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"Game-changer"

Hugo redefines the DAC genre

"Superb"

★★★★★

*What Hi-Fi Sound and Vision,
group test winner*

"A landmark digital product"

★★★★★

Editor's Choice, Hi-Fi Choice

"Chord's best-ever DAC"

Hi-Fi +

"Spectacular"

Ken Kessler, The Telegraph

"Breaks all records"

★★★★★

Hi-Fi World

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MCINTOSH MB100 MEDIA BRIDGE

The MB100 has four USB inputs plus an eSata port for the direct connection of external drives. Its network port offers direct connection to online streaming services including Pandora, SiriusXM, Spotify, Rhapsody and TunesIn.

For integration into existing home audio systems, the MB100 has two analogue and two digital outputs, plus it can be connected via USB to other McIntosh USB-enabled products.

Users can also create two independent audio zones when using the USB connection in combination with either the analogue or digital outputs. The MB100 will automatically synchronise content stored on networked computers.

The MB100 utilises the same 8-channel, 32bit/192kHz DAC as the D100 digital preamp, which is isolated from the motherboard. The operating system and music player are housed on an SSD. The MB100 can be controlled via an iOS or Android app, a web browser, or a remote control with TV interface. It is also compatible with many popular home automation systems. Price is £5,995.

Call 01202 911886 or go to www.mcintoshlabs.com for more information. See next month's Hi-Fi World for a full review.



PRO-JECT RPM1 CARBON

Pro-Ject Audio Systems has announced the release of the RPM 1 Carbon turntable.

The low-resonance chassis uses a new inverted platter bearing with ceramic ball for reduced rumble while the decoupled 15V AC motor is driven using an AC generator with DC power supply for enhanced speed stability. There is also a new S-shaped carbon fibre tonearm with an effective length of 8.6" made from carbon fibre with an aluminium core.

The arm is supplied with a 2M Red cartridge pre-fitted. There is a new magnetic anti-skate system too. Available in three gloss finishes, black, red and white, it is priced at £325.

Log-on to www.henleydesigns.co.uk or call for more information.

MISSION M-CUBED

The successor to the M-Cube surround sound speaker package, M3 features five satellites – each one small enough to fit in the palm of your hand – and a subwoofer employing a 200mm long throw driver.

The system includes BMR drivers that disperse sound over a 90-degree angle. This means that the little speakers connect directly to the user's AV amp where the original M-Cube

required users to connect the satellites directly to the subwoofer.

The Mission M3 is available now priced £699.95. The UK range launches in an all-black finish with an all-white version to follow later this year.

Go to www.mission.co.uk for more information.



SOMLE

Somle offers a range of stands for TV use but featuring speakers installed into the stand itself to create a tidy, presentable choice to the normal messy conglomeration of boxes and wires.

The Silent 1250 can handle a TV from 42" to 55" and offers 100W of power via a 38mm tweeter, 102mm mid/bass unit and 203mm sub.

Bluetooth 4.0 is also included and it arrives in black or silver. Price is £900.

More variants and styles via www.somle.co.uk or call 01482 895320.





TAD MAD

Technical Audio Devices Laboratories (TAD) has released its new CEI speaker which sits in the Evolution series. Designed and developed entirely in-house, the CEI inherits the loudspeaker technology from the RI (Reference Series).

The speakers have the option of two different side frame colours, black or white and the aluminium panels are also available in either silver or grey.

The speaker uses the CST (Coherent Source Transducer) – a coaxial driver with beryllium tweeter and magnesium midrange. TAD also uses a vapour deposition process to enhance the sonic abilities of the tweeter. The CEI woofer uses a one-piece dust cap/cone construction.

Finally, the company uses a rigid framework of birch plywood combined with MDF for the enclosure, stiffened by aluminium panels on each side wall. A custom-designed stand is also available. Price is £15,995 for the speakers only.

Call 0203 5442338 or email info@nunudistribution.co.uk for more information.

EARTHQUAKE SUBWOOFERS

The Multi-Room Company has added the Earthquake brand of subwoofers to its portfolio. Earthquake, founded over 27 years ago in California, produces a variety of subwoofer designs.

The Multi-Room Company has chosen a number of models to feature from the diminutive FF6.5 front-firing 150W sub to the 600W MiniMe P12 with its 12" powered driver and 12" S.L.A.P.S. (Symmetrically Loaded Audio Passive System) passive radiator. Prices include: FF6.5, £250 and the MiniMe P12 at £1050.

Go to www.multi-room.com or ring 01242 511133 for more information.



CREATIVE DAC/HEADPHONE AMPS

Creative Technology has launched a new series of USB DACs and headphone amplifiers consisting of the Sound Blaster E3 (24bit/96kHz) and the Sound Blaster E1 (almost half the size and weight but 16bit/44.1kHz only). Prices are £100 for the E3 and £40 for the E1.

Log-on to www.soundblaster.com for more information.

ATLAS FLOOR SPIKES

Machined from solid blocks of African Blackwood, the Atlas McCallum Isolators have been created to reduce the mechanical vibration between a speaker cabinet/stand and the room. Two variants are available: the Atlas McCallum Isolator (£125 for four) which is designed for standmount and small floorstanding speakers and the higher-mass Atlas McCallum Celtic Isolator (£400 for four) for larger floorstanders. The smaller Isolator has a mass of 20g each while the Celtic isolator has a larger 40g mass and features a nickel-plated aluminium former. For further information go to www.atlascables.com or call 0800 731 1140.



RUARK R2

With a slightly revised chassis, this third generation R2 replaces the LCD display with an OLED variant. On the top is an improved RotoDial control system that has been taken from the R7 model. Inside,

apart from support for DAB, DAB+ and FM, Bluetooth allows streaming opportunities while a newly fitted USB port also offers charging capabilities for phones. Spotify Connect has also been added. Price is £399.

Call 01702 601410 or log-on to www.ruarkaudio.com for more information.

CLEAR REFLECTIONS

The Clear Reflection interconnect cables use a pair of Matched Propagation conductors, similar to those found in Clear interconnects, dielectric materials and two spiral shields. Single ended terminations use SRCA, with copper-plated outer barrels. Balanced terminations get the Gold XLR plugs, the same used on Clear interconnects.

Clear Reflection speaker cables are based on the geometry of Cardas Audio's Golden Reference speaker cable, with refinements and improvements that include the use of Matched Propagation Conductors. Prices start at £899 for a 1m set of Clear Reflection interconnects and for the Clear Reflection speaker cable prices start at £1,649 for a 1.5m set.

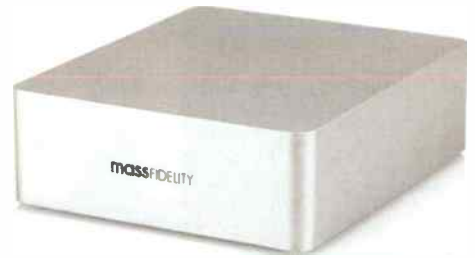
More information from 020 8948 4153 or at www.audiofreaks.co.uk.



MASS FIDELITY

The Mass Fidelity Relay is a Bluetooth DAC that allows you to stream to your existing hi-fi set-up. There is no Wi-Fi set-up and no downloading of apps to control the system. Featuring a Burr-Brown DAC and a Cirrus microprocessor, which decodes lossless aptX, the Uni-fi output stage provides the option of using your outboard DAC. With a five second push of the power button a relay switches the two RCA jacks to output a 24bit S/PDIF digital allowing you to stream to two outboard DACs at the same time. Price is £199.

Click on www.anthemavs.co.uk or call 01825 750 858 for more information.



TRON AMP

GT Audio has announced its new Tron power amplifier offering nine watts per channel with 4, 8 and 16 Ohm outputs with a low noise output, alloy chassis, C-Core output transformers and chokes, a D3a driver stage, Electro Harmonics 300Bs, Teflon valve/tube bases and a valve rectified power supply.

Available in silver and black, gold and black plus gold and red, it is priced at £6,750 and includes a special flight case. Go to www.tron-electric.co.uk/products/viewatlantic or call 01895 833099 for more information.

VINNIE ROSSI'S LIO

Fed up with the built-in obsolescence culture of modern technology, Vinnie Rossi has produced the LIO under his own name instead of his usual Red Wine Audio brand.

Using a newly patented (pending) power supply (using ultra-capacitors), the chassis forms a shell for a range of hi-fi technology variants from an integrated amplifier, DAC, headphone amplifier and more. The idea is that you continually add the components to the appropriate bay inside the chassis, which is packed with a range of inputs and outputs. Prices range from \$3,180.

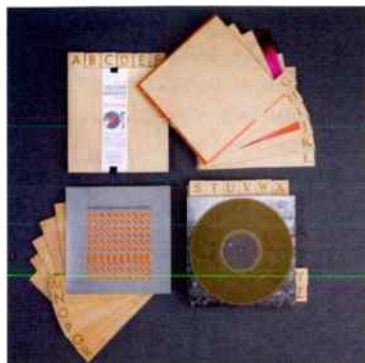
Go to vinnierossi.com or email info@vinnierossi.com for more information.



KATE KOEPEL RECORD DIVIDERS

Koeppel has launched a collection of laser-cut wooden record dividers aimed at organising media. The collection of typographic laser-cut wood panels is designed and manufactured by a small team of craftsmen and women in San Francisco. The range offers a combination of options. These include: two tab styles: horizontal tabs for shelving and vertical tabs for record boxes; two sizes, for 12" and 7" records; two typographical versions, a full twenty-six panel A-Z set for large record collections and an abbreviated six panel set (A-D, E-H, I-L, M-P, Q-T, U-Z) for smaller collections; two lettering styles, engraved or stencilled. Engraved typefaces are engraved on both sides of the divider, while the stencil typeface is cut right through and two lettering typefaces: sans serif ('Futura') or serif ('Mrs Eaves').

A genre-based range is also planned for the near future. Prices range from £295 for a full 7" alphabetical set and £395 for the full 12" set version. Go to www.soundfoundations.co.uk or call 0118 981 4238 for more information including other design variants.



CRYSTAL CABLE ARABESQUE MINISSIMO

Toted as offering Arabesque-like speaker performance at a more affordable price level, the compact Minissimo cabinet shape was developed specifically to minimize sonic issues using Comsol mechanical and gas dynamic modeling software. The non-symmetrical shape eliminates parallel walls and common dimensions to reportedly improve resonant decay without resorting to damping materials.

The lower price is achieved by adopting a one-piece cabinet construction, milled from a solid block of resin/metal matrix material. This is itself a costly process but dramatically reduces the time necessary for assembly.

The Natural Science crossover, a new topology that offers non-reactive electrical characteristics, has also been included.

Meanwhile, the tweeter includes a beryllium dome and the mid/bass unit uses a 150mm laminated paper cone.

The Arabesque Minissimo by Crystal Cable is available in three standard colours: Pearl White, Solar Orange and Aquamarine Blue. Price is £9,998.

Go to www.absolutesound.com or call 0208 971 3909 for more information.

for more news please see page p25

For CD - try this!



Oppo's BDP-105D Blu-ray player uses one of the best digital convertors going and sounds superb with silver discs, including CD. It puts Noel Keywood in a spin.

Using one of the world's best DAC chips, an ESS Sabre32, Oppo's BDP-105D Blu-ray player offers high-end CD replay, as well top quality DVD and Blu-ray audio - and you can connect up a computer via USB to play ripped CD or high-resolution audio at up to 384kHz sample rate I found.

For £1000 that's a whole lot

of ability, plus there's a lot more I haven't yet mentioned.

Are there limitations? Turns out there are.

Not only does the BDP-105D play almost all silver discs, including SACD and DVD-A, it also has S/PDIF inputs, optical and electrical, so any external digital device, like a Mac Mini, MacBook Pro or Astell&Kern AK100 high-resolution portable player, can be connected to take

advantage of the DAC.

Because the ESS Sabre32 has huge dynamic range, to exploit it balanced audio outputs are needed, so Oppo fit balanced XLR output sockets as well as unbalanced phono sockets of course. Multi-channel audio is down-mixed to these outputs.

That's the audio side covered in basic outline, but there's more. Playing DVDs and Blu-ray video and audio discs, the BDP-105D decodes

all video disc audio formats, especially DTS HD Master Audio and Dolby TrueHD. It outputs video's audio stream digitally through HDMI to a receiver, and in analogue form through phono sockets in seven channels, plus subwoofer, for a legacy seven-channel receiver with analogue inputs, or any other set-up. There are no analogue video outputs, only HDMI digital. All the same, there is on-board video adjustment, as well as optional processing via Darbee, so whilst the Oppo doesn't have legacy video it does have copious modern-day video processing ability.

The front panel has only disc play functions. The remote control is therefore an essential item, even to change inputs, so best not to lose it down the back of the settee. And like many A/V products you navigate via on-screen menus; there are no secondary displays on the player, so a TV or video monitor must be connected and switched on, except when playing CDs or SACDs.

Able to play Netflix and VuDu, this player is also internet savvy. It has an RJ45 network socket and auto-detects new firmware versions. I updated to latest version 10XEU-75-0515 before testing or using the player. It sees UPnP media servers and saw EyeConnect on my Mac (OS: Mavericks) and Windows Media player on my PC (OS: Windows 7), although seeing the Mac took some prompting at times. It sees the iTunes library, which means no FLAC, only WAV and iTunes formats but that does mean high-res lossless too.

And it will read files from a memory stick, music, video or picture files, from one front panel socket for short term sneakernet use, or two rear sockets for long-term storage. Unusually, the user manual doesn't say what formats are recognised "support for content is on a best efforts basis". Eh? The user manual is available on-line and you can find this in p43. More later.

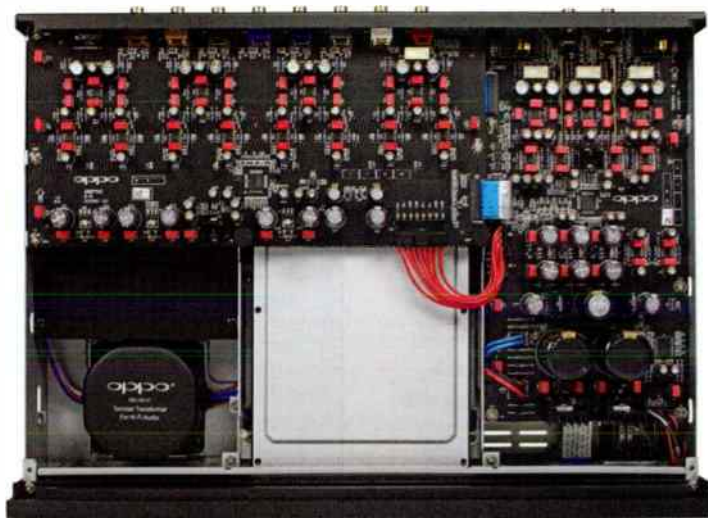
After measurement I used the Oppo at home, and also in our office listening room, in two quite different systems. At home I ran it through a Marantz SR802 receiver driving a six channel system, with two Martin Logan Electromotion electrostatics up front, two surround speakers and two backs. Alternatively, with volume control active it ran a WAD 300B valve power amplifier running the Electromotions in a stereo system. At work the Oppo's volume control was also used, allowing it

to connect directly to a pair of Quad II-eighty power amplifiers driving Tannoy Kensington Gold Reference loudspeakers; Quad QMPI monoblock power amplifiers run through balanced cables was an interesting alternative, but I did not try it, because there was too much else to run through.

I mention all this partly to illustrate that with on-board volume control (built into the Sabre32

confirms this in a note on p21. I got silence when playing back '192s', like Otis Redding's 'Otis Blue' (24/192) from my Astell&Kern AKI 20 portable player via its optical digital output. This was an unexpected limitation.

The question then arose: would it play 24/192 WAV and FLAC files from a memory key? It did, playing test files perfectly. It also plays DSD files with .dff and .dsf file extensions. This is a peculiar inconsistency: via S/



Internally the BDP-105D reveals its complexity. A screened toroidal mains transformer (bottom, left) provides power and the disc transport mechanism sits at centre. The ESS Sabre32 chip is a small square block nestling at centre of the right hand circuit board.

chip) and XLR outputs swinging a full 4V (as well as phonos swinging a conventional 2V) the Oppo can drive any power amplifier in a stereo system, so can be used as a high-quality stereo source, as well as an equally able Blu-ray player, or just a high quality CD player. It mixes down multichannel to stereo of course.

Now to a few small funnies and limitations. Under test I found

PDIF it won't play top resolution files, but from a memory key it will.

So on to USB - and here it became even stranger. Oppo quote 192kHz sample rate but our UK player signalled to my MacBook Pro (OS: Mavericks) it accepted 384kHz sample rate - and it did! The Sabre32 will work up to this rate, so its powers have been fully exploited via USB. There are no file limitations,

"The Oppo's major ability is to play almost every silver disc out there with superb sound quality"

the S/PDIF inputs went silent when fed 176.4kHz or 192kHz sample rate digital, odd since this is not a limitation of the Sabre32 and electrical S/PDIF, at least, always works to 192kHz these days. Unfortunately, on the BDP-105D it does not and the user manual

as long as the music player in use can play them but I could not get sound when playing DSD files (.dff and .dsf) with Simple Audio player and Audirvana, even though the Oppo saw a 358.2kHz sample rate PCM input from my MacBook Pro, indicating it was getting a high-



That this is a high resolution audio player is underlined by its balanced XLR outputs on the rear panel. There are two memory stick USB mass storage sockets, one HDMI input and two HDMI outputs, one streaming native DSD. Note also eight multi-channel audio outputs.

resolution data stream. It may just be it was detecting a high rate DSD stream, flagging it erroneously as PCM. Whatever - I got silence over USB although the Mac was playing, connected headphones showed.

Other small limitations to be aware of are that the video side inevitably has regional management and ours was a Blue-ray Region B/DVD Region 2 (Europe) player, not a USA/I player. Also, although DVD-A discs are played, HD DVDs are not. SACD discs are played, in full multichannel form and output over HDMI2 can be set to DSD or PCM for a receiver that cannot. Note that internally the Sabre32 processes DSD from SACD discs and outputs it via the rear panel analogue audio outputs, so you get the quality of the Sabre32 here - and measurement showed excellent figures from an SACD test disc.

IN USE

In use I found the remote control a mixed bag. It has a good Direct button that switches off internal video processes and sends a black signal over HDMI so there is no high-frequency (data rate) info on the R, G and B data lines. It has a strong back light for the buttons too and audio functions are conveniently in a line at top.

The remote was just-about legible in low lighting. Some of the user-interface behaviours were odd: why step through a menu with the Audio selection button, for example, when up/down buttons on a joy stick are purposed for this and used elsewhere?

I started out playing a Blu-ray I know well, John Meyer's 'Where the Light Is' and stopped immediately: the picture was too contrasty. Switching

WHO ARE OPPO?

Oppo are No9 in China's mobile phone market, I read in EE Times. This piqued my interest. But they also make Blu-ray players and - now - high-end planar magnetic headphones, PM1s. So who are Oppo and how come they make 'mobiles as well as hi-fi'?

Oppo is a brand name used by Chinese OEM manufacturer BBK Electronics, said to rival Sony for manufacturing capacity with a workforce of 12,000 - not small then. Helping explain why their BDP-105D Blu-ray player reviewed here is such a sophisticated product: they have purchasing power and they have been making product for a wide range of Japanese high-end brand names for a long time. A company like this has it all - except a brand name. So BBK invented Oppo.

The Oppo mobile phone division is based in China. However, the Oppo DVD player division is based in Mountain View, California, putting it into close contact with the invaluable U.S. market. This explains why U.S. magazines and consumers are more aware of the brand and this player than we are in the UK, and also why the BDP-105D has an ultra-high quality audio DAC on-board, the respected Sabre32 is manufactured by ESS, also of California.

That unravels a few mysteries, I hope, about who exactly Oppo are, and why/how they produce some fascinatingly exotic audio products.

As an aside - mobile phones and audio may seem odd bedfellows, but perhaps not. Our Rohde&Schwarz UPV audio analyser is in fact purposed for testing mobile phones, whose audio must meet international audio standards. Phone manufacturers, including Apple, have to take audio quality very seriously, in meeting international standards, and they use Rohde&Schwarz analysers because testing with a UPL (or UPV) is part of the standard.

So Oppo bring up a world of inter-connectedness in consumer electronics. We may never have heard of them but in the background they are a big player.

video to 'straight through' cured this and I got on with listening.

SOUND QUALITY

The qualities of the Sabre32 were very obvious when spinning Carlos Santana's 'Supernatural' DVD-Audio disc (24/96). The Sabre is smooth yet deep, in my experience of it, and 'Put Your Lights On' immediately reflected this, being easy on my ear from the smooth almost silky flow to notes from Santana's guitar to the full-bodied sound of the Latin American percussion accompanying him. There was a subtle sense of air around the vocals from 'Everlast', helping bring an extra sense of dimension to the song's setting. In all this struck me as about the best I had heard the song, and following tracks all benefited similarly, sounding more atmospheric than I had ever heard any of them - and less digital.

Digital glare and jitter were down, and subtle nuances more apparent; the whole was easy yet natural. I've not spun my DVD-As through a Sabre32 before and this showed me yet again just how good a DAC it is, bringing out the best from digital by suppressing all those properties that act against it.

Does it work as a high-quality CD player? It certainly does. Interesting was the fact that even old discs were less hashy and confused than I know them from other players; Gerry Rafferty's 'Time's Caught Up On You' from 'On a Wing & a Prayer', an early 16bit DDD from 1992, revealed this, sounding as if it had been digitally cleaned to become less confused and more focussed. But here I encountered another issue: treble level was fully supported and very strong. I wanted to reach for a 'slow' filter of the sort you get on

Audiolab's M-DAC, but there isn't one. The Sabre32 comes with fast and slow filter options built in but Oppo don't enable this feature; they use fast, which gives a better measured result, but can sound a tad lacerative with old CD. Slow reduces time domain ringing and zingy treble, and is subjectively preferable with CD I feel, as do many others. Oppo are missing a trick here.

Spinning Purcell's 'Rondo from Abdelazer' on SACD was gripping: the organ sounded vast, the notes were well formed, as if the organ pipes themselves were in my lounge, and trumpet at centre was big and bold, and also rock stable - another property of the Sabre32 I've detected before through my Martin Logan Electromotions that in themselves have razor sharp imaging and can illuminate jitter, or lack thereof. I was almost shocked by the sheer scale, smoothness, depth



and dimensionality of the BDP-105D. This great performance was carried on through endless SACDs: choral works like 'Canticum Cantorum' placed the choir in an atmospherically open space, accompanying strings were smooth and wonderfully separated, one from the other.

Replay from memory stick was also great fun, because there was no file faffing: the Oppo just got on with playing WAV, FLAC and DSD without murmur. Blood Sweat and Tears in DSD (.dsf) playing 'Spinning Wheel' placed David Clayton Thomas clearly in front of me: trumpets and trombones had power and presence in the room and images were again superbly outlined. The Oppo has scale and I suspect this is attributable to a good on-board power supply.

CONCLUSION

This is one of the best digital players I have ever heard. It's Sabre32 DAC, which my ears tell me has been very

well implemented, gave devastatingly good sound quality - so much so that I'll likely be getting one to replace my much used and loved Cambridge Audio 650BD universal player.

The Cambridge also plays it all but the Oppo is a step up sound-quality wise, a generation ahead - and in front of the DAC pack generally, with the arguable exception of Audiolab's Sabre32 equipped M-DAC and Q-DAC, but they don't play video or SACD.

Inability to play 192kHz sample rate files through S/PDIF is a little strange, but often they will be transferable to a memory stick, and then they will play, so there is a work-around to this limitation. Similarly, inability to play DSD over USB can be worked around in the same manner: use a memory stick.

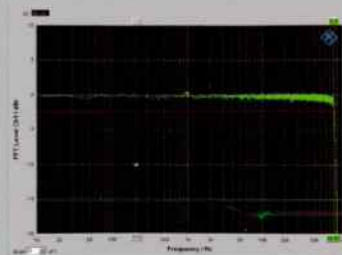
Such drawbacks are minor I feel against the player's major ability: to play almost every silver disc out there, with superb sound quality.

So if you're looking for an ultimate player of just about anything - this is it. It's as simple as that! Low price is an extra.

