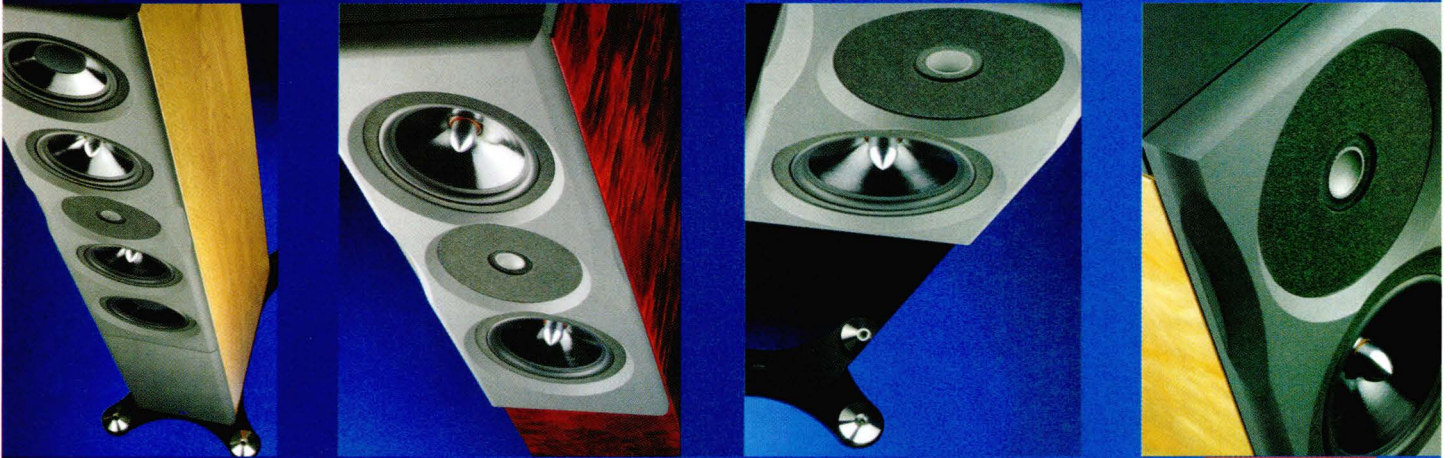
The Grande Utopia Be will always have a slight tendency to warmth. It is an almost inevitable consequence of the extraordinary bass extension which no room, however big, will be transparent to. Over two months, the speaker provided some wonderfully vivid and colourful music making, with tremendous low frequency urge with that almost understated quality that only comes from a speaker that doesn't have to work too hard. It also has an exquisitely refined and transparent treble once the wide wall reflections have been dealt with. Finally, it boasts a perceptibly forward and explicit midband which is still beautifully layered and dimensional.

Living with Focal-JMlab's signature loudspeaker was surprisingly easy. Musically it is impressive rather than obviously imposing. It sounds relaxed when it should be, but with real menace, depth and colour when the music demands. It is, quite simply, one of the defining products of the mature age of high fidelity, and one that doesn't know about compromise, because at this level compromise is simply not part of the bargain it makes with the real world. It is not showy, it has little overt character of its own, but the sound is beautifully put together – the high-end Lexus of the loudspeaker world. **HFC**

Alvin Gold

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Avid Acutus

Avid's first turntable is also its largest – but can it still mix it with the big boys?

PRICE: £6,000 (chrome), £8,000 (gold) CONTACT: Avid, Unit 52, 137 North Gate, Alconbury Airfield, Alconbury, Huntingdon, Cambs PE28 4WX ☎ 01480 457300 🌐 www.avidhifi.co.uk

When Avid first appeared on the scene in 1999 its appearance and the name of its maker gave us the impression that it was of Germanic descent, but as it turned out we were fooled. Conrad Mas is very much an Englishman and his turntables are now made in Huntingdon. The Acutus was Avid's statement turntable, the mothership that has spawned three offspring, so to speak. They all bear resemblance to their parent and are clearly purebred but inevitably they are compromised in order to make them more affordable – the Acutus is the cost-no-option blueprint.

There are some quite unusual elements in this beefy turntable, the suspension being the most obvious. This combines very strong vertical springs with 'O' rings positioned to discourage side-to-side movement. The subchassis is a large casting, with an unusual 'V' section in each supporting arm, the shape being designed to dissipate vibration and give exceptional rigidity. The subchassis supports the large tapered bearing housing that, in turn, supports the platter. The bearing itself is an inverted affair with a ruby thrust ball. The aluminium platter has a polymer surface and is driven by a massive free-standing motor – it all adds up to a very substantial record player, especially in terms of height.

The suspension looks and feels very impressive – tap the platter and there's none of the yawing or pitching that you'll find with most sprung decks. Instead, the energy is absorbed in a vertical bounce that tails off smoothly. The Acutus is clearly a well designed and finished turntable.

Avid's huge record clamp is made up of a central face which holds the record centre against the bearing housing, plus an outer clamp which presses the record down onto the platter, helping to flatten out warps. Avid recommends it be screwed down extremely tight.

Used 'in anger', the Acutus has considerable presence and precision, a good LP taking you right to the musical event, such is the degree of ambient resolution. After a while it becomes clear that this is largely due to the turntable's extraordinarily low noise floor. It redefines the classic phrase 'inky blackness', and does so in such unsubtle fashion that you often wonder, when you've just let go of the arm lift, if the needle is on the record at all. Suddenly there's sound – it makes you

jump, and it also makes you wonder about the amount of rumble there is on other turntables.

With a high-mass platter and high-torque motor there's an expectation that the bass performance will be special, an expectation that is fully rewarded – but not in an overpowering sense. You're not distracted by the lower registers – rather, they act to underpin the music and reinforce its power. We've not heard Massive Attack's bass-heavy *Mezzanine* sound as alive and powerful as it did here – there's a lot more going on down there than you'd think.

“The Avid's extraordinarily low noise floor redefines the phrase 'inky blackness' for turntables.”

The Acutus isn't heavy sounding either, which can be a problem with mass. In fact, its inertia seems to supply tremendous agility and speed, and dynamics leap from the speakers. On the other hand, compressed records sound compressed – the Acutus revels in what it finds in the groove, good or bad.

The Acutus is one of those hi-fi components that you quickly get used to. Because it doesn't seem to introduce any colour of its own, there's really very little that you can say about it – apart from what your records sound like, because that's what you hear to a greater extent than with most of the high-end turntable competition. In the five years since this turntable made its debut a few worthy rivals have appeared, but we have no doubt that the Acutus will still give them a good run for their money. And with a new, even higher-end Acutus with a special power supply now just around the corner (for an extra £3,000), its impressive story is set to continue... **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

See HFC 194 (October 1999) for our original review of this product




KARAN
ACOUSTICS

Karan Acoustics KA S 270

Not heard of Karan Acoustics? This big, brooding power amp demands your attention

PRICE: £6,950 CONTACT: Audiofreaks Ltd, 15 Link Way, Ham, Richmond, Surrey TW10 7QT ☎ 020 8948 4153 @ www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Karan Acoustics is not that well-known... yet. It's a small Eastern European manufacturer with just an integrated amp, a line preamp and three power amps in its range – although phono stages, power supplies and all sorts of traditional ventures for a high-end amp company are planned.

The KA S 270 is the least costly of the three power amps and – despite the single chassis – is basically a pair of hefty monoblock amps sharing the barest minimum of components. Just the chassis, the mains socket and the red front panel light are common to both channels. Under the lid, transformers, circuits and connectors are all entirely separate. The next Karan up the food chain even separates the power cables... and the largest is in entirely separate chassis, and costs a cool £25,000.

A word on the chassis – fantastic! These big black cases are beautifully constructed, hewn out of solid lumps of alloy with an inset Karan name carved into the top plate and the sort of build quality that only the likes of Jeff Roland can best. That's why the combination of two sets of transformers, big electrolytic caps and massive casework makes this one of the heaviest boxes around at over 50kg.

The KA S 270 is entirely and truly balanced in operation. It is possible to be driven in pseudo single-ended mode (there are a pair of quality WBT gold phonos alongside the XLR sockets), but to do this needs a special XLR blanking plug that is not supplied as standard. It delivers 270 watts into eight ohms, 400 watts into four ohms and is filled with high quality components. It's internally wired with Cardas cables, sports top-notch Sanken bipolar output devices and uses Karan's own can-sized polystyrene reservoir capacitors. Aside from a power switch and a pair of WBT speaker terminals on the rear panel, and an illuminated red Karan logo on the front, that's it.

Naturally, the amp demands a good quality preamp to drive it, and Karan's own two-box affair is a perfect match. Ideally, the amplifier should be driven in dual differential mode for best performance. But, even through the phonos, it's clear the power amplifier has the potential to deliver something really special.

SOUND QUALITY

Powered up for an hour or so, this becomes the Goldilocks of amps – it makes a sound that is not too bright or forward, not too dark and laid back... but just right. It's controlled, nicely rounded and deep. If the overall look is one of dark, powerful assurance, then that is more than matched by its sound. This has to

be one of the most chocolatey-smooth sounding amplifiers around, yet it never once draws attention to itself. It's like an English Gentleman of old – polite, refined and controlled, yet capable of running a huge empire (okay, the simile breaks down there).

This control and refinement is delivered thanks to effortless dynamics, which present the music without any form of ostentation or pretentiousness. Stick on something extremely natural – *Mood Indigo*, played by Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington in the early 1960s – and the Karan not only delivers insight into the recording and the studio; the effortless drive of the KA S 270 places two of the finest jazzers of the 20th Century in your living room.

Imagery is exemplary, and just as effortless. There is no need to describe the amplifier's depth, width or height potential; it merely responds to the source, preamplifier and speakers without omission or commission. This deserves not to be dismissed – it's like the 'straight wire with gain' goal of all

“The Karan becomes the Goldilocks of amps – it makes a sound that is not too bright and not too laid back... but just right.”

amplifier designers, writ large. There is no physical foreshortening of the soundstage, even with good and slightly upfront recordings like Damien Rice's *O*.

This recording, dragged into service almost daily, came as a bit of a surprise here. Every nuance of this CD is known through endless replays, but the Karan still managed to bring out something more. Not more information – everything was there, with striking levels of detail – but more satisfaction. It's not a difficult disc and has a lot going for it in hi-fi terms – it's a new recording, well-produced and not too complex. But this amplifier managed to bring out a physical, visceral nature often glossed over in other amplifiers, which instead emphasise the detail on-disc.

It is the antithesis of the more forward sort of sound often typified by Krell and similar. If you gravitate toward that kind of approach, or the dry, fast sound of something like the Linn Klimaxes (see review, p58), the Karan KA S 270 will never appeal. On the other hand, if you get the niggling feeling that the Krell or Linn sound is too upfront, this is one of a handful of non-valve amps that will fit the

bill. One of the few solid-state amps in this issue that has the same level of valve-like smoothness is the Conrad-Johnson Premier 350 (p30). But strangely, the two don't clash particularly – this is darker, the C-J is warmer (and slightly noisier – the balanced circuit of the Karan helps take the noise floor down to an exceptionally low level).

There is a curious aspect to the Karan, one that denotes high quality. You begin by listening at normal listening levels and do so satisfactorily. Yet, as the listening session progresses, you find yourself turning the music down, not up, to find the best level. It's not that the Karan is hard or harsh at higher volume levels – quite the reverse in fact – it's just that the performance is so consummately chilled out and in control that you feel able to play music at lower levels and yet still obtain the same level of information and musicality. Of course, this needs speakers that are good enough to resolve at low levels without becoming uneven and such beasts are not in abundance. In the right context, it has the

ability of achieving the 'talk over' test – music can be played at a level where it can comfortably be talked over in polite company, yet is still so insightful that the conversation tends to fall away to listen to the music.

This lower listening level sound quality is directly proportional to the Karan's ability to reproduce extremely low-level detail coherently at all volume levels. It's also because of the amplifier's valve-like smoothness. But mostly it's the low-level performance. Stick on the SACD of Bob Dylan's *Blood On The Tracks* and you can almost hear the vitriol and alimony underlying the music, and you can certainly hear the almost inaudible sounds normally masked by the noise floor of the amplifier.

The Karan has a definite place in the modern high-end. It's ideal if you want a powerful amplifier that sounds like a well-designed valve amp in all the right places – and like an authoritative transistor amp in all the right places, too. And the build quality is so sublime, it puts Rolls Royces to shame. So long as you don't crave an upfront sound, this is the hidden star in the high-end hi-fi heavens. **HFC**

Alan Sircom



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Few, if any, loudspeakers can match the mystique and reverence that surrounds the Quad Electrostatic. The original (aka the ESL-57) caused such a sensation when it was launched back in 1957 that some rivals reportedly retired from speaker building on the spot. Its successor, codenamed the ESL-63 (because work started in 1963), didn't actually appear until late 1981, and remained perpetually back-ordered until the mid-1990s when new European safety legislation forced a redesign, just around the time that Quad was undergoing a change of ownership.

Now the brand has been stabilised under IAG control, the electrostatics have gone back into production, and with two models rather than one. The ESL-988 follows the same basic formula as the ESL-63, albeit with numerous detail improvements, while this ESL-989 model uses many of the same elements but in a significantly taller panel. These quite bulky monoliths do look rather severe in black, though blue ('nouveau') and brown ('vintage') are also available.

Electrostatics operate on a totally different principle from conventional moving coil drivers, generating their sound output from a large panel of ultra-light plastic film that is stretched between high-voltage-charged plates. This very distinct approach has numerous consequences, the crux being that the panel radiates sound both forwards and backwards – known as a dipole, which also occurs with some conventional speaker driver set-ups – but with front and back out of phase with each other, so that any output to the sides is cancelled out. This front-to-back cancellation also means that the absolute bass extension is actually determined by the width of the panel – so the 988 and 989 are identical in this regard.

