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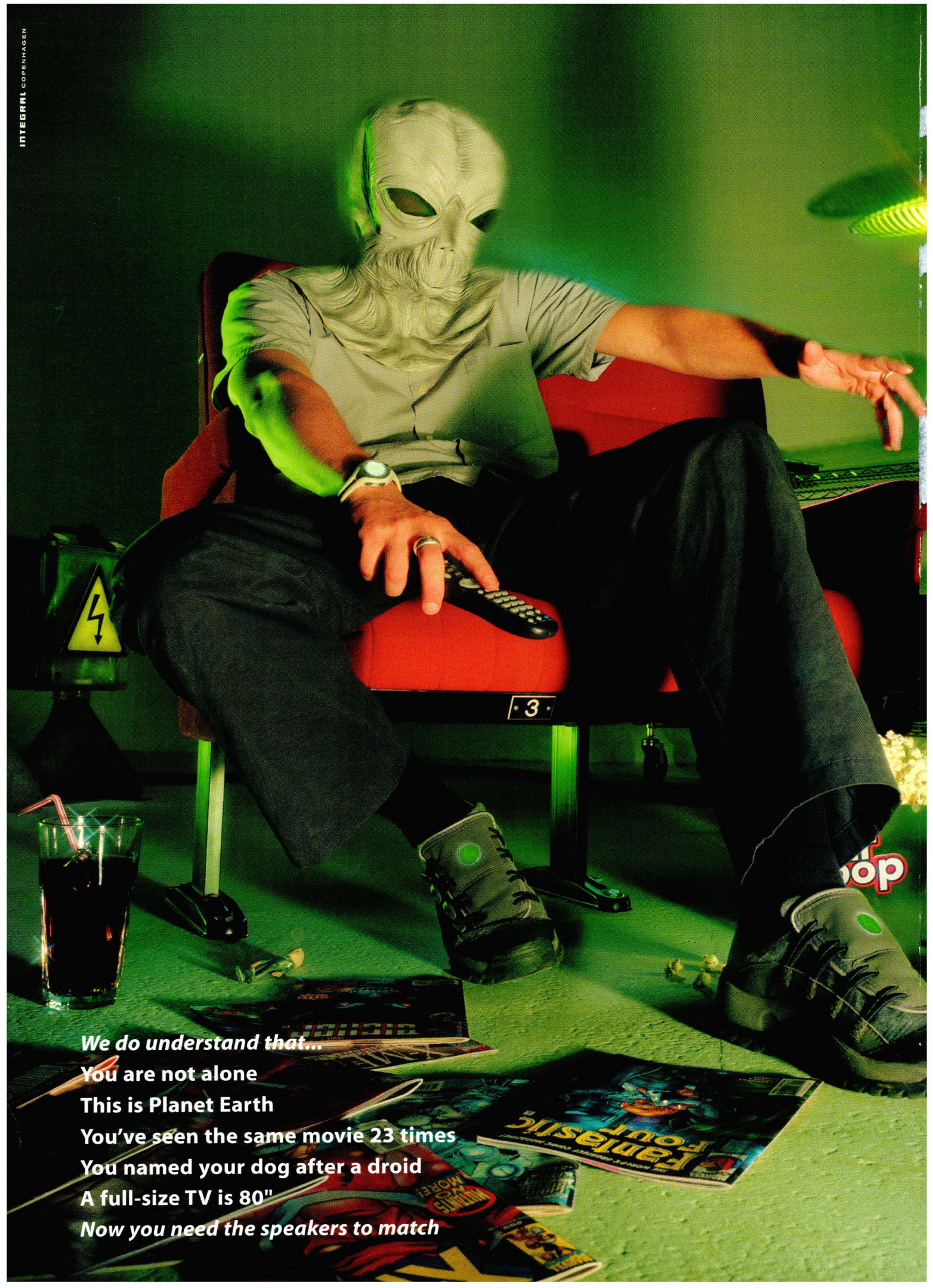
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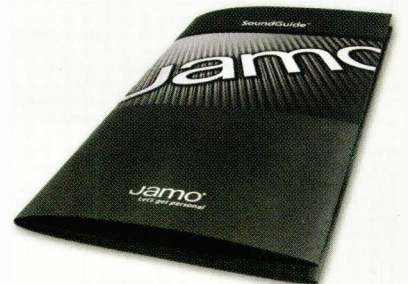
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Fax: +44 (0)1480 437715

www.cyrusaudio.com

email: info@cyrusaudio.com

CONTRIBUTORS



Tim Bown likes dance and indie music and plays it on an Arcam FMJ CD player, Roksan amp and PMC speakers.



Dan George likes rock music and plays it on a Naim CD player, Bryston amps and B&W Matrix 801 loudspeakers.



Christian House is our web site Editor. His induction into the world of hi-fi is not yet complete but we live in hope.



Paul Messenger likes dance, folk, rock and classical music on vinyl and uses Linn, Naim and Rehdeko kit with gusto.



Paul Miller is the king of the technical world when it comes to hi-fi. He uses DPA amps and Audio Note speakers.



Alvin Gold prefers serious classical music and has a predilection toward Krell electronics and JM Lab speakers.

HOW WE TEST THE PRODUCTS

Our reviewing process is the most rigorous in the business. We focus on transparency and resolution, mixing traditional hi-fi values with the latest technological developments via a blend of subjective views and scientific analysis.

■ **BENCH TESTS** Our main group test each month concentrates on a key area, with products from across the separates market. The testing consists of three stages: 'blind' listening, hands-on subjective testing and scientific measuring. The latter phase is conducted by our Technical Editor using computerised measuring equipment custom designed for the purpose. He is recognised as the leader in his field.

■ **GROUP TESTS** Each issue features a number of additional tests aimed at narrowing the field in a specific product area. Here the testing involves just the reviewer concerned with no lab or panel testing, but plenty of comparisons.

■ **SOLO REVIEWS** As well as group tests we also review single components. In our First Impression section, you'll find brand new products that warrant early exposure, while High Performance concentrates on the latest aspirational, high tech components.

AWARD TAGS



BEST BUYS are considered to offer an excellent standard of performance at an attractive price.



RECOMMENDED products are first class components, losing out to Best Buys only because of a higher price or less competitive sound quality.



A third award, **EDITOR'S CHOICE**, is reserved for those products reviewed solo and awarded where the Editor is convinced that a product offers exceptional quality for the price.

"If you like music that was made before the digital era, there's nothing like listening to it on the medium for which it was intended."



You will, I imagine, have detected the record playing theme that runs through this issue by now. It is extremely gratifying that the medium that is close to my and many of my colleague's hearts is once more getting the

positive attention that it deserves. I'm not a die-hard vinyl fan (anymore), there are a lot of great CD players and not a few great CDs, but if you like music that was made before the digital era – anything up to 1980 – there's nothing like listening to it on the medium for which it was intended. And it's not unusual to find contemporary material that sounds superb on vinyl either, Rage Against The Machine's debut offering being a fine example.

Part of the appeal of record players is the potential to fine tune them to taste. You can combine deck, arm, cartridge and phono stage to taste and spend many a pleasurable hour getting them set-up just so. I recommend spending about half an hour tuning then using the rest of the time to enjoy your vinyl, but there was a time when I had more time than vinyl and the story was rather different.

Alongside our budget turntable and cartridge reviews, Jimmy Hughes has some set-up tips for those not familiar with the arcane world of record players (page 39), Paul Messenger, meanwhile, gets to grips with the reasons behind the format's resurgence (page 130).

It's not all records this month, however – Paul Miller has taken a look at the mysterious world of system synergy (page 42). From a measurement standpoint there are a number of reasons why certain CD-and-amp or amp-and-speaker combinations will not produce great results and he has pointed out how, with the aid of our reviews, you can avoid such technical incompatibility.

Our group of active speakers also makes interesting reading. Very popular with the professional community, these compact designs have built in amplification and electronic crossovers. The advantages of the breed include being able to tailor amplifiers precisely for the drive units they power and the removal of a network between the two. The drawback is cost. Find out whether the pros outweigh the cons in our six way test on page 80. In the meantime, keep spinning those discs – whatever they're made of.



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**GROUP TEST
ACTIVE SPEAKERS**
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ACTIVE SPEAKERS DO IT ALL.

HI-FI CHOICE
Future Publishing Ltd,
99 Baker Street, London W1U 6PP

EDITORIAL
020 7317 2600
Fax 020 7317 1125
Regrettably we can't speak to readers
or answer queries on the phone. Please
send a letter, fax or e-mail instead.

Editor Jason Kennedy
jason.kennedy@futurenet.co.uk
020 7317 2496
Deputy Editor Tim Bower
tim.bower@futurenet.co.uk
020 7317 2495

Art Editor Del Gentleman
del.gentleman@futurenet.co.uk
020 7317 2494
Production Editor David Bailey
david.bailey@futurenet.co.uk
020 7317 2493

Staff Writer Dan George
dan.george@futurenet.co.uk
020 7317 2497

Online Editor Christian House
christian.house@futurenet.co.uk
020 7317 2490

Consultant Editor Paul Messenger
Technical Editor Paul Miller
Contributors Richard Black, Alvin
Gold, Jimmy Hughes, Wes Phillips,
David Vivian
Photography Chris Foster,
Hugh Threlfall

ADVERTISING
Fax 020 7486 5676
Group Ad Manager
Rob Debenham: 020 7317 0239
rob.debenham@futurenet.co.uk
020 7317 2495

Ad Manager
Andrew Goldsmith: 020 7317 0202
andrew.goldsmith@futurenet.co.uk
Senior Sales Executive
Gina Fontanarosa: 020 7317 2684
gina.fontanarosa@futurenet.co.uk
Sales Executive
Richard Dappiano: 020 7317 0278
richard.dappiano@futurenet.co.uk

Sales Executive
Mark Smith: 020 7317 2643
mark.smith@futurenet.co.uk

PRODUCTION
01225 442244
Production Coordinator
Diane Ross
Production Manager
Sam Clements
MARKETING
01225 442244
Product Manager Racheal Beasley
Group Marketing Manager
Donna Holland
MANAGEMENT
Publisher Simon Davies
020 7317 2600
simon.davies@futurenet.co.uk
Creative Director Paul Kurzeja
Advertising Director Karen Needham
Group Publisher Andy Sutcliffe
Managing Director Mike Frey
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Hi-Fi Choice is available for licensed publication overseas. For further details contact Chris
Power, on +44 (0)1225 442244, by fax +44 (0)1225 732384, or by e-mail at
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Finance Director: Ian Links
Tel: +44 1225 442244 www.thefuturenetwork.plc.uk
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cinema products throughout Europe.



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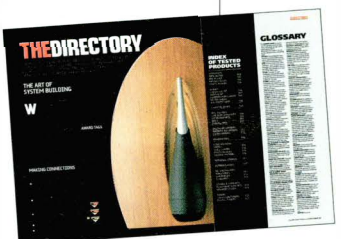
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FIRST IMPRESSIONS

TIM BOWERN AND DAN GEORGE PICK THE FRESHEST FINDS FROM THE NETS OF THE HI-FI TRAWLER



EDITOR'S CHOICE
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine
★
"THIS NEW HARLECH IS CAPABLE OF PURE, UNADULTERATED MUSICALITY."

CASTLE HARLECH S2 LOUDSPEAKERS

★★★★★ £999.90

For many, the Harlech has been the jewel in Castle's crown for the past few years. An elegant floorstander available in a range of real wood veneers, which was a speaker capable of filling even large rooms with music and captivate listeners with the range of its expression.

Alas, the Harlech is dead, but here's its successor. Castle has jiggled its component parts and built a newer, stronger specimen, considerably more costly than the original but undoubtedly more meaty in terms of its specification.

Look at it, and you'd be hard pressed to know it's a different speaker. But remove the grills and the most obvious change is apparent – there are still two mid/bass drivers, one firing forward and the other upwards from the top of the main enclosure, but their cones are now made from woven carbon fibre instead of polypropylene. These also feature a new die-cast chassis and a 30mm dual-layer voice coil for improved handling and dynamics. Elsewhere, the crossover has been tweaked and the tweeter is now a fabric

dome rather than aluminium.

Despite these comprehensive changes, the Harlech S2's sound is reminiscent of its predecessor. That includes its foibles: it's a touch bright on occasions, and lacks a little authority in the bass. But for all this, the new version is capable of pure, unadulterated musicality. It's a dynamic and slightly forward performer; its top-firing driver contributes to a soundstage of ample proportions, but it's also nimble in the midrange, with a degree of delicacy few floorstanders can manage this side of a grand.

It works particularly well with acoustic instruments. It adroitly plucks the individual strands of an orchestral recording, or the delicate licks of something more contemporary, and places them in a vivid and dexterous whole.

More driving material, like rock or dance, shows the S2 in slightly less favourable light, missing the authority in the bass though they remain agile and expressive. But overall, it deserves our undoubted praise. The jewel in Castle's crown now shines ever brighter. **TB**

DATASTREAM

MEASURES 20x94x32cm (WxHxD), 2x130mm mid/bass drivers with carbon fibre cones, 28mm fabric dome tweeter, sensitivity rated at 88dB, Impedance rated at 8 ohms, nine standard wood veneers plus Santos rosewood or yew for an extra £200.

CASTLE ACOUSTICS
☎ 01756 795333

AUDIO INNOVATIONS SYSTEM ALTO CD/AMP/TUNER

★★★★★ £599.95

Hi-fi fans may remember the original Alto – in fact you'd struggle to forget it, such was the impression it left. Quite unlike any of its peers, the system Alto is back in its traditional guise and you can't help but admire the balls of the company for backing such a wonderful and radical looking piece of hi-fi. Now under the wing of the Audio Partnership, the Alto amplifier is allied with a new CD/tuner. The combo is unquestionably stylish, the look drawing influences from valve designs in an attempt to produce a likeably different alternative. Power handled by the amp has been beefed up from 35 to 50 Watts per channel, and within the elliptical chassis lies circuitry derived from the Cambridge Audio A500. Unusually, subwoofers can be attached via a sub output connection at the rear.

The CD now uses a Sony mechanism and chipset which is claimed to improve upon the older Samsung electronics. A buttonless fascia

sports only a very discreet, camouflaged eject button, which when depressed reveals a rather flimsy looking tray. Understandably, losing the, less attractive, remote could be a problem. A display no more than matchbox-sized made track information impossible to read from anything more than three feet away. Evaluating the two products sonically revealed a somewhat reserved amplifier, tonally warm and laid back, with a relaxed musical style. Critically the music lacked presence and, on occasion, rhythm. Neither was CD quality quite as transparent as we might have hoped. Likewise with the tuner, the presentation had a strong sense of warmth, but bass tended to suffer from a distinct shortage of solidity via Tannoy MX2 speakers.

The cracking looks and stunning style are sadly not matched by the Alto system's sound quality. But shoppers with an eye for aesthetics may be able to overlook the performance for what remains competent set-up. **DG**

"CRACKING LOOKS AND STUNNING STYLE SADLY ARE NOT MATCHED BY THE MUSICAL DELIVERY."

DATASTREAM

DATASTREAM 50 Watts per channel; five line inputs plus tape loop; line out for subwoofer; optical and coaxial digital output.

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"THIS IS A CD PLAYER WITH ALMOST VINYL-LIKE ATTRIBUTES."

The Rega's distinctive top-loading mechanism.

REGA PLANET CD PLAYER

★★★★★ £498.00

Those boys at Rega have been doing some revamping, ringing in changes both aesthetic and sonic to a large selection of kit. Even the perennial Planar turntables have been spruced up, as shown elsewhere in this issue, but the biggest changes have been wrought to the firm's line up of electronics. Rega's 2000 range now features sturdy aluminium casework in place of the previous plastic variety, a situation largely dictated by market demands. Nowadays, if you can't put your separates in a sturdy metal case, they won't sell.

Hot on the heels of the new Brio amp featured last month comes this, the first CD player to emerge from Rega's re-jigged range. Like its predecessor it's called the Planet, and it's still an odd-ball top-loader. But its case feels more substantial and there are significant mods under the lid, among them a new Sony mechanism and a custom-built 24-bit DAC chip.

If distinctive looks win prizes, Rega doesn't need to phone a friend. The player's crimson display gives it a menacing air, topped off by a loading bay that bears uncanny resemblance to the Starship Enterprise. Or should that be Voyager? Whatever, when you lift the lid and slip in a CD, you know you're in for a musical experience decidedly out of the ordinary.

And so it pans out, just as it did with the original Planet. The strength of Rega's entry-level CD has always been its cohesive and fluid nature, with few of the obvious digital artefacts associated with 'bad' CD sound. It avoids the glassy edge of some of its rivals, coupling a coherent midband performance with on-the-pulse timing and easy-on-the-ear smoothness. But while such well-gelled attributes have real appeal, particularly with classical or acoustic material and notably with voices, there are times you wish for a little more 'oomph' – more punch down low and sparkle up top. Especially with rock and dance stuff: Primal Scream's *Get Your Rocks Off* just didn't.

This is a player with almost vinyl-like attributes, a candidate for anyone after an affordable machine that stands out from the crowd. It does have oddities – it's rather susceptible to knocks, and if you want remote control you'll have to pay £25 extra. Ultimately, it performs best in a system with speakers on the punchier, brighter side of things, like Rega's own. **TB**

DATASTREAM

ALUMINIUM CASING, Sony transport mechanism, custom-built 24-bit DAC chip with extra power supply for the digital section, toroidal transformer with separate windings for display and audio stages
REGA ☎ 01702 333071



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pleasure



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DYNAUDIO AUDIENCE 62 LOUDSPEAKER

★★★★★ £729.00

“Goody,” said I, realising I had a pair of Dynaudios to review. This Danish brand makes excellent speakers, several of which I know quite intimately. I’ve long used a pair of the baby Audience 40s in my bedroom and find them the most beguiling little boxes; other models have done particularly well in these very pages, from the larger Audience 50 to models from the upmarket Contour range. But now the Audience line-up has been tweaked, which means we have to test each model all over again. Hardship, eh?

The Audience 62 weighs in at £729 and replaces the old-style 60. It’s Dynaudio’s most affordable floorstander, which makes it a pretty important model as far as its maker is concerned. It’s fairly compact and reasonably attractive, though anyone with experience of Audience speakers would know better than to expect real wood veneer – you’ll have to put up with a good quality vinyl wrap, available in a range of colours from black to white with various wood effects in between.

And so, as we wired the 62s to a top-of-the-range Cyrus CD player and Arcam amp, our expectations were high. Which is why, ultimately, we came away a little disappointed. This is undoubtedly a good speaker, one of the better floorstanders at the price endowed with a sound that gels from top to bottom. Bass has weight, but it’s flab-free, there’s good coherence through the midband and the tweeter is one of considerable quality. But overall it somehow lacks a little transparency and expression alongside its most sonically striking price point peers, and some of the immediacy of its smaller range-mates to boot.

Taken as a whole, there’s not a lot to complain about. It’s a musical all-rounder, as solid with The Jesus and Mary Chain’s bruising *Cracking Up* as it is with a spot of Schumann or Haydn. Everything gels together and there are no obvious sonic foibles – a well-engineered product with no overt weaknesses. That alone makes it well worthy of audition, but it just misses that measure of magic necessary for a fifth star, that certain something needed to project it to the top of its price point tree. Unlike a number of other Dynaudios, it’s good... but not *that* good. **TB**

“THIS IS UNDOUBTEDLY A GOOD SPEAKER, ONE OF THE BETTER FLOORSTANDERS AT THE PRICE.”

DATASTREAM

MEASURES 24x80x20cm (WxHxD), proprietary 125mm mid/bass cone with convex centre piece, 28mm soft dome tweeter, vinyl finish, sensitivity rated at 86dB, impedance rated at 4 ohms
DYNAUDIO ☎ 01732 451938



The new Audience 62 – Dynaudio’s most affordable floorstanding speaker.



"THE WEALTH OF FEATURES OFFERED BY THE PIONEER MAKE IT A VERY DESIRABLE PRODUCT."



PIONEER PDR-609 CD-R/RW RECORDER

★★★★★ £280.00



Things have certainly changed since the early days of burning CDs. Gone is the simplicity, it would appear. Nowadays you actually have to consult the manual to make a straight clone! But, it's all in the name of progress, and never have we been so blessed with recording options, or trick features. The PDR-609 is a direct replacement for the PDR-509. New capabilities include a CD Text feature with a redesigned remote to facilitate data inputting, and an upgraded A/D converter for improved recording from analogue sources. The well-constructed machine has a fascia loaded with buttons. Although welcome, they can be hard to read due to the small legends.

All sample rates can be accommodated, from 10kHz to 59kHz – handy for recording manipulated signals off DAT where tempo has been altered without affecting pitch. An Auto Bypass function of the sample rate converter allows bit-for-bit cloning of HDCD and dts discs encoded

with 5.1 surround. In record mode the on-screen prompts can be overwhelming, there a lot of questions to which need answering before you make a recording. It does leave less room for error, though. Record features are plentiful, you can set track numbers when recording say, interviews and performances from the radio, adjust digital record levels, and monitor your source through headphones if required. The list goes on.

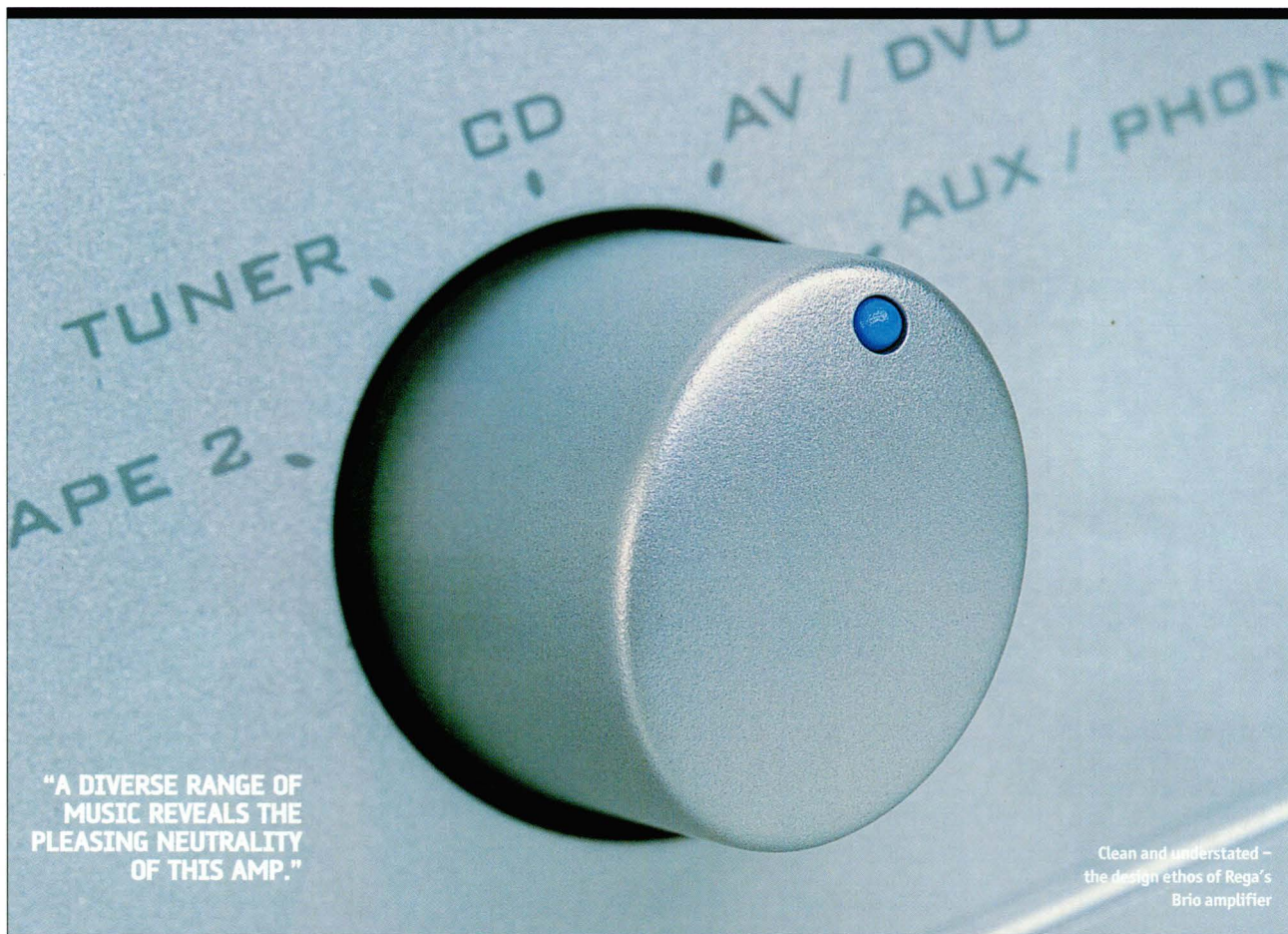
A good standard of playback quality is also evident. Bass weight is impressive and the airy presentation of percussion instruments is very attractive. A generous soundstage makes listening a joy; vocals are clean and impressively smooth.

The wealth of amenities offered by the Pioneer makes it a very desirable product, especially at £20 less than its predecessor. Equally the likeable sound quality makes the machine hard to fault. **DG**

DATASTREAM

CD-R/RW ABILITY; optical and coaxial digital in/outs; analogue in/outs; digital record level adjust; 10-59kHz sampling freq range; CD text; headphone socket.

Pioneer ☎ 01753 789789



"A DIVERSE RANGE OF MUSIC REVEALS THE PLEASING NEUTRALITY OF THIS AMP."

Clean and understated – the design ethos of Rega's Brio amplifier

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO A5 STEREO INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

★★★★★ £120.00

Straight out of the box, the Cambridge Audio A5 amplifier looks impressive for its budget price tag. Competition is quite fierce in this category, and buyers' expectations still remain quite high. To many newcomers, £120 for an amplifier is still a considerable amount of money. The A5 replaces the A4, which although generally well received, was criticised for not being particularly dynamic, something the team at Cambridge Audio claims to have addressed with the new amplifier. The stylish new matt silver casework works well, and the blue LED when powering up is a nice contemporary touch. Inside the new bodywork lie a power supply and toroidal transformer designed to counter the A4's shortcomings.

It was a pleasure to connect up this amp, as the line inputs were labelled upside down, making leaning over the machine to plug in your cables a doddle. Great idea. Against the competition, this amp is rather pretty, and aesthetically I doubt you would be disappointed with the machine in

your rack. But would you be equally content with its sound?

We hooked up the A5 with a range of suitable budget equipment. A musically diverse listening session revealed the pleasing neutrality of this amp, the midband was informative and open, and the bass, although lean, was fairly accurate. The A5 did manage to reveal instrumentation quite well, but the sound was somewhat lacking in confidence and coherence, and often the treble appeared grainy. It would be fair to say that Cambridge Audio has achieved its aim for improved dynamics within a visually appealing and bang-up-to-date enclosure. It could be a bit more exciting though; some warmth could go a long way to help draw you into the music. **DG**

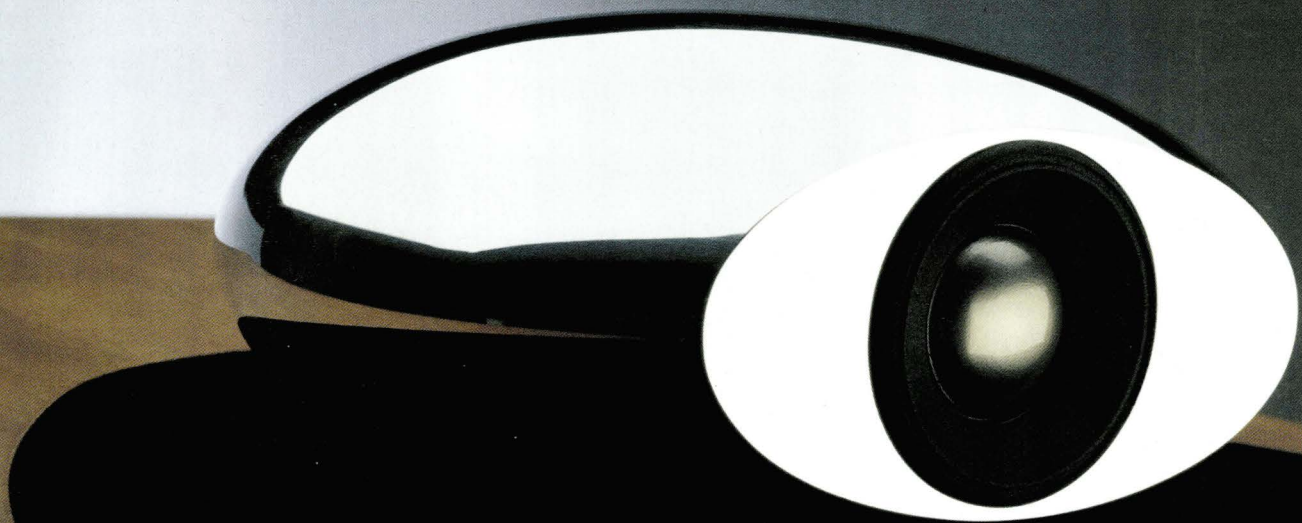
DATASTREAM

65 WATTS PER CHANNEL; six line inputs; twin speaker outputs; bypassable tone controls.
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GYRO SPIN OFF

MICHELL'S GYRO TURNTABLES UPGRADED

Michell's stunning Gyro turntables have been upgraded. Both the long standing Gyrodec and the stripped down Gyro SE now sport DC motors, said to notably improve performance. Prices have increased marginally in the process – the SE has risen from £775 to £829, with the Gyrodec moving from £975 to £1,043. Similar changes will be made to the flagship Orbe deck later in the year. To correspond with these developments, a new optional power supply has also been added to the existing quartz controlled QC unit – the voltage controlled VC costs £425.

Michell ☎ 020 8953 0771



The upgraded Michell Gyrodec turntable, now with VC.

SHELL OUT FOR SNELL

SNELL'S MASSIVE REFERENCE SPEAKERS ARRIVE – AT A PRICE

US-based Snell Acoustics has launched a reference class speaker to celebrate its 25th birthday. The hand-built Type XA Reference sports an impressive array of seven drive units, intended to offer broad sonic dispersion with a wide 'sweet spot'. Two 127mm midrange drivers sandwich a 25mm titanium dome tweeter, with a pair of 203mm bass drivers either side. These are mounted in Snells' largest ever production cabinet, a double enclosure with the internal box and external cosmetic wrap bonded together with a lossy adhesive. Add a three layer baffle and you've got the most massive and inert construction the firm has produced to date. Prepare to part with between £25,000 and £30,000 for a pair, depending on finish. See-Hear ☎ 01795 597590



Two speakers or a house in Newcastle – your choice.

ROTEL ROLLS OUT DVD

NEW DVD-V PLAYER FROM HI-FI GIANT

Audio specialist Rotel has unveiled its second generation DVD-Video player – the RDV995. Priced at £700, it follows last year's RDV985, which was essentially a re-cased JVC.

However, the new model is very much a Rotel product and incorporates certain components culled from its two-channel line-up and aimed at optimising sonic quality with both CDs and DVD-Video discs. There's decoding on-board for Dolby Digital, dts and Dolby Pro-Logic, while digital audio outputs include both coaxial and optical options. Outputs on the video side encompass composite, component and S-Video.

Also new from Rotel is the RSX972, a multichannel receiver priced at £1,000 and rated at 75 Watts for each of its five channels of amplification. It sports decoding for Dolby Digital, dts and Pro-Logic, and includes an AM/FM RDS tuner with 30 station presets.

And Rotel's activity doesn't end there. On the two-channel side there's a £700 pre/power amp combo from the new 10 Series range – the RC1070 and RB1070, set for an HFC review next month. A number of more upmarket components are also waiting in the wings, including a further DVD player featuring DVD-Audio playback. More news as we get it. Gamepath ☎ 01908 317707



CYRUS MAKES GRAND DVD

MUSICAL NOUS PROMISED FROM NEW DVD-V PLAYER

Cyrus has revealed details of the first DVD player to hit its range. The DVD 7 will be priced at £1,000, and unsurprisingly given the brand's hi-fi heritage it is claimed to sound just as good with CDs as with DVDs.

According to Peter Bartlett, Cyrus' Sales and Marketing Director, its sound is almost on a par with the excellent CD 7; the brand's flagship dedicated CD player. "The DVD players we auditioned at the start of this project varied considerably on picture quality but proved consistently appalling when playing CDs," he said. "Our customers wouldn't be happy with any old DVD player no matter how nice the box looked."

Under the lid lies a carefully isolated Philips mechanism and substantially configured power supplies, with both optical and coaxial digital audio outputs round the back. Future upgrade paths are plentiful: users can improve performance by adding an off-board PSX-R power supply, and a twin mono DAC upgrade is promised by summer. Potential upgrades to DVD-Audio compatibility are currently being explored. In the meantime, the DVD 7 is due to hit the shops in April.

Cyrus Electronics ☎ 01480 435577



Cyrus' new DVD 7 – promised to be great with CDs.

PICTURE PERFECT

NEW DVD-V TECHNOLOGY TO FEATURE IN DENON'S NEXT PLAYER

DVD-Audio isn't the only high-resolution technology making a splash in the DVD world – picture quality is getting a shot in the arm thanks to Progressive Scan Video. Denon's DVD-2800 is one of the first players to sport the feature, under the guise 'DVDO PureProgressive' through Silicon Image's latest digital video processor.

On the downside, Progressive Scan is currently only compatible with the NTSC video system, which means it only works with US DVDs. Also, very few video displays in the UK market will accept progressive scan – no ordinary TVs, just plasma screens and projectors with suitable component video inputs. However, prime UK industry movers are intent on forcing through a European standard. Chief among them is Arcam's John Dawson, whose high-end FMJ DV27 player also sports Progressive Scan.

DVD-Audio isn't supported by Denon's machine, but sonic quality from CD and DVD-Video sources remains a priority. It employs 24-bit/96kHz compatible audio DACs from Analog Devices, includes HDCD audio processing and is one of the few DVD players to supply a true 24/96 digital output. It can also play both CD-R and CD-RW discs, including MP3-encoded CD-Rs. Price is expected to be in the region of £750-£800.

Denon ☎ 01234 741200

Denon's new DVD-2800 DVD-V player.



Sony's latest tiny Memory Stick gadget, the NW-MS9.

PERSONAL SERVICES

WALKMAN WALKS ON, AS SONY UNVEIL NEW PERSONALS

Sony has lifted the lid on its latest range of personals, all featuring the revamped Walkman logo first applied to last year's high-tech Network model. As expected, the line-up encompasses four separate music storage formats: cassette, CD, MiniDisc and solid state memory.

Among the highlights is the jog-free D-EJ925, claimed to be the world's smallest CD model with a circumference barely greater than an actual disc. Then there's the MZ-R700PC, a recording MiniDiscWalkman complete with a USB PC-Link cable so you can transfer computer audio files to MD. And for those into solid state MP3-type technology there are two new models: the NW-E5 with its whopping 96MB built-in memory and a natty Memory Stick based device called the NW-MS9. Most, if not all, should be in the shops by the time you read this. Sony ☎ 0990 111999

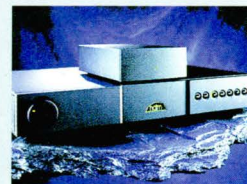
IN BRIEF

NAIM has launched an off-board Series 5 phono stage called the Stageline (right). It's housed in a machined aluminium case and power can be supplied directly from a Naim amp like the Nait 5 or NAC 112, or by a separate power supply like the Flatcap 2. It's available for either moving coil or moving magnet cartridges at £175. ☎ 01722 332266

BANG & OLUFSEN is to use Philips' Bluetooth wireless technology in a forthcoming range of speaker designs expected early 2002. The collaboration reflects Philips' strategy to accelerate wireless connectivity into the market. www.components.philips.com

NORDOST has re-vamped its Red Dawn speaker cable. Red Dawn 2 is promised to offer breathtaking detail and control – a three metre pair can be yours for £919. ☎ 01352 730251

TEAC has launched a new low cost DVD player, the £230 DV-3000. It includes 'virtual



surround technology', which is intended to create a 3D sound from a two channel set up. ☎ 01923 819630

B&W is to distribute high-end Canadian brand Classé Audio in the UK, Europe and the Far East, from June 2001. The Classé range includes CD and DVD players, stereo and multichannel amps and A/V processors. ☎ 01903 750750

BBC WORLDWIDE has paired up with Dutch company Opus Arte to produce DVDs of BBC classical music programmes. Planned releases include recent and archived music, plus new programmes over the next five years. ☎ 020 8433 2412

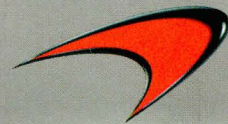
IN BRIEF CONTINUES ON P.19

McClaren



DVD32R

Europe's First THX® Ultra certified DVD player for NTSC & PAL



The DVD32R is Europe's first DVD player which exceeds the high THX® Ultra standards and allows reference standard replay of CDs.

High-mass Transport for Low Jitter

The DVD32R uses a top loading transport, allowing its drive motor and servo electronics to be mounted to a heavy, mass loaded sub-chassis. The result is improved data integrity and reduced jitter.

Automatic, Adaptive Drawer Mechanism

The DVD32R aluminium diecast drawer door runs on a polished steel bar and a Teflon glider for smooth and reliable operation, driven by an adaptively controlled electric motor via a steel wire.

Precise Clock for best Sound and Video

The low phase noise single frequency master oscillator ensures that all video and audio clocks are synchronous, with clock signals being transferred using independently buffered and precisely terminated traces.

Field-leading MPEG Decoder

TAG McLaren worked closely with National Semiconductor's field-leading subsidiary Mediamatics, in finding the best MPEG decoder. After long evaluation Pantera-DVD™, the

first IC to integrate all back-end functions of a DVD player onto a single chip, was selected. This unrivalled level of integration includes host processing, a 32-bit RISC processor, 10-bit video DACs and the NTSC/PAL encoders.

Uncompromised Video quality

The video circuitry uses broadcast quality components, with video outputs being individually buffered and vertical and anti-flicker filtering to deliver high quality graphics.

Test-Pattern Generator

In-built test-patterns and electronics test circuitry assist in calibrating the tv for best picture quality.

Advanced Digital Waveform Control

Advanced circuitry optimises rise and fall times whilst preventing waveform discontinuities, reducing the demand on the digital interconnects.

TAGtronic Link T'L for Minimal Jitter

T2L allows the DVD32R to lock its data output to the low noise, ultra low jitter DAC reference clock in the AV32R.

Massive Power Reserves

The DVD32R uses a large toroidal transformer as this has the benefit of a very low stray magnetic field, reducing the possibility of interference with the audio data and video signals. A second, smaller

transformer is used to power the remote control circuitry, allowing very low electrical consumption when switched to standby.

Multiple Power Supplies

Separate power supplies reduce interference between the processing stages, right down to having separate windings on the transformer.

Multi-Layer Printed Circuit Boards

Multi-layer pcbs provide controlled impedances and minimise coupling. Performance is further enhanced using leaded components for perfect analog signals and SMD for fast digital transfer, with quality being optimised using inert-gas soldering.

Enhanced TAGtronic Bus

The TAGtronic Communication Bus allow products to work seamlessly together to form an effective, integrated system.

Upgrade Path

Building on TAG McLaren's class-leading commitment to upgradability, the DVD32R is scheduled to receive a hardware upgrade to DVD-Audio, Progressive Scan and Digital Video whilst functionality enhancements are distributed through TAG McLaren's website, allowing convenient software upgrades at home (using a PC).

TAG McLaren Audio, The Summit, Latham Road, Huntingdon, Cambs. PE29 6ZU

freephone: 0800 783 8007 tel: 01480 415600 fax: 01480 52159 e-mail: helpdesk@tagmcclarenaudio.com

To book an audition contact one of these authorised DVD32R stockists:

Audio Designs	East Grinstead, West Sussex	01342 314569	Listening Rooms	Chelsea, London	0207 244 7750	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Kingston, Surrey	0208 547 0717
Audio Excellence Ltd	Cardiff, Wales	0292 022 8565	Martin Kleiser Ltd	Chiswick, London	0208 400 5555	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Liverpool, Merseyside	0151 707 8417
Audio Excellence Ltd	Clifton, Bristol	0117 926 4975	Martin Kleiser Ltd	Uxbridge, London	01895 465444	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Nottingham, Nottinghamshire	0151 911 2121
Audio Excellence Ltd	Exeter, Devon	01392 491194	Martins HiFi	Norwich, Norfolk	01603 627010	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Plymouth, Devon	01752 226011
Audio Excellence Ltd	Swansea, Wales	01792 474608	Moorgate Acoustics	Sheffield, Yorkshire	0114 275 6048	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Preston, Lancashire	01772 825777
Audio T Ltd	Basingstoke, Hampshire	01256 324311	Music Matters Ltd	Solihull, Birmingham	0121 742 0254	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Reading, Berkshire	0118 959 7768
Audio T Ltd	Brentwood, Essex	01277 264730	Nottingham HiFi Centre	Nottingham, Nottinghamshire	0115 978 6919	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Sevenoaks, Kent	01732 459555
Audio T Ltd	Camberley, Surrey	01276 685597	Oxford Audio Consultants	Oxford, Oxen	01865 790879	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Southgate, London	0208 886 2777
Audio T Ltd	Chandler's Ford, Hampshire	02380 252827	Peter Tyson HiFi	Carlisle, Cumbria	01228 546756	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Tunbridge Wells, Kent	01892 523548
Audio T Ltd	Cheltenham, Gloucestershire	01242 583960	PJ Hi-Fi	Guildford, Surrey	01483 504801	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Walford, Hertfordshire	01923 213533
Audio T Ltd	Headington, Oxford	01865 765961	Prestige Audio Ltd	Harrow, London	0208 868 3300	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Witham, Essex	01376 501733
Audio T Ltd	High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire	01494 558585	Rayleigh Hi-Fi	Lakeside, Surrey	01708 680551	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Worcester, Worcestershire	01905 612929
Audio T Ltd	Reading, Berkshire	0118 958 5463	Rayleigh Hi-Fi	Rayleigh, Essex	01268 779762	Stereo Stereo Ltd	Glasgow, Scotland	0141 248 4079
Audio T Ltd	West Hampstead, London	0207 794 7848	Rayleigh Hi-Fi	Rayleigh, Essex	01245 265245	Suttans Hi-Fi	Bournemouth, Dorset	01202 555512
Billy Vee	Lewisham, London	0208 318 5755	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Bedford, Bedfordshire	01234 272777	The Audio File	Bishops Cleeve, Hertfordshire	01279 506576
Harrow Audio	Knightsbridge, London	0207 730 1234	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Clifton, Bristol	0117 974 3729	The Hi-Fi Shop	Belfast, N. Ireland	02890 381296
HiFi Corner	Harrow, Middlesex	0208 930 9933	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Edinburgh, Scotland	0131 229 7267	The High End	Barnes, London	0208 876 3355
Lintone Audio Ltd	Aston Quay, Dublin	00353 1671 4343	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Epsom, Surrey	01372 745883	The Powerplant (Hi-Fi) Ltd	Brighton, Sussex	01273 75978
	Metro Centre, Gateshead	0191 460 0999	Sevenoaks Sound & Vision	Glasgow, Scotland	0141 332 9655	Unilet Sound & Vision	New Malden, Surrey	0208 942 9567



NEW FORMULA SURROUND

TAG MCLAREN'S NEW DOLBY TECHNOLOGY SHOWS HOW 2 = 5.1

TAG McLaren's AV32R processor is the first product to support Dolby's latest surround sound format – Pro-Logic II. This is a matrix-based format designed to convert any stereo source into surround, from CDs and vinyl records to TV broadcasts. The intention is to bridge the gap between old style Pro-Logic and discrete Dolby Digital, taking two-channel sources and creating an open and balanced sound field.

TM's commitment to DPLII comes as part of its continual programme to offer upgrades to the AV32R as and when new technology demands. The upgrade will be part of the next revision to the processor's firmware; the user simply enables DPLII by paying an £80 license fee and entering a special code using the standard remote control. TAG McLaren ☎ 0800 7838007

DVD-AUDIO SOFTWARE HITS UK

FINALLY, MULTICHANNEL DVD-A TITLES ARE RELEASED...

After numerous false starts, the race to get DVD-Audio software into the UK would seem to be hotting up. Dts is already shipping its first trickle of titles, released through the company-owned dts Entertainment label. Each disc is marketed as a 'dts Music Experience' package, incorporating three different versions of the album in question: a high-resolution MLP multichannel track, playable on DVD-Audio compatible players, along with dts 5.1 and Dolby Digital 2.0 versions compatible with ordinary DVD-Video players. Artists in this initial batch include Larisa Stow, Toy Matinee and Steve Stevens.

Meanwhile, Warner Music International has selected April 6 for the world wide launch of its first wave DVD-Audio titles, many of which saw the light of day in the US late last year. More than 25 titles have been announced so far, with artists ranging from Fleetwood Mac and The Doors to Stone Temple Pilots and The Corrs. All discs feature both



high-resolution MLP and 'lossy' Dolby Digital surround versions, ensuring you've something to play whether your DVD player is Audio/Video compatible or just Video only.

The arrival of these discs is a welcome fillip for the DVD-Audio camp, given SACD's head start and growing software base, albeit a largely two-channel one at present. All the major music labels are said to be behind the high-resolution DVD format, but Warner is so far the only one to confirm titles. We await more with baited breath...

Website: www.dtonline.com

NEW IMPROVED DAB

VIDEOLOGIC LAUNCHES NEW DIGITAL RADIO TUNER

VideoLogic is set to launch an improved version of its DRX-601E digital radio tuner, the first DAB product to break the £300 barrier and recipient of a Best Buy Award in HFC 211. The DRX-601ES (below) comes in a silver finish and will sell for £350.