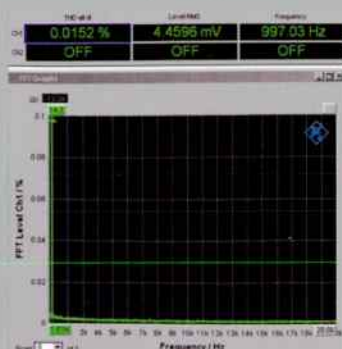
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Using the Oppo BDP-105D as a DAC, frequency response with 192kHz sample rate PCM digital from a LaCie USB key (memory stick) extended to a very high 90kHz, so Oppo have opted to use the Sabre32's 'fast' filter. Similarly, running the same file from a MacBook Pro via USB gave the same result, so the player

FREQUENCY RESPONSE, 192k



DISTORTION, 24bit, -60dB



has enormous analogue bandwidth, as high as possible from 192kHz sample rate.

Interestingly, the Mac showed, on its Audio/Midi console (in Utilities), 352.8kHz and 384kHz sample rate options, usually only available through an I2S link, and at these output sample rates from the Mac the Oppo played perfectly, but it does not of course alter the analogue bandwidth of a 192kHz test file. You must record at these sample rates to be able to benefit from them, and 384kHz is way off the consumer map at the moment.

The S/PDIF inputs, electrical (coaxial) and optical, accept 96kHz sample rate data maximum, a peculiar limitation, especially via the electrical connection (optical is often limited to 96kHz by the Toslink optical receiver unit). Analogue bandwidth extended to 46kHz (-1dB) through these inputs. The problem here is not performance related, it is that playing 192k invokes a "no play" scenario (i.e. silence) from the player, and this is best avoided. Play of 192kHz sample rate data via S/PDIF electrical is common nowadays, so this limitation of the BDP-105D is baffling, and in stark contrast to its ability to play 384kHz via USB.

With 24bit data, distortion at -60dB was as low as it can get at 0.015%,

but the Oppo outputs from the Sabre32 direct to XLR and this is what the ESS DAC can do. Dynamic range (EIAJ) measured 123dB and this is also exactly as expected from a Sabre32 properly implemented. It is a very high figure, only bettered when two Sabre chips are used, one per channel, with all eight channels paralleled. So this player fully realises the potential of the Sabre32 and should fully convey its excellent sound.

With SACD, measured performance was equally impressive. Analogue bandwidth extended to 40kHz (-1dB) and distortion was a very low 0.018% at -60dB, right on par with 24bit PCM code: the BDP-105D gets the best from SACD discs.

Measurements from the BDP-105D are as expected from a Sabre32 DAC, meaning they are as good as it gets when one chip is used, and well beyond rivals. That puts this player in the top league, measurement wise. However, there are inconsistencies, inability to accept 192kHz sample rate PCM data via its S/PDIF inputs being major. NK

Frequency response	4Hz-90kHz
Separation	113dB
Noise	122dB
Distortion	0.015%
Dynamic range	123dB

OPPO BDP-105D £1050



DUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT

Fabulous sound quality and great versatility make this a superb player.

FDR

- sound quality
- plays most silver discs
- plays files, inc DSD

AGAINST

- no 192k S/PDIF
- awkward input control sequences
- no DSD over USB

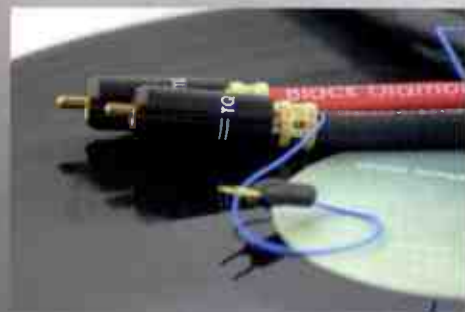
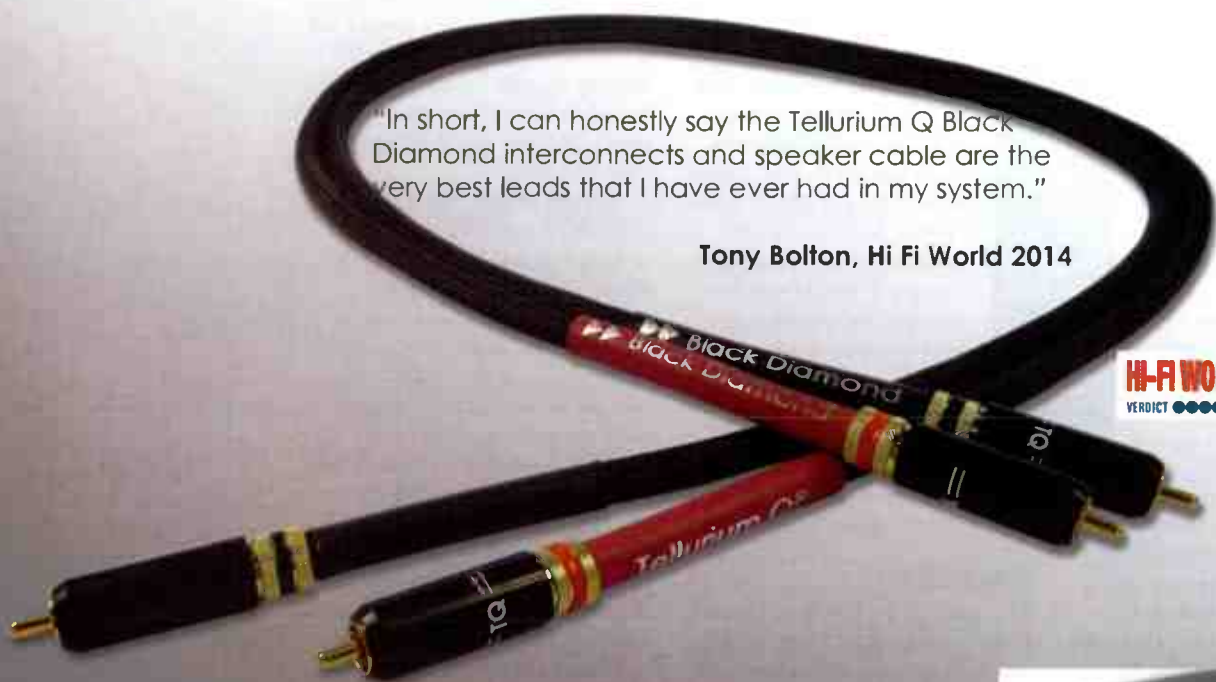
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Tony Bolton, Hi Fi World 2014



HiFi Pig Review

"The top end was clearly beyond what the K2 [Audioquest] had to offer me and I was really trying to hear something that presented itself to me which would lead me to believe that it was a bit over the top, harsh and spitty but it just didn't happen. A true increase in perceived bandwidth was shining through with strings giving small nuances of reverbs that I hadn't heard so well articulated before"

"Nordost-with-substance"



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Musical Energy

Acoustic Energy's 103 entry-level floorstanding loudspeaker promises big sound from a compact cabinet. Jon Myles finds it a star performer.



The I series is Acoustic Energy's new entry level range of loudspeakers – comprising a standmount, centre channel, subwoofer and the floorstanding 103.

AE makes no bones about the fact that the 103s were designed with smaller rooms in mind – hence features such as the front-firing slot port to make close-to-wall positioning a viable option.

That brief also accounts for relatively compact dimensions, the 103s measuring 85cm tall and 19cm wide. If you're challenged for space then the Acoustic Energy's should prove no problem.

The driver complement has trickled down from Acoustic Energy's more expensive 300 series, with two hard-anodised 110mm aluminium mid/bass units allied to the company's proprietary 28mm soft dome tweeter.

The vinyl-wrapped cabinet has a sloped baffle to aid time alignment with slightly tapering side walls to break up internal standing waves.

The grilles attach magnetically so no ugly fixing points are visible if you choose to leave them off.

On the rear is a single pair of sturdy, gold-plated 'speaker binding posts so bi-wiring is out – probably a sensible option in this sector of the market.

Colour options include ash, walnut or a high-gloss white vinyl wrap.

Entry level it may be but the overall fit and finish belies the 103's modest £550 price tag. Little design touches like the tasteful aluminium surrounds setting off the drivers add a touch of class to the overall look of the package.

SOUND QUALITY

Engineering an affordable floorstander is inevitably a matter of compromise. The more money you spend on the drivers the less there is for the cabinet and vice-versa.

Here, Acoustic Energy seem to have got the balance just about right. The sound is clean and precise with a good

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deal of detail on offer.

More impressively the 103s have a sense of scale that similarly priced standmounts would struggle to match.

Choral works such as Arvo Part's 'De Profundis' are portrayed with appropriate gravitas, the music swelling into the room with all the necessary atmosphere and occasion this haunting piece demands.

The effect is helped by the fact the AEs image exceptionally well. Positioned some 6 feet apart and with a slight toe-in they threw out a wide soundscape, the music extending beyond the far edges of the 'speaker baffles and also having height and depth.

That gives live music a wonderfully natural feel. John Coltrane's 'One Down, One Up Live At The Half Note' sees the musicians anchored in their own space with the drums, saxophone and bass clearly delineated stage right and left. This is a slightly rough and ready recording but has such zest and energy through the AE 103s that those deficiencies are quickly forgotten. Instead Coltrane's band sounds lithe and nimble throughout.

Try something a little more up-tempo and the 103s show they can latch onto a rhythm well. Imelda May's 'Love Tattoo' is punched out with verve, the walking bass lines coming over as rich and full-bodied.

If anything there's a touch of mid-bass bloom to the sound which subjectively gives the impression of a little extra heft in the lower registers. That's useful as 'speakers of this size are never going to produce earth-shaking bass – but what is there does have a fulsome quality.

Spin the Chemical Brothers' 'Block Rockin' Beats' and you don't get to feel the very lowest octaves but the 103s dig deep enough to give a suitable club-like feel to the track.

Essentially, though, the overall sound is extremely smooth and the soft dome tweeter unruffled. It doesn't have quite the bite and leading edge definition of metal-domed or ribbon varieties – but nor does it have the tizziness or sting that some of these display.

The tweeter's easy-going nature adds a degree of sophistication without sacrificing significant detail. That helps soften the lacerating edge of some less-than-perfectly recorded CDs such as Oasis's 'Definitely Maybe'. Noel Gallagher's guitar work still has sufficient bite and attack but

doesn't pierce your ears as it can on some lesser 'speakers.

This even-handed nature brings a great presence to the likes of Sinead O'Connor's 'Sean Nos Nua' where the singer's haunting vocals are rich and resonant – her changes of pitch and subtle phrasings ringing out clear and true above the understated backing.

With an 88dB sensitivity the Acoustic Energys will also go loud with relatively modest amplification (see Measured Performance). I started off using them on the end of Cocktail Audio's combined streamer/music server/amplifier with its Class D output stage and it managed to drive them to neighbour-bothering levels with ease in Hi-Fi World Towers large listening room.

Paired together and you have the basis of an eminently listenable hi-fi system for around £1,300.

Push the 103s really hard and they do start to display an element of boxiness, the cabinets starting to thrum along with the music to an extent. But, to be fair, you have to really crank the volume before that happens – and in the sort of space the Acoustic Energys are designed to be used in, that's hardly likely to be a consideration.

Suffice to say they will easily go loud enough for most people without hardening up, losing their composure

or throwing their toys out the pram.

They'll also do it in an eminently enjoyable and musical manner which some 'speakers costing a good deal more would fail to match.

Added to that, they image extremely well, have good detail and don't need masses of power to reach decent listening levels.

CONCLUSION

The Acoustic Energy 103s have a degree of sophistication and all-round musical ability that belies their entry-level status.

A well-engineered balance which gives a rising low-frequency lift adds a lot more depth and heft to the sound than their size might lead you to expect.

Some might crave a little more bite to the treble, but in the final analysis the 103's smooth, uncoloured and tonally rich nature is likely to have you listening longer.

Factor in their fine build quality allied to an elegant-looking cabinet and they are something of a bargain at just £550.

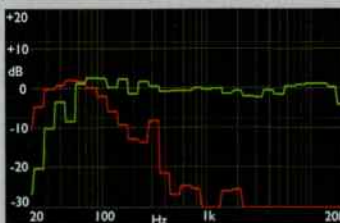


MEASURED PERFORMANCE

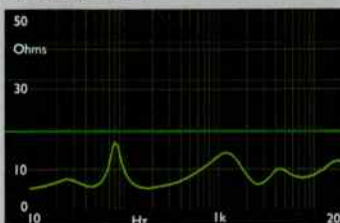
Our frequency response analysis shows the 103 has a slight roll down in upper mid-band output to the crossover point at 3kHz, just enough to soften out the sound a tad, without removing detail.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

Green - driver output
Red - port output



IMPEDANCE



When full output is maintained around 3kHz it can make for harshness with bad recordings.

The treble unit is a small +1dB above median output, just enough to ensure treble is subtly obvious rather than overtly strong. Similarly, bass rises slowly but progressively toward low frequencies, so the 103 will not lack bass and will have body to its sound as well. The slot floor port peaks at 50Hz so produces low bass, but subsonics are unlikely.

Impedance measured 8 Ohms overall. The impedance curve is relatively flat our analysis shows, making the 103 an easy, unreactive load. With a respectable sensitivity value of 88dB sound pressure level from nominal Watt (2.8V) of input the speaker will go loud from 60 Watts or so.

The Acoustic Energy 103 has been carefully tailored to give obvious but not excessive bass and treble. It is smooth and uncoloured, and quite sensitive too. In all areas it measured well and should give good subjective results. **NK**

ACOUSTIC ENERGY 103 LOUDSPEAKERS
£550



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT

Big, uncoloured sound with plenty of detail. Ideal for smaller rooms.

FOR

- good bass
- excellent stereo imaging
- modern, compact design

AGAINST

- some might like more treble bite
- nothing else at the price

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WIN A SUPERB WORLD DESIGN HD3S HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER IN THIS MONTH'S GREAT GIVEAWAY!

Here's your chance to win the superb World Design HD3S headphone amplifier we reviewed in our September 2014 issue. Read the excerpt below and answer the questions at the end.

"The World Designs HD3S uses output matching transformers to feed headphones and is fitted with a volume control. Priced at £499 for the kit, or £659 for a pre-built version as used in this review, HD3S

is the latest version of the World Designs headphone amplifier. It features an aluminium case in place of the steel of the previous model. It is also equipped with internal dip switches to select output impedance to match a wide variety of headphones.

The single-ended circuit design uses two ECL 83 triode-pentode valves (one per channel). A large toroidal transformer supplies the power and two E/I output transformers drive any load from 16 Ohms to over 300 Ohms depending

upon how the dip switches are set. Volume is set by an ALPS Blue Velvet potentiometer.

The fit and finish of the casework (measuring a compact 220 x 310 x 85mm; w/d/h) is excellent with touches, such as the precisely engraved World Designs logo and the heavily chromed volume control knob, ensuring that this product looks considerably more expensive than even its pre-built price tag would have you believe."

For a chance to win this great prize, just answer the four easy questions on the right. Send your entries on a postcard only by December 5th 2014, to:

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QUESTIONS

[1] The case is made of -

- [a] wood
- [b] steel
- [c] brass
- [d] aluminium

[2] The valves are -

- [a] ECC83
- [b] ECC88
- [c] ECL 83
- [d] EF80

[3] Compatible phones are -

- [a] 16-300 Ohms
- [b] 8 Ohms
- [c] 12 Ohms
- [d] 4 Ohms

[4] The Alps potentiometer is a -

- [a] Green bean
- [b] Blue lagoon
- [c] Blue Velvet
- [d] Red dawn

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MODEL SHOWN:
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MODEL SHOWN: MU-SO

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by Naim

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Yamaha's retro revival



Martin Pipe goes back to the future with Yamaha's versatile A-S701 integrated amplifier



Cast your mind back to the late 1980s, when many Japanese manufacturers were offering integrated amps with inbuilt 16-bit DACs to exploit CD, DAT and pre-DAB digital broadcasting technologies that never really took off in the UK. On first appearance, the £560 Yamaha A-S701 amplifier featured here could easily have been mistaken for a product of that era; our review sample's aluminium frontage has even been finished in the then-trendy black (silver is available as an alternative).

The styling is retro in other respects, with the Yamaha trademark rectangular control knobs harking back to '70s classics like the CA-1000. The A-S701 doesn't have that 1973-vintage unit's switchable pure Class-A mode, being first and foremost a complementary Class-AB design based around paralleled pairs of Sanken power transistors capable of delivering up to 100Watts RMS

per channel into eight-ohm loads. There are, however, plenty of other gizmos to play with.

Tone controls? Yup, they're here. So too is that 'Yamaha special', a continuously-variable loudness control. This gives the user full manual control with a central 'flat' position claiming neutrality. The idea is that you adjust the volume to a level you're happy with and then rotate the loudness control for what you consider to be the most tonally-balanced sound.

However, the treble and bass controls (with 10dB of cut or boost) also influence presentation. Tone controls are arguably useful as they can tame bright-sounding recordings and/or bass-heavy speakers. Unfortunately, they can also fundamentally compromise sound quality.

With this in mind, Yamaha gives you the ability to defeat such gadgetry. There are in fact two such modes. One, 'Pure Direct', switches

out the tone and loudness controls. The other, 'CD Direct Amp', bypasses both the tone controls and the input selector providing a more direct route for the CD input.

The A-S701 also gives you plenty of connections. On tap are three line inputs as well as separate inputs for CD and tuner. Oh, and Yamaha has made provision for a turntable. The relevant phono input is suitable for MM or high-output MC cartridges.

And then there's the A-S701's on-board DAC. Its PCM-only coaxial and optical inputs will go all the way to 24-bit/192kHz courtesy of a Burr-Brown PCM5102A DAC.

No USB input is offered alas. In output terms, Yamaha has catered for two pairs of speakers (both, either or none can be active) and headphones. Those with smaller bookshelf-type speakers will appreciate the A-S701's ability to connect a powered subwoofer. Other features include power-saving auto stand-by and remote control.

SOUND QUALITY

A lot of Yamaha gear from the '70s and '80s can, if it has been looked after, still sound good today. By and large, the A-S701 continues this trend.

Sources included a Squeezebox Touch, playing music stored in FLAC form on a SD card, and my faithful Linn LP12/Basik/Ortofon 540 MkII. A Chord DAC64 was used as a reference DAC for comparison, everything being heard through Acoustic Energy AE109 speakers or Sony MDR-1R headphones.

First up was a Hungarotron CD rip containing Béla Bartók's 'Contrasts for Violin, Clarinet and Piano' as performed by Dénes Kovács, Miklós Szenthelyi and Zoltán Székely. An old (1970) analogue-sourced recording it may be, but the A-S701 managed to convey this jazz-influenced chamber work with rich tonal colour and intimacy. The third movement, which borrows from the rhythms of Bulgarian folk music, is propelled along convincingly. That was with the Yamaha's onboard DAC. Switching to the Squeezebox's analogue output coupled perceptible coarsening with a slight blurring of the stereo image.

The brief of the DAC was to improve the sound of multimedia devices and Yamaha have clearly fulfilled that goal. However it failed to match the sheer musical delight that the A-S701 managed to deliver when our DAC64 was connected between the Squeezebox and the CD line input. Here the music acquired an organic flow that excited yet at the same time remaining natural.

You don't want to use the tone controls unless you have to, though. Even when they're in their central (i.e. neutral) positions, their mark is left. The solid Mini-Moog bassline of Quincy Jones's 'Razzamatazz' sounds better-defined and more controlled with them taken out of circuit. At the same time, a higher-end 'tizz' - most noticeable with percussion - becomes less evident. With more complex music (Beethoven's '5th Symphony', DG/Kleiber/Vienna Philharmonic) the soundstage is more natural and subtly-detailed.

The phono stage doesn't reach the heights that Yamaha scaled in the era when musical life



revolved at 33rpm. It lacks bass depth although timing and energy are evident. Presentation veers towards brightness, and some of the more delicate musical elements are smoothed over. But records are certainly enjoyable and what we have here is a viable vinyl 'starting point'.

CONCLUSION

As an amplifier, the A-S701 cannot be criticised. It strikes a sensible balance between connectivity, user convenience and sound quality. At no time did it sound strained, even with orchestral climaxes. During the final stages of this review, I compared the A-S701 with Roksan's K2BT.

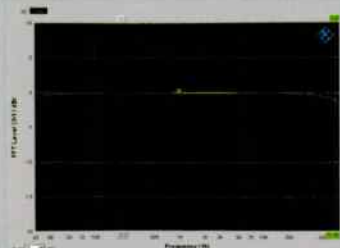
The latter turns in a more musical performance - but isn't as well-featured as this Yamaha and is dearer. That puts the A-S701 into context: it does a lot and it does it well, at an affordable price.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

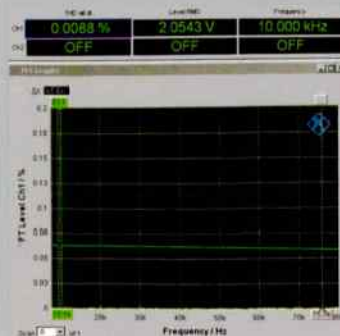
The Yamaha A-S701 produced 135 Watts into 8 Ohms under test and a massive 240 Watts into 4 Ohms, so this unit has plenty of power.

Distortion in the midband

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



measured a minuscule 0.003% and at high frequencies little more, just 0.005% at 1 Watt and 0.02% under full output (-1dBV), into 4 Ohms. There was little sign of distortion at all output levels, our Rohde&Schwarz UPV analyser showed, as output was gradually increased.

The electrical S/PDIF digital input worked up to 192kHz and distortion at -60dB was a low 0.05% with 24bit digital code. The limitation appeared to be output stage noise, but the Rec output returned the same result, so may have been DAC noise. EIAJ Dynamic Range was good at 113dB, but not exceptional. The optical input receiver accepted 192kHz sample rate data - a plus point - and frequency response extended to 63kHz with this sample rate.

The MM phono input exhibited a slow fall off in bass, due either to insufficient 3180µS EQ gain, or the influence of a warp filter Yamaha have included, that introduced a useful -13dB warp attenuation at 5Hz. The phono stage will have a lean sound as a result. Switching Direct out and increasing bass using the Bass tone control just about managed to counter this. However, the tone controls affect the midband more

than extremes and weren't especially well tailored for subtle adjustments.

The A-S701 is powerful and distortion free, so should have a crisp yet smooth sound. Both S/PDIF digital inputs work up to 192kHz sample rate, but there's no USB. The phono stage is adequate, but will sound a tad lean. NK

Power	135Watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	14Hz-71kHz
Separation	92dB
Noise	-99dB
Distortion	0.009%
Sensitivity	240mV
Digital	
Frequency response	4Hz-64kHz
Separation	92dB
Noise	-112dB
Distortion	0.05%
Dynamic range (EIAJ)	113dB
Disc	
Frequency response	35Hz-20kHz
Separation	85dB
Noise	-81dB
Distortion	0.01%
Sensitivity	4mV
Overload	57mV

YAMAHA A-S701 AMPLIFIER £560



EXCELLENT - extremely capable

VERDICT

A successful balance of today's technology and yesterday's styling, Yamaha's A-S701 is a good all-rounder.

FOR

- plenty of connectivity, both in and out
- good overall sonic presentation
- remote control and other practical features

AGAINST

- tone controls (thankfully switchable!)
- missing its predecessor's record- output switching
- no USB port

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Pictured with optional TJ Full Music6SL7, David Shaw CV181tp Tung Sol KT150 and Jensen Copper foil in paper and oil audio capacitors

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Our new series of "Low Distortion Tertiary" output transformers are the best we have ever made, enabling us to reduce global feedback by about 40%. All our amplifiers are designed and finished in Leicester. Warranty and service is done by the engineers that designed them so you can be sure of long term performance. We incorporate a "standby" switch in order to protect the valves during warm up. All of our amplifiers are hand made using "point to point" soldering without using printed circuit boards. We are convinced this sounds better. It allows for very easy servicing, upgrades and modifications. High quality components are used throughout including silver plated PTFE audio cable SCR capacitors audiophile resistors. Loudspeakers of nominal impedance between 3 ohms and 10 ohms may be used with virtually no reduction in power or quality. A choke regulated power supply adds richness to the sound quality that silicon devices alone are unable to do. In short we have created an amplifier of excellent flexibility and quality which retains the qualities traditional of traditional design and performance. Bespoke upgrades available including silver/copper capacitors, valves and design.