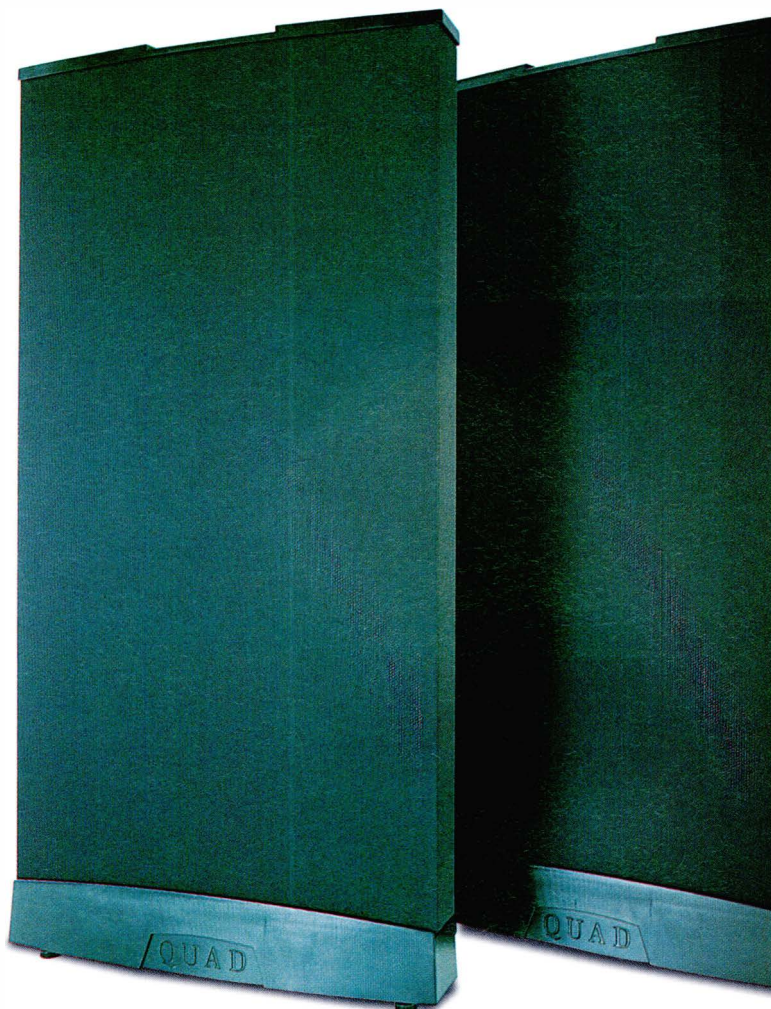
“One can't fail to be impressed by how clean this loudspeaker sounds through the midband.”

The dipole operation results in a figure-8 sound radiation pattern, rather than the substantially spherical pattern created by a conventional box loudspeaker, and this has several implications. The sound is delivered forward and back, but much less goes up, down or to the sides, resulting in a high direct-to-reflected sound ratio. It also allows the speakers to be placed quite close to side walls.

This latest ELS features improved materials for greater mechanical integrity and sonic transparency, but at its heart is still Quad's clever 'delay line' approach, in which the flat diaphragm mimics a pulsating sphere, maintaining fairly consistent directivity right across the band to minimise 'beaming'. You'll need an extra plug point as a mains connection is required to energise the panels.

In-room measurements show that the 989 has an impressively smooth and even midband but also that the top end (above 8kHz) is a little on the dull side. Physics dictates that there's no 'bottom octave' bass (below 40Hz), while it's also a difficult speaker to drive, with a very low 82dB/W sensitivity, and a low impedance (three ohms in places) too.

Under our room conditions it's also rather too strong (though notably smooth) through the mid-bass region (50-150Hz), suggesting that the 989 would be better suited to spaces rather larger, or with greater bass absorption, than our 4.3x2.6x5.5m room. The smaller and less costly 988 is actually more suited to a room of this size – in fact, that probably goes for the majority of typical British listening rooms too.



The inherent 'differentness' of a pair of these electrostatics dominates the listening experience – you'll either deeply love it or it won't be for you – but do take plenty of care with positioning. Try placing them rather further apart than normal, and make sure they're at least a metre out from a rear wall. There's no doubt that the reduced room interaction of dipole operation significantly enhances stereo image precision, though some may find the lack of room effects rather disconcerting – indeed, the Quads are slightly reminiscent of headphone listening.

Above all, one can't fail to be impressed by how clean and transparent this speaker sounds through the midband. There's a lovely freedom from midband 'boxiness', and colorations are inherently exceptionally low. The top end is notably clean and free from any unpleasant 'fizz', but it also sounds a shade dull and shut in. There's still plenty of delicacy and detail, but some lack of air and sparkle.

The bass is equally distinctive. It lacks some ultimate weight, can get a bit thumpy on heavy rock/dance material, and could have a bit more drive and 'punch'. But its smoothness, evenness and a lovely freedom from overhang ensures great clarity and analysis, and that's particularly welcome with delicate classical material. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

See HFC 213 (April 2001) for our original review of this product



Linn Unidisk 1.1

Can a multiformat jack of all trades really compete with the audio specialists?

PRICE: £6,500 CONTACT: Linn Products Ltd, Glasgow Road, Waterfoot, Eaglesham, Glasgow G76 0EQ ☎ 0141 307 7777 🌐 www.linn.co.uk

Linn Products is one of, if not *the* slickest manufacturer of high-end electronics in the UK. It works on a grand scale, with state-of-the-art facilities and the sort of research and development budget that most hi-fi companies can only dream of. The Unidisk is Linn's answer to the conundrum facing every audiophile who wants to embrace new formats and take on the multichannel challenge – which format

should I go for? By making a truly universal player that plays all the major audio and video formats that are found on 5cm silver discs they have taken away the dilemma.

The Unidisk 1.1 is the top dog in Linn's triumvirate of universal players. Launched in 2002, it is a dedicated, no-compromise player which eschews onboard processing for Dolby, DTS, bass management and so on, on the basis that anyone spending this much will

have the facility in their amplification and quite probably much more besides. The other two Unidisks are the 2.1 which, for a saving of two grand, offers the same quality of video but lesser sound, and the most recent member of the clan, the Unidisk SC which supplies onboard processing yet costs a mere £2,995. Given that few other brands have players much above a grand, Linn would appear to be attempting to corner the market in high-end

and unlike all but the biggest brands, you won't find other people's mechs or DACs inside. If that were the case there would be little point in the OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) option that Linn offers to other manufacturers, an approach that puts it up with the big players like Sony and Pioneer.

Unlike those brands, however, Linn has yet to offer a FireWire or i.Link-type digital connection for transmitting high-resolution digital signals to a processor. There is a DVI output for digital video which can be converted to HDMI with a suitable adaptor, but given the presence in Linn's range of surround processors like the Kisto this is perhaps a surprising omission, though hardly a major one.

“Overall, the Unidisk 1.1 delivers a neutral, clean and tight sound, which also possesses a great sense of integrity and focus.”

The back panel of the 1.1 is replete with connectors. These are mostly oriented toward different video display devices and include separate PAL progressive and interlaced component outputs on BNC connectors alongside the aforementioned DVI multipin output (SCART, S-video and composite outputs are also available). Audio connections include six-channel phono sockets plus an extra L/R pair in single-ended phono and balanced XLR varieties. There's also a BNC for electrical and Toslink for optical digital audio connections.

SOUND QUALITY

Slipping Norah Jones' sultry tones into the Unidisk it was immediately clear that this is a pretty serious player, as both the singer and her band took on a presence and tangibility that is uncommon with digital formats. This SACD is one of the better ones around but with the more affordable players we've tried the results have not been like this. One would hope that Krell's dedicated SACD player might be able to show it a thing or two, but with a direct comparison impossible at the time of review that's by no means a certainty. The lush, slick nature of the recording, which seems to have a polish of the sort you only get in top-notch studios, was as clear as Norah's dusty voice.

Moving over to DVD-Audio (two-channel at first) proved even more interesting. There are few high-end players for this format so any decent machine should reveal a bit more than the norm and luckily the Unidisk is more than that. Medesky, Martin and Wood's lounge jazz sounds took on a conviction that we've rarely encountered before, the excellent *Snake Anthony* track revealing the player's excellent sense of timing to full effect. This inspired us to stick on a disc that so far has failed to make as much impression as was hoped – Led Zeppelin's *How The West Was Won*, which has

always sounded as good if not better on CD. Here, however, the tables were turned and the full power and majesty of a band at the peak of its powers was revealed – that and all the distortion from the PA! This is a huge sounding album with an expansive live sound and truly awesome energy levels – it could sound cleaner but live recordings through rock PA systems are rarely really clean, even now.

The Unidisk delivers a neutral, clean and tight sound with a great sense of integrity and focus. It's not perhaps as forgiving as some players and those after a relaxed sound may find their tastes better catered for elsewhere.

Results with CD reflected the very positive findings with other formats. EST's *Seven Days*

of *Falling* revealed much of its inner detail, alongside the band's sense of timing and some lovely double bass notes – the player showing real grip in this department. The sound was drier and leaner than on our reference Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD player, with slightly sharper leading edges and a stronger bass line. But the Linn is clearly a worthy CD player, capable of engaging results whatever you stick in its beautifully machined drawer.

As a multichannel player the Unidisk is likewise impressive. Unfortunately, Linn had removed its Akurate speaker system from our clutches so we used a Cyrus set-up of CLS 50s and a REL Stadium III, a fairly modest system in context. But it's easily good enough to reveal the way the player manages to place the sound in the room without drawing attention to the speakers. The classic *Sacred Feast* choral disc revealed much of the recording venue's spacious acoustic, while the Led Zeppelin live experience delivered more of its powerful atmosphere alongside the band's phenomenal drive and groove. In some respects the result was not as good as that achieved with better speaker systems but lesser sources, which goes against the ethos that Linn has always stood by. Of course, the speaker systems we refer to cost more than this player, in the Akurate's case a lot more, so there is some logic to the result. Several discs sound stunning nonetheless – Arvo Pärt's *De Profundis* on ECM revealed much of its huge dynamic range and thanks to the REL, all of its big bass drum.

The Unidisk is a fine player that does a remarkable job with everything you throw at it. A more than satisfactory CD player that also plays both high-resolution formats and delivers top-notch video is a rare thing, but to do it with such finesse in such a well-built and thought-out machine is a luxury. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

universals. Word has it, however, that Linn has sold its Silver Disk engine technology to at least one other manufacturer, which will shortly be releasing its own universal player.

The Unidisk's USP is the way it treats each type of disc separately – when it's playing one type it switches off the circuitry for the other. Most of the affordable universal players tend to convert SACD's DSD bitstream to the PCM of CD and DVD prior to conversion, but the Unidisk has discrete circuits for each stream and therefore becomes a dedicated player for whatever type of disc you want to play. This approach includes separate circuitry for audio and video from DVD, CD and SACD making it, in practical terms, four players in one box.

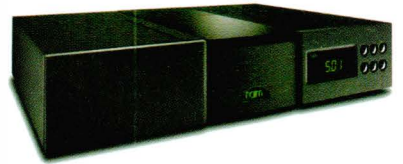
The Silver Disk Engine at the heart of the Unidisk players is a ground-up Linn creation

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Wilson Benesch ACT

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Sheffield-based Wilson Benesch specialises in the application of carbon fibre composites (CFCs). Its original speaker was the ACT One, the initials standing for Advanced Composite Technologies. This has now been replaced by a new £8,400 version simply called the ACT, which in 'standard' finish combines matt black metalwork with a glossy, woven-pattern CFC section. High quality real wood veneers can be laid on the metal for an extra £705.

This gorgeous looking and attractively compact speaker is now much heavier than before – up from 42kg to 74kg – because MDF sections of the enclosure have been replaced by thinner but heavier metal. This has also increased the internal volume. Nearly all the structural components are either CFC or metal, the latter used for both the front baffle and internal braces. Woven pattern CFC forms a single tapered U-section around the rear part of the enclosure. The curved sides and a narrow back are usefully irregular in plan, helping 'spread' and 'de-focus' internal standing waves and reflections. The exceptionally thick, gloss-lacquered top will help block sound transmission.

Size-wise the ACT is about right – big enough to do the business, small enough not to impose, and with lots of clever detailing to make it look interesting. The driver configuration is a simple 'two-and-a-half-way',

using two of WB's own proprietary 'Tactic' drive units. The lower one of these just covers bass frequencies, up to around 500Hz, and the upper one handles the complete bass and midrange spectrum, right up to 5kHz, where the soft fabric dome tweeter takes over.

The Tactic driver's frame is machined from solid aluminium, and shaped to give a very unobstructive profile behind the diaphragm – all the more so because the tiny motor structure uses powerful, compact neodymium alloy magnets. The cone material is a three-layer, self-bonding woven isotactic polymer, with specific variations between the bass-only unit and the bass/mid driver.

Both cone drivers are port-loaded – the bass/mid unit through the spine near the top of the cabinet and the bass-only driver through the middle of a substantial steel and MDF base, equipped with four of the wickedest looking spikes around. Fed by hefty twin terminal pairs via audiophile cables, the crossover network is deliberately simple, with first-order filtering, selected polypropylene caps and air cored inductors.

The first thing one notices after connecting up is that the ACT has a superbly 'quiet' enclosure. It probably has a lower 'sonic signature' than any floorstander we've heard, bringing new meaning to the phrase 'freedom from boxiness'. Confirm it for yourself, by feeling the virtual absence of box vibrations when playing loud, heavy music.

“It's brilliantly effective for simple relaxation, with unusual freedom from box effects.”

It's almost as though the drive units are operating as if suspended in the air. The stereo imaging is very precise, so one hears the music filling the space around and between the speakers, but remains unaware of their exact location. Central focus is particularly impressive, the images not only stable and precisely placed, but also correctly proportioned in size and scale. And because it's so self-effacing, this is a brilliantly effective speaker for simple relaxation, the unusual freedom from box effects minimising overhang, timesmear and other fatiguing artefacts.

The ACT has a very decent overall balance, but it's not totally neutral. The top end is just a little obvious and exposed, drawing attention to itself perhaps a touch too much. The presence band is a little restrained (avoiding aggressive tendencies), the upper midband is a shade forward, while the lower midband is a little on the lean side, giving a slightly cool overall character.

Overall, however, the ACT has some exceptional qualities that make it a must-listen for anyone researching high-end speaker options. Bass is beautifully clean, providing unusually fine insight into the most complex bass interplay and texture, and its superb enclosure engineering contributes to a stereo image that's almost uncanny in its freedom and focus. Best of all perhaps, it delivers superior full-bandwidth performance from a floorstander that's both stylish and compact. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

See HFC 252 (April 2004) for our original review of this product

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Hovland HP-200 and RADIA

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PRICE: HP-200: £6,450 (line-only), RADIA: £7,995 CONTACT: Metropolis Music, 6 London Road, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN1 1DQ ☎ 01892 539245 🌐 www.hovlandcompany.com

Hovland was one of our most pleasing yet serendipitous discoveries of the last 12 months. The brand, which is based in Los Angeles, started out repairing and modifying hi-fi, and then sourcing and making its own cables and capacitors under the MusicCap brand. Slowly, Hovland has been developing its own pre and power amplifier components, the latest of which is the HP-200. Reviewed here with the RADIA power amp, this new preamp is remote controllable, unlike the existing HP-100 (which continues to run concurrently with the new model). Both preamps are a natural match for the RADIA, not least because their gain is marginal with some third party power amplifiers, but this is not an issue with Hovland's own.