There are some internal changes, including a performance-enhancing technology called PAC. VideoLogic was in the process of submitting the patents as we went to press and so was unable to shed much light on what it actually does, except to say it tackles the sometimes 'cold' nature of digital radio to create a more natural, involving sound. Check our review next month for the full story; the product itself is available in April. VideoLogic ☎ 01923 260511



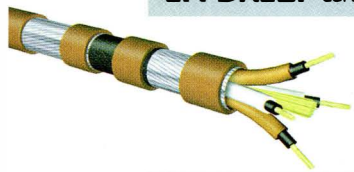
THULED UP

DELICIOUS DANISH DVD!

More specialist hi-fi brands are plunging into the world of DVD-V – one of the latest is Danish brand Thule. The Space DVD250 (below) comes in two versions: the standard transport-only model, designed to hook into the firm's own processor, and the DVD250B. This second version includes D/A conversion with both balanced and unbalanced analogue audio outputs. Other features include a dual-laser mechanism, and a better error correction system. Price is £1,045 for the Space DVD250, or £1,150 for the 'B'. Audio Reference ☎ 01252 702705



IN BRIEF CONTINUED



VAN DEN HUL has launched a new range of interconnects. The first from the Fusion Series is the Integration Hybrid, a triple shielded 'quadruple core' interconnect. Its conductor fuses together copper, zinc and silver, the result of which said to be a complete

lack of sonic harshness. ☎ 020 8997 4280

EARFIT from Advanced Communication Solutions is an anatomically designed ear plug intended to make in-ear headphones more comfortable. It's also claimed to reduce background noise, so you can listen at lower volumes. ☎ 01582 767007

LINK ELECTRONICS is offering a complete DVD repair and upgrade service. This includes authorised repair of Sony,

Panasonic, Pioneer, Philips and Thomson machines. ☎ 08707 481222

NAD has dropped the price of its C540 CD player from £330 to £250. Stocks are expected to last until the summer. ☎ 01908 319360

PHILEX has produced a new range of optical digital interconnects called Thor. Various adapters are available for different connection options, including optical to coaxial. ☎ 020 8457 2100

SONICLINK'S new SG Whisper interconnect has been developed from the Silver Pink for budget applications. Its screened coaxial construction uses silver plated copper conductors. A one metre pair should cost around £45 ☎ 01332 361390

TIME AND TUNE is a new Website allowing users to search for home entertainment systems at prices said to be much lower than the high street equivalent. www.timeandtune.com

"Beauty and A Beast"



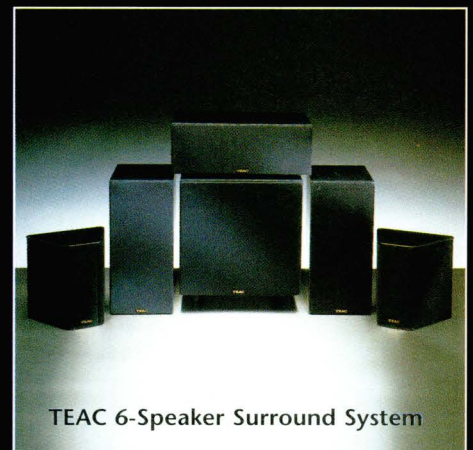
Home Theatre systems used to be big, cumbersome and ugly. And, their performance was pretty ordinary too.

But, all that has now changed. Because TEAC have just introduced a Home Theatre System with stunning looks and a performance way beyond its compact size. It is light years beyond your imagination. It comes complete with a 5 x 50W amplifier, Dolby Digital DVD Player and a 6 Speaker package that includes an active sub with variable crossover and gain,

matched voicing centre, left and right speakers, and bipolar rear speakers. It's all ready to plug in and play, all you need is a television. It will change the way you watch movies and other programmes at home for good. And best of all, the system costs less than £1100.

For once, a movie story with a happy ending.

Visit your TEAC Stockist for a demonstration or call TEAC on 01923 819630 for information on this extraordinary system.



TEAC 6-Speaker Surround System

TEAC

The TEAC DVD Home Theatre System

NET WARS

WES PHILLIPS REPORTS ON THE CONTINUING SAGA OF NAPSTER AND THE LATEST HAPPENINGS STATESIDE.

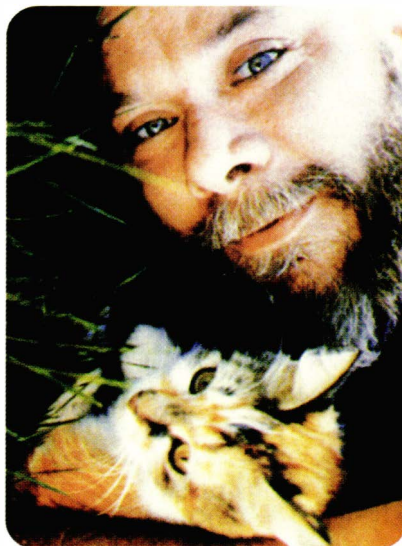
Napster continues to dominate industry headlines here. On 12 February, the Ninth US Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Napster must stop trading in copyrighted material and may be held liable for "vicarious copyright infringement" – a move that probably would put an end to the saga. This created a flurry of activity at the file-sharing site as consumers raced the deadline, downloading music while it was still free.

Napster tried to garner recording industry support with a proposal that would pay \$1 billion over the next five years for the right to use copyrighted material. The file-sharing company's proposed solution would pay licensing fees to the world's five major record companies, as well as to independent labels and artists.

"61 PER CENT OF US INTERNET USERS OPPOSE LAWS THAT WOULD SHUT DOWN FILE-SHARING PROGRAMS SUCH AS NAPSTER."

While Universal Music and Warner Music expressed dissatisfaction with the plan, the EMI Group said it would be interested in participating if they could be persuaded Napster had developed a realistic business model.

Industry wags asked, "Who'd give Napster a billion dollars?" And, of course, that is the important question – where will the money come from? In February, the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA) conducted a survey, 'Digital Download', which studied American consumers' online habits and attitudes. The survey revealed that an astonishing 89 per cent of US Internet users have downloaded multimedia content, and most of them oppose any effort to get them to pay for it: half of them oppose fees for downloading con-



Prolific musician, and founder of Takoma Records, John Fahey took simple folk tunes and mixed them with classical styles from Europe, India and the East.

tent of any description, 77 per cent oppose fees for downloading any audio files, pictures, or games – and 61 per cent oppose laws that would shut down file-sharing programs such as Napster.

KLIPSCH BUYS MONDIAL

One of the oldest and most-respected names in American hi-fi, Klipsch Audio Technologies, has purchased "selected assets" of Mondial Designs, Ltd, maker of the Acurus and Aragon amplifier, pre-amplifier, and signal processors. The Mondial products appeared at CES 2001 as part of the Klipsch family of products.

Klipsch is looking to expand the line with "six or seven" new Mondial amps, as well as move into the digital loud-speaker business.

Former Mondial president, Anthony Federici has formed a new company, D&A Labs, which is currently designing a high-end receiver for the home theatre market. It should be available this spring.

CONVERGENCE CHIP

A solution to the SACD/DVD-A impasse has been announced by Texas Instruments. The chipmaker's Burr-Brown division has created a high-performance audio digital-to-analog

converter (DAC) specifically designed for consumer and professional audio systems such as DVD and CD players, HT receivers, SACD players, HDTV receivers, and digital mixing consoles.

The PCM1738 chip employs the company's new Advanced Segment DAC architecture, which is noted for its dynamic performance and imperviousness to clock jitter. TI claims 24-bit resolution and 192kHz, delivering 117dB dynamic range, 117dB S/N ratio, and 0.0004% distortion.

Features include balanced current outputs, 16 to 24-bit data reception, simple DSP interface, and two modes of operation: external digital filter mode and DSD decoder. Look for products featuring this chip next Christmas.

JOHN FAHEY, RIP

On a sad note, John Fahey, an original and iconoclastic guitarist, died on 23 February. Fahey recorded over 60 albums, among them *Blind Joe Death* and *Death Chants, Breakdowns, and Military Waltzes*, as well as a series of phenomenally popular Christmas records.

He was one of the first musicians to establish his own record label, Takoma Records, which also released albums by Peter Schmidt, Leo Kottke, and several of Fahey's heroes, including the bluesmen Bukka White and Skip James. Takoma was sold to Chrysalis in the 70s.

During the 80s, Fahey fell on hard times. He divorced his third wife, lost his house, and often lived in the Union Charity Mission in Salem, Oregon. He was rediscovered in the 90s. Rhino Records released a retrospective, *Return of the Repressed*. He sobered up and began to play in public again. He also published a book of autobiographical stories and sketches, *How Bluegrass Music Destroyed My Life*.

Fahey suffered a heart attack in mid-February and died after an unsuccessful series of surgical procedures. He was 61.

Wes Phillips is our US news correspondent, he keeps his finger firmly on the audiophile pulse.

PURE AND SIMPLE

PEOPLE ARE CATCHING ON TO THE FACT THAT VINYL'S STILL POPULAR?
DAVID VIVIAN MEETS A MAN TO WHOM THIS IS NO SURPRISE AT ALL...

It would be plausible to believe that production of the Long Playing record had flat-lined. Slipped into a deep coma at the very least. If not dead, then not moving much.

Alive nonetheless. CD's silver bullet brought vinyl to its knees, burgeoning digital media should, by rights, be finishing the job. But guess what? Records are staging a recovery. It is not, to be honest, the sort of comeback that would impress Lazarus much. The figures – UK LP sales for 2000 up 40 per cent on the previous year's, 12-inch singles up by 28 per cent – still exist in the realm of what financial analysts call a “residual market”. That it's happening at all, though, is little short of amazing.

Mike Loveday, who gave Britain its first TV-advertised K-Tel compilation album in 1975, tells it like this: “LPs as a mainstream music format were effectively killed off by the major labels who had obviously watched CD hardware come down in price to a point where they could bring in CDs *en masse*. I think the critical point was 1987. That's when you could buy a CD player for £200.”

And that's when it started to go seriously pear-shaped for vinyl. Mike, like many industry insiders, thought the format was a goner. Then, in 1994, while he was helping speaker maker B&W set up its own jazz CD label, he took a call from a Japanese customer who said he wasn't interested in the CDs; he wanted the Fourth World album on 180 gram vinyl (that's audiophile weight, most LPs are 120 gram pressings) – and he wanted 500 copies. A month later his request was for 1,000, and a month after that it had risen to 2,500. Mike, who describes himself as 100 per cent entrepreneur, 100 per cent music lover, thought “What the hell?” “We manufactured 2,500 records, shipped them out to Japan, got paid and that was that,” he says with a shrug in his voice that recalls his attitude at the time.

But ‘so what?’ quickly caved in to curiosity. Mike

simply had to know if he'd been party to a one-off phenomenon or was staring change in the face. So he took six months off and did his vinyl homework. He researched everything from global output to boot sales. What it told him was that the UK's ‘residual market’, far from being a muddy little tributary of the fast flowing glory days, was actually strewn with gold nuggets for the taking. Vinyl was hip, vinyl was the mainstay of the DJ and dance scene and, for audiophiles, vinyl still represented the pinnacle of sonic performance.

Mike knew what this small but vibrant niche needed: an LP-only re-issue label pressing on heavy, flat 180 gram vinyl. He called it Simply Vinyl.

“The first challenge,” he remembers, “was to secure some repertoire. Most major labels had bigger fish to fry and weren't interested in vinyl. I had to approach it with a reasonable amount of diplomacy and stealth and not get in their hair.”

Sony, with whom Mike had build up plenty of contacts over the years, was first on the books. Others followed over the next 18 months.

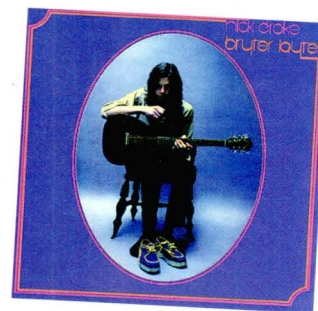
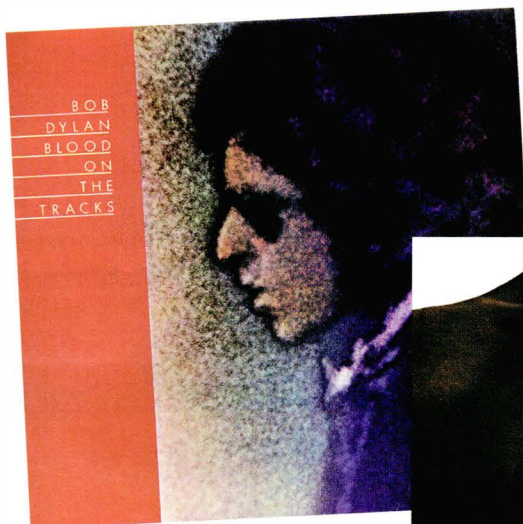
“My approach to the niche market was to start with the biggest sector – rock and pop – and mainly from the sort of classic period when people bought records,” explains Mike. “Music meant something and it was part of your life – 1969 to the early 80s. I wanted all the major bands, the big artists. We were surprised by the demand for Nick Drake's albums. He's got a huge following for a bloke that died 25 years ago.

“But we also concentrated on the predictable golden oldies, the Leonard Cohens, the Bob Dylans, The Birds and so on. We've slowly built the catalogue. Right now there are 340 titles. About 18 months after we started, we slipped in Tarantino movies because we knew that Tarantino movies had a very strong vinyl following. They were somehow hipper on vinyl. *Pulp Fiction* actually had been out on vinyl but it was very rare – probably no more than 2,000 units across the world.

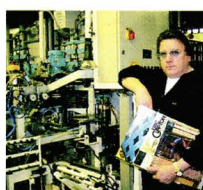
“We followed that through and started to release more soundtracks. We grew a soundtrack



David Vivian talks to the movers and shakers in the hi-fi industry about these subjects close to our hearts.



"SOME PEOPLE FEEL ITS A MUCH FRIENDLIER MEDIUM. IT'S BIG, YOU CAN READ THE LINER NOTES, YOU CAN FEEL THE RECORD."



Top: A selection of Simply Vinyl's re-releases. Above: Simply Vinyl supremo Mike Loveday.

branch; soundtrack buffs are avid collectors. Later we did the same with soul, R&B, rap and reggae. With some trepidation, because we felt that this was probably the one area where vinyl was still alive and available fairly cheaply on imports. We were careful. We decided that if people wanted James Brown, rather than give them eight JB records, we went for the 'best of' approach. Value for money." Despite the audiophile overtones of 180 gram vinyl, Mike is as much pragmatist as absolutist. If a compilation works, it works.

Now Simply Vinyl works hand-in-hand with Sony, BMG, EMI, Universal Music and Virgin, among others. Great slabs of iconic rock and pop on great slabs of vinyl are just around the corner. "We're just finishing off the David Bowie back catalogue, then we're moving on to Pink Floyd," deadpans Mike. "We're committed to putting out the whole of the Elvis catalogue." Not a bad conversation stopper.

So, has the whole thing come full circle? Is vinyl now hip again?

"Without a shadow of a doubt. In truth, it was never anything else. It's certainly been driven in this country by DJs and dance. Turntables have grown in sales volume over the last three or four years. Turntables are making a comeback on music centres. The buyers are responding to something in the market place.

"It's a cult, retro thing and it won't go away. Some people feel it's a much friendlier medium. It's big, you can read the liner notes, you can feel the record. Back in the early days, we spent an entire day feeling cardboard. The manufacture of

card has changed over the years; it's much more compressed and dense now. What we were looking for was that sort of hairy cardboard feeling.

"It's involving, tactile. You take it out and look at it; I think there's something about the sheen. You know when you sit down you're only going to do, at most, 28 minutes of listening. It's a bit of pure quality time. I call it a cigar and fine wine experience."

I suggest that Simply Vinyl isn't about selling records but time capsules. "Absolutely," agrees Mike. "Music transcends everything. Any track marks a point in time for you personally with something that was happening in your life. What we're trying to do here is give someone a product that will actually trigger that memory. An artefact, if you like.

"The simple philosophy of the company is to maintain the 180 gram vinyl format, keep it alive for as long as possible and make as much catalogue available within that format."

Which is laudable in the era of the silver disc. And surprisingly profitable. Simply Vinyl's value on the world market is \$500 million. Not bad for a format that's on its last legs.

Simply Vinyl can be purchased from larger HMV, Tower Records and Virgin stores. Single albums are £16.99, doubles £18.99.

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SELECT

PHONO/AUX

CD

TUNER

AV

DVD

PHONES

ARCAM
CD92

OVER £3,000 WORTH OF ARCAM GEAR MUST BE WON

After many hours of cajoling we have finally managed to persuade Arcam to let us give away some of its fabulous new DiVA kit. We managed to get two CD and amplifier combinations, each representing the pinnacle of the

DiVA range.

The E850 CD92 disc player featured in our March issue, where Alvin and his listeners were very impressed with its performance – so much so that it was awarded a *Hi-Fi Choice* Recommendation. Features include the dCS Ring DAC converter, HDCD decoding and specially damped casework.

The A85 amplifier is reviewed in this very issue (page 48) and has managed to pull off an even more impressive trick by winning a *Hi-Fi Choice* Best Buy accolade. The A85 is a sophisticated design that incorporates the ability to adjust the gain of each of its seven inputs, has (bypassable) tone control settings for each input and even different graduations of volume stepping per input. An unusually flexible design that nonetheless manages to cut the sonic mustard.

The pairing will undoubtedly sound as sweet as the proverbial nut with a decent loudspeaker system on the end, and all you have to do is answer the following questions to be in with a chance of winning one of the two combos on offer.

COMPETITION RULES

- 1) The Closing Date for the Arcam Competition is **Friday 4th May 2001**.
- 2) Winners of the Arcam Competition will be judged from all correct entries submitted, and drawn at random after the Closing Date given in 1) above.
- 3) All winners will be notified by post.
- 4) The Editor's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into.
- 5) The Arcam Competition is not open to employees of Future Publishing Ltd, Arcam nor their suppliers, agents or associates.
- 6) We regret this competition is open to UK residents only.
- 7) No cash alternatives will be offered.
- 8) We reserve the right to substitute alternative prizes with equal value to those shown, in the unlikely event of stock being temporarily unavailable.
- 9) By entering the competition, you agree to be bound by the rules.
- 10) No purchase necessary.

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Answer the question below by circling the correct answers, then fill in your name, address and daytime telephone number in the spaces given.

WHAT IS ARCAM IS SHORT FOR?

- A All Really Cool Amplifiers, Mate
- B Allied Radios Cambridge
- C A&R Cambridge
- D Acme Rentals Cambridge

**OR CALL THE COMPETITION PHONE LINE
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Call the above number. You will be asked to give your answer, and a few personal details (name, address, etc). Calls cost 50p per minute and last no more than 90 seconds.

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Please remember to tell us whether you are over 18 years of age.

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Please tick here if you are under 18 OR do not wish to receive further information on other products or services.

t

his is my second five-and-a-half grand integrated amplifier in as many months – and yet a year ago the breed barely existed. Something is clearly afoot. Is it that even audiophiles no longer have the space to dedicate to multiple boxes, or are we merely trying to simplify our lives and remove clutter? Both

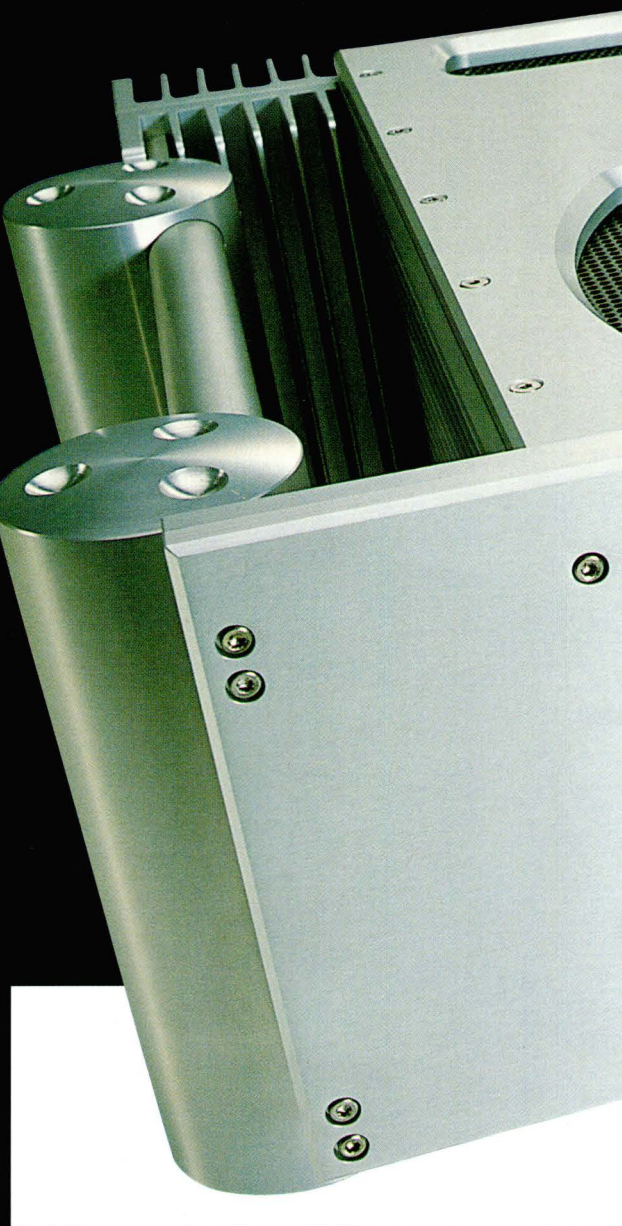
REVIEW/JASON KENNEDY

options make sense, and if you can get pre/power quality from a single box, then that can't be a bad thing.

This new Chord integrated more than doubles the specified power output of last month's Mark Levinson, its nominal 220 Watts into eight ohms outgunning a fair few standalone power amps in this price range, and I'm told by Chord that this is a conservative estimate. This is partly reflected in the CPM 3300's 19kg mass, but the switch mode power supply style that Chord specialises in means that figure is somewhat less than it might ordinarily have been (the 100 Watt Levinson weighed 27kg). Sizewise it's a compact unit, measuring 133x420x355mm (HxWxD) without the Integra legs on this model – they add £135 apiece and you can use as many as six, or none at all. If you opt for the latter, then the choice is between the horizontal aluminium bars or wooden cheeks.

This amplifier has a number of features that will be familiar to Chord users but which can be a little baffling to the newcomer, specifically the bus system. This allows you to independently record two different inputs simultaneously, a potentially useful facility for the keen recorder, but one which introduces a degree of complexity to the user interface that is initially rather opaque. The amplifier has no controls marked select or input 1, 2, etc, but rather has buttons marked A and B which scroll through the five line inputs on the display. Once you have learned to ignore the B button this isn't difficult, until you start playing with the remote that is. The latter is an aluminium brick that features rather a lot of ball bearing buttons and

“THE AMP EMITS AN ATTRACTIVE AND POWERFUL PURPLE/BLUE GLOW FROM UNDER ITS BONNET.”



three times as many coloured legends. This being a result of the remote's ability to drive Chord's CD and AV components as well; it's a system remote, in other words. The thing must have cost a fortune but even Chord admits that a smaller unit would be easier to use and is planning to make such a thing. Presumably it won't have a separate set of input switches for each bus, nor operate CD transports, DACs and AV processors. Less would definitely be more in this instance.

The amplifier itself emits an attractive and powerful purple/blue glow from under its perforated bonnet. This acts largely to show off the workmanship and technology inside but



SEE THE LIGHT

CHORD'S NEW HIGH-END INTEGRATED AMP REALLY HELPS YOUR MUSIC SHINE – LITERALLY.

also, it's claimed, it helps reduce stray RFI. The light is produced by concentric rings of rice-grain size LEDs which act as aerial for radio frequency interference, mopping them up with a bit of stealth technology.

As well as the bus system, the onboard micro-processor allows you to set the gain of each input so as to balance them against one another and avoid leaps in volume when switching from one source to another. Even with the lowest gain setting I found that I was running out of volume steps when listening quietly late at night however, probably a factor of the slightly more sensitive than usual loudspeakers, but something the Levinson managed to gear itself around.

The back of the beast contains inputs labelled Disc 1 and 2 for which a balanced XLR socket is also available, radio, video and T1 and T2. Outputs consist of T1 and T2 again plus preamp outputs and speaker sockets of the rather cramped together variety – bi-wiring without spade connections is a bit of a fiddle.

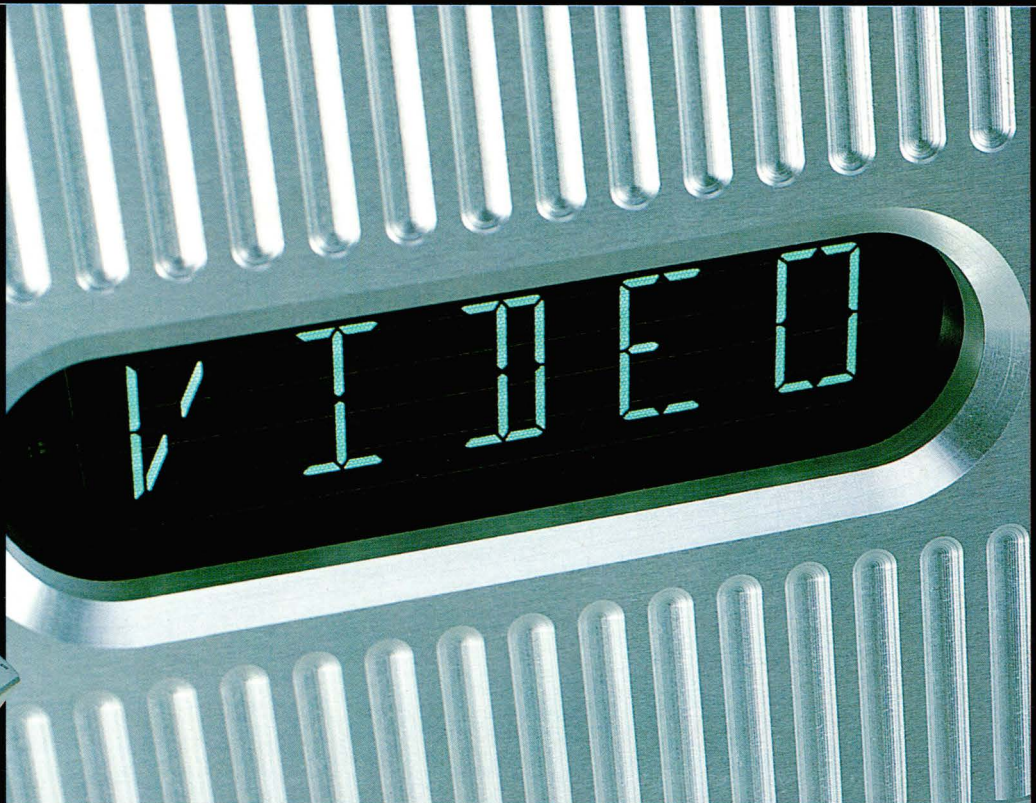
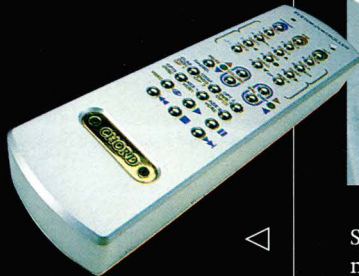
SOUND QUALITY

This Chord followed the Mark Levinson No383 (HFC 212) into the arena, and I used a NAD S100/Gamut D200 pre/power combo for reference. Sources included an SME Model 20A/vdH Grasshopper/TED Groove record player, AP Eikos CD player and the Sony SCD-555ES SACD player. ▶



Left: The input display clearly shows which of the six possible sources is selected.

Below, from top: Chord's rather complex system remote – they're working on something a bit less confusing!; Some of the socketry is a bit cramped, making bi-wiring speakers a bit difficult; That shiny blue light in full... Ooh.



Speakers were Living Voice Avatar OBX-R connected with Electrofluidics Monolith cable.

The sonic contrast with the Levinson was no less substantial than the ergonomic one. The Chord sounded organic and highly sensitive to compression within recordings after the less analytical American behemoth. I've noticed this ability to reveal degrees of compression with Chords before; it serves more than anything to reveal the style and vintage of recordings to an uncanny degree, and makes a very good case for the modern variety. Going from *OK Computer* (Radiohead, 1997) to *Lark's Tongues In Aspic* (King Crimson, 1970) makes a better case for modern studio techniques than most. It's not merely compression of course but all manner of recording trickery, but the sound of compression has changed more than most things, as has the way its used. In some instances this isn't very appealing, you don't necessarily want your Jimi Hendrix to have that 60s sound, but it's true to the source and that, after all, is the goal.

It also serves to reveal the better recordings in more of their glory, some old stuff sounds superb even by today's standards – John Martin's *Solid Air* for instance has a huge soundstage and a very natural, fluid feel that the analysis offered by this Chord serves very faithfully. Likewise the more recent *Tabula Rasa* on ECM, Arvo Pärt's powerful piece coming across with all the power, scale and grit that it warrants.

The Chord seems to fare better with simpler, less dense material however, and recordings with a lot going on don't seem so effective. It's not that things sound messy but the timing loses its edge and you lose some of the music's emotional element. Pretty ethereal stuff really, but the stuff that certain music is all about. Another mild criticism is of bass extension: while there is no shortage of grip or control, absolute weight doesn't seem as rock solid as some.

The quality of Timbaland's work on Missy Elliot's *Da Real World* is fully evident however, the lyrics fully comprehensible in all their grim glory and the production as precise and slick as you could ask. It proved well suited to the extra low-level resolve available from the SACD player too, revelling in the reverb and phase variations that the player unearthed.

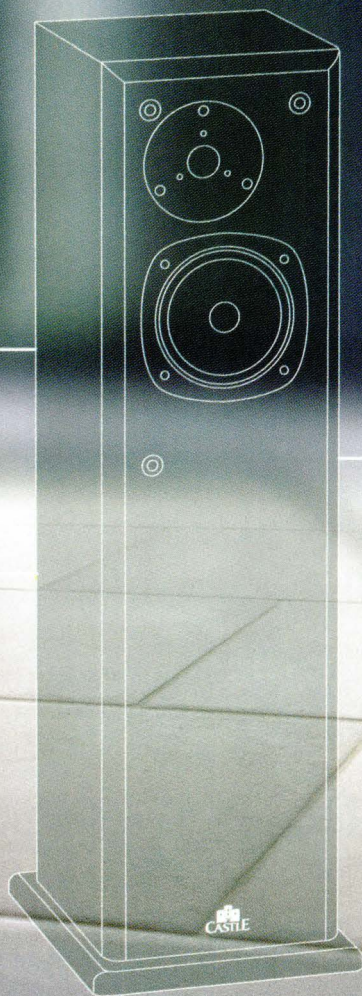
CONCLUSION

This ambitious Chord integrated is clearly a very capable amplifier in many ways: it's sensitive, transparent and has a superb grip on level variations or micro-dynamics. Its only shortcomings are the rather unusual ergonomics and a slight lack of fluidity when the going gets dense. Build quality and finish are superb, and the blue light is simply gorgeous. If you fancy a compact amp with bags of power there isn't a great deal of competition.

£5,495 Chord ☎ 01622 721444

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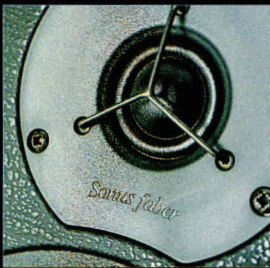
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Above: The unusual shape of the GP Home speakers helps disperse internal standing waves.
Below: The GP Home uses good quality drive units and encases them in leather and walnut. Nice.



PIANO FORTE

MEET THE BIG GUNS IN SONUS FABER'S CONCERT HOME RANGE



Italian speaker specialist Sonus Faber is best known for making some of the most beautiful 'high end' speakers on the planet, none of which I've actually had the chance to try yet. And perhaps just as well. The chance to spend a few weeks with a pair of the wonderful Amati Homages would be followed, sure as fate, by the considerable trauma involved in giving them back again.

Although these upmarket works of art make most of the headlines, Sonus Faber also makes a range of rather more affordable models, known collectively as Concert Home. The largest of these is this clumsily named but attractively presented and elegantly proportioned floor-stander, the £1,589 Grand Piano Home.

It has all the same styling cues as the little Concertino, but here, writ large, they somehow look a whole lot more impressive and purposeful. In outline configuration, this speaker is a port-loaded 30-litre 'two-and-a-half-way', based on twin 6.5-inch frame main drivers. The lower of these drivers (along with the port) is just used across the bass region, while the upper one covers the whole bass and midrange, right up to the (nominal 3kHz) tweeter crossover point.

It's an increasingly common but nonetheless practical line-up for medium-to-large rooms,

ets that house the equally chunky spikes and locknuts: these stick out sideways rather than fore-and-aft, but still ensure good stability.

The drive units are pretty impressive too, with cast alloy frames, decent size, shielded magnets and coated woven glassfibre cones. Although cone materials are only part of the mix, one bonus in starting with a woven base is that the ultimate breakup is better spread than with a homogenous material. The tweeter is a 26mm fabric dome, and a single terminal pair is fitted, so bi-wiring/-amping is not an option here.

In-room measurements confirm the decent 90dB sensitivity rating, alongside good ultimate bass extension (-8dB at 20Hz in-room), but this isn't a particularly easy load to drive, either at low or high frequencies. The balance definitely points towards free space siting, and errs a little on the warm and rich side of absolute neutrality. The traces don't look particularly smooth, but they do hold within quite tight limits, with a beautifully well judged overall trend.

SOUND QUALITY

The GP Home is a quite delightful sounding loudspeaker, with a seductive midband openness and neutrality that will never set your teeth on edge, yet which never sounds recessed or shut in. The GP Home has an altogether more relaxing

"THE GP HOME IS A QUITE DELIGHTFUL LOUDSPEAKER, WITH AN ALTOGETHER MORE RELAXING WAY OF MAKING MUSIC."

combining the simplicity of a two-way with the advantage of an extra driver and box volume to add some worthwhile extra bass weight. And while the Grand Piano Home carries a pretty hefty price premium over the budget equivalent, the deeper one digs into the fine detail, the more the quality and value becomes apparent.

Let's start from the outside. This is no simple rectangular box. The back and sides are vertical, but the base is deeper than the top, the front panel tilts slightly backward, while the top is also tilted, and its edges rounded off. Introducing some asymmetry is beneficial, not only because it makes a more interesting shape, but it also helps 'defocus' internal standing waves.

The front, top, back and base are all covered in a mottled matt black leather finish, which is quite original, but it's the chunky solid walnut side panels – apparently mechanically decoupled from the main box wrap – which add the real touch of class. Piano gloss black is an option here, but not the pale woods which seem to be most fashionable these days. The whole thing weighs a substantial 25kg, and a further touch of class is found in the chunky ironwork brack-

way of making music, with accurate tonality, ample reserves of headroom, and an impressive freedom from boxiness.

This is a speaker that leads with its midband, and focuses the attention thereon. Some might favour a little more top end zip and bite, or indeed some extra bottom end grunt and drive. But the midband is where most of the musical action takes place, and this Sonus Faber has few equals in the delicate art of voicing, bringing a fine evenhandedness to the table whatever the source or type of material you choose to play.

CONCLUSIONS

Start off with a basic configuration which makes perfect sense for medium-to-large rooms, execute it with the best quality ingredients and a soupçon of design flair, and you have the recipe for a high class loudspeaker that is very easy to love, and equally difficult to criticise. I daresay you can probably find comparable performance somewhere else for less, but I doubt you'll find more delicious styling and presentation – or a sillier name.

£1,589 *Absolute Sounds* ☎ 0208 971 3909

FORUM LETTERS

LETTER OF THE MONTH WINS A TDK GOODIE BAG

Send us your views of the magazine
and the world of hi-fi:

Forum: Letters
Hi-Fi Choice
99 Baker Street
London W1U 6FP
dan.george@futurenet.co.uk

**"IT SEEMS THAT JIMMY
BASICALLY ROBBED HIS
SPEAKERS OF THEIR
BASS RESPONSE."**

SEAN - SINK THE SINKS

**"WHEN USING ANALOGUE CAS-
SETTE - EVEN WITH A HIGH
QUALITY MACHINE AND TAPE -
TONE CONTROLS ARE A MUST!"**

NEVILLE FOSTER - NO TONE MOAN

**"I LOVE BRITISH HI-FI - BUT
WHY CAN'T THEY PUT TOGETHER
A DECENT REMOTE CONTROL?"**

DR PETER LOON SENG CHEE - REMOTE RANTINGS

LETTER OF THE MONTH

SINK THE SINKS

I am writing in response to Jimmy Hughes' article about using the Seismic Sinks under his Impulse H1 speakers. I appreciate that he likes them but I am not convinced that he is not unnaturally altering the response of his speakers like some kind of giant EQ device. A Seismic Sink is basically an isolation platform. Fine, but a loudspeaker cabinet can benefit from isolation only if it does not absorb pistonic force from the drivers. That is to say, the cones are moving, pushing air. Specifically they need something to push against. If the cones are moving air and what they are pushing against is also moving, you are taking energy away from the drivers and modifying their response. Based on what Jimmy said, it seems that he basically robbed his speakers of their bass response and because of that, had the resultant apparent improvement in midband resolution. To quote, "The floor mounted speaker offered impressive tightness and control, while the Sink mounted

speaker sounded a shade more natural". If he likes his speakers this way, great, but I worry that others might follow suit thinking that they are improving the performance of their speakers when in fact they are compromising it. Sean, via e-mail

The Editor replies... That would be a problem only if the drive units were moving at a tremendously low frequency, as it is you have the same effect as you do when walking or running in water. Walking is relatively easy but running is very difficult because water gets stiffer with frequency. Speaker drivers move considerably faster than the pneumatic suspension in Sinks can and thus they do not absorb cone movement. What the Sink does is stop the floor acting as a sink for cabinet energy, an effect that will vary according to cabinet construction, and in turn if you have a suspended floor it will stop this acting as a crude subwoofer. They certainly enhanced my system on a wooden floor quite significantly without any negative effects on the bass.



Pump up the jam...
We've always said that
Seismic Sinks are the business,
but some of you don't agree.



Letters page sponsored by

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REMOTE RANTINGS

I love British hi-fi. They make wonderful music. What I cannot understand is why can't they put together a decent remote control? Actually this also applies to some other foreign brands too, but the worse culprits are Brits. Seen a recent Linn remote? All similar buttons, small words and plenty of buttons – try locating the volume control. Even within a particular company, the quality of remotes varies on whether they just get an off-the-shelf unit or bother to design one. Rotel makes a nice remote (or rather they bought a nice one) for the Rotel-991 pre-amp. But look at the remotes for the RCD-951 and RCD-971 CD players: bland, small buttons of the same size.

What I cannot understand is, why spend money on super features, then make it difficult for buyers to use the equipment?

Then come the buttons themselves. How much more does it cost to have buttons colour-coded or made different sizes so that someone can feel his way to the various functions without gazing down at a series of identical buttons. If the important controls like the volume or on/off buttons can be placed in more prominent positions and made bigger this will definitely make life easier.

Dr Peter Loon Seng Chee, Singapore

RELATIVELY SPEAKING

When you are doing your Bench Tests are the awards for sound quality relative to the other items being tested or to



Pause... No, pause. Oh, damn! No, not record. Not record! Aaaargh!

the price of the actual item? Therefore, is your panel saying that the sound of the Marantz CD6000 KI Signature at five stars is better than the Naim Audio at more than twice the price? Or should I take it as one of your rivals stresses that the quality award is relative to the price? If you can take the time to answer I would be interested.

Rob Raeburn, via e-mail

The Editor replies... Our ratings and awards are based on sound quality per pound. They Reflect the price of the machine and the general standard of the group its in.

SONY SUPPORTER

I was looking at your Directory and noted that the comments for the Sony ST-D777ES said "that neither its DAB or FM performance really shines". Having been listening to one of these tuners now for a couple of weeks I find these comments curious to say the least. I have nothing but praise for this tuner and would recommend anyone looking for a DAB tuner to seriously consider one.

Given suitable source material I have found it capable of producing an excellent sound with a very believable soundstage. Since using this tuner I find that I need very little persuasion to listen to Radio 3, although I would agree that there are issues concerning the data rate used by broadcasters. Listening to CDs is all very well but it is nice to be able to listen to live performances – and also to find that there are works out there you haven't heard before and wish to add to your collection.

Philip Tyler, via e-mail

JM LABS JUDGEMENT

I've been considering the purchase of the JM Labs Electra 915.1 for some time now. The review performed by Paul Messenger, in my opinion, was not complimentary. Paul did get off to an unfortunate start with the 915 what with cutting his finger, and with the original poorly voiced version. My concern is that this unfortunate first impression may have biased his review. After all, Paul is only human and first impressions can be lasting ones. I've noticed in the contributors' section that Alvin Gold has a 'predilection' toward JM Lab speakers. Did Alvin also audition the 915s? If so, what was his impression? In the review there is no mention of a panel or other people involved in the audition. It is of great interest to me to know the opinion of others on the staff regarding the 915.1.

Bob Baron, via e-mail

The Editor replies... Alvin reviewed the 915s for another magazine and found that with the right amplifier – a powerful one – they could be very good in an analytical, slightly forward fashion. But Paul wouldn't have let the speaker's sharp edges put him or the listening panel off.

NO TONE MOAN

In regard to the letter from Nick Clarkson (Lowering the tone, HFC 213), I totally agree with him especially when using analogue cassette – even with a high standard machine and tape, tone controls are a must! If you must get around them, the best way is either tone defeat or source direct switching.

On the subject of coloration you often hear about LEDs on amps and CD players adding distortion and electrical interference; I find it interesting that on the Arcam A85 we not only have a volume LED, but also text. Do you think this is a contradiction in terms, as we are often told minimalist controls and buttons are a must?

Neville Foster, via e-mail

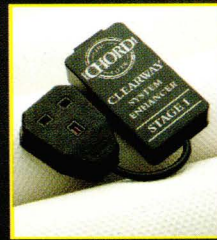
EXPERIENCE THE CHORD EFFECT!



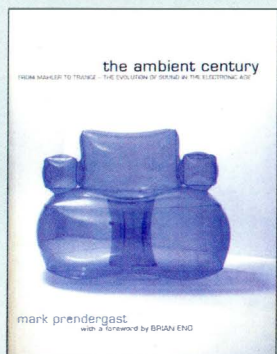
The first time you hear your sound system with Chord interconnecting cables will be the first time you've **really heard** it. Be warned - the effect can be shattering. Your eyes and ears will be opened. Your music will never sound the same again. Specify Chord cables - Hear the light!



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COMPETITION RESULTS



We were inundated with entries for our caption competition to win first editions of *The Ambient Century*.

Congratulations then to Emma Hobson, Harry Bhatti, Karen Eckerman, Mark Terry, Martin Mccannon and Simon Lee, who all receive a copy of Mark Prendergast's definitive history of ambient music. Their captions to the picture from the film *Groove* managed to draw on pizzas, Frisbees and pot throwing. Keep checking for new competitions at: www.hifichoice.co.uk/competition.asp

POLL NEWS

Our latest poll asked users to select their 2001 hi-fi resolution. 38% of over 800 voters decided they needed to clean their contacts. Sorting CD collections came second with 24% followed by playing more music (24%), and upgrading cables (13%). Sadly only 12% cent wanted to bring their friends into the hi-fi fold.

WHAT'S GOING ON

THIS MONTH'S HOT TOPICS ON THE CHOICE WEB FORUM

Our forum users have been toying with both nostalgia and prophecy. Discussing their favourite CD albums of the past year, opinions differed widely, from Primal Scream's rocking *Xtrmntr* to Radiohead's experimental *Kid A*. One member made up several of his own categories including 'Best Recording', 'Best Live Album' and 'Mainstream' – a future Brits judge, we believe!

Looking forward, talk has turned to the comparative merits of SACD and DVD-A. Which has staying power? DVD-A, said one browser, as it will hit the market hard 'as more and more of the general public buy DVD players for home movies'. Another claimed SACD 'sounds like the master tape' as opposed to it's competitor's 'cold' han-

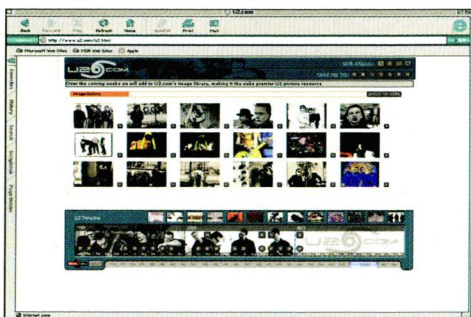
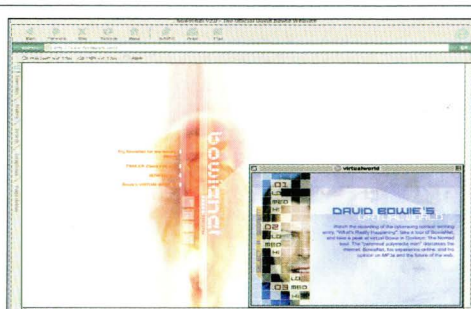
dling. While a third thought they should be able to 'co-exist'.

The following are some of the latest forum conversation topics. For these and dozens of others log on to www.hifichoice.co.uk and click on the forum to join the chat...

MAINS CABLES: Do trick mains cables really make a difference, and if so what sort of improvements – or is it all a con?

IMAGING: Are there any speakers out there that offer holographic imaging and real bass that don't cost an arm and a leg?

TUBES VS TRANSISTORS: You'll find enthusiasts who opine the wonders of valve or tube amps and those who can't live without transistor grunt. Which side of the fence are you on?



WEBSITE HI-FIVE

A SELECTION OF MUSIC-MAKERS' OWN WEBSITES...

U2 www.u2.com

Immensely flash web presence for the Gaelic gods of rock. Takes a while to load up, but includes some snazzy features like a pop-up U2 diary timeline and videos to download.

LLOYD COLE www.lloydcole.com

Just about the most personal artist's site there is. Cole actually edits and designs it himself. Good for receiving new tunes and getting gig info on the plaintive popster.

DAVID BOWIE www.davidbowie.com

The man who fell to earth has landed heavily in the virtual arena. Partly an extension of an artist's work and partly an avenue into Bowienet (his rival ISP to the giant AOL).

ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA www.rpo.com

This extremely old-fashioned looking site is the definitive source for the RPO. A detailed events calendar combined with features on individual members and the orchestra's educational role make this an amateurish hit.

COURTNEY PINE www.courtneypine.com

Lots of interesting details on Pine's work. Read his views on receiving an OBE, contemporary jazz and his top ten favourite tracks. A fine, rambling site.

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SYSTEM

WOKE UP THIS MORNING

I woke up one morning and decided it's time for me to move up a notch in the search for a more natural sound. After reading through your magazine I have come up with the following lists. CD players: Sony SCD-555ES or Sugden CD21. Amps: Lavardin IT or Sugden A21a. Speakers: JMLab Electra 905, Spondor SP2/3E or Sonus Faber Grand Piano. I listen mainly to jazz and world music.

Okere, via e-mail

The Sugden CD player/amp combo you mention certainly proved beguiling when we reviewed it in *HFC* 208, and is well worth an audition for its free-flowing musicality. But you do list some rather interesting alternatives. Sony's SCD-555ES (pictured) is a stunning CD player for the money, and it offers two-channel SACD playback into the bargain. Given your music taste, you're bound to find a few titles you want on SACD. Combine that with an amp like the Lavardin and you should end up with something really thrilling.

The speakers you mention are all interesting and extremely varied in nature. Once again, the only way to



find the one that best suits your own ears is to audition, but certainly the JMLab would make an engaging choice. For our opinions on the Sonus Faber model check out the review elsewhere in this issue.

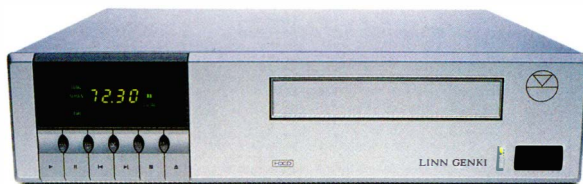
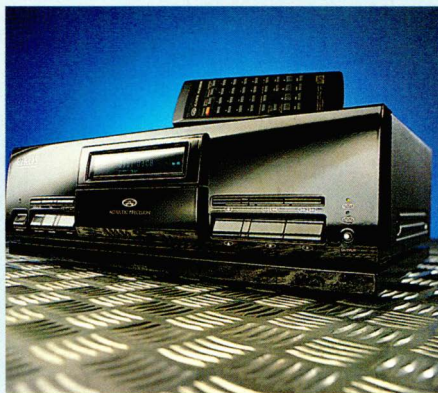
MODIFICATIONS

PRECISE DETAILS

I own a Pioneer Precision CD player and I'd like to know how I can enquire about Tom Evans' upgrade?

Mjeff, via e-mail

The Welsh Wizard Tom Evans resides at: 50 Bedwlyn Road, Ystrad Mynach, Hengoed, Mid Glamorgan CF8 7AE. You can call him on 01443 833570 - he's always delighted to receive enquiries. We'd certainly recommend anyone interested in hi-fi gives his products a whirl - some of them are revelatory - and anyone wanting to get more out of a Pioneer CD player should definitely give him a shout!



CD PLAYER/SPEAKERS

OBVIOUS CHOICE

I want to upgrade my Sony CDP-XB930E CD player with something that will work well with my Naim 32.5/135/Hi-CAP pre/power amps and Ruark Talisman speakers. The obvious choice is the Naim CD5 but that's a non starter because I want a digital output. I've got a budget of £800-£1,200 - would the Cyrus 7 be a good choice, particularly in view of its upgradability? The speakers will be next - should I just buy a pair of Naims or are there other options around a grand which will do the job with my amps?

Alan Collingburn, via e-mail

You should certainly give the Cyrus player a listen; it's a focussed and well balanced player. You simply must hear Sony's SCD-555ES too, along with the Linn Genki (pictured). On the speaker front, try the PMC FB1 and Neat Elite, both of which are floorstanders. If you'd prefer a stand-mount, consider the JMLab Electra 905 or, for a more laid-back and enveloping sound, the Celestion A1.



CD RECORDER

DUBBING DILEMMA

I'm thinking of buying a CD recorder and I'm considering two twin deck models: the Pioneer PDR-W739 (pictured) and Philips CDR-785. As well as using it to listen to CDs, I want to make copies from CD and phono (Linn Sondek) for the car. Are either of these models suitable for my needs?

Steve Adby, via e-mail

Twin deck CD recorders are a handy and affordable solution if you want to play and copy CDs using just one box. Of the two you mention, the Philips is probably the better featured. However, the Pioneer is probably also the better of the two for recording from analogue sources like vinyl.

But if your budget can stretch further, we'd recommend considering a separate CD player and recorder – you'll get much better playback that way, and arguably better recording quality too. Try matching a good entry-level player like Marantz's CD6000 with a recorder like the Pioneer PDR-609, featured in First Impressions this issue.

HEADPHONES

CAN TRACKING

You gave the JVC HA-DX3 cans a fab review, but where on Earth can I buy them? I've tried every shop down Tottenham Court Road, they're not even on the JVC Website! Do they actually exist?

Marcus Tylor, London

We called JVC and the company insists these headphones are still current, but admits they're a little thin on the ground. It recommends you call the customer helpline to find your nearest stockist or perhaps order direct: tel 0870 330 5000. Failing that, try a pair of Grado SR-225s or Sennheiser HD590s instead. Their reviews may not have been quite so glowing, but they are excellent phones and worthy of audition.

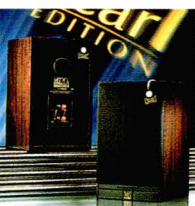
BUDGET SPEAKERS

FRESH PEARLS

I'm on the brink of buying a pair of Mordaunt-Short MS20i Pearl speakers to replace my ageing Missions. I was hoping to find a comment about them in your magazine but there's nothing! Did you review them? If so, what are they like?

Andrew Tottle, via e-mail

The MS20i Pearl emerged a few years back, a while before Mordaunt-Short hit the rocks. The brand was eventually bought by Audio Partnership, which has since developed an all-new range with metal drive units called Declaration. Products from the brand's previous incarnation are no longer made, so they've been removed from the Directory.



However, we can confirm that the MS20i Pearl (pictured) was arguably the best £200 speaker available when launched and would remain a strong buy – unusually fast, open and detailed for a model at its price. Current alternatives to audition would include the B&W DM601 S2 and Tannoy mX2.

MULTICHANNEL AMP

DISTINGUISHED COMPANY

I'm in the market for a high quality multichannel processor and power amp. In your January issue I read a review of a B&W Nautilus 800 speaker package, for which the TAG McLaren AV32R processor was used along with the TM100x5R and Bryston 9B five channel amps. Your review stated that the speakers were easily able to distinguish between the quite different characters of both these power amps. What exactly are these differences?

Willy Piers, The Netherlands



The Bryston is the faster and more dynamic sounding of the two, while the TAG McLaren is more cautious and laid-back. We would tend to prefer the Bryston, particularly for musical purposes.

However, the AV32R is a particularly fine processor and heartily recommended as an all-round master control for music and movies. You won't buy better for the money, though anyone intrigued by DVD-Audio may be surprised to learn it doesn't have the necessary six-channel analogue inputs. The official line from TM is that there's not enough room on the back panel! However, in line with TM's upgrade policy, this facility will be available as an option for users should it be required.

NUISANCE

GROMMETS

I have a Marantz MR2021 system, which comes with LS2021 speakers. My problem is that the speaker grilles keep coming off because the four rubber grommets are worn. I need a new set of rubber grommets but Marantz can't help. Can you?

S. A. Meylak, Peterborough

Blimey! What have you been doing with your grills? Frankly, we don't fancy your chances of getting a new set of grommets for your purposes. If you just want to leave the grilles on, our suggestion would be a blob of Blu-Tak at each corner. Or in true hi-fi tradition leave them off altogether!

SPEAKER CABLE

PARANWIRE!

I recently bought a pair of KEF Q35 (pictured) speakers based on your review. You recommended bi-wiring them, but I'm new to all this stereo stuff and I've read both positive and negative stuff about bi-wiring. The store recommended I bi-wire them so I bought the appropriate cable. Did I do the right thing?

Don Cooper, USA

Rest easy, Don. Certainly, opinions differ as to the attributes of bi-wiring – there are those who believe it's an invention to sell more cable – but the truth is the degree of effect it has depends on each individual speaker design. Some are put together in such a way that single wiring is at least as good, and some don't



have the facility at all, though it got to the point in the UK that speakers wouldn't sell if a designer didn't at least provide the option. Rightly or wrongly, punters began to associate the provision of bi-wiring as a mark of quality. In the case of your KEFs, bi-wiring is certainly a positive thing and can bring audible improvements in terms of image depth and focus when used with a good quality amplifier.



After the movies, thrill to the music.

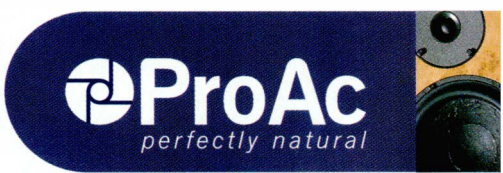
Introducing the ProAc Home Theatre system. We introduced it to Home Entertainment magazine and they gave it a five star rating (May 2000). Apart from the centre-channel unit, we didn't just set out to make a dedicated cinema system. We reasoned that if our highly successful Tablette 2000 and Studio 125 hi-fi systems were capable of great performance with music, they should be equally potent with movies. And we were right.

This exceptional blend of carefully matched drive units and crossovers provides the ultimate in total sound experience, producing an unfatiguing, smooth, natural and dynamic performance from film or music. Whichever way you want it, fasten your seat belts. This system will fire your senses, providing a compelling and unforgettable audio experience. Every time. On DVD, CD or vinyl.

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The Vinyl Touches

JIMMY SETS ABOUT SETTING UP THE PERFECT TURNTABLE

“VINYL HAS A WAY OF DRAWING YOU INTO THE MUSIC, BUT IT CAN BE AS MADDENING AS IT IS MAGICAL. IT’S ALL IN THE SET-UP...”



It's good to see a resurgence of interest in vinyl. Obsolete it may be but for many, the LP provides something that pristine CD lacks. Call it feeling, emotion, involvement; LP has a way of drawing you into the music that defies analysis. But vinyl can be as maddening as it is magical. It's all in the set-up...

Take tracking force. This is the weight (or pressure) at which the stylus tip contacts the record groove. Most manufacturers suggest a range of playing weights as a guide – say 1.8g to 2.2g. You should achieve good performance within these extremes, but optimum results usually fall towards the upper end of the range specified.

Play too light and you risk mistracking – a distortion caused by the stylus tip's inability to stay in contact with the groove wall. Playing at excessively heavy weights may cause the stylus cantilever to collapse so that the cartridge body sits too close to the LP surface. Sound quality changes with stylus pressure. At lighter weights, the sound tends to grow brighter and livelier; heavier forces tend to produce a fuller, darker tonal balance. Because stable secure tracking is, in my view, a fundamental pre-requisite for enjoyable trouble-free LP reproduction, I'd personally advocate playing weights that err towards the maximum recommended.

Tied in with tracking weight is something called VTA – vertical tracking angle. This relates to the angle at which the stylus tip contacts the groove wall. Usually, VTA is 'correct' when the arm tube is exactly parallel to the surface of the LP – as viewed from the side. But LPs vary according to the angle of the cutting stylus used during mastering. So VTA (unless altered for each LP) is inevitably something of a compromise.

Raising the back of the arm, so the tube slopes down to towards the cartridge when viewed from the side, creates a positive VTA, and brightens the tonal balance, increasing treble output. Lowering the back of the arm (negative VTA) has the opposite effect, reducing treble and making the tonal balance richer and warmer. There's been a recent groundswell towards a slightly negative VTA

as the optimum compromise. But much depends on the cartridge, and personal taste.

Another common adjustment is anti-skating force, or bias compensation. This is a degree of side-thrust applied to the arm to equalise the tendency for the pickup to be 'pulled' towards the centre of the LP as it spins. The aim is to ensure that any forces acting on the stylus tip are pretty much equal. Years ago, it was recommended you set the anti-skating force by putting the stylus on a spinning blank disc (an LP without grooves), increasing or decreasing side-thrust until the pickup head remained in a stationary position. However, current thinking says that this leads to excessive levels of side-thrust, and that many pickups perform best with minimal anti-skating force.

Most turntables are fitted with pivoted tonearms. But LPs are cut by a motorised 'arm' that moves in a straight line across the surface of the disc. This discrepancy creates a small degree of tracing error as the stylus moves across the LP. By optimising the angle at which the cartridge sits in the tonearm's headshell, and getting it in the right position relative to the centre-spindle, this can be minimised.

Everything hinges on the tip being in the right place, so most headshells allow the cartridge position to be altered. To check this you need an alignment protractor. Because the effects of misalignment grow worse as you approach the end of a side, alignment is usually optimised for the minimum groove radius.

Finally, a turntable/arm/cartridge combination is a physical device that's attempting something almost impossible; the reproduction of minute wavelengths that approach those of light. So mechanical integrity is paramount. Make sure the fixing bolts that hold everything in place are firmly tightened. Of all the various mechanical interfaces, the one between cartridge and headshell is the most important.

Take care not to over-tighten the fixing bolts and damage the cartridge body. And don't exert excessive force on delicate arm bearings if tightening a cartridge in a fixed headshell arm that's mounted on a turntable. It's easy to cause damage without realising it!

Jimmy Hughes is the king of hi-fi tweaks, his quest for the absolute sound knows no bounds.

YESTERDAY'S RADIO TOMORROW'S WIRELESS

Not into digital radio? Then you're missing out on a broadcast revolution

There is a revolution going on in radio, right here and right now. Its all about the digital radio multiplexes which have been proliferating at an extraordinary rate since the launch of the medium in November 99. The chances are that right now you could be tuning into a dozen new exclusively digital stations, more if you live in one of the bigger cities. There are now 18 national stations and 98 local stations broadcasting digitally, and by the end of

next year there will be over 300 digital radio stations in the UK, including many of your current favourites and many brand new ones exclusive to digital.

Alongside the proliferation of stations is a significant growth rate in transmitter coverage. Today, over 78 per cent of the populace can receive digital radio. In 18 months this will have increased to 85 per cent, in other words unless you live in the Outer Hebrides the chances are you will be able to access the future of radio.

At present there are a variety of

tuners on the market, you will find a full listing in the Directory, but until recently prices have kept them out of the reach of all but the most discriminating audiophile. Now, however, a couple of newcomers to separates hi-fi have dragged the price down to a



Above: The VideoLogic DRX-601E represents the entry level for digital radio, while the Psion Wavefinder (right) works with a PC.

WAVEFINDER™

A large, blue, textured digital radio tuner unit, the Psion Wavefinder. The unit is shown from a low angle, emphasizing its curved shape. The brand name 'WAVEFINDER™' is printed in white on a blue rectangular label on the front. The background is a dark blue gradient.

"RIGHT NOW YOU COULD BE TUNING INTO A DOZEN NEW EXCLUSIVELY DIGITAL STATIONS, MORE IF YOU LIVE IN ONE OF THE BIGGER CITIES."

very competitive £299, a price that will probably be undercut by the end of the year, but the best deal that's available now. The brands in question are VideoLogic and Psion, the former makes the DRX-601E a separates tuner with scrolling display and sound quality that competes with the best in class. Psion's Wavefinder is the first digital radio receiver that's designed to work with a PC and as a result it can fully exploit the potential of the medium. With a PC and the supplied software you can access the Digizone, a broadcast data service with games, web pages, cartoons and additional news and information from some of the digital radio stations.

NEW STATIONS

Digital One is broadcasting ten national digital radio stations on its network, including the three existing national commercial stations and seven unique, digital only stations - Planet Rock, Core, Life, PrimeTime Radio, Bloomberg Radio, ITN and OneWord.

The BBC is planning to add five new stations to its existing national network. These will include Asian and black community oriented stations alongside one concentrating on books and plays, and another playing archive music, interviews and concerts. If your musical tastes are more contemporary you'll be able to find specialist stations on your local multiplex that cater for all manner of taste.

In London there are now 18 stations and more to come, these include the familiar FM broadcasters like Capital, BBC LondonLive etc, but also a raft of digital only stations with a remit to serve minority taste, such as Ministry of Sound and The Groove. The former plays chart hits and club dance music while The Groove is for connoisseurs of Motown and soul.

It's not all music though there are speech based newcomers like Oneword which covers books, plays, poetry and comedy as well as local magazine type stations that specialise in what's happening in your area. All of the BBC's AM stations

digital radio
tomorrow's wireless™

are available digitally, so you no longer have to dig out a tranny radio to hear the World Service or Radio 5 Live, the former producing some much needed competition for Radio 4. News junkies are well served by digital radio, with News Direct and ITN alongside traffic and travel specialists like Travel Now.

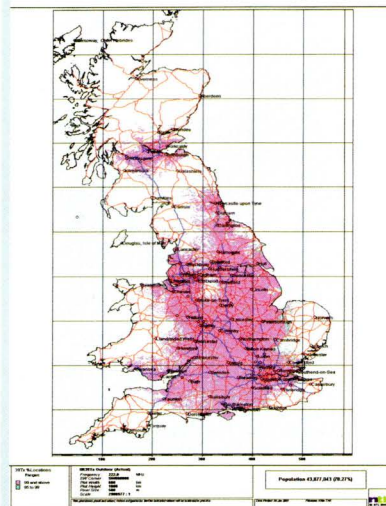
To find out what you could be listening to check out the official digital radio website at www.ukdigitalradio.com, this lists current and forthcoming stations by region and in the case of the commercial broadcasters you can sample content over the web. Alternatively if you have Sky you'll find several digital stations alongside the TV channels with most packages.

As well as the expansion in stations and coverage the future has a couple of other things in store for digital radio users, among these will be enhanced data streaming and electronic programme guides (EPG) - a form of enhanced teletext type service. Hardware will also appear in all the forms we have come to expect from radio, alongside some that are distinctly unconventional such as PDAs and mobile phones. One current project will deliver in-built storage and Smartcard slots with which you can record programming, retrieve information and customise your listening profile.

DIGITAL FOR ALL

With digital radio we have a situation that must be directly analogous to radio broadcasting in its earliest days: you needed broadcasting before anyone would buy a wireless, and you needed big unit sales before prices came down. At present most of the digital tuners available are state-of-the-art designs from high profile brands, but now that the ball is rolling everyone will be making the things over the next year. The question is, can you afford to wait?

DIGITAL ONE RADIO COVERAGE



Northern Ireland is not included in Digital One's licence, but it is covered by the BBC's national multiplex

NATIONAL COMMERCIAL STATIONS ON THE DIGITAL ONE NETWORK

CLASSIC FM

The UK's leading classical music station

VIRGIN RADIO

Classic tracks and today's best music

ITN

ITN, delivering unmissable news, money, sport, weather, travel and entertainment

CORE

Fresh Hits for the UK

TALKSPORT

Sport, news and views

PLANET ROCK

The Rock Specialist

BLOOMBERG RADIO

24 hour business and personal financial information

LIFE

The Music Sounds Better

ONEWORD

Every story begins with Oneword

PRIMETIME RADIO

Easy listening, melodic music from the last six decades

NATIONAL STATIONS ON THE BBC NETWORK

BBC Radio 1

BBC Radio 2

BBC Radio 3

BBC Radio 4

BBC Radio 5 Live

BBC 5 Live Sports Plus

BBC World Service

BBC Radio 4 (Longwave Service)

THE BLACK ART

YOU HEAR A LOT OF TALK ABOUT SYSTEM SYNERGY, ABOUT HOW SOME CD PLAYERS WORK BETTER WITH SOME AMPS... BUT WHY? PAUL MILLER INVESTIGATES.

Back in the dark ages of hi-fi when the height of data storage technology involved large, warped slivers of black vinyl transcribed by a small rock, armature and length of scaffold, the art of system matching was shrouded in mystery. Today's digital systems might appear equally mysterious, but at least many enthusiasts are spared the task of dealing with the various permutations of pick-up cartridges, tonearms and turntables. Where once system performance was dominated by the source, today's hi-fi systems have the capacity for greater simplicity and even greater performance.

One attraction of the CD player as a source is its neatness as an integrated solution. Fortunately, when Sony and Philips were developing the technology some 20-odd years ago, they avoided the temptation to offer interchangeable lasers as an upgrade process. Even two-box CD players, separating the CD transport from the essentially analogue process of digital to analogue conversion, have proved something of a non-event in recent times. We have had 'CD stabilisers', green pens to 'absorb stray laser light', and the chance to upgrade internal crystal clocks. But, as a rule, the advent of CD has swept away an industry of back-room tweekers, purveyors of snail oil and fairy dust.

HIT OR MISS

Of course, optimising the siting and alignment of a suspended-chassis turntable never was black magic. But it was often difficult, even hit-or-miss. Changes in room temperature and humidity, for example, could alter the compliance of the cartridge's suspension and thereby affect the sound. Hence the reason why audiophiles would point a small lamp at the cartridge to keep its innards consistently warm.

To an extent, the polymers used in the construction of speaker cones and surrounds still stiffen or relax in response to shifts in ambient temperature, even though the laser in your CD player is relatively immune to changes in heat or cold. Humidity is another matter, for while modern laser lenses are less hygroscopic than their forebears, no optical system will eagerly track through a fine layer of condensation. Bring a disc in from a cold car, slide it into your home CD player and the additional burden on its focus servos and error concealment circuitry will hardly benefit the sound.

EVER DECREASING CIRCLES

The movement of a laser pick-up as it keeps track of a CD's imperceptible spiral of data also involves a deal of precision mechanical engineering. These moving parts are also affected by changes in temperature, not least over the first 10 minutes or so of initial use. Here 'stiction' between the laser sled and its run-

ners, for example, can be at its greatest, increasing pickup errors, which, even with sophisticated data correction, still incur an increase in distortion.

I have measured CD players that afford some 0.008 per cent distortion at peak output, falling to 0.0008 per cent once the transport has 'warmed-up'. Similarly, few amps are optimised until they have been left ticking over for ten minutes or so, many recording worthwhile reductions in noise and, particularly, odd-order distortions as the supply regulators warm-up and output transistors respond to the bias current.

These are all subtle effects but are representative of legions of minute imperfections that persist through all hi-fi systems, imperfections that give rise to distortions that, in turn, either work as a positive or destructive influence on the sound of the system as a whole. Purists will point out that any distortion represents a compromise but, in reality, there's no escaping the fact that many people prefer one coloration or another.

"YOU COULD PICK ANY CD PLAYER, PARTNER IT WITH 95 PER CENT OF AMPLIFIERS AND SPEAKERS AND STILL NOT RUN INTO GENUINE INCOMPATIBILITY."

COMPATIBILITY CLASH

MOST COMBINATIONS OF COMPONENTS WORK FINE BUT THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLES ARE MORE TECHNICALLY INCOMPATIBLE THAN MOST:

AMPS THAT ARE SENSITIVE TO ULTRASONIC INPUT

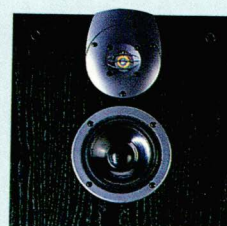
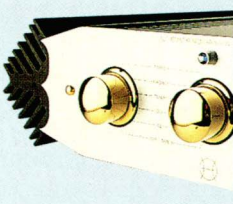
Alchemist Kraken APD6A
AMC 3025A
Magnum IA120

SPEAKERS WITH DIFFICULT IMPEDANCE/LOAD

Dynaudio Audience 72
Infinity Delta 60
Wharfedale Diamond 7.2

CD PLAYERS WITH HIGH ULTRASONIC OUTPUT

Arcam Alpha 7
Roksan Kandy
NAD 522



“MOST CD PLAYERS HAVE A SUFFICIENTLY LOW OUTPUT IMPEDANCE THAT THEY WILL ‘DRIVE’ ALMOST ANY INTERCONNECT AND AMPLIFIER.”

average input overload margins (Linn amplifiers spring to mind) but you'd have to feed it from a CD player with an exceptionally high peak output (certainly higher than the nominal 2V standard) before clipping its input stage.

Similarly, most CD players have a sufficiently low output impedance and available current that they will 'drive' almost any interconnect and amplifier input of choice. Look for an output impedance of 200 ohm or less if your amplifier has a lowish 22 kohm input impedance (47 kohm is standard). For years, TEAC CD players had an output impedance around 1 kohm, while the inductive output network of Audio Note's players and DACs presents a higher value still.

Partnered with anything other than its own amplifiers, which typically provide a super-easy 100–1,000 kohm load, and the CD/amp response will suffer an audible loss of both low bass and high treble.

SEEN, BUT NOT HEARD

Other areas of 'incompatibility' between CD players and amplifiers are less straightforward. Although the CD format is only capable of storing audio information up to 20kHz, the notional limit of human hearing, years of *HFC* lab tests have shown that significant levels of noise above this frequency regularly escape the player's filters. Burr-Brown's old PCM1710 DAC, as used by Arcam and Roksan in the past, was particularly aggressive in this regard, thanks to the action of its internal noise-shapers. Substantial levels of noise would escape from the player, up to and beyond 100kHz, leaving the partnering amplifier to deal with the fallout.

Although it's fair to say we could not hear this noise directly, few amplifiers are as linear when 'amplifying' signals at 100kHz as they are at 10kHz or 1kHz, for example. As distortion typically always increases with frequency, figures might be a hundred or thousand times higher at 100kHz than at 1kHz. And it's this distortion, particularly an intermodulation or 'beating' distortion

If they didn't, we'd all be using exactly the same system and you'd not be reading *Hi-Fi Choice*.

LOSE YOUR COOL

The fact that an audio system typically sounds better warm than cold is hardly revolutionary, but it is worth bearing in mind when experimenting with different CD players, amplifiers and speakers. As is the overall listening level. Many a system upgrade or 'enhancement' boils down to minute shifts in sound level which, in turn, affects the subjective balance. This is the reason why *HFC*'s blind listening tests are conducted at

precisely matched levels. Different products are perceived to sound slightly louder or quieter when, in reality, this is purely a function of their handling of musical dynamics, acoustic space and timbral nuances.

These are all issues that concern the validity of an A/B comparison but are not, strictly speaking, issues of compatibility. In practice you could pick any one CD player from our guide, partner it with 95 per cent of available amplifiers and speakers and still not run into a genuinely limiting incompatibility. Amplifiers equipped with logic-steered input selection often have lower-than-

◁ between similar frequencies, that folds directly back into our range of hearing. If higher frequencies still are permitted to enter the amplifier, either from the CD player, via the power supply or as a radiated (Radio Frequency) noise, then even relatively insignificant levels may prompt an audible response.

TOO NOISY BY RF

Because the RF interference is noise-like, the distortion will also appear as a form of noise that can be compared against the normal background 'hiss' of the amplifier. This increase in noise is visible as the raised blue areas on the plots of Fig 1 (over page). The test itself is fairly vigorous and undoubtedly represents an abnormally high level of RF interference. Nevertheless, the difference in immunity between the two amplifiers is extremely obvious.

If this were to occur in 'real life', even reduced in intensity, then the CD player auditioned through the top amp would sound harder and less harmonious than it would through the lower amp. This holds true if the amplifiers are otherwise identical, offering the same power output, the same tolerance of difficult

the graph). As the musical peaks become more transient (shorter in duration), the 'red' amplifier clearly outstrips the ability of the 'blue'. It finally delivers 250 Watts for the latter's 175 Watts with fleeting two millisecond musical peaks. More headroom means more power means more volume. So, depending on the nature of the music, the red amp could very easily sound louder and less compressed than the blue, perhaps even matching the muscle of a notionally more powerful amplifier, represented here as the black trace starting at 178 Watts/8 ohm.

The significance of this effect will be moderated not only by your choice of music but also by the cable and speaker. Just as the specification for power output offers little clue to the amplifier's real potential, so too are claims of a flat frequency response largely irrelevant.

WILD AT HEART

In practice, the speaker load does not behave like the 8 ohm resistor used by a manufacturer when it records figures for power output, response, noise and distortion, for example. The undulating grey trace on Fig 3 indicates how the

"THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS EFFECT WILL BE MODERATED NOT ONLY BY YOUR CHOICE OF MUSIC BUT ALSO BY THE CABLE AND SPEAKER."

speaker loads and offering broadly equivalent levels of conventional harmonic distortion. Incidentally, incompatibilities of this nature may account for differences in published reviews of the same CD player, for example, as it's highly unlikely that two magazines will use the same amplifier and speakers.

Then there is the question of the music's dynamic content. Depending on the design of the amplifier's power supply, there's usually a trade-off between its ability to deliver progressively more power into low impedance loads versus the amount of headroom available to accommodate musical peaks.

Figure 2 is a perfect case in point. The red and blue traces represent the dynamic power outputs of two amplifiers that both offer 112 Watts/8 ohm under *continuous* conditions (far RHS of

reactive nature of a real speaker can produce an impedance that varies quite wildly with frequency. Some speakers are less wild than others while some amplifiers, by dint of a lower output impedance among other things, suffer less of an interaction.

Look at how two amplifiers from this month's test (the Exposure in blue and Marantz in red) deliver very different electrical responses when driving this speaker load. If both were measured into a standard 8 ohm resistor, you'd be hard pressed to tell them apart. In a listening test, would the gently down-tilted treble of the Exposure yield a sweeter sound? Of course, change the speaker and the relative difference between the Exposure and the Marantz would change again, perhaps to the point of swaying your preference from

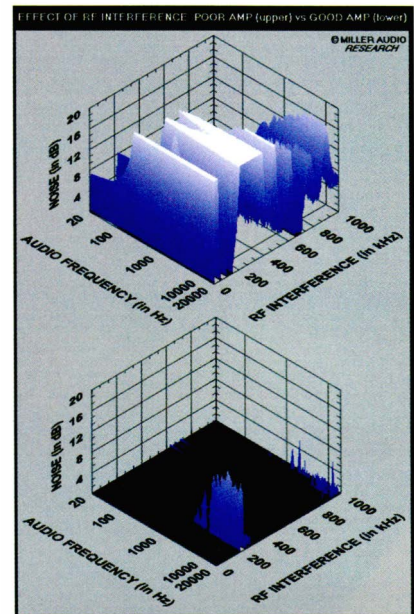


Fig 1. How interference can alter the sound of the same CD player through different amplifiers.

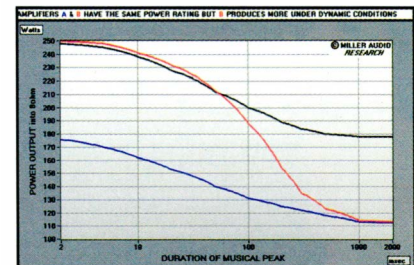


Fig 2. Just because two amplifiers have the same power rating, they don't play equally loud...

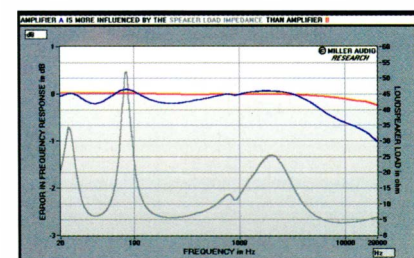


Fig 3. Amplifier output impedance varies with frequency as does the speaker load, moderating the overall frequency response.

one to the other. And yet, as both amps are perfectly able to drive the speaker to decent levels, neither could be accused of being genuinely 'incompatible'.

I have dealt with a few of the technical aspects of compatibility which go some way to explaining the notion of system synergy. Next month we'll take a closer look at the amplifier/speaker interface and some other aspects of system matching.

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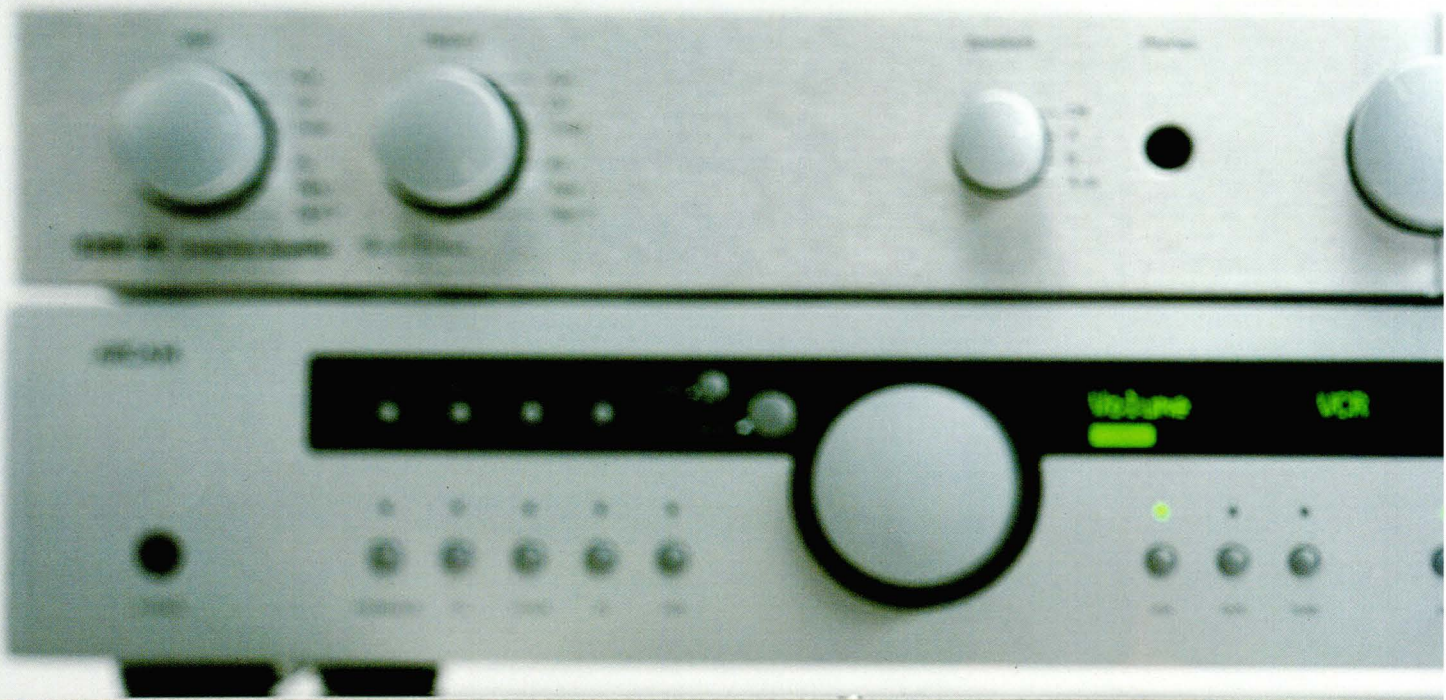
Marantz combines the CD-17 CD player, the ST-17 tuner and the PM-17 amplifier to create something really special. All products have a solid metal casing and use state-of-the-art technology. Hi-Fi sound with no compromises.

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INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

ALVIN GOLD AND PAUL MILLER PUT SOME VERY PROMISING UPMARKET INTEGRATED AMPS THROUGH THEIR PACES.

Anyone who holds on to the antediluvian belief that amplifiers sound much of a muchness, or even that they don't make much difference to the way that real life systems perform given the other imperfections that inevitably take their toll, should spend some time with the amplifiers reviewed here. Not only do they cover a surprisingly wide performance spread, but there is scant evidence from this batch that advancing technology is doing much to narrow the gap.

Welcome then to this round up of 10 integrated stereo amplifiers, which range in price from £599–£1,550. The group includes familiar and unfamiliar names, including a significant newcomer to this country in the shape of Plinius from New Zealand. Important new designs featuring novel technology come from established UK names Arcam and Naim, and a number of the models come from Japan, France and Scandinavia, the last two increasingly interesting sources of quality hi-fi. And we have one real oddball, a preamplifier from Linn with built in power amplifiers, and the ability to be expanded into a multi-room server or receiver – the Majik, which ironically is probably the longest running design in the group.

Although the technology is part of the story, sound quality takes centre stage in these tests. It is worth repeating a warning that has been given many times in the past, but which turned out to be particularly important with some of the models in this group, which is that you cannot necessarily expect top class performance until the amplifiers have been allowed to run in, which can take as long as 72 hours.

The standard testing programme was followed for this test (see page 5), which included two days of tests involving groups of listeners who auditioned the amps under blind listening conditions, and more extensive sighted hands-on testing, using a wider range of source material and partnering equipment. And the results were certainly interesting...

THE PLAYERS

THE AMPLIFIERS

ARCAM DIVA A85 £700
 CREEK 5350SE £799
 EXPOSURE 2010 £599
 LINN MAJIK £845
 MARANTZ PM-17 MK II £999.90
 NAIM NAIT 5 £799
 PLINIUS 8100 £1,450
 PRIMARE A30.1 £1,500
 THULE IA60B £700
 YBA INTÉGRÉ ALPHA DT £1,550

OTHER EQUIPMENT USED

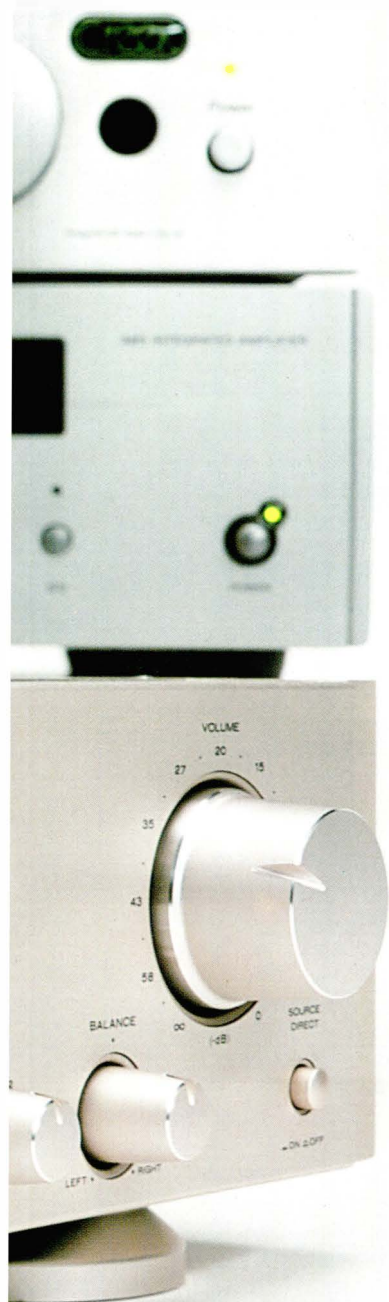
Primare V20 DVD player
 Musical Fidelity A3 CD player
 JMLab Mezzo Utopia loudspeakers
 Mission 772 compact speakers
 Nordost Valhalla interconnects and speaker cables

THE LISTENING PANEL

Steve Harris (TAG McLaren)
 Mark Hockey (Kenwood)
 Mike Martindale (Arcam)
 Alan O'Rourke (Ruark)
 Danny Haikin (B&W)
 David Inman (Castle)

MUSIC USED DURING TESTS

Rickie Lee Jones - *It's Like This*
 Fisher/Bartok - *Danse des garçons* from *Concerto for Orchestra*
 Joe Sample - *Old Places Old Faces*
 Michaelson/Brahms - *Clarinet Trio*





ARCAM DIVA A85

SOUND ★★★★★ **VALUE** ★★★★★ **£700.00** **CONTACT** 01223 203200 www.arcam.co.uk **GUARANTEE** 2 years

Most of the DiVA range has been derived from the FMJ or Alpha series, but the A85 is new from the ground up. A software driven model, the remote control switches the seven line inputs, and allows volume levels to be normalised between inputs, for different bypassable tone control settings for each input, even for different volume control laws (normal, fine and reference, the latter with 72, 0.5dB steps). Two pairs of speakers and headphones can be connected. An expansion module will be available to allow

use of future formats such as DVD-A with an outboard power amplifier to make up the full 5.1 channel complement, and the input gain can be fixed to allow volume control from an external processor.

The circuit also marks a departure, with extensive use of surface mount devices, DC coupling throughout and a new topology designed to reduce distortion and noise, and enhance protection. With most switching and other options performed in software, reliability should be improved, as is channel balance throughout the volume range.

SOUND QUALITY

The A85 doesn't sound like any Arcam amplifier we've tested in the past. The old easy-on-the-ear and sometimes slightly lazy quality has been displaced by a brighter, bolder, leaner sound. "It's far quicker [than the previous amplifier in the listening test], and the first that makes the bass work properly," noted one of the Joe Sample recording, while others described the sound as "glowing" and "more natural". Strong imagery and rhythmic timing were praised, but the Ricky Lee Jones vocal was thought by one panellist to "shout" when loud, and he also found the amplifier "too smooth", though the general thrust of most of the comments in four separate presentations was the other direction. Perhaps the most striking praise came from one who pointed to detail in the (relative) silences between notes in the Brahms recording that was simply not audible through most of the other amplifiers.

The familiar DiVA bodywork hides a completely new set of circuits underneath.

This is indeed a class act. I found the Arcam consistently vivid and lively, and if it doesn't have quite the polish or rich tonality of the Primare A30.1, it costs a lot less too, and in isolation you might never notice the limitations. It was consistently musical and transparent with all the music thrown at it, and irrespective of the speakers chosen.

CONCLUSIONS

A clear break with tradition, the DiVA A85 is a leaner, fitter and more modern amplifier than previous Arcams, and although it doesn't always have the easy manners of its predecessors, at is arguably more in tune with the times. A clear, unequivocal Best Buy, not just because it sounds good but also for the features designed to accommodate changes to come, notably multichannel audio.

"THE ARCAM IS CONSISTENTLY MUSICAL AND TRANSPARENT, IRRESPECTIVE OF THE SPEAKERS CHOSEN."



THE LAB REPORT

WITH ITS RECENT INVEST-

MENT in new engineering talent being realised in the Diva DV88 DVD player, Arcam has been keen to follow this up with some equally new amplification. This is the A85, whose claim to fame (borne out in practice) is a remarkably low level of distortion. Arcam suggests around 0.005% but the A85 actually achieves levels as low as 0.0006-0.0015% through bass and midrange over much of its dynamic range. This only increases to 0.01% at the high treble extremes. Power

output is met at 2x105W/8 ohm and 2x155W/4 ohm, increasing under dynamic conditions to 150W, 265W, 409W (14.0A) and a truly massive 522W (22.9A) into 8, 4, 2 and 1 ohm loads, respectively. This amplifier will drive any speaker you care to throw at it! Otherwise, the response is pleasingly flat to within 0.08dB (as is the 0.1 ohm output impedance), digital volume adjustment yields only minimal errors in balance (just 0.04dB), while the A-wtd S/N ratio is bang on-target at 85.7dB (re. 0dBW).



CREEK 5350 SPECIAL EDITION

SOUND ★★★★★ **VALUE** ★★★★★ **£799.00** **CONTACT** 020 8361 4133 www.creekaudio.co.uk **GUARANTEE** 2 years

Creek Audio specialises in the affordable end of the market, and majors on reputedly excellent service backup. The company boasts that any of its products can be made fully serviceable, even those dating back to the genesis of the brand in 1982. Creek's previous amplifiers had compact, low-cost housings, but the all-aluminium 5350 sees a rethink. It has grown in width, and sports a thick, brushed fascia extrusion. The turned controls add an impression of luxury previously missing from the range. The controls are limited to listen and record selectors, switching for two pairs of speakers and a headphone socket. A compact remote control handset is included, and the preamp and power amp can be operated independently.

The basic design features a passive preamplifier, with the inputs fed directly to the volume control, but an active gain stage (+6dB) can be

added for those with a tuner or some other non-digital source component with a relatively low voltage output. Phono step-ups are also available. Power output from the MOSFET amp is specified as 85 Watts/channel (8 ohms).

SOUND QUALITY

The panel clearly had mixed feelings about this amplifier. It was deemed to have a "poorly controlled bass" (Joe Sample and others), though it was praised in the same piece for its "clean, clear upper registers", and in the Brahms for its "good separation between instruments", and its "fine tonal balance and sense of space". The Bartok was described by this listener as offering a "good combination of detail and harmonic structure", for example in the pizzicato strings at the start of the extract. Another listener made the same point about what he termed as "loose and ill-defined" bass, but this

time the rest of the amplifier's performance was tarred with the same brush (flat, messy, difficult to follow etc). The third panellist, however, found the Creek made him "sit up and take notice".

With the deciding vote, and many more hours of listening under my belt, I finally came down in favour of an amplifier that clearly does have a rather slow and heavy bass. This gave a balance with well-recorded acoustic material that was akin to listening with a slight loudness contour, and which with rock music could simply sound heavy handed. But the Creek also has a midband and treble of considerable depth and range, with

The Creek's sexy aluminium fascia marks a styling departure for the range.

rich and well varied tonal colours, a sense of space around the notes and almost liquid delivery that gave the host system an unusually musical quality.

CONCLUSIONS

The Creek has a preference for smaller to medium size loudspeakers, though it seems unfazed by low impedance loads, and was reasonably consistent with different cable types. Although the bass can sound muddy and opaque, it has an impressively smooth and airy sound.

"THE CREEK ALSO HAS A MIDBAND AND TREBLE OF DEPTH AND RANGE, WITH RICH AND VARIED TONAL COLOURS."



THE LAB REPORT

RECENT CREEK AMPLIFIERS have sailed very close to the wind with regards their power output specification (see 4330SE, HFC 208), and the 5350SE is no exception. Rated at 85W/8ohm, two channels driven, this sample delivered just 86W with a +1dB increase to 2x108W into 4 ohm. Nevertheless, Creek amplifiers are typically very tolerant of difficult speaker loads, offering far higher outputs under *dynamic* or music-like conditions. Specifically, the 5350SE sustained some 123W,

221W, 323W (12.7A) and 391W (19.8A) into 8, 4, 2 and 1 ohm loads, respectively. Even with 'long term' transients lasting 100msec, the amplifier lifts its performance to 110W into 8 ohm. Other features include a low +33.9dB gain (meaning that you'll get more use out of the volume control), low 0.002% midrange distortion and a moderate 87-88dB S/N ratio. Output impedance is usefully low at 0.008 ohm through the bass, increasing to a maximum of 0.04 ohm at HF where the response is just -0.2dB down.