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World Radio History

Westminsters in Shoreditch

Noel Keywood visits a new London bar where audiophiles can delight in the sound of Tannoy's giant Westminster Royal Gold Reference loudspeakers driven by some serious valve amplification

From one end of town to the other - Westminster to Shoreditch. Someone has installed a pair of massive Tannoy Westminster Royal horn loudspeakers, in latest Gold Reference form, at a restaurant/bar in Shoreditch, East London. It was in fact Paul Noble, Creative Director of Spiritland and a serious audiophile who loves Tannoys. Somehow he managed to persuade Tannoy to lend him a pair of their biggest 'speakers - and when I found out I got down there sharpish, arriving on opening night.

Spiritland is a music residency at Merchants Tavern bar/restaurant and will be there for three months, 'til 1st January 2015. DJs play differing music selections every evening so you can get to hear these unique and monstrously large loudspeakers anytime, a rare occurrence as there are very few on demo in the UK.

We borrowed a pair some years ago, for demo at an audio show in Manchester and it took three men to move each one because they weigh 138kgs (304 lbs) - oh, and they cost £28,000.

But the real point of interest is the compound horn loading used for the 15in Dual-concentric drive unit. There is a rear horn, explaining why the cabinet is so large, and there's a midrange horn in front of the cone, clearly visible in our picture. Loading a huge 15in bass unit with a rear horn moves air like a Rolls Royce Trent engine and whenever I've heard the Westminster it shook my body with its low frequency power. This is a loudspeaker that can produce seismic events.

Add in a concentric horn-loaded front tweeter that fires directly at listeners and you end up with an intense experience.

I had a hankering in Merchants Tavern to put on some music with cojones and turn the volume up but, as Paul pointed out, this was a bar where people wanted to talk, not be battered into a pulp.

All the same, the big Tannoys, carefully mounted on plinths to put the treble horn just above heads so treble would carry, sounded good.

Wisely they are driven by valve amps, in this set-up a pair of Canary Audio M500 power amplifiers with 300B output tubes, supplied by Definitive Audio.



Music comes from vinyl as well as tape - and there's digital.

So if you want to see and hear a pair of Tannoy Westminster Royal Gold Reference loudspeakers, get yourself over to Shoreditch, a now-trendy area of East London, and enjoy a beer or a meal in front of a great sound system.

SPIRITLAND AT MERCHANTS TAVERN
see <http://spiritland.club/for full details>.

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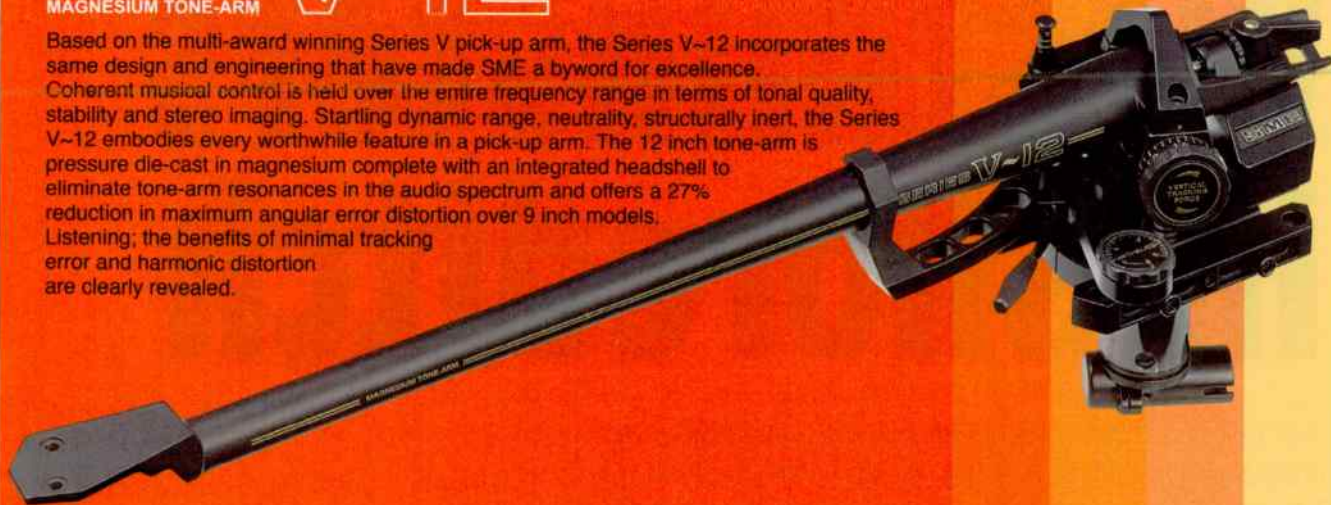
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Nearest tube: Old Street, Northern Line. It's a few minutes walk away, but take a map, or phone with GPS maps, 'cos the area is busy and labyrinthine.



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LETTER OF THE MONTH PRIZE



KEF Q100 LOUDSPEAKERS

Visit our website at www.hi-fiworld.co.uk or send your emails to letters@hi-fiworld.co.uk. Letter of the month wins a pair of KEF Q100 loudspeakers.

Answers by: NK - Noel Keywood; PR - Paul Rigby; TB - Tony Bolton; MP - Martin Pipe; HB - Haden Boardman; RT - Rafael Todes; RA - Rod Alexander; JM - Jon Myles.

For more advice see Letters from earlier issues at www.hi-fiworld.co.uk/letters

A pair of KEF Q100 loudspeakers are on their way to **CHRIS LLOYD**, Letter of the Month winner in our November 2014 issue.

Letter of the Month



"My main CD player is now a Rega Apollo-R. Not only is it a great player, but it has a really simple drive mechanism" says Rob Nichols. "Then invest your money in a separate DAC".

LESSONS IN HI-FI

You published a letter from me a couple of years ago, asking for advice on upgrading. Since then my system has changed and I thought you might be interested in the lessons I've learnt on the way.

On a small budget, get the best standmount speakers you can find. I learnt this by accident. I'd started down the tower speaker route but couldn't resist a pair of Heybrook HB1s on eBay for a fiver. They were meant for a second system in my study. They ended up replacing my TDL RTL2s as my main speakers and I haven't looked back since. I think you need to pay serious amounts of money (£1000+), to get tower speakers that will give you

the insight and depth of a half-decent standmount speaker. I shudder to think how much I'd have to spend to find tower speakers that will better my Spondor S3/SR2s.

If you only have a few hundred pounds, buy the best integrated amplifier within that budget. For example, for £500 you can easily find a decent integrated amp but even on eBay you'll be either skilled or lucky to find a pre/power combo that will be of the same quality. I'm still amazed how much better my Audiolab 8000S sounded compared to the pre/power combos I'd previously cobbled together via eBay.

The easiest way to get a pre-amplifier on a tight budget is to buy an

integrated with a power amp output. I've now got a pre/power combo that's better than my Audiolab 8000S on its own. I bought a Beard P35 Valve power amp on eBay recently. The combination of 8000S as pre-amp and P35 is streets ahead of the 8000S on its own. Sure, a dedicated pre-amp should be better but that can wait until I have the budget.

If you want to buy new, look for equipment that is just about to be superseded by a new model. I bought my Audiolab 8000S just before the 8200A was released. OK the 8200A may be better but you won't get one new for less than £300, like you could for 8000Ss at the time. That is, until the model that will replace the 8200A is

about to be released.

Invest in a dedicated phono amp. I enjoy owning and playing LPs but for most of my systems CD has been my main source. The thing that made LPs sing for me was getting a decent phono amp. The amp that opened my eyes was a small battery-operated Sony MM Cartridge Equalizer EQ-2. I saw it on eBay for £20 and thought I'd try it out. The difference was remarkable. My records all became more enjoyable overnight. I've since moved on to a Trichord Dino which I like as it gives me a lot of freedom with cartridge choice, as well as being a cracking amp.

Stand alone DACs are great. I used to just have one digital source. I now have three. Investing in a decent multi-input DAC is an effective use of your money when you are on a tight budget. It can add clarity and richness to so much of your system without breaking the bank. It also reduces the need for ports on your amplifier. One of the things I've liked about my 8000S is the number of inputs but now I only use two (DAC and Turntable). My Peachtree DAC-IT has pride of place at the core of my system.

The most fragile part of a CD player is the drive. CD draw mechanisms can be complicated and it is likely this will fail before anything else in the box. So I now believe there are two strategies to use when selecting a CD player.

First strategy: buy a second-hand CD with a decent transport. Ensure it is so cheap that you can afford to replace it easily if the drive fails. My personal favourite is the Sony CDP XB 920/930. They can be bought for £20-£30 on eBay and have a really good drive mechanism.

Second strategy: buy a CD player with a really simple but effective drive mechanism. My main CD player is now a Rega Apollo-R. Not only is it a great player but it has a really simple drive mechanism. Then invest your money in a separate DAC which will have a minimum of moving parts and should last as long as your upgrade cycle.

The best accessories are high-quality power cables. For me, the most impressive demonstration at this year's Bristol Hi-Fi show was IsoTek's demonstration of the difference good power leads and a mains conditioner make to a system. Following that I bought a selection of IsoTek and MCRU mains leads and this has been one of the most cost-effective upgrades to my system that I've made. Good interconnects make a difference, but the



If you want a bargain DAC, based on the ESS Sabre32 chip, an Audiolab Q-DAC is Noel Keywood's favourite.

place to start is getting a good mains signal. Once that is sorted, you can start on the interconnects.

Rob Nichols.

Hi Rob. Fascinating that after all that experimentation, courtesy of eBay, you should rate mains leads as the most important accessory. Musician and contributor Rafael Todes may well agree as he places a lot of emphasis on these components, that otherwise raise deep scepticism amongst many.

You forget to mention the crucial pick-up cartridge... I hope yours is from Goldring because all 1000 Series cartridges are a superb beginner's choice. Nagaoka cartridges like the ultra budget MP-110 are also good, and this may well appeal to your eBay sensibilities. Then there are the Ortofon 2M series cartridges. Battery powered preamps avoid hum loops of course but are rare.

On the subject of DACs, Audiolab's Q-DAC is a great budget choice as it has fabulous performance and sound, plus a great filter set, all for £400. It is a digital

bargain and superb for top-quality CD, hooked up to a half-decent CD player with digital output. The Q-DAC's ESS Sabre32 chip has powerful on-board jitter elimination and suppresses repetitive-pattern digital noise that's audibly detectable and subversive to good sound quality. **NK**

Hello Rob. Bargains can certainly be had on eBay. You can if you're not careful succumb to the dreaded bidding wars - especially for 'fashionable' items - and end up paying a lot more than is necessary. Set a limit - and go no further. From over thirty years of personal experience, I can fully-understand your appreciation of buying second-hand. That way, you can - with care - end up with a decent-sounding system for surprisingly little outlay.

My system has at various times come from second-hand or charity shops, pawnbrokers, adverts in local papers, Exchange and Mart or Loot and various jumble and car boot-sales as well as eBay. Also add to this list events like the Tonbridge Audiojumble featured in this issue.



Reviewer Martin Pipe thinks Rob Nichols may well be interested in a Teac CD-P800NT since it plays CD and can rip them to a digital file format too.

You can find many bargains there - and even more if you're handy with a soldering-iron and test equipment.

Another draw of such events is that almost everyone you meet will be an audiophile and/or music lover.

On a different note, why not consider transferring - with the aid of a computer - your CDs (in lossless form, natch) to a solid-state player that can drive your DAC? You won't need to worry about failing drawer mechanisms or lasers and your full collection will be a few button-presses away. Particularly-recommended is the Teac CD-P800NT reviewed in the last issue (this will also play any newly-acquired CDs you haven't had a chance to 'rip') **MP**

Hi Rob. It sounds as though you have had a thoroughly good time exploring the different avenues that hi-fi has to offer, and at an affordable price.

I am in full agreement with you about the importance of getting the mains supply correctly sorted out. Even only 20 years ago, the majority of houses only had a television, video player, table lamps and the usual basic kitchen appliances plugged into the mains.

Nowadays it is loaded with the noise of the switch-mode power supplies that seem to power everything from the fridge to our TVs as well as all of the chargers that seem to have become an inescapable part of modern life. Add in the noise that computers make (most houses having more than one such device nowadays) DECT phones, wi-fi, computer game consoles, etc, and this results in the modern mains supply now being very noisy. This is why mains filtration is now a vitally important part of any system.

Try plugging your TV and DVD into a filter as well. The improvements should include better and more even colour and texture with sharper definition of the edges and shape of the images and with less bleed around the shape of movement. Basically you should see a visual description of the improvements that you have already heard in the sound of your system.

TB

BI-AMP MONO AMP QUERY

I have just returned to my hi-fi following a long break and what can I say - the

hi-fi bug is back! Previously I had a bi-amp set up with an Arcam A22 integrated and an Arcam P35 power amp driving my PMC FBIs, source Naim CD5 with Flat Cap 2. Having rediscovered my love for all things two channel I have just purchased another P35 power amp, the idea being to use my integrated as a pre-amp until I can afford to upgrade to a dedicated pre in the future.

Having read through my Arcam manual I have become aware of the facility to use my power amps as mono amps and use each one to drive a speaker each, still in a two-channel set up. This is where my confusion begins. I understand a link bar needs to be used in the audio out of each power but I don't understand how each power would connect to my integrated/pre as there is only one pre-out?

I get the whole daisy chain thing but you would need to use the line out of the power to link up the second power, this would then prevent me connecting the link bar - so now very confused!

I believe the mono set up I am seeking is known as vertical bi-amping, as opposed to the horizontal set up I had previously. It would seem to me that there are even greater sonic benefits to be had with this set-up, particularly low end as each speaker is being driven by greater power, what do you think?

I would appreciate any advice you can give me as I am really keen to get this set-up but concerned about damaging something! Also in terms of future pre-amp upgrade, what would you suggest?

Kind Regards,

Dan Broomfield



An Arcam P35 100 Watt power amplifier that Dan Broomfield wants to use for "vertical bi-amping".

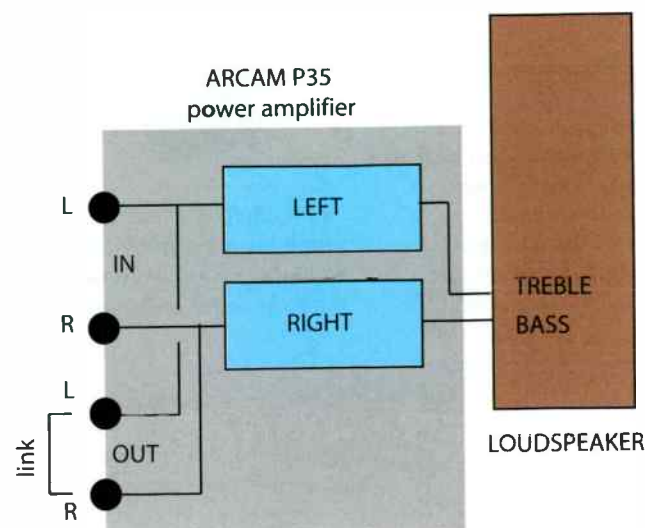
Hmmm, yes. I have just downloaded the Arcam P35 manual and it is a bit confusing but after a bit of head scratching, I got it. You must remove the link from its storage position and insert it into the Right and Left output sockets. These are (I presume) feed-throughs from the input sockets, so inserting this link effectively connects Left and Right inputs together, mono'ing the amp. It means you can use either input socket, Left or Right, to connect to one channel of your pre-amplifier. One loudspeaker output then goes to the treble section of your loudspeaker and the other output to the bass section.

Both Naim and Arcam make pre-amps you may want to consider. Or use what we choose to use, a Music First Audio passive magnetic pre-amplifier. These are fabulously neutral and widely admired - and rightly so.

NK

CARTRIDGE CHOICE

The core of my system comprises Michell Orbe with SMEV and Ortofon Rondo Bronze, McIntosh MCD301 SACD player, Mastersound PH-5 pre-amp with Rothwell MCL step up, Mastersound 845 monoblocks and ART



Deco 10 loudspeakers.

I am extremely happy with my set-up but age and wear has dictated that my beloved cartridge is nearing the end so I am entering into the minefield that is cartridge choice. I will be honest and admit I have no idea which direction to go as there are so many options with little chance of a home demo except possibly Jordan Acoustic where I purchased the majority of my gear. I have a very eclectic choice of music but my favourite bands are Genesis, Pink Floyd, Porcupine Tree, Simple Minds etc

My question is simple - what are the best choices of cartridges for myself. I have no budget or maximum price but ideally I would be looking to spend somewhere between £1500-£2000.

Thanks,

**Russell Field
Rotherham**

Hi Russell. My first thoughts are to stay with Ortofon since you are obviously very happy with the sound of your Rondo Bronze. Within your price points there are two cartridges that immediately spring to mind from their range: the Cadenza Bronze at £1395 and the Black model, priced at £1750.

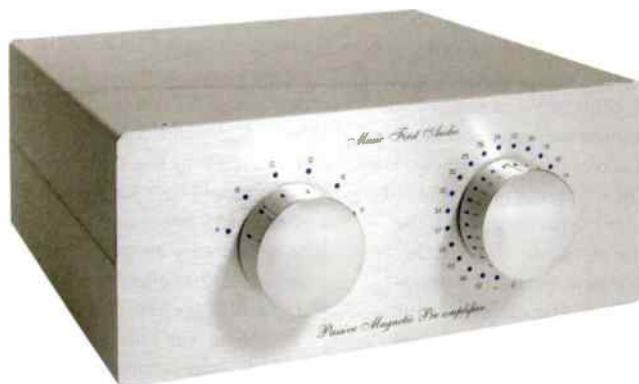
The current range of Ortofon cartridges have a colour coding to help the purchaser decide what sort of flavour they wish to have in the sound. The top Black range have a slightly softer, romantic sound which works very well with classical music and the solo voice and acoustic guitar types of folk music but would not be my first choice for playing the more electric guitar driven sounds that you mention.

The Bronze series have an altogether more incisive performance that, to my ears, more accurately captures the sound of electric guitars and transmits the drive to the rhythm more effectively. This makes for a more exciting and involving listen to that style of music than when played through the Black range. As you go down the Ortofon range treble becomes more apparent.

Ortofon also offer a trade-in service, so do not dispose of your Rondo Bronze until you have contacted either your local dealer or the importer, Henley Designs (+44 (0) 1235-51 1666 or www.henley-designs.co.uk) to discuss your next purchase. **TB**

HYPERSONICS AND PHASE

With great interest I read Andrew Entwistle's letter. More specifically his



The Music First Audio passive preamp. Although unpowered the internal transformer provides +6dB gain. This preamp is fabulously neutral.

comment, your elaborate response and reader Paul Gladwell's reaction on hypersonics. Being a scientist myself I am always displeased with seemingly complete technical answers that explain why you cannot hear what you hear and that the observed differences all come down to snake oil. Remember these were the kind of answers that explained that Red Book CD was the best we would ever need, why there is no difference between cables, why the quality of components, their mechanical support and the type of soldering does not really matter, etc.

My own vision on the subject is that, in most of such airtight answers, it seems to be forgotten that a large majority of important parameters are left out altogether. If one considers a hi-fi system or any component as a transfer system for waves, than it is very easy to grasp why most of the standard measurements (frequency range, cross-

do not take into account the temporal part of the wave dynamics. The point is that all sound to be reproduced or recorded can be analysed into an infinite series of in-phase sine waves. The ability to transfer these waves without time dependent phase shifts will then discriminate between good and bad equipment. This is described by the so called phase transfer function, i.e. the amount of phase shift per frequency (you must be familiar with that Noel, as electrotechnical engineer). The wider the zero shift (or constant shift plateau, the better the equipment). I'd imagine that what is needed is the time auto-correlation function of that phase transfer function. You can easily imagine that mechanical vibrations for example reduce the width of the transfer plateau.

Let me give an example that convinced me a long time ago, back in the eighties. My ex-father in law was radio engineer at the Belgian Radio



"Best choices of cartridges?" The top Ortofon Cadenza Black range have a slightly softer, romantic sound which works very well with classical music, says Tony Bolton, or you can choose the Bronze for guitar-driven sounds.

over, harmonic distortion, dynamic range) are important but insufficient to qualify a component or a system (something we know for a long time already).

The problem with the usual observables is that they are static and

and Television service and quite a good engineer he was (he is happily retired now). We wanted to compare a regular Philips cassette tape with a top-notch TDK cassette. What my ex-father in law did was to look at the Lissajous figure

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DP David Price, editor; MK Noel Keywood, publisher; PR Paul Rigby, reviewer; TB Terry Bolton, reviewer; RT Rafael Todes, reviewer (Aldigr Spring Quartz); AS Adam Smith, reviewer; DC Dave Crawley, Sound Hi-Fi, World Design, etc.

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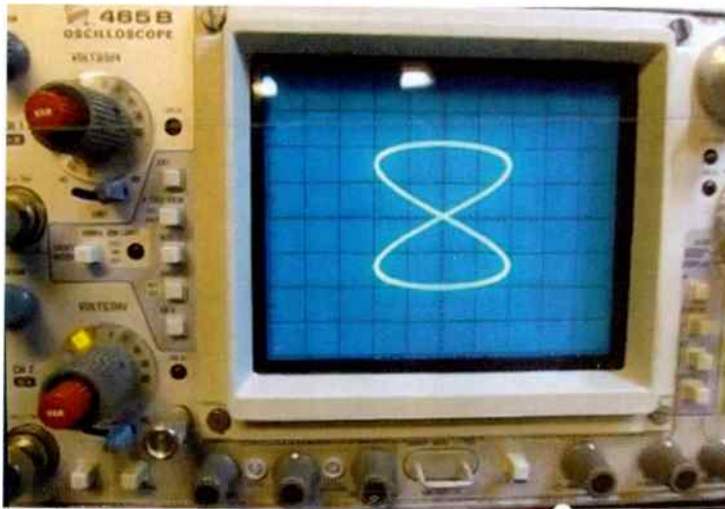
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Rudi Deblieck explains that a Lissajous figure on an oscilloscope can be used to reveal phase errors. If you want to see a demo of this technique, go to YouTube - it's useful for engineering students.

on an oscilloscope, having the input sine wave on x and the playback head signal on y . That was very revealing: up to 10-15kHz the TDK tape would show a relatively undistorted, time stable Lissajous figure whereas the Philips tape above 5 kHz became quite distorted and above 10kHz it became also time unstable. This was a first indication for me that phase transfer was important.

Therefore one can easily imagine that the importance of hypersonics lies in the wider stable phase transfer plateau that will accompany it. This is bound to give audible differences. Moreover, if one Fourier transforms the phase transfer function, one gets the impulse response function. This represents the time domain spread of an infinite sharp pulse (expected to be better for a HF transfer system), which is going to be audible as the level of acuteness of the reproduction of, for example, the hit of a drumstick or the plucking of a string or the hit of a cymbal. Again, a system with broader than necessary frequency range will most certainly be able to cope with such pulses and give a better time resolution.

What I'd basically suggest is that measurements should more focus on the useful phase transfer measurement of components, cables and complete sets. A very good example according to me is the jitter measurement that you currently do with the Rhode and Schwarz test to discern between digital components, as jitter comes down to the time base precision of the analogue part of the digital signal (again phase shifts).

I would like to hear your comment on this phase transfer/impulse response approach. In the meantime I send an updated picture of my current set-up,

that is now completely Audio Note, with very high-quality speakers. The whole set-up was built and adapted by my friend and high-end guru Edwin Maas and it sounds beguilingly natural. It is currently one of the best rated hi-fi systems in the Netherlands of which the top four are all Audio Note, btw.

Finally, let me congratulate you with the splendid publication that *Hi-Fi World* is every month again. It is a genuine pleasure to read.

Kind regards,
Rudy Deblieck
Belgium.