If you have a particular preference for valves over solid state or vice versa, you should probably find some new reading material at this point. Like the older HP-100, the new preamp is driven by thermionic valves, albeit with a solid state power supply stage ("for stability"), while the RADIA power amp at the muscle end of the system is solid state. We tested the HP-100/RADIA combination in HFC 250, and found it sounded different from most to the extent that it refuses to conform to the stereotypes of either technology, but there is no doubt that these components belong in each other's company in a way that goes above and beyond simple electrical compatibility. There is real synergy here, and the same applies to the HP-200/RADIA.

The preamp's remote control logic extends to source selection (there are five line inputs plus tape; the HP-100 has eight plus tape). A switchable processor-bypass input is included, and an RS232 interface allows integration with systems using external controllers.

The HP-200 is the same size as the older model, and although it looks rather different, the essentials of its construction are similar – a mutually self-damping combination of acrylic panels and a polished aluminium frame, with a curious, but very winning aesthetic that marries cutting-edge contemporary and retro. If it was a city, it would be Barcelona.

The remote is a work of art in its own right. A slim, heavy item of extruded aluminium and acrylic, it feels good in the hand and the buttons are light and positive, but it needs a clear view of its host to work reliably.

The original 31-step 2dB precision resolution attenuator that sits at the heart of the older preamp has been reworked, and now has 35 steps, giving a total operating range of 70dB. It still uses what are described as ultra linear

metal-film resistors alongside dual, hermetically sealed-in-glass, rhodium-contact reed relays, the latter introduced to facilitate remote control using a small custom logic board.

You can read more about the RADIA in our original review, but as an *aide mémoire*, it is a 125-watts-per-channel bipolar stereo power amp. The HP-200 was conceived as an 'HP-100-plus', the 'plus' being remote control, but somewhere along the line, someone had a bright idea, and the new preamp has gone beyond its original remit. So rather than adding features and shedding a little sonic competitiveness, it's gone the other way, and the new preamp if anything works better.

One difference is that the combination seems a little quieter. The first review pair (with the HP-100) had some minor noise problems which may have been specific to the system set-up, but if so, the new one is essentially silent from the listening hot seat. As before, coloration levels are lower than expected for a

that the power output of the RADIA less than doubles when the load impedance is halved suggests that it may struggle with more complex (electrically reactive) loads.

But most speakers are not like the Nautilus 800, and the Hovland duo fitted like a glove with other speakers available during the test period, not least the Lumley Lampros 300 and Anthony Gallo Reference III. It also worked brilliantly with Quad 989 electrostatics. In each case, the Hovland brought a steady hand to the proceedings. Each note sounded carefully articulated and properly expressed, so that complex musical arguments in a recording of Beethoven string quartets in one memorable example made sense because the contribution of each musician was easy to read.

With the Hovland pair, it was easy to follow the subtle dynamic shadings in piano arpeggios, and fine singing (Janet Baker's *Mahler Lieder Eines Fahrenden Gesellen*, for example) was beautifully expressive, and

“The combination refuses to conform to the stereotypes of either valve or solid state.”

preamp that uses valves. It sounds more solid and tighter than expected, and even more so than the HP-100 allowed, in part perhaps because microphony, often a problem with valves, has been reduced below even the very low levels scored by the older preamp.

SOUND QUALITY

It takes a while to get to grips with this combination. In many ways it is the least obvious, the least demonstrative pre/power amp combination we have encountered in a long time. Auditioned alongside some alternative high-end combinations, it doesn't have the blinding speed and articulation of the Krell KAV-280p/KAV-2250, for example. Neither does it have the astonishing refinement, detail and lively midband of the (much more costly) Hovland dm10/dm38.

What the Hovland does best is musical expressiveness – its stalking ground is the middle registers, and the middle part of the dynamic envelope. If it is stretched really hard with current-hungry monster loudspeakers like the B&W Nautilus 800, it begins to show the strain, and either of the two alternatives mentioned work more seamlessly through and beyond the pain barrier – the Hovland just shows the pain. To be fair, it goes into battle with a substantial power deficit, and the fact

genuinely moving. You sense that whoever designed these two amp components really understood something about the often vexed relationship between musical expression and the hardware used to reproduce it.

Compared to the still very impressive HP-100 – it should be said that there was a gap of some months between auditioning the two preamplifiers, though with the same power amp – the HP-200 is a little harder hitting. Transients seem a little sharper, a little better focused, and the decay of individual notes is more progressive. Tonal colours are particularly well expressed by the HP-200, and the whole demeanour of the preamp is like an HP-100 that has had a little cotton wool taken out, so that it is more focused on the job at hand, with blacker spaces between notes adding contrast to the internal structure of the music.

The qualities referred to here are mostly quite subtle, and don't make for an immediately impressive ride. They grow on you, but only if the rest of the system is sympathetic to the attributes that the Hovland brings. The HP-200 and RADIA pre and power amps are great products in their own right, but in some not easily deciphered way the combination is still more than the sum of the parts. **HFC**

Alvin Gold

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Martin Colloms, Hi-Fi News April 2004



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Krell SACD Standard

Krell showcases SACD with uncompromised CD replay in this high-end audio disc spinner

PRICE: £4,244 CONTACT: Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.krellonline.com

Choosing a high-end disc player these days brings all manner of issues to the fore. Should it be CD-only, still the only viable disc format blessed with a truly universal remit? Or should it include DVD-Audio and/or SACD, which add something, while often taking something away from baseline CD performance? Perhaps it should be a 'universal' machine, to cover all the bases? Or a player with an i.Link (or similar) next-gen digital interface, to address future-proofing as well?

There are no definitive answers at present. It's all down to priorities. But it's becoming clear that although neither of the high-res formats has a hope in hell of catching, still less replacing compact disc, a kind of order is establishing itself, in which DVD-Audio is becoming recognised as the format that does it all – high quality audio, video, added content – while video-free SACD is becoming the purist audiophile choice by default, supported by a broader range of software (though still pitiful by CD standards)

The Krell is in the vanguard of a number of high-end, audio-only SACD players which are either available, or soon will be, from Sony, Classé and others. Its capabilities are straightforward, but in many ways that's the point. It's dressed to kill in the new, delectable KAV-series silver-finished casework (black is available, but why...?), distinguished by rounded corner extrusions and fully machined aluminium panels. Inside, it's what the Krell isn't that helps define what it is. In particular there is of course no video circuitry. This is a dedicated SACD/CD player with analogue stereo and multichannel outputs, the stereo option repeated in single-ended and balanced form. A Philips mechanism in a separate anti-resonance housing drives Burr-Brown PCM 1738 hybrid 24-bit D/A converters in differential mode, with current mode gain stages borrowed from Krell's amplifiers for the main channels, which allows balanced operation, but not unfortunately for the centre and rear channels. The control system is very slick, with some useful behind-the-scenes logic, and a range of digital filters allows some fine tuning. Some may not find the very tiny control buttons, or the camcorder-type credit card remote very appealing, but there are no substantive failings.

Sound-wise, the SACD Standard is very impressive. As a CD player it follows the pattern of other recent Krell kit in the same series (like the

KAV components), veering away from the very heavy-duty, impactful quality of the more traditional top-end Krell components. The emphasis is instead on lightness of touch, exquisite detailing, subtlety and musical expression. Stereo soundstaging, however, remains very firm and explicit.

“Good SACDs reproduce with a liquid smoothness and superb three-dimensional imaging.”

In short, the SACD Standard is a very impressive CD player. But it is significantly better still as an SACD player. It has all the qualities that are apparent when playing CDs. But in addition it has a new-found eloquence and subtlety, and even finer detail. Depending on which digital filter is selected, the Krell covers the full frequency range in a way that some competing players don't, perhaps for fear of overexciting amplifiers that don't have the same abilities. The SACD Standard, however, takes no prisoners. As long as it is used with appropriate amplification and speakers (Krell and Focal-JMLab for much of this test), good SACDs reproduce with a liquid quality, a smoothness combined with very obviously three-dimensional imaging that is closer in many ways to good vinyl replay quality than it is to compact disc, but without any of the traditional stumbling blocks of vinyl records – noise, crackle and the like.

It remains open how much improvement, if any, would be available if all channels were equally endowed internally. I suspect there'd be some, but even as it stands, this is one of the finest SACD players available, not over-endowed with toys, but superbly engineered both as a CD and as an SACD player. A fabulous choice for use in a music-oriented hi-fi system, whether two-channel stereo or full-blown multichannel. **HFC**

Alvin Gold

See HFC 251 (March 2004) for our original review of this product



ATC SCM150ASL Pro

Fancy taking the sound of a top studio back to your abode? Meet ATC's enormous 'standmount'...

PRICE: £9,498 per pair CONTACT: ATC, Gypsy Lane, Aston Down, Stroud, Gloucestershire GL6 8HR ☎ 01285 760561 🌐 www.atc.gb.net

Having spent longer than is healthy in the company of ATC's remarkable SCM50ASL speakers, we've always been intrigued by what the company does with its larger models. The SCM50 is not exactly small, the number in its name indicating its internal volume as with all ATCs, but we knew that there are also models that climb into the 'hundreds' and being audio masochists we've been on the look out for an excuse to review a pair. It came as quite a shock, therefore, when what turned up was this behemoth of a speaker, which inhabits a cabinet that is about the size of a regular fridge but weighs significantly more. You can tell from its all-black finish as well as some other details that this is not primarily a domestic loudspeaker – a 'domesticated' version with a veneered cabinet is available at a premium but this is a rare beast, built to order at ATC's Gloucestershire factory. Indeed, as if to emphasise this model's 'pro' credentials, our review pair had itself come hotfoot from Jools Holland's studio, where it was on 'dem'. It turns out that he decided to go the whole hog and get a pair of SCM300ASLs instead – well you would wouldn't you, if you had the space and the wherewithal. Lucky so and so!

This is the largest pair of speakers we've had the pleasure of lugging into the listening room used for this test (113cm high on their stands) and anything bigger wouldn't have gone up the stairs! Some may think them too big, but all you have to do to make them change their minds is to play them a decent tune. When you hear what this speaker can do, your priorities seem to change.

As the SCM150ASL Pro has no grille (though you can get a grille-equipped pair for an extra £360), it's easy to see what makes it tick. This is a full three-way, reflex-ported design with the distinctly 'pro' touch of overload indicators for mid and bass drivers. The high-frequency unit has a 25mm dome and features a silver voice coil with a double magnet system. The midrange dome is a hand-built Super Linear design and the beast below is a 375mm (15in) doped carbon reinforced paper cone, also featuring Super Linear magnet technology.

The A in ASL stands for active; a Tri Channel power amp and electronic crossover pack on the back of each SCM150ASL produces a very healthy 350 watts of combined power – 50 watts to the tweeter, 100 watts to the midrange and 200 watts to the bass unit, all in Class A up to two-thirds output. Which, given the high sensitivity of the design (the passive

SCM150 measures 91dB), is all most of us will use – you'd require an auditorium to really need that last third of power reserve.

SOUND QUALITY

When you first sit down to listen to your music through a pair of these speakers it confounds expectations. A big, *really* big speaker like this ought to produce a big, ballsy sound, but instead what you get is the same balance you might expect from an accomplished speaker of any size – an even, neutral sound. This is not a crude loudspeaker – it may be able to deliver a claimed 118dB but at normal listening levels it's positively civilised. What it does instead is reveal aspects of your favourite music that seem so obvious, you can't understand why they weren't clear or at least noticeable before. One example is Joe Walsh's track *Dreams*, where the vocals were recorded in mono in each channel. These are used individually and together to great effect, and the SCM150ASL makes that studio technique clear as day, yet other speakers often fudge the issue.

This speaker has a level of distortion/coloration that is way below that normally encountered and it combines this with a breadth of bandwidth and dynamic range that is spine-tingling. It seems to do this by making more time to describe each note – it doesn't slow things down at all but the lack of

“The ATC combines low distortion with a dynamic range that is spine-tingling.”

distortion is apparent in the way that you can hear so much more. On test, the varying weight that Esbjörn Svensson applies to the keys of his piano as well as the full tonal depth of each note was immediate and real. On the other hand, the energy and sheer groove of Captain Beefheart's *Low Yo-Yo Stuff* was abundant, and it's this sensitivity to all aspects of each record that makes this speaker so addictive – you never know what you're going to hear from familiar material. Or just how good or bad those recordings are, for that matter – all aspects of the recording are clear, be it compression, dynamics or plain fidelity. Richard Thompson's *Old Kit Bag* proved itself to be a simply stunning recording and a good example of the superiority of vinyl, and even the Norah Jones SACD played on a good high-resolution player cannot compete with a pressing like that. Conversely, some recordings sound pretty rough – Zappa's *Apostrophe* on

CD was flat and a little brash, but we could still hear much more than usual. The guitar on the title track by the way was pure filth, grunged to the max, which is undoubtedly what Zappa put down in the studio.

The bass delivered by this ATC is more than ever a reflection of what's on the record. Some tracks, usually modern ones, had lovely, deep, rounded and powerful bass whereas others seemed oddly light in that respect, usually on the older recordings. There are plenty of exceptions of course – the bass pedals on *Supper's Ready* by Genesis were pretty heavy, particularly during the 9/8 time *Apocalypse*. Rage Against The Machine was suitably visceral too, the bass guitar delivering both depth and weight yet doing so in a nimble, powerful manner that fully revealed the timbre of the instrument, while Bugge Wesseltoft's *Somewhere In Between* revealed scarily large yet controlled slabs of double bass.

This is a phenomenally revealing and capable speaker, and in terms of transparency to detail, energy, timing and bandwidth it has few peers. Imaging is slightly compromised by that huge baffle, and the large flat panels that make up the cabinet. Nonetheless, there is a solidity to the sound that more than makes up for this, and there is also the likelihood that in a larger room the sound would have a greater chance to escape the speakers.

This is the most revealing and entertaining pair of speakers that this writer has had the pleasure of using in nearly two decades of reviewing. It tells you all about every piece of music played, and if you're in company the discussion turns to the quality of musicianship rather than the sound of the speakers. Hang the expense, this is a beg, borrow or steal loudspeaker – there's no going back once you've heard *this* much. And if you want to go the whole multichannel hog, you could even build the set-up listed below – the same rig as used by James Guthrie to master Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon SACD*! **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

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Clearaudio Master Reference

Acrylic overkill or transparent wunderdeck, Clearaudio takes turntable design to the limit

PRICE: £15,470 (with arm and cartridge) CONTACT: Audio Reference, Unit 8, Enterprise Park, Slyfield Industrial Estate, Guildford GU1 1RB ☎ 01252 702705 🌐 www.clearaudio.de

All the record players in Clearaudio's impressive ten-strong range share materials and concepts that find their ultimate form in the huge Master Reference, the heaviest turntable we've had the pleasure of reviewing.

You'll notice a number of unusual aspects to this turntable apart from its size. For a start there are three motors. Clearaudio considers that the side force created by a single motor and drive belt design means that resonance is fed into the platter, so by using three motors and soft silicone belts it has sought to balance out the forces produced by the motors.