EXPOSURE 2010

SOUND ★★☆☆☆	VALUE ★★☆☆☆	£599.00	CONTACT 01273 423877	www.exposurehifi.com	GUARANTEE 3 years
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Exposure is a celebrated hi-fi marque that failed to track changes going on around it, and eventually its amplifiers ended up looking dated and agricultural just as others were getting their acts into gear. The original founder and designer, John Farlowe, has since become semi-detached from the company which has seen changes in ownership and design influence, and the current range shows clear evidence of greater attention to styling and detail. There are even better looking amplifiers around, but the 50 Watt/channel 2010 is clean, straightforward and generally very presentable, the key

features being the thick slab brushed alloy fascia and matching turned aluminium controls with their blue LED inserts. Blue is the in colour for LEDs these days it seems.

Straightforward is also the right word for its features count. There are six inputs in all, one of which can be converted for use as a phono stage. A preamplifier output is available and has obvious applications in bi-amplified systems. The only controls are for volume and source selection, but both are motorised, and can be driven from the remote control, which also accesses the various inputs, and operates the basic features of an Exposure CD player.

SOUND QUALITY

There should be no problems identifying this one in a line-up, even with the lights off and only the sound for identification. The 2010 has a full, rich balance, a recessed midband and a loss of clarity that led one panellist to speculate that the amplifier came from a big name producer trying to break into the hi-fi business with an easy, safe-sounding amplifier.

The Exposure 2010 is both of these things, but it was also decreed to be "overblown" and to "lack sparkle" (Joe Sample and Brahms respectively). A second panellist felt that it was "a good all-rounder and OK" in one track (Brahms), but "slightly veiled, though still listenable" in the next (Rickie Lee Jones) and "veiled" again in the Bartok. "Big and blowsy," concluded a third. A consistent pattern is obviously emerging...

With this degree of unanimity in the listening panel, readers will not

The classy Exposure 2010 – evidence of the company's new attention to style.

be too shocked to hear that the amplifier sounded much the same in the hands-on tests. It is by no means a poor amplifier. The full, rich tonality meant that the amplifier sounded very colourful, and the large scale imagery is also a plus point on the whole, but those looking for a more precise, clinical sound – and in particular for greater clarity and transparency – will find the Exposure is probably not for them.

CONCLUSIONS

Make of this amplifier what you will. I found it too vague and ill focussed to be convincing; and it also gave signs of level dependency, the sound changing with changes in level – not grossly, but certainly enough to be noticed in critical listening, and enough to prevent it sounding completely consistent.

"THOSE LOOKING FOR A MORE PRECISE, CLINICAL SOUND WILL FIND THE EXPOSURE IS PROBABLY NOT FOR THEM."



THE LAB REPORT

ALTHOUGH EXPOSURE amplifiers have a loyal fan club, their popularity is not derived from excessive power output or a defiant tolerance of difficult speakers. In practice, the 2010 just meets its 50W/8 ohm specification at 55W, though the "typically <0.01% distortion" is already breached at 50W thanks to a progressive rather than abrupt mode of clipping. Although only 63W is possible under continuous conditions into 4 ohm loads, the amp does perk up under dynamic conditions to deliver 76W, 106W, 95W (6.9A) and

62W (7.9A) into 8, 4, 2 and 1 ohm loads respectively. On the whole, distortion climbs almost uniformly with frequency, beginning at a low 0.001% at 20Hz (bass) through 0.02% at 1kHz (midrange) to 0.25% at 20kHz (high treble). If a low feedback design was suspected then the high 0.23ohm output impedance and rolled-off bass/treble frequency response adds further weight. Finally, inter-channel crosstalk is low, balance good at 0.3dB and the 0dBW S/N on the healthy side of average at 87.3dB.



LINN MAJIK

SOUND ★★☆☆	VALUE ★★☆☆	£845.00	CONTACT 0141 307 7777	www.linn.co.uk	GUARANTEE 2 years
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Mysteriously, the Majik (b. 1993) is billed, not as an integrated amplifier, but as a control preamplifier “complete with on-board stereo amplifiers” (sic). The secret behind this apparent contradiction is that the Majik is just the starting point for what can grow into more than just an integrated amplifier. This is done by adding so-called Sneaky modules, or by upgrading to better, more powerful outboard power amplifiers (like the Klout) or active speakers, which are accommodated via the preamp output and power amp input sockets, or even internally. There are matching power amp inputs too. Sneaky modules are available to convert the Majik for multi-room use via a line driver or a local receiver module, but note that only one module can be fitted at a time.

Headphones can be connected via a dedicated internal headphone amplifier, which automatically disengages the speakers. The amplifier is

controlled by microprocessor, and includes a precision ladder type volume control with 1dB steps over most of the volume range, separate record and listen selection, volume control management when changing inputs to avoid nasty surprises, and “intelligent” output protection. The Majik is available with or without an internal MM phono stage. The test sample was so equipped, but the phono input was untested.

SOUND QUALITY

This amplifier received mixed notices, reflecting a rather uneven performance. One concluded that the Linn is “easy to listen to – the sound doesn’t impose, but it doesn’t give anything back”, while another thought it sounded “sloppy, with little sense of performance” (Brahms) and “big and loose – [with] poor timing” (Joe Sample). A third panellist however prefaced every remark with “good”, as in “good separation” (Brahms), “good stereo spread” (Rickie Lee

Jones) though his positive reaction was atypical for the group.

One rather obvious interpretation of the Majik, reinforced by connecting outboard power amplification, is that it is a rather good preamplifier with a relatively shambolic power amplifier stage. The amp holds up well to moderate volume levels, but it soon hits the buffers if stressed, and even without its power envelope it lacks the ready analysis and transparency of the YBA, or the grace and sophistication of the Primare, to name but two. My own notes made when listening hands-on was that it sounded rather lush and sibilant, and that although instrumental separation was good,

The Majik can be just the starting point for an unusually flexible amplifier.

there was an intermittent sense that individual voices and instruments were modulating others.

CONCLUSIONS

A real curiosity, the now quite elderly Majik has class-leading flexibility via the Sneaky module facility and ability to use the pre and power amps independently. But while the preamp is lean, clean and mean, the power amps are not in the same class. Not formally recommended then, but worth considering, especially in a multi-room environment.

“THE LINN MAJIK HOLDS UP WELL TO MODERATE VOLUME LEVELS, BUT IT SOON HITS THE BUFFERS IF STRESSED.”

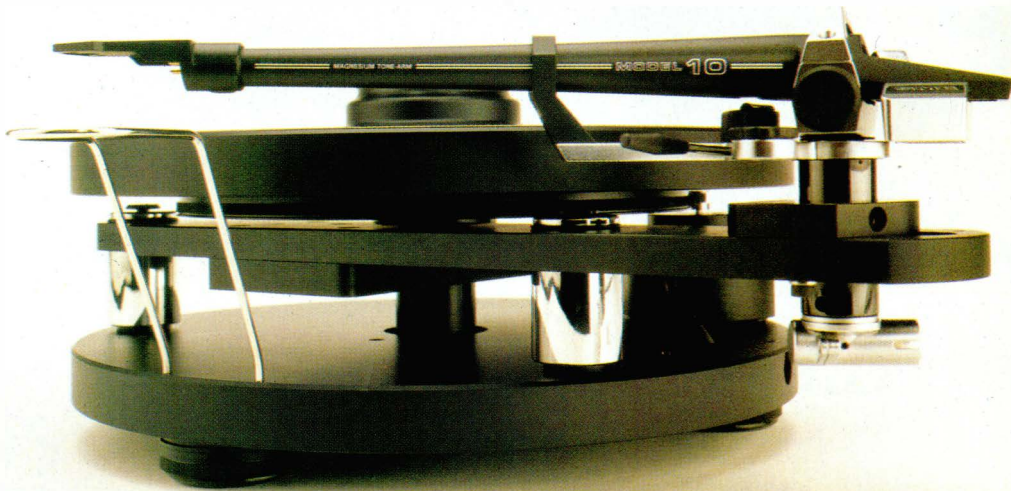


THE LAB REPORT

IN CERTAIN RESPECTS, the Majik behaves like a precision instrument, in others it betrays a marked asymmetry between channels. Power output was true to within 0.1W of 35.6W at 20Hz, 1kHz and 20kHz into 8 ohm, increasing to 64.3W into 4 ohm. The supply is so stiff that any increase in output under dynamic conditions is negligible. Similarly, the gain of +35.8dB was matched to within 0.03dB between channels thanks to the digital volume control. And yet

distortion varied markedly, from as low as 0.0065% on both left and right channels at 20Hz to 0.005% (left) and 0.015% (right) at 1kHz and 0.035% (left) to 0.11% (right) at 20kHz. The response, meanwhile, was matched to within a fraction of a dB, rolling gently away at HF to give a -0.5dB droop at 20kHz and -1.2dB at 30kHz. Nevertheless, the high 0.28 ohm output impedance will ensure this response is modified in line with speaker and cable impedance (loading) in practice.

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MARANTZ PM-17 MK II

SOUND ★★☆☆	VALUE ★★☆☆	£999.90	CONTACT 01753 680868	www.marantz.co.uk	GUARANTEE 2 years
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The Mk II PM-17 looks much like its predecessor (reviewed *passim*). It has wrap around side cheeks and a heavyweight fabricated finish, WBT speaker terminals (previously specified for the KI Signature version) and other luxury touches, even a meter that tells you when the amplifier is, er, on heat. The features list includes six line inputs, incorporating a dedicated CD-R input and two tape circuits, with separate record and listen selectors (also new). The design even includes an MM/MC switchable phono input, and has acquired a switchable link between the pre and power amplifiers, plus tone and source direct switching, a headphone socket, a system remote control and D-Bus sockets for linked system operation. There have been changes to the circuit topology too, including the ability to use the amp with a matching power amplifier in a BTL (Balanced TransformerLess) phase

inverted configuration for improved sound quality – but ‘Improved gain distribution’. What’s that about then?

SOUND QUALITY

The PM-17 Mk II is a bold, power amplifier, but if it measures similarly to the Arcam A85 in many ways, it certainly doesn’t sound similar in any way. The panel was distinctly unimpressed, with a high degree of consistency in repeat presentations lending force to their conclusions.

These were that the Marantz sounded, quote, “muted, veiled and dull”, with a “soggy bass”. In what was undoubtedly the quote of the day, it was described in the Brahms recording as the “fat uncontroller”. These negative opinions were not quite unanimous. One panel member felt that the Marantz was a “good all-rounder” in one presentation, and “clean, but warm and sweaty” in the next, but the negatives predominated. Rickie Lee Jones for example

“sounded like she’s caught a cold” (in fairness, her delivery is characteristically nasal anyway), and the Bartok test track was described as “hollow”.

Given the slightly higher than normal source impedance identified in Paul Miller’s test programme, and thinking that there may be some interaction with the speaker cable impedance, much shorter lengths of a different Nordost cable were tried in the hands-on testing. But there was no obviously useful outcome, and the sometimes almost radiogram-like quality remained. The sound is a little slack, being the wrong side of the Primare, which combines its warmth with strong discipline and dynamics,

Beautifully built and comprehensively equipped but a little short on thrill-power.

where the Marantz gave a rather blowy lower midband, affecting orchestral ensemble adversely, and producing a dulled percussion sound.

CONCLUSIONS

Improvements in this version seem to have been aimed at addressing the rather mechanical edge and lack of transparency identified in the original, but in the process they’ve driven the amplifier too far in the opposite direction. The cleaned up KI Signature version of this amplifier will be the one to watch, no doubt.

“IT HAS WBT SPEAKER TERMINALS AND EVEN A METER THAT TELLS YOU WHEN THE AMPLIFIER IS, ER, ON HEAT.”



THE LAB REPORT

APPEARANCES ASIDE,

Marantz’s PM-17 Mk II provides stiff competition for Arcam’s A85 in terms of performance. The Marantz affords a strictly regulated 2x90W output into 8 ohm at all frequencies up to 20kHz, increasing to a solid 2x148W into 4 ohm. Gain is high at +40.2dB overall which means you’ll not get full use from the volume knob with high output (CD/DVD) sources. Otherwise, like the Arcam, distortion is also vanishingly low. Indeed with figures <0.0009% through bass and midrange, this

amp bests the A85, and only deteriorates slightly to 0.002% at 5kHz and 0.005% at 20kHz. The response is only mildly tailored at -0.1dB (20Hz) to -0.2dB (20kHz) though, bearing in mind the exceedingly low THD, its output impedance is a little higher than expected (though not *high*) at 0.055 ohm (left) and 0.075 ohm (right). Crosstalk is better than -80dB at all frequencies while the A-wtd S/N ratio is a consistent 88.7dB (re. 0dBW) on both channels. All in all, the PM-17 MkII is a powerful, robust modern design.



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Richard Black, Hi-Fi Choice,
Issue 203, June 2000.



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NAIM NAIT 5

SOUND ★★★★★	VALUE ★★★★★	£799.00	CONTACT 01722 332266	www.naim-audio.com	GUARANTEE 2 year
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For many people, the entry level Nait is the only Naim product they'll ever encounter. It embraces much of the thinking that informs grander Naim amplifiers like the NAP500, but with a more affordable price tag, and of course less power. The ability to improve the amplifier by bolting on an external power supply has been retained however.

The Nait 5 is the latest version of the Nait, last tested in version 3R, but all inputs are DIN based – the 3R had a single line input using phono sockets, which made life easier for owners of third party source components. Remote control is included, and volume adjusted using a discrete resistive ladder network whose design is said to be partly responsible for the improved sound claimed for the model, as well as better channel balance at low volumes. The Nait 5 includes the ability to normalise volume levels between the six line

inputs. New power amp circuitry offers faster signal transition times (presumably a reference to a wider bandwidth and higher slew rate) and better power supply noise rejection. Reduction of microphony is a major priority here, and although the amp is microprocessor controlled, all digital circuitry is switched off when not in use to reduce noise.

SOUND QUALITY

For better or worse, this is the least obviously Naim-like amplifier in living memory, though there are still echoes of the coloration that afflicted early Nait. "A tad shouty", as one put it following the Ricky Lee Jones track, while another found the Nait "grey and vague". Agreement about the vocal quality of the Nait 5 came from another listener, though he went on to suggest that the amplifier "made sense", had "good rhythmic ability" and "a slightly rich bass" (Brahms).

On the whole though the Naim is a

well-disciplined, clean-sounding amplifier with few identifiable colorations or departures from neutrality most of the time – "measured" as one panel member put it. Although it provides what is arguably a less exciting ride at times, the more even-tempered quality made it more transparent, and without doubt it will be easier to live with in the long term. It even produced a credible stereo soundstage, with a real impression of depth as well as one of width, which has not always been a hallmark of the brand.

The ever-green Naim Nait entry-level amp is back – and better than ever.

CONCLUSIONS

Classic Nait virtues are tamed in this new, more sophisticated entry-level Naim for the millennium. As the numbers show, this is far from being the most powerful amplifier in its class, and the sound does tend to sag a little under stress with large scale music, including driving rock or loud choral music. But this condition is treatable using one of the outboard power supplies – at a price.

"ALTHOUGH IT GAVE A LESS EXCITING RIDE, THE NAIM'S EVEN-TEMPERED QUALITY MADE IT MORE TRANSPARENT."



THE LAB REPORT

ALTHOUGH THE NAIT 5 IS least likely to be voted 'Powerhouse of the Year' in the context of this group, this latest version holds up very much better into low loads and at the frequency extremes than its predecessors. For example, the 34W achieved into 8 ohm is maintained at 31W/20Hz and 32W/20kHz while modest increases to 45W, 74W, 70W (5.9A) and 23W (4.7A) are available into 8, 4, 2 and 1 ohm loads, respectively, under dynamic, music-like conditions. Neither is distortion

debilitating at typically <0.015% up to 5kHz, only increasing to 0.04-0.05% at 20kHz (all re. 10W/8 ohm). Although Naim has brought the Nait bang up-to-date, the 0dBW S/N is still slightly compromised at 76.8dB (about 10dB below average) while the high 0.24 ohm output impedance will surely modify the HF response of the system according to the speaker load characteristics. Otherwise, the Nait is looking a lot 'cleaner' and its low +34.2dB gain means you'll get better use of the volume control.

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PLINIUS 8100

SOUND ★★★★★	VALUE ★★★★★	£1,450.00	CONTACT 020 8459 8113	www.pliniusaudio.com	GUARANTEE 2 year
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Plinius is one of the very few internationally recognised hi-fi brands based in New Zealand, and I first made its acquaintance at the Las Vegas CES a couple of years ago, with a range headlined by some drop dead gorgeous and clearly well-endowed pre and power amplifiers. The 8100 is from the other end of the range. The entry level integrated, it is based on an earlier model known as the 2100.

The 8100 is rated at 100 watt/channel, though its real-world delivery belies this. The amplifier is home to six line inputs, including two tape circuits, and there are separate listen and record selectors, and a preamp output which allows easy upgrading of the power amp, or biamplication. The only luxury of note is the chunky, well made remote control, which accesses the volume control and mute, completing a classic specification for a purist low-features line level amp.

SOUND QUALITY

The 8100 is a curious amalgam in many ways, but in the end this is one of those amplifiers that performs the way that the test lab numbers say it should. The first feature noted was that it is very powerful, easily outblasting other integrated amplifiers in the test, and with the capability of driving speakers like the JMLab Mezzo Utopia, which has more than enough power handling ability to sink most integrated amps, to unfeasibly high volume levels.

Would that it had sounded as sophisticated as it was loud. Words derived from 'shout' appeared in my listening notes many times, and the amplifier sounded a little messy with densely scored, finely detailed recordings like the Bartok – and many others for that matter. It simply doesn't have the requisite finesse to compete with the Arcams, YBAs and Primares that it is up against, although those with low sensitivity speakers who sin-

cerely want to play music very loud will find ample recompense. Stereo imagery was a little cramped too, but bass quality was tight, deep and tuneful, though slightly overblown, highlighted by a slightly reticent treble extreme.

The panel took a similar view. One felt the bass was "doubling", affecting upper bass and midband clarity (Joe Pass), while another described the same track as "very growly", though he also described the track as "warm, smooth and musical". The piano part in the Ricky Lee Jones was "rich, resonant and believable", but it became "glassy when loud", and

The entry-level Plinius amp doesn't provide much in the way of flashy featu es.

overall this listener deemed the sound "competent at best".

CONCLUSIONS

There is more to this brand than meets the eye, and we look forward to hearing the next model up in the range. But in a particularly competitive area, the Plinius 8100 lacks the wherewithal to convince. Had a little power been traded for a bit of extra finesse, the Plinius would probably have turned out to be a much more impressive beast.

"IT IS VERY POWERFUL, EASILY OUT-BLASTING OTHER INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS IN THE TEST."



THE LAB REPORT

A NEW NAME FROM down under and a heavyweight amplifier to boot, the Plinius 8100 packs a 150W punch from both channels into 8 ohm. This develops to 2x190W into 4 ohm and a massive 225W, 365W, 508W (15.9A) and 265W (16.3A) under dynamic conditions into 8, 4, 2 and 1 ohm loads, respectively. The amplifier is pretty sensitive (gain is +40dB or x100) but includes plenty of built-in 'colour' thanks to an extensive pattern of harmonic distortions. Even under ideal conditions, distortion is

typically ~0.08-0.1% through the midrange, increasing to 0.4% at 20kHz with as little power as 10W/8ohm. The response, too, is tailored with a -1.6dB droop at HF, increasing to -2.6dB at 30kHz. Crosstalk also increases to a relatively weak 42dB at 20kHz, though the channel *balance* error is acceptable at 0.4dB (re. 0dBW). The amp is also relatively noisy with a residual hum of -65dBV but an increase in white noise (hiss) that brings the overall S/N ratio down to 78dB (re. 0dBW). Powerful then, but coloured.



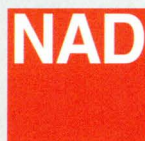
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VALUE ★★★★★

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No longer a new introduction, the 30.1 has been covered in this group test format in *Hi-Fi Choice* in the past, but it has updated for the millennium, with a variety of component changes that constitute a mild fine-tuning exercise. Preamplifier outputs have been added, and a power amp version of the amplifier, the A30.2, has been added to the range for bi-amplified systems. There is also an optional phono stage, though this was not supplied, and the amp comes with a basic remote control, though we were sent the optional metal full system remote.

Retained are all the qualities that made the 30.1 special, not least the clean elegant styling, the trademark front panel stand-off and the use of quality materials, especially the solid outer casing and the turned alloy controls. It's not exactly under-endowed internally either, with two massive transformers contributing to

the unusual weight. The design features two balanced inputs (the matching CD player has a balanced output), and a fully balanced circuit topology, and there are six inputs in total, but no tone controls or other facilities such as gain matching.

SOUND QUALITY

In an excellent range, the 30.1 was always one of the most convincing and well rounded models, and the recent changes only enhance its status. It attracted some rare plaudits in the panel tests: "a lovely amplifier" wrote one, and it won virtually universal praise for its "absolute naturalness... realistic and extremely accurate [tonality]" and for "doing exactly what it says on the tin". There were sporadic complaints, for example of a "chromium plated" quality and an "inability to time" by one, and for being "a big softy", but there was little consistency in the points made, and they do little to blot a nearly clean copybook.

I have no personal doubt that this is a particularly fine amplifier. It has the rare ability to dig down deep into the recesses of the music, extracting previously unnoticed detail, without pulling the music apart, or rendering it unlistenable in the manner of some very analytical amplifiers. It has a warmth that is surprising for such an open sounding design, and a poise that is altogether more characteristic of some of the better and more costly pre and power amps. Female vocal (for example the superb Beatles cover *For No One* chosen for the panel tests) was light, open and seductive,

Despite being packed in a box, the Primare does exactly what it says on the tin.

and orchestral material was handled with scale and panache, with never a hint of any power limitations.

CONCLUSIONS

By no means inexpensive for an integrated amplifier, the A30.1 is worth every penny. This is indeed an amplifier that does exactly what it says on the tin, but it does so with real warmth, almost affection, and with a style that is almost a metaphor for its superb packaging. Best Buy.

"IT HAS A POISE THAT IS ALTOGETHER MORE CHARACTERISTIC OF SOME OF THE BETTER PRE AND POWER AMPS."



THE LAB REPORT

DESIGNED AS A DUAL-MONO amplifier, Primare's A30.1, like Thule's IA60B, features an entirely balanced circuit topology right through to the speaker outlets (the return or 'black' speaker terminal should never be grounded in this amp). It's powerful, offering a full 2x120W into 8 ohm and 2x180W into 4 ohm with sufficient reserves to deliver 150W, 280W, 435W (14.8A) and 445W (21.1A) under dynamic conditions into 8, 4, 2 and 1 ohm loads. The A30.1 is sufficiently speaker-tolerant not to limit

its application, while the 0.05 ohm output impedance, exceptionally flat response (just -0.15dB at 20kHz) and superb channel separation (as high as 90dB at 20kHz) pay testament to the quality of its engineering. The electronic volume control also ensures excellent channel matching, indeed I measured errors of just 0.15dB over a full 70dB range. Conventional analogue pots would typically suffer errors ten times this value. A modern amplifier then, for modern source components.



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THULE SPIRIT IA60B

SOUND ★★☆☆	VALUE ★★★★★	£700.00	CONTACT 01622 664070	www.thule-audio.dk	GUARANTEE 2 years
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Thule has been covered in these pages before (most recently the review of the Spirit PR150B/PA150B pre/power amp in *HFC* 212), and this one follows the pattern in being extraordinarily cleanly styled. There are only two front panel controls, a large volume rotary which operates a digital ladder network (80, 1dB steps), and an inconspicuous button that toggles between the various inputs, and which doubles as a power standby switch. A display window reads out the volume and input status.

The IA60B is a 60 watt/channel amplifier with five single-ended line inputs, and one balanced input (not assessed here as no balanced source was available). Two are labelled as tape inputs, but only one has a record output. Additionally, the IA60B has preamplifier outputs, which could be used in a bi-amped system.

SOUND QUALITY

The panel was clearly uncomfortable with this amplifier, finding the Brahms recording “unnatural”, and Ricky Lee Jones vocals “sibilant and nasal” – not the first time she has been accused of the latter, though when everything else was right, this was rarely an issue. The Joe Sample track was described as having “poor timing” and “lacking power”.

In my hands-on tests, the Thule did not acquit itself particularly well. It was clearly the most characterful of the amplifiers in the test, and moreover the colorations were not of a kind that were musically benign – as was the case most of the time with the Creek amplifier, for example. The best that can be said is that it has a lean, open sound that was explicit, though it left little to the imagination, and the bass, though tuneful, was lean, dry and lacking in authority and power. The Spirit also sounded rather harsh

and grainy, with an edgy upper-mid-band led balance at low volume levels that became progressively more strident as the volume was raised. Imagery was characteristically flat and lacking in the depth dimension, and there was very little sense of air and space around the notes.

Checking back with the Spirit IA100, which is a more powerful variant of what appears to be a similar design, there is an obvious family resemblance. In the IA100 a problem was identified with complex material, and the amplifier was described as glassy, and these descriptions are equally appropriate in this case too.

Amps don't come much more simply styled than the austere Thule.

CONCLUSIONS

There is something to be said in favour of this amplifier for those who find others lacking in clarity, or whose speakers are naturally dull or unintelligible. Musically however the IA60B sounds messy and ill balanced. It has a raw, strident mid/top, a rather resonant and thin (though tuneful) bass, and a lack of grace overall that becomes more obvious as the volume level is raised. The IA60 is an excessively characterful, and ultimately disappointing, performer.

THE LAB REPORT

THE BALANCED INPUT AND

bridged output configuration of the Spirit IA60B is only superficially similar to the Primare, though my warnings about the ‘live’ red and black speaker terminals hold true. Dealers should take particular care if the IA60B is routed through a speaker selection switchbox, for example. Anyway, the 2x60W rating is met by the skin of its transistors, increasing to just 2x90W into 4 ohm and 90W, 150W, 92W (6.6A) and 33W (5.5A) under dynamic conditions into 8, 4, 2 and 1 ohm loads respectively.

Clipping is progressive rather than abrupt, so the maximum current rating increases from 6.7A to 11.6A if the THD limit is relaxed from 1% to 2%, for example. Either way this is no powerhouse and neither is it especially low in coloration, with distortion increasing from ~0.025% to ~0.12% at HF with strong 2nd, 3rd and 5th harmonics dominating the spectrum. The response shows a slightly muted treble (-1dB at 20kHz but a full -4.5kHz at 50kHz) but noise, balance and separation are all fine.

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YBA INTÉGRÉ ALPHA DT

SOUND ★★★★★ **VALUE** ★★★★★ **£1,550.00** **CONTACT** 020 8255 6868 **GUARANTEE** 2 years

The YBA amplifier provided for this test was labelled as the Intégré Alpha – but in fact the amp is in a ‘DT’ configuration. This includes a collection of revisions and updates to the Alpha: DT stands for Dual Transformers, one per channel, to distinguish it from the single transformer base model. Presumably production amplifiers available for sale will be properly signposted. Upgrades include a thicker 8mm frontplate, new control knobs and vibration damping feet, and remote control is now included as standard. Internally, all inputs are hard wired to the volume control, star earthing has been implemented and quieter transistors specified.

The Intégré is a relatively heavy, compact design that sits on three feet, and which is home to a volume control, a source selector for the six inputs and a record out selector which includes an ‘off’ setting. The

remote control adjusts the motorised volume pot or invokes mute. Rear panel socketry includes biwire speaker terminals (two pairs, unswitched). It is possible to fit an internal MM phono step-up module, and an external MC step-up is also listed, though the MM stage is still required to provide equalisation. Power output is a relatively modest 50 Watts/channel.

SOUND QUALITY

Clearly one of the better amplifiers on test, this model got the panel sitting up and taking notice. Typical comments included the following: “good dynamically, and conveys the sense of the music” (Brahms), “That works! Balanced and natural, low coloration” (Rickie Lee Jones), and “Very good sense of being there: accurate scale with good detail”. The sense of strong rhythmic involvement and of good timing was a consistent through the listening presentations,

and also in the hands-on tests, which placed the amplifier unequivocally towards the top of the group. About all it lacks is the sense of scale that comes from a fully developed bass.

The YBA did attract some comments suggesting it has a “big, beefy sound” in one example (Joe Sample), but in other musical examples it came across as lean, occasionally dry and moderately powerful, which is how I heard it in the subsequent hands-on testing too. It does give a very lively, close up feel though, and this quality can make Intégré-driven systems sound very immediate and

While it may look like a plain old Alpha, the YBA’s fascia conceals a more powerful beast.

tactile, but there was a noticeable loss of very high frequency air and space, much of the detail apparently being related to the upper midband.

CONCLUSIONS

System design is the key to good results. The YBA works best with straightforward 8 ohm loads, and with relatively short loudspeaker cable runs, for which the relatively high source impedance provides a convenient explanation.

THE LAB REPORT

No specification was provided, though YBA’s literature does suggest the Intégré Alpha is a low-to-moderate feedback design. This is perfectly acceptable, though there are trade-offs in increased output impedance (~0.17ohm) and the effect this has on the overall system response (-1.2dB at 20kHz into 8 ohm) and higher-than-average levels of distortion. While it is argued that reduced feedback equals improved sound quality, this is only likely to be the case where good symmetry is demonstrated between channels. In this instance, although

the left/right gain was near enough identical at +38.5dB, the amplifier’s left channel clipped at 45W while the right continued to 55W (re. 8 ohm) just as both harmonic and intermodulation distortion was typically 10 times higher (0.12% left vs. 0.014% right, midband). Power output into lower impedances is restricted by commensurate increases in distortion, yielding just 60W (right) and 55W (left) into 4 ohm at 1kHz with a 0.5% limit. Separation is also weak at HF, though the 0.3dB balance is good and 85dB S/N perfectly adequate.

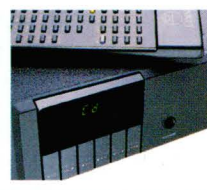
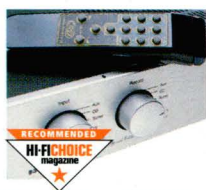
“ONE OF THE BETTER AMPS ON TEST - THE YBA GOT THE PANEL SITTING UP AND TAKING NOTICE.”



CONCLUSIONS

This was an unusually interesting and varied group, and some clear trends became apparent as the test proceeded. On the most basic level, standards of physical presentation are improving. Arcam's DiVA range has a much simplified set of controls, and looks like a much higher quality product than the Alpha range, and the Creek 5350SE has also benefited tremendously from its makeover, and finally has a suit of clothes that matches the designer's intent. The same applies to Exposure. A significant technology trend is an apparently accelerating drift towards resistive ladder volume controls, and microprocessor logic control. Bringing such benefits as superior channel balance at low volume levels where normal potentiometers tend to go badly astray, lower cross-talk and enhanced long

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS AT A GLANCE



MAKE MODEL	ARCAM DIVA A85	CREEK 5350 SE	EXPOSURE 2010	LINN MAJIK	MARANTZ PM17 MKII
PRICE	£700.00	£799.99	£599.00	£845.00	£999.90
SOUND VALUE	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
CONCLUSION	An impressive new model, with good sound and great flexibility.	Impressively smooth and airy, but the bass can sound muddy and opaque.	Inconsistent, vague, unconvincing sound – all together, not that impressive.	Class-leading flexibility, but the pre/power combination makes a hash of things.	Powerful, but a little muted and dull, the new Marantz failed to impress.
GUARANTEE	2 YEARS	2 YEARS	3 YEARS	2 YEARS	2 YEARS
THE LAB REPORT					
DYNAMIC POWER OUTPUT					
SPEAKER LOAD TOLERANCE					
AUDIBLE DISTORTION					
NOISE					
OVERALL RATING					
MEASUREMENTS					
POWER OUTPUT, 8 OHM, 1KHZ	105W	86W	55W	36W	90W
POWER OUTPUT, 4 OHM, 1KHZ	159W	108W	63W	64W	145W
DYNAMIC HEADROOM, 1KHZ	150W	123W	75W	37W	95W
MAXIMUM CURRENT (10MSEC, 1% THD)	22.9A	19.8A	7.9A	1.4A	10.5A
THD @ 10W/8 OHM, 1KHZ	0.001%	0.002%	0.025%	0.005%	0.0008%
A-WTD SIN RATIO, RE. 0DBW	85.6dB	87.5dB	87.3dB	N/A	88.7dB






TEMPTED BY ANY OF THE AMPS ON OFFER IN THE TEST?
ALVIN GOLD ROUNDS UP THE BEST AND WORST IN THE GROUP...

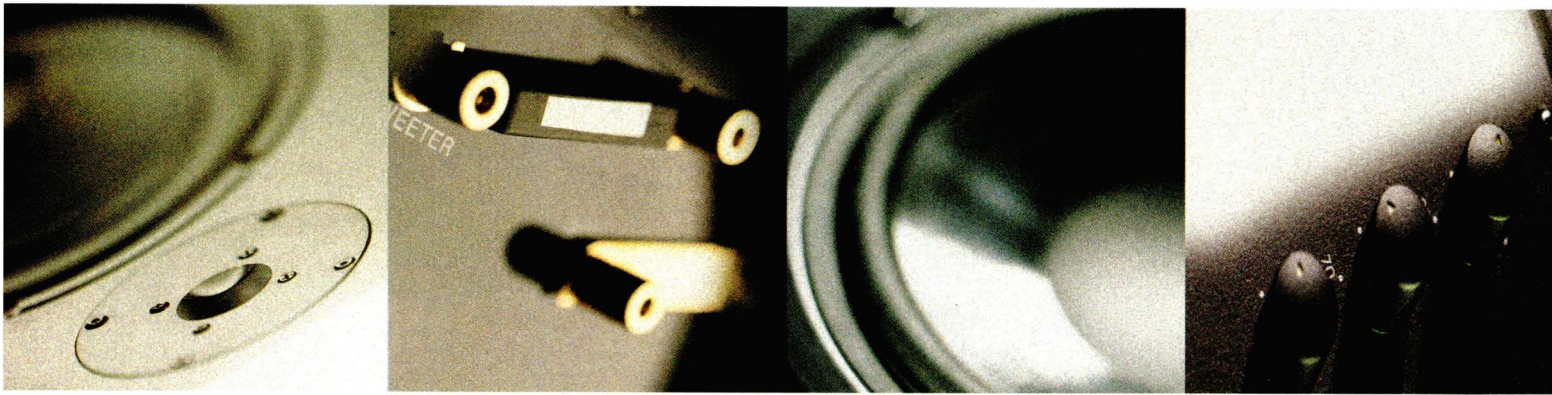
term reliability. Such networks are not new of course, but they have not been popular in the part of the market we're looking at here, in part because of worries about performance. Now with companies as conservative as Naim putting their name to such circuits, and indeed building in quite sophisticated extra features which are dependent on microprocessor control (e.g. input level normalisation), the boot seems to be on the other foot. It is significant that fully half the amplifiers in the test are built around such circuits: the Arcam, Thule, Linn and Primare, as well as Naim's amplifier itself.

The test results themselves contain their fair share of surprises, and some results which tie in with what we already knew. The Thule IA60B performed very similarly to the IA100 tested previously, which is disap-

pointing but no surprise, while something of the same can be said of the glamorously packaged Marantz PM-17 Mk II, though the latter at least is much the better of the two. The 2010 from Exposure, a brand that once competed neck and neck with Naim, lacked focus and drive, and Plinius, New Zealand's best known brand, provided a powerful amplifier in the 8100 with a promising performance which fell only a little short of the sophistication needed for recommendation. Finally, the Linn Majik has power amplifiers that are no match for the preamplifier, though given its very specialised expansion abilities this may not be an issue for the buyer (see review). Several of these are still good amplifiers, but they simply fall down in one performance area or another, or they are priced too high for the level of performance on offer.

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS AT A GLANCE

    					MAKE MODEL
NAIM NAIT 5	PLINIUS 8000	PRIMARE A30.1	THULE SPIRIT IA60B	YBA INTEGRE ALPHA DT	
£799.00	£1,450.00	£1,500.00	£700.00	£749.99	PRICE
★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	SOUND VALUE
Well disciplined and clean sounding – a clear improvement over past Naim amps.	Doesn't quite convince, lacking a certain finesse and deftness of touch.	Not cheap, but certainly worth every penny, with real warmth and style.	A very forward-sounding amp, but can sound a bit messy and too characterful.	Lean and dry balance, but intrinsically detailed, and with good presence.	CONCLUSION
2 YEARS	2 YEARS	2 YEARS	2 YEARS	1 YEAR	GUARANTEE
THE LAB REPORT					
					DYNAMIC POWER OUTPUT
					SPEAKER LOAD TOLERANCE
					AUDIBLE DISTORTION
					NOISE
					OVERALL RATING
MEASUREMENTS					
33W	150W	120W	60W	45W	POWER OUTPUT, 8 OHM, 1KHZ
50W	190W	180W	94W	55W	POWER OUTPUT, 4 OHM, 1KHZ
45W	225W	140W	90W	60W	DYNAMIC HEADROOM, 1KHZ
5.9A	16.3A	21.1A	6.7A	5.5A	MAX CURRENT (10MSEC, 1% THD)
0.013%	0.09%	0.018%	0.025%	0.12%	THD @ 10W/8 OHM, 1KHZ
76.7dB	78.0dB	85dB	84.8dB	84.8dB	A-WTD S/N RATIO, RE. 0DBW



Five Stars For Value

Paul Messenger explains why you should visit an independent specialist dealer if you are searching for real hi-fi satisfaction

Why use a specialist hi-fi dealer? The short answer is because he knows one hell of a lot more about hi-fi than you do. And if you've gone to the trouble of picking up a specialist magazine on the subject, you're obviously interested in something rather more than a mini system from the nearest electrical superstore.

You've probably bought this magazine for one of two reasons. You're looking for advice (presumably unbiased and good) on choosing and using your hi-fi system, and/or you're checking out the ads to decide where to go and buy it.

The independent specialist dealer doesn't know everything, and he doesn't know much about you, but if music's an important part of your life, he's the only guy around who's able (and hopefully willing) to help you choose the equipment which will give you the best long term satisfaction.

Power of the Press

Dealers sometimes moan to me about the power of the press, and the disproportionate influence of its 'Best Buy' and multi-star ratings. Well, I've been in the press for twentysomething years, and still feel more ignorant than powerful.

The more I mess around with hi-fi gear, the more I become aware of our lack of real understanding of the subtleties involved, and the more I appreciate the importance of the dealer's skills and experience, in bringing together components so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

We hacks get paid to write words, often about components in isolation, because individual product reviews are still the staple diet of the press. They can sometimes provide a useful guide to the way a product performs, but only under the particular

circumstances in which the review was conducted.

The hi-fi reviewer attempts, with varying degrees of success, to evaluate a particular component, and find something interesting (and hopefully positive) to say about it. That's about the end of it, and it's on to the next product.

The magazine prints the review, and that very process magically confers a measure of authority. Experienced hi-fi enthusiasts, who read reviews over a period of years and try out various products themselves, soon start to realise the limitations of that approach. Some reviews are better than others, but none can get to grips with the real heart of the problem - whether a given product will improve your musical satisfaction, in your system and your room.

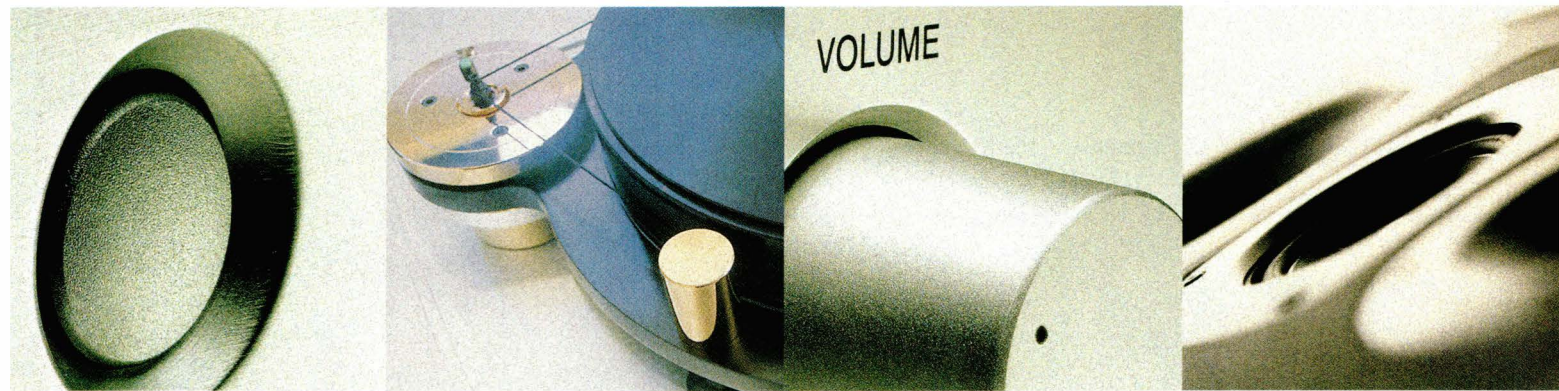
The Role of the Dealer

The dealer's role is very different, and potentially much more valuable. He has the chance to talk one-on-one. If he's good at his job, he'll use that opportunity to find out what you as an individual are looking for (or listening) for.

His motivation is very different too. Sure he wants to make a sale. That's the lifeblood of any shop. But he also knows that if something he sells really does deliver long term satisfaction, there's a very good chance you'll come back again to see if he can repeat the trick some time in the future.

STAR QUALITIES

value for money	★★★★★
service	★★★★★
facilities	★★★★★
verdict	★★★★★



If you go into a shop and demand a particular CD player, on the basis that it got seven stars (out of five) in last month's magazines, the shop will probably simply take the line of least resistance and sell it to you. (Or switch-sell you to a similar price alternative, if he's fresh out of stock of that particular flavour-of-the-month.)

If you go in and say you're looking for a CD player, and want his advice on what to choose, things are liable to become more interesting. The onus is now on the dealer to show what he can do. His first task is to ask the right questions to try and get some idea of what you might be after.

Asking the questions is the easy bit. The real skill comes in using the information to come up with a shortlist of likely contenders, and then conducting a demonstration so that you have a real chance to play a central role in the decision making process.

Putting together a successful hi-fi system might not be as difficult as it was twenty or thirty years ago, but it's just as easy to make a mess of things. Put the 'wrong' combination of components together and it'll still sound a lot better than any cute little mini system package. It might even rate a five star review. But it won't match the potential of a carefully balanced and properly installed system, and it

certainly won't cater for your own particular preferences and personality.

We British are notoriously indiscriminating consumers, at a mass market level at least. The majority of the population don't even bother to drive a car they're thinking of buying, never mind take the trouble to listen to hi-fi equipment.

The majority will therefore end up with hyperstore mediocrity, and hi-fi that's about as tasty as supermarket bread. But if music is an essential ingredient in your daily diet, you owe it to yourself to become a member of the discriminating minority.

You know full well that your music collection is as individual as your wardrobe, and just as precious too, so it's worth taking the time and trouble to search out the dealer and equipment that will make that collection come alive, and give you a new buzz every time you play your favourite discs.

The independent specialist may not beat the chain store on price, but he continues to thrive in a hostile environment because real hi-fi is so much more than a matter of price. The people who work in these shops are themselves enthusiasts, often with many years of experience in meeting customer's needs, and the very necessary expertise to ensure that the whole thing is properly set up to deliver the best results.

The better the hi-fi, the more important it is to get the fine details right at the installation end of things, but even the least expensive equipment can be made to sound a whole lot better if good care is taken over the fine details - the support furniture, the cabling, the positioning of speakers and so on.

Without expert assistance even high class hi-fi can give mediocre results. With it you'll stand a very good chance of ending up with something rather more than a consumer durable - something which will be a source of considerable pleasure and genuine emotional satisfaction for decades to come.

I agreed to write this signed piece, irrespective of the specific sponsors, because I believe the independent specialist dealer plays a vital role in giving customers long term hi-fi satisfaction. The views and opinions expressed here are my own and not necessarily those of Hi-fi Choice.

Paul Messenger

The specialist Dealers listed here are professional and enthusiastic. Give your nearest a ring for a demonstration.

TOP 20 UK SPECIALIST HI-FI DEALERS

LONDON

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI
190a New North Road
020 7226 5500

SW11

ORANGES & LEMONS
61/63 Webbs Road, Battersea
020 7924 2040

W4 MARTIN-KLEISER
109 Chiswick High Road
020 8400 5555

SOUTH

Ashford, Kent
SOUNDCRAFT HI-FI
40 High St. 01233 624441

Chelmsford
RAYLEIGH HI-FI
216 Moulsham Street
01245 265245

East Grinstead
AUDIO DESIGNS
26 High St. 01342 314569

Kingston-upon-Thames
INFIDELITY
9 High Street Hampton Wick
020 8943 3530

Lakeside Retail Park

RAYLEIGH HI-FI
Dansk International
Furniture World
01708 680551

Rayleigh, Essex
RAYLEIGH HI-FI
44a High St. 01268 779762

Ringwood, Hampshire
PHONOGRAPHY
Star Lane 01425 461230

Southend-on-Sea
RAYLEIGH HI-FI
132/4 London Road
01702 435255

Uxbridge **MARTIN-KLEISER**
278 High Street
01895 465444

Worthing **PHASE 3 HI-FI**
213-217 Tarring Road
01903 245577

MIDLANDS

Banbury **OVERTURE**
3 Church Lane
01295 272158

Birmingham
SOUND ACADEMY
152a High Street, Bloxwich
01922 493499

Leicester **CYMBIOSIS**
6 Hotel St. 0116 262 3754

Northampton **LISTEN INN**
32 Gold St. 01604 637871

Shrewsbury
CREATIVE AUDIO
9 Dogpole 01743 241924

NORTH

Cheadle **AUDIO COUNSEL**
14 Stockport Road
0161 428 7887

Oldham **AUDIO COUNSEL**
12/14 Shaw Road
0161 633 2602

Sheffield
MOORGATE ACOUSTICS
184 Fitzwilliam St
0114 275 6048

York **SOUND ORGANISATION**
2 Gillygate 01904 627108

SCOTLAND

Edinburgh
RUSS ANDREWS HI-FI
34 Northumberland Street
0131 557 1672

Glasgow **STEREO STEREO**
260 St. Vincent Street
0141 248 4079

N. IRELAND

Belfast **LYRIC HI-FI**
161 Stranmillis Road
028 90 381296

CARTRIDGES & TURNTABLES

AGAINST ALL THE ODDS, VINYL HAS SURVIVED INTO THE 21ST CENTURY. BUT HOW DO YOU TELL A DECENT PLAYER FROM A DUFFER? RICHARD BLACK HAS THE ANSWERS.