I totally agree with you Rudy. Measuring phase in system components can be done, especially with two-channel analysers, but at the end of every system lies a

loudspeaker and you get so many phase-destroying resonant systems and even complete phase rotations here it overshadows phase change elsewhere. True, you don't get rapidly changing phase, as with jitter and tape flutter, but loudspeaker phase distortion has to be judged alongside other factors such as box return energy that comes out through the cone – something no one talks about. Unless of course you see the time delay in phase terms – but I hate to think of how we could illustrate this and measurement would be time consuming and complicated I suspect.

Audionote? Like me, Audionote use transformers, and you'll not find these very phase linear at the extremes of their passband. You may have a conceptual contradiction here!

We would like to extend our jitter measurements and even borrow a Network Analyser to measure the transfer function of cables to see if there's anything that could be learned there but time and money tend to impose a limit on our ambitions and what we can practically do.

You may be amused to know that Rohde&Schwarz are happy to lend us a Network Analyser, but we could not get an intelligent result from it without a week of training, and in any case the British Army currently are evaluating this analyser so unless we are prepared to chase a Challenger 2 across Bovington Plain there's not much chance of getting it. **NK**

Your letter makes fascinating reading Rudy. Hi-fi designers have for a long time understood the importance



Rudy Deblieck's hi-fi system that uses mainly Audionote products. "It is currently one of the best rated hi-fi systems in the Netherlands of which the top four are all Audio Note" Rudy tells us.



"The British Army are currently evaluating a Rohde&Schwarz network analyser so unless we are prepared to chase a Challenger 2 across Bovington Plain there's not much chance of getting it." says Noel.

of phase distortion. Remember when linear-phase speakers, which time-aligned the drive units, became fashionable? Tone controls and filters introduce phase shifts that have a subtle effect on timing and stereo imaging and that's why they should only be engaged if there's no alternative. And everyone who's ever listened to analogue tape will understand the importance of getting head azimuth alignment correct; as you twiddle the azimuth screw images move all over the place when listening on headphones, because of phase changes. **MP**

IMPEDANCE CONVERTOR

I wonder whether you could advise me about the purchase of a simple pre-amp. I am constructing a line-level crossover to go between pre-amp and power amps, but the input impedance of the power amps is only 10k Ohms. I could do with it being >20k Ohms, say 47k Ohms. This is so that I can choose component values for the crossover filter to avoid loading the preamp. I don't need selector switches, just a single input device to enable the impedance conversion. Does anyone sell boxes to do this?

Regards
Jim T

Er, Jim, you stick a 37k resistor in front! In series with 10k this gives you 47k. It also gives you -13dB signal attenuation unfortunately, so you pay a price. Either turn up volume to compensate or add in a gain stage. Obviously, you can put the resistor in the output of your crossover network. And try to learn and use LTSpice – it's free and it will sort everything out for you. The user interface is a bit weird but it will

do all the calculations for you, once mastered. You will find LTSpice at the website of Linear Technology, who support it. There's a vast user group on Yahoo as well, where you may well find passive filter circuits that interest you. **NK**

You will find 22k and 15k in series give you Noel's 37k and are standard 1% metal-film resistor values - these can be bought 'over the counter' from your local Maplin store (order codes M22K and M15K). In the real world, though, you'll probably get away with a single 39k (M39K) resistor. **MP**

L55/9 REVIEW

As an older American audiophile and part-time reviewer who grew up listening to many British speakers in my formative years, your L55/9 review brought back many old and good memories. I lived with several sets of IMF speakers, Bowers and Wilkins DM6s (still alive and well at a friend's home) and Rogers LS3/5a. I still have strong, positive memories of an afternoon with a pair of Rogers LS3/6 speakers and listening sessions with the Spondor BC1 at a friend's store and the larger BC3 at a good friend's home.

But the L55/9 brings back fond



"Old 70s and 80s classic BBC loudspeakers refuse to fade away, and keep re-appearing. In spite of many improvements in speaker design in the intervening years there was some special magic in their performance" says Allen Edelstein.

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memories of a grand month in the early 80s spent with its older, bigger brother, the LS518. It was a powered speaker then, of course, bi-amped using modified Quad 405 amps with built in electronic crossovers. I eventually wrote a very positive review published in *Stereophile*. Indeed, it was the first time I had a desire for looking for a replacement for the DM6s. Unfortunately, at about \$6000 they were above my means but that's another tale. In the LS518 I recall a speaker with BBC sound reminiscent of my LS315a speakers, but with deeper, way better damped bass (the LS315a is a bit of a boomer though I still loved them) and way less of the well known BBC dip. And if my understanding that the LS519 was meant to be a smaller speaker with the same sound as its older sibling then it appears that your review confirms that.

That's very good so my congratulations to both Graham and Spencer Hughes. It's obvious that, like old generals, the old 70s and 80s classic BBC designs refuse to fade away, and keep reappearing. In spite of many improvements in speaker design in the intervening years there was some special magic in their performance. It's a shame that the BBC development department is no longer with us.

I have to commend Graham and Spencer on their approach to bringing back the new LS519. Most revivals of BBC designs use the power of computers to enable reasonably similar commercial drivers to simulate the sound of original BBC designs. There's something more elegant and more correct about using a current version of the original tweeter and developing a woofer as close as possible to the original polypropylene device to resurrect an old classic.

I contacted Graham when I first heard about their LS519 and inquired about the possibility of an LS518 revival. My thoughts often return to that month spent with that speaker. They confirmed they were looking at it. But they mentioned that it would be a passive design.

I understand the commercial benefits of a passive design but given the LS518 history as a powered system and my belief that, done correctly, a powered speaker system is a superior path to take, I hope that in the future they will also consider a powered version.

In the meantime thanks for the LS519 review and thanks for the memories.

Allen Edelstein
New Jersey
USA

You are more than welcome Allen. And thanks for writing to us once again, getting close to status as "Letter from America" from Alistair Cooke. I don't know whether you heard this radio programme in the U.S. but it was a reflective and eloquent view from a veteran radio journalist on topics in the U.S. and outside world. He never touched on loudspeakers though!

But we all retain fond memories of great experiences – and hi-fi offers up plenty of those. Good to enjoy them. **NK**

for!)

In "Got It Taped" in the same issue, Tony Bolton says Opus 3 believe close miking can exaggerate dynamic range. This runs contrary to the accepted wisdom, at least in classical circles, that it compresses it.

Kind regards,
Mark Hodgson
London

Hi Mark. The spontaneity that you mention not only applies to the classical output of the 1950s and early 60s, but to the jazz and

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The screenshot shows a search bar at the top with the text "Find a podcast by radio station or genre". Below it, there is a grid of podcast thumbnails. The first thumbnail is for "BBC RADIO 4" and features a large number "4" in a blue circle. Below the thumbnail, the text reads "Alistair Cooke's Letter From America Rediscovered". To the right of the thumbnail, the text says "Alistair Cooke's Letter from America Rediscovered" and "Highlights from lost recordings from the 1970 and 80s." At the bottom right of the grid, it says "Episodes available: Indefinitely".

Letter from America reaches Hi-Fi World courtesy of Allen Edelstein, and the series is still available on the BBC's website. Hear about why the Soviets needed soap!

SPONTANEITY

Your correspondent James Beaumont (Oct) may be unaware that many classical collectors prefer older recordings not only for the sound, as Tony Bolton has observed, but because they were often recorded more spontaneously; for example Istvan Kertesz's 1963 Decca Dvorak 8th was done in a single take following a concert and is not unique.

I can't agree with Roland Gardiner about leaving the tone controls turned up as a default (I've had the same discussion with my brother, but he listens mainly to rock which is artificially amplified anyway). I do believe they're essential, though, as not all recordings are created equal(ised). So I'll be keeping my 20-year-old Audiolab 8000C, rewired on your recommendation.

John R Walsh's disappointment with SACDs surprised me; I have the Cambridge 651BD Blu-ray (you recommended its predecessor), and it gets more out of them than my excellent, newish CD player (XTZ CD-100; Hi-Fi World has a lot to answer

popular music genres of the era as well. Studio time was an expensive commodity so there was an expectation that a band would be professional enough to be able to perform the piece being recorded as though it were a live situation and not rely on multiple takes and the time-consuming and expensive process of editing them down afterwards. The briskness of the one day the Beatles spent recording most of the 'Please Please Me' LP was a typical case in point.

Within the classical arena the vast majority of recordings from this era were handled in exactly the same way, recorded at a pace that would be unthinkable in today's world. I think that it does make a difference, in a very subtle way, to the feel of the flow of the music. There is a subliminal wholeness to the sound of music that has been recorded in one take, compared to something that has been built up from multiple takes. You are more aware of the humanity performing it and their interaction

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with the sounds, in my opinion.

In "Got It Taped" I merely reiterated Opus 3's views upon the effects of close miking instruments.

TB

SANSUI

I have a Sansui network streamer with an unusual problem. From a laptop I can stream WAV files via wireless transmission. However, the same files will not play back using a wired connection. Internet radio works fine, wired or wireless. WAV files play direct from USB. Software updates are up to date.

The unit is out of warranty. It never did play WAV files when wired connection was used so I assumed this was a limitation of the player. Different

changes. You access your router by entering its IP address into a web browser: check the Netgear's instructions for this procedure. The default username is usually 'admin' if you haven't changed anything, with no password. A router's IP address is usually 192.164.100.1, the last numeral (1) varying from 1-10. If desperate (I have suffered with routers over the years!) try incrementing one at a time from 1 to 10.

Then you must check Windows to see whether it is set to connect to a network and also whether a firewall may be blocking comms. I am not a Windows expert, but had to run through this the other day

Why not try one of the free third-party DLNA/uPnP server programs doing the rounds? XBMC, for example, is very user-friendly and also includes a decent media player. Don't forget to ensure your Windows firewall is suitably configured, though.

Another option is to consider storing your music on a networked storage device with uPnP server. These devices - which connect to a spare router port - aren't expensive nowadays, and will free up your computer. A quick playback solution is to copy files from your PC to a USB stick, and plug that into the Sansui's front panel. Remember that although the WLD 201 can handle 24-bit audio, the maximum sampling rate



Why won't my Sansui play WAV files over a wired connection? asks Andy. We try to solve the mystery.

laptops with different versions of Windows (Vista, 7, 8, 8.1) have been tried. Only recently did I try wireless and was perplexed when this connection worked with uncompressed WAV.

NETgear cable router N2000 connected with cat5e to SANSUI WLD 201, connections checked at both ends. Any advice would be appreciated. Regards,

Andy

Hi Andy. The Sansui must 'see' the laptop over the wired network and the connection is usually established by a DHCP server. You need to check its network settings to see whether the Sansui has the computer's correct IP address or whether there is a problem here. Ensure the subnet mask is correct too. You may have to manually enter all this data (good luck!).

Also – and perhaps first – interrogate your router to ensure it sees both the Sansui and the laptop on the network; it will have a 'client list' on a menu. If you do not recognise the clients listed, then unplug devices to see whether they disappear, but you may have to manually update the list to see

and was surprised at how much had to be done in Network Settings to get the thing to see other network devices; I presume Microsoft see a home network as a security risk, whereas Apple do not. Windows Media Player has a UPnP server so you must have this installed and running - with songs in it! Since wi-fi works, however, I suspect this bit is all OK. Good luck. **NK**

The Sansui streamer supports WAV playback. Checking your network settings is advisable but your problem might also be an issue with the DLNA/uPnP server software that you're using - you might be relying on the 'basic' software that ships with Windows. Not all servers know how to handle some file formats and codecs (check any relevant settings, especially those related to media-sharing and the capabilities of detected 'playback clients'). That you can play WAV files via wi-fi and not the faster Ethernet is indicative of the frustratingly-unpredictable behaviour for which unique collections of different networkable devices are notorious - so much for internationally-agreed protocols!

supported is only 48kHz. That should be fine for CD-sourced material, though. **MP**

Thanks very much for replying. The two devices see each other. Both laptop and streamer show on the router page. I have played with all settings in Windows Player 12 and the router. I forgot to mention that MP3 files work OK. WAV files start and stop. About 3 seconds play 3 seconds gap. I tried increasing buffer in WMP. Maybe I should revert back to inconvenience (LP). Hopefully, one day someone, somewhere will make technology simple and effective to use, instead of awkward and frustrating. Best regards,

Andy

Aha! If you can play MP3 but not WAV you are suffering a data rate limitation. Such stuttering is a sign of a system at its limits.

As Martin says, you should be able to play up to 24/48. If this is unsuccessful you can reduce sample rate with XLD and this should eliminate the problem. If it doesn't then reduce bit depth because this also lowers data rate. Stay with 24bit if you can, however. **NK**



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KEF R500, Hi-Fi News & Record Review, November 2014



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Magical Mu-So



It's a Naim – but not as we know it. Jon Myles is blown away by Naim's first wireless speaker package.

In the five years since the introduction of the ground breaking Naim Uniti all-in-one streamer/CD player/DAC/amplifier, the company has been releasing new products at a dizzying rate. From the shoebox-sized UnitiQute to the USB DAC-VI and the eye-wateringly expensive Statement amplifiers, the Naim production line has been kept busy.

And now we have the Mu-So – which could well be the most radical product to emerge from Naim's Salisbury HQ since the aforementioned Uniti itself.

Why? Well, for a start it looks nothing like anything else in the company's range, eschewing the traditional utilitarian black box for a silver finish and sculpted look that places it firmly in the 'lifestyle' section of the market. Heck, even the traditional Naim green logo has been replaced by a white version.

It's also the first Naim product to be offered for sale in the likes of John Lewis and Apple stores, as well as through the company's usual chain of dealers.

But more importantly, it's the

company's first entrant into the burgeoning wireless speaker market – a standalone one-box replay system aimed squarely at those who might want a taste of the Naim sound but without the hassle of separate boxes and loudspeakers.

As such it's a self-contained amplifier/streamer/speaker system with wireless and Bluetooth capability, housed in a 122mm x 628mm x 256mm (H/W/D) wooden enclosure which is in turn clad in anodised aluminium. The whole thing weighs in at a not inconsequential 13kgs and feels exceptionally sturdy.

There's no CD provision or – surprisingly – headphone socket, but the unit does support both wired and wireless streaming up to 24/192kHz, Bluetooth, aptX, Apple AirPlay, Spotify Connect and internet radio, as well as having USB, optical and analogue digital (S/PDIF) inputs.

Behind the front grille sit six speakers, one tweeter, one midrange and one bass unit per side, each driven by its own 75 Watt digital amplifier. A bass port vents to the lower left side of the casing while 32-bit digital signal processing

(derived from Naim's work on in-car entertainment systems for Bentley's luxury cars) is used to fine tune the sound.

On the top sits a touch-sensitive, sunken rotary volume and input control exactly the same as the one used on Naim's £125,000 Statement pre-power combination. In use it has a superbly smooth and responsive feel but to get the best out of the Mu-So and the full benefit of its networking ability and DSP capabilities you'll need Naim's free smartphone/tablet control app – now available for both Android and iOS devices after years of being Apple only. Luckily this is one of the best apps out there – fast, responsive and fully-featured with the bonus of a tie-in to the Rovi music database for accessing extra information on artists and albums when streaming music.

It also provides access to features such as a loudness control for enhancing lower-level listening and a room position setting for close-to-wall/free space operation, as well as creating playlists and saving favourite internet radio stations etc.

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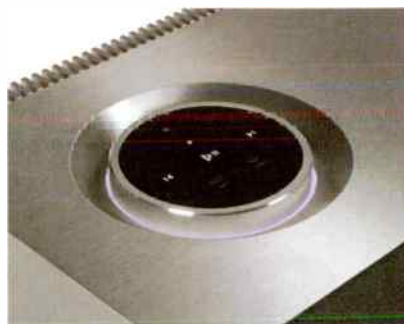
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The top panel control is the same as the one used on Naim's range-topping Statement pre-amp/power combination and is smooth and easy to use.

there's no doubt it looks superb. The aluminium heatsink spanning the rear of the unit looks purposeful while the mirrored acrylic base with the subtly glowing Naim logo adds a real touch of class.

Set-up is also refreshingly simple. Simply turn it on, let it scan for your network or Bluetooth device, enter a password if necessary and then choose which audio source you want to play music from with either the top-mounted selection dial or the smartphone app. Users of Apple iPhones can also have their mobile transfer network settings to the Mu-So automatically.

SOUND QUALITY

So it looks good – but how does it sound? In short, superb. Anyone fearing all the work may have gone into the design at the expense of sound quality need have no worries. For a start it sounds much bigger than you'd expect – easily capable of filling even a fairly large room.

What's more the soundstage spreads beyond confines of the cabinet with both left and right stereo separation and palpable height and depth. That's not something you always get from one-box wireless speaker systems and really sets the Mu-So apart from many of its competitors.

The sound is also typically Naim – with that trademark drive, rhythmic assurance and sure-footed low-end that has come to define the brand.

The bubbling synths, deep electronic low-end and sonic trickery that make up Underworld's 2014 remaster of their ground breaking album 'Dubnobasswithmyheadman' comes over as delightfully full-bodied, the sound enveloping the room while effects sweep from left to right with precision.

Streaming a 24/192kHz file of REM's 'Near Wild Heaven' the leading edges of notes were well-defined with a crisp, clear bite to Peter Buck's guitar. There was excellent separation between the various instruments, making it easy to follow individual musical threads. In fact at times it was hard to believe I was listening to a one box speaker system.

How much of this is down to the digital signal processing (DSP) inside the Mu-So is open to question, but as the unit's speakers themselves are relatively small and close together

there's no doubt it must be having a some effect.

And while DSP may be an anathema to many hi-fi traditionalists, it's so well tuned here that music through Mu-So never comes over as artificial or forced, but has a natural, free-flowing sound about it.

That quality extended to whatever input I chose. Streaming Barb Jungr's 'From Stockport To Memphis' the singer's smoky voice was full of emotion, every change of intonation beautifully captured.

Indeed there was enough detail on offer for me to hear every intake of breath she took.

That level of transparency does mean the Mu-So isn't quite as forgiving of lower quality recordings as some rivals. Compared to some other wireless 'speaker systems the Naim will let you know when you're streaming low bit-rate files or anything with an especially hard edge, instead of masking over the deficiencies. It never comes over as actually unpleasant but you'll certainly notice the difference.

That, though, is an indication of just how good the Mu-So is with well-recorded or high-resolution material. Streaming a 24/96 file of The Clash's seminal 'London Calling', Paul Simonon's bass was taut and tuneful and the whole song pushed along with verve. Playing the same group's 'The Card Cheat' – again 24/96 – with its Phil Spector-like production the Mu-So threw out a wall of sound.

A special mention, too, to the internet radio function. While the quality of broadcasts on the internet varies tremendously, streaming a

higher bit-rate station such as Radio Paradise (320kbps) gave music on radio rich in detail and atmosphere – easily good enough to serve as more than just background. What's more, the Mu-So maintained a rock-solid connection with no drop-outs.

CONCLUSION

A one-box speaker system such as this is never going to match a full-size hi-fi system for absolute sound quality. But there are many people who either haven't the room for such a set-up yet, or perhaps don't want to allocate it, but still want good quality music replay. For them the Mu-So is ideal. I also imagine it will sell in droves to many current Naim devotees who want a compact second system for their bedroom, kitchen or study.

At £895 it's not exactly cheap – but then nor is it overly expensive for a Naim, especially when you factor in the brand's renowned build quality, service back-up and resale values.

Most importantly it looks good, sounds superb and is a breeze to operate. As such this could be as big a landmark product for Naim as the original Uniti was just a few short years ago. Highly recommended.



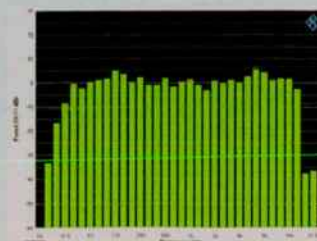
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Our analysis shows frequency response of the Muso via the loudspeakers, using a pink noise test signal. Output is reasonably flat across the audio band, from 40Hz up to 20kHz. Bass below 40Hz is inevitably rolled down, as it has to be to prevent excessive driver excursion. There's still plenty of low bass, however, with a bit of lift (+5dB) around 125Hz to add a little body to the sound. There's a similar lift around 6.3kHz to add some emphasis to treble, this analysis being at high volume with intrinsic loudness compensation inoperative.

As volume was reduced, some

boost was applied to bass and treble, but little. The Muso is, acoustically, reasonably well balanced, having good frequency extension, if with a bit of bass and treble emphasis. **NK**

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



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Held at the Marriott hotel, Brooklyn – within walking distance of New York's Brooklyn Bridge – this year's New York Audio Show had plenty of interesting audio products, Noel Keywood finds.

New York Audio Show 2014

There's nowhere quite like New York - big beyond belief, brash and earthily vibrant, even to a hard-core Londoner like me. So, I thought, what would a New York audio show offer? 'Empire State' electrostatics even larger than the 8ft 10in high Soundlab electrostatics I saw at the California Audio Show? There was only one way to find out...

MBL 101E RADIALSTRAHLER LOUDSPEAKERS

MBL's 101E (MkI) Radialstrahlers we reviewed in our June 2006. These omnis radiate sound all round and always impress. The new 101E MkI's looked good in New York. Made in Germany - see www.mbl.de.



TINEO J HORNS

In the Ayon Audio USA room I spotted these rather lovely USA Tube Audio Labs Tineo J Horns, price \$35,000. See www.ayonaudio-usa.com



MURAUDIO DOMAIN OMNI-DIRECTIONAL ELECTROSTATIC LOUDSPEAKERS

They were 'just' 4ft 8in high (143cm), but Muraudio's Domain appealed to every part of me. They are deliciously complicated, mounting a large cylindrical electrostatic unit - no less - above a conventional sealed-chamber (infinite baffle) woofer. The idea is to fire sound all round from the wide-range electrostatic. Omni-directional 'speakers give a big, spacious presentation and that's what I heard from the Muraudios, but they also imaged well unlike most omnis. Impressive stuff. Made in Canada - see www.muraudio.com.



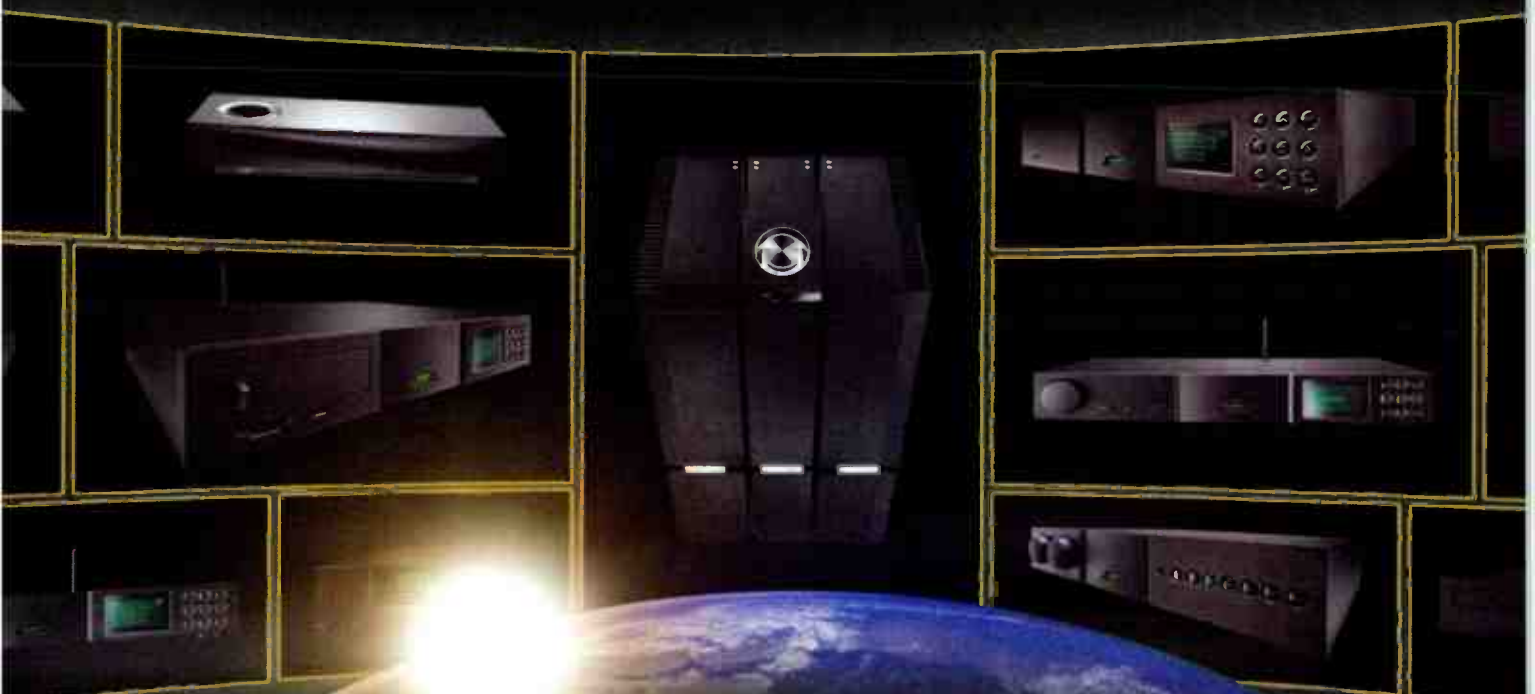
VAC TUBE AMPLIFIERS

Here was a nice surprise - VAC. This manufacturer of tube amps doesn't have much of a presence in the UK but they were a popular choice of tube amplifier amongst show exhibitors I noticed. And Hi-Fi World reviews VAC amps because ace contributor and musician extraordinaire Rafael Todes (Royal Philharmonic, Allegri String Quartet etc) swears by them, insisting they eclipse all other valve (tube) amps. On display were a variety of models including the Master Preamplifier shown here. Made in the USA - see www.vac-amps.com.