Each motor is driven by the Clearaudio APG (Accurate Power Generator) power supply, a hefty unit with three outlets and a single inlet. The APG is a mains regenerator that offers adjustment for the two usual speeds and provides on/off switching.

The Master Reference doesn't have a suspension system but uses spider-shaped Perspex plates to decouple the arm and platter from the base which supports the motors. The platter is an 80mm deep monster that sits on a hand-polished, inverted ceramic bearing, the bearing itself supported by two acrylic spiders which are in turn supported by aluminium cones with stainless steel spacers. The top spacer forms a base point for a tonearm, so you could equip this turntable with three separate arms if you wanted, but Clearaudio's top-end Master TQ-I (supplied as part of the package reviewed here) should suffice for most.

“When this arm and turntable are combined with Clearaudio's Accurate cartridge the result is a phenomenally vivid sound.”

In fact, the TQ1 is more than just an ordinary arm – this parallel/linear tracking design uses a three-wheeled carriage that runs on quartz rails and supports the short quartz tonearm itself. The latter has a fixed-position headshell at the front and compact counterweights at the back.

When this arm and turntable are combined with Clearaudio's Accurate cartridge to form the £15,470 package featured here, the result is a phenomenally vivid and dynamic performance. The sound depends on the standard of the recording of course but put a good one on, such as Richard Thompson's *Old Kit Bag* for instance, and the degree of presence and realism that's produced is quite simply stunning. The vibrancy of the guitar, double bass and voice which are extracted from this record is quite uncanny, as if the turntable is investing them with some sort of energy that you don't normally get with hi-fi systems. It's almost 'super real' by comparison with more sober sounding decks like our reference SME Model 20A (see review of the 20.2A, p77).

A word of warning though – it's highly sensitive to the quality of the recording you use with it. The low-fi caterwauling of the White Stripes'

White Blood Cells album proved to be a little disappointing in its lack of dynamics and generally 'small' sound. But given the band's predilection for the sound of the sixties this makes sense – this basic, raw, unsophisticated sort of sound is undoubtedly intentional, and the LP (when played on this deck) is still a lot more vibrant than the CD.

One reason for the Clearaudio's open sound is its excellent high-frequency performance – during our test period, Hariprasad Chaurasia's flute soared over Zakir Hussain's multilayered tabla beats like nothing else on the latter's *Making Music* LP. This is largely what makes the Clearaudio sound so alive – that and its exquisite sense of timing. Not only do all rhythms sound spot-on, but the finest variations in tempo are tracked perfectly. The turntable seems to be able to track the build-up of energy in the music with uncanny sensibility, and it does this largely by resolving micro dynamics – the absolute level of each note – to a greater extent than usual.

Clearly a highly capable and engaging record player, this Clearaudio makes a very good case for the parallel tracking tonearm. For those looking to wring the last ounce of life and energy out of their vinyl it will be a revelation. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

See HFC 256 (August 2004) for our original review of this product





Magnum Dynalab MD 106T

Defiantly analogue and complete with valves, this is a radio enthusiast's dream

PRICE: £3,600 CONTACT: Audiofreaks Ltd, 15 Link Way, Ham, Richmond, Surrey TW10 7QT ☎ 020 8948 4153 🌐 www.magnumdynalab.com

Although radio was the original hi-fi source long before the LP disc evolved, tuners today tend to be something of an afterthought – something that amp makers put together in their spare time, largely to satisfy customer demand for a tuner that cosmetically (and by inference sonically) makes a good match for a carefully chosen amp, and also operates from the same remote handset.

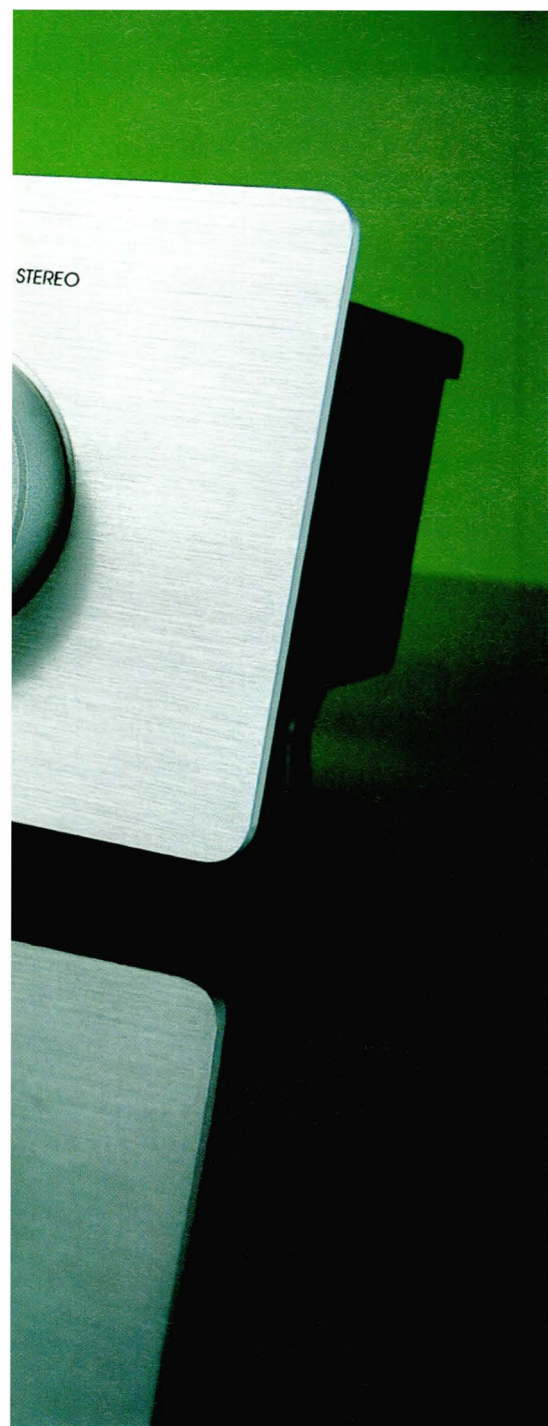
This is a shame. Here in Britain the BBC provides us with one of the world's finest radio

services, whatever one's taste. Investing serious money in a specialist stereo FM radio tuner opens the doorway to untold quantities of free music, some of it of very high quality too. And if you want the very best from radio today, it makes sense to check out the one brand that is first and foremost a radio tuner specialist.

That brand is Canada's Magnum Dynalab, which dabbles a bit in amps, but is first and foremost into FM radio, manufacturing a hierarchy of classically styled, traditionally

analogue tuners, some of which are very costly indeed. That's certainly true of this MD 106T, which sits one rung below the brand's top 108 model, and one up from the 102 we reviewed in May 2003 (*HFC* 241), the 'T' suffix indicating it's part of a new range equipped with triode valves in the audio circuitry.

As any audiophile will confirm, provided good reception conditions are available, traditional analogue FM radio has a definite quality advantage over DAB digital radio. And



despite ministers' rhetoric, it seems impossible that any government will have the gall (and suicidal tendencies) to 'turn off' an FM service that's regularly used by tens of millions of radios in cars and homes across the country – at least not for a very long time.

Magnum Dynalab not only rates analogue FM radio, it also reckons that continuous analogue tuning simply sounds better than its digital synthesis equivalent, even though it's much more difficult and costly to implement.

The only digital bit here is the central tuned frequency readout, which is both large and (too) bright. Above that is a 'magic eye' valve that gives very precise centre-tune indication, while to left and right are large 'swinging needle' meters for signal strength and multipath. The large and beautifully weighted knob on the right does the tuning, a matching

one on the left switching between two F-type aerial sockets. Four toggle switches cover on/off power and muting, stereo/mono, and wide/narrow selectivity, but there's no attempt to implement RadioText. Socketry includes both balanced and unbalanced outputs, and the option list includes black, silver and gold front panels, the last two for £150 extra. Sharp-eyed readers might notice a little infrared receptor next to the maker's name in the picture (left), though this optional remote control feature isn't normally available in the UK.

The real cost of this tuner is in the selection of top quality components, the hand-alignment of front-end filters, and the zero-feedback triode audio amplification stage, with Amperex 'Bugle Boy' 6922 tubes. Other key components include Kimber AKCG pure silver cable, Burr-Brown op-amps with Black Gate capacitors, MIT caps in the audio path, bypass and AC filtering, and Pearl Coolers on the valves.

Having purchased a pre-Triode MD 102 some years ago (after finding it sounded significantly superior to an MD 100), I was intrigued to discover whether this 106T would sound better still. I connected both Magnum Dynalabs to different inputs on my Naim NAC 552 preamp; split the RF (aerial) feed so that both received an equal share; tuned both to Radio 3 and sat down to compare these two

“The cleanliness, clarity and sweetness at the top end was particularly natural and inviting, with great delicacy and realism.”

tuners. Good though the MD 102 is, it took only a few seconds to realise that the 106T was obviously superior, with an even tauter sound and possessing clear improvements in top-end openness and transparency.

It was a surprise to discover that the 106T had a somewhat stronger output level than the 102 – the spec quotes 1.5 volts as against one on the unbalanced phono outputs, and three rather than 2.2 volts via the balanced XLR sockets. The unbalanced level is still less than that put out by a CD player, so there's no practical problem here, though it did mean A/B comparisons needed a little extra care.

Some may regret the lack of remote control, but the hands-on tuning is an absolute delight, with a beautifully weighted 'flywheel' knob, and all the aids – especially the very sensitive 'magic eye' – worked very well indeed, with plenty of sensitivity and selectivity for those wishing to seek out weak, distant stations.

SOUND QUALITY

Listening to *Late Junction* on Radio 3 one evening, I encountered fiddler Martin Hayes and guitarist Denis Cahill dueting on a succession of folk ballads and reels from

County Clare in Ireland. The sound was so vivid and clean I was transfixed by its realism, the penny quickly dropping as I realised that this was a live studio session rather than merely CD replay.

This particular session really showed up the advantages of this costly tuner, its superior dynamic expression and splendid lack of timesmear giving the musical performance real power, impetus, expression and direction. It provided a timely reminder of just how good the best of radio can really be, especially when the usual artefacts of the recording studio are avoided.

That was just one example of how exciting and involving this tuner could be. What was great with simple folk music was if anything even better with more complex classical material, where massed violins had marvellous texture and discrimination. The cleanliness, clarity and sweetness at the top end was particularly natural and inviting, with great delicacy and realism.

The human voice is especially well served. Choirs sound delightfully natural, operating in acoustic settings that are realistically portrayed with fine depth perspectives, and bringing excellent separation to the individual voices. Speech too was exceptionally realistic: sibilants and consonants are convincingly

integrated with the body of a voice, yet without any exaggerated 'spitch' or 'splash', giving very superior realism, expressiveness and low-level intelligibility.

What's particularly pleasing is the ease with which this tuner can get one into unfamiliar music. I'm no particular fan of modern jazz, but found myself sucked into a *Jazz Legends* programme on Radio 3, where Julian Joseph was discussing and playing the work of the Art Ensemble of Chicago. The sheer immediacy and harmonic richness of this combo was very involving, despite the decidedly unfamiliar nature of a composition like *Focus*.

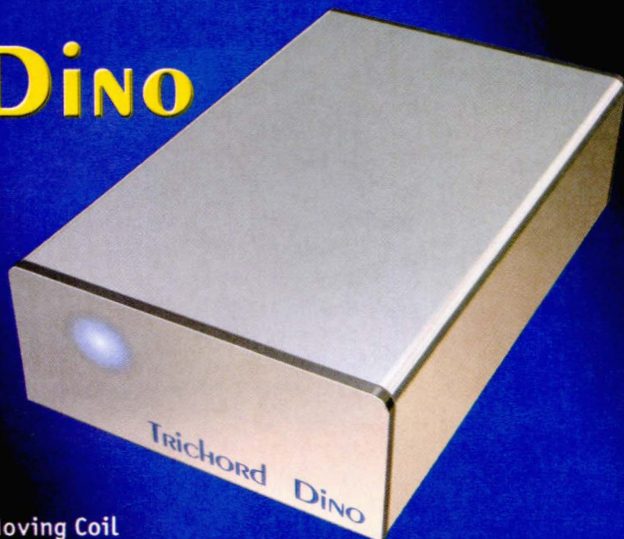
The 106T has great ability to discriminate between the quality of both the original sources, or the transmissions. It's therefore excellent with top quality BBC stations like Radios 3 and 4, but rather less happy with the heavily compressed output of Radio 1 and most commercial stations.

The acid test for any component is how much you want to use it, though it's likely that anyone with an MD 106T in their system will be doing a lot of radio listening, rejoicing in the extra zest and enthusiasm this magnificent tuner brings to the party. **HFC**

Paul Messenger

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MartinLogan Prodigy

Seriously high-end hybrid electrostatic that can live in 'ordinary' sized rooms – at a pinch

PRICE: £11,998 per pair CONTACT: Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.martinlogan.com

At 60kg, nearly 1.8 metres tall, 42cm wide and 71cm deep, the Prodigy is no child-sized speaker. It looks gorgeous, but it takes up a lot of room, not just because of its bulk, but because it can't be consigned to a position up against the back wall if you want it to deliver the goods. It also has quite exotic tastes in amplification and source components, a result of its unusual resolving power. But MartinLogan has made strides in practicality. Older ML designs needed a lot of space behind the diaphragm to work properly. The new ForceForward technology eases the space requirement somewhat.