Why would someone want to buy a brand new budget turntable in 2001? Could be they read the news that vinyl sales outgrew CD sales last year and wonder what this supposedly antiquated format has to offer. Or maybe they have noticed the increasing range of LPs and singles on sale for less than CD prices at the better-stocked record shops.

Or perhaps you already own several hundred vinyl discs. Maybe you've been promising yourself a new turntable for years. Maybe you just got into collecting secondhand vinyl.

But is a budget turntable necessarily a good buy? It's generally easier to make the case for audiophile turntables than audiophile CD players – the law of diminishing returns is less vicious with LP replay. On the other hand, there is much pleasure to be had from any decent budget spinner. There is also the question of ease and simplicity of use, and fancy turntables have a reputation for being relatively fussy

about maintenance. All four models tested here can pretty much be plonked down, plugged in and used – though, of course, you'll get some extra performance from careful set-up and siting (don't forget that turntables are microphonic, so the surface they stand on is critical, and some isolation is often a good idea).

And then there's the cartridge. Never mind upgrades: if the stylus on an old cartridge is worn, replacing it might easily cost as much as a new cartridge. Don't forget that a worn stylus or a badly behaved cartridge can cause permanent damage to your records. And make sure that a new cartridge is properly fitted with correct alignment (offset and overhang). If you are in doubt about this, a good dealer will be able to help and it's worth taking that up even if there's a small charge. The differences between good and bad alignment are not subtle.





THE PLAYERS

TURNTABLES

DUAL CS415	£159.99
MOTH ALAMO	£285.00
REGA P2	£198.00
REGA P3	£298.00

CARTRIDGES

AUDIO TECHNICA AT110E	£27.95
GOLDRING 1006	£70.00
GRADO PRESTIGE BLACK	£49.00
REGA BIAS	£42.00

OTHER EQUIPMENT USED

Moth phono stage
 Harman/Kardon HK6500
 integrated amplifier
 ATC SCM20 loudspeakers
 Kimber 4TC speaker cable
 Custom interconnect cables

MUSIC USED DURING TESTS

Mahler: *Symphony No. 5* -
 Symphonica of London/Morris
 Grace Jones - *Island Life*
 Pink Floyd - *The Wall*
 Ronald Center: *Dona Nobis Pacem* -
 Queens Cross Chorus etc./Atkinson



DUAL CS415-2

SOUND ★★☆☆☆ **VALUE** ★★☆☆☆ **£159.99** **CONTACT** 01604 491999 www.yellouk.com **GUARANTEE** 1 year

For several decades Dual was the first 'real' turntable (as opposed to the plastic horrors that used to grace all-in-one systems before CD) that most people bought. It must be said, however, that the classic Dual decks were rather more solid and sophisticated than this one, which feels surprisingly insubstantial.

The platter is made of thin pressed metal and is an exceptionally sloppy fit on its spindle. The arm tube is metal, but most of the rest appears to be plastic, and its mounting is far from rigid. The supplied cartridge (Dual badged) is removable but as the arm's tracking force is not adjustable it had better be replaced with one of identical mass and tracking force. Seen from underneath, the deck's main structure is found to be made of quarter-inch chipboard, with the fully automatic mechanism realised in plastic and thin pressed steel.

So far, so uninspiring. But let's look a little more dispassionately at things: the felt mat will do a lot to ameliorate the intrinsic sound character of the platter. The arm may be cheesy but it seems quite free to move and at least is not unduly resonant. And the lack of any adjustments means they can't be accidentally upset. The automatic mechanism works perfectly

well, no clunkier than any other, and the motor is arguably better in many ways than the 'mains synchronous' types beloved of most specialist manufacturers. It is also adjustable (from below, with a screwdriver) so that the deck's inaccurate speed could be corrected by musically astute listeners.

SOUND QUALITY

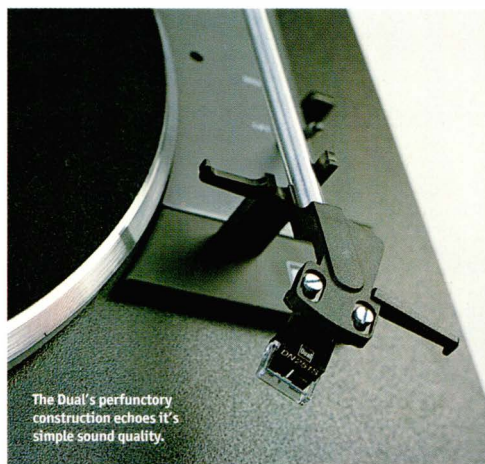
It would be unreasonable to expect any great sonic insights from such a basic product. The most one can really demand is an absence of annoying buzzes, rattles or other obvious sonic intrusion. That being so, the CS415-2 does indeed pass its first inspection. Even disc surface noise – often an immediate drawback of cheap decks – is not particularly obtrusive. It's clear, though, that this deck will never satisfy lovers of big fat bass. In fact, it seems to have a pronounced aversion to low frequencies, with any kind of music, at any level. No amount of experimenting with supports, not even changing up to a cartridge worth more than the deck itself (re-balancing the arm with Blu-Tak), could do much about this.

Otherwise the sound is perfectly listenable. Midrange is not unduly coloured, treble extends tolerably well and is actually quite commendably clean, considering everything. Dynamics are not marvellous and neither is stereo imaging but there's a valiant stab at both. The overall tonal balance is quite laid back and ultimately there's a sense that the sound is optimised for background listening. I don't think many people would find the sound exciting under any circumstances, but it's never offensive either.

CONCLUSION

'Not offensive' sounds like a distinctly backhanded compliment and this deck's self-effacing (some would doubtless argue music-effacing) manner unquestionably errs on the side of extreme caution in presenting a musical experience. But then many people probably only require a turntable for occasional use and might regard that as acceptable. For them, and given that it does at least do what it says on the box, this deck is given a qualified Recommendation.

"THE DUAL'S SOUND IS PERFECTLY LISTENABLE... THE TREBLE IS QUITE CLEAN, CONSIDERING EVERYTHING."



The Dual's perfunctory construction echoes its simple sound quality.



MOTH ALAMO

SOUND ★★☆☆☆ **VALUE** ★★☆☆☆ **£285.00** 01234 741152 www.hi-fi-accessories-club.mcmail.com **G'TEE** 2 years

Any resemblance between this deck and the two Regas, particularly the P2, is distinctly not coincidence. Moth is not the only manufacturer to have bought bits from Rega and used them in its own designs, and in fact the Alamo is largely a cross between the P2 and the P3, with one significant difference from either in its acrylic platter. For those too young to remember the Great Turntable Wars of the 1970s and '80s, acrylic (aka Perspex or methacrylate) was the platter material introduced to this country at least by Pink Triangle, the idea being that with no mat between platter and disc the similar properties of both would enhance damping of resonances in the disc, thus improving sound definition. By and large this worked: the trouble is that PT's platter was twice as thick as the present suspect and was precision machined, expensively, all over. This platter is cut from 'as received' sheet and is considerably less than perfectly flat and, perhaps even more serious, is interfaced to the subplatter by a glued-in spigot which is poorly fitted and tends to make the platter sit crooked.

Otherwise what one gets is essentially the plinth/chassis of a Rega P2 with the slightly more sophisticated arm of the P3. The motor is exactly as per P2, as are the feet – the nearest the deck comes to a suspension. Moth does not supply the deck with a cartridge nor particularly recommend any model, so for review a Rega Bias was used for starters.

SOUND QUALITY

It's surprising just how large the difference turned out to be between this deck and either of its Rega brethren, though one of the reasons for the difference remained elusive. On the positive side, the sound has a good degree of excitement and energy, with fair bass and good treble extension. It soon became clear, however, that there is an upper midrange harshness and lack of detail which is not shared by either of the Regas. A certain amount of component swapping between decks, and trying a variety of cartridges, showed that the problem stayed with the chassis. It eventually transpired that the chassis itself 'sounded' different from the apparently

identical one of the P2: pressing my ear to each in turn while tapping an opposite corner, I found that the Alamo possessed a couple of extra resonances, one in the midrange and one in the upper bass register, the latter very slow to decay once excited. As the sound of a turntable is largely determined by the resonances in its chassis, no wonder the end result was quite different.

That apart, it is interesting to experiment by using or omitting the felt mat over the platter. At best, omitting the mat can give a slight tightening of detail but perceived background noise sometimes seems to rise a little too. Tune according to your taste!

CONCLUSION

Given the structural similarities between them, not to mention the nearness in price, it is only logical to compare this turntable with the Regas in the test. Unfortunately the harshness mentioned above is really quite unsubtle and is hardly likely to appeal to many listeners. Even if that is a sample variation, though, the advantages of this deck are not otherwise obvious.



A cross between Rega's P2 and P3, the Moth sadly shares none of the sonic attributes.

"THE SOUND HAS A GOOD DEGREE OF EXCITEMENT AND ENERGY, WITH FAIR BASS AND GOOD TREBLE."



REGA P2

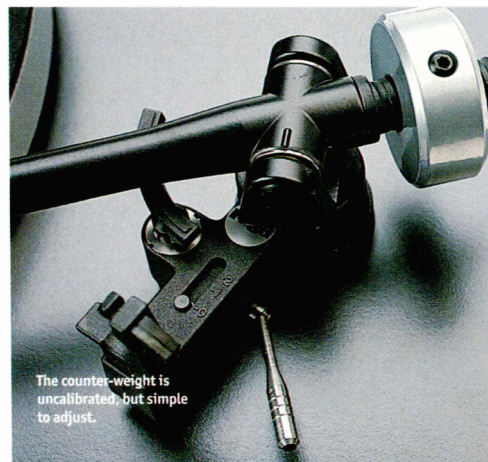
“WHAT CHARACTERISES THE REGA APPROACH IS ITS SHEER LIVELINESS.”

SOUND ★★☆☆☆	VALUE ★★☆☆☆	£198.00	CONTACT 01702 333071	www.rega.co.uk	GUARANTEE Life
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After some millennia of budget predominance, the Planar 2 has been replaced by the P2. Differences? Basically only the platter: once glass, it is now painted particle board. In terms of precision that's certainly a retrograde step, but from a sound quality point of view it's not clearly either an improvement or the opposite. Otherwise, construction is largely familiar. The basis is a chassis of painted chipboard, on which are mounted the arm, motor and main bearing.

The arm seems unchanged from the classic RB250, considered by many to be one of hi-fi's greatest bargains. Its tube and headshell are a single forging, and the bearings in both planes are precision ball races, giving exceptionally good coupling of vibration from one end to the other. The counterweight is notionally uncalibrated as Rega encourages the use of a proper stylus force gauge, but in fact one turn of the counterweight on its screw thread corresponds to about 2g downforce. The arm is simple and unfussy to set up and use.

Like most UK turntable manufacturers, Rega favours a small motor running directly off the mains, its speed determined solely by the frequency of the mains. The motor was once



The counter-weight is uncalibrated, but simple to adjust.

suspended by rubber bands, but is now stuck in place with a double-sided sticky pad. The motor drives the precision plastic subplatter via a round-section belt, and speed change is manual. The P2 arrived with a Bias cartridge fitted, which was used for most of the listening as well as being reviewed in its own right.

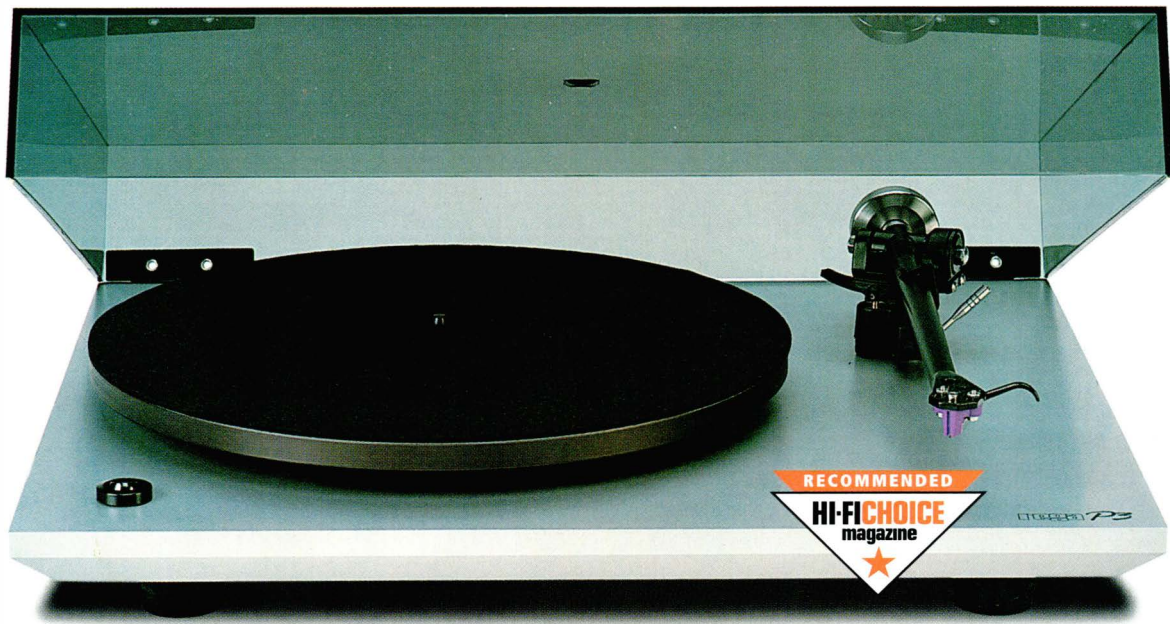
SOUND QUALITY

Not having an original Planar 2 for comparison I've only hazy memories to go by, but what matters is that this deck puts up just as much of a fight as the old version did. Looking back to the days when there were dozens of budget turntables around rather than just a handful, perhaps what really characterised the Rega approach was its sheer liveliness. In terms of tonal subtlety or insight other decks could equal, sometimes better, the Planars, but none had quite the 'danceability factor'.

Well, that's still there in abundance. But the detail? It's probably much of a muchness with earlier versions, although with so much less competition around it's now more likely to be considered class-leading. If your tastes run to symphonies or operas, where 25 different instrumental lines are going along simultaneously, you might find it difficult disentangling everything, and in recordings with a natural acoustic the P2 definitely seems to move the walls inwards compared with a much more sophisticated high end deck. By the same yardstick, stereo imaging is not 100 per cent, and characterisation of solo voices is somewhat lacking: but neither of these is such a grave drawback. Tonal accuracy of course depends quite a lot on the cartridge. With the supplied Rega Bias the sound is just a little bright; a much dearer Glanz cartridge showed that greater mellowness is achievable.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, this deck has lost little or nothing of its appeal over the years. This appeal is most obvious with pop and dance music, but even with classical and smooth jazz there is much to admire. Add functional elegance and noted reliability and we have the making of a continuing Best Buy.



REGA P3

SOUND ★★★★★	VALUE ★★★★★	£298.00	CONTACT 01702 333071	www.rega.co.uk	GUARANTEE Life
--------------------	--------------------	----------------	-----------------------------	--	-----------------------

As with the P2, the P3 is a mildly updated version of the Planar 3. Similarities between it and the P2 are many, although there are important differences. The chassis design is exactly the same, but the chassis itself is thicker, bevelled at its edges and apparently made of a different material. The bearing, the subplatter and the motor are much the same, but the platter is made of thick glass and the arm is Rega's slightly more sophisticated RB300. The latter shares its main tube with the RB250 but has calibrated spring-applied downforce adjustment which offers small but significant advantages over the more common reliance on gravity: with a spring, tracking of warped records is likely to be better.

The glass platter is by its nature a high precision item which helps improve stability of the whole deck. Its relatively high mass reduces speed variations ('wow and flutter') in its rotation while any tendency it has to ring when excited is largely damped by the felt mat. And the thicker chassis also has less tendency to ring and resonate, as can be easily demonstrated by applying one's ear to one corner while gently tapping it. All this should enhance the purity of sounds recovered by the deck. Rega's upmarket cartridge, the Elys (£89) was supplied fitted, but this deck was also used as the principal test bench for the four cartridges reviewed later in this issue.

SOUND QUALITY

Summarising this deck as 'a more civilised version of the P2' would on the whole be entirely fair. There's still plenty of excitement around, but it isn't quite as raw. Within the mix, it's quite noticeably easier with the P3 to hear what's going on and whereas the P2 can sometimes seem to get so carried away that the beat is in danger of getting lost or at least submerged by the general melée of sounds, the P3 has a sturdier bass line which holds its own with more authority. Indeed, in terms of tonal balance it has slightly more bass, but that's only part of the story: it's the firmness with which that bass is presented, rather than its absolute volume, that is important.

As for higher frequencies, the midrange is a touch clearer

than on the P2 although it's by no means completely free of coloration, while the treble is a little more open. In fact one of the traditional weaknesses of the Rega decks has always been some 'splashiness' in the treble and it's not completely banished here. How much this bothers you will depend of course on the rest of your system and what kind of music you play, and if you have rather bright speakers and listen to big orchestral music you might find it a drawback. With a well recorded drum kit it's less obvious, but some drum synths show it up quite badly. It varies a little with the cartridge, and a laid-back one will help – Rega's own are very slightly on the bright side of neutral.

CONCLUSION

In general, this is a very capable deck for a very modest price. Most dealers who stock the P3 will also keep a P2 so it's easy to compare the two and decide how much you think the difference is worth. What you won't find is very much competition from other makes! That makes a Recommendation for this deck even more obvious than it always was. It's a great little product and a very safe buy.



The P3 is a more substantial version of the P2 and features the classic RB300 arm.

"IN GENERAL, THIS IS A VERY CAPABLE DECK FOR A VERY MODEST PRICE."

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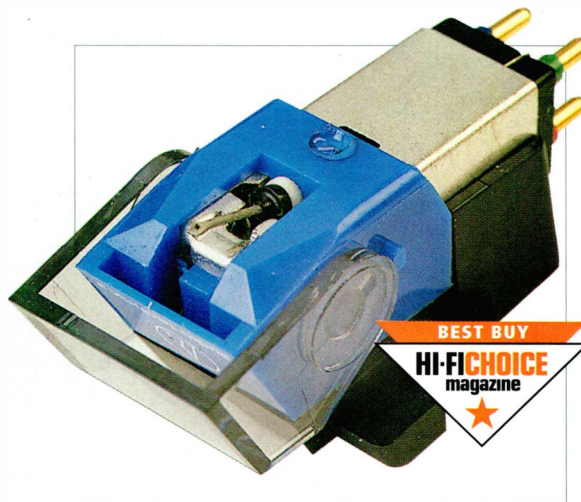
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GROUP TEST CARTRIDGES



AUDIO TECHNICA AT110E

CONTACT: 020 8603 0480 www.audio-technica.co.uk GTEE: 2 YEARS

SOUND ★★★★★ VALUE ★★★★★ £27.95

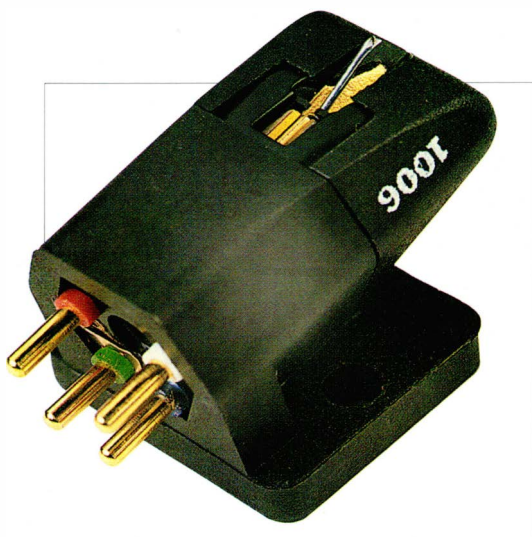
Audio Technica has long been a major cartridge manufacturer, though I dare say in these days the firm's other product lines (not least headphones and professional microphones) serve it better. Still, full marks for keeping several budget cartridges going. This unpretentious little beast has a typical specification, with elliptical stylus and moderate mass and compliance which make it suitable for most arms. Audio Technica quotes an unusually wide range of tracking force, between 1.0 and 2.0g, which is misleading – don't try anything below 1.5g, though it seemed quite happy around that figure.

SOUND QUALITY

A rather impressive performance from such an apparently humble cast member. Yes, there is some coloration around (the bass is probably a little on the fruity side of neutral and the midrange is not entirely natural) but the sound is remarkably clean even at noisy climaxes, and in quiet music there is plenty of detail to be found – arguably just as much as with any of the other, dearer, cartridges in the group. On the P3 turntable used for most of the cartridge tests, surface noise also seemed a touch lower compared with music levels, though this may vary depending on the deck. But all round there is much to admire: plenty of bounce and sparkle, solid and assured bass, excellent insight into the music and only a very little hardness when the going gets tough. What's more, performance seems relatively unfussy about set-up, always a bonus.

CONCLUSION

Don't be put off by the low price. This is a very capable cartridge indeed and one that's likely to enhance many a budget turntable set-up. Its clean tracking bodes well for record care, while the full bass will help offset the low frequency leanness of many cheap turntables. An excellent first upgrade choice and a clear Best Buy.



GOLDRING 1006

CONTACT: 01284 701101 **GUARANTEE:** 1 YEAR

SOUND ★★☆☆ **VALUE** ★★☆☆ **£70.00**

A name going back almost to the dawn of audio time, Goldring has a good reputation especially for low-to-medium price moving magnet cartridges: this is the cheapest of a family of four which differ principally in stylus profile (more sophisticated profiles in the dearer models give better high frequency pickup under difficult conditions). The funky body shape fits a standard headshell, though it is a little awkward to fit either bolts or nuts from underneath. Most characteristics are absolutely par for the course, but output voltage is a little higher than in most cartridges, which gives a small but potentially audible reduction in noise. Tracking force is suggested as 1.75g, which seems about right – perhaps a touch more, 1.9g or so.

SOUND QUALITY

Results were mixed. Treble is certainly very extended but seems to err on the bright side, which can become tiring and is arguably a characteristic not well suited to budget turntables which often share that flaw. Bass is extended and strong without being overbearing, and imaging is pretty good. The main drawback seems to be some harshness when the music gets at all loud, and no amount of fiddling with set-up will make this go away. There's also a knock-on effect in the way that stereo images tend to collapse towards the centre, and in general detail suffers quite noticeably. Quiet music seems much happier, with the sound becoming quite sophisticated (a good cartridge for chamber music lovers, perhaps?) but even in the most energetic rock tracks the harshness is a bit too much for real comfort.

CONCLUSION

If only the fine tonal balance and resolution that this cartridge displays at low levels would persist throughout the dynamic range, it would be very fine. As it is, it seems to lack the all-round ability that would win it a gong.

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GRADO PRESTIGE BLACK

CONTACT: 01284 701101 www.gradolabs.com **GUARANTEE:** 1 YEAR

SOUND ★★★★★ **VALUE** ★★★★★ £49.00

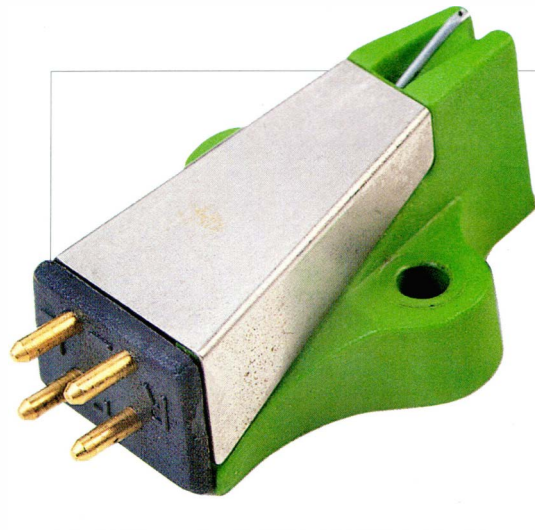
Grado is a US-based specialist manufacturer with some novel ideas on cartridge design. Among those is the 'Flux Bridger' system used in this and other cartridges, a variant on the usual moving magnet principle which is claimed to give a significantly improved frequency response: most MM cartridges manage a little above 20kHz but Grado boasts of more than an extra octave, about 50kHz. That's clearly a good thing, as is the low distortion characteristic of the system. Drawbacks? Really only one: this is a fussy so-and-so to set up. Obviously offset and overhang must be right, but arm height and tracking force required some careful tweaking before the Prestige seemed to be giving its best. In practical terms, though, there's nothing to distinguish it from 'conventional' moving magnet designs.

SOUND QUALITY

The following comments assume that set-up has been attended to very carefully! If not, expect a considerably cruder performance. But under ideal conditions this is a very capable cartridge indeed. Not surprisingly in view of the extended bandwidth, treble is very open and clear, with a welcome lack of haze and blurring. Bass is quite well extended, although perhaps not the best of the bunch, while midrange is neutral. There is some very good imaging in evidence and detail is really quite admirable, suffering just a little at high volumes. There's also a particularly good sense of recorded space, with a very believable ambience, and you'll know when set-up is just so because the ambience is the first thing to suffer when it's not.

CONCLUSION

This is really more of an enthusiast's product than an all-rounder but it is worth persisting with its foibles because the ultimate performance is genuinely above its price class. It should enhance any budget turntable and is strongly Recommended.



REGA BIAS

CONTACT: 01702 333071 www.rega.co.uk **GUARANTEE:** LIFE

SOUND ★★★★★ **VALUE** ★★★★★ £42.00

Although this cartridge is a conventional moving magnet design, Rega has taken a bold decision in making the stylus assembly non-replaceable. That's been done principally for reasons of structural integrity (if the stylus assembly is removable, as is usually the case, there's a danger that it may be loose and thus less able to function at its best) and isn't as cussed as it may sound: yes, one must remove the whole cartridge for retipping but the cost is similar to that of a new stylus for most other models. The tapered body makes setting up the turntable easier, in some ways, as it's easier to eyeball the cantilever when adjusting offset angle, and it's just possible to fit the cartridge with the stylus guard in place. Tracking force, mass and compliance are all moderate.

SOUND QUALITY

In keeping with the general Rega ethos, the basic characteristic is of lively energy, with a good strong punch. Accordingly, the upper bass is forceful and precise, but in the lowest reaches there is not quite the authority of the Audio Technica. Treble is rather a matter of taste: it has something of a tendency to hardness which can make the sound rather dry and uninviting, but at best it gives the impression of tight control. Ambience and imaging are only moderate. As so often, it depends on the music you listen to, and anything with more synthesisers than acoustic instruments can come across very well thanks to the control, making for an exciting sound overall. Dynamics are handled well, with just a little hardening and thickening at very high levels.

CONCLUSION

If you buy a Rega deck this may well be the most obvious cartridge choice, but do give it a try before shelling out. You may love it, but you may find something a little more smooth and beguiling preferable.

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CONCLUSIONS

RICHARD BLACK REVEALS WHICH PLAYERS AND NEEDLES ARE IN THE GROOVE...

Four current budget turntables: two of them are more or less identical to models introduced over two decades ago, one is more or less an amalgam of the former two. A stagnant, decaying market? No, just a mature one, with a mature attitude that 'if it ain't broke...' Rega is no more infallible than any other company but it's undeniable that it got it right with the Planar 2 and 3 models, and the fairly minor overhaul they've both had of late does little to change their appeal.

Let's start with the one that got away. Moth's Alamo is not a bad turntable, but it was let down on test by two unrelated points. First, its chassis seems to sound different from the apparently identical one on the Rega P2. That may be a sample oddity, but even if it is the sloppy platter assembly and its performance in context don't seem to justify the extra over a standard P2, despite the better arm.

Then there's the Dual CS415-2. It's cheap and cheerful, and it's only just hi-fi. But it's recommended on the not unreasonable grounds that it could easily be a lot worse. It goes round steadily enough, it's got fully automatic operation, and when all's said and done it allows you to hear most at least of what's on the disc. What's more it really is a no-brainer to set up and use.

Rega's P3 is easily the most sophisticated of this bunch. No, it's not high end, and considerably more expensive models from Michell, Nottingham Analogue and SME, for instance, leave it well behind. However, it gives a good solid sound with plenty of verve and, especially when fitted with an upmarket cartridge (I tried a couple worth at least as much as the deck itself) and well isolated from external vibration, has

considerable detail retrieval skills. In other words, good upgrade potential.

And the P2, while some way behind the P3 in detail and smoothness, is such a lively and entertaining performer that it can only continue to wear the Best Buy badge it first won in days of yore.

As for cartridges, the Best Buy was easy when its price was revealed. Audio Technica's AT110E is, overall, probably the joint best of the bunch and as the cheapest it's clearly a winner. Goldring's 1006, by contrast, seemed if anything the weakest and the dearest. The Rega Bias and Grado Prestige Black are both decent needles but the Grado won the laurels for what it can achieve, even if it takes some fiddling to achieve it.

The LP is dead – long live the LP!

“A STAGNANT, DECAYING MARKET? NO, JUST A MATURE ONE, WITH A MATURE ATTITUDE.”

TURNTABLES AT A GLANCE

				
MAKE MODEL	DUAL CS415-2	MOTH ALAMO	REGA P2	REGA P3
PRICE	£159.99	£285.00	£198.00	£298.00
SOUND VALUE	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
CONCLUSION	Just about as basic as LP replay can get and still give pleasure – which it does.	Amalgam of Rega parts, plus acrylic platter, but only a qualified success.	The old favourite carries the torch forward with energy and boundless joie-de-vivre.	The virtues of the P2 plus smoothness and better recovery of detail.
GUARANTEE	1 YEAR	2 YEARS	LIFE	LIFE

CARTRIDGES AT A GLANCE

				
MAKE MODEL	AUDIO TECHNICA AT-110E	GOLDRING 1006	GRADO PRESTIGE BLACK	REGA BIAS
PRICE	£27.95	£70.00	£49.00	£42.00
SOUND VALUE	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
CONCLUSION	Excellent performance for the price, with little more than mild coloration.	Marred chiefly by persistent harshness which affects all but very quiet music.	Admirable detail and treble extension, with good bass and ambience too.	Can sound a little hard and lacking bloom, though often exciting.
GUARANTEE	2 YEARS	1 YEAR	1 YEAR	LIFE



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ACTIVE SPEAKERS

PAUL MESSENGER CHECKS OUT HALF A DOZEN SPEAKERS THAT WEIGH A LOT MORE THAN THEY SHOULD AND NEED TO BE PLUGGED INTO THE MAINS.

This group of speakers is very different from our normal crop. They're all relatively small, surprisingly heavy, and decidedly expensive. In fact they all feature something called 'active drive', which is quite distinct from conventional, so-called 'passive' loudspeakers.

The core difference is that the typical two-way passive loudspeaker uses a crossover network between the amplifier and the drive units, so that the bass/mid unit gets the bass/mid frequencies, and the treble goes to the tweeter. The active speaker opts instead to do the crossing over between the the preamp and power amp, and therefore needs to have, say, two power amps per two-way loudspeaker.

The most obvious advantage is the elimination of the 'passive' crossover network, by nature a crude affair that adds distortion and takes its toll on amplifier performance. Furthermore, the power amp's low output impedance can theoretically dampen speaker voice-coils and diaphragms, an electronic network allows much more subtle balance tailoring, and protection circuitry can be matched to the specific driver.

As reflected in the brand names, active speakers have their roots in the powered loudspeakers long used in pro audio. Five of our six have their electronic crossovers and power amps built into the speaker enclosures, so you just need to supply mains power, and the signal input from a preamplifier. Most have both phono/unbalanced and XLR/balanced inputs, the latter less common on domestic hi-fi equipment, but better suited to long cable runs. The Linn speakers use separate outboard electronics, like regular hi-fi gear, because they start off as passive designs, but are tested here with their Aktiv upgrade option.

An electronic crossover can provide much more subtle filtering and equalisation than a passive network, and several models allow some 'tailoring' of the sound balance to suit specific conditions – optional bass alignments to suit free space or close-to-wall siting, for example. Power amps and their protection circuitry may also be matched to the specific drive units.

THE PLAYERS

ATC T16	£1,750.00
EXCEL 202A	£1,795.00
GENELEC HT206	£1,400.00
LINN KATAN AKTIV/LK140	£2,385.00
MERIDIAN M33	£1,495.00
PMC AML1	£3,525.00

OTHER EQUIPMENT USED

Linn LP12 turntable
 Naim ARO tonearm
 Linn Arkiv B and Dynavektor XV-1 cartridges
 Naim CDS CD player
 Naim NATO1 tuner
 Naim NAC52 (unbalanced) and Bryston BP25 (balanced) preamplifiers
 The Chord Company (unbalanced) and Bryston Musiflex (balanced XLR-terminated) interconnects
 Kimber mains leads
 Kudos S100 speaker stands

MUSIC USED DURING TESTS

Brendel/Haitink/LPO&C - Beethoven
Piano Concerto No. 1
 Mari Boine - *Eallin*
 The Grateful Dead - *Reckoning*
 Wyclef Jean - *Carnival*
 Basement Jaxx - *Remedy*

ACTIVE/POWERED/PASSIVE

Note that an active speaker is not necessarily the same as a powered speaker. Some active speakers are powered (eg ATC, Meridian), some are not (eg Linn, Naim). Likewise some powered speakers are active, though others (such as the 'power towers', popular in the USA) are part active, part passive, and others still may be purely passive, featuring a single built-in power amp (eg sat/sub combos, computer speakers).



“WHILE THE DYNAMIC CONTRASTS WERE CONVINCING, IT WASN'T EASY TO HEAR DEEP DOWN INTO THE MIX.”

ATC T16

SOUND ★★☆☆☆☆	VALUE ★★☆☆☆☆	£1,750.00	CONTACT 01285 760561	www.atc.gb.net	GUARANTEE 6 years
---------------------	---------------------	------------------	-----------------------------	--	--------------------------

ATC is probably best known of all active speaker builders, their passive alternatives accounting for only around 10 per cent of production. This T16 was conceived primarily for the 'home studio' user, and uses a hefty cast alloy enclosure that's available in a riotous choice of colours. Ours came in attractive metallic pink, though the pastel yellow is reportedly very pretty too.

With no grille to cover up the business bits, the T16 looks striking and makes no attempt to disguise the fact, yet it's also rather elegant in its own assertive way. Painted to match the casting, the very thick MDF front panel has elegantly post-formed edges, curved top and bottom edges, and is solidly secured by ten visible bolts. Besides the drivers and a large port, there's a little blue LED to indicate power on.

The casting is immensely strong and rigid, 6mm thick, ribbed and with a further 6mm layer of damping. The sides and top are curved, helping to de-focus internal standing waves, while the rear combines housing for the amplification and socketry, plus very hefty heatsink fins. In fact the whole casting acts as a massive heatsink, and gets warm to the touch, even when quiet, as ATC runs its power amps – 200W plus 50W – with a significant class A bias.

It's the heaviest model in our test group at 17.5kg. A box-shaped section on the rear below the fins provides mains and signal inputs, the latter on a balanced XLR socket. There are two knobs here, one of which provides gain (volume), while the other acts as a bass booster.

Flush mounted into the front baffle, the main driver has a chunky 6.5-inch cast frame, a deliberately coarse-textured 130mm doped paper cone, and a 45mm voice coil. The tweet-

er is a 25mm fabric dome device. The speaker is fitted with three feet, two fixed while the third at centre-rear has a screw thread to allow the baffle to be slightly tilted, up or down.

The in-room measurements threw up some surprises. The broad midband and treble look smooth, but in view of the box and driver size, the bass is surprisingly limited. There is little of consequence below 50Hz, and even the mid-bass is a tad dry. Mounting the speakers closer to a wall fills out the mid-bass, but at some cost in midband smoothness. The bass booster can fill out the mid-bass, but the action of this control is a little strange, having little effect for the first two-thirds of its rotation before coming in hard.

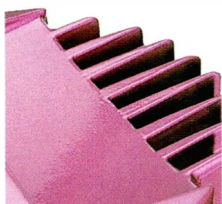
SOUND QUALITY

The T16 delivers vivid dynamic contrasts, but in other respects its sound quality was a little disappointing, and didn't really seem to take full advantage of the benefits of active drive, especially in terms of transient definition.

There's a basic lack of transparency here that always made one conscious that this was music reproduction, not production. While the dynamic contrasts were thoroughly convincing, it wasn't easy to hear deep down into the mix, and leading edges weren't crisply defined. Speech reproduction was expressive but with some coarseness and coloration.

CONCLUSION

The T16 has a lot going for in terms of its construction and enclosure design, but the whole somehow adds up to rather less than the sum of the parts, and for all its dynamics, some lack of transparency and coherence hampers its musical skills.



Volume and bass controls on the heavily heatsinked rear panel.



“THIS IS A BEAUTIFULLY JUDGED SPEAKER, WITH LOW COLORATION AND VERY NATURAL TONALITY.”



EXCEL 202A

SOUND ★★★★★ **VALUE** ★★★★★ **£1,175.00** **CONTACT** 020 8354 0820 **GUARANTEE** 1 year

Excel makes professional monitor speakers, and has been doing so for the past five years, since its principals left the BBC. It's a familiar heritage which has spawned a number of successful brands down the years, though it's maybe a bit early to predict whether Excel will join their ranks.

The 202A is the middle of three compact stand-mount models, all actively driven two-ways with similarly uncompromising pro styling. Excel also has an 801FEU (Frequency Extension Unit) in its range, which is effectively a powered subwoofer designed to be used in pairs as stands to support any of the compact monitors.

The important fine detail is all neatly executed, with nicely radiused box edges and flush-mounted drive units, and the sheer unfussy simplicity of this speaker has its own appeal. It's actually slightly deeper than its height, which is unusual but helps keep the front small. The main driver and tweeter are quite widely spaced, alongside a well-flared port and a little blue 'on' indicator light. A substantial perforated metal grille (not shown) provides protection for the tweeter's 28mm fabric dome, but is better removed in use (as it adds a treble peak).

Weighing a considerable 15kg, it all feels very solidly built, and uses a class 6.5-inch main driver with phase plug and 125mm flared plastic cone. The back panel is equally neatly executed, with modest heatsinking and a solitary balanced XLR input, alongside the IEC mains input. From the outside there appear to be no adjustments, but in fact there's quite a lot of flexibility available via two sets of 'jumpers' accessible by removing the amplifiers, permitting adjustment of midband EQ, bass roll-off and treble level.

First off, the far-field in-room measurement seemed a little too laid back in the upper midband, but moving the appropriate jumpers a notch gave a smooth and near-ideal mid-to-treble. The bass alignment looks pretty well suited to free space sitting, if a trifle over-active around 50Hz.

SOUND QUALITY

'Musical' tends to be an overworked and underspecified adjective in hi-fi criticism, but it's still the best term to sum up my reaction to this Excel, though 'smooth' and 'even-handed' also come quickly to mind. Acoustically speaking, especially in terms of the midband voicing, this is a beautifully judged loudspeaker, with impressively low coloration and very natural perspectives and tonality.

But it's also just a bit too soft and gentle when it comes to handling dynamics and transients. The sound is very smooth and even, and quite transparent and delicate, with good basic timing and coherence, but it does lack some drive and impetus, and leading edges seem a little muted. This speaker doesn't have enormous loudness capability when subjected to heavy bass thumps, though for most normal purposes the headroom should be quite adequate.

CONCLUSION

One might fairly argue that the 202A's acoustics are better than its amplification. It's true that the music could do with a little more zip and drive, but the sound is smooth with low coloration, and the voicing so beautifully judged that Recommendation seems entirely appropriate, providing you can handle the Pro styling and balanced input.



No controls on show, but there are jumpers inside.



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GENELEC HT206

SOUND ★★☆☆☆ **VALUE** ★★☆☆☆ **£1,400.00** **CONTACT** 01423 359054 **GUARANTEE** 2 years

Genelec has been making actively driven monitoring loudspeakers since way back in the 1970s, and has probably done more to advance the active cause than any other brand. Indeed, to my knowledge Genelec has only ever made active, powered speakers, and the majority of these have sold to professionals worldwide.

Indeed, until fairly recently Genelec was only distributed through ProAudio channels. CSE’s decision to offer the company’s Home Theater range through regular domestic retail channels owes much to the rise of multi-channel home cinema sound. Based closely on the long established 1030A Pro monitor, this £1,400 HT206 is the smallest in the range, combining a box size of 6.5-litres with a 6.5-inch frame main driver, port-loaded via two front slots. Its ProAudio ancestry is obvious enough from the its simple styling.

That said, I rather like its understated, form-follows-function minimalism. The front panel is acoustically very smooth, with flush-mounted drivers and a wide, shallow flare surrounding the 19mm metal dome tweeter – Genelec’s Directivity Control Waveguide, shaped to control dispersion especially around the crossover point. A little green ‘on’ indicator lamp is also built into the tweeter housing.

The metal back panel is a busy affair, and is also spring-decoupled from the rest of the enclosure, so the electronics are somewhat isolated from the vibrations generated by the main drive unit. Graphs printed on the back show the effects of switching any one of a dozen trim switches, the three groups of four covering treble and bass tilt, and bass roll-off. A flat free-field response is promised with all set ‘off’. There’s a potentiometer to set gain, and inputs on phono (unbalanced)

or XLR (balanced). An 80W amplifier feeds the main driver, which has a 125mm polymer cone, while a 50W amp drives the 19mm metal dome tweeter.

Far-field in-room measurements confirm an essentially flat response above 50Hz in free space, while the pre-set switches should prove handy in dealing with real world situations – such as using this shielded speaker on top of a TV set as a dialogue channel. Deep (sub-50Hz) bass is not on the agenda, but that’s hardly surprising for a small speaker.

SOUND QUALITY

The HT206’s even balance adds very little character of its own, but there’s also some lack of excitement and generosity about the sound which, ultimately, is a bit ‘small boxy’, and lacking in dynamic vigour and contrasts. It’s easy enough on the ears, and commendably free from unwanted ‘nasties’, and as such is not an easy speaker to criticise. Quality pin-point imaging and fine smoothness are two more plus points, but there’s also a certain blandness which keeps one a little detached, so that the attention is apt to wander.

The fine basic tonal accuracy is ample justification for its role as a genuine mini monitor, but the HT206 doesn’t have the communication skills of competitors like the Meridian M33.

CONCLUSION

The exhaustive specification that Genelec publishes is a great confidence booster, and there’s no denying this little speaker has plenty going for it. But ultimately it seems more concerned with sonic accuracy than musical communication, and lacks the delicacy and dynamism of more hi-fi oriented competition.



The Genelec is kitted with a comprehensive, if daunting, set of controls.

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LINN KATAN AKTIV/LK140

SOUND ★★★★★ **VALUE** ★★★★★ **£2,350.00** **CONTACT** 0141 307 7777 www.linn.co.uk **GUARANTEE** 2 years

Linn takes the classic hi-fi approach to active drive loudspeakers by keeping the speaker just a loud-speaker, and adding extra amplification down where amplifiers normally reside, a strategy particularly well suited to 'upgrading' a passive speaker to active drive. One less happy implication is the great black snake of a speaker cable, but one of Linn's neat tricks is to fit the power amplifiers with Aktiv crossover modules.

The Katan is a two-way speaker, tapered in shape, finished in real wood veneer, and priced per pair at £600 in black or £635 in cherry. There are optional matching stands (£135/pr), while the LK140 power amps cost £750 each (two are required) and the Aktiv models £125 each (again two are needed). That brings the total up to a minimum of £2,325 excluding stands, which is a good chunk above the group average here, but the amplification – rated at 95/140W per channel into 8/4 ohms – is rather more powerful than most.

This system places around 75 per cent of the budget on the amplification. It keeps the speakers tiny and is the only one of our group to cover them in real wood veneer. And because the power amps sit close to the sources and pre-amp, there's no need to use balanced pre-to-power amp links.

The power amps are plain and functional 'black boxes', well endowed with flexible socketry, including shielded speaker outputs. Linn supplied terminated speaker cables, and sent the amps already fitted with the Aktiv filter boards. Converting the Katans to Aktiv drive proved a simple 10-minute job.

The Katan is even slimmer at the back than the front, has a small rear port, and two drive units, the main driver equipped with a 90mm plastic cone, the tweeter a 19mm dome. Linn

suggests siting 4-12 inches from a wall, which gave an in-room response that's well balanced overall, but not particularly smooth – a little strong around 50Hz, lean through the upper bass and lower mid, then forward in the upper mid (800Hz-1kHz) and relatively strong through the treble too.

SOUND QUALITY

There's much to like about the Katan Aktiv, but in truth this little speaker's solitary 5.25-inch main driver is probably better suited to smaller rooms than the 4.3x2.6x5.5 metre volume used for the tests. The overall balance is significantly brighter than the group average, which is a good way to show off the impressive clarity of the amplification, but it does tend to reveal a lack of warmth and authority through the bass region.

Matters improved somewhat when I changed the Katan stands for the more massive and stable Kudos 100s used elsewhere in the tests, but there's still some lack of bottom end drive and grunt here. When fed the bass-rich mix on, say, Wyckle Jean's *Carnival*, the bass driver simply lost it on occasional heavy transients, even at quite modest overall levels. It didn't happen often, but was irritating when it did. That aside, the sound is winningly coherent with only modest coloration.