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KEF LOUDSPEAKERS

KEF launched new Reference loudspeakers, the Reference 3 and Reference 5 in a start-of-show press conference held for the U.S. press that I attended. They also showed Blade 2, a new, smaller version of the Blade introduced a few years ago. Pictured is the Reference 5 that sounded smooth and open, imaging deeply when fed historic analogue material, namely the Count Basie Orchestra behind Billie Holiday. Made in UK - see www.kef.co.uk.



MARTIN LOGAN CLX ELECTROSTATIC LOUDSPEAKERS

Martin Logan had their big CLXs on demo at the show and told me that a new model, of similar size to the CLX but with a dynamic lower bass unit, was due. The CLXs gave the clearest sound by far, and all-of-a-piece, although they were being run by transistor amps and really needed VAC or Audio Research tube power I felt. Made in the USA - see www.martinlogan.com.

KINGSOUND ELECTROSTATIC HEADPHONES

Kingsound, who make superb electrostatic loudspeakers, were demonstrating new electrostatic headphones, the KS-H3 driven by vacuum tube amplifier M-20. They had the superb light, clear and delicate quality of electrostatics but were not short of firm bass too. Unfortunately, needing a high-voltage power supply these are not phones for the commute to work. Made in Hong Kong - see www.kingsaudio.com



LIVE PERFORMERS

Canadian cellist Vincent Belanger was accompanied by guitar and the duo played live to remind us all what real instruments sound like - as well as providing much appreciated entertainment.



NOLA LOUDSPEAKERS

The Nola Metro Grand Reference Gold loudspeaker uses magnesium alloy cone bass drivers in a closed cabinet but mount a cone midrange and ribbon tweeter on an open baffle above to eliminate coloration from internal cabinet reflections. Carefully balanced to sound natural, the Nolas provided one of the best sounds of the show. Imaging from the ribbon tweeter was pin sharp and the midrange was delightfully clear. Made in USA - see www.nolaspeakers.com.



VPI TURNTABLES

VPI were demo'ing their new Prime turntable, fitted with an Ortofon Cadenza Bronze MC cartridge, feeding their new 50 Watt KT88 equipped tube amplifier the 299D - or perhaps Outsider they said - driving a pair of Tannoy Guy R. Fountain 'Memory' loudspeakers found on e-Bay, I was told.



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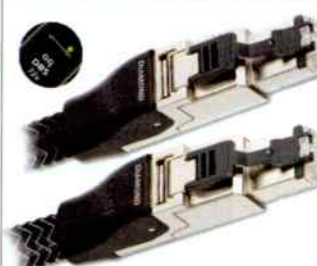
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Music to Go

Bayan's Soundbook Go portable 'speaker aims to give you good quality sound in the great outdoors. Jon Myles forsakes his listening room to try it out.

Bayan Audio has forged quite a reputation for itself in the wireless Bluetooth 'speaker market. Its products aren't the cheapest on the market – but they make up for that with their innovative design and standard of construction.

I was more than impressed with the original Soundbook model and its bigger brother the X3. Now they're joined by the more compact £79.99 Go – designed to be slipped into a pocket for taking into the garden, park...or wherever you fancy listening to music in the open air.

Like its bigger counterparts the Go is built around a sturdy enclosure with a fabric cover including a front flap which folds back to act as a stand, as well as an on/off control.

Sound is provided by two 1-inch long throw neodymium drivers augmented by a 2-inch passive bass radiator driven by a 15 Watt amplifier. Charging is via a micro-USB

slot while a hands-free microphone allows for conference calling and there's a 3.5mm audio-in jack for the connection of external devices such as iPods.

Weighing in at 480g and measuring just 160mm/88mm/40mm (W/H/D) the Go is eminently pocketable and with an estimated nine-hour battery life should have enough juice to last most people for at least a day.

Inevitably, however, the diminutive Go has lost a couple of features compared to its bigger brothers. So gone is the FM radio receiver and Bluetooth's aptX capability.

SOUND QUALITY

The Go punches out good bass for its size with just a touch of top-end emphasis to add air and detail to the soundstage.

Playing some classic jazz in the shape of 'Giant Steps' and cymbals are crisp and clear while Coltrane's saxophone has a good body.

Turn it up (the little Go can go surprisingly loud) and the Bayan retains its open and clear nature – only starting to sound compressed when you reach the very upper limit of the frequency range.

And while it's never going to rival bigger designs for outright resolution, it did a commendable job of separating individual instruments in denser mixes such as Led Zeppelin's 'When The Levee Breaks'.

Give it something a little less congested like Arvo Part's 'Spiegel im Spiegel' and it captures a great deal of the atmosphere of this haunting piece with impressive tone to the piano and violin.

CONCLUSION

The Go produces a nicely balanced, detailed and surprisingly loud sound for its size. Sturdy construction and innovative design are also a plus. Anyone looking for a truly portable Bluetooth loudspeaker has to put it at the top of their audition list.

**BAYAN AUDIO
SOUNDBOOK GO**
£79.99



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT

A nicely-engineered product that mixes good sound with true portability. Ideal for taking out and about.

FOR

- compact design
- clean, crisp sound
- goes surprisingly loud

AGAINST

- no aptX

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HA-1
Headphone Amplifier



A heady Cocktail

An all-in-one solution for storing and playing your entire music collection – that'll be the Cocktail Audio X30. Jon Myles investigates.



Whatever your views on the sonic pros and cons of CD replay, there's no doubting the real reason it usurped vinyl as the main music medium for the majority: sheer convenience.

Forget VTA, tracking weight, pitch stability, leveling, isolation, choice of cartridge, groove wear, carefully turning over the disc at the end of each side etc – simply slot the CD into a machine and hit play.

So it's ironic that now silver disc sales are falling the download-driven technology supplanting it comes with its own in-built complications. Ethernet switches, UPnP servers/clients, DLNA, WAV, ALAC, Ogg Vorbis, Flac, ALAC, wired or wireless NAS drives and what have you.

No wonder then that some manufacturers are trying to make the transition as smooth as possible. Which is where the Cocktail Audio X30 comes in.

The X30 is a one box music replay/storage/UPnP streamer/radio

system containing a hard disk, CD player/ripper, 50 Watt per channel Class D amplifier allied to a comprehensive selection of both digital and line level inputs and outputs.

In short, the Cocktail can hold and play back your entire music collection (yes, including ripped vinyl – more of which later) in a unit the size of a CD player. Just add speakers and you're away.

Inside is a 700MHz CPU allied to a 24bit/192kHz Burr-Brown PCM1792A DAC and Texas Instruments Class D amplification. Buyers can specify their own storage size options including either HDD or SSD drives. Thanks to a recent price cut a unit equipped with a 2TB Western Digital hard drive now costs £799 – a £200 saving on the original list price.

As the base unit without a hard drive is priced at £699 it's clear Cocktail aren't overcharging for fitting storage.

Connection options include both coaxial and digital input and outputs which all support files up to 24-

bit/192kHz, as does the AES/EBU out.

A pair of line-level outputs allows the connection of an existing amplifier if required, while the Cocktail also boasts three USB ports, line-level inputs, an FM radio tuner, Ethernet port, 6.3mm headphone socket and a 3.5mm input for connecting your smartphone.

Control is via a fully-featured remote or the front panel rotary dials in combination with the clear, 5-inch colour display. Connect the X30 to a network and you can also administer it from a computer – making



A full-function remote makes operation relatively simple - although a dedicated smartphone control app would be better.



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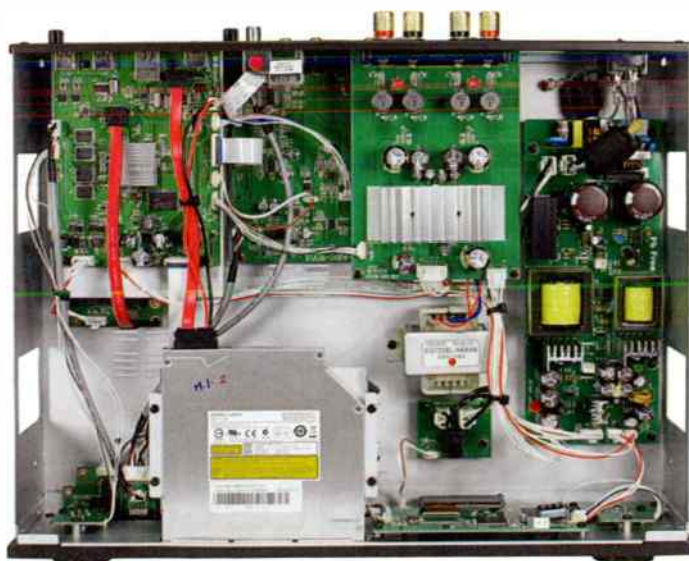
operations like metadata wrangling much simpler.

OPERATION

So how does it work out of the box? Well, astonishingly well. Plug the unit in, connect it to your network (I went wired but you can buy a wi-fi dongle for £29) and everything comes on stream very easily.

Insert a CD into the slot-loading drive and once read you'll be asked whether you want to play it or rip to the hard drive. If the latter, you have a choice of format (WAV/FLAC/MP3 etc) and also the ripping speed. For best playback quality stick to uncompressed WAV and the slowest speed.

Even at this setting the X30 is relatively speedy – ripping an entire CD in a matter of minutes including the downloading of album and track information from the internet and



Inside the X30 utilises a Class D Texas Instruments amplifier section alongside a 24bit/192kHz Burr-Brown PCM1792A DAC. Cocktail conservatively rates output power at 50 Watts per channel - we measured 60 Watts into 8 Ohms and 100 into 4 Ohms.



The rear of the Cocktail X30 has a full range of both digital and analogue inputs and outputs. The bay on the bottom right of the picture accepts either HDD or SSD drives - with buyers able to specify their preference on order.

assigning album artwork.

All music is stored in a Browser section – which will also display the contents of any connected NAS drives or DLNA-compatible smartphones or tablets.

Overall, despite a myriad of playback/ripping options, operation is fairly intuitive once you've spent a little bit of time with the unit. Just as importantly, network connection remained rock solid throughout the review period.

The only real niggle is there's no dedicated smartphone/tablet app available for easy control. Cocktail do recommend a number of generic third-party iOS/Android apps as an alternative – but in practice none of them worked perfectly and I invariably defaulted to the remote or front panel controls for both reliability and ease of use.

SOUND QUALITY

The first thing to note is that the X30 does a superb job of ripping

CDs. Playback from the hard disk had punch, clarity and a fair amount of detail about it.

Johnny Marr's guitar work on Electronic's 'Tighten Up' had plenty of definition with leading edges picked out well while Bernard Sumner's distinctive vocals are suitably plaintive. The timing was also spot-on – with plenty of drive and rhythmic propulsion.

A WAV rip of Jackie Leven's 'Fairytale For Hard Men' was also suitably atmospheric – the late singer's impassioned delivery full of gruff emotion.

With higher-resolution material in

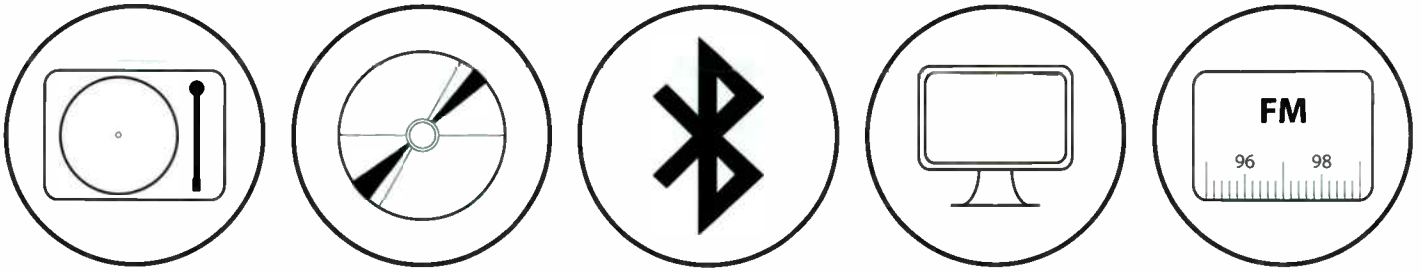
the shape of Lorde's 'Royals' in 24bit/48kHz the Cocktail did a good job of conveying the extra musical information on offer, with more openness and poise to the sound.

If anything there's a slight treble emphasis – but not enough to make the X30 sound shrill. Instead it means



The 5-inch front panel control screen gives access to all the Cocktail's functions. CD rips, downloads and recordings reside in the Music DB folder on the upper left hand corner.

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Boasting a massive 9 inputs, My Audiophile Integrated Amplifier, or MaiA, offers the most complete amplifier solution for audio fans on a budget in a stylish, compact chassis.

Incorporating a Moving-Magnet (MM) phono stage, a 24-bit/192kHz D/A Converter, XMOS® asynchronous USB streaming technology, aptX® Bluetooth and additional Line inputs for traditional sources such as radios, there's nothing you can't connect MaiA with.

In addition to boasting a powerful output for its size MaiA can also have a pair of headphones connected, and the compact IR remote makes operation effortlessly simple.

With an existing range of Box Design sources available in a size and price that perfectly complements this stunning amp, MaiA is a must-audition product for anyone interested in affordable hi-fi.

- 2 x 30W power output (4Ω)
- 2 x RCA Line inputs
- 1 x Stereo Mini-Jack Line input
- 1 x Moving Magnet Phono input
- 1 x Bluetooth aptX® input
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Album artwork and track listing can all be displayed when playing.

elements such as female vocals are projected well with an admirable clarity to them.

In absolute terms the Class D amplifier lacks a little stage depth and all-out low-end thump. Connected to our reference Tannoy Kensington Gold Reference floorstanders there wasn't the all-out grip on the cones to bring the type of earth-shaking bass these 'speakers are capable of.

But pair the Cocktail with 'speakers more in its price range – such as Acoustic Energy's entry-level I03s – and it's on firmer ground, providing a big, room-filling sound, able to go loud with little obvious strain.

I also briefly connected the X30 to a Yamaha A-S701 amplifier (see review this issue) and this brought greater solidity and all-round sophistication to the sound.

That's a point worth noting for those who are happy with their current amplifiers but are looking to add the storage facilities and streaming capability of the Cocktail to their existing system.

Especially so for those who fancy digitising their entire music collection. Connect your record player's phono stage to the line-in of the X30 (up to 24/96 resolution) and it'll copy vinyl to the hard disk much in the same way as it rips CDs. Admittedly, the process isn't quite as simple and you'll have to input the metadata yourself but it's a handy feature all the same.

Playback quality of the rips is also more than adequate. It's a little short of the overall warmth and mellifluous quality of straight vinyl replay but stands comparison with CD.

The Cocktail's other sources also acquitted themselves well. FM radio was crisp and the supplied aerial pulled in a host of stations.

Higher bit-rate internet stations also sounded clear, the unit doing a good job of smoothing over the hard edges that can sometimes afflict this medium.

As an additional bonus the X30 also gives the option of recording both FM and internet radio for those looking to timeshift programming or build their own archive of

transmissions (subject to copyright restrictions, of course!).

CONCLUSION

In terms of value for money, there's little else to touch the Cocktail Audio X30 at the moment.

Yes, you can buy separates that better various elements of its performance in one way or another – but as a whole they'll end up costing significantly more.

Instead the Cocktail offers a cost-effective, easy-to-use, fuss-free method of storing, streaming and playing back music – with the added benefit of being able to digitise your vinyl collection as well as record radio broadcasts.

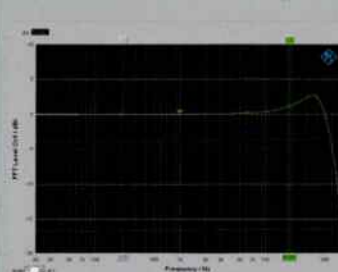
Couple it with a pair of good mid-market loudspeakers and you have an excellent, future-proofed hi-fi system at an affordable price.

Add in the ability for future upgrades via the addition of an outboard power amp (or indeed a DAC) and it makes a very tempting proposition indeed.

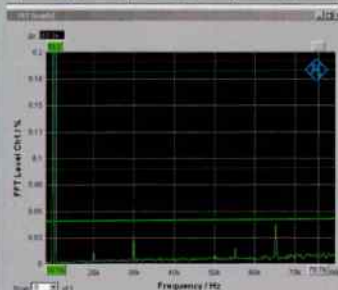
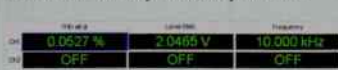
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Cocktail Audio CA-X30 produced 60 Watts into 8 Ohms and 100 Watts into 4 Ohms, under test. Fed a signal into its AUX input, distortion levels were low for a Class D amplifier, around 0.02% in the midband (1kHz) into a 4 Ohm loudspeaker load. There was little deterioration at high frequencies, unlike so many Class D amps, with values no higher than 0.13% at full power, and a

FREQUENCY RESPONSE, 192k



DISTORTION, 1 Watt, 10kHz



credible 0.05% at 1 Watt.

Frequency response via the AUX input, converted to digital via a 24/192 ADC, was a little unusual, peaking at 38kHz. This introduces a little treble lift in the audio band and may make the CA X30 sound a tad bright. As the same result was obtained via the digital S/PDIF input (electrical, 192kHz sample rate) this would appear to be a property of the DAC, likely its filters, rather than the ADC.

There was some distortion and noise from the DAC, obvious on our Rohde&Schwarz at -60dB and measuring 0.13% with a 192kHz sample rate. This limited EIAJ Dynamic Range to 108dB, an unspectacular figure for 24bit resolution.

The CA-X30 measured well in every area, considering low price. **NK**

Power	60 Watts
Aux.	
Frequency response	4Hz-18kHz
Separation	88dB
Noise	-92dB
Distortion	0.05%
Sensitivity	480mV

S/PDIF	
Frequency response	4Hz-18kHz
Separation	88dB
Noise	-107dB
Distortion	0.13%
Dynamic range	108dB

COCKTAIL AUDIO X30 £799 (WITH 2TB HDD)



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT

Impressively versatile amplifier/streamer/music server that combines fine sound with intuitive operation. Recent price cut makes it even better value for money

FOR

- ease of use
- excellent ripping options
- clean, clear sound
- ability to record vinyl and radio

AGAINST

- no dedicated smartphone app

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The Beatles in Mono !

With the eagerly awaited release of the Beatles' newly remastered mono albums just around the corner, what better time for Miyajima's hand-crafted mono, stereo and 78 rpm phono cartridges to come to the UK?

Japan-based Miyajima have been making phono cartridges for more than three decades. Only recently discovered by American and European audiophiles, they have since received rave reviews all over the world and deservedly so.

With several patents under his belt, Noriyuki Miyajima is a passionate music-lover and a true artisan manufacturer.

Every Miyajima cartridge is handcrafted in-house by a dedicated full-time team of six based in in Fukuoka, Japan.

The cartridge bodies are individually precision-milled from rare and exotic hardwoods including ebony, rosewood and mpingo African blackwood.

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Revelatory realisation

Tony Bolton has a moment of revelation as he listens to two affordable interconnects from Epiphany Acoustics.

development of the highly-regarded Eichmann Bullet plug (see www.kleinnovations.com for more details) which have silver-plated, pure copper signal and ground pins. The cable

high-density copper braid, the second being of overlapping foil. This is covered with an ultra low-loss Teflon dielectric and terminated in KLE Silver Harmony connectors.

This cable is a lot thicker and stiffer than the other so will need more care in routing in tight areas.

Sonically it had certain similar characteristics, such as a real focus on the beat of the music but this was combined with a great deal more air and space in between the sounds of the differing instruments and voices. R.E.M. sounded as though they were performing on a bigger stage, for instance.

Moving onto Beethoven, the sound was far better, with a sense of greater balance and control right across the sonic spectrum. The orchestra felt as though they had room to breathe and this resulted in a more detailed and open presentation of the sound. I also felt that there was greater musical energy being displayed at both frequency extremes.

The Atratus II interconnect is very good, and if you do not regularly play complex classical sounds then will give a very satisfying presentation of the music, especially anything that has a beat to it.

For classical fans, the Atratus III would be my choice. Users of other types of music will also benefit from its detailed and open presentation of sounds. I would say that it offers a performance that is noticeably higher than I would expect at this price point which is why I have given it a £ sign along with five Globes.

Epiphany Acoustics is a name that has graced the pages of this magazine before. In December 2012

Paul Rigby gave a 5 Globe review to their E-DAC. As well as making electronics the company, based in the South of England, also make a range of interconnects, of which we have the mid-priced Atratus II and range-topping Atratus III for review here.

Both cables were run in for several days on the Blue Horizon Pro-Burn cable burn in accelerator before being plugged in between a Teddy DAC and a Townshend Audio Allegri pre-amp in my upstairs system. I listened to each one over an evening and did comparative listening using the R.E.M. album 'Automatic For The People' (Warner Brothers 9362-45055-2) and Vladimir Ashkenazy playing the piano in the Mehta/Vienna Philharmonic recording of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.5, the 'Emperor' (Decca 411 903-2).

Starting with the more affordable Atratus II, these are made with twin core copper conductors for the signal, a high-density copper braid shield and ultra low-loss foam high-density polyethylene dielectric. They are terminated with KLE Copper Harmony connectors. These are a

is very flexible so will fit into tight spaces quite easily.

When listening to the R.E.M. album, I was immediately impressed with the way this cable transmitted the rhythm of music. The uptempo 'Man On The Moon' had a real snap to the beat that got my feet moving instantly. The imaging was good, with Michael Stipe seeming to stand directly in front of me as he sang. Moving onto Beethoven, this cable gave a good, if not exceptional account, of itself. It transmitted the music but I felt that the power of a full orchestra was causing a bit of congestion. At times the sound felt as though there was too much information trying to be reproduced at once. It was still good but the experience left me aware of the price point at which I was listening.

The Atratus III cable is a development of the Atratus II and

features UP-OCC copper conductors wrapped in two shields. The first is a

EPIPHANY ACOUSTICS ATRATUS II INTERCONNECT. £64.99 1M



EXCELLENT - extremely capable

VERDICT

Good value interconnect that focusses the listener on the rhythmic values in music

FOR

- excellent grasp of rhythm
- strong central image
- smooth sound

AGAINST

- not at its best with complex classical sounds

EPIPHANY ACOUSTICS ATRATUS III INTERCONNECT £99.99 1M



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT

Retains the Atratus II's focus on rhythm but adds a greater sense of air and space

FOR

- detailed and spacious soundstage
- clearer and deeper bass
- tight timing

AGAINST

- nothing

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Decoupled Double Dome tweeter

Sunday best

Martin Pipe reports back from the October Audiojumble in Kent

On two Sundays a year, something special comes to the Kentish town of Tonbridge. Audiophiles, music lovers, vintage radio collectors and electronics enthusiasts assemble in the town's Angel Centre, a large public sports venue. A fair amount of space - two large halls and a couple of side-rooms - provide space for well over a hundred traders and displays; for the October 4th event covered here, organiser John Howes reported a total of 140 stands. Their contents ranged from a demo of the fine-sounding £1500 'Retro' system from iFi, comprising the input-rich 'Stereo 50' valve amp and a pair of 'LS3.5' bookshelf speakers, to a working display of beautiful Nagra and Sony tape hardware. One look at those spinning spools and flickering meters and one can see why analogue open-reel tape decks, like steam locomotives, have their loyal followers. In between, a wide variety of record stalls selling music on vinyl, CD and tape, hi-fi ranging from mainstream to cult-classic and sellers of components or test-equipment jostled for floor-space with piles of cheap repairable equipment.