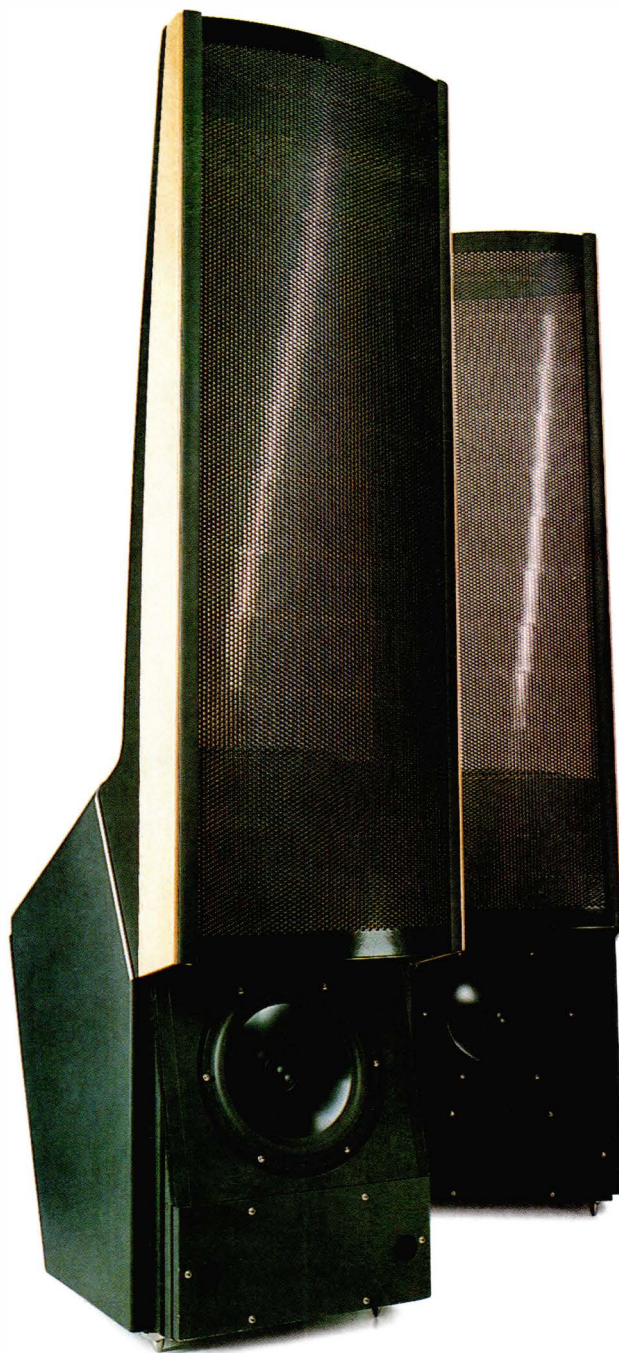
Electrostatics typically produce a tightly beamed output on the forward axis, but MartinLogan's curved diaphragms open dispersion out to around 30 degrees, while minimising interaction with side walls as there is little output at wider angles. Like all electrostatics, the panels are dipolar and extremely transparent. Not just visually, but also sonically, and reflections from the rear wall cause comb filter type response variations as the reflections interact with the direct forward output. This dictates an optimum position (panel to rear wall) of at least 1.5 metres in most rooms, but prior to the Prodigy the bass required even more. ForceForward technology involves two bass drivers, one pointing back, the other forward, each with its own acoustic loading and with its own crossover network, configured so that the rear output is partly cancelled, and the forward output reinforced over a critical frequency band. As a result, the bass output dispersion nearly matches the forward panel dispersion near the crossover point. The benefit is that the Prodigy's bass output needs considerably less breathing room.

The semi-transparent panel/stator assembly makes the Prodigy much less visually oppressive than other similarly bulky speakers, but the impedance plot is all over the place, and you'll need a top-class amplifier to drive the Prodigy as hard as it can be driven, perhaps something like a Krell FPB model, though it would be interesting to hear it with a Halcro dm38 (see review, p106).

Even prior to the Prodigy, MartinLogan had done sterling work on integrating electrostatic panels with moving coil bass drivers, and managed to push the crossover frequency down far enough, and to match the dispersion patterns closely enough, to produce something approaching homogeneity. But clearly there was development work still to be done. The Prodigy represents the result of that work.

“They can produce a stereo image that hangs in space right there in front of you.”

In the very best sense, the Prodigy is not a loudspeaker that will fail to make an impression. Carefully set up and adjusted – and the combination of ForceForward and the Curvilinear curved diaphragm technology doesn't absolve you from this – a pair of Prodigies can produce a stereo image that hangs in space right there in front of you, one where any tiny movement of the performers translates into motion within the soundstage. Layering of detail is delivered as is, with low-level reverberant information presented quite separately from the direct instrumental sounds. Play vocal material and you will discover that the Prodigy can reproduce singing voices with an unrivalled purity. You may find imaging too close and upfront for your tastes, but that can be tuned out at the cost of some image precision.



The bass has a detectable warmth, but is genuinely deep and powerful, and broadly speaking matches with the character of the mid and treble panel, if not quite its astonishing fine-grain resolving power. Certainly it is hard to detect where the ELS panel stops working and the bass section takes over.

In short, the Prodigy is a thoroughbred – a latter-day hybrid electrostatic classic, with more bass, image scale and musical architecture than any of its obvious rivals. **HFC**

Alvin Gold

See HFC 204 (July 2000) for our original review of this product



dm38

-58.0db -58.0db
cd unbal B @in stereo

HALCRO dm10

I/O MUTE INPUT SELECT VOLUME
L BALANCE R
PHASE MONO

Halcro dm10 and dm38

Halcro dips its toe into (almost) affordable high-end amp territory with its latest power tower

PRICE: dm10: £11,300, dm38: £13,550 CONTACT: Audio Reference, Unit 8 Enterprise Park, Slyfield Ind Est, Guildford, Surrey GU1 1RB ☎ 01252 702705 🌐 www.audioreference.co.uk

The unique aerofoil-like shape of the vertical towers does much to define the image of Halcro amplification, but this is a mere sideshow in what makes the brand stand out. In fact, Halcro is notorious for playing its cards close to its chest, but the one feature that is highlighted by the company is rarely discussed in detail by others, and that is harmonic distortion. Halcro claims not just that its amps produce less distortion than others, but that its ZeD technology package reduces worst-case audio band distortion to 0.0001 per cent – around 100 parts per billion, and orders of magnitude less than the opposition, the best of which are generally specified around the 200,000 parts per billion level. With signal purity (read accuracy) of this level, Halcro claims the absence of any audible electronic signature, especially with harmonically complex music which produces larger amounts of aharmonic and intermodulation products which vary with music content and volume. It is the varying distortion content of reproduced music that appears to draw the ear, rather than its absolute level.

Of course, many factors are involved in reducing distortion, such as a sophisticated power factor corrected switch mode PSU, extensive interstage electromagnetic screening and separation (a major reason for the bulk and weight of Halcro amps), and a 'dual correction' system that addresses several unspecified forms of distortion said to arise in Class A and Class B output stages alike.

The recently introduced dm38 power amp is similar to its senior siblings, but with a toned down though still highly impressive specification. Power output is 180 watts per channel (eight ohms) or 350 watts per channel (four ohms) at less than 0.0007 per cent (<110dB) THD up to 20kHz at full power. Inputs are available in balanced, unbalanced and current mode, the latter using phono connectors, and not Krell's CAST interface, which is also used by Halcro. You should know also that the dm38 stands 79cm tall, and weighs 55kg. Shy and retiring it is not.

The remote controllable dm10 preamp allows five line inputs to be assigned to any of its three unbalanced, three balanced and single current mode inputs. The phono input is hardwired and includes continuously variable capacitance and resistance. The preamp comes with a headphone amp and is controlled by a sophisticated microprocessor-driven operating system, which includes volume offsets which ensure that all inputs appear at the same level

when switching from one to another. In terms of build, the dm10 takes its cue from the power amp, and it stands a full 24cm tall, and weighs 23kg – almost unprecedented for a preamp.

Halcro's first products were a pair of monoblocks, the dm58 and the range-topping dm68, at £26,300 per pair (see review, *HFC* 243). Last year these were followed by a pair of preamps, the dm8 and the dm10 featured here, which differ only in that the former is a line-level preamp, and the latter includes a phono stage. The general design concepts are similar to the power amp, and all four products offer considerable flexibility, not least in how they interface with source components and with each other. The dm38 is a lower cost (but still very expensive) stereo power amplifier.

SOUND QUALITY

Some months ago I spent some time with the dm10, on that occasion partnered with the dm68, which was a curious and fascinating experience. The time gap between then and now is too great to make direct comparisons, especially as the peripheral equipment, and in particular the loudspeakers, were completely different. Nevertheless, there are clearly points of similarity, and one intriguing difference. On

“It has a special excellence associated with the mid/treble, as though it is internally lit.”

the whole, I'm as certain as I can be that the dm68 is a significantly better amplifier than the still mightily impressive dm38. It has a special excellence associated with the midband and treble, as though internally lit, an ability to reveal the inner structure of even the most complex music with an impeccable precision and sense of structure. It is a fine-grain quality that, compared even to other very good amplifiers, sounds as though the music has been pulled into unprecedentedly sharp focus.

The effect is extremely lively and vivid – hence the earlier comment about being internally lit – and this is certainly echoed by the dm38. Indeed, the sense of light and shade was the first thing that was noticed when the power amp was up and running after a short run-in period. The dm38 seems to have slightly less internal contrast, a slightly less colourful quality, but in those many things it does well, it is still miles ahead of just about everything else.

In one important area, however, the new entry-level (hah!) Halcro dm38 appears to

have an edge on the dm68. With the senior model, at least with the speakers to which it was connected (Focal-JMLab Grande Utopia Be), the bass never quite knitted together with the rest of the audio frequency band in a way that was completely convincing. It is tempting to blame the Grande Utopia for this, but in the end, given that the same speaker behaved without this change in character with alternative high-end amps, this supposition doesn't hold water. In the case of the dm38, what was immediately apparent was that there was no discontinuity; that its character is completely homogenous, as far as can be determined within the resolving power of the rest of the system. The latter included a Sony SCD-XA9000ES SACD player with B&W Nautilus 800, Quad 989 and Anthony Gallo Reference 3 speakers, hooked up with Nordost Valhalla, which is one of the few cables with the speed and resolution the Halcro demands.

Even if the new power amplifier doesn't quite rise to the often dizzyingly stratospheric heights of the earlier, senior model, the dm38's consistency and common purpose, the way that the music holds together across the frequency band and the whole dynamic envelope, makes this amplifier truly special. In

this the dm10 preamplifier is the ideal partner – transparent, dynamic, and with the same incredible resolving quality and transparency, and incidentally vanishingly low background noise levels.

You could say that this is a horses for courses product, one that can drive just about any conceivable load, and that it has immaculate timing and class-leading fine detail resolution, but that with lower resolution speakers, however good in other respects, the Halcro is simply wasted.

Based on limited evidence from the Krell KAV-2250, Krell's high-end amps still sound more sure-footed in the bass, but the dm38/dm10 combination restores a consistency across the frequency band as well as elsewhere that Halcro could not lay claim to before. Finally, it has a wonderfully engaging, fresh and vibrant quality, one that has just about no discernable electronic signature at all. Now if it could only be done at a price that *more* people could afford... **HFC**

Alvin Gold

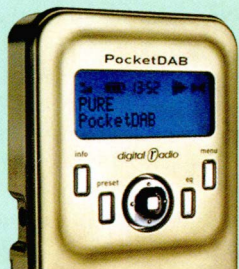
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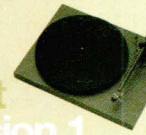
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PRICE: £24,500 per pair CONTACT: Living Voice, Stanhope House, Harrington Mill, Leopold St, Long Eaton NG10 4QE ☎ 0115 973 3222 🌐 www.livingvoice.co.uk

Living Voice founder Kevin Scott enjoys a bit of full-on entertainment, that's why he chose to build a monster horn speaker called the Air Partner when he first launched this brand. It was about six feet tall, three feet deep, and featured the first cellular horn that had been seen on a domestic loudspeaker for aeons. Kevin realised that just because a technology was not new didn't mean it wasn't good, and with the fervour for low-power single-ended triode valve amps at the time there was a theoretical market for speakers with a sensitivity of over 100dB.

That speaker however proved to be a little bit too big for most music lovers – let's face it, not many of us have an auditorium to fill and the 'pro' derivation behind the Air Partner ensured that was pretty much its forte. So Kevin downsized (well, a little bit anyway) and produced the Airscout, which at 63x115x57cm (WxHxD) could be considered a bit more living room-friendly. But horns are tricky things. They may be staggeringly efficient – they produce plenty of power when driven by single-figure output amps – but they have to be absolutely enormous to produce anything approaching decent bass. The Airscout is not able to deliver anything that might be described as bass so the RW24 horn 'subwoofer' was created to augment its output. The term subwoofer is not entirely accurate because even this substantial horn-loaded unit with its twin 300mm (12in) drivers only goes down to 50Hz, so it's more like regular bass than sub-bass.

The Airscout is a three-way system, a sort of sub/sat of the horn world, albeit without the intention of being hidden away – after all, why would you want to hide veneers like these? This is a beautifully finished speaker that features serious ordnance in the drive unit department. High frequencies are supplied by a slotted JBL horn tweeter, the midrange by a Vitavox pressure unit with a 60mm dome via a five-cell exponential horn, and the upper bass comes courtesy of a Vitavox 300mm doped paper driver.

The result offers sensitivity of 105dB, which means that your single-ended 7.5-watt valve amp will be able to make the party jump all night long. But this system is too good for parties – the level of energy it produces is nothing short of revelatory, and most regular box

speakers sound positively limp by comparison. The latter have a significantly flatter frequency response though, which is worth something if neutrality is your goal. But if thrill power and visceral grip are priorities, the Airscout is a speaker system to die for.

It is very rich tonally but because of its phenomenal speed and a complete absence of boxy colorations this is not a ponderous or thick richness – more a total evocation of the instruments and voices being reproduced. You quickly become accustomed to the openness and dynamics on offer – perhaps too quickly, in fact, as soon you'll be taking them for granted. But put on a pair of normal, direct-radiating speakers and it becomes blatantly obvious how clean, uncompressed and natural the Living Voice horns sound.

“This beautiful speaker features serious ordnance in the drive unit department.”

The RW24 bass system has the uncanny ability to open up bass notes and reveal their tuning and colour – what previously sounded like amorphous blobs of bass turn into a pizzicato double bass with body and timbre. The sharp roll-off you get with a horn makes the bass seem extremely nimble and a shade light but this is largely because you are not hearing the resonances of a box joining in with the music.

What is most appealing about this speaker system is that it brings out so much in your music collection. Nearly every disc or LP sounds better than you would imagine and truly great music genuinely shines. This combined with the beautiful veneers used to finish the cabinets makes this a large speaker system that will enhance any decent-sized living room, not to mention enhancing your standard of living by delivering the soul and energy of music at its finest. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

See HFC 163 (February 1997) for our original review of this product



Theta Compli

Are the days of the high-end CD player numbered? Meet Theta's audiophile-grade 'universal' solution

PRICE: £4,482 CONTACT: Absolute Sounds Ltd, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.thetadigital.com

There are those who think CD should stay with CD players and that the DVD-Audio, DVD-Video or SACD player has no place in high-end – especially two-channel high-end – audio systems. The Theta folk aren't among them. The Theta Compli is a do-it-all disc spinner that favours everything equally.

It's a surprisingly svelte for a player at this lofty level – normally when spending £4,500 on a player, companies feel disposed to

package them in cases twice the size of the Compli. That said, it's built like a tank, with a thick front panel and neatly rounded casework.

It is based on a top-end Pioneer universal DVD player, although you need to be seriously eagle-eyed to spot the similarities. The remote handset is a Pioneer with a Theta badge, the display is Pioneer and übergeeks may spot the same transport mechanism. But that is about as near as Theta comes to badge engineering.

To dismiss this player as a well-dressed Pioneer is as daft as claiming that a Jaguar is merely a Mondeo in drag. Every aspect of the player has been addressed to engineer the best possible performance across all formats, whether CD, SACD, DVD-A or DVD-V.