CONCLUSION

I couldn't help thinking that this package supplies rather better amplification than the speakers can really cope with. The open and sweet top end is very beguiling, but the system is a bit short of low-end grunt and authority. That said, there's oodles of detail and delicacy here, so the Katan Aktiv makes a very attractive proposition, especially for smaller rooms.

"THE SOUND IS COHERENT, WITH ONLY MODEST COLORATION."



The Linn's amplification modules are separate to the speakers themselves.

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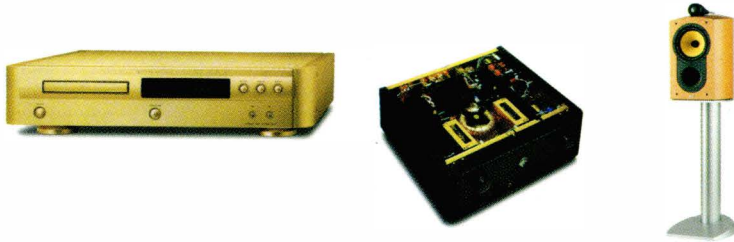
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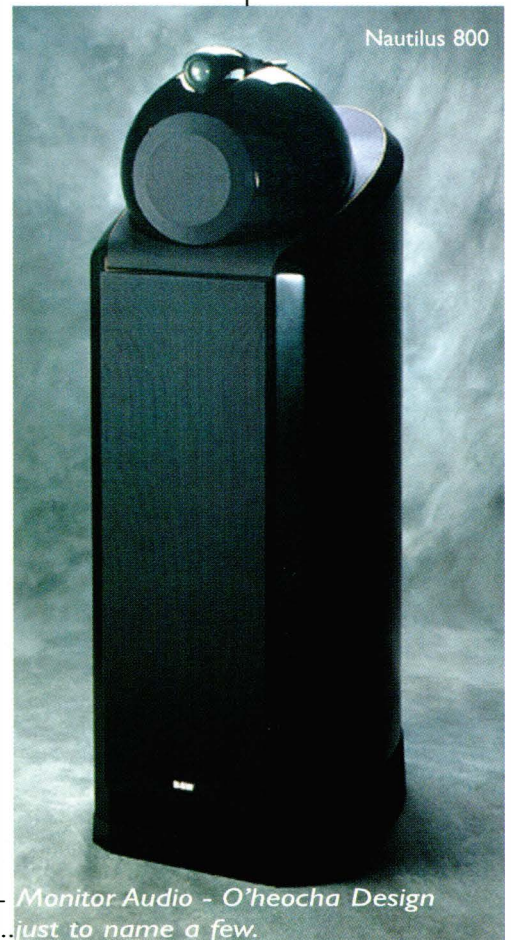
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MERIDIAN M33

SOUND ★★★★★ **VALUE** ★★★★★ **£1,495.00** **CONTACT** 01480 521444 www.meridian-audio.com **GUARANTEE** 3 years

A long-established member of the British specialist hi-fi elite, Meridian is well known for its surround sound and multi-room systems and advanced digital signal processing techniques. But it is also the one hi-fi brand that has pioneered and persevered with integrated active speakers for a great many years, the better to support the multi-room and surround sound systems, a role for which the M33 would seem particularly well suited.

Functional minimalism is the phrase that springs to mind, as the front panel is just large enough to accommodate a pair of 5-inch main drivers, operating d’Appolito style above and below a central fabric dome tweeter. Or indeed either side of said tweeter, as this speaker is clearly conceived with at least one eye on providing centre-front ‘dialogue’ reproduction from above or below some sort of video display unit (the M33C variant is magnetically shielded). Five M33s, along with a high quality subwoofer (or two), can make a strong claim to being one of the most discreet high performance ‘5.1’ surround speaker systems around.

The textured matt black metal enclosure looks rather prosaic, but again form follows function, and this is no piece of bent steel. Rather it’s an alloy casting, lined with damping compound, and cunningly tapered to boot. As an enclosure material, a cast alloy structure is significantly less bulky than a wood-based box of equivalent stiffness, further contributing to the compact dimensions.

There are no ‘user-adjustables’ on the M33, though there is the facility for using the Omnimount bracket mounting system, and the speaker has the option of accepting balanced XLR, or phono unbalanced signal inputs. The speaker operates

in sealed-box mode, and the twin 5-inch main drivers each have 94mm carbon fibre cones, with a combined radiating area at least equivalent to a 6.5-incher.

In-room far-field measurements show an alignment that’s ideally suited to close-to-wall siting. There’s no deep (i.e. sub-50Hz) bass, but output above 50Hz is very well balanced and smoother than most, the only character of note being a modest notch centred on 2kHz.

SOUND QUALITY

Perhaps the M33’s unassuming appearance left me approaching this speaker with limited expectations, but start playing music through them and you’re immediately aware of their genuine hi-fi pedigree, and surprised at how much bass Meridian has squeezed out of such small enclosures.

While close-to-wall siting introduced a measure of midband hollowness, it also gave the best bass alignment, and while this speaker is no deep bass excavator, it does the rest of the bottom end with considerable agility. Indeed, dynamic literacy and range is a hallmark of this speaker. It’s very good at conveying musical tension, but doesn’t overstep the mark by becoming unruly or edgy. Tonally it’s fundamentally neutral, if a tad shiny with it, though speech shows some nasality.

CONCLUSION

This delightfully discreet little speaker does everything bar the low bass exceedingly well, and shows its true hi-fi pedigree in fine transparency, dynamic range and tension. It may not look all that special, but the sound it generates belies its modest dimensions, and is delightfully coherent and informative.



No tone controls, but either RCA phono or XLR connections can be added.

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PMC AML1

SOUND ★★★★★ **VALUE** ★★★★★ **£3,525.00** **CONTACT** 08704 441044 www.pmc-speakers.com **G'TEE** 5 years

Entering its second decade as probably Britain's fastest growing quality speaker brand, PMC has recently enjoyed significant success on the hi-fi scene, especially with its passive TB1/2 stand-mounts and FB1 floorstanding models.

This AML1 is more or less the same size as the TB2, is also a two-way, and shares the PMC trademark technique of transmission line bass loading, but that's where the similarities end. For starters, the AML1 carries a price tag nearly three grand more. It's very much part of PMC's pro line of speakers, with balanced XLR signal input only, striking styling, and a moulded blue front panel that won't sit too easily in many domestic environments – the grey alternative is more discreet.

The two power amps and associated active electronics are all built into the rear panel with generous integral cast alloy heatsinking. The op-amps use discrete, matched transistors; other components, including Oscon capacitors, are tightly tol-eranced audiophile grades.

There's no overall equalisation here, and the 1.4kHz crossover filters are steep, minimising overlap by rolling the main driver off at 24dB/octave, and bringing the tweeter in at 18dB/oct. A little (blue) flap at top/rear opens to reveal four knobs, a switch and an LED, the former providing gain (volume) and three optional calibrated equalisation contours, by-passable by the switch. The EQ provides gentle low and high frequency tilts, hinged 500Hz, plus a low frequency roll-off, for fine tuning to taste, ancillaries or environment, though our tests were carried out in by-pass mode.

The drivers are interesting, especially the main unit's honeycomb flat diaphragm, 120mm in diameter and made from a

carbon fibre/Nomex composite. The tweeter is large, with a 32mm fabric dome covered by a perforated metal 'lens', the better to operate down to the lower than usual crossover.

The far-field in-room measurement is not particularly smooth, but stays within tight overall limits. Clearly suited to free space operation, the balance is a shade warm through the mid-bass, but it goes deep too – 20Hz in-room registers -10dB ref the midband. Further up the band there are mild peaks at 800Hz and 3-4kHz.

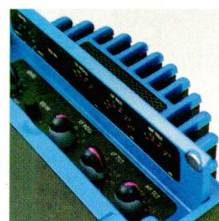
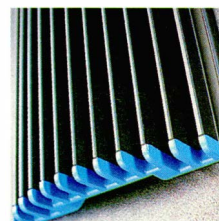
SOUND QUALITY

In the past, I've criticised PMC speakers for a tendency to be a little too laid-back. Now I'm criticising one for being a little too forward and up-front – which just happens to be the way I prefer it, because it's inviting and articulate at low levels.

It's the way this speaker delivers true scale and weight, plus considerable dynamic range and drama, that really sets it apart. It also goes impressively loud, though the forwardness means it does tend to get aggressive with a lot of material if you push it too hard. Stereo imaging is exceptional, as is the AML1's freedom from 'boxiness' and ability to deliver very convincing low frequency ambience on live recordings.

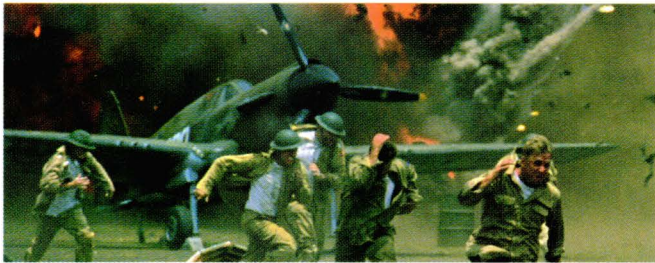
CONCLUSION

This is an expensive speaker, no question, but it's also an extraordinarily capable one, which justifies its price by delivering far more weight and drama than one has any right to expect from a compact stand-mount. It also has a freedom from boxiness that will see off the majority of floorstanders, so if you can handle the forwardness, and the balanced-line drive – go for it.



The PMC's EQ and volume controls are mounted at the top rear of the speaker.

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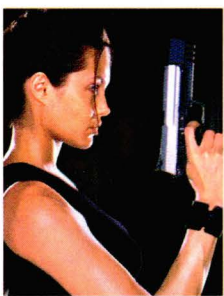


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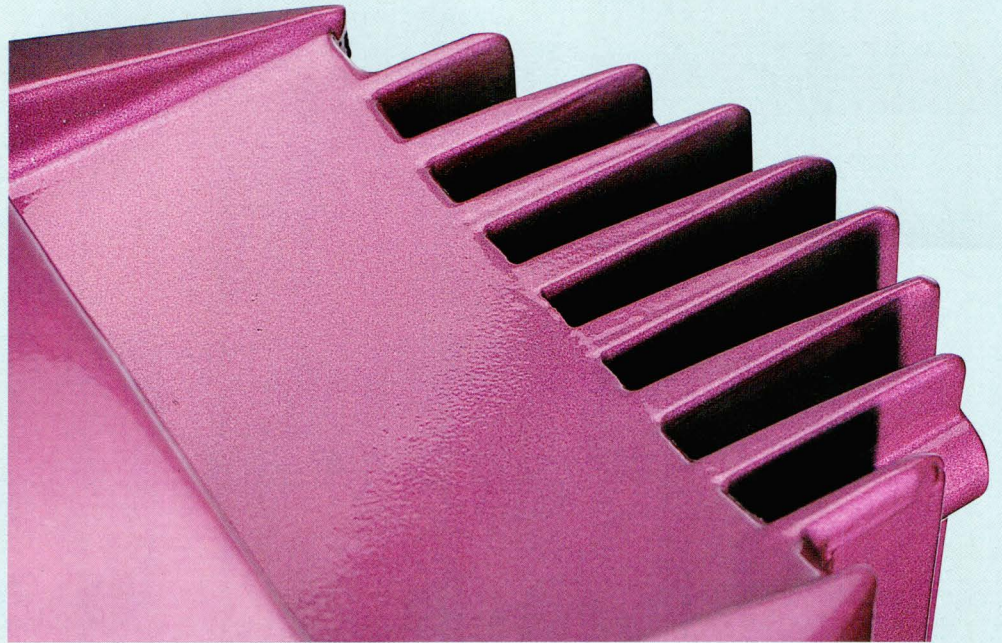
PAUL MESSENGER ACTS ON HIS INSTINCTS...

Tackling a new and hitherto unreviewed type of speaker is always interesting. I've done it before, more than once, and it always turns out to be more challenging, time-consuming, but ultimately more rewarding than a test of more orthodox products.

That was certainly true of these active speakers. Several represent something of a moving target, by including means of making fine adjustment to the sound balance to compensate for taste, ancillaries or environment. There's also the little matter that each speaker comes complete with its own power amps, and there's really no way of reliably isolating the speaker from the drive electronics or vice versa.

With a price span from £1,400 to £3,525, we're looking at an expensive group here, and since they're also all stand-mounts, you'll also need to find some more money for stands (or perhaps wall brackets for those with Omnimount fixings). The high prices are of course mainly down to the electronics, which probably typically account for around two-thirds of the total.

Having taken these around the block a few times, I'm pretty well convinced that the amplification is actually rather more important than the loudspeakers, and that



"I'M CONVINCED THAT, WITH ACTIVES, AMPLIFICATION IS RATHER MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE SPEAKERS."

achieving a good balance between the two is a far from easy task. The concept of amplifier sound is more widely appreciated in hi-fi than ProAudio circles, and superior amp performance undoubtedly benefited hi-fi stalwarts like Meridian and Linn.

It's actually very difficult to set up a valid like-for-like comparison

between active and passive drive speakers, but I have to say I enjoyed this group as a whole. Although low bass wasn't really on the agenda, these compact speakers were still more than capable of generating a remarkably fine subjective impression of genuine scale and weight. 'Activation' definitely has its benefits!

ACTIVE SPEAKERS AT A GLANCE

						
MAKE MODEL	ATC T16	EXCEL 202A	GENELEC HT206	LINN KATAN AKTIV/LK140	MERIDIAN M33	PMC AML1
PRICE	£1,750.00	£1,175.00	£1,400.00	£2,350.00	£1,495.00	£3,525.00
SOUND VALUE	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆
CONCLUSION	Great construction, but a lack of transparency and coherence hampers its musical skills.	Might be better with a bit more drive, but the sound is smooth, clear and beautifully judged.	Plenty going for it, but the Genelec lacks some musical delicacy and dynamism.	Sweet top end and oodles of detail and delicacy make for a great speaker for smaller rooms.	True hi-fi values shine through this delightfully discreet little speaker. An easy Best Buy.	Spectacular, weighty and dramatic sound from a small, but expensive, speaker.
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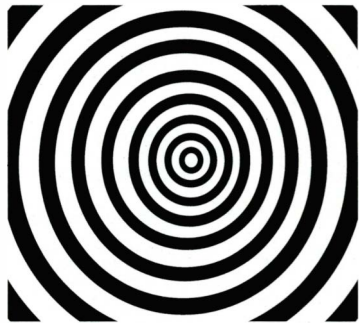
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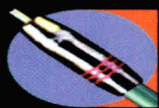
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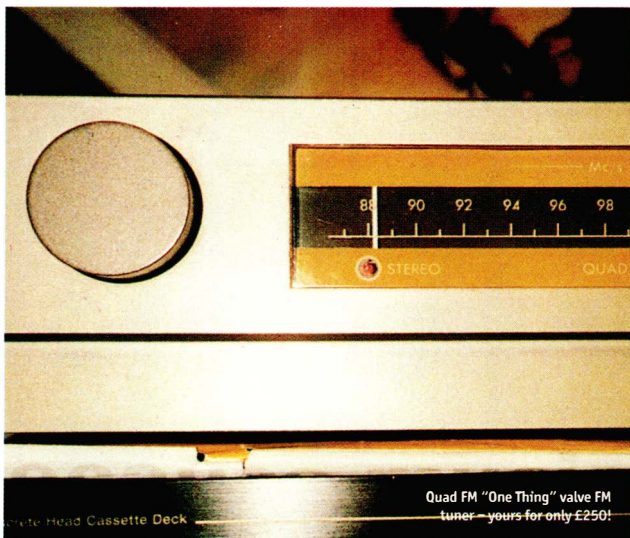
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Buying secondhand can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand new product engineered down to a price. Do some research on which brands and products have a good service back-up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a second-hand hi-fi dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty. So it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. Products such as speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amplifiers, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be troublesome — have a proper dem, and judge the seller as well as the goods!

THE DIRECTORY

THE *HI-FI CHOICE* DIRECTORY ROUNDS UP 1,000 PRODUCTS REVIEWED IN OUR PAGES. HERE YOU'LL FIND OUR OPINIONS ON THE BEST HI-FI COMPONENTS, ALONG WITH ALL THE INFORMATION YOU'LL NEED TO DECIDE WHICH ONES ARE RIGHT FOR YOU.

THE ART OF SYSTEM BUILDING

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

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

So once you have shortlisted some components, the next step is to track down a knowledgeable dealer to take you through the options available. As well as getting the basic hardware right there is the question of which cables to use; should you stick with what comes in the box or pay extra for interconnects and speakers leads? Once you've established that the latter is the way, listen to a dealer's recommendations as to the right cable for your system.

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

MAKING CONNECTIONS

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

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

AWARD TAGS

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

A third award, the Editor's Choice, is reserved for those products reviewed solo, such as you see in the First Impressions or High Performance sections. An EC is awarded where the Editor is convinced that a product offers exceptional quality for the price.



GLOSSARY

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

AC-3: Audio Code number 3, the compression algorithm that lies behind Dolby Digital.

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

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

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

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

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

CD-RW: Recordable/erasable and re-recordable CD, discs must be unfinalised before they can be re-recorded.

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

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

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

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

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

DAC OR DIGITAL-TO-ANALOGUE CONVERTER: The stage at which incoming 16-24 bit digital data is used to reconstruct a recognisable analogue (music) waveform.

DOLBY DIGITAL DD (AC3): A compressed (10:1) digital audio format that typically contains five or more entirely discrete channels.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JITTER: An insidious distortion specific to digital audio whereby the clock, used to regulate the conversion of data into analogue audio, carries a degree of uncertainty.

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

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

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

MAIN DRIVER: A drive unit which reproduces both bass and midrange frequencies.

MASKING EFFECT: The audibility of distortion and/or quieter instruments in a mix depends upon the intensity of the music as whole.

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

NETWORK: see Crossover.

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

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

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

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

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

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

TOSLINK: The proprietary name given by Toshiba to the optical fibre signal transmission system it invented for consumer applications. The system includes dedicated connectors, transmitters and receivers.

TRANSISTOR/MOSFET: the two main types of power semiconductor used in amplifier output stages. Differences are subtle and much argued over!

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

TWEETER: Treble driver.

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

WOOFER: Bass driver.

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AMPLIFIERS



SPECIFICATIONS

STEREO AMPLIFIERS – INTEGRATED

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
	Affordable Valve Co. EL34	650	A real bargain on the face of it, but the sound is oh so soft, warm and old-valve. Too much of a good thing	4					40	202
	Alchemist Kraken APD6A	599	Compact, with Darth Vader styling, yet sound quality is meek and mild, despite strong midband dynamics	5	●				55	175
R	AMC 3025a	140	Surprisingly potent and easy on the ear, if not especially analytical — classic bargain-basement material, in fact	4	●	●	●	●	30	171
R	AMC 3050a	170	Tremendous value for money, and a full, big, if rather uninformative sound	4	●	●	●	●	45	167
BB	Arcam Alpha One	230	Rather like an Alpha 7 but without the remote control and what appears to be better sound quality still	6				●	35	186
	Arcam Alpha 7R	300	Decent, if slightly system fussy amplifier that no longer pulls all the right strings	5	●		●	●	45	196
	Arcam Alpha 8R	350	Workmanlike amplifier is well thought through, but is now beginning to show its age.	5	●		●	●	50	208
R	Arcam Alpha 9	500	Not quite a match for the Alpha 9/9P combo, the solo integrated is nevertheless colourful and explicitly detailed	7			●	●	70	168
R	Arcam Alpha 10	800	Although not the best sounding in its class, the Alpha 10's modular nature demands it be taken seriously	5			●		100	181
BB	Arcam FMJ A22	1,000	Powerful, articulate, and expandable into a home cinema or multiroom amp/controller	7			●	●	100	201
EC	ATC SIA2-150	1,984	An impressive sounding integrated amp with a dynamic, open and detailed sound	4			●		150	192
	Aria S2	1,000	Glamorously packaged valve amp produces a real eyes closed, feet up kind of sound	4					12	190
BB	Audio Analogue Puccini	450	Superbly finished, the entry-level Audio Analogue performs way out of its class	5	●	●			40	175
	Audio Analogue Puccini SE	595	Upgraded, more powerful Puccini is disappointingly sluggish and curiously lacking in musical vitality	5	●	●			40	181
R	AVI S2000MI	999	Fine, detailed amplifier with excellent timing and strong control of a wide range of loudspeaker loads	5			●		100	175
	Bryston B60R	1,249	Great build, but the lazy bass and opaque treble bracket an articulate midband. Comes with 20 year guarantee	5			●	●	60	175
R	Cambridge Audio A500RC	200	Solid value, decent build and a surfeit of watts make this an attractive proposition, but it can sound slightly loose	6			●		50	196
R	Canary Audio CA-608	1,495	If you value the grand scheme of things and appreciate a bit of dynamic vigour this could be the amp for you	4					24	202
R	Copland CSA8	945	Sophisticated yet transparent, this is one of those amplifiers that sounds good even when the gloss has worn off	5					60	168
R	Copland CSA 28	1,249	Elegant Scandinavian cool, abundantly detailed if somewhat system dependent	5	●		●		60	189
	Copland CTA 402	1,698	A unusually flexible valve amp with an attractive and textured sound	5	●		●		35	193
	CR Developments CR324	569	Solid and capable on paper, this is a bit of a blunt instrument when let loose on the music	5					150	181
R	Cymbal CA1	499	Lacklustre amplifier tends to underperform with complex material. Best with straightforward compact loudspeakers	6					40	178
	Creek 4330	279	Diminutive but classy amp will drive anything, and can be specified in various configurations	4	●				40	192
	Creek 4330SE	499	Somewhat perplexing, though always interesting, miniature audiophile amplifier, needs careful system matching	5			●		50	208
R	Cyrus 5	500	A enjoyable amp that is assured and unflappable, although detail is unremarkable	7			●	●	45	205
R	Cyrus 7	700	Welcome return to form for the Cyrus stable: this is the best sounding audio brick around	6			●	●	60	196
BB	Denon PMA-255UK	140	Great beer-budget buy, with everything necessary for basic but decent high fidelity operation	5				●	30	208
	Denon PMA-725R	350	Warm, bold, up-front presentation, but musically unexciting	5	●		●	●	97	157
R	Denon PMA-1500R	500	Recommended for its outrageous power, especially with problem speakers	5	●	●	●	●	70	181
R	Densen Beat B-100 MkII	650	High 'air guitar' factor, and can punch above its weight, but check it will complement your system	5					60	175
	Electrocompaniet EC1-3	1,000	Basically good, but too many rough edges to warrant recommendation	6			●		75	201
	Ezo Aria HE	449	Quick, detailed but aggressive and sometimes coarse sounding amp. Beautifully turned out, though	5				●	40	208
	Graaf Venticinque	1,790	Smart and practical, but it just never seems to shine sonically	6					25	202
	Hofli Audis Signature	750	A 'no-feedback' circuit giving outstanding resolution, but significant load dependency	4	●				65	181
	JoLida 202	695	Well-built and technically accomplished, affordable valve integrated with subtle refined, if not quite gripping sound	4					40	168
	JVC AX-R5	200	Versatile, and lots of even-handed, articulate detail; but let down by superficiality	5	●		●	●	45	149
	Kenwood KAF-3010R	180	Plenty of twiddly bits yet weak on inputs, and basically good, but somewhat uneven sound quality	4	●		●	●	70	186
BB	Kenwood KAF-3030R	250	Highly capable amp with good treble, bass and fine detail	5	●		●	●	65	205
	Kenwood KA-5090R	300	Large, well equipped and high tech integrated, but TRAITR output still gives a harsh, unobtrusive performance	5	●	●	●	●	65	171
	Krell KAV-500i	5,000	More at home in background listening/home cinema applications than out-and-out audio maniac set-ups	5			●		250	192
	Lundahl Mag Amp	1,735	Unusual valve/magnetic amp hybrid with relaxed balance and good timbre	5					23	196
	Marantz PM-6010 OSE	229	Good starter amplifier, with characteristic smooth, low key delivery	5	●		●	●	50	196
	Marantz PM7000	300	Lots of power for the price, but detail and subtlety seem to have been sacrificed	6	●		●	●	115	205
	Marantz PM6010 OSE Ki Sig	400	Well-made, but somewhat ill-balanced amplifier that doesn't slot into most systems comfortably	6	●		●	●	50	208
	Marantz PM-17	900	Probably worth it for the WBT terminals and other build features alone, but this model doesn't sing as it should	6	●	●	●	●	60	181
	Marantz PM-17 Ki-Signature	1,300	Full feature audiophile amp where the end results don't quite justify the fantastic ingredients	6	●	●	●	●	60	189
	Mark Levinson No383	5,500	Extremely versatile design that thinks and acts like a serious pre/power. Sounds superb	5			●		100	212
	Manriro Asty	400	Engaging, but ill-disciplined, even OTT amplifier with unpredictable system compatibility	5					55	178
R	Musical Fidelity X-A2	500	A chip off the old block; sounds very similar to the X-A1 and XA-100R	6					75	208
	Musical Fidelity A3	849	Similar to the XA-100R internally, and a little too relaxed for some	5	●	●	●	●	85	196
R	Musical Fidelity X-A100R	999	Sings like a thoroughbred, but better with Mozart than Mötörhead	6			●	●	75	189
	MVL A2	970	Curiously designed, and curious sounding amplifier with Sound Sentinel circuits to address perceived weaknesses	9	●			●	100	201
	Myryad T-40	400	The T-40 is a well built and sensible, but needs more dynamics and finesse	6	●		●	●	50	192
R	Myryad MI120	600	Well styled, well built: a good, even tempered amplifier, although it can sound rather brittle	6			●	●	60	175
BB	NAD C320	200	Excellent budget amp from the maker of the seminal 3020 offers better clarity and neutrality and good build	6			●	●	40	186
R	NAD C340	270	A classic NAD amplifier copes with any speaker, delivers plenty of power, and does so with calm decorum	6	●		●	●	50	192
BB	NAD C350	300	A typical NAD: refined, warm tonality, adequate detail, and a strong power yield	7			●	●	60	208
R	NAD 317	400	Build quality aside, the current improved version is a real powerhouse, but smooth and detailed too	6			●	●	80	196
	NAD 5300	1,900	Substantial integrated with loads of power and no shortage of finesse, slightly bass-strong	5			●		100	189
	Opera Aida	795	Low power (in practice) minimalist integrated amp, but the mahogany wings don't help it to fly	5	●	●			60	201
	Pathos Classic One	995	Unusual looks and even more unusual electronic design, but compromised musical potential	5			●		55	202
R	Pioneer A-407R	230	Clean, consistent, finely detailed sound, good finish and (mainly) good build	5	●		●	●	45	186
R	Pioneer A-607R	300	Lively, articulate amp with plenty of drive and a hint of brightness	5	●		●	●	60	192
	Pioneer A07	999	Curious blend of high-end attributes and inconsistent, though undeniably detailed sound	5			●	●	80	175
R	Præcisa Acustica Sonoro	1,800	It is not often that transistor amplifiers are made to sound so palpably valve-like	5			●		100	189
R	Primare A10	500	Beautifully made, smooth and easy sounding, and though not overtly detailed or dynamic, is well organised musically	6					50	208
R	Primare A20 MkII	799	Everything except packaging has changed in Mk II version: but ballsier model has lost none of its refinement	5					70	181
BB	Primare A30.1	1,499	Superb build and aesthetics, and undemonstrably musical down to its smallest screw	6			●		100	189
	Rega Elex	398	Minimalist amplifier, derived from Elicit, is a little uninspiring, although at least it is well behaved	4	●				50	162
	Restek Fantasy II	1499	Muscular, but ultimately rather strident amplifier which needs careful system matching	4			●		100	189
R	Roksan Kandy KA-1	475	Power with control, barely compromised by a small degree of dryness	6			●	●	120	205
R	Roksan Caspian	795	Mainstream Roksan line level amp works well under most circumstances	6			●		70	201
	Rose Scion	615	Unique two-box integrated gives real subtlety and low level resolution, but the sound lacks scale and weight	5	●	●			65	168
BB	Rotel RA-931 Mk II	189	Simple, non-remote amp majors on clarity and transparency, without sounding over-analytical	4	●			●	35	208
BB	Rotel RA-971 MkII	275	Improved RA971 is a chip off the old block: bags of power, but with added precision and clarity	6				●	60	196

STEREO AMPLIFIERS – INTEGRATED (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
	Rotel RA-972	400	Better in the treble than the bass, which is a little too rounded and woolly	6			●	●	90	205
	Sharp SM-SX1	3,300	Jewel like 1-bit digital amplifier with limited power reserves but offering glimpses of sonic magic	5					50	211
	Sharp SM-SX100	10,000	The world's first stable, 1-bit digital amplifier is a technological milestone that should go from strength to strength	n/a					110	200
R	Sony TA-FB740R	200	Very open and clear sound, comfortable with a wide range of musical styles	5	●		●	●	60	205
	Sony TA-FB940R	300	Technically innovative amplifier fails to cut the mustard with complex material	5	●	●	●	●	70	208
	T+A PA-1220R	1,445	Unique presentation and feature set, but sometimes rather relentless sound quality	7			●	●	100	189
	Tact Millennium MkII	7,000	This digital class D amplifier represents a bold declaration on the future expansion of digital audio in the home	n/a			●		150	194
	TAG McLaren 60i	500	Clean, slightly antiseptic sound from this beautifully turned out entry level Audiolab 8000LX replacement	6				●	60	189
	TAG McLaren 60iRv	1,000	Looks, feels and sounds better than the Audiolab it supersedes. Smooth, open, refined but lacks body and drive	6			●	●	60	184
R	Talk Electronics Storm 1	500	Good soundstaging and strong detail are provided by this unassuming and not especially powerful model	6					50	162
	Talk Electronics Cyclone 1	550	Much improved build quality and silver finish, but the sound lacks physicality and can sound strained	6			●		65	196
R	Talk Electronics Storm 2	650	Crisp, clean, well defined sound, arguably lacking warmth, but a good midrange purchase overall	6			●		50	175
	Teac A-E2000	180	Has the potential to cause significant damage in the budget amp sector once the wrinkles are ironed out	6					50	195
	Technics SU-A660 Mk 3	200	Plenty of wellie for the price, but the sound can be a tad coarse and lacking in fine detail	5	●			●	37	186
	Technics SU-A808	300	Intriguing amplifier, with abundant detail but dynamically rather flat	6	●		●		55	196
R	Token Audio K50	350	Stainless steel finish, others available. Sound is warm and attractive, though a little undynamic	5					50	186
	Tube Technology Unisis Sig	2,400	A very attractive product which combines many classic valve attributes to good effect	5	●				30	202
	Yamaha AX-392	170	Standard budget fare, and it's easy to pick holes, but in undemanding surroundings it works creditably	6	●		●	●	60	192
	Yamaha AX-496	179	Lacklustre, if well equipped and powerful, amplifier shows some improvements over previous amps, but not enough	6			●	●	85	208
R	Yamaha AX-492	220	Powerful, well equipped amplifier at an attractive price, offers powerful and engaging music-making	5	●		●	●	85	178
	Yamaha AX-592	280	Fine, middle ranking amplifier, with a detailed midband but performance declines at frequency extremes	5	●	●	●	●	100	171

STEREO AMPLIFIERS – PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
	Amp Flux System 2	3,000	Three-box affair with a clean, spacious sound and plenty of slam. A touch steely, but undeniably potent	5			●	●	50	187
	Alchemist Kraken APD7A/8A II	1,098	Unusual looks and unusual sound too, rather rough and lacking detail	6					55	187
R	Arcam Alpha 9C/10P	1,000	Well specified and flexible preamp with sound only just lacking in greatness	6			●	●	100	187
HF	Arcam Alpha 9P	400	Clear, colourful and well-disciplined, the Arcam is a strong all-rounder that can compete with conviction	1					60	165
	Audio Note M Zero/P Zero	998	Neat shoe box-size components. Able to impart music with real life and soul when partnered with P Zero power amps	5					8	191
EC	Border Patrol 300B SE	3,995	Single ended valve power amp with passion, grace and fire, and plenty of grunt to boot	1					8.5	186
R	Bryston BP20/3B-ST	2,850	Recommended for pretty much any demanding application	8			●	●	120	212
	Cary CAD 2A3SE	1,575	Monoblock valve power amp. Low power but gives delightful speed, coherence and transparency	1					5	196
	Chord SPM-4000	8,500	Sound is as stylish as its appearance is bold. Probably one of the best amps you are likely to hear	1					410	202
	Copland CTA-301MkII/505	2,498	Sweet sounding, but never gets bogged down in audio treacle. Refined yet never over civilised	4	●				67	151
HF	Creek P43R/A52SE	949	Excellent sound, remote control operation and upgrade options from fine value preamp.	6			●	●	100	187
BB	Creek P43R/A43	1,148	Great value and a podium performance earning a best buy	6			●		140	212
	Crimson 620C	875	Not entirely satisfactory power amp which has dynamic strengths, but underachieves when the volume is raised	1					50	181
R	Crimson CS610/CS630	1,250	Good, clear sound, including a decent phono stage, but flexibility is limited. Slimline monoblocks with grunt and finesse	3	●	●			100	187
	Cyrus Power	498	Detail and midband clarity and stand-out qualities. Smooth and refined with most types of music but bass-soft	1					50	183
R	Cyrus aCA7.5/Smart Power	1,250	Great for classical, jazz, and existing Cyrus owners, recommended	7				●	60	212
	Cyrus aCA7.5aPA7	2,694	Low feedback power amp design that's a positive departure from the transistor norm, preamp is functional but not as impressive	5			●	●	150	190
	Densen Beat B-200	1,000	A versatile preamp with a high 'air-guitar' factor and Densen's characteristic styling	6	●	●				191
R	Densen B-300	800	Expensive but highly musical. Colourful and warm sound with strong timing and listener involvement	1					100	183
EC	Gamut D200	2,995	Single MOSFET pair per side gives tremendous resolution and timing (balanced only). Formerly Sirius	1					200	183
EC	Levinson 380/334	9,490	Preampifier combines precision and warmth with unusual configurability, power has refinement, authority and transparency to spare	6			●		125	195
	LFD Mistral Linestage/Power	898	Strong ergonomics, generally decent sound, but a little lacking in detail	6					60	165
	Linn Kolektor/LK85	990	Beautifully tuned out machine, yet slightly bland, aimed at an all Linn system	9	●	●			62	212
	Meridian 502	1,295	Extremely sophisticated analogue controller with tremendous flexibility and a fast and tidy presentation	7						162
	Michell Orca/Alecto mono	3,600	Line-level design with a gorgeous remote and focused, spacious sound	6			●		100	187
R	Moth 30 Series Monoblocks	879	Tested with Active Preamp. Demonstrated solid balance and proved adept at delivering vital musical qualities	1					100	155
	Moth 30 Active LS/60 Stereo	948	Excellent-sounding ultra-simple miniature preamp, power amp lacks finesse and control, however	4					60	165
	Muse Model Three	1,990	Natural sounding tranny preamp with useful audiophile features. Works beautifully with 160 power amp	5			●			166
R	Musical Fidelity X-P100	800	Good long-term listening prospects; detailed and a little fruitiness (tested with X-A200 power amp)	6	●		●			200
	Musical Fidelity NuVista 300	3,300	Powerful smooth sound with tremendous bass extension. Capacity to fulfil the demands of the most dynamic material	1					350	199
	Myryad MA120	450	Based on M1120 integrated – see latter for comments, but sounds significantly better when bi-amped with M1120	1					60	165
R	Myryad MP100/MA240	1,600	Smart finish and impeccable manners, smooth, clean performance	6			●	●	120	212
R	NAD 114	270	Beer-budget preamp which sounds focused, detailed and consistent	6	●	●		●		165
R	NAD Silverline S100/S200	2,000	Beautifully built kit that sounds as good as it looks with heaps of power	7			●		200	200
EC	Naim NAC112/NAP150	1,375	Clean, clever simplicity, plus a very well balanced sound that's much sweeter than earlier Naims	6			●		50	213
	Naim NAC112/NAP150/FLATCAP 2	1,800	Adding a FLATCAP 2 brings a very worthwhile sonic upgrade to the basic NAC112/NAP150 combo	6			●		50	213
	Naim NAC102/NAP180	2,122	More of a 'character act' than a neutral reproduction system, majors on excitement at the expense of subtlety	6			●		60	200
EC	Naim NAP500	10,000	Wonderful neutrality, bandwidth and dynamic range, plus Naim's traditional leading edge definition	1					140	208
	Quad QC-twenty four + 2 x II – forty	4,000	A classic valve amplifier in circuitry and sound, but with modern ingredients and gorgeous retro styling	7					40	213
R	Rega Hal/Exon	2,194	Passive line stage dedicated to Exon monoblock power amps, bold outgoing, in-command sound	6	●	●	●		125	165
BB	Roksan Caspian Power	595	Excels musically and in conventional hi-fi terms. A power amp for people with long-term satisfaction in mind	1					70	183
	Rotel RC-971	150	Low price is offset by rather coarse sound quality with certain types of music. (Tested with RB-971 power amp)	5				●		178
	Samuel Johnson pca100	1,800	Stylish wood and metal fascia - precise, clean sound with an emphasis on leading edges	6			●	●		201
	TAG McLaren PA20R/125M	1,500	Clean, detailed sound but limited thrill power	6			●	●	145	184
	Talk Hurricane 2L/Tornado 2	1,249	Design of integrity which gets to the heart, if not the soul, of the music	6					65	165
	Technics SU-C3000	2,997	Price includes SE-A3000. Supremely clean and even sounding combo, though it could be more musically involving	5	●					188
	Technics SU-C1010	300	Although the sound's basically all there, it's arguable that a good integrated offers more, for less	6	●		●			200
	Thule Spirit PA100	600	More successful than matching preamp: sound is gutsy and lively, and generally clean	1					100	187

PHONO STAGES

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
	Clearaudio Symphono	740	Slightly inconsistent balance mars the performance of this lively performer	0		●				201
R	Creek OBH-9	160	A neat little unit with an essentially neutral and listenable character	0		●				189
	Cyrus aEQ7/PSX-R	826	Very hi-tech product which tends too much towards smoothness except at climaxes, which can be rough	0	●					189
	Densen DP-Drive/DP-02	350	Quite unusual design in many ways: sound is mostly good but never quite shakes off a 'synthetic' quality	0		●				189
R	Electrocompaniet ECP-1	495	An excellent phono amp that combines well-rounded balance with detail and low noise	0	●	●				189
BB	Moth 30 Series Phono	249	Fine sound all round, in any kind of music, from this bargain phono stage	0	●	●				189
	NAD PP-1	40	A basic phono stage that does its job rather coarsely: a bit bass-shy too	0	●					189
R	Pass Labs XOno	2,995	Not absolutely neutral, but the overall result is so beguiling it's hard to resist	0	●	●				201
R	Primare R-20	500	Fights a little shy of densely scored music, but generally an enjoyable and neutral performer	0	●	●				201
R	Pro-Ject Phono Box	40	Moving-coil compatibility is a dubious extra in a way, but MM performance is acceptable at this giveaway price	0	●	●				201
R	QED Discsaver DS-1	35	It's cheap, it's cheerful, it's OK – perfectly adequate for use with a phono-less integrated, though not very refined	0	●	●				189
	Roksan Artaxerxes X/DS1.5	1,150	Delicate and well balanced, slightly congested at climaxes. Power supply expensive, but runs two Roksan components	0	●	●				189
	TAG McLaren PPA20	1,500	One of the best-equipped phono stages available. Resolution is excellent, but timing is marginally behind the best	0	●	●				187
R	Tom Evans The Groove	1,500	Plenty of detail, excellent imaging and almost flawlessly neutral: a good choice for information retrieval off any LP	0		●				201

AMPLIFIERS



SPECIFICATIONS

MULTI-CHANNEL AMPLIFIERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	LINE INPUTS	MM PHONO INPUTS	MC PHONO INPUTS	REMOTE CONTROL	HEADPHONE SOCKET	POWER OUTPUT (W)	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Arcam Alpha 10 DAVE/10P	2,500	Packed with a diversity of electronics that against engineering odds sounds extremely good	5			●	●	110	198
BB	Arcam FMJ A22 DAVE/P25	2,850	Powerful, authoritative, great stereo, excellent home cinema - what more can you want?	7			●	●	100	210
	Cyrus AV5	1,000	Few processors are as adept with music. An effective multi-channel solution for music fans	4			●		N/A	201
	Cyrus AV5/SmartPower	2,650	Refined, detailed and attractive, but ultimately lacking in balls.	3			●		60	210
BB	Denon AVC-A150E	1,200	State of the art sound quality, a strong feature set and reasonable pricing. What more could you want?	11	●		●	●	125	210
R	Denon AVR-3300	800	Not as powerful as Denon claims, but nonetheless capable of impressive high-fidelity multi-channel sound	4			●	●	75	198
	Kenwood KRF-V7773D	800	Bold, detailed presentation, but there are some technical limitations and a slightly mannered quality, especially with music.	10	●		●	●	120	210
BB	Marantz SR5000	500	Something of a rough diamond, but a powerful and entertaining package	5			●	●	105	198
BB	Marantz SR7000	700	Excellent at the price, and almost equally effective with 2-channel music and multichannel AV.	9			●	●	100	210
	Musical Fidelity HTP/HT600	3,998	A very well matched pairing with considerable musical talents	8			●		100	207
BB	NAD T760	650	More than adequate home cinema receiver that usually doesn't muck up the music	7			●	●	60	210
	NAD T770	1,000	Lacks both transparency and subtlety while the omission of dts will be a drawback for some at this price	5			●	●	90	198
	Nakamichi AV-10	1,000	A very powerful AV receiver that's easy to install and set-up with a civilised and subtle performance	4			●	●	140	198
R	Onkyo TX-DS989	2500	Authority personified, excellent AV signal processing, but sound quality a tad unsubtle.	9	●		●	●	160	210
	Pioneer VSA-E08	1,300	THX circuitry gives home cinema material a boost, but this is not an obvious first choice for music.	10	●		●	●	100	210
	Pioneer VSX-908RDS	1,000	A flexible heavyweight AV receiver whose sound is just a little too stodgy and lacking in crispness	4			●	●	80	198
	Primare P30/A30.5	3,700	No 5.1 channel input for DVD-A/SACD but capable of almost uncomfortable realism with real solidity and drive	8			●	●	120	210
R	Roksan DSP/5 ch amp/VSU	2,440	Clean, powerful stereo expanded seamlessly, if without distinction, to 5.1 channels.	4			●	●	80	210
	Rotel RSP976/RMB1075	1,700	Works well with music and has no shortage of power but lacks THX processing	8			●	●	120	213
R	Rotel RSP-985/RPB-985 MkII	2,400	The hugely versatile processor is the weaker subjective link in this otherwise impressive combo	3			●	●	130	198
	Sony TA-E9000ES/N9000ES	2,300	Big, gold, powerful and remarkably versatile but fails to cut the sonic mustard	5			●	●	110	198
R	Sony VA777ES	1,500	Smart circuitry gives this model unusual precision and transparency, and it is a fine all rounder 9	9			●	●	100	210
	Technics SA-DA10	500	Lower mid-market AV amp has all the right ingredients, but fails to stir the soul	5	●		●	●	80	210
	Yamaha DSP-AX1	1,600	An anorak's delight, and one of the most flexible and effective soundfield creators ever conceived	11	●		●	●	110	210

CABLES



SPECIFICATIONS

ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS (PRICES PER TERMINATED METRE PAIR)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	Acoustic Precision Eikos	89	Not entirely neutral: probably best suited to upbeat music. Very stiff construction		●	●		●			188
	Audio Note AN-A	18	Not especially impressive: warm but well-rounded balance that restricts 'air' but is quite clear	●				●			108
	Audio Note AN-C	35	Neutral but lacking in subtle texture and unable to distinguish fine detail					●			131
R	Audio Note AN-S	99	Up-beat and enthusiastic sound with satisfyingly deep and grumbly bass	●				●			131
	Audio Note AN-V	179	15 individually insulated silver strands make up this very clean and dynamically unchallenged cable	●		●			●		131
	Audioquest Sidewinder	40	Suppresses the sound. At this price it's a disappointment		●			●			211
R	Audioquest Coral	99	Slightly forward imaging hardly detracts from its excellent tonal qualities and detail	●				●			200
R	Cable Talk Advanced 3	35	Good sound and great detail, but a slight brashness in the treble	●				●			211
R	Cable Talk Studio 2	65	A first-class performer from tonal, dynamic and rhythmic standpoints	●				●			160
	Cambridge Pacific	30	Lacks subtlety and bass impact but is otherwise quite serviceable for the price		●			●			176
R	Cambridge Audio Studio Ref	40	Dynamic cable with strong soundstaging and only a slight lack of detail	●		●		●			160
	Cambridge Silver Spirit 60	100	Good bass but a lack of detail and differentiation of instruments	●				●			188
R	Chord Calypso	30	Informative, clear sound at a decent price	●				●			211
	Chord Cobra 2	50	Good, strong sound with full-bodied music, less happy with smaller forces	●				●			176
	Chord Chameleon 2	90	Deep bass is fine but despite that the sound can be a bit hard and lacking body and resonance	●				●			188

ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS						ISSUE NUMBER		
				SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER		SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE
R	Connections Midas HD	39	Canary yellow cable with excellent plugs and an open sound. Slight treble glare	●		●		●			160
R	DNM Reson	40	Seemed a little harsh in the test system, but can work well and should be tried	●			●	●			200
BB	Ecosse The Composer	29	A high degree of realism and delicacy, and a fantastic price		●	●		●			211
	Goertz M1 Interconnect	145	Soft sound lacking in bite, with excessive and plummy bass (NB sample used in review was only 0.5m)	●			●	●			176
	Insert Audio IC100 MkII	47	Mostly good sound is let down by pervasive dryness			●		●			176
R	Insert Audio Image 5.1	85	Very good detail and imaging: perhaps a touch bass-light		●	●		●			200
BB	Ixos Gamma Audition II	30	Detailed and neutral, with just a hint of pleasant mellowness	●		●		●			211
	Ixos Gamma 1002	39	Lumpy bass, grainy treble, and poor integration. Nice colour, though	●		●		●			176
	Ixos 1000	90	Nothing badly wrong, just a little bit bland and outshone by others at the price	●		●		●			200
BB	Kimber PBJ	68	Assured sound, solid and natural bass and clear treble — excellent performance all round			●		●			188
	Kimber Hero	110	Slight roughness detracts from some music; seems well suited to rock and jazz. Lively and detailed	●		●		●			176
R	Moth Ley Line Black	100	Offers a full sound, neutral yet very solid and confident in delivery. Expansive imaging retains music's energy	●		●		●		●	108
	Moth Ley Line Grey	200	Detailed, but there's a sense of distance between music and listener: vocals are coarse rather than liquid	●		●		●		●	108
	Nordost Black Knight	60	Flat black cable that is distinctive but slightly coloured — but not in a wholly negative manner	●		●		●			160
R	Nordost Solar Wind	85	Good tone and dynamics, with just occasionally a touch of bass-lightness in busy music	●			●	●			188
R	Nordost Blue Heaven	145	Very good bass and only slightly grainy treble add up to a well integrated, natural-sounding cable	●			●	●			176
	Precious Metals 5535	50	Extended bass, but dry character suits electronic music better than acoustic		●	●		●			188
	Profigold PGA301 MkII	40	Mellow and well rounded, but can seem a little heavy		●	●		●			211
R	Prowire VHQ	10	This crisp cable lacks a little refinement, but it's great for the price		●	●		●			211
R	Prowire Silver	60	A good cable in every way, with just the occasional hint of coloration and coarseness		●	●		●		●	176
	QED Qunex 1	20	Well balanced, and easily rivals more expensive cables		●	●		●			211
BB	QED Qnect 2	30	Very well balanced, refined and detailed, this is everything a good cable should be, and excellent value			●		●			176
R	QED Qnect 45	70	Some coloration and roughness in the midrange and treble, but bass is gratifyingly solid	●		●		●			188
R	QED Qnex Silver Spiral	90	A great cable for lovers of big sounds	●		●		●			200
	Reference CS1	75	A moderate performer, with a little coloration and a tendency to lose bass at climaxes	●		●		●			188
	Silvertone Ex-Static	35	Pleasantly unfatiguing and competitively priced cable that lacks detail and insight		●	●		●			160
BB	SonicLink Silver Pink	35	Dynamically sensitive and muddle-free. We're unsure about the flesh-coloured finish, though...	●		●		●		●	160
R	SonicLink Black	49	Nickel-plated copper with a slight dryness in the bass and a hint of treble roll-off don't compromise integration	●		●		●			176
	SonicLink Lilac	65	Some dryness can affect transient sounds, though tone is generally good, especially in the bass	●		●		●			188
	SonicLink Violet	85	Better bass than treble — a little dry in the upper octaves	●		●		●			200
R	Straight Wire Chorus	40	A very confident cable with good bass, though perhaps a shade of treble loss		●	●		●			176
R	Straight Wire Sonata	80	Tonal balance favours lower frequencies but despite this it's a very listenable cable		●	●		●			188
	Straight Wire Encore II	100	Slightly variable bass performance is a weakness in this otherwise capable cable	●		●		●			200
BB	Supra EFF-ISL	80	Excellent sound in all areas — nothing to criticise	●		●		●			188
R	Tara Labs Prism 22	64	Mild tendency to plumminess offsets some hardness in complex music with mixed results		●		●	●			188
	Tara Labs Prism 55-i	195	Good with laid-back music, but seems lazy with more exciting material	●		●		●			200
BB	TCI Viper	55	Fine performance in all areas: just the smallest hint of sibilance. Very good value	●		●		●			200
BB	van den Hul PB5	50	A highly neutral cable with fine dynamic and rhythmic performance too — excellent		●	●		●			188
R	van den Hul Source HB	65	Price for 0.8m. Hybrid carbon-fibre/copper cable that is a paragon of naturalness		●	●		●			160
R	van den Hul D102 MkIII HB	80	A fine cable, but the competition has crept up and it no longer leads the pack	●		●		●			200

DIGITAL INTERCONNECTS (PRICES PER TERMINATED METRE PAIR)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS								
R	Audioquest Digital One	35	A neutral and capable cable that adds little or no character to the sound			●		●		E	207
	Chord Optilink	40	Beautifully made, but performance is practically indistinguishable from other, cheaper, Toslink leads					●		O	207
R	Chord Prodac	50	Price for 0.6m length. Lively detailed treble, drives music along confidently with no hint of fizz			●		●		E	131
	Ixos 1051-100	39.95	Plenty of bass, and detail seems good, but there's a loss of involvement			●		●		E	207
	Moth Leyline Datalink	120	A thin, coaxial version of Leyline Black with a rather hard and unforgiving character. Too expensive			●	●	●		E	108
BB	QED Qunex P75	25	A superbly capable interconnect that's highly detailed and well balanced			●		●		E	207
R	Ross OP004	19.99	Sounds much like most other Toslink leads: slightly lacking detail, but good value					●		O	207
	SonicLink Digital Optical	30	Possibly slightly more detailed than other opticals, but still no match for a decent electrical digital link							O	207

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SYMMETRICAL
COAXIAL
STRANDED
SOLID CORE
COPPER
SILVER
DIG CABLE TYPE
ISSUE NUMBER

DIGITAL INTERCONNECTS (PRICES PER TERMINATED METRE PAIR)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
R	SonicLink Green	60	Spacious, positive and engaging if a bit over-crisp at times — very compelling, however		●		●	●	●	E	131
	Straight Wire Info-Link	300	A good cable, but bass seems a little light and detail suffers a little at climaxes		●		●		●	E	207
R	van den Hul Optocoupler	49.95	Noticeably has the edge over other optical leads, but still second best to electrical types							O	207
BB	van den Hul The First	140	Exceptionally natural albeit slightly cautious compared to some. Plenty of subtle information and integration		●	●				E	131

LOUDSPEAKER CABLES (PRICES PER METRE LENGTH)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	ALR Jordan QMM	5	Generally neutral, if sometimes bass-shy, but not very communicative	●		●			●		183
R	Audio Note AN-B	16.50	Well suited to valve systems, elastic bass, methodical but unintrusive and musical			●		●			133
R	Audio Note AN-L	29.50	Fruity bass and expressive vocal rendition was appreciated by the panel, which was happy to accept its foibles	●			●		●		133
R	Audio Note AN-SP	150	A calm and civilised presentation, very quiet in the way it reveals subtle low level detail. Great poise and clarity	●			●		●		109
R	Audioquest Slate	15	Capable across the board, with just the smallest degree of dryness, but very listenable	●			●	●			203
R	Bandridge LC7409	4	Detailed and up-beat cable. A bit too steely for classical strings			●		●			157
R	Cable Talk Talk 3.1	2.25	Quite well-balanced but tends to lose bass lines in complex music	●		●		●			168
	Cable Talk Talk 4.1	4.25	Smooth and cultured sound that lacks fine detail and is a bit too restrained			●		●			157
	Cable Talk Flat 2	5	Rather unexciting sound, with variable bass and dry voices	●				●			203
	Cable Talk Concert 2.1	8	Can make stereo images recede, and favours the upper bass	●		●		●			192
	DNM LSC350	6.95	Majors on midband and lower treble lucidity at the expense of bass and extreme treble extension	●			●	●			168
R	Chord Company Odyssey	17	Relatively vice-free cable with good detail throughout the range and generally neutral bass	●		●		●			192
	Chord Company Rumour 2	10	Performance is listenable enough but fails to excel in any area	●		●		●			203
BB	DNM LSC8500	12	High impedance can influence the treble response, but this was a winner on sound per pound. Bi-wire				●	●			133
R	Electrofluidics Monolith 2020	45	Excellent bass extension and very fine performance elsewhere - one of the best cables available all round	●			●	●			203
	Gale XL189	1	Slightly bright and not too subtle, but a perfectly acceptable cable for any starter system	●		●		●			168
BB	Gale XL315	2	A little lacking in detail but plenty of life and excellent value			●		●			157
R	Gale XL160-2	2.50	Rhythmic and bouncy-sounding bi-wire cable. Can be slightly manipulative	●			●	●			157
R	Goertz M2	32	Remarkably detailed, smooth, neutral and with excellent bass; check amplifier compatibility	●			●	●			168
	Hitachi LC-OFc	7	Very crisp, very clear and very confident. In the right system would be very expensive to better	●		●		●			109
BB	Ixos Gamma 6003	2.99	A little midrange dryness, but bass is among the best at this price, strong and consistent	●		●		●			203
R	Ixos Gamma 6006	5	Bass is better than treble, which can become spitty and sibilant - though only slightly	●		●		●			192
BB	Kimber 4PR	4.90	Considering the price, this cable's very slight dryness is forgivable when everything else is so right		●		●				192
R	Kimber 4VS	8.50	A good mix of virtues including particularly fine bass	●			●	●			183
R	Kimber 4TC	18.80	A well-balanced cable with good performance in all areas	●		●		●			168
BB	Kimber 8TC	348	Very capable in all areas, particularly good at imaging and with firm bass. Price for 5m terminated pair	●		●		●			203
	Linn K20	4	Seems to work best with lively, unsubtle music - can be dry and edgy	●		●		●			183
	Naim NAC A5	5.5	A 'dinosaur of a cable', this stiff wire rod doesn't belong outside Naim systems, where it works a treat	●		●		●			109
	Nordost Octava	3	Fair bass but confused treble and some coloration	●			●	●			168
	Nordost Flatline Gold II	9.50	Exciting sound but a bit too 'in-her-face', and bass is not always even	●			●	●			92
	Ortofon SPK100	3	Grey-sounding - strips instruments of their natural richness and resonance. A bit bass-shy, too	●			●	●			133
R	Ortofon SPK200	4.99	Good strong bass and fair detail, only slightly marred by a little dryness	●			●	●			183
R	Ortofon SPK300	8	Tremendously open and atmospheric, with robust, full-blooded bass - if slightly bright at times	●			●	●			133
	Precious Metals SL102	10	Unusual construction gives rather strained sound, only really cheering up with simple musical textures	●		●		●			183
	Profigold Silverflex LC8258	4	A pretty-looking cable that does little to offend but is let down by some congestion	●		●		●			203
	Prowire Out of Sight	1.99	Special-purpose cable for laying under carpets etc. Fair sound across the board	●			●	●			203
	Puresonic 7845	1.95	Big, weighty sound - but too messy and bloated for its own good	●		●		●			183
	Puresonic 7891	2.85	Chunky cable design; shame about the sound quality	●		●		●			157
	QED Qudos	2.25	Despite high-tech design and excellent Air-Loc plugs, its music-making failed to gel	●			●	●			57
BB	QED Qudos Silver	5	A few minor flaws but overall performance is very assured for this price	●		●		●			192
	QED Profile 4x4	9	Good midrange and treble balance, but bass is rather slack and detail not outstanding	●			●	●			168
	QED Genesis Silver Spiral	30	Commendable bass, with a little dryness and mildly compromised imaging; good, but not the best at its price	●		●		●			203
	SonicLink 5300	18	Happiest with simple music; tends to smudge detail in complex pieces	●			●	●			168
R	SonicLink AST50	1.95	It may look like bell-wire, but AST50 sounds detailed, ordered and balanced	●			●	●			157
R	SonicLink AST75	2.95	Unusual materials and rather unusual performance too, strong on excitement and with plenty of bass	●			●	●			203
R	SonicLink AST150	3.95	Slightly plummy bass and a useful way of holding musical strands together	●			●	●			157
	SonicLink AST200x2	5.95	At its best with exciting music, this cable seems shy of subtler details	●			●	●			192
	Straight Wire Duo	3	Not so subtle and lacking some detail, but sound is consistent with level and musical style	●			●	●			203
	Straight Wire Rhythm	6	Its major flaw seems to be woolly and indistinct bass, which pervades most types of music	●			●	●			192
BB	Straight Wire Quartet	8	A good all-rounder with full tone, clear detail and natural ambience	●			●	●			183
R	Supra Ply 3.4	6.95	Clean sound which stays together well at high levels, with full bass - perhaps a touch of treble restriction	●			●	●			183
R	Supra Ply 3.4/5	7.95	Good in all areas with rich bass and just a touch of treble roughness	●			●	●			203
R	Tara Labs Klara	2.95	A good budget cable with an even spread of virtues - and very minor vices - across the board	●			●	●			183
	Tara Labs RSC Prime 500	36	More suited to melodious music than anything with bite and drive, with only moderate detail	●			●	●			203
	TCI Python	7.99	No single major sin, but detail is not outstanding and rhythm isn't always completely solid	●			●	●			203
R	Townshend Isolda	50	Superb sound all round, and amplifier compatibility enhanced by included stabilising inductor	●			●	●			203
	van den Hul The Clearwater	7.99	Despite its evocative title, the Clearwater turns out to be a disappointingly murky-sounding cable	●			●	●	●		109
	van den Hul Royal Jade	10.99	Lots of technology, but sound suffers from dryness and woolly bass	●		●		●			203

MAINS CABLES AND CONDITIONERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	Clearaudio Accurate Power Gen	1,090	Compact and beautifully finished unit that offers positive sonic benefits that justify the price								206
R	Lynwood Electronics Mega Power	295	Reasonable price model that improves focus while producing a sweet, tight and clean bass								206
R	PS Audio Power Plant	1,200	Power Plant improves the cleanness and separation of individual voices and instruments, giving an impressive 3-D quality								206

MAINS CABLES AND CONDITIONERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SYMMETRICAL	COAXIAL	STRANDED	SOLID CORE	COPPER	SILVER	DIG CABLE TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
											206
	GTA PHY-HP board	299	Dozing style and quality, the board generates an extremely natural and truthful sound								206
BB	Russ Andrews Kimber/Power Block	350	Improved version that elevates music to a cleaner and more three-dimensional experience with greater stereo imagery								206
	Russ Andrews The Purifier	250	More ambitious version of the Silencer that gives a cleaner, quieter background, allowing more low level detail								206
BB	Russ Andrews Silencer	40	A cost effect solution to noise-free mains supply that reduces 'hash' without losing brilliance and immediacy								206
	SonicLink S-Gold mains	225	Delivers a clean incisive sound with excellent detail, clarity and with no increase in noise								206
R	Trichord Research Powerblock500	300	Isolation transformer that bolsters clarity, openness and gives an increased refinement making for a purer and natural sound								206

CASSETTE DECKS



SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	DOLBY C	DOLBY S	DOLBY HX PRO	3-HEAD	TWIN DECK	AUTO REVERSE	AUTO CALIBRATION	ADJUSTABLE BIAS	ISSUE NUMBER
												136
BB	Aiwa AD-F450	120	Basic but well-designed deck. Astonishing value; only the poor metering gives the game away									136
BB	Aiwa AD-WX727	170	High-class twin for those who want bells, whistles — and music									146
	Harman/Kardon TD420	250	Minor inconsistencies detract from a well-conceived, minimum features design									140
	Harman/Kardon TD450	350	Draw loader with poor tape navigation features; good midband but shallow bass									164
BB	JVC TD-R472	200	Excellent auto-reverse deck which doesn't suffer the usual disadvantages and is very sharply priced									158
BB	JVC TD-V662BK	270	Assured, clean and agile-sounding recorder, if not quite the most refined in its class									146
	JVC TD-W718	300	Twin deck. Good for creative live recording, but no timer standby. Respectable performance									171
R	Kenwood KX-W6080	200	Modestly decent-sounding twin deck, with some transport instability and ragged bass									171
	Marantz SD455	170	Works well as a single deck, especially on replay, but dubbing at high/low speed compromises sound									184
	NAD 613	230	Rough and ready, but enjoyable sound, though marred by mechanical motor noise									158
	NAD 616	300	Twin deck with basic features. No Dolby setting memory, transport is too unstable for audiophile use									171
	Nakamichi DR-10	800	An ergonomic oddity, but one of the last of the great cassette decks. Worth considering against MD									195
R	Onkyo K-611	460	Cute drawer-loading mini-size component with 3 heads and dual capstan transport									146
R	Pioneer CT-5550S	250	Great features, good with cheap low bias tapes, but slightly synthetic sound quality									164
	Pioneer CT-W806DR	300	Had it not been for the iffy transport quality, this sophisticated twin would have been Recommended									171
	Teac V-1050	180	One of the cheapest 3-head machines around, but it shows in very 'thick' sound									184
BB	Technics RS-AZ6	200	For those who can't afford the RS-AZ7; clarity over the widest bandwidth thanks to AZ thin-film head									164
	Technics RS-AZ7	270	Thin-film head gives a solid, almost CD-like bass and midrange. A clear advance in state-of-the-art									158
R	Yamaha KX-490	200	Electrifyingly transparent and capable deck whose only flaw is a trace of audible wow and flutter									158
R	Yamaha KX-580SE	250	Subtle, engaging and transparent deck, with a lightweight tonality, but stability and strong detail									171

CD PLAYERS



SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	AES/EBU ELEC DIG OUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	ST OPT DIG OUT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	VARIABLE OUTPUT	MULTI-DISC	SACD COMPATIBILITY	ISSUE NUMBER
													166
BB	Acurus ACD11	899	First-rate if costly player, which combines a delightful transparency with an uncontrived naturalness										166
	Acoustic Precision Eikos	1,850	Seriously customised Pioneer with extraordinary resolution and world beating imaging and bass										165
	Advantage CD1S	3,995	A CD player of some stature — what it lacks in dynamics it makes up for in subtlety and flow										193
	Alchemist Kraken	1,249	Distinctive looking player likely to suit a Alchemist system, but will result in variable results elsewhere										190
R	Alchemist Nexus APD32A	597	Refined treble, constrained yet capable bass and attractive all-round presentation										169
	AMC CD8A	150	Has balanced output, but is otherwise rather grey and unremarkable										172
BB	AMC CD9/DAC8	200	Beer-budget two-box system (player plus DAC) is smooth, attractive and easy on the ear										179
	Anthem CD1	1,595	Unusual combination of high-end player, complete with HDCD, and changer. Good, but noisy										178
BB	Arcam Alpha 7SE	300	Sharper, clearer Alpha 7 SE, and more affordable than before										207
	Arcam CD72	400	Easy going, slightly soft-centred reworking of Alpha 7 in new, svelte DIVA clothing										212
R	Arcam Alpha MCD	450	Excellent bass and natural midband, but just a touch of treble dryness, from this very listenable changer										178
BB	Arcam Alpha 8SE	600	Excellent (and very reasonably priced) HDCD-compatible player is a strong all-rounder										176
R	Arcam Alpha 9	800	Refined, articulate player which employs new DAC technology to great effect										188
R	Arcam CD92	850	High resolution player needs a touch of spit and polish to be completely convincing										212
R	Arcam FMJ CD23	1,100	World class presentation allied with innovative technology to deliver an engaging standard of music making										206
	Audio Analogue Paganini	750	Basically good, but sometimes heavy-handed player										191
	Audio Note AN-CD1	600	Easy on the ear, and for a valve player, easy on the pocket, but a bit Radio 2-flavoured										188
	Audio Note AN-CD2	999	High output impedance makes performance unduly system fussy										195
	AVI S2000MC2	899	A chip off the old block. This model's in-yr-face balance obstructs an otherwise finely detailed sound										176
R	AVI S2000MC Reference	1,399	Lean, dry, high resolution player, built to outlast most of us. A fine performer in a sympathetic system										169
	Balanced Audio Tech VK-D5	3,995	A valve-infused player with a big and engaging sound. Lacks a little subtlety										194
	Cambridge Audio D100	120	Hard, clangy and coloured sounding, and with suspect control logic										200
BB	Cambridge Audio D500	200	Clean and highly articulate player wears well in extended use										202
R	Copland CDA 266	1,199	Simple yet elegant design is unexpectedly sophisticated under the skin, and effective in execution										176
	Copland CDA 289	1,898	Beautifully built and musically enjoyable. Lacks some precision, but still among the best below £2,000										194
R	Cymbol CDP12	1,299	Clean, detailed and airy HDCD-equipped player with minimalist trappings										176
R	Cyrus dAD1.5	395	Improved dAD1 variant has improved digital filter for a more natural, easy on the ear quality										191

ISSUE NUMBER
SACD COMPATIBILITY
MULTI-DISC
VARIABLE OUTPUT
HEADPHONE SOCKET
BAL ANALOGUE OUT
ST OPT DIG OUT
OPT DIG OUT
ASSEMBL ELEC DIG OUT
ELEC DIG OUTPUT

ONE-BOX CD PLAYERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS															
R	Cyrus CD7	800	New Cyrus player has strong all-round attributes to match its good looks															212
R	Cyrus dAD3 Q24	900	Bold, lean and lively player demands sympathetic system matching															200
R	Denon DCD-435	130	Good low cost player, and a step up from the DCD-425, its predecessor															191
R	Denon DCD-655	180	Fine, slightly soft-edged budget player, and a good ameliorative for aggressive, edgy systems															200
R	Denon DCD-1550AR	350	Disappointing bland and ploddy sound from an immaculately constructed, high-tech player															179
R	Densen B-400	1,280	Bold, purposeful sound, but lacks subtlety, and has some ergonomic flaws															212
R	EZO Fog Stage 3	1,170	Curious player is difficult to drive, and has sound quality that both enchants and sometimes confounds															212
R	JVC XV-D723GD	500	Convincing DVD-Audio player that is ultimately let down by poor CD performance															206
R	Kenwood DVF-3030	180	Solid CD player with straightforward features															207
BB	Kenwood DP-4090	250	Focuses a clear, wide aperture lens on the music — and has CD Text too															172
R	Kenwood DP-5090	300	Disappointing senior brother to the excellent DP-4090, but surface interface is good															179
R	Kenwood DVF-R9030	800	Kenwood's first DVD-A player suffers from a mild compression of dynamics resulting in a polite yet matter of fact sound															206
R	Linn Genki	995	Explicit, rather bright sounding player with strong multi-room appeal															212
R	Marantz CD5000	150	Well equipped budget player sounds thin and rough at times															202
R	Marantz CC3000	150	Ragged sounding multidisc player, but it is cheap and well equipped															204
BB	Marantz CD6000	250	Great package with all mod cons, and eminently listenable too															207
BB	Marantz CD6000 OSE	300	Superbly constructed, slightly emasculated sounding, but smooth and articulate															200
BB	Marantz CD6000 KI Signature	500	Excellent all rounder, a well appointed good value package															212
R	Marantz CD-17 MKII	800	Sophisticated player with a short but attractive feature set, and a new found bounce in its step															206
R	Marantz CD-17KI Sig	1,100	Minor QC problems aside, this is a superbly turned-out machine, but ultimately a little bland															176
R	Marantz CD-7	3,500	A superbly designed CD player, both inside and out. Precise and dramatic in equal measure															194
EC	Marantz SA-1	5,000	The brand's first SACD player is a stunning machine that's equally as strong with conventional CD															208
R	Meracus Tanto	1,395	Believable tonal colours and textures, refinement takes preference over dynamics — but it's not cheap															169
BB	Meridian 506	1,100	Revised 506 includes MSR remote and a new D/A chip, which makes it livelier and more detailed															176
R	Monrio Asty	695	Well built player has solid, propulsive sound quality that deteriorates towards HF															200
R	Monrio Privilege	995	Costly and well-engineered, but ultimately rather heavy-handed and dull, if refined player															166
R	Musical Fidelity X-RAY	799	Brilliantly packaged and clean but slightly antiseptic sounding player															184
BB	Musical Fidelity A3 CD	800	Excellent player has few faults apart from a slight loss of EHF detail															200
R	Myryad T-10	400	Rather ordinary player fails to shine with good music recordings															184
R	Myryad T-20	600	Matter of fact styling and sound quality, a tad bright for some systems															195
R	Myryad MCD500	1,300	Well-built, attractive player, showing much promise, but can be a little heavy-going on audition															176
R	NAD C520	170	Significantly improved entry level NAD is smooth and dynamic, if slightly dull															202
R	NAD 524	250	Clean, clear and essentially musical player in the NAD mould															191
R	NAD 523	250	Lacklustre musical presentation was disappointing on test; so was the absence of a digital output															204
R	NAD C540	330	Not cheap, and disc handling is pedestrian at best, but the C540 is smooth & elegant with just a hint of aggression															200
R	NAD Silverline S500	1,100	It sounds as good as it looks, which is notably refined and easy on the ear															195
R	Naim Audio CD5	1,120	Recommended subject to audition, a dynamic machine, yet some physical minuses															212
R	Naim Audio CD2	2,000	Provides bags of detail with a solid stereo focus but not all the romanticism we know to be possible															163
R	Nakamichi MB-10	400	Jewel of a multi-disc player, with crisp sound and superb fuss-free compact packaging															204
EC	Naim NACDSII/XPS	5,625	Brings you the Naim sound, but for once doesn't have to rely on Naim ancillaries to get the results															188
R	Onkyo DX-7222	150	Competitive following recent price cut, and on the whole a strong performer musically															200
R	Onkyo DX-7511	300	Earthbound mid-price CD player fails to excite															207
R	Parasound C/DP-1000	499	Comes on like a high end player, but ultimately sounds a bit weak and soft-centred															184
R	Philips CD751	150	Inconsistent and occasionally opaque and scrawny sounding cheapie															172
R	Pioneer PD-5507	200	Low cost Legato Link implementation sounds gentle but slightly muddled															191
R	Primare D20	799	Well presented player doesn't quite cut the mustard, though it performs promisingly															188
R	Revox Exception E426	2,250	Very stylish with a light, agile sound that extends superbly and has fine timing															182
R	Roksan Kandy	475	Slightly old-fashioned sound quality player available in various colour schemes															200
R	Roksan Caspian	895	Improved Caspian (retested for 2001) is still bold, dynamic player, but rather more subtle and expressive															212
R	Rotel RCD-951	300	Disappointing chopped-down RCD-971 — buy the original															191
BB	Rotel RCD-971	450	Odd disc handling logic, but bold, detailed and refined sound make this a must															184
R	Rotel RCD-991	825	Strong midrange player with switchable dither levels to provide some system tweaking ability															212
R	Sherwood CD1	1,100	A very neutral, even handed sounding player with a rather flat, lifeless sound. Beautiful construction															163
R	Sharp DX-5X1	2,700	Stylish player with a slightly forward but extremely nimble sound. Connects to matching digital amp via dedicated umbilical															211
R	Sony CDP-XE330	100	Unrefined, but lively, detailed and highly affordable															202
R	Sony CDP-XE530	140	Well equipped, but raw, scrappy sounding player lacks depth and weight															200
BB	Sony CDP-XB930E	300	Yet another first rate UK optimised player with all the bells and whistles															195
R	Sony SCD-XB940	550	First mainstream SACD player that easily outstrips comparable CD players at this price															206
BB	Sony SCD-555ES	1,200	Fabulously built with superb sound using both CD and Super Audio software, you'll be hard pressed to find a better CD player at the price															213
EC	Sony SCD-777ES	1,700	Beautifully built SACD player that looks like a bit of a CD player bargain															198
EC	Sony SCD-1	2,500	The first SACD player sounds fabulous but there's not much competition and limited software as yet															194
R	T+A CD1210R	1,185	Intriguing player with rather pushy basic sound, but has switchable digital filters															188
R	Talk Electronics Thunder 1	550	Entry level upgradeable Talk. Electronics player sounds slightly muted															200
R	Talk Electronics Thunder 2	699	Fine player, slightly lacking in dynamics, but readily, if expensively upgradable in various ways															191
R	Talk Electronics Thunder 3	1,000	Clean, fast, and availability of a complete upgrade path make this a good long term proposition															195
R	TAG McLaren CD20R	1,249	Dry and unatmospheric, but plenty of presence — recommended with caution															188
R	Teac VRDS-9	700	Well-presented. This Teac is crisp, yet shallow, and inconsistent in sound quality and partnering skills															176
R	Teac VRDS-25x	1,000	Excellent, individualistic player with bold, colourful sound, but test sample had iffy CD-R compatibility															195
R	Technics SL-PG390	90	It's very cheap. Very, very cheap															202
R	Technics SL-PS7	200	Strong, but ultimately rather opaque and hard-sounding, high tech CD player															207
R	Technics SL-MC7	300	Maximum storage capacity for a minimum price, and presentable sound too (multidisc)															204
R	Thule Spirit CD100	600	Definitely a try before you buy machine, but the bass and mid are excellent															188
R	Trichord Genesis	549	Breathed-on Pioneer is warm and mellifluous, but ultimately lacks drive and authority															169
R	Trichord Revelation	799	Well-ordered and clean sound that may be a little too refined for some, images well															166
R	Tube Technology Fusion MKII	1,350	Improvements over the original model but still remains too inconsistent for its own good															206

ONE-BOX CD PLAYERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	ASTERBU ELEC DIG OUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	ST OPT DIG OUT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	VARIABLE OUTPUT	MULTI-DISC	SACD COMPATIBILITY	ISSUE NUMBER
BB	Acurus ACD11	899	First-rate if costly player, which combines a delightful transparency with an uncontrived naturalness	●									166
	Acoustic Precision Eikos	1,850	Seriously customised Pioneer with extraordinary resolution and world beating imaging and bass	●									165
	Advantage CD15	3,995	A CD player of some stature – what it lacks in dynamics it makes up for in subtlety and flow	●	●	●		●		●			193
	Alchemist Kraken	1,249	Distinctive looking player likely to suit a Alchemist system, but will result in variable results elsewhere		●								190
R	Alchemist Nexus APD32A	597	Refined treble, constrained yet capable bass and attractive all-round presentation	●									169
	AMC CD8A	150	Has balanced output, but is otherwise rather grey and unremarkable			●		●	●	●			172

CD TRANSPORTS

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

DACs

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	ASTERBU ELEC DIG OUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	ST OPT DIG OUT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	VARIABLE OUTPUT	MULTI-DISC	SACD COMPATIBILITY	ISSUE NUMBER
	Alchemist TS-D-1	300	24/96-equipped DAC sounds tidy but a little shut-in with both 16-bit CDs and 24-bit/96kHz DVDs										187
	Audio Note DAC Zero	369	Neat valve-equipped DAC sounds smooth and fluid in the right system. (Tested with CDT Zero transport)										191
R	Audio Note DAC Zero1x	750	Although ominously esoteric on paper, it's smooth, open and easy on the ear in practice (Tested with CDT Zero)										212
	Audionote DAC 5	18,500	Astonishingly natural and realistic in the right system, the only problem being the extravagant price										203
EC	dCS Delius	5,000	State-of-the-art resolution with considerably greater flexibility than anything else, hard to beat	●	●		●	●		●		●	207
	dCS Purcell	3,500	The first upsampler on the market adds significant depth and increased bass resolve with a suitable DAC	●	●		●					●	207

DVD PLAYERS



SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELEC DIG OUTPUT	ASTERBU ELEC DIG OUT	OPT DIG OUTPUT	ST OPT DIG OUT	BAL ANALOGUE OUT	HEADPHONE SOCKET	VARIABLE OUTPUT	MULTI-DISC	DVD-A COMPATIBILITY	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Alba DVD103	150	Good value for money but not much of a CD player, crude and serviceable but remarkably inexpensive	●		●			●				207
R	Arcam DIVA DV88	899	A DVD-Video player built with non-obsolescence in mind, but picture quality exceeds musical quality as a CD player	●		●							213
R	Denon DVD-1500	400	Colourful and engaging (if lightweight) sound, with excellent picture quality	●					●				207
R	Denon DVD-3300	999	Sometimes slightly inconsistent and strident sounding in all modes of use, but it pulls a little more off disc too.	●					●			●	213
R	Denon DVM-3700	1,000	One of the first multi-DVD players, and a fine all rounder, with average to good pictures, and better sound	●					●		●		204
EC	Denon DVD-5000	1,600	The first DVD-V player that ain't bad as a CD player. A fine musical device	●					●				187
R	Encore DV-450	200	Superb value for money, though mainly of interest to the videophile on a shoestring	●					●				207
	Hitachi DVP-505	300	DVD player has rather dark, unexpansive sound, but good picture quality	●					●				207
	JVC XV-D701	500	Good video player, but rather undeveloped musically – CD Text is neat, though	●					●				198
	JVC XV-523	280	Looking impressive on screen, but lacks resolution and consistency when pushed hard	●					●				207
	JVC XV-515GD	300	Musically soft as a baby's bottom, and as surprising as yesterday's news	●					●				202
	JVC XV-D723	500	The first DVD-A player is more of a DVD-V with A added rather than the next generation of hi-fi	●					●				205
	Kenwood VDF-R9030	899	The first multi-disc DVD-Audio player is physically large and ergonomically obstructive, but it is a smooth, slick operator	●					●		●		213
R	Kenwood VDF-9010	1,000	DVD player with brilliant picture and clean, lively sound	●					●				190
	NAD T-550	500	Soft-centred but likeable player in the classic NAD mould	●					●				202
	Nakamichi DVD-10	800	Not the most compelling model in the resurrected Nakamichi line-up	●					●				198
	Panasonic DVD-RV40	350	Modestly equipped, gives good pictures, but is musically unengaging	●					●				207
	Panasonic DVD-A360E	580	Powerful equipment, and unthrottled digital output notwithstanding, sound quality is modest at best	●					●				198
	Panasonic DVD-A7EB	699	Chopped down Technics DVD-A10 retains most of the flagship's headline features with well balanced, but less refined and less articulate sound	●					●			●	213
BB	Philips DVD750	400	Clever DVD with CD-R/CD-RW compatibility and surprisingly keen sound	●					●				198
BB	Pioneer DV-525	399	Lean, clean and lively sound quality. CD-R and 24/96 compatible, too	●					●				202
BB	Pioneer DV-626D	450	Superbly equipped, and more than respectable sound quality	●					●				198
	Philips DVD960	530	DVD-V player has strong sound quality and good, though slightly washed out, pictures	●					●				207
BB	Pioneer DV-717	550	Superb DVD player with good picture quality and which really knows how to play 24/96 discs	●					●				190
R	Pioneer DV-939A	1,200	Fine player with near state of the art video performance and attractive, easy on the ear music making, from CD and DVD-Audio alike.	●					●			●	213
R	Primare V20	1,000	Elegant and well built DVD performer that possess a strong picture quality and decent CD player	●					●				206
	Samsung DVD-907	500	DVD player with below average picture, and lacklustre sound quality	●					●				190
	Sony DVP-CX850D	600	Lacklustre sound quality is a disappointment, but the price is appealing for a 200-disc DVD player	●					●		●		204
R	Sony DVP-S7700	950	Powerfully endowed player offers articulate and believable sound	●					●				198
	Sony DVD-S9000ES	1,200	First DVD machine to play SACD has a 'Lexus' sound style that never really gets its hands dirty	●					●				210
	Sharp DV-760	500	Reasonable picture, but sonically brings new meaning to the term rough and ready.	●					●				202
	TAG McLaren DVD32R	3,995	A tour-de-force of engineering, albeit with matching price tag. But picture quality is second to none	●					●				212
	T+A DVD 1210R	1,699	Ergonomically a mess, but detailed, dynamic and emphatic, though there is no guarantee of a DVD-audio upgrade path	●					●				213
	Technics DVD-A10	899	Well built, early generation DVD-A player with full in-board DVD-Video decoding and a more than workmanlike sound.	●					●			●	213
	Theta DaViD	4,650	A top-notch CD transport, that also plays DVD-Video discs well. Pricy for a DVD transport, but worth it	●	●	●	●						191

ISSUE NUMBER
DVD-A COMPATIBILITY
MULTI-DISC
VARIABLE OUTPUT
HEADPHONE SOCKET
BAL ANALOGUE OUT
ST OPT DIG OUT
OPT DIG OUTPUT
AES/EBU ELEC DIG OUT
ELEC DIG OUTPUT

DVD PLAYERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS												
	Toshiba SD-100E	250	Mainstream player offers so-so features, performance and pricing	●											207
	Toshiba SD-3109	380	Defocused and soft-edged, this is more attractive for its picture than its sound quality.	●											202
	Toshiba SD500E	599	OK DVD-Video player, but lacklustre with music, especially when reproducing high resolution DVD-Audio material.	●										●	213
	Toshiba SD9000	800	Costly, high tech player with stunning pictures and crisp, slightly lightweight sound	●											198
BB	Toshiba SD900E	1,299	Top class DVD-Audio player and also a superb DVD-Video player; in this context pricing is competitive.	●										●	213
	T+A DVD-1210R	1,699	Ergonomically a mess, but detailed, dynamic and emphatic, though there is no guarantee of a DVD-Audio upgrade path	●											213
	Yamaha DVD-S795	529	Fare price, and an unconstrained digital output, but otherwise unexciting	●											198

DIGITAL RECORDERS



SPECIFICATIONS

MINIDISCS

ISSUE NUMBER
ELEC IN/OUTPUTS
OPTICAL IN/OUTPUTS
PORTABLE
FORMAT

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS							
	JVC XM-448	220	An hidden keyboard is a great idea, but musically it sounds rather cool and strident					●	●	205
	Kenwood DMF-5020	250	it may be high-tech but nothing conceals the caricatured sound					●	●	205
R	Kenwood DMF-9020	500	One of the best MD decks yet for sound quality, and the first to make titling a practical proposition					●	●	191
	Marantz CM635	500	CD player and MD recorder in one box: a practical idea but sound and features don't really match the asking price					●	●	191
	Onkyo MD-121	450	Midi-sized deck that sounds slightly coloured at times, though immediate and lively					●		177
R	Pioneer MJ-D508	200	Well equipped but musically sleep inducing player that deserves its recommendation due to price					●	●	205
R	Pioneer MJ-D707	250	A handy set of features for the price, though sound is not outstanding					●	●	191
	Sharp MDR3H	300	Nifty machine combining a 3-disc CD changer with a MD recorder. Sound on both is rather below par, though					●	●	184
R	Sony MDS-JA555ES	650	Powerful demonstration of Sony's proficiency, it delivers the best MD can offer					●	●	205
	Yamaha MDX-793	300	Nice machine to use and has some useful features, but sound quality a little wanting					●	●	191

CD RECORDERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS							
	JVC XL-R5000	450	Flexible, ratty build, and attractive sound, but it's a little expensive compared to other rivals					●		205
	LG ADR-620	350	A powerfully equipped machine with useful multi-room capabilities, but sound quality is rough and ready					●	●	205
	Marantz DR700	600	Dearer than Philips and Traxdata equivalents, with apparently only a smarter front panel to show for it					●	●	191
R	Marantz DR-17	1,500	Highly recommended, but with a jitter problem that, resolved, would improve sound quality					●	●	205
BB	Philips CDR951	380	An improvement on previous models, it delivers the musical goods in some style					●	●	205
R	Pioneer PDR-509	300	Straightforward design and excellent recording properties that are slightly dulled by the replay chain					●	●	205
R	Pioneer PDR-W739	400	Flexible multi-disc that has everything including respectable sound and pricing					●	●	205
	TEAC RW-800	350	Capable recording tool, but a little rough and ready as a player					●	●	205
R	Traxdata Traxaudio 900	399	Identical to Philips and Marantz models: it makes bit-perfect copies of CDs and has perfectly acceptable replay					●	●	191

HEADPHONES



SPECIFICATIONS

HEADPHONES

ISSUE NUMBER
3.5mm JACK ADAPTOR
IMPEDANCE (Ω)
MASS (g)
CLOSED BACK
OPEN BACK
CIRCUMAURAL
SUPRA-AURAL
ELECTROSTATIC

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS												
R	AKG K100	36	Leather clad groover with bags of power and clarity, for a respectable asking price							190	100	●	205		
	AKG 301	70	Big 'phones with even and detailed sound but lacks sufficient bass weight							230	100	●	194		
	AKG K 240 DF	100	Inoffensive 'phones that are very laid back, if lacking in grunt							240	600	●	186		
R	AKG K1000	700	One of the best dynamics on the market, hooks directly into speaker outputs							270	120		99		
R	Audio Technica ATH910PRO	80	The closed back 910s are an improvement on the 909s, with a nice rhythmic quality rarely found							280	40		55		
R	Audio Technica ATH-D40fs	100	Detailed and involving sound with a professional 'studio' quality appeal							250	66		194		
R	Audio Technica ATH-M40	120	Incredible detail and honesty from these classically designed studio 'phone							250	60		186		
	Beyer DT311	50	Uncharacteristically tight, unrefined sound quality from this otherwise well engineered 'phone							124	40	●	133		
	Beyer DT411	63	A reasonable but not very thrilling headphone that doesn't really offer enough at the price							120	250		111		
	Beyer DT331	65	Clear and extremely detailed sound with rather thin bass							210	40	●	194		
	Beyer DT431	81	Nice looking 'phones that may not be the best players on the field, but will always give 100 per cent							210	40	●	186		
	Beyer DT531	105	Average performer from an established player. Lacks punch and bite							245	250	●	205		
R	Beyer DT511	106	Superb midband clarity and speed slightly at odds with soft bass. Even so, high tingle factor							200	250		172		
BB	Beyer DT831	140	These provide silky, smooth textures in abundance and we're not just talking about the velvet ear pads							295	250	●	186		
	Beyer DT100	160	Rugged, modular professional design, but bass is woolly and treble lacks detail							350	600		157		

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	ELECTROSTATIC	SUPRA-AURAL	CIRCUMAURAL	OPEN BACK	CLOSED BACK	MASS (g)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	3.5mm JACK ADAPTOR	ISSUE NUMBER
	Grado SR-40	45	Cheap and nasty appearance largely redeemed by cheerful, up-beat sound. Very comfortable		●		●		120	32	●	172
BB	Grado SR-60	79	For sheer musical enjoyment these are hard to beat. Retro styling may not be to everyone's taste		●		●		200	32	●	194
	Grado SR-80	100	Open and dynamic with pedantically open mid-band. Crude physical design, rough frequency extremes		●		●		60	8	●	157
R	Grado SR-125	150	What these 'phones lack in style they make up for ten-fold in musical quality				●		200	32		186
R	Grado SR-225	200	Warm, darkly coloured tonally and ultimately lacking in clarity, but true to the spirit of the music				●		200	32		163
	Grado SR-325	300	Elegant sound across the frequency spectrum; let down by old fashioned ear-piece design		●				200	32	●	205
BB	Jecklin Float Model 1	79	While very unusual in appearance, the Floats give remarkable sound quality and openness			●			400	200		55
	JVC HA-W60	49	Remarkable lack of interference and hiss ameliorates adequate sound of this cordless design		●			●	165	I/R	●	172
R	JVC HA-W200RF	75	Distinct lack of hiss from these FM cordless 'phones ensures that detail and depth are easily heard			●		●	280	20,000	●	186
R	JVC HA-DX3	200	Great headphone with a rich bass, careful mid-range and high comfort factor			●		●	340	90	●	205
	Koss TD/80	50	Oodles of bass but with a recessed midband; tiresome on the head with prolonged wearing			●			250	60	●	194
	Koss R/100	100	Rather cheap looking 'phones that supply good detail but are severely lacking in midrange excitement			●		●	215	60	●	186
	Precide Ergo Model 2	140	Still has much of the spaciousness of the Float from which it is derived, but coarse mid/top				●		380	100		163
	Philips HP910	80	Ergonomically good but suffers from a muffled mid-range and over excited bass		●				247	32	●	205
	Sennheiser IS 380	55	As close as you'll get to real hi-fi with infra-red phones at this price. Inevitable hiss spoils the illusion		●			●	192	I/R	●	172
R	Sennheiser HD 570 Symph	90	Comfortable, light-weight 'phones with a detailed and open sound but lacks bass depth on weightier music			●	●		210	64	●	194
R	Sennheiser HD 545	125	Fine all-rounder that takes all styles of music in its stride. Ear-clamping headband			●	●		255	150	●	172
BB	Sennheiser HD 565 Ovation	150	Wide bandwidth design which is refined, expressive and extremely comfortable			●	●		255	150	●	157
	Sennheiser HD590	160	Assured and confident player with very low colouration and great comfort			●	●		270	120	●	205
	Sennheiser HE 60/HEV70/UK	998	Very nearly a superb electrostatic, with a pure midband, but top end is sibilant and edgy	●		●	●		260	N/A		163
	Sony MDR-V700DJ	100	Great looking fold-away 'phones with exceptional build quality. Kickin' bass		●				300	24	●	194
	Sony MDR-CD 2000	200	Large pads make for sweaty listening. Pure mid-tones, but weightless bass			●	●		300	32	●	205
BB	Technics RP-F800	50	Comfortable budget model that sounds sublime with great dynamics			●		●	160	40	●	205
	Technics RP-DJ1200	130	Functional design with head-pulping bass and muggy tonal balance. Good job they're sweat-proof					●	230	32	●	172
R	Stax System II	400	Luxury option at its price, but the sound delivery is five star quality all the way	●		●	●		295	50	●	205
BB	Stax Lambda Nova Basic	395	Refined, articulate, yet with real presence – and a notable bargain by electrostatic standards	●		●	●		347	N/A		163
	Vivanco SR322	30	Weak design and uncomfortable, but redeems itself with substantial sound quality			●	●		248	32	●	205
	Vivanco Cyberwave FMH3000	40	The only cordless 'phone to offer genuine walkabout freedom, but sounds like a cheap FM tuner					●	210	FM	●	172
	Vivanco IR5800	50	Consistently musical infra-red design. Doesn't reach for sonic heights so hiss can be forgiven			●	1/2		226	I/R	●	172
R	Vivanco SR650	50	Unusually comfortable 'phone with excellent detail resolution but aggressive			●	●		175		●	157
BB	Vivanco SR750	60	Cossetting physical design, attractive sound, though suffers overhang and lacks ultimate dynamics			●	●		188		●	157
R	Vivanco SR 950	80	Cuddly feel and sound make these an enjoyable pair of 'phones						252	32		194
	Vivanco FM7980	80	A fair amount of whine and crackle detracts from 'phones which are otherwise very listenable		●			●	280	9,000	●	186
	Vivanco FM8180	99	Well thought-out features and a better than average sound are, at times, marred by intrusive hiss			●		●	240	9,000	●	186