Among the latter was a rather tatty Marantz PM66KI for...£1. This Ken Ishiwata-tuned version of the PM66 integrated amp was dead owing to blown output transistors.

The same stall also offered a mint upmarket Yamaha synthesiser tuner that worked perfectly as long as you were prepared to overlook its faulty frequency display. Vintage solid-state gear from Leak, Quad

and Armstrong also went for a song - as did speakers from Wharfedale, Celestion and others. Turntables and CD players of all types abounded. With care, an analogue or digital music playback system could have been assembled for the price of a night out.

I picked up a Philips AH762 tuner-preamp, designed to partner Philips MFB speakers like the RH541s

the commercial stall-holders are a legion of enthusiasts selling their own records, tapes and gear. Be warned - some of the latter tend to leave their tables under the watchful eye of a neighbouring stallholder so they themselves can go round the show in search of that elusive bargain. As a result, you'll have to come back in the hope that the seller has returned (hint: leave a mobile phone number!).



featured in last month's *Olde Worlde*, for a fiver! Vinyl, from cherished '50s-era Decca FFRR mono classical LPs to today's 180g audiophile pressings, were waiting to be purchased. Own a 2in. 16-track tape machine? For a tenner, you could have acquired the master tape of Christine Harwood's 'Before You Right Now,' an up-tempo soul number recorded in late 1971.

If you have an interest in this sort of stuff - and as a *Hi-Fi World* reader, you almost certainly do - then you're in for an enjoyable day out. You can pick up a bargain, while having a pleasant natter with like-minded people. Interspersed between

To stand a better chance of getting your hands on the most popular, elusive or collectable items, you're advised to buy a £10 'early bird' ticket that grants entry at 9.30am. That's not to say that the second wave of visitors (who flood the halls at 10.30am after buying £5 tickets) don't find anything of interest. There's usually plenty to go round...

The next Audiojumble takes place on Sunday 8th February 2015. www.audiojumble.co.uk

Words and pictures: Martin Pipe

FEATURE

Bill Beard was the man responsible for the P100 Mk1 valve amp you see here. The Beard P100 is an ultra-linear push-pull dual-mono design built around KT88 tetrodes. It could deliver a meaty 100W with Class A operation up to 40W or so. This fully-serviced example was offered for £650.



In past issues we have been 'bigging up' the £288 Beatles In Mono box-set. At



the October Audiojumble, you could have acquired two Beatles boxes for...£25. Here we have the all-analogue (and stereo) 1980 'From Liverpool' Beatles Boxes - one LP, the other cassette. The LPs (on the left) were apparently in good condition.



A BBC APR-500 Sony mastering deck - one of the Japanese giant's last analogue reel-to-reel machines. This one had been rebuilt to capture and play two tracks on half-inch tape at 30ips. It sounded effortlessly open with a selection of modern-jazz master tapes.



Philips' innovative F9638 Motional Feedback 'speakers. They dedicate separate amps to bass and treble/midrange and feature ribbon tweeters. There was superficial damage to the drive units' flat diaphragms. Still, for £65 the pair you couldn't really complain...



These Celestion Ditton 551s from the late 1970s were a true bargain, at £60. The 551s were vented boxes containing a 290mm woofer, 50mm dome midrange and 19mm dome tweeter. Treble and mid-range levels could be adjusted via front-panel pots.



Swiss-made Nagras - for demo purposes only and not for sale. In the foreground is a Nagra T, one of the best quarter-inch machines ever made. There was also a four-channel digital Nagra D. The owner told me he still uses it as a DAC!

An Ariston RD11 - a 1970s belt-drive deck that shares much with the Linn Sondek in engineering terms. Both of these Scottish 'tables had 24-pole synchronous motors and three-point suspension. This RD11, complete with seven-ties-tastic Grace tonearm and ADC QLM34 cart, could have been yours for £200.



This Nagra, a IV-SJ (half-track stereo) in showroom condition, was for sale. These impeccably-built



machines, introduced in 1971, were used for location work by broadcasters and film-makers. Nagra recorders do hold their value, though; the seller of this one expected (not unreasonably) £1,600 for it.

Audiophiles of a certain vintage will recall the NAD 5120 and its 'floppy arm'. NAD did, however, sell more conventional 'tables' - such as this direct-drive 5080, complete with platter strobe and straight tonearm, from the very early 1980s. £150 was being asked for this specimen.



A Michell Orbe SE. As beautiful to look at as it is to listen to, this belt-driven unit remains in production. This one was being offered for £950 - representing a useful saving of well over £2,000 relative to a factory-fresh unit.



Stax was synonymous with high-end headphones throughout the 70s and 80s. With its attendant SR-4 adaptor, these SR-40 electrets circa 1975 could have been yours for £100. What a shame you can't plug 'em directly into your iPhone...



Here is a well looked-after quarter-track Teac A-3300 open-reel tape deck, capable of running at 9.5cm/s or 19cm/s. Those 10.5in spools give long continuous running times. A steal for £120...



A Technics Direct Drive SL110, launched in 1975. This one was ready for a SME 3009 S2 tonearm. With a newer SME arm, this £250 example could sing once more.



Not one, not two but three Technics SL-7s - wonderful linear-tracking, quartz-locked DD automatic turntables. In the pre-CD era decent reproduction and convenience weren't mutually-exclusive. These went for £80 (slightly scuffed), £110 (mint condition) and £120 (mint and boxed).

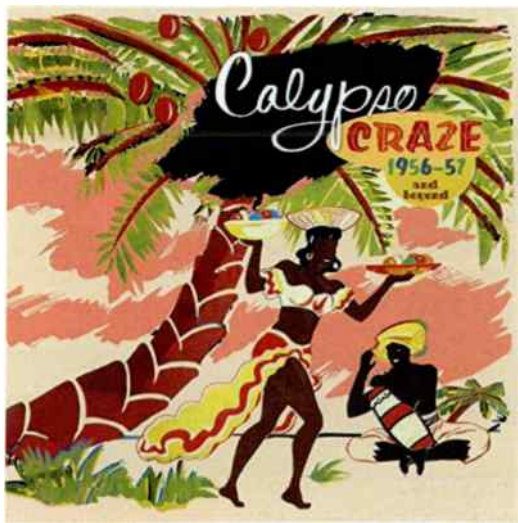


This enormous Mullard TYS5-3000 is a HF transmitting valve - specifically a RF power triode capable of delivering 3.5kW at frequencies of up to 12MHz. It is unused, and came in a custom-built wooden case. A collector paid £100 for this conversation piece - a fraction, one guesses, of its original price.



On the left is a Philips N7150, a three-speed machine able to take spools of up to 7in. diameter. At right is a Tandberg TD20A, a two-speed machine able to accept professional spools. These quarter-track decks, in excellent condition, were offered for £100 and £200 respectively.





CALYPSO CRAZE 1956-57 AND BEYOND

Various
Bear Family

You know, there was a moment, during the mid-fifties, when rock'n'roll had a real fight on its hands and the threat came, from all things, calypso. It was a serious craze at the time. Of course, calypso didn't arrive, fully formed, during the mid-fifties. It emerged from Trinidad, from its folk and carnival scenes, moving to the USA and establishing itself with an increasing presence within the musical firmament via the likes of colourfully-monikered figures such as The Lion, Atilla The Hun, Sir Lancelot, Lord Invader, Duke Of Iron and Macbeth The Great, alongside more mainstream figures such as Louis Jordan, Ella Fitzgerald and Eartha Kitt. It's those early days that cover the first two CDs of the six CD box set (that also features an additional DVD of calypso performances and a beautifully produced hardback book).

The genre became a craze when the star of Harry Belafonte rose into the sky and he released his hit,

'The Banana Boat Song' (1955), a song that was partly attractive to Belafonte because it contradicted the then-stereotype of the lazy black man.

Others began to take note: Marty Robbins and Hank Snow, for example, while Marty Jackson even sang calypso in Yiddish. Belafonte then began to distance himself from the growing popularisation that flowered soon after.

That didn't stop the likes of Jeri Southern ('Fire Down Below'), Pat Boone ('Technique'), Louis Armstrong ('High Society Calypso'), The Kingston Trio ('Zombie Jamboree') and even Robert Mitchum ('What Is This Generation Coming To'), jumping on the bandwagon. Even comedy got in on the act with Stan Freeberg's 1957 hit single, 'Banana Boat (Day-O)' still being regularly play-listed on the likes of BBC Radio 2 during the late seventies.

This luxury box set tells the whole story and more.



CHAIRMEN OF THE BOARD

The Complete Invictus Studio Recordings:
1969-1978
Edsel

A smooth Detroit soul combo whose hit 'Give Me Just a Little More Time' rose to No 3 in the charts, care of the high and distinctive vocal delivery of the group's primary songwriter General Norman Johnson. In fact, it even had a Four Tops flavour to it. Johnson, a long-term founding member of R&B and pop outfit, the Showmen, went solo in 1968 and joined up with Holland-Dozier-Holland's new Invictus label in 1968, getting together with Danny Woods (also of the Showmen), Harrison Kennedy (who had spent time with Stone Soul Children) and Eddie Curtis (who had sung with Huey Smith & The Clowns). Initially called the Gentlemen, they quickly changed their name to Chairmen Of The Board. 'Give Me Just a Little More Time' was a great way to start a band career that was then followed by '(You've Got Me) Dangling on

a String' and 'Everything's Tuesday' which cemented their R&B chart positions.

Despite this constant stream of singles, the band stopped recording in 1971, which led to a temporary breakup. They reformed soon after and continued touring and releasing albums until 1976, when they finally disbanded. Their last album 'The Skin I'm In' was arguably their best as the outfit explored psychedelic funk rock.

This box set arrives with a sturdy slip case packed with nine CDs featuring the four studio albums: 'Give Me Just A Little More Time' (1970), 'In Session' (1971), 'Bittersweet' (1974) and 'Skin I'm In (1974)' plus solo albums from General Johnson ('Generally Speaking' (1972)), Harrison Kennedy ('Hypnotic Music' (1972)) and Danny Woods ('Aries' (1972)). You also get bonus tracks, non-album singles and rarities plus a thirty-six page booklet..

Back in the fifties and early sixties, America went through a teenager, teeny-bop, bubble-gum phase, seeking out good-looking young men for screaming young girls to adore. Many of them were not particularly good singers, and some of them never recovered from the shock of stardom. The teen idol, often epitomised by Fabian, ruled the airwaves at the time.

Darren was one of those idols. He was an acceptable face of rock'n'roll, which meant that he wasn't really a rock'n'roller at all. In fact, Darren was firmly middle-of-the-road in terms of singing style. Actually, his singing talents weren't up to much either.

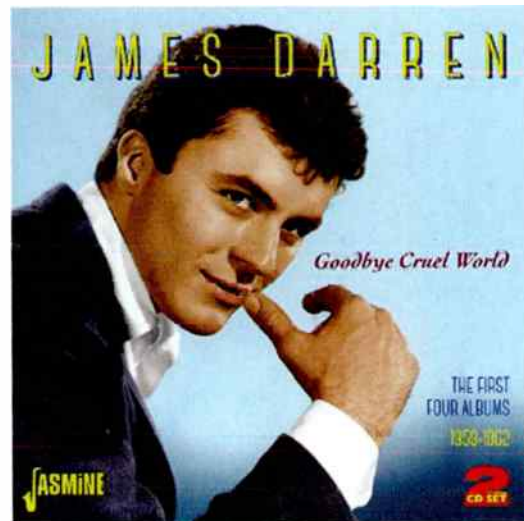
He began recording for Colpix in the late-fifties and quickly began a screen career that saw him star in numerous films. This double CD compilation packs in a value for money collection, totting four albums: 'Album No. 1', 'Sings For All Sizes', 'Gidget Goes Hawaiian' and 'Love

Among The Young'.

During these four albums he recorded a fair few novelty-tinged hit singles of which 'Goodbye Cruel World', which made No 3 in the charts, was the biggest and best.

But, hey, you can't accuse Darren of skimping on material. He was able to draw from a host of respectable songwriters including major Brill Building talent such as the Goffin-King, Mann-Weil and Pomus-Shuman teams. That's not all, Bob Crewe (The Four Seasons), Gloria Shayne and Howard Greenfield offered Darren material. Not their best material, sure, but material nevertheless.

Speaking as a died-in-the-wool Trekkie, however, I have to hold my hand up and admit that I am a big fan of Darren's. His appearance in 'Deep Space Nine' (DS9) as hologram crooner Vic Fontaine was the highlight of the entire series, in my eyes. Check out the LP, 'This One's From the Heart', to hear many of those DS9 songs again..



JAMES DARREN

Goodbye Cruel World
Jasmine

Whenever you hear the words 'Mark I' attached to the history of any band you just know that is has been the recipient of ructions, heartache, anger, sadness, misery plus a smattering of fist fights and court action to boot. You never hear the following in such circumstances, "Eh, Kev, time to go, we've got another drummer. Taxi's waiting." "No problem, Bert. Thanks for everything." "Ello Jim. Drummer's seat's still warm but don't get too comfortable. I give you a year, max, then expect to be fired, out of the blue, and possibly stranded in a foreign country to boot." "Look forward to enhancing my tan then, Bert. Huh, Huh."

I mean, it never happens, does it?

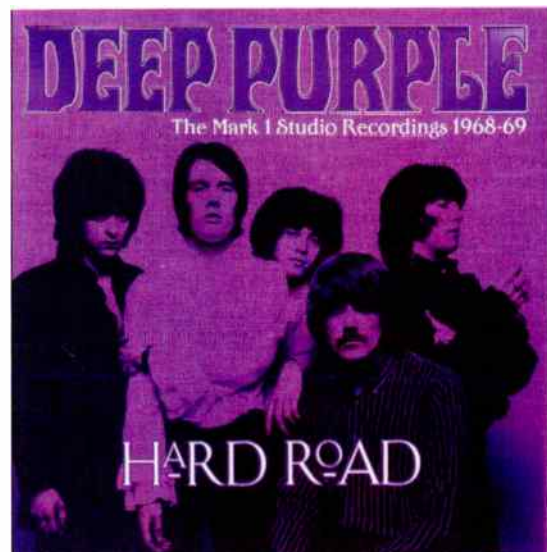
A similar existence has been attached to the members of Deep Purple. This box set shows the Mark I albums (featuring Richie

Blackmore, Rod Evans, Nick Simper, Jon Lord and Ian Paice), packed in a sturdy, yet dinky little box, packed with classic albums such as: 'Shades Of Deep Purple' (1968; mono and stereo mixes); 'The Book Of Taliesyn' (1968; mono and stereo mixes) plus Deep Purple (1969). All arrive with bonus tracks featuring outtakes, rare mixes, remixes, A-sides, B-sides and more.

'Shades...' may lack a sense of direction and it only took three days to produce but it's still a corker. The fundamentals of hard rock are certainly there from the off, although Blackmore sounds rather ill at ease.

'Taliesyn...' is a vehicle for the artistry of Lord's superb keyboard work while 'Deep Purple' saw the transition from prog rock to hard rock.

Fans will appreciate the mono/stereo options. An original mono version of the debut album is a real rarity, for example.



DEEP PURPLE

Hard Road: The Mark 1 Studio
Recordings 1968-69
Parlophone



Fine balance

Astell&Kern fit a balanced output to their AK120 portable digital player, bringing it MkII status. Noel Keywood checks the changes.

Let me get the new AK 120 MkII into context first. It is a pocketable digital player that is powered by internal batteries charged via USB. It plays all digital files, especially high-resolution, in addition to MP3s (etc) via headphones, offering very high sound quality. Crucially, the headphone socket now delivers a CD level output signal of 2V, so it can be connected up direct to a hi-fi amplifier, allowing the AK 120 MkII to be used as a high-resolution digital player that can, of course, play ripped CDs.

Instead of Wolfson DACs, two Cirrus Logic CS4398 DAC chips, one per channel, are used in the new MkII player. Measurement confirmed they achieve higher dynamic range than before, no less than 118dB through the headphone output - that's way above all other portable players and a great many hi-fi DACs.

Size-wise the new AK 120 MkII is narrower but taller than its predecessor, measuring 118mm high, 55mm wide and 15mm deep. Being machined from a single billet of aluminium (anodised), it feels both rigid and strong but also a tad weighty, coming in at 177gms. This makes it pocketable but I'm talking

trouser pockets here, not a shirt pocket.

A bright and finely detailed AMOLED touch screen is used, having 480x800 resolution.

There's a nice simple rotary volume control as well as touch screen volume control, an on/off button and two headphone outputs across the top of the player. The left side has forward/reverse and play/pause transport control buttons but these functions are repeated on the touch screen.

There's 128GB of internal memory and a single microSD card slot that can accept another 128GB maximum.

On my Mac, loading via USB is now through an Android loader, not to mass storage as the original AK 120, so the player's operating system has changed to Android. A Mac won't natively see an Android device but a PC will. When loading measurement files I accidentally deleted music files and these were impossible to recover because recovery software could not see Android controlled hardware, a small potential danger.

Both WAV and FLAC up to 24/192 are played. There's also Apple's AAC, AAC and AIFF formats (m4a), as well as MP3 and WMA of course. OGG and Ape are in there too. Of special interest are DFF and DSF files as Astell&Kern label them: these are DSD files and both DSD64 and DSD 128 sample rates are played, converted to PCM.

The bottom of the case carries a USB micro-B socket for charging and data transfer, but it can be switched to accept incoming digital from a computer, so the player can be used as a high-quality external headphone amplifier. Which brings me to those two headphone sockets.

One is a standard 3.5mm 3-pole socket into which any headphone can be connected. The other is a small 2.5mm 4-pole socket, for balanced headphones. They have completely separate signal cables to each ear piece; there is no shared signal return line. This requires use of a 4-pole connector and unfortunately Astell&Kern use a miniature, almost-unavailable, physically weak 2.5mm jack. I was unable to find a matching plug in the UK and soldered up an adaptor (used in this review) for my Oppo PM1 planar magnetic headphones, using a plug sent from Korea by iRiver. It had to be clamped in a special soldering stand, with light and magnifier, to be soldered with a fine tip iron. So best to be aware that using the AK 120 MkII's balanced output may not be easy.

The balanced output can work through an adaptor lead (PEF12 £699!) terminated with XLR plugs to feed a balanced amplifier input.

There's enough output to drive even the most insensitive headphones loud I found, the PM1s being a good example.

There is an S/PDIF optical output that carries up to 192kHz sample rate data. There's also a Bluetooth



A micro-USB connector (bottom) and microSD card slot at side.

short-range transmitter so music can be sent from the settee to the hi-fi and although compressed this gives convincingly good quality. DSD cannot be streamed and car Bluetooth is not compatible, Astell&Kern state.

Music can be streamed to the player over wi-fi from an MQS Streaming Server, software for PC (XP to 8) and Mac (Lion: OS X 10.7 or later) must be downloaded from Astell&Kern. Or it can be streamed through the USB connection but music cannot be sent in the other direction, from the player to a DAC over USB.

When used as an external DAC/headphone amp the AK120 II would not accept 192kHz sample rate files at 24bit resolution from my Mac (OS X Mavericks), only 24/96. Firmware update info is automatically gathered over wi-fi and the review sample was up to date at review with firmware 1.01.

The internal lithium polymer battery has 3250 mAh capacity, is non-removable and charges via USB's 5V line, so charge time depends upon source current, but a 2A source will charge the player in 4 hours, and double for a 1A source. Playing time is around 10 hours, depending upon screen usage.

SOUND QUALITY

Using Oppo PMI planar magnetic headphones with both unbalanced and balanced leads, showed again that balanced has some obvious advantages. With Queen singing 'Don't Stop Me Now' (24/88.2kHz FLAC) the soundstage was widened with better emphasis from left and right and better separation between instruments, with harmonies clearly at left one minute, then taking up centre stage as they take the lead. There was a less diffuse quality, both in image distinction, as well as temporal definition, so the metronomic timing of kick drum was

pin sharp in the time domain.

That the new MkII has more dynamic push was hammered into me directly I pressed play on Fleetwood Mac's 'Dreams' (24/96 FLAC). I was hit forcefully by Mick Fleetwood's drums that open the track; rolls across the drum set were punchy and perfectly defined. Again there was a super-wide sound stage with gentle tapping on cymbal at far left clearly audible, punctuated by crashes, whilst drums rolled across the stage clearly right to left, all of this clear to follow behind Stevie Nicks' vocals.

No matter how good the Astell&Kerns have become, and how good they are against rival players, a good external mains powered DAC still offers improvement. Connected to an Audiolab M-DAC via optical digital I heard a very similar sound balance from the M-DAC's headphone output, a trifle less sorted across the soundstage due to unbalanced working but also with a tad more dynamic punch and low-level air and insight. The M-DAC uses a ESS Sabre32 and I selected Optimal DD filtering for best impulse behaviour. This comparison does highlight how close the AK120 MkII now gets to a top-quality mains-powered DAC and what you can expect when driving a hi-fi amplifier from its headphone output when

it is switched to Line to bypass the volume control.

CONCLUSION

This is a player a music producer would demand. It separates out musical strands, almost rudely showing what is happening in every part of the physical sound stage at every moment in time. Punchy, dynamic and super clean it is an analytical tool of the highest order



On top are a conventional 3.5mm headphone socket (at right), and rare 2.5mm four pole socket giving balanced output. Also, rotary volume control.

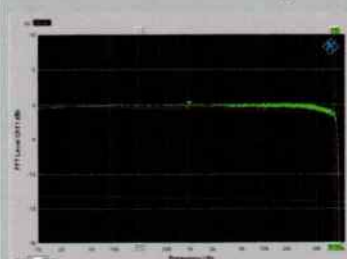
yet svelte in its presentation.

The new AK120 MkII is a Rolls Royce of a player, beautifully built and with wonderful sound. Only the use of a 2.5mm 4-pole headphone jack that's almost unobtainable stands out as a curious impediment to the full exploitation of its abilities. It is very pricey too.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

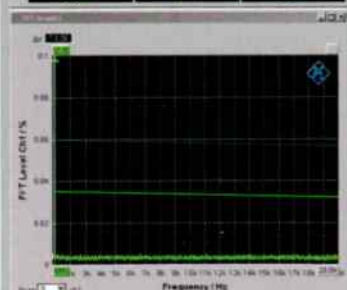
Frequency response extended to a high 85kHz upper limit with 192kHz sample rate data, our analysis of a white noise

FREQUENCY RESPONSE, 192k



DISTORTION, 24bit, -60dB

THD @ 100	Level @ 100	Frequency
0.0280 %	2.1571 mV	997.00 Hz
OFF	OFF	OFF



file shows. This is a very high upper limit by current standards. It shows iRiver have sought to ensure the MkII delivers a performance demonstrably ahead of the original AK120 that reached 73kHz.

In the same vein EIAJ Dynamic Range has been improved from a very respectable 115dB - excellent for a portable - to 118dB, a figure that is approaching some of the best stand-alone hi-fi DACs.

Headphone output has increased too, now measuring 2V, up from 1.6V of the original player - and plenty enough to drive even insensitive planar magnetic headphones (e.g. Oppo, Audeze) loud.

The AK120 MkII has improved upon the original player in all areas and is now even further ahead of all around it. It has a fabulous performance for a portable. **NK**

Frequency response	4Hz-85kHz
Separation	101dB
Noise	-117dB
Distortion (24bit,-60dB)	0.028%
Dynamic range (EIAJ)	118dB
Output	2V

ASTELL&KERN AK120 II £1450



EXCELLENT - extremely capable

VERDICT

Fabulous sound and build quality. A deeply sophisticated portable player.