The back panel gives some idea of just how radical the upgrades inside are. There's BNC and AES/EBU digital connectors alongside the normal Toslink and coaxial. There is also

Well, almost. SACD playback has a definite forward quality with a touch of sibilance that is never quite smoothed over (this is one of the few places where the player shows its Pioneer colours). In fairness, this is pretty subtle – it's less obvious than with many machines and only really noticeable when switching between disc types. Elsewhere the player is deftly balanced, making a sound that is as effortlessly smooth as it is keenly dynamic. It is also one of the most neutrally enjoyable players around.

SOUND QUALITY

Whatever form of disc is used, there is a sense of consummate detail and a coherence that is rare in universal, do-it-all players. Many such players have decent levels of information retrieval – it's a strong suit of the breed. Unfortunately, they often turn that information into a post mortem of music, eviscerating the recording and leaving it flat, cold and on the slab. The Theta is one of the few exceptions. It manages to keep the music alive, bouncy and focused, while retaining the informative nature of the universal disc.

Soundstaging is excellent, with a sense of layering within a tight-knit image that forms between, behind and in front of the speakers. It doesn't run particularly wide of the speakers, but within the confines of that space, it is truly holographic. Damien Rice's well-recorded 'O' CD sounded magical here – the disc's sense of occasion was highlighted by a soundstage so natural, so vivid and so

these can be over or understated; smoothed off in an attempt to rid the player of brightness, or brought so far forward that the music sounds like an all-girl chorus. Here, the player has exactly the right balance, and enables the listener to define the drive of Mozart's masterwork, to such an extent that if I were to be buried tomorrow (in fact I plan on being trebuchet'd and flung against a wall of lightly oiled supermodels, but that's an entirely different tale) I would want to be dropped off with this recording being played through this player. No, I wouldn't die for the Theta Compli, but I'd happily be buried to its accompaniment.

One of the biggest compliments in high-end seems like the biggest insult. This player sounds like it isn't there. It seems to add or subtract practically nothing to the disc and has no real influence over the sound of the electronics and speakers in tow. The palpable sense of correctness this bestows on all tracks played through it merely shows it to be the benign partner in all systems. This is not damning the Compli with faint praise, it is rare – read that as almost impossible – to find a disc spinner with almost no sonic signature, and when it comes to the still relatively new universal breed the numbers (so far) drop to the amount you can count on the fingers of one hand. And a hand that has spent some quality time with a threshing machine at that. Basically, the Compli is in the company of Linn's Unidisk, Bel Canto's Player and perhaps one or two other machines in the universal stakes. That's heady company indeed.

“The Theta Compli is one of the first truly platform-agnostic players and it's equally happy with any disc you care to spin.”

solidly bolted down, it seemed as if the musicians had joined us in the room.

Many universal players suffer from bass lightness – it's most noticeable in the SACD replay, but extends to all formats. Bass is controlled and ordered, but gently rolls off and lacks the sort of deep-seated sense of rhythm found in good-order dedicated CD replay. This problem is not endemic though – the Theta proves that. This player has depth and clarity in the bass. From the organic bass of early 1960s jazz from Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington to the deep and nasty artificial dub reggae sounds of Burning Spear, bass is presented without boom or overhang, but in a deep and lucid manner.

One of the acid tests of any player is Mozart's *Requiem* (the Decca – Solti version) on CD. Played at a decent lick, this should have plenty of space around the instruments, with soaring, articulate vocals (especially female vocals), which jump out at the listener, but never overawe the rest of the recording. Too often,

Okay, let's put this into some kind of perspective. The Theta Compli will not outplay an Audio Research, a Naim, a Wadia or any of the rarefied CD-only players around the same price. There is a touch of the universal player flatness that is freed up by using a dedicated CD player. But only a touch – you'd almost have to compare the players side by side to hear the difference. Essentially, if CD playback is your only priority, a dedicated high-end CD player will give you that extra 10 per cent. But if you plan on exploiting the flexibility of next-generation music discs plus films on DVD, all from a single player, the Theta is king.

It's that flexibility – coupled with excellent sound quality on all formats – that makes the this player such a valid option for today's audio enthusiast. Its video performance is as strong as its sound, and if the call of multichannel music and home cinema is becoming hard to resist, the Compli is one player that won't sacrifice your CD collection in the process. **HFC**

Alan Sircom

the Theta Digital Interface connector and an RS232 connection for AMX or Crestron remote hook-ups. The TDI link is a proprietary high-speed digital interface (in the manner of i.Link, Denon Link or Meridian's Smart Link) that allows digital transfer of all digital audio data, SACD and DVD-Audio included, to other suitably equipped Theta products – outboard DACs, processors and so on. Naturally, all the usual stereo and multichannel analogue connectors are also included, as are composite, S-Video and component/progressive scan video outputs. Optional extras include SDI and 480-pixel digital video connections (for those with the latest plasma screens or projectors).

This is one of the first truly platform-agnostic players around and it's equally happy with any disc you care to spin – CD, SACD or DVD-A/V.

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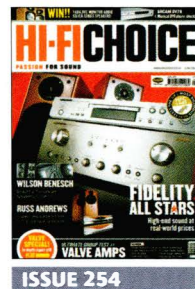
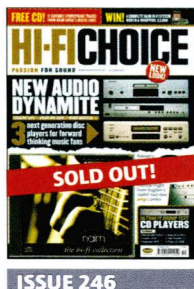
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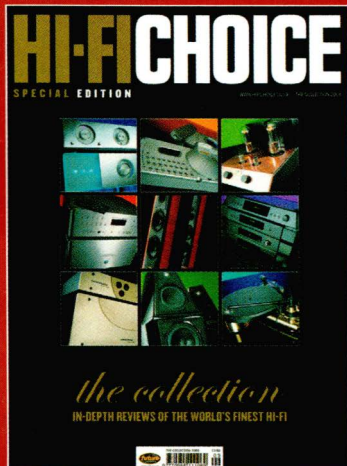
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Model 20/2



Model 30/2



Series M2



Series 300



Series IV



Series V



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KRELL RESOLUTION

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JADIS

Golden energy and deep emotion: there has never been a valve amplifier quite like a Jadis. Wonderful to look at, achingly beautiful to experience, these amplifiers are for those who treasure the heart of music. Affordable stairway to heaven.

ORACLE

Too exquisite for words! So just listen instead. We haven't sold the Oracle Delphi turntable for many years, but now here it is, back again and better than ever in its Mk V incarnation. A classic reference to the glory of vinyl records.

SONUS FABER

No speaker is more beautiful, and no speaker can communicate more than a Sonus faber. The Stradivari, the new flagship of the Homage series, has been described in a review as as one of the world's great loudspeakers. It is.

PRIMA LUNA

Just bought a new car? Oh dear, money's tight - but you still want beautiful music. We can do it! Gorgeous KT-88 valve sound with the Prima Luna Prologue 2. Peanuts money!

Krell, Sonus faber, Jadis, Copland, Pathos, Oracle, Lyra, Audio Research, Unison Research, Martin Logan, Prima Luna, Chord Company, Transparent, BCD, Futureglass, finite-elemente

The PINEWOOD MUSIC COMPANY

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Sevenoaks SOUND & VISION

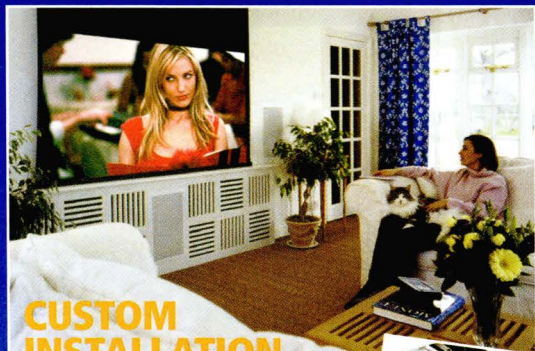


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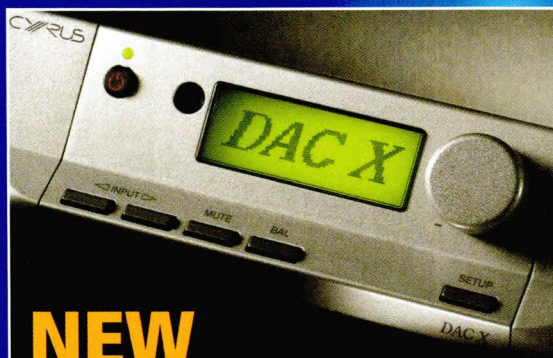
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NEW CYRUS DAC-X

Cyrus' new **DAC-X** is one of the world's finest Digital to Analogue Converters, allowing any CD player to be upgraded to the very latest 192Khz DAC technology. In true Cyrus tradition this new decoder can also be supplied - or upgraded - with dual mono, fully balanced, pre-amplifier cards built-in. This Pre-amplifier version will be known as the DAC-XP

CYRUS

ARCAM DIVA CD192 UPSAMPLING CD PLAYER



Following the critical acclaim of Arcam's recently introduced home cinema products - the DV79 HDMI equipped DVD-Audio Player and AVR300 7.1 Channel Receiver - Arcam has introduced the CD192 CD Player to its highly successful DiVA range.

According to Arcam, the CD192 is "the highest performing model in the DiVA range, offering superior performance, a greater feature set and better value than has previously been possible in the DiVA product line."

ARCAM
SOUND & VISION

DENON AVR-2805 A/V SURROUND RECEIVER

Hot on the heels of Denon's AVR3805 is its smaller brother - the '2805. This new model incorporates all the latest surround formats combined with enhanced installation flexibility, setup and simplicity of operation.



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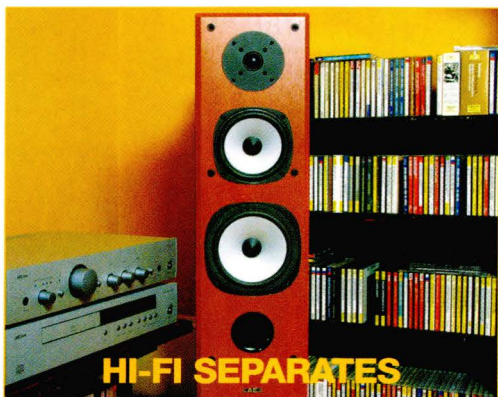
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Arcam DiVA CD73T CD Player £399.95



FREE GRADO SR60 HEADPHONES WORTH £90 WHEN YOU PURCHASE AN AMP AND CD TOGETHER FROM ONE OF THE FOLLOWING MANUFACTURERS - ARCAM, CYRUS & ROKSAN*
NOT IN CONJUNCTION WITH ANY OTHER OFFER OR PROMOTION

Michell Gyro SE Turntable / RB300 Tonearm £1049.95

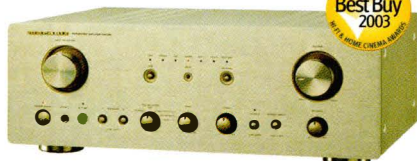


"The Gyrodec SE sounds great, combining the best sonic characteristics of rivals... Quite simply, the Michell Gyrodec SE is terrific. Nothing compares at this price point - it's well deserving another Best Buy."

CLAIM £50 TOWARDS THE GOLDRING CARTRIDGE OF YOUR CHOICE*



Marantz CD5400 CD Player £119.95



SAVE £80

Marantz PM7200 Amplifier £249.95

"This is one of the most powerful amps in its class, at 95w per channel, and it sounds it with anything from dance to a big orchestral work, offering a delicious combination of poise and impact. Stick with fast, dynamic speakers such as B&W DM601 S3s or KEF's equally capable Q1s and the results will amaze."



Pro-ject 1 Xpression Turntable (Black) £209.95

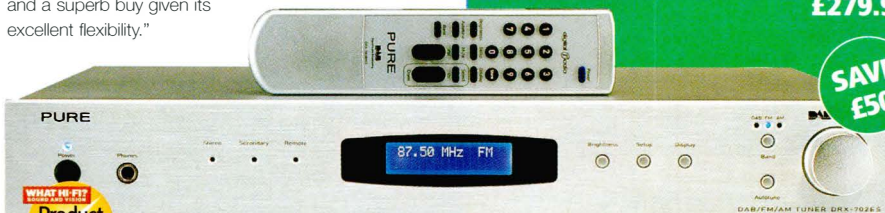
"Compared with a £200 CD player this deck sounds remarkable: dig out your vinyl and give the Xpression a spin."

Pro-ject 1 Debut II Turntable (Black) £119.95



THE PROJECT RANGE STARTS AT ONLY £119.95

"So do you buy a digital tuner? Or an analogue one? Now you don't have to pick: just buy Pure Digital's DRX-702ES! Whether on FM or DAB, this tuner sounds superb... The overall balance is powerful, clean and crisp, making this a fine tuner by any standards, and a superb buy given its excellent flexibility."



DIGITAL RECORDERS



Yamaha CDR-HD1300 CD-RW/HD Recorder £449.95

SAVE £80

"No more wasted CD-Rs: in a stroke of genius, Yamaha had the idea of combining a CD recorder with a hard drive, enabling you to edit your music before burning it to disc. The result was the excellent CDR-HD1000, and the CDR-HD1300E is its younger, cheaper and vastly superior sibling. It's the best home-recording solution currently available."

Pioneer PDR-609 CD-RW Recorder £169.95



DAB RADIO

Pure Digital DRX-702ES Analogue/DAB Tuner £279.95

SAVE £50

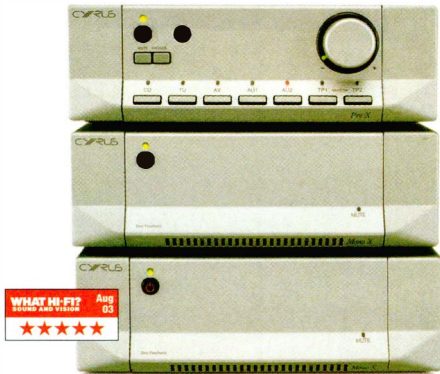
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experience more
experience more



Cyrus
Pre X Pre Amplifier £999.95
Mono X Power Amplifier (Each) £1199.95

"This Cyrus pairing isn't cheap but listen to a well-run-in sample and its array of talents is hard to beat. Load your favourite CD into a capable player, turn up the Pre X and the sonic magic will be worth every penny."



WHAT HI-FI? Aug 03
★★★★★

SEE FREE GRADO SR60 HEADPHONE OFFER*

Mission
780 SE Speakers £349.95

"The revamped Mission 780s are hugely enjoyable: anyone with up to £400 to spend should consider these standmounters. Mission's clever move has paid off."

WHAT HI-FI? May 03
★★★★★



FREE QED CABLE
WORTH £60

MJ Acoustics Reference 100
Subwoofer (Black) £349.95

"You get a high level of detail and the kind of impact most sub-£1000 floorstanders would struggle to match. The verdict's simple: buy with confidence."