FOR

- sound quality
- build quality
- DSD replay

AGAINST

- expensive
- 2.5mm balanced jack
- Android interface

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"the Sabre32 DAC has a smoothness that makes listening a pleasure"



Noel Keywood

I have become an ESS Sabre32 DAC fan I must admit. My ears tell me it gives superior sound quality to all else. I am not alone it seems: the Sabre is becoming ever more popular amongst manufacturers as they fall for its sonic charms. Oppo's BDP-105D Blu-ray player in this issue illustrated yet again how products built around the Sabre can be ground breakers. But as their numbers increase so do peculiar design quirks, as I see them, due to design and cost pressures. Here's a look at what the Sabre32 has been designed to do, and what you commonly find it actually does after being stuffed into a box. There are some big differences.

Over the last few years, differences between DACs have been subtle; in the Sabre32 they are less so. It has quite distinct subjective properties that hook me every time. There's a lack of digital glare and a smoothness that makes listening easy on the ear.

At the same time there is immense low-level detailing that makes for a sound less barren than usual, even from CD where 16bit imposes a low-level limit. This typically makes live vocals, where a microphone is picking up subtle ambient cues, sound more dimensional and atmospheric: there's a person at the microphone, a performer - not a detached mechanical voice.

From a technical perspective it's interesting - to me at least! - that our Rohde&Schwarz UPV audio analyser clearly shows the major advantage this chip has over all others currently available: enormous dynamic range. In the BDP-105D this measured 123dB - and any figure above 120dB is, currently, stratospheric. Most DAC chips manage up to 120dB with 24bit, so the ESS Sabre32 is quantifiably ahead,

and this is when it is working at half of its full potential, four of the eight parallel processing channels in a ESS9018 being used per audio channel, left and right. For cost reasons this is how it is normally configured in a stereo DAC, such as Audiolab's M-DAC and Q-DAC, or a 9012 is used. The BDP-105D uses two ESS9018s in fact, one for the 7.1 channel AV audio output and another for the stereo output, a lavish arrangement.

It is possible to run all eight of the Sabre32's channels in parallel, however, to achieve a massive (quoted) 132dB of dynamic range. The Resonance Invicta Mirus convertor we reviewed in the September 2014 issue does this, meaning two ESS Sabre32s must be used, but the end result was an astonishing 131dB measured dynamic range, our UPV analyser showed, putting it way ahead of all other stereo DACs. But two chips, at around \$35 apiece, when bought in quantity, inevitably raises price.

ESS show AD797 audio amplifier chips used between the Sabre32 and the outside world in their development boards and balanced XLR has a chip less than unbalanced (phono socket) output, explaining why it gives the best results. If the 'box designer' (he who stuffs!) decides to use another chip, distortion or noise may suffer, so the real life performance of a Sabre32-equipped product does depend upon design decisions that may be swayed by budget and here is where our measurements reveal differences. A Benchmark HGC DAC2 currently under test for the next issue is swinging a low 3V via XLR and there are visible distortion products, so the output arrangement looks to be different to usual.

The Sabre32 comes with a 32bit internal resolution volume control

and slow and fast digital PCM filters, as well as DSD decoding with four internal filter options. Diligent/knowledgeable engineers can program in their own filter coefficients to come up with any desired filter characteristic.

To date only Audiolab have programmed up audio filters, mainly because their designer John Westlake knows what to do and how to do it. Few digital audio engineers have a deep enough understanding of analogue audio to know how this is going to impact sound quality or whether it is even worthwhile doing, although ESS App notes clearly show their slow filter has far lower group delay than the sharp filter, for example.

Purely on the basis of listening, I'd choose a slow filter with better time domain impulse behaviour over a fast filter that measures better any time, and so would others I know when faced with this decision. Yet in general you will find the fast filter is used by default and the ESS filters included on the chip are usually made unavailable to users.

Potential buyers may want to take a view on this. There's no filter option on the Oppo, for example, but as it has so much else on-board and costs just over £1000 this can be excused, methinks.

Audiolab have seven filters on the £400 Q-DAC (but no DSD), Benchmark have no filter options on their £1650 DAC2, whilst Invicta instigate ESS's fast and slow option on the £4499 Mirus. There are big differences here.

Worse, to confuse things, I think ESS's own filters are not very useful, differences between them being too small.

So there's a way to go yet with the Sabre32 and leeway for digital audio to get better than we know it today. It's all in the chips! ●



Xtension 9 SuperPack

The Xtension 9 SuperPack from Pro-Ject Audio Systems represents one of the finest high-end turntable packages available today. Drawing inspiration from Pro-Ject's first ever 'money-no-option' turntable, the Xtension 12, this streamlined version boasts advanced technologies and phenomenal value for money.

The high-gloss plinth (available in Black, Red or White) is an MDF construction filled with metal granulate, making it high-mass and non-resonant just like the platter, which is made from a special alloy lined with Thermo-Plastic Elastomers and topped with recycled vinyl records. The whole turntable is magnetically decoupled from a rack by three specially designed feet.

The Xtension 9 SuperPack's motor efficiency is improved by the built-in speed control module, and the whole package is finished off by the stunning 9CC Evolution Tonearm and pre-fitted Ortofon Quintet Black.

Available in the UK for **£2,200** (UK SRP)



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"Punk might have seemed to be revolutionary but, in retrospect, it wasn't"



Paul Rigby

It's odd, isn't it? We strive to be different and yet we end up being the same. The older I get the more like my dad I become. I laugh and I shock myself at how much like my father it sounds. I raise an eyebrow in a certain way, catch the look in the mirror and see my father. It's scary.

Music is the same in many ways. It moves in looping circles. People are always looking for the 'New Thing', the next new fad, a new type of music and the next revolutionary genre that will re-write how music will be played and heard.

But music always comes home. Returning back to its roots, even if it might do that with added tweaks. Yes, there are major musical genres but only a few that are truly different.

Take Rock, for example. You may investigate the boundaries and hidden corners of the genre but, basically, heavy metal, blues rock, post rock and jazz rock are all part of the same musical monster.

It's like any mature 'product'. Once the basic form has been explored, people can't help but tinker, twist, modify, prod, push and mould but the roots to rock remain.

I was struck by this when chatting recently to rockabilly fan and successful female solo artist Imelda May.

She mentioned that punk might have seemed to have been revolutionary at the time if you were there (I was and that's just what it seemed to be at the time) but, in retrospect, it wasn't.

It was more evolutionary, in fact, and it was just another variant of Rock. It could be traced back to rock's roots.

It was fun and energetic but it merely focused our minds on what had already been possible for years (in terms of music, publishing, fashion

or social interaction).

This combination of tweaking and exploration of musical genres and so-called revelations was brought home to me when I received a batch of new CDs from veteran English record label, BGO (<http://www.bgo-records.com>).

Featuring a wide catalogue of artists and genres, it's easy to browse the company's lists and see the splintering and octopus-like evolution of rock as a genre.

A clue to the point of all of this can be found in the introductory paragraph. Part of the reason for the splintering and morphing of rock is down to our parents and our childhood influences.

Childhood (from zero to eighteen years of age, say) is terribly influential. That is where we soak in the majority of life's information. Information that will inform our future.

This is also why you always hear that rock artist X, for example, featured country elements on his new album because X's mother or father played a lot of country in the house when he was a kid.

You blend your current observations with your childhood influences to create something 'different'. As such, though, you never move forward, in a straight line, but in swirling loops moving backwards to move forwards, like a wave on an oceanic tide.

One BGO artist Albert Hammond (featuring on BGO albums such as 'When I Need You' and 'Somewhere In America') commented on one release, "I wanted to go back to my roots, to Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochran, Roy Orbison and Elvis and to all the people I have played all my life and are the reason why I am doing what I am doing". There's the circle again, the loop.

Another BGO artist, Sha Na Na (who appear on the LP 'The Night Is Still Young'), made their name and their debut at the legendary Woodstock festival.

The whole point of the band's revivalist existence, however, is the older, traditional rock'n'roll/doo-wop. Even seemingly different genres have been morphed into rock.

"Fairport (Convention) was in the dressing room at University" said band member Ashley Hutchings of a gig in the late sixties, "getting ready to play and Sandy (Denny) started to sing 'A Sailor's Life' – acoustic guitar...voice – as she would in a folk club years previously".

"We picked up our instruments and we jammed along. It sounded really good to us. We'd not really done anything like this before".

"It came time to go onstage. We said, 'Ok, let's start with that.' We went on stage, played it and improvised the whole piece. It was magical. We never looked back".

"There's very few times when you can say in music that 'This was the first.' But you can put your finger on that evening as the beginning of British folk-rock".

You can hear more of Hutchings musical forays on a series of BGO CDs featuring The Albion Band on titles such as 'Rise Up Like The Sun'.

Then there's the blues which Rock also assimilated into blues-rock in the late sixties.

But you talk to someone like Canned Heat's drummer Fito de la Parra – who played magnificent blues on BGO albums such as 'Canned Heat' and 'Boogie With Canned Heat' – and discover that the people he most wanted to meet were the likes of soul legend Ray Charles and jazz greats such as Gene Krupa and Buddy Rich!

As I said, it's all loops and circles, people, loops and circles. ●

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"I wonder whether stereo is actually as accurate a presentation of sound as mono is"



Tony Bolton

One of the interesting aspects of this job is coming across a piece of equipment that causes me to start questioning previously held perceptions. I am not talking about a product that merely does a particular aspect of its job better than a previous example. Rather I am talking about equipment such as the Miyajima Labs Premium BE II cartridge reviewed in this issue.

In this case, the sound is presented in a somewhat different way to the majority of other modern mono cartridges. It has considerably more presence and an air of naturalness that I've not heard from other modern mono cartridges. It is a sound that bears a closer resemblance to that of the Decca mono magnetic cartridges from the 1950s than it does to the sound of a modern moving coil cartridge. There is a fundamental correctness about the speed of the presentation of sounds, their decay and the description of the beat of the music that leaves me feeling that a lot of modern cartridges have what is actually a rather 'mannered' approach.

The thing that is intriguing me at the moment is how realistic this is. Is the modern take on sound more accurate than this presentation?

Because at the same time I am also wondering whether stereo is actually as accurate a presentation of sound as mono is. I will explain.

Most of what we call stereo recordings are not true stereo. They are a collection of mono signals recorded from a series of microphones, usually recording either a single instrument or a small bank of them. The sound is then presented to the listener spread across a stereo soundscape by artful usage of panning and echo to get differing left to right positions and varying levels of depth

in the soundstage.

True stereo recordings are those made with a crossed pair of microphones used in the Blumlein technique or a by employing an array such as the Decca Tree, capturing the entire soundscape in one take.

Opus 3 Records of Sweden offer superb examples of the Blumlein style of recording technique and having listened to some of their master tape recordings I would say that there are some very fundamental differences between what we call stereo and what actually is stereo.

We have become very used to hearing an artificially created soundscape that is wide, spacious and has everyone on the soundstage nicely separated so you feel that you can tell exactly where everyone is. I comment on such things quite regularly in my reviews and thoroughly enjoy the way in which this style of sonic presentation engages with my imagination.

However, it is not a realistic representation of how the sound is spread out at a real performance. In the last year I have attended classical orchestral and choral concerts, one opera and gigs ranging from jazz through to electronica and none of them has had the sound presented in this perfectly focussed and balanced way.

In general, the middle part of the sonic image in real life tends to be more grouped together, with the left and right edges spread a little further out, whereas most modern recordings will have the image spread evenly across the soundstage.

I would also query whether we usually hear a live event in stereo (in the form that we think of stereo sound these days), or whether the sound that reaches our ears, having been focussed by the shape of the venue, is actually closer to what I call widescreen mono.

In fact the only times where I was fully aware of the spatial effects of stereo at a live event has been when listening to electronica relayed through a speaker system, which is a totally artificial construct in the first place. Natural instruments interact with the venue and the sounds tend to blend somewhat by the time they reach the audience.

What really brought this home to me was hearing some jazz played live recently and then listening to the same tunes played on LP afterwards. I have both stereo and mono copies of the tracks in question (although obviously not by the band that I had just seen) and found that the listening experience of being at the live event was more closely matched by listening to the mono version rather than the stereo one. The latter seemed artificial in the presentation, almost a little too artful in its creativity, whereas the mono cut had the same grounded, like it or lump it honesty of the unamplified live performance.

So this leads me to wonder, are we being seduced by electronic trickery into listening to artificially constructed soundscapes and, if we are, then what exactly are we trying to reproduce on our hi-fi systems? Is it a recreation of the live listening experience, is it the recording event that took place in the studio, or are we creating this "never never land" listening experience of the perfect concert, secure in the knowledge that it could never actually exist?

We all want to extract as much musical information as we can from our music collections – this is why magazines like this one exist. But whether we are actually just making the recordings sound good or are pursuing an honest representation of live music being performed in front of us may well be two very different things. ●

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All is A1-OK

Martin Pipe is enthused by the Furutech-made ADL A1 'micro-DAC'

Remember the two-box CD player? A transport spun the disc, recovering the digital data that would be turned into music by an accompanying digital-to-analogue (DAC) converter box.

Today, we live in an age of ever-shrinking electronics - computing

power that not so long ago filled an air-conditioned room is now fits a smartphone in your jacket pocket. What a pity these 'jacks-of-all-trades' seldom sound particularly good.

And so I was intrigued to learn of the ADL (Alpha Design Labs) A1, a pocket-sized battery-powered DAC/headphone amp that can stream music from the USB port of an Android device (there's also the X1, its Apple-happy equivalent). Thanks to its Cirrus CS4392K converter chip,

the £435 A1 natively supports DSD (2.8MHz and 5.6MHz) and 16- or 24-bit PCM audio with sample rates of up to 192kHz. A range of top-mounted LEDs indicate the currently-active mode. It's supplied with a number of USB connecting cables, including short ones that hook up to smartphones and tablets and longer ones that enable the A1 to act as a computer DAC.

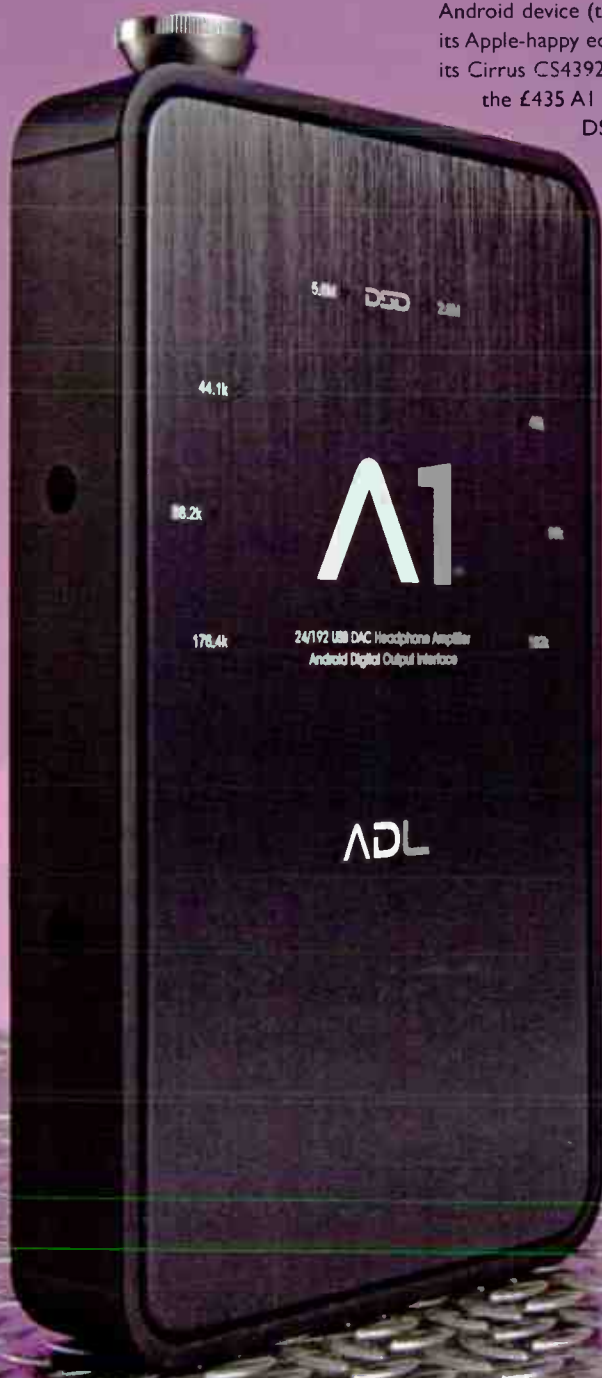
The A1 is about the same shape and size as my Samsung Galaxy S4 Mini, and as both are thin they easily fit in my pocket,

together (ADL even supplies a band to bind them). I could use the smartphone like the transport of a two-box CD player, streaming music of my choice to the A1 and its audiophile electronics. No more lousy headphone drive chips - the possibility of playing hi-res music on the move is an enticing one.

Not surprisingly I was excited. However, this soon turned to disappointment. I just couldn't get the two devices to talk to each other. The caveat for Android users is that their device needs to support a USB protocol known as 'On The Go' (OTG). And while the full-sized Galaxy S4 is OTG-conversant, the Mini isn't. If you're planning to use an A1 in this role, check first that your device is compatible (a list of tested models is on the website).

But fear not: as the A1 is capable of more. As just mentioned, this pocket wonder will act as a USB DAC with various computer platforms - Windows XP or higher (downloadable driver needed), or Mac OS X. ASIO and asynchronous transfer are supported. The desired input is selected with a slide switch - which has a third position. This accepts the input from a Minidisc-type 3.5mm optical input, enabling the A1 to be used as a DAC with conventional digital-audio sources like CD transports.

In addition to the headphone socket is a 3.5mm line output, which is also adjustable in level via the front-panel analogue volume knob (which also turns the A1 on or off). As a result, you'll be able to drive



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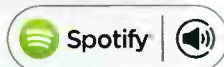
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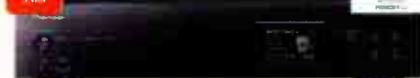
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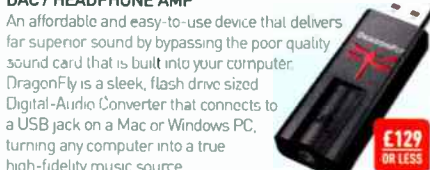
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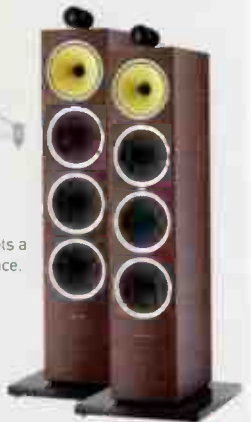
2.5 way speaker system combining excellent dynamics with a naturally rhythmic sonic character and light, controlled bass. The Silver 6 is an outstanding communicator of music and film audio.

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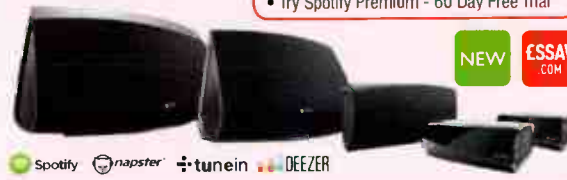
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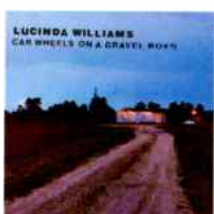
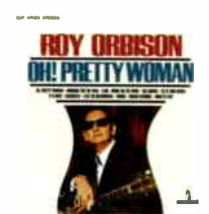
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CLEARAUDIO OVATION TURNTABLE 83
Tony Bolton sings the praises of Clear Audio's latest turntable

MIYAJIMA ARTISAN CARTRIDGE 89
A handcrafted moving coil cartridge from Japan makes a big impression on Tony Bolton

news



MOVING FORWARD

New from this important vinyl outfit is Ray Charles 'At Newport' (1958) where Charles gives it everything he has in this raucous set.

Two connected LPs now. The first is Booker T. & The MG's 'Hip Hug-Her' (1967) featuring solid Southern soul. Featuring bassist Duck Dunn, this is a strong album including the mid-tempo Motown track 'Get Ready'.

Next is Wilson Pickett's classic 'In The Midnight Hour' (1965). Another slice of Southern soul but one featuring songs co-written with Steve Cropper, guitarist from Booker T. & The MGs.

From a year earlier, 1964, and the Four Tops' superb debut originally released via Motown. Lead singer Levi Stubbs is on fine form.

Another album of early songs but only recently recreated by the son of Roy Orbison. 'Oh! Pretty Woman' (2013) features the hit single plus rarities and unreleased tracks.

Also look out for Lucinda Williams' 'Car Wheels On A Gravel Road' (1998), the first time that it has appeared on vinyl; Tony Joe White's classic 1971 self-titled, third LP, full of soul-dripping ballads; Gram Parsons' 'The Early Years Volume 1 & 2' was originally released on Sierra Records; the

Wu-Tang Clan's 'W' (2000), an under-hyped, spartan, inconsistent LP that is full of masterful highlights. Finally, Chicken Shack fans be aware that '100 Ton Chicken' (1969) is on the streets. Not the band's best, it has to be said.

JAZZ IT UP!

From Pure Pleasure

(www.purepleasurerecords.com) is Milt Jackson's 'Sunflower' (1973), his best for the CTI label but feels more like a group effort with Herbie Hancock, Freddie Hubbard, Ron Carter and Billy Cobham. Also look out for 'This Is Chris' (1955), Chris Conner's final Bethlehem recordings. Cool yet emotional.

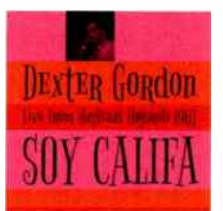
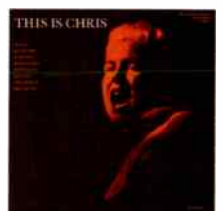
Next is The Dave Brubeck Quartet and 'West Side Story And Other Works', also called 'Bernstein Plays Brubeck Plays Bernstein' (WaxTime), a successful melding of jazz and classical.

'Mingus Revisited' (WaxTime), previously 'Pre Bird' features music before Mingus clapped ears on Charlie Parker. Typically progressive sounds.

The Kenny Wheeler Quintet offer 'Flutter By, Butterfly' via SoulNote, complete with a free included CD. Reflecting his talent as a player of both cornet and flugelhorn, Wheeler also presents a suite of excellent tunes.

Also look out for Dexter Gordon's 'Soy Califa, Live From Magleås Højskole 1967' (Gearbox, www.gearboxrecords.com) a Danish TV performance recorded on August 5 1967. Wonderful stuff, forceful and full of energy.

Finally, Don Cherry's 'Live In Stockholm' (Caprice; www.capricerecords.se), is partly improvised with glorious partly composed selections acting as relief.



SPINEFARM ROCK

Check out, from Spinefarm (spinefarmrecords.com), Seether's new album 'Isolate And Medicate'. It's very Nickleback but with added colour and variety.



THIRTY TIGERS TRIO

Three from Thirty Tigers (thirtytigers.com) starting with St. Paul And The Broken Bones' garage-sounding 'Half The City'. James Brown-esque retro soul. Trampled By Turtles' seventh album, 'Wild Animals', a downtempo bluegrass/folk LP is moody and ethereal. John Fullbright's 'Songs' is an excellent collection. Very Randy Newman or even Merle Haggard. Sparse, open and warm.



GOING MOBILE

New from Mobile Fidelity (www.mofi.com) are a batch of Bob Dylan releases, each offering excellent mastering: 'Highway 61 Revisited' (1965), his brilliant, sound and personality changing landmark LP; 'New Morning' (1970), an idiosyncratic and charming outing plus 'Before The Flood' (1974) a double album celebration of the 1974 tour with The Band, featuring reimagined versions of old favourites.

There's also three from Judas Priest: 'Stained Class' (1978), an important heavy metal LP that showed incredible band focus; 'Killing Machine' (1978), a fan favourite that moved beyond 'Stained Class' to encompass broader themes plus 'Screaming For Vengeance' (1982), the band's US breakthrough and MTV favourite and one of the best heavy metal albums of all time.

Also look out for Miles Davies jazz classic 'Bitches Brew' (1970); Bill Evans/Jim Hall's 'Undercurrent' (1962) and Billy Joel's 'The Nylon Curtain' (1982).



...AND FINALLY

Mixing funk with soul and jazz is Crowd Company's 'Now or Never', full of catchy riffs and those traditional smoking grooves.

New from Paul Weller is 'More Modern Classics' (Virgin), a compilation and sequel to the 1998 'Modern Classics' hits collection. This package see a heap of hits plus A-sides that were not.

Onto Morrissey and his latest 'World Peace Is None Of Your Business' (Harvest) that is direct, holds the attention but lacks elegance.

Beautiful South's Paul Heaton and Jacqui Abbot team up for 'What Have We Become' (Virgin) that, oddly, does have lyrical elegance...of The Smiths, in fact. Majestic and wry pop.

Norwegian trumpeter Arve Henriksen a modern day Miles Davies, releases 'The Nature Of Connections' (Rune Grammofon; www.runegrammofon.com) which moves more towards Nordic folk and contemporary music. It's still fascinating.

Misha Hering is Memnon SA. New album, 'Citadel' (Breed Media), remarkably, mixes doom metal with classical arrangements. Bleak, isolated and stunning.

Zoo Harmonics' 'Business In the Front/Party In The Back' (Pet Harmony) offers happy punk with a bouncy, jolly pace with lots of rhythmic interest.

Hooray For Earth's 'Racy' (Dovecote; www.dovecoterecords.com) has a distinctly underground 80s indie production feel with melodic pop vocalisations, full of hooks.

Finally, Bombadil has released 'Tarpits And Canyonlands' (Ramseur; www.ramsuerrecords.com) as a double album, multi-gatefold edition recorded direct from 24bit/96kHz digital files. Including fourteen art prints, this alt.folk pop is both winsome and earnest in equal measure.



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Standing Ovation!

Tony Bolton gets into the groove with the Clearaudio Ovation turntable.



German turntable manufacturer Clearaudio have developed two distinct styles of turntable. There are the sculptural designs, such as my old Master Solution and the replacement Innovation models, and a range of more conventionally styled decks of which the Ovation, launched in October 2012, is the top model.

The deck costs from £4075, depending upon the finish chosen (black, wood and black, wood and silver or black and silver are available) and the choice of arm is left to the purchaser. Clearaudio supply a range of mounting plates so most makes are catered for. For this review we chose Clearaudio's Clarify arm, costing £950. This 9-inch arm is made of woven carbon fibre and uses magnets in the bearing assembly to

create a frictionless bearing. It comes with a 1m long cable built in so there is an uninterrupted run of lead from the cartridge tags to the phonostage. It will take cartridges weighing between 2.5g and 17g so should accommodate most designs satisfactorily. A little care is needed in setting this up since the height of the arm above the platter has a very big effect on the downforce setting. (See Noel's comments below). The anti-skating adjustment is unusual in being accessed from underneath the arm. It is factory preset to 2.4g and can be adjusted by rotating a bolt using the provided Allen key.

As mentioned, the deck is conventionally styled but the

components that make it up are less so.

The black finished aluminium plates on the top and bottom sandwich a layer of 'PanzerHolz'. This is made of layers of wood that are compressed under such pressure that they are bullet-proof. Within this sandwich of wood and metal there is a resonance damping layer of approximately 100,000 stainless steel balls.

The DC motor is integrated into the chassis and is controlled by four blue illuminated buttons on the front left of the plinth. These select Off or the three speeds on offer, which can be fine tuned using the pots located at the back of the plinth near the power input from the wall-mounted transformer plug.

Set-up is fairly straightforward. There is a machined aluminium subplatter that must be placed on to the Ceramic Magnetic Bearing assembly, after putting a few drops of the supplied oil onto the bearing. The flat drive belt is then placed around the platter. At this point the inner platter is riding higher than the motor so the belt must be placed on at an angle. Adding the mass of the CNC-machined black POM platter lowers the platter assembly so it rides at the correct height.

Underneath is a sensor for the optical speed control which monitors the rotational speed of the platter via an infra-red strobe.

The deck is supported on three spiked feet, which are adjustable for leveling purposes and since it weighs 13.5kg and occupies a space 420 x 350 x 140mm, should fit on the majority of racks and wall shelves.

I set the deck up in place of the Master Solution on the downstairs system, and also transferred over the Benz Wood SL cartridge from its customary resting place on the Magnify arm so I could compare the two decks' performance.

I spent a couple of evenings exploring the new deck's capabilities on my usual ramble through the



The DC motor is built into the plinth and drives an alloy subplatter

record collection before getting really analytical about the sound.

I found it gave superb results with classical music. The recording of Mendelssohn's 'Hebrides Overture', also known as 'Fingie's Cave', was displayed on a very large and airy soundstage. I would say that the edges of this were slightly wider than when played though the Master

I enjoyed the openness and space within the presentation of this music that allowed me to explore all of the differing strands of electric and acoustic guitars, synthesizers and vocals. Treble seemed unfettered in reaching up high and the mid-band was well balanced and integrated into the sounds around it. Vocals were particularly well-defined.

"the presentation of the beat drove the music along in quite a sprightly manner with quite a punch to the sound"

Solution, with the depth of the image being about the same. The placement of the differing instrumental groups within the orchestra were clearly defined and I felt as though I was sitting on a level with, and quite close to, the musicians.

This piece of music ebbs and flows in intensity as it recreates the impression of the sea swirling through the rocky structure of the caves and this dynamic change seemed quite faithfully captured by the Ovation, with possibly a wider range between quiet and loud than I would have heard through the Master Solution.

After this I played the 30th Anniversary edition of Pink Floyd's 'The Dark Side Of The Moon'. The steady pulsing of the heartbeat that runs through this album was defined and precise, with a metronomic steadiness that caused the Chario subwoofers to pulsate gently. It was not overblown but reassuringly solid in the presentation of deep bass.

I finished the microgroove section of my listening with Primal Scream's 1991 opus 'Screamadelica'. This combines conventional guitar riffs with early electronica, overlaid with both natural and processed vocals. Again, the staging was solid and focussed and the presentation of the beat drove the music along in quite a sprightly manner, with a real punch to the sound when the music required it.

Since three speeds are provided as standard on this deck I transferred over the Ortofon 2M 78 cartridge from the SME M2-9R where it normally lives and placed Muggsy Spanier's 1938 version of 'I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate' on the platter. On pressing the appropriate button, 78rpm was attained quickly and I lowered the needle into the groove. The music bounded out of the speakers with far more presence than it would have had on the Master Solution. I felt that the shape of the sounds was better



The arm is supported by magnetic bearings. Tracking force is adjusted by rotating the knob at the back of the arm. The arm height can be adjusted by slackening the hex nut, accessed through the hole on the mounting plate, and raising or lowering the arm by hand.

described and the timing of the rhythm was a little tighter. I would also say that surface noise was a little reduced, which may well be down to the smoother rotation of the platter courtesy of the DC power supply and the electronic speed control.

It is very apparent to me that the new speed control system and the Ceramic Magnetic Bearing assembly play a major part in elevating the performance of this deck close to that of an older model that was considerably more expensive when new. How much is due to each of these components individually I don't know but having discovered that the bearing assembly is available for retro-fitting to most older Clearaudio decks I shall try and explore this.

In the meantime, I am thoroughly impressed with this record player. It is easy to set up and use, good looking and has an air of unmistakable quality about it, from the standard of finish, which is excellent, through to the unobtrusive but quick way it gets the platter up to the chosen speed. Sonically it is excellent, offering a detailed and immersive presentation of music that never seems to get tiring to listen to and has a flow to the rhythm that I can only describe as quite natural.

It is expensive, but quality and longevity are not cheap and this deck offers both.

The magnetic bearing assembly is protected by the white ceramic shaft. The infra-red sensor for the speed control can be seen in front of the bearing.



MUSIC USED

Mendelssohn 'Overtures', Moshe Atzmon conducting the New Philharmonia Orchestra. EMI Records Ltd. ESO 7003. 1976.

Muggsy Spanner and His Ragtime Band. 'I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate.' HMV. B.9047. 1938.

Pink Floyd. 'The Dark Side Of The Moon.' Harvest records. SHVL 804. 1973.

Primal Scream. 'Screamadelica.' Creation Records. CRELP 076. 1991.

SYSTEM USED

Benz Micro Wood SL and Ortofon 2M 78 cartridges

Leema Acoustics Agena phonostage,

Tucana II amplifier

Chario Ursa Major loudspeakers



The woven carbon fibre construction of the Clarify arm can be clearly seen.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The turntable revolved -0.7% slow, but speed can be adjusted. Basic rotation-rate wow at 0.55Hz (33rpm) was reasonably low, measuring 0.15%. There was some flutter too, again measuring 0.15%. Total weighted wow and flutter measured 0.1%, a good result, if not exceptional. The Ovation won't have the

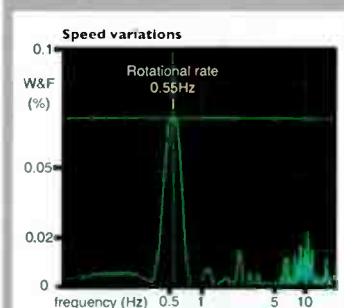
rock solid stability of Direct Drive or Funk Firm's Vector drive, but it is better than most belt drives.

Setting down force on the arm was made difficult by the non-linear behaviour of the magnetic bearing system; stylus force varied by around 0.4gms over 1mm of height, so setting 1.6gms on our stylus gauge 1.5mm above an LP surface had the stylus skating over a disc, because actual downforce was 1gm or so. Downforce must be set at exactly record surface height, a stringent requirement.

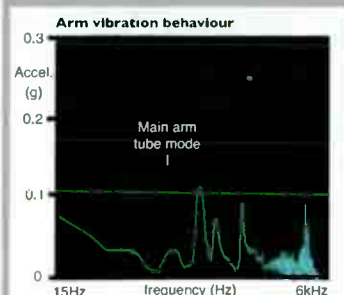
Analysis with a Bruel&Kjaer accelerometer attached to the headshell shows the arm tube is well damped. A main mode at 300Hz suggests a stiff tube and there is one narrow peak at 545Hz, but it encompasses little energy. Similarly the headshell is free from high frequency vibration.

The arm's downforce system is questionable, but the arm tube and headshell perform well; the turntable is good but not exceptional. NK

SPEED VARIATIONS (W&F)



ARM VIBRATION



Speed	-0.7%
Wow	0.15%
Flutter	0.15%
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PRO-JECT MEASURE IT 2 £90.00

The picture on the box of the Measure it 2 stylus force gauge from Pro-Ject Audio does not do justice to the product housed inside.

On opening the box I found a well made case with a lined and padded interior which housed a screwdriver, batteries, calibration weight and an alloy-cased set of digital pickup scales.

The scales measure 122 x 27 x 55mm and weigh 170g so will compress the suspension of a Sondek and the like to about the same level as the weight of a record.

The instructions say that it is accurate to +/- 0.002g and will weigh up to 5g. This happens to be the mass of the calibration weight that is supplied and the instructions are very clear on how to employ this.

In use I found it was consistent

in the readings that it displayed when I repeatedly lowered the pickup down, but it could fluctuate slightly if the stylus landed in a different part of the white weighing area. For absolute consistency it is better to aim for the black dot in the middle of this.

I am impressed with the Measure it 2. It is very well presented, solidly made and the touch sensitive screen seemed to be responsive but not over sensitive, so that minimal pressure on the screen produced the desired results without upsetting the equilibrium of my Sondek's suspension.

Priced at £90 it is not cheap but is of considerably better quality and presentation than the less expensive, and smaller, plastic designs.

It is certainly something that I would be very pleased to find in my Christmas stocking! **TB**

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SOUNDBITES



PRO-JECT BRUSH IT £15.00

The carbon fibre anti-static record cleaning brush is something that has sat at the side of most people's turntables for so long that it tends to get taken for granted.

My one was a case in point. It has resided on the shelf beside the Sondek for several years and is used to brush down the turntable mat before each listening session and for cleaning any records that have stray dust motes daring to settle on the

grooves.

It has had an easy life since a record doesn't get near my turntable unless it has been through a record cleaning machine.

Even so, when I compared the condition of it to the new example that I have here, branded with the Project logo, I was surprised at the ragged appearance of the bristles on my old one.

An examination with a magnifying glass confirmed that years of usage

had worn away the previously neat ends of the carbon fibre filaments.

I cleaned a few records with both of them, trying a few from the "to-clean" pile that were dusty but not really dirty, and found that the new example seemed to extract more dust from the grooves than the old one. On vacuum-cleaned records there was also more detritus showing on the newer example.

My old brush has now been demoted to hi-fi dusting duties and the new one now keeps my records dust free.

This type of brush is one of those items that we are so familiar with that we tend to forget about replacing them periodically.

The Project Brush IT is a well made example of the breed and at £15.00 is reasonably priced so it is worth treating your records to a new brush like this one. **TB**

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Mono master

Tony Bolton explores the capabilities of a dedicated handmade mono cartridge from a specialist Japanese manufacturer



If I was to describe to you a pickup cartridge that tracked at between 2g and 4g, was mono and was fitted with a 1.0 mil (0.0010") conical stylus then you could easily be forgiven for thinking that this review was about some ancient cartridge from the early days of microgroove. But you would be very wrong. This specification belongs to the Miyajima Laboratories Premium BE II cartridge which is a current production model and second from the top of the company's range of six mono cartridges.

The name will not be familiar to most British readers since, until Timestep took on the distribution in July this year, they had never been represented on these shores. I had heard of them, following their garnering some prestigious awards in America, and have been waiting for the opportunity to hear one.

Each cartridge is handmade by a team of six people at the factory in Fukuoka, Japan, under the direction of Noriyuki Miyajima who founded the company. Even though they have been in production for only three decades, their first product was a dedicated mono cartridge, designed from scratch, rather than being an adaptation of a stereo design.

The Premium BE II cartridge under review here shares its African Blackwood body (otherwise known

as Mpingo; a material used in flutes, clarinets and oboes) with the range-topping Zero model. The bodies are individually milled in-house on Roland Camm-3 CNC milling machines. The generator is a unique patented design called 'Miyajima Vertical Axis Concentration' which only produces electrical energy in response to horizontal movements of the cantilever.

This is very short and disappears up into the body vertically. It can be rotated in the horizontal axis without doing any damage to the internal wiring, so careless handling need not be the disaster that it can be

"the sound was vivid, very alive and superbly driven..."

with other designs. Being a moving coil design the stylus is not user replaceable.

The stylus, as previously mentioned, is conical and of 1.0 mil diameter, so is not suited to playing modern mono pressings. Other cartridges in the Miyajima range are fitted with a 0.7mil stylus that would make them suitable for playing the likes of the new Beatles box set

and post 1970s reissues of older recordings. This cartridge is dedicated to playing original mono grooves which are slightly larger than the modern variant.

From what I have managed to ascertain, the mono groove size was reduced from the late 1960s and early 1970s as original mono cutting lathes went out of use and stereo cutting heads were employed for cutting reissue records from most manufacturers.

I initially set the cartridge up

on the Clearaudio Magnify arm but halfway through the 30 hour recommended running in period I transferred it to the SME M2-9R which is also in place on the Master Solution, while the Magnify served other needs.

Setting it up is very easy since the cartridge body is square edged and the stylus and cantilever are very visible. The cartridge weighs 11.8g

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so presented no balancing problems with either arm used. I experimented with the tracking force and, after a few hours of listening, settled on the recommended 3.5g as producing the most balanced sound.

Running-in was a long drawn out process and I would say that every bit of the 30 hours is required to get this cartridge fully on song.

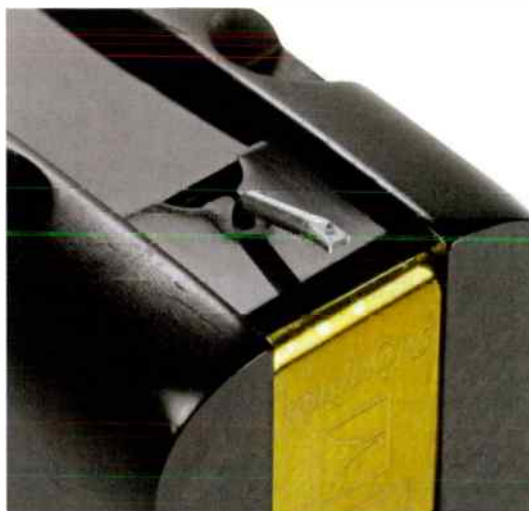
Having achieved a stable sound I started off with one of my earliest LPs, a 1951 Philips first pressing of Tchaikovsky's '5th Symphony'. I've had this copy since my teens and have always loved the performance for the way Van Kempen gets the orchestra striding out the beat in the 4th movement, creating a sensation of an unstoppable force propelling the tune to its conclusion.

I was delighted to discover that the Premium BE II transmitted this rhythmic intensity superbly, with the sort of snap to the pacing that I would normally expect when playing this record on an idler-driven deck, not a belt drive. The attack of notes was clean and precise and their stopping points were equally well defined. I was also impressed with the way the needle dug a pretty full-bodied sound out of these ancient grooves. Most modern cartridges are not kind to this record and it sounds elderly and frail when played with

trusty first pressing of 'Please Please Me'. This had been through the wars before I was given it but when tracked with a sympathetic cartridge, such as mono Ortofons or Benz Micros, can sound very good with tolerable levels of background noise. Playing it with this cartridge was revelatory.

The sound was vivid, very alive and superbly driven with less intrusion from the appalling state of the groove walls than I have ever heard before. There was noise but it was so well suppressed that it was worthy of mere passing mental comment as to its existence.

A near mint copy of The Oscar Peterson Quartet playing 'Stompin' At The Savoy' sounded little short of amazing. I felt very in contact with a solidly grounded sound that had



The conical 1.0mil diamond stylus. The cantilever can safely rotate if touched, without damaging the internal mechanism.

how good this cartridge is. It doesn't try to impress with an obviously forward or deep sound, but strikes a balance somewhere between the two extremes.

There is a fundamental rightness about the way records sound when played through it that has completely won me over to the point where I will state, that so far, this is the best dedicated mono cartridge that I have ever had in the house. I am now itching to try the stereo and 78 models. Watch this space.



Although this is a mono cartridge, four connecting pins are provided so that parallel mono signals can feed both channels of a stereo phono stage.

them. Here it regained the vigour and freshness that it would have displayed when new.

I was sufficiently impressed with the way it retrieved musical information with virtually no surface noise disturbance that I put on my

plenty of detail around the small sounds such as the high-hats yet filled the room with a wide and deep sense of its presence.

Needless to say I have also ransacked my singles collection and am nothing short of stunned as to

MUSIC USED:

Tchaikovsky. 'Symphony No.5 in E minor. Op.64.' Concertgebouw Orchestra, Amsterdam, conducted by Paul Van Kempen. Philips Records. A 00141 L. 1951.

The Beatles. 'Please Please Me.' Parlophone Records. PMC 1202. 1963.

The Oscar Peterson Quartet. 'Plays Stompin' At The Savoy and The Astaire Blues'. Columbia Records. 33 C 1038. c1956.

SYSTEM USED:

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NEXT MONTH JANUARY 2015 AWARDS ISSUE

Yes, January 2015 is our enormously popular awards issue where we pick out the products that moved us most. Don't miss what came out top in 2014. And also we bring you...

McIntosh MB100 Media Bridge

The new McIntosh MB100 Media Bridge due in our next issue is dizzyingly capable. Not only does it store all your music on a 1TB internal hard drive but it stores it to Apple iCloud or Amazon Cloud, so you can enjoy it elsewhere - say in your Bermuda beach condo. It accepts online streams from Pandora, SiriusXM, Spotify, Rhapsody and TuneIn as well as internet radio stations and, of course, reads a network, USB keys as well as digital inputs. Don't miss reading what happens when McIntosh bring their design powers to bear on a media bridge.

Also, we hope to bring you –

Focal Aria 926 loudspeakers

Roksan K3 Amplifier

Benchmark Media DAC2

Funk Firm FX3 tonearm

Samsung BD-H6500 Blu-ray player

JBL Authentics L16 wireless speaker

Noble Wizard in-ear headphones

...and much more.

This is a selection of what we hope to bring you, not a complete list. We regret that due to a wide range of issues, such as failure under review, we cannot guarantee that all products listed above will appear.

PICK UP THE JANUARY 2015 ISSUE OF HI-FI WORLD ON SALE 28TH NOVEMBER 2014, OR SUBSCRIBE AND GET IT DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR: SEE PAGE 42

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JANUARY 2015 - 5TH NOVEMBER

FEBRUARY 2015 - 4TH DECEMBER

KIRSTY MACCOLL

KITE SALVO



"You can see why she was considered by many observers as the best female singer of her generation"

"Kite' was MacColl's second solo album, but it took her ten years to get there. Part of the issue and the reason for the long delay was because she took time off to have children but, despite her love of music, she also had issues with performing because she suffered from stage fright.

"I didn't do any performing for 10 years" she said. "Then I forced myself to get over it. I decided to fix up a tour, and if I didn't enjoy it by the end I would never do it again".

That situation, thankfully, never came about and, despite the lay-off, 'Kite' became her best album of, what has to be remembered, is a great bunch of LPs, both in terms of MacColl the singer and MacColl the songwriter.

With 'Kite' you can see why she was considered by many observers as the best female singer of her generation. In addition, the production values on this release are well thought out, with her vocals overdubbed several times on most tracks to create thick, lush harmonies, most notably on the gorgeous cover of the Kinks' 'Days', one of her musical influences.

Other influences of note, while we are on the subject, also include Frank Zappa (revealing her rather playful way with words and the structure of songs), the Beatles (for her intense melodicism) and David Bowie (for always looking for 'the other way' when approaching a song). She took another pathway when she looked to create a song and, for that matter, when enjoying songs from other songwriters.

"I tend to like the ones who can make me laugh, the ones who don't take themselves too seriously" she said.

On this album her songwriting was excellent, with some of her sharpest and cleverest words and most memorable melodies found here. Yet, these attributes, in one form or another, have been a feature of all her work from the earliest times.

"I had a desperate urge to express myself through music" she said. "I was going through all the usual things that tear you up at a younger age. I don't think the early stuff was particularly inspiring but it was enough to make me think I could do better".

There are several highlights on this LP, including 'What Do Pretty Girls Do?'. Ex-Smiths man Johnny Marr, co-writer of a couple of tracks on the album, agreed. "She wasn't a good musician, technically. She wasn't interested in mastering an instrument but she was great at putting chords together. Her expertise was melody, lyrics and harmony. She's one of England's greatest-ever pop lyricists, she believed her songs should be almost like mini-novels and she was a Jedi at harmony. The way she recorded her harmony vocals was amazing. She'd pick the least obvious bit of the song, find the least obvious harmony part and sing it really quietly. She'd double this little part and move away from the mike and sing it in a slightly different way and start building these layers. Bit by bit this amazing puzzle would fall into place. She had a system that was all her own".

Other tracks of note include the songs, 'Innocence' and 'Free World'. Both numbers have the ability to shove her attitude right in your face. But they are contrasted with songs such as 'Fifteen Minutes', which exposed MacColl at her most understanding. Not all of the songs on this album are her own but that's fine because the stand-out covers – the Smiths' 'You Just Haven't Earned It Yet, Baby' and Kate and Anna McGarrigle's 'Complainte pour Ste. Catherine' – are given the MacColl overhaul and are brilliant inclusions that work well.

'Kite' has been reissued by Salvo as a remastered edition, along with seventeen bonus tracks and a twenty-eight page booklet featuring lyrics, rare photos and memorabilia.

The package has been presented in a rather nice multi-gatefold edition. I don't see a better release of 'Kite' coming your way soon. It looks great, sounds perfect and is packed with rarities, so grab it while you can.

While you're there, though, note that the label has also sympathetically treated other MacColl albums in the same fashion, such as 'Titanic Days' (that includes BBC live tracks from 1995 and a booklet), 'Desperate Character' (remastered with a booklet), 'Electric Landlady' (with sixteen bonus tracks and a booklet), plus 'New England' a 'Best Of...' collection that includes an extra DVD disc of ten promo videos. **PR**

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