WHAT HI-FI? Best Buy 2003

FREE QED CABLE
WORTH £60



FREE QED CABLE
WORTH £60

NEW

KEF Q4
Speakers £399.95

The Q4 is one of the latest additions to KEF's acclaimed Q Series. At the heart of this floorstander lies the Uni-Q driver array - a 130mm die-cast chassis housing a long throw cone and coincident mounted 19mm aluminium dome HF unit. This driver arrangement makes the speaker much easier to place in the room and alleviates the 'sweet spot' found on 'ordinary' speakers. This has been combined with a dedicated 130mm LF unit for extended bass output which belies the size of its diminutive cabinet.

FREE QED

SPEAKER CABLE

WORTH

WITH ALL HI-FI SPEAKER PAIRS OVER £299*

£60 WITH SPEAKERS OVER £299
£80 WITH SPEAKERS OVER £499
£120 WITH SPEAKERS OVER £999

B&W
DM602 S3 Speakers £299.95

"These solidly made standmounters perform well across the whole range of musical styles... Add these speakers to your hi-fi system and you're guaranteed magnificent integration between the drivers and an even tonal balance."

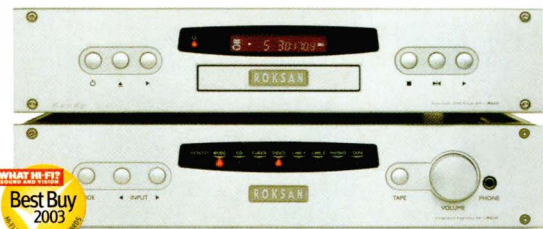
FREE QED CABLE
WORTH £60



WHAT HI-FI? Best Buy 2002
SPEAKERS £201-£350

Roksan Kandy
KD1/III CD Player £649.95
KA1/III Amplifier £649.95

"Timing and rhythm are excellent. DJ Shadow is delivered with clarity and a tight bass, while at the other extreme the treble is sweet and detailed, getting the most from Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*. The result is a breathtaking Best Buy amplifier that betters its competition with ease." KANDY KA1/III AMPLIFIER - AWARDS 2003



WHAT HI-FI? Best Buy 2003

"The Kandy KD1/III CD player offers a great array of talents - team it with its amp stablemate and you have something close to the ideal visual and sonic combination."

WHAT HI-FI? Dec 03
★★★★★

FREE

GRADO SR60 HEADPHONES WORTH £90 WHEN YOU PURCHASE AN AMP AND CD TOGETHER FROM ONE OF THE FOLLOWING MANUFACTURERS - ARCAM, CYRUS & ROKSAN* NOT IN CONJUNCTION WITH ANY OTHER OFFER OR PROMOTION



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Sevenoaks SOUND & VISION



NEW

MUSICAL FIDELITY



Musical Fidelity has unveiled two integrated amplifiers and a CD player as part of its revamped X-series. The 40 wpc, **X-80 (£599.95)** and the 80wpc **X-150**

(£799.95) amplifiers feature a dual-gang analogue volume control and high-output transistors for each channel. The X-150 also includes a high quality phono stage.

The **X-Ray²** CD player **(£899.95)**, is the replacement for the legendary X-Ray and uses the same DAC and upsampling

principles as the acclaimed Tri-Vista SACD player. From a technical standpoint, the X-Ray² is equal of some of the most expensive players on the market.



WIRELESS NETWORKING

MUSIC ALL AROUND THE HOME

You've heard of hi-fi – now welcome to the world of wi-fi! Wi-fi devices allow you to network a range of devices together – from your music system to your PC – without the wires. For example, a multiroom server like Yamaha's MusicCAST can wirelessly send music to up to five 'client' playback systems dotted around your home. That music could be stored on the MusicCAST server device or other sources – existing hi-fi kit, maybe, or an internet radio station or MP3 files from your PC; plug-in adapters make it easy to wi-fi-enable products.



**YAMAHA'S MusicCAST
MCX-1000 DIGITAL SERVER & MCX-A10 CLIENT**



YAMAHA MusicCAST

MCX A10 **£599.95**
(MusicCAST Client)
MCX 1000 **£1799.95**
(MusicCAST Server)

CYRUSLINK

Linkserver 160 **£2999.95**
(Four Zone HD Server 160Gb Drive)
Linkserver 250 **£3499.95**
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Linkwand **£199.95**



Cyruslink

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COMPACT HI-FI SYSTEMS



Linn Classik Music System (Ex Speakers)

£799.95 When purchased with speakers over £299*
When purchased on its own **£849.95**

"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."



Denon DM31 UD-M31 CD Receiver

£189.95 When purchased with speakers over £99*
When purchased on its own **£199.95**

SAVE £40

"The D-M30 was exemplary, as its three What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision Awards clearly show. The D-M31 is even better, making it phenomenal value for money."

OPTIONAL RECORDERS:

DMD-M31 MINIDISC RECORDER • DRR-M31 CASSETTE DECK
NB - PRICE EXCLUDES SPEAKERS

B&W 704 Speakers £1399.95

The 704 speakers are part of B&W's new 700 series. These floorstanding, two-and-a-half-way, vented box speakers and are available in a variety of attractive finishes. In a recent What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision group test the 704 offered "Remarkable openness and clarity that is unrivalled at this price."



**FREE QED CABLE
WORTH £120**



PLEASE NOTE: SOME PRODUCTS MAY NOT BE AVAILABLE AT ALL STORES. PLEASE CALL BEFORE TRAVELLING.

***ADDED VALUE OFFERS - FROM RANGE AVAILABLE IN-STORE. NOT IN CONJUNCTION WITH ANY OTHER OFFER. ADVERTISEMENT VALID UNTIL AT LEAST 25/08/04, E&OE.**

experience more

experience more
experience more



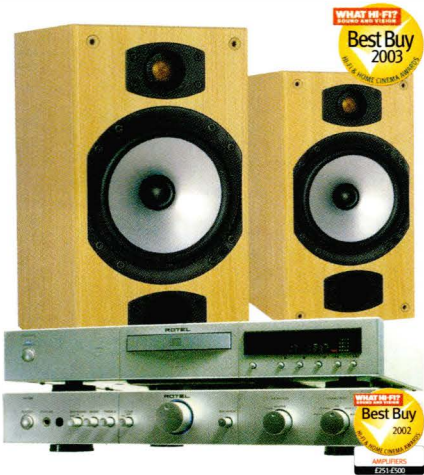
SEPARATE HI-FI SYSTEMS

Rotel
RCD-02 CD Player
RA-02 Amplifier



Monitor Audio
Bronze B2 Speakers

For this recommended Hi-Fi System we have combined Rotel's highly rated RCD-02 CD player and RA-02 amplifier with Monitor Audio's beautifully balanced Bronze B2 speakers. This package gives a powerful, fresh and vibrant sound. The compact 'B2' speakers, available in a variety of finishes, were awarded 'Best Buy' by What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision, with the sound being described as "Superb.. Speakers don't get much better than the B2's"



The RA-02 amplifier features remote control and a phono input. The RCD-02 (★★★★★ - What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision - August 2003) is HDCD compatible and includes a digital output for connecting to a digital recorder.

SYSTEM PRICE | SAVE
£799.95 | **£129**
PRICE EXCLUDES CABLES & STANDS

HI-FI SYSTEM 1 - NOT IN CONJUNCTION WITH ANY OTHER OFFER OR PROMOTION



SEPARATE HI-FI SYSTEMS



Arcam
CD73T CD Player
A65 Plus Amplifier



KEF
Q4 Speakers

Arcam and KEF both have an enviable reputation for producing great sounding kit without breaking the bank. This system shows why with a well balanced sound that's both musically involving and enjoyable.

At the front of this package is Arcam's upgradeable CD73T CD player - a What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision 'Product of the Year 2003'. We've coupled this with Arcam's complementary A65 Plus integrated amplifier and KEF's new Q4 floostanding speakers featuring KEF's unique Uni-Q technology for easier room placement.

SYSTEM PRICE | SAVE
£999.95 | **£149**
PRICE EXCLUDES CABLES & STANDS

HI-FI SYSTEM 2 - NOT IN CONJUNCTION WITH ANY OTHER OFFER OR PROMOTION



SEPARATE HI-FI SYSTEMS

Roksan Kandy
KD1/III CD Player
KA1/III Amplifier



Monitor Audio
Silver S6 Speakers



The combination of Roksan's Kandy MK3 CD and amplifier is, according to What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision, "Something close to the ideal visual and sonic combination" (December 2003). We have partnered these with the Silver S6 floorstanding speakers from British

speaker specialists, Monitor Audio. The combination of Roksan's excellent rhythm and timing, with its tight bass and sweet detailed treble coupled with the 'S6's' ability to stay unruffled even when the music is at its most complex, makes this a remarkable system.

SYSTEM PRICE | SAVE
£1889.95 | **FREE SOUNDSTYLE RACK WORTH £300***
PRICE EXCLUDES CABLES & STANDS

HI-FI SYSTEM 3 - NOT IN CONJUNCTION WITH ANY OTHER OFFER OR PROMOTION

Sevenoaks

SOUND & VISION



PRODUCT RANGE

An outstanding selection of products are on display and available for demonstration at all Sevenoaks Sound & Vision stores.

However, some products may not be available at all stores. Please call to check availability before travelling.

TURNTABLES

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| Goldring GR1 | £139.95 |
| Michell Gyro SE/RB300 E50 GOLDRING CARTRIDGE* | £1049.95 |
| Michell TechnoDec (Ex Arm) | £599.95 |
| Project Debut Phono SB | £169.95 |
| Project Debut II (Black) | £119.95 |
| Project Debut II (Colours) | £134.95 |
| Project 1 Xpression | £209.95 |

TUNERS

| | |
|-------------------------------|---------|
| Arcam DIVA T61 | £199.95 |
| Cyrus FM X | £499.95 |
| Denon TU260L MKII | £99.95 |
| Harman Kardon TU970 DAB/AM/FM | £299.95 |
| Marantz ST4000 | £99.95 |
| Pure DRX-701ES DAB | £199.95 |
| Pure DRX-702ES Analogue/DAB | £279.95 |
| Roksan Kandy KT1 MKIII | £549.95 |

CD PLAYERS

| | |
|---------------------------|----------|
| Arcam DIVA CD73T | £399.95 |
| Arcam DIVA CD82T | £499.95 |
| Arcam DIVA CD93T | £699.95 |
| Arcam DIVA CD192 | £849.95 |
| Arcam FMJ CD33T | £1299.95 |
| Cyrus CD6 | £599.95 |
| Cyrus CD8 | £999.95 |
| Cyrus DAC-X | £1099.95 |
| Denon DCD485 | £119.95 |
| Linn Genki | £1099.95 |
| Linn Ikemi | £2199.95 |
| Marantz CD5400 | £119.95 |
| Musical Fidelity X-Ray V3 | £899.95 |
| Musical Fidelity A3.2 | £999.95 |
| Musical Fidelity A308* | £1999.95 |
| Quad 99 CD-P | £999.95 |
| Roksan Kandy KD1 MKIII | £649.95 |
| Roksan Caspian M | £1099.95 |
| Rotel RCD02 | £379.95 |
| Rotel RCD1072 | £594.95 |

CD RECORDERS

| | |
|-------------------------|---------|
| Pioneer PDR609 CD-RW | £169.95 |
| Yamaha CDR-HD1300 CD-RW | £449.95 |

AMPLIFIERS

| | |
|---------------------------|----------|
| Arcam DIVA A65 Plus | £ CALL |
| Arcam DIVA A80 | £599.95 |
| Arcam DIVA A90 | £849.95 |
| Arcam FMJ A32 | £1149.95 |
| Cyrus 6 | £599.95 |
| Cyrus 8 | £799.95 |
| Cyrus Pre X Pre | £999.95 |
| Cyrus Mono X Power (Each) | £1199.95 |
| Denon PMA355 | £179.95 |
| Linn Kolector Pre | £574.95 |
| Linn LK85 Power | £544.95 |
| Marantz PM4400 | £149.95 |

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| Marantz PM7200 | £249.95 |
| Musical Fidelity X-80 | £599.95 |
| Musical Fidelity X-150 | £799.95 |
| Musical Fidelity A3.2 | £979.95 |
| Musical Fidelity A3.2 Pre | £999.95 |
| Musical Fidelity A3.2 Power | £999.95 |
| Musical Fidelity A308 | £1999.95 |
| Quad 99 Power | £549.95 |
| Roksan Kandy KA1 MKIII | £649.95 |
| Roksan Caspian M | £999.95 |
| Rotel RA-01 | £249.95 |
| Rotel RA-02 | £349.95 |
| Rotel RA-1062 | £594.95 |

SPEAKERS

| | |
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| Acoustic Energy Aegis Evo One | £149.95 |
| Acoustic Energy Aegis Evo Three | £279.95 |
| Acoustic Energy Aelite 602 | £449.95 |
| Acoustic Energy Aelite 603 | £749.95 |
| Acoustic Energy AE1 MKIII (From) | £1699.95 |
| B&W DM601 S3 | £249.95 |
| B&W DM602 S3 | £299.95 |
| B&W 704 | £1399.95 |
| B&W 705 | £899.95 |
| KEF Q1 | £249.95 |
| KEF Q4 | £399.95 |
| KEF XQ1 | £749.95 |
| Linn Katan | £649.95 |
| Mission m31 | £119.95 |
| Mission 780SE | £349.95 |
| Mission 782SE | £899.95 |
| Monitor Audio Bronze B2 | £199.95 |
| Monitor Audio Silver S1 | £299.95 |
| Monitor Audio Silver S6 | £599.95 |
| Monitor Audio Silver S8 | £799.95 |
| Monitor Audio Gold Reference 10 | £799.95 |
| Monitor Audio Gold Reference 20 | £1499.95 |
| Quad 11L | £379.95 |
| Quad 12L | £499.95 |
| Quad 22L | £894.95 |
| Ruark Epilogue II | £344.95 |
| Wharfedale Pacific Evolution 30 | £649.95 |

HI-FI SYSTEMS

| | |
|--------------------------------|---------|
| Denon 201 Ex Speakers | £499.95 |
| Denon DF101 Ex Speakers | £299.95 |
| Arcam DM31 Ex Speakers | £199.95 |
| Linn Klassik Music Ex Speakers | £849.95 |
| Teac Legacy 600 Ex Speakers | £199.95 |
| Teac Reference 300 Ex Speakers | £449.95 |
| Teac Reference 500 Ex Speakers | £569.95 |

DVD SYSTEMS

| | |
|---|----------|
| Denon ADV-M71 Inc SC-M51 Speakers | £499.95 |
| Denon DVD-500SD Inc 5.1 Speaker Package | £499.95 |
| Denon DVD-770SD/AVR-770SD Ex Speakers | £599.95 |
| Jamo DVRS50/A305PDD Inc Speakers | £649.95 |
| Jamo DVRS50/A355PDD Inc Speakers | £899.95 |
| KEF KIT100 Inc Speakers | £1199.95 |
| Linn Klassik Movie Di Ex Speakers | £2299.95 |
| Teac Legacy 700/LS-L800 Inc Speakers | £799.95 |

MULTI-ROOM AUDIO

| | |
|---------------------------|----------|
| Cyrus Linkserver 160 | £2999.95 |
| Cyrus Linkserver 250 | £3499.95 |
| Cyrus Linkport | £649.95 |
| Cyrus Linkwand | £199.95 |
| Yamaha MusicCast MCX A10 | £599.95 |
| Yamaha MusicCast MCX 1000 | £1799.95 |

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| | | |
|---------------------------|----------|--------------|
| MAKE & MODEL | REGION 2 | MULTI REGION |
| Arcam DIVA DV88 Plus | £599.95 | £599.95 |
| Arcam DIVA DV78 | £699.95 | £699.95 |
| Arcam DIVA DV89 | £799.95 | £799.95 |
| Arcam DIVA DV79 | £999.95 | £999.95 |
| Cyrus DVD8 | £1199.95 | £1199.95 |
| Denon DVD-2200 Universal | £ CALL | £ CALL |
| Denon DVD-2900 Universal | £ CALL | £ CALL |
| Denon DVD-A11 | £ CALL | £ CALL |
| Denon DVD-A1 | £1599.95 | £1599.95 |
| Harman Kardon DVD22 | £299.95 | £299.95 |
| Harman Kardon DVD31 | £399.95 | £399.95 |
| Pioneer DV370 | £ CALL | £ CALL |
| Pioneer DV565A Universal | £139.95 | £159.95 |
| Pioneer DV575A Universal | £149.95 | £179.95 |
| Pioneer DV668AV Universal | £ CALL | £ CALL |
| Pioneer DV668AV Universal | £ CALL | £ CALL |

| | | |
|------------------|---------|---------|
| Toshiba SD330E | £69.95 | £79.95 |
| Toshiba SD240E | £ CALL | £ CALL |
| Toshiba SD340E | £ CALL | £ CALL |
| Yamaha DVD-S540 | £119.95 | £119.95 |
| Yamaha DVD-S1500 | £399.95 | £399.95 |

DVD RECORDERS

| | | |
|-----------------------------|----------|--------------|
| MAKE & MODEL | REGION 2 | MULTI REGION |
| Panasonic DMR-E55 DVD-RAM | £ CALL | £ CALL |
| Panasonic DMR-E65 DVD-RAM | £ CALL | £ CALL |
| Panasonic DMR-E85 DVD-RAM | £ CALL | £ CALL |
| Pioneer DVR3100S DVD-R/RW | £379.95 | £399.95 |
| Pioneer DVR5100HS DVD-R/RW | £469.95 | £499.95 |
| Pioneer DVR-520H HDD/DVD-RW | £ CALL | £ CALL |
| Pioneer DVR-720H HDD/DVD-RW | £ CALL | £ CALL |
| Pioneer DVR-920H HDD/DVD-RW | £ CALL | £ CALL |
| Toshiba RD-XS30 DVD-RAM | £429.95 | £ TBA |

AV AMPLIFIERS

RECEIVERS & PROCESSORS

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----------|
| Arcam AVR200 AV Receiver | £599.95 |
| Arcam AVR300 AV Receiver | £1299.95 |
| Arcam AV8/P7 AV Pre/Processor/Power | £5499.95 |
| Cyrus AV8 AV Processor | £1099.95 |
| Denon AVC-A1SRA AV Amplifier | £ CALL |
| Denon AVR1604 AV Amplifier | £2199.95 |
| Denon AVR1804 AV Amplifier | £ CALL |
| Denon AVR2805 AV Amplifier | £ CALL |
| Denon AVR3805 AV Amplifier | £ CALL |
| Harman Kardon AVR330 AV Receiver | £599.95 |
| Harman Kardon AVR630 AV Receiver | £999.95 |
| Marantz SR4400 AV Receiver | £269.95 |
| Marantz SR5400 AV Receiver | £349.95 |
| Onkyo TX-SR601E AV Receiver | £ CALL |
| Onkyo TX-NR801E AV Receiver | £ CALL |
| Pioneer VSX-C501 AV Receiver | £329.95 |
| Pioneer VSX-D812 AV Receiver | £319.95 |
| Pioneer VSX-AX3 AV Receiver | £649.95 |
| Pioneer VSX-AX5 AV Receiver | £ CALL |
| Pioneer VSA-AX10Ai AV Amplifier | £ CALL |
| Rotel RSP1066/RMB1075 AV Pre/Power | £1799.95 |
| Rotel RSP1098 AV Processor | £2294.95 |
| Yamaha DSP-AX750SE AV Amplifier | £ CALL |
| Yamaha DSP-AX640SE AV Amplifier | £299.95 |
| Yamaha DSP-Z9 AV Amplifier | £ CALL |
| Yamaha RX-V550 AV Receiver | £ CALL |
| Yamaha RX-V640RDS AV Receiver | £349.95 |
| Yamaha RX-V650 AV Receiver | £ CALL |
| Yamaha RX-V1400RDS AV Receiver | £ CALL |
| Yamaha RX-V2400RDS AV Receiver | £ CALL |

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| Acoustic Energy Evo 3B | £749.95 |
| Acoustic Energy Aego P5/II | £499.95 |
| Artcooustic Diabolo | £994.95 |
| B&W VM1/AS1 | £849.95 |
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| Castle Compact CC3 | £999.95 |
| Energy Take 5.1 | £399.95 |
| Energy Encore | £999.95 |
| Infinity TSS750 | £499.95 |
| KEF KHT1005 £100 FREE QED CABLE* | £499.95 |
| KEF KHT2005 £2150 FREE QED CABLE* | £799.95 |
| KEF KHT5005 £200 FREE QED CABLE* | £1199.95 |
| KEF Q7 AV £300 FREE QED CABLE* | £2199.95 |
| M&K K5 £250 FREE QED CABLE* | £1699.95 |
| M&K K3 | £1894.95 |
| M&K Xenon 25 | £2249.95 |
| M&K 850/CS35/V850 | £3899.95 |
| Mission M30 AV Pack | £449.95 |
| Monitor Audio Bronze B2 AV | £799.95 |
| Monitor Audio Bronze B4 AV | £949.95 |
| Monitor Audio Radius 270 | £499.95 |
| Monitor Audio Radius 5.1 | £999.95 |

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|--|---------|
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| NJ Acoustics Pro 100 (Black) £60 QED CABLE* | £599.95 |
| NJ Acoustics Ref 100 (Bk) £60 QED CABLE* | £349.95 |
| NJ Acoustics Ref 1 (Black) £60 QED CABLE* | £699.95 |
| REL Q150E MKII (Brittix Black) £100 QED CABLE* | £499.95 |
| REL Q201E (Brittix Black) £100 QED CABLE* | £724.95 |
| REL Q400E (Brittix Black) £100 QED CABLE* | £999.95 |
| REL Quake (Brittix Black) | £349.95 |
| REL Stampede (Black) £100 QED CABLE* | £549.95 |
| REL Strata 5 (Brittix Black) £100 QED CABLE* | £699.95 |

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| Fujitsu P42HHA30 42" | £3499.95 |
| Fujitsu P42HHS10 42" (ED) | £3799.95 |
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| Hitachi 32PD5200 32" | £ CALL |
| Hitachi 37PD5200 37" | £ CALL |
| Hitachi 42PD5200 42" | £ CALL |
| Hitachi 42PMA500E 42" | £ CALL |
| Panasonic TH42PW6B 42" | £2399.95 |
| Panasonic TH37PE30B 37" | £ CALL |
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| Philips 37PF9965 37" (ED) | £2399.95 |
| Pioneer PDP434HDE 43" | £3999.95 |
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| Pioneer PDP504HDE 50" | £4999.95 |
| Toshiba 42WP36P 42" | £ CALL |
| Yamaha PDM4210 42" | £3999.95 |

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|---------------------------|--------|
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| Panasonic TX2LT3 22" | £ CALL |
| Panasonic TX26LX1 26" | £ CALL |
| Panasonic TX32LX1 32" | £ CALL |
| Philips 30PF9975 30" | £ CALL |
| Sharp Aquos LC-15B4E 15" | £ CALL |
| Sharp Aquos LC-15S1E 15" | £ CALL |
| Sharp Aquos LC-20S1E 20" | £ CALL |
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| Sharp Aquos LC-37AD1 37" | £ CALL |
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| Toshiba 26WL36P 26" | £ CALL |
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PROJECTORS

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| NEC HT1000 DLP | £ CALL |
| Sanyo PLV-Z1 LCD | £999.95 |
| Sanyo PLV-Z2 LCD | £1449.95 |
| Screenplay SP4800 DLP | £849.95 |
| Screenplay SP4805 DLP | £1299.95 |
| Screenplay SP5700 DLP | £2699.95 |
| Sharp XV-210 LCD | £1099.95 |
| Sharp XV-291E DLP | £1799.95 |
| Sharp XV-2200 DLP | £ CALL |
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| Sim 2 Domino 20 HDMI DLP | £3999.95 |
| Sim 2 HT300 Plus DLP (ED) | £5499.95 |
| Sim 2 HT300 Xtra DLP | £7999.95 |
| Sim 2 HT300 Xtra HDMI DLP | £7999.95 |
| Sim 2 HT500 Link DLP | £2499.95 |
| ThemeScene H30 Cinema DLP | £1199.95 |
| ThemeScene H50 Cinema DLP | £1499.95 |
| ThemeScene H56 Cinema DLP | £2299.95 |
| Yamaha DPX-1000 DLP (ED) | £5499.95 |

REMOTE CONTROLS

| | |
|--------------------------|----------|
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| Marantz RC9200 | £799.95 |
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| PANA | TX-42PT12 | PANA | NV-VP30EBS | PANA | NV-SV12EBS |
| PANA | TX-32PS1 | PANA | DVD-S75EBS | PANA | DMC-LC40B |
| PANA | TX-28PS5 | PANA | DVD-S35EBS | PANA | NV-HV6DEBS |
| PANA | TX-28DK2 | PANA | DVD-LV65EBS | PANA | NV-HS8BD |
| PANA | TX-28DK2 | PANA | | PANA | DMC-LC5B |
| PANA | TX-24PS1 | | | | |

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- DOLBY DIGITAL / DOLBY PRO LOGIC / SIMULATED DOLBY NICAM DIGITAL STEREO
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- DVD PROGRESSIVE SCAN INPUT
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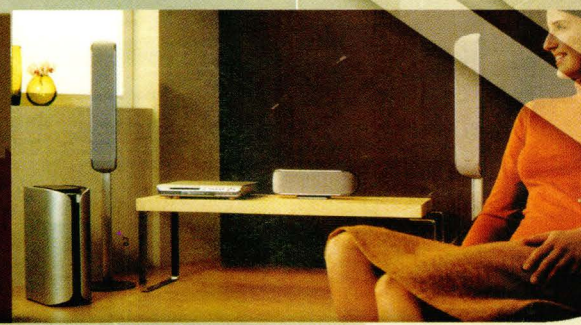
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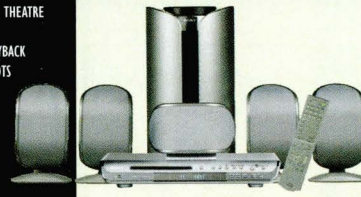
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DAV-SC5

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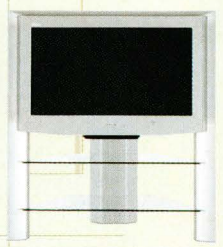
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| SONY | KV-28LS36 | SONY | KE-32TS2E | SONY | OSC-V1 |
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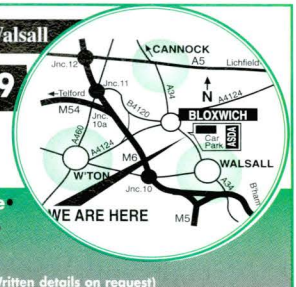
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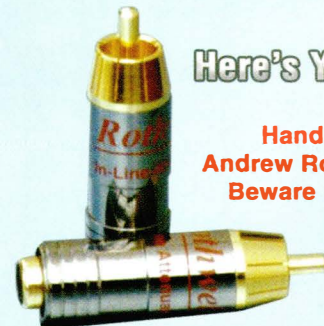
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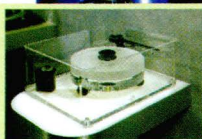
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- Chord Signature Cables
- Cut Loose Audio amplification
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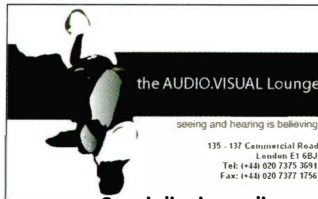
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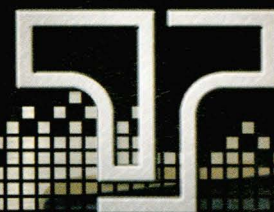
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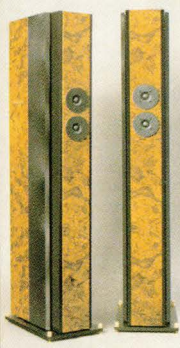
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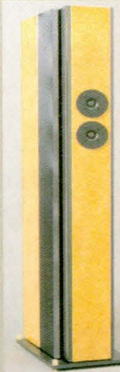


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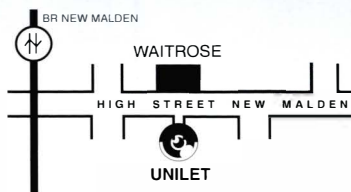
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CS-220UK (CR-505DAB + D-S7GX)

WAAT WIDE RANGE AMP TECHNOLOGY CD-RDS DAB DIGITAL AUDIO BROADCASTING MP3 CD-R

As 'hot' goods go the compact ONKYO CS-220UK is definitely worth handling. Not only can it receive shedloads of exclusive digital radio channels - all in hiss-free, crystal-clear digital quality - but for maximum choice there is an excellent FM/AM tuner provided too. Consider too the MP3-capable CD player, as well as separate bass/treble knobs plus 5-mode clock/timer. Factor in the supplied two-way loudspeakers and you've got a true, hi-fi grade music system ... in an unfeasibly tiny package. A bit of a steal you might say ...

See more at www.onkyo.co.uk

*ONKYO was Japan's No. 1 selling Mini system - width from 201 mm to 300 mm - brand in 2003. (based on the sales reports of 3,500 audio retailers in Japan 2003 - Source GfK Marketing Services Japan Ltd.)