LOUDSPEAKERS



SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (db/m)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Acoustic Energy Aegis One	150	At a new low price, this has a very natural and transparent midband, erring a little on the dull side	19,36,5,24		87	6	40	●		187
R	Acoustic Energy Aegis Two	250	Floorstanding variation on the Aegis One theme, with a neutral, even and detailed if slightly shiny sound	19,87,24		89	8	40	●		201
	Acoustic Energy AE120SE	500	Attractive styling and good sonic headroom, but a heavy, uneven overall balance, and a difficult amp load	18,97,28	●	89.5	10	25	●		199
R	Acoustic Energy AE520	1,000	Could be more neutral, but high-class build is reflected in a high-class sound. Very elegant too	21,98,30	●	91	3	25	●		190
	ALR Entry 2	250	Metal cone stand-mount has a generous performance envelope, but sound quality was controversial	20,33,29		90	4	22	●		201
	ALR Jordan Note 3	1,000	Very substantial, with tuneable ABR for better room matching. Sounds good but could be more neutral	24,5,37,32		89	5	30	●		211
	ALR Jordan Note 7	2,500	A beguiling Anglo-German collaboration delivers metal-cone precision with fine dynamic range	25,107,32	●	92	4	25	●		196
	AR 15	275	Neat and chunky wall/stand-mount certainly knows how to rock and roll, less convincing on the delicate stuff	22,37,22		90	4	45	●		201
R	Arcadyis Concept 2	1,200	Solid oak floorstander is a little lazy sounding, but is well balanced and smooth with modest coloration	19,90,26	●	86	7	25	●		211
	ATC SCM10	1,000	A compact speaker with good transparency but lightweight bass	18,38,25,5		80	8	65		●	192
	ATC SCM70ASL	10,500	Stylish aluminium casework disguises dynamic grip, tracking and precision that equals the very best	127,40,46	●	A	A	20	●		205
R	Audio Gem Emerald	540	Pretty, compact floorstander with lively if lightweight sound	18,94,21	●	87	6	4-0	●		164
R	Audio Note AN-E/D	1,520	This classic large stand-mount might have throwback aesthetics, but it delivers an exceptional allround sound	36,79,28		92	4	20	●		204
	Audio Physic Tempo	1,999	Tall and unusually-styled floorstander has stunning stereo but suspect bass tuning	22,107,47	●	88	8	28	●	●	143
R	Audiovector C2	799	Elegant two-and-a-half-way has a big, full bandwidth sound, but midband seemed a little underdeveloped	19,106,27	●	90	4	20	●		190
R	Audiovector M2	1,399	High-class, smooth and slightly laid-back performer has driving bass. It's upgradable, too	20,102,30	●	89	4	22	●		180
R	AVI NuNeutron	500	A smooth and subtle though pricey sub-miniature, albeit with the inevitable limitations of the breed	14,27,23		86	4	50		●	190
R	AVI Biggatron Red Spot	600	Good bass coherence and timing, but the lean and decidedly forward balance won't be to every taste	19,5,37,30		88	7	30		●	211
	AVI Positron	899	This 'mini-floorstander' is capable of great precision and delicacy, but in a rather small-scale way	175,74,24,5	●	85	6	40	●		174
R	B&W 601 S2	200	A smooth and sophisticated stand-mount combines good drive with fine neutrality	20,5,36,23		89	4	30	●		207
BB	B&W 602 S2	300	Large stand-mount has fine dynamic literacy and good communication skills at a very competitive price	23,5,49,29		90	5	28	●		201
R	B&W 603 S2	550	Capable of being driven seriously loud, but the cautious balance seems less happy playing at low levels	23,5,87,29	●	91	4	22	●		193
	B&W CDM-1NT	750	An uncommonly stylish and sonically self-effacing stand-mount that should be very easy to live with	22,40,29		89	7	30	●		208
	B&W CDM-7NT	1,250	A very classy floorstander, in sound as well as looks, with fine bass drive, authority and overall neutrality	22,95,29	●	90	6	20	●		208
R	B&W Nautilus 805	1,400	A small-sounding loudspeaker dynamically, but very stylish, clean and 'unboxy', delivering loads of detail	24,42,31		89	12	28	●		199
	B&W Nautilus 803	3,500	Classy looking three-way with impressively deep bass, wide dynamic range and a laid-back balance	29,108,42	●	89	3	20	●		210
	B&W Nautilus 804	2,500	The prettiest Nautilus has tremendous clarity and imaging but lacks the welly of bigger models	24,1015,24,5	●	89	8	38	●		200
EC	B&W Nautilus 802	6,000	Outstanding example of the high-tech speaker builder's art, needs real power but gives real sound	39,111,55	●	91	8	34	●		183
R	B&W Nautilus 801	8,500	The 801 is a magnificent loudspeaker in nearly every respect, but it is one that likes to play loud	52,111,69	●	91	8	34	●		186
R	Blueroom Minipod	249	The Minipod can show its competitors a thing or two about freedom from boxiness and looks fab	18,34,17		91	4	50		●	193
R	BC Acoustique Araxe	1,300	Neat compact floorstander is a very lively communicator, if a little short of deep bass grunt	21,92,30	●	94	3	40	●		204

STEREO SPEAKERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE (WxHxD) (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (db/W)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
	Cabasse Farella 400	950	Exciting but very upfront-and-in-er-face sound. High sensitivity, fine build and good dynamic drive	26,92,32	●	92	5	28		●	180
	Carlsson OAS2.2	1,500	Ultra-discreet design integrates cleverly with the listening room. Impressively unboxy, but sounds a bit thin	41,54,37	●	90	8	20		●	195
	Castle Richmond	250	Tiny real-wood miniature has a lightweight but very coherent sound, a bit in-er-face but plenty of fun	17,33,20		90	5	50	●		201
	Castle Inversion 15	425	This striking looking standmount is a good all-rounder, commendably free from boxiness	22,42,25		91	4	30		●	193
	Castle Severn 2SE	700	Pretty little floorstander is lively and communicative, if a little coloured in the voice band	21,84,24	●	88	6	28		●	204
	Castle Harlech	880	Handsome big-sounding floorstander, great value and dynamic midrange	20,96,33	●	88	8	28	●		160
	Castle Inversion 100	1,975	Large semi-omni design with gorgeous Art Deco styling, sounds open but bass alignment is ill-tuned	26,5,11,45	●	91	8	20		●	195
	Celestion A Compact	600	Provided the room isn't too large and your tastes not too heavy, this is a charming little number	17,24,21		90	3	45		●	193
	Celestion A1	899	Rich, warm and laid-back, but a true quality sound; lovely build	24,41,35		88	6	25	●		164
	Celestion A2	1,500	Full-scale, big sound from ultra-elegant floorstander. Smooth and slightly laid back presentation	24,93,39	●	89	6	22		●	180
	Chario Syntar 100	249	Pretty with a pleasantly easygoing balance, but not the most communicative or exciting sound around	18,32,27		87	6	45	●		170
	Chario Hiper 1000	300	Classy looking standmount has a sweet, easygoing sound with fine midband voicing	18,35,28		87	4	45	●		187
	Chario Constellation Lynx	550	Beautiful near-miniature is let down by a midband too laid back for its own good	20,36,26		87	3	40	●		190
	Chario Academy Millennium 2	2,100	Price includes stands. A showy speaker that lives up to its own hype	22,53,35		90	4	55	●		190
	Cyrus CL570	800	Wonderfully striking styling, but presence is very laid back; likes playing loud	22,33,32		87	8	40	●		211
	Dali 606	400	A big bruiser at a tempting price. Sounds refined and polite, but also packs some punch	22,97,32	●	91	4	25	●		174
	Dali Royal Menuet MkII	400	Classy sub-miniature with a beautiful box and fine ingredients, but a little lacking in subtlety and excitement	16,26,18		87	3	50		●	190
	Dali Evidence 870	1,300	A real heavyweight, sonically and physically, and good for movies as well as music	24,5,106,36	●	93	2.5	20	●		204
	Dynaudio Contour 1.8 MkII	1,842	Wonderful voice-band delicacy and loads of deep bass from a very elegant and compact box	21,95,29	●	85	4	20	●		167
	Dynaudio Audience 72	1,100	Very competent in most respects, but doesn't quite grab the attention; could be more communicative	20,97,26	●	89	3	20	●		211
	Elac CL102 II	599	Chunky floorstander with classy drivers has a neutral, slightly 'shiny' character, and could have more punch	20,95,28	●	88	9	23	●		199
	Elac CL 310i Jet	800	It's pricey, and you can buy better performance for the money. Small speaker, good sound	12,3,20,8,28,2		86	4	42	●		191
	Eltax Liberty 3+	150	Bright, bassy, laid back and attractively evenhanded, but dynamically challenged. Big box for your dosh	20,5,38,34		86	4	25	●		187
	Eltax Linear Response	249	A curiously dumpy shape, but smooth, laid-back performer is easy on the ears, with fine tonal accuracy	25,35,32		85	4	40	●		177
	Eltax Chroma Front	300	Gorgeous shiny styling package at an ultra-competitive price, suffers from an excess of rather flabby bass	19,98,28	●	87	4	25	●		201
	Energy e:XL 25	400	Neat slimline design delivers a fine all round performance for the price, but could sound smoother	15,87,31	●	90	4	25	●		201
	Epos ES12	499	High quality luxury standmount has great midband and stereo imaging	20,38,25		85	8	45	●		160
	Epos ES25	1,655	Handsome floorstander with a rather uneven and bass heavy balance	24,90,35	●	88	6	22	●		143
	Gale 2i	140	Unspectacular sound and appearance fail to help this solid little miniature stand out from the crowd	22,40,27		88	7	40		●	170
	Heybrook Prima 2	159	Great openness, speed and timing. Sounds fresh and vital, though sometimes lacks scale and weight	20,29,18		87	6	50	●		179
	Heybrook HB1	180	Good value but an uneven performer, the HB1 provides plenty of fun with the volume turned wqj up	21,38,25		88	3	50	●		207
	Heybrook Heylette	200	Attractive traditional-style near-miniature with classy main driver now has fine overall balance to match	19,5,30,22		88	4	45	●		187
	Heybrook Optima	259	A dumpy ugly duckling with a heart of gold. Deserves a better tweeter, but communicates well	22,88,29	●	94	4	30	●		193
	Heybrook Heylios	269	Classically styled stand-mount has a fine balance of smoothness and dynamics, plus real wood veneer	23,5,36,27		89	6	25	●		201
	Heybrook Ultima	649	Has the bass wallop to justify its dual hi-fi/home cinema roles, but doesn't excite	22,97,29	●	89	6	45	●		174
	Heybrook Duet	750	Looks slightly old-fashioned, sounds a bit coloured but its fine timing and liveliness serve music well	23,43,30		88	11	27	●		199
	Heybrook Octet	1,800	Good-looking but pricey floorstander with novel drivers and a fine ceramic-enclosure midband	24,97,31	●	90	6	25	●		180
	Indigo Three	500	Cute 'n' chunky standmount is an entertaining communicator. Great fun, despite some sonic weirdness	23,30,5,32		86	17	24	●		199
	Infinity Delta 60	700	Striking and massive floorstander, lots of speaker for the price, but seems a victim of its own complexity	29,115,41	●	90	4	25	●		183
	Infinity Kappa 70	795	Fine material value. Sonically big, smooth and even, but lacking in coherence and dynamics	26,96,27	●	87	4	25	●		204
	Jamo E800	200	Nicely voiced, open midband but bottom end is a bit strong and amorphous	17,5,33,29		87	3	30	●		207
	Jamo D830	1,400	Dynamically exciting and communicative, but lacks both smoothness and neutrality. Pricey too	24,5,38,32		88	5	30	●		211
	JBL LX2	250	Invigorating, if a touch crude, this good-hearted speaker reproduces music with enthusiasm	22,40,27		87	8	40	●		170
	JBL T1200	400	Very substantial standmount knows how to rock and roll, but can sound uncouth on more delicate material	21,41,30		92	5	40	●		193
	JBL L20	700	Pricey, heavy and a bit laid-back, but this is a fine rock'n'roller which is dynamic and communicative	26,42,28		86	8	30	●		138
	JBL SVA1500	700	A distinctive Pro-style bi-radial horn tweeter, with a fun sound, enlivened by a juicy bass thump	17,5,51,31		86	8	40	●		174
	JBL L40	1,000	Classic, large, three-way standmount is full of vim and vigour, with a superb sense of balance	30,65,31		88	4	23	●		167
	JBL 4312 II	1,000	Crude but startlingly effective dynamics. The original party animal knows just how to rock'n'roll	36,60,30		94	4	25	●		190
	JBL SVA 2100	1,250	Monstrously large and brutish styling, goes very loud as well as deep. Fine focus but some boxiness	37,114,52	●	91	8	<20	●		180
	JBL L90	1,500	A classic monitor which communicates with gusto and enthusiasm, though it can sound a bit crude	24,94,35	●	91	6	23	●		143
	JBL LX70	550	Bassmeister supreme, shame the rest doesn't match up. Fine sensitivity but an itchy, scratchy treble	26,5,94,30		91	4	33	●		183
	JBL Xt40	500	Real wood and a cute shape, with a punchy driving bass, and a restrained overall balance	23,82,31	●	88	6	40	●		210
	JMLab Cobalt 815	999	Hefty real-wood floorstander has a slight 'boom'n'tizz' character but delivers big speaker grip and dynamics	22,100,31	●	90.5	9.5	22	●		199
	JMLab Electra 905	1,200	Compact but massively engineered, delivers a very classy sound with exceptional dynamic range	23,5,47,38		90	4	40	●		204
	JMLab Electra 915	1,795	Fine headroom and bass, and classy engineering too, but also a tricky amp load which lacks delicacy	26,5,106,36	●	92	4	20	●		195
	JMLab Mezzo Utopia	7,250	Looks good and sounds even better. A genuinely big speaker with fantastic coherence	35,115,47	●	92	4	30	●		186
	JPW ML510	130	Lots of good quality speaker for the price, but not an ideal match for cheap budget components	20,34,22		88	5	50	●		169
	JPW ML910	330	Loads of speaker for the money, plenty of headroom and loudness capability, but sounds dull	23,104,30	●	91	4	43	●		183
	JPW ML1010	400	A seriously substantial speaker for the price, and an obvious choice for those who like their music loud	22,5,115,40	●	91	6	25	●		170
	KEF Cresta 2	149	A good looking/value package but sonically disappointing, and no match for the Q15	20,5,37,24		91	4	40	●		195
	KEF Q15.2	200	A vigorous and entertaining compact speaker that remains particularly well aligned for close-to-wall siting	20,5,31,27		89	3	30	●		207
	KEF Q-55.2	500	Beefy vinyl-finished UniQ delivers loads of bass, but might have more control	21,87,29	●	90	4	25	●		210
	KEF Reference One-Two	1,350	Limited low bass but bags of headroom. Coherent and lively sound, but could be more transparent	22,5,87,35	●	89	3	40	●		211
	KEF RDM Three	1,500	Definitely a speaker aimed at long-term satisfaction rather than immediate impressiveness. Nice	24,100,27	●	90	4	40	●		189
	KEF Reference Model 2	1,599	Classy, large floorstander that has massive headroom and clean mid-to-treble, but limited deep bass	23,103,34	●	89	4	30	●		167
	Keswick Audio Aria II	379	Confident and dynamic sound, if a little crude and shut in	21,42,24		89	8	20	●		148
	Keswick Audio Torino	999	Good value, lively contender with distinctive styling. Goes loud and deep but could be smoother	26,93,28	●	90	4	20	●		167
	Linn Kan	295	Great bass discrimination from size, ensuring a very informative, if slightly shut-in experience	19,31,19		86	4	45	●		187
	Living Voice Auditorium	1,500	Pretty, compact floorstander has wonderful coherence, high sensitivity and fine dynamic integrity	21,5,98,29	●	91	4	25	●		180
	Living Voice Avatar OBX-R	4,000	Discreet but extremely fine design with external crossover and an affinity with valves	21,5,104,27	●	89	8	45	●		196
	Magnat Vintage 320	350	Loads of speaker for your money, but the sound is thick, heavy and lacking in presence and authority	25,102,30	●	90	4	20	●		201
	Magnat Vector 77	450	Tall, dark and a lot of speaker for the money. Beautiful balance, but lacking in subtlety and transparency	22,115,29	●	89	5	30	●		183
	Magnat Vintage 710	800	Very competent but didn't particularly stand out; distinctive styling and slightly shiny sound	20,27,42,32		90	5	25	●		211
	Magnat Vintage 720	1,200	Slightly crude in some respects but lots of heart, fine scale, decent dynamic coherence and integrity	29,113,32	●	88	4	20	●		180
	Martin-Logan Prodigy	8,967	Combines the finesse of an electrostatic with the grunt of cleverly engineered cone bass to good effect	42,179,71	●	91	4	28	●		204
	Mirage FRX7	550	Neat slim floorstander has a heavy, laid back balance, probably better suited to movie than music reproduction	17,5,95,32	●	90	4	25	●		204
	Mirage OM-5	3,000	A meaty model that goes loud without distortion, digs deep with aplomb and creates plenty of depth of image	133,30,42	●	90	6	22	●		206

STEREO SPEAKERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (db/m)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FRONM (Hz)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
	Mirage OM-10-1	2,000	Tall black omni-bi-pole has plenty of bounce and dynamic vigour, but is more room sensitive than most	23,118,30	●	88	4	20	●	●	210
R	Mission 700	130	A lot of speaker for the money. Good bass weight and extension and goes loud with ease	18,34,26		87	8	40		●	179
R	Mission 771e	200	Beautifully styled miniature has a delightfully voiced midband, and real wood finish too	17,31,22		86	6	45		●	207
	Mission 780	299	Gorgeous miniature has a fine midband and clean, bright treble, slightly odd bo tom end	16,5,28,27		86	6	40	●		201
R	Mission 773e	400	Beautifully designed slim floorstander could be more neutral but still delivers an all-round entertaining sound	17,5,88,26		92	4	30		●	193
R	Mission 774	500	Gorgeous floorstander is an entertaining communicator, despite some balance oddities (bright treble)	18,95,31		90	4	40	●		183
R	Mission 782	699	Ultra-compact floorstander has a glorious midband and slightly odd bass. Good communication skills	16,5,82,28		86	9.5	25		●	199
R	Mission 775e	800	Lots of speaker for the money, and musically involving too, if a little short of serious weight and authority	23,115,30		93	3	25		●	204
	Mission 783	1,000	Plenty of bass weight, and a clean, articulate midrange, but the two don't quite seem to gel	20,5,97,33		87	5	20	●		211
BB	Monitor Audio Bronze 2	180	A real corker, which combines solid material value for money with a fine all round sonic performance	18,5,35,27		89	3	30		●	207
	Monitor Audio Silver 5i	450	Great looking, sharply priced real wood floorstander, but bottom end lacks drive and tension	20,81,21		87	5	30	●		210
	Monitor Audio GR20	1,500	Solid and confident design with all metal drivers and neutral if slightly uninspiring sound	20,92,5,30		89	6	30	●		212
	Mordaunt-Short MS902	200	Gorgeous metal-finished budget stand-mount has a shiny sound to match its looks	18,31,25		87	4	45	●		207
BB	Musical Tech Kestrel Evolution	315	Cutely styled, cleverly compact and a smooth, subtle and coherent performer, best suited to smaller rooms	20,85,19		86	4	40	●		201
R	Musical Technology Harrier	400	Very pretty package, good measured performance and even sound. Sensitivity is low, and dynamics limp	25,80,23		86	8	25	●		152
BB	Musical Technology PM15	450	A subtle, understated but very involving example of the 'classic' luxury-finish compact standmount	20,41,27		88	5	38			183
BB	Musical Technology Falcon	680	Big speaker has a big but also surprisingly smooth and civilised sound. Fine material value too	33,117,30		89	4	22	●		190
R	Musical Technology Condor	1,000	Lots of clever ideas in a floorstander, which places transparency and smoothness ahead of dynamic drama	25,91,23		85	4	28	●		174
BB	Naim Intro	660	Great dynamic range and info retrieval, but thin, lacks warmth	24,89,27		89	6	30	●		164
R	Naim Credo	1,060	Involving sound, but rather forward and cold. Good clarity, but some coloration and a lack of richness	24,89,30		88	8	28	●		180
R	Naim SBL Passive	1,970	Lively and punchy – smoother but more upfront than before	27,89,27		88	6	25		●	143
EC	Naim NBL	6,648	Elegant, large floorstander is exceptionally informative with an awesome dynamic range and dry, forward balance	29,116,47		89	4	20	●		200
R	Neat Critique 2	445	Contemporary standmount has a clean, crisp sound with lovely natural midband voicing	22,32,24		86	6	50		●	183
BB	Neat Mystique Mk2	575	This elegant package delivers a fine overall sound quality; some might find the top end too insistent	20,86,18		85	6	23	●		177
R	Neat Neat Petite III	795	The treble is peaky, but this is still one of the most coherent and communicative miniatures around	20,30,5,20		86	5	30		●	211
R	Neat Elite	1,195	A highly entertaining all-rounder, has a planar tweeter that sounds sweet, if not particularly smooth	20,88,18		88.5	6	25	●		195
BB	NHT Super One	250	A fine compromise between size and performance, sensitivity and hence loudness capability is modest	18,5,29,5,23		85	8	30	●		170
BB	NHT 1.5	400	This compact standmount sounds much bigger than it has any right to. Good timing and communication skills	18,42,26		85	6	40	●		177
R	NHT Super Two	550	Black and shiny compact three-way floorstander has marvellously even balance and good coherence	18,5,100,26		87	8.5	25		●	199
	Opera Prima	495	Good-looking hardwood enclosure, plus fine mid and treble, but less satisfactory bass	19,34,31		90	4	40	●		190
	Origin Live Conqueror	1,650	Chunky floorstanding three-way has lovely cabinetwork and lively sound, but limited deep bass	24,94,27		88	8	30	●		167
R	Orelle Swing	1,200	A superb example of what an essentially small loudspeaker can do, with bags of brio and enthusiasm	18,101,28		87	8	45	●		195
BB	PMC TB2	600	A worthy and prettier successor to the TB1, which sets a high standard in its size/type class for neutrality and transparency	20,40,5,31		88	8	30	●		211
R	PMC LB1	999	Still fully competitive eight years after our original review, this genuine compact monitor is now a modern classic	17,5,53,26		87	6.5	40	●		199
BB	PMC FB1	1,275	Handsome floorstander has the lively coherence of a simple two-way alongside impressive bass weight and extension	20,105,31		88	6	20	●		204
	Polk RT16	799	Bass rich, lively and powerful, but suspect top end; big and not very pretty	22,105,39		91	4	22	●		160
	ProAc Response 2.5	2,700	For aspirant high-enders looking for seriously good boxes, this speaker should be first port of call	22,107,25		86	8	30	●		149
	ProAc Tablette 2000 Sig.	899	Beautifully veneered compact stand-mount is classically balanced, if a little on the bright side of neutral	19,36,26		87	6	30	●		204
	ProAc Studio 125	1,000	Pretty if pricey compact floorstander with a beautifully natural and neutral midband, and some bass thump	20,94,28		87	8	28	●		192
	QLN Signature	1,000	Attractive pyramidal standmount with heavy, laid-back balance but remarkably unboxy sound	27,37,36		83	4	25	●		167
	Quad ESL-989	4,600	A very 'different' speaker experience, with magnificent midband transparency and imaging, but limited loudness capability	67,134,32		83	3	38	●		213
R	Rega Jura	450	Beely sounding, chunky floorstander sounds very 'direct coupled' to the music, if a touch 'boom'n'tizz'	22,5,92,5,26		90	5	25	●		193
R	Rega ELA Mk II	498	Pretty and smooth, the latest incarnation has a superb midband and excellent communicative skills	30,80,20		87	8	40	●		139
R	Rehdeko RK 115a	1,700	Single-driver system has limited bandwidth and obvious coloration, but wondrous dynamic coherence	34,42,27		95	8	55	●		167
	RMS Revelation Series 1	1,299	Innovative metal-box compact with integral port/stand – clean with good timing but very laid-back balance	20,99,24		81	8	22	●		167
	Roksan ROKone	595	Large standmount is musically very communicative, if a little coloured	21,45,33		89	6	30			160
R	Roksan OJ3X Black	995	innovative low-line, two-way floorstander with decoupled tweeter; great bass and fine dynamic range	28,79,46		84	8	20	●		167
BB	Royd Doublet	485	Great value compact floorstander: lively and very informative, if a little uneven	18,93,19		90	4	28	●		160
R	Ruark Epilogue	269	Beautifully finished miniature with a lively balance and plenty of charm; best suited to smaller rooms	17,29,23		87	8	47			183
	Ruark Sceptre	599	'Traditional' cabinetwork with class veneer and shiny gilt fixings, hampered by rather wayward sound balance	21,38,31		87	8	40	●		174
	Ruark Prologue One R	949	Strikingly contemporary compact floorstander is well voiced but a little lean in overall balance	17,5,93,28		88	5	25	●		204
R	Ruark Excalibur	7,000	A big, handsome speaker with a big, laid-back but open sound, rocking bass and loads of headroom	30,125,53		90	4	30	●		186
R	Sequence 400	329	Clever hang-on-wall panel is well voiced, though bass isn't too great	25,100,7		86	8	45		●	164
	Silverado Raider	695	Beautifully built audiophile compact: neutral if bright, tough work for amps	20,40,25		83	3	30	●		164
	Snell K.5	795	Classy AV-ready stand mount is very solidly engineered. Sound is neutral but lacks excitement	22,46,30		87	6	25	●		190
BB	Snell E.5 Mk2	1520	Large floorstander has serious deep bass extension, and also a delicate midband with low coloration	22,109,30		89	4	20	●		211
	Snell XA75ps	4,500	Active bass floorstander with marvellous mid coherence, slightly suspect bass integration.	28,117,50		91	6	25	●		194
	Sonloquy SM 2A3	1,095	Fine match in balance, coherence, transparency and speed. Intended for use with Cary CAD 2A3SE	35,5,19,30		91	8	45	●		196
	Sonus Faber Concertino	599	A beautifully neutral loudspeaker in a beautiful Italian suit of clothes. Classy, if quite pricey	21,32,29		87	5	30	●		193
	South Coast Speakers Lancelot	895	Pretty compact standmount has nice ribbon tweeter but sounds a bit soft and lacks dynamic vigour	19,36,26		84	8	45	●		199
R	Spendor 2030	599	Discreet slimline floorstander with delicately coherent, laid-back sound	18,89,27		87	8	30	●		160
EC	TAG McLaren F1	15,000	Oddball aesthetics with accurate, unflappable, controlled and consistent sonic neutrality	40,127,48		87	8	25	●		202
BB	Tannoy mX2	150	Surprisingly refined considering its very modest price: very communicative with outstanding midband delicacy	18,5,33,25		89	4	45	●		2 0
	Tannoy Revolution 1	200	Pretty little mini-monitor is smooth, well mannered and polite to a fault, lacks dynamic expression	17,30,22		86	4	30	●		187
BB	Tannoy mX3	300	A great all-round compromise at a very modest price, combining good looks with fine midband voicing	18,5,87,26		90	5	40	●		201
R	Tannoy mX4	350	Lacks dynamic grip and authority, but delivers great bass extension and a classy overall balance at a sharp price	18,5,96,26		88	4	20	●		210
BB	Tannoy Revolution R2	350	Bargain price real wood floorstander is beautifully voiced and very even-handed, if a tad laid back	17,94,24		90	4	20	●		193
	Tannoy Revolution R3	550	Handsome real-wood floorstander does a decent job, but lacks the evenness of its smaller R2 brother	18,5,103,28		89	8.5	28	●		199
R	Tannoy D300	999	Gorgeous-looking compact floorstander. And a fine all-round performer, too	24,85,23		87	6	26	●		167
	Tannoy ST-100	1,200	This supertweeter adds a subtle and delicate effect while also broadening the soundstage at a price	15,10,5,6		95	8	N/A	●		206
	Tannoy Kingdom 12	6,000	Something of a throwback, but great fun, with fine dynamics and authority, but a tricky amp load	54,106,46		92	3	28	●		213
	Technics SB-M500	450	This model offers a clean, open sound, offset by midbass, heavy balance and low sensitivity	25,78,37		85	8	25	●		152
	Triangle Cometes	359	Communicative standmount has great midband dynamics, but the very bright top end might be intrusive	22,40,29		91	4	42	●		193
BB	Triangle Zephyr II	599	Loads of fun. Dramatic dynamics and righteous timing will give any hi-fi system a wake-up call	22,94,29		91	4	25	●		190
EC	Veritas H3	6,000	Loads of fun with wonderful dynamic and temporal integrity from horn-loaded Lowther drivers	30,110,47		104	4	50	●		191
R	Vienna Acoustics Mozart	1,500	Gorgeous slimline floorstander sounds very laid-back but very charming, and musically literate	17,97,30		88	7.5	25	●		199
EC	Wilson benesh Discovery	5,500	Innovative three way with built-in stand, combines great subtlety with weight and headroom	23,47,38		87	6	45	●		212

STEREO SPEAKERS (CONTINUED)

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (db/m)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (HZ)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
EC	Wilson benesch Bishop	20,000	Deep and even bass sets new standards for cleanliness and clarity; lovely open midband too	23,161,561	●	89	4	520	●	●	189
	W-ardedale Diamond 7.2	140	A good-hearted, lively and up-front performer that's a little lacking in subtlety and smoothness	19,29,5,23		88	4	45	●	●	169
	Wdale Diamond 7.2 Anniversary	200	Lively and exuberant, but a tad untidy with it; can sound a bit cold and hard	19,29,5,24		88	4	40	●	●	187
R	Zingali Overture 2S	1,975	Gorgeous, pricey, imposing standmount has a horn tweeter of great delicacy. Impressively weighty	30,57,38		90	8	25	●	●	195

SUBWOOFERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (db/m)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (HZ)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
	Acoustic Energy AE108S	299	Lots of loud subwoofer for your money, though ultimately more film than music oriented	50,42,43				20		●	179
R	B&W ASW1000	499	Bulky heavyweight is a high quality item, able to generate more bass output than music is likely to need	54,47,50	●	A		A20	●	●	198
	Jamo D8SUB	950	Pretty but pricey, the D8SUB packs plenty of punch (for movie fans), but doesn't delve deep enough for music replay	45,5,41,45,5		A		30		●	210
R	JPW SW60	349	A real heavyweight, sounds clean and transparent, if perhaps a little understated. Usefully flexible	55,47,39				20		●	179
	M&K MX70	795	Cutely compact and entertaining too, but lacks the ultimate extension to justify its high price	37,32,30	●	A		25		●	210
	Mission 7AS2	399	Ugly if very effective at supplying very low bass, but filter could do with more flexibility higher up	56,30,31	●			<20	●	●	198
R	Paradigm PDR-10	150	Not much grip, drive or authority, but it doesn't get in the way and it is very cheap	34,5,36,42	●	A		25		●	210
	Polk PSW430	400	A lot of subwoofer for your money, but lacks deep grunt and is more movie than music oriented	38,5,45,46	●	A		25		●	210
R	REL Q50	375	This good looking if bulky sub does the business with impressive flexibility and sonic self-effacement	42,53,31				20		●	210
R	Ruark Log-Rhythm	775	Adds weight and scale with commendable discretion, making a positive contribution to the whole musical exposition	43,43,43	●	A		<20		●	210
	Soliloquy 510	1,050	(Active) Pretty subwoofer, cosmetically matching SM 2A3 speakers, pricey and mid-bass a bit strong	51,30,5,46	●	A		25	●	●	196

LOUDSPEAKERS

MULTICHANNEL SPEAKERS & PACKAGES

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (db/m)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (HZ)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
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BB	Acoustic Energy Aegis Three	350	High value floorstander has deep and even bass and a smooth neutrality thereafter	19,90,25	●	90	5	22	●	●	198
R	B&W LCR6	349	Large, gutsy standmount intended for all-round AV use delivers fine performance as a stereo pair too	20,5,55,32		90	5	20	●	●	198
	B&W Nautilus package	6,500	This classy, laid-back package is arguably too good for current programming. Very bulky centre speaker	var	var	n/a	3	20		●	210
	Definitive Technology BP2X	595	Pricey but effective bi-polar surround speaker, with unusually high sensitivity	23,37,15		94	4	120		●	198
	Definitive Technology BP2004	1,700	Pricey bi-polar floorstander has a fine midband, let down by its built-in powered subwoofer	19,104,31	●	91	5	28	●	●	198
	Dynaudio L/R C 120	439	Slim centre and front standmount, has an evenhanded but rather laid back balance but lacks drive	16,5,57,31		89	5	25	●	●	198
	Jamo Concert package	2,500	Lovely main speakers sonically overshadow the centre, while surrounds are a bit obvious too	var	var	n/a	5	30		●	210
BB	JBL Xti-series package	1,100	Hexagonal boxes all round, this package has decent authority and all round tension	var	var	n/a	5	40		●	210
	KEF Q-series package	880	Cleverly designed, vinyl-finished UniQ package packs a goodly thump but centre and surrounds stand out	var	var	n/a	3	25		●	210
	Mirage OM-series package	2,000	Big black and bouncy package with omni fronts has plenty of vigour but some coloration var	var	var	n/a	4	20		●	210
R	Mission 77DS	199	Neat flush-mount surround speaker has no bass but a smooth midband and nicely restrained treble	34,26,12		92	4	120		●	198
	Mission Cinema 8 package	1,400	Beautifully styled and cleverly designed package, but could have more grunt and drive for the price	var	var	n/a	4	30		●	210
	Polk RTE 1000p	1,300	Tall elegant tower with built-in powered bass 'subwoofer' that needs using with discretion. Bright but engaging	20,110,35	●	91	4	25	●	●	198
	Monitor Audio Silver series	1,000	Great looking conventionally styled package lacks something in dynamic drive and tension	var	var	n/a	4	30		●	210
R	Mordaunt-Short Declaration 500	1,600	Good value vinyl THX Select package with Power Towers. Good authority but must be 5.1-connected var	var	n/a	n/a	3	25		●	210
R	PMC FB1/TB2 package	2,200	Classy if bulky and pricey package has good transparency, coherence and weight	var	var	n/a	6	20		●	210
R	Rega Jura/Ara/Senta	920	Classy real wood package does a good all round job, but sounds bright and might have more surround weight	var	var	n/a	4	25		●	210
BB	Tannoy mXAV4 package	500	Lacks grunt, grip and authority, but smooth and refined with seamless surround coherence	var	var	n/a	4	20		●	210
BB	Tannoy Saturn 56LCR	400	A punchy compact standmount based on a serious cast-frame, pro-style dual-concentric driver	21,38,29		89	6	25		●	198
BB	Tannoy Saturn 56	500	Fine value vinyl floorstander offers plenty of genuine grunt and real dynamic tension	21,89,29	●	91	4	20	●	●	198

CENTRE CHANNEL SPEAKERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	SIZE WxHxD (cm)	FLOORSTANDER	SENSITIVITY (db/m)	IMPEDANCE (Ω)	BASS FROM (HZ)	FREE SPACE	CLOSE TO WALL	ISSUE NUMBER
R	Acoustic Energy Aegis Centre	140	Good value centre-front speaker but a tad shut in and with a slightly obvious top end (price per speaker)	46,17,20		89	5	50	●	●	198
	B&W Nautilus HTM1	1,500	Very bulky for a centre speaker, though very capable too - a little less laid back than its siblings	76,37,30		89	4	30		●	210
	Castle Keep	250	Substantial centre-front speaker based on Harlech drivers but with rather brighter voicing	48,17,29		88	8	45	●	●	198
R	Definitive Technology CLR2002	595	Pricey, but undoubtedly one of the better centre-front speakers around, with fine timing and open voicing	55,5,17,31		90	4	40	●	●	198
	Jamo Concert Center	550	A decent balance match but lacks the class and grip of the Concert 8s, and is bulky and pricey too	55,22,30		87	5	100		●	210
BB	JBL Xti10C	200	An elegant, cleverly designed centre and a good match for the 40s. Better value than most too	51,19,5,27		88	5	50		●	210
	KEF Q95C	200	This artfully designed UniQ centre looks much better than most on top of the TV set	40,17,17		89	3	120		●	210
	Mirage OM-C2	600	Large but discreet omni-bi-pole matches OM-10-1 well but lacks tight focus, and seems expensive	64,18,5,31		88	4	50		●	210
R	Mission 77C	199	A good centre-front match for 77-series, the triple tweeter might be a curiosity, but voicing is very good	42,17,21		91	4	100		●	198
	Mission 78C	350	Makes a good visual and sonic match for the 782, but quite pricey by comparison, given the ingredients	45,17,19		86	3	100		●	210
	Monitor Audio Silver Centre 10i	300	Neat and good looking partner to the Silver Sis, but a little more forward, and quite expensive too	50,17,21		87	4	100		●	210
R	Mordaunt-Short MS 504	200	Smart yet discreet and a good match for the 502. Sounds clean and expressive, and is well priced	50,19,20		88	3	120		●	210
R	PMC TB2M/C	325	This bulky centre speaker is quite pricey, but it combines good transparency with some authority	40,20,31		87	6	50		●	210
	Polk CS 1000p	999	Monstrously large and heavy centre-front speaker, presumably for those with monstrous intentions	87,22,35		92	4	25	●	●	198
R	Rega Senta	185	The very compact Senta is sensibly priced, a bit bright maybe, but articulate and expressive	32,16,21		89	4	120		●	210
BB	Tannoy mXC	100	Could be more exciting, but a very impressive centre speaker at an unusually reasonable price	42,16,21		88	4	120		●	210
BB	Tannoy Saturn 56C	200	A punchy compact standmount based on a serious cast-frame, pro-style dual-concentric driver	38,21,29		89	6	25	●	●	198

PERSONAL / INTERNET

SPECIFICATIONS

PERSONAL STEREOS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	STORAGE FORMAT	RECORDING	IN-LINE REMOTE	CODEC	PC CONNECTION	STANDARD CAPACITY	ISSUE NUMBER
	Aiwa HS-PX307	30	So-so sound but an impressive features roster. Decent value overall	Cassette		●				204
R	Aiwa AM-HX50	180	Neat play-back only personal with an impressively full-bodied sound, though short on detail	MiniDisc		●				204
	JVC XL-PG7	100	Undistinguished CD model, with tacky build and below-par sound	CD		●				204
R	Panasonic RQ-SX71	70	A sleek aluminium body, decent sound and superb features	Cassette		●				204
	Panasonic RQ-SX91	80	A super-slick personal for well-heeled cassette users. Sound is rather bright	Cassette		●				204
	Panasonic SJ-MR100	250	Well built and nicely appointed, though performance is unremarkable at the price	MiniDisc	●	●				204
R	Philips ACT7582	115	A splash-proof body and an entertaining sound – the perfect CD personal for holiday japes	CD		●				204
III	Sharp MD-MT831H	250	Smart design, sprightly sound and a well featured package	MiniDisc	●	●				204
	Sony WM-EX404	35	Super-stylish but sonically flawed, with particularly uncomfortable earphones	Cassette		●				204
R	Sony D-EJ815	140	High-tech build and features, including super-effective shock protection. Sound is soft but substantial	CD		●				204
BB	Sony D-EJ915	150	A beauty to behold – the most portable CD player yet and a good performer to boot	CD		●				204
BB	Sony MZ-R91	250	A petite and sexy beast with good sound and excellent facilities	MiniDisc	●	●				204

INTERNET AUDIO

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	STORAGE FORMAT	RECORDING	IN-LINE REMOTE	CODEC	PC CONNECTION	STANDARD CAPACITY	ISSUE NUMBER
	Aiwa MM-VX100	130	Aiwa's expertise in the personal stereo field is visible, but performance is only average	Solid State	●	●	MP3	PRL	32MB	204
	Audio ReQuestARQ1	568	Full size separate containing CD player, hard drive and PC connection. Sign of things to come?	CD/HD	●		MP3/MM	APR/USB	17GB	208
BB	Creative Labs Digital Jukebox	349	Smartly designed high-capacity portable with storage for over 1,000 tracks	Hard Drive	●		Agnostic	USB	5.7GB	208
R	DigMedia Music Store	350	Innovative CD/hard drive combo with optional solid state portable. MP3 with or without a computer	CD/HD	●		MP3	USB	5.4GB	208
	JazPiper MV32P	125	First wave player that looks good but sounds bright. Includes voice recording and phone book features	Solid State	●		MP3	PRL	32MB	195
	LG MF-PD360	130	Good looking and temptingly affordable, but features and performance are nothing special	Solid State	●		MP3	USB	32MB	208
	LG AHA-FD770	200	Cassette and solid state personal in one – novel idea, poor execution	SS/Cass	●	●	MP3	PRL	32MB	204
	Logix Evzone	219	Novell MP3 player that uses Iomega Click! discs for storage. Chunky but quite effective, and discs are much cheaper than memory cards	Click! Discs	●		MP3/WMA	USB	40MB	213
R	Neo-25	420	Sparsely equipped but efficient hard drive portable with an exceptionally high potential capacity. Average in the sound department	Hard Drive	●		MP3	USB	10GB	213
R	Philips eXpansion EXP103	190	The best MP3-CD personal, at least at the time of writing... An effective solution for MP3 on the move	CD			MP3			213
R	Pine D'Music	120	Good build, solid sound and a voice recording mode make this a good first-time buy	Solid State	●		MP3	PRL	32MB	195
	Pontis SP504	158	Not the best aesthetically, but exceptionally good MP3 sound	Solid State	●		MP3	USB	32MB	204
R	Rio 500	190	Well featured and a strong performer, though new generation Rios have now arrived	Solid State	●		MP3	USB	64MB	195
R	Rio 600	169	Neat design, strong future-proofing, good features and sound. Only its memory lets it down	Solid State	●		Agnostic	USB	32MB	208
	Sanyo SSP-PD7	250	Cute but pricey with limited supplied memory, but sound is good and it's one of the first to employ AAC coding	Solid State	●		MP3/AAC	USB	32MB	213
	Schneider MPMan F20	99	The world's first MP3 personal. Basic but still good value	Solid State	●		MP3	PRL	32MB	195
	Smart Portable MP3 Disc Player	119	CD personal that also plays MP3 tracks burnt onto CD-R discs	CD			MP3			208
	Sony NW-MS7	249	A gorgeous little personal using Sony's Memory Stick storage. Good but pricey	Solid State	●		MP3/ATRAC-3	USB	64MB	208
R	Sony MDC-PC3	350	A MiniDisc deck which hooks to a PC. Introduces cheap and flexible MD media to the world of MP3	MiniDisc	●		MP3/ATRAC	USB		213

RECORD PLAYERS

SPECIFICATIONS

TURNTABLES

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	MANUAL	AUTO	SEMI-AUTO	SPEEDS	SUSP SUBCHASSIS	EXTERNAL PSU	SUPPLIED WITH ARM	SUPPLIED WITH CART	ISSUE NUMBER
BB	Audio Note TT1/ARM1	594	Simple and unpretentious, it delivers a real taste of true high end performance at an affordable price	●			33/45	●	●	●		203
	Avid Acutus	4,995	Extremely capable design with no apparent shortcomings, don't sell your vinyl 'til you've heard it on this!	●			33/45	●	●	●		194
	Clearaudio Reference	3,990	Opulent beast tested with Souther TQ-1 arm. Tends to gloss over detail, but can sound bold	●			33/45	●	●	●		144
R	DNM Rota 2	5,600	Tonally slightly bleached, but extracts detail like few others. Works well on its own table	●			33/45	●	●	●	●	144
	Dual CS 455.1	220	Neat record player with automatic convenience (and 78rpm), but doesn't match simpler manual rivals sonically		●		33/45/78	●	●	●	●	203
R	Dual 505-4 UK	250	Consistent sounding and well isolated turntable. It is slightly lacking in oomph			●	33/45	●	●	●	●	103
R	Kuzma Stabi/PS	1,950	(Tested with Stogi Reference) Solid oak plinth; sound is very clear, detailed and extended				33/45	●	●	●		91
R	Linn LP12 Basik	1,100	Trails the full LP12 significantly, but pace, rhythm, timing etc still top rank	●			33	●	●	●		103
R	Linn LP12 Lingo	1,750	The classic reference is improved by the Lingo, but charming character remains	●			33/45	●	●	●		91
R	MicHELL Gyrodec	875	Sweet and natural-sounding player, well matched to Rega RB300 arm	●			33/45	●	●	●		55
EC	MicHELL Gyro SE	775	A stunningly desirable combination of looks, solidity and sound make this a tempting turntable	●			33/45	●	●	●		190
BB	MicHELL Orbe SE	1,725	A Superb turntable, able to mix it with the best at virtually any price	●			33/45	●	●	●		192
BB	NAD 533	220	Sonically a little crude, but musically satisfying results at a very modest price	●			33/45	●	●	●	●	203
BB	Notts Analogue Spacedeck/Arm	750	No frills, just a first-rate, outstandingly natural-sounding deck that will last forever	●			33/45	●	●	●		159
BB	Pro-ject 2	300	Remarkably effective at the price, with decent timing and a generally well defined sound	●			33/45	●	●	●	●	164
	Pro-ject Classic Cherry	450	A great looking turntable with a generous and dynamic sound, but lacks something in overall coherence	●			33/45	●	●	●		203
	Pro-ject Perspective	750	Flexible facilities and competitive package, but performance of turntable alone is behind the best	●			33/45	●	●	●		192
R	Pro-ject 6/Sumiko	850	Don't think of this as a deck with a good arm, but as a scaled-down Oracle Delphi — it's that good	●			33/45	●	●	●		138

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	TURNTABLES (CONTINUED)					ISSUE NUMBER	
				MANUAL	AUTO	SEMI-AUTO	SPEEDS	SUSP SUBCHASSIS		EXTERNAL PSU
BB	Rega Planar 2	214	A remarkable product at the price, surprisingly articulate and confident	●			33/45			48
R	Rega Planar 3	274	Sounds musical in a balanced manner, needs decent isolation and suffers a little pitch instability	●			33/45		●	164
BB	Rega Planar 25	619	Great looking turntable has a silky smooth sound with exceptional midband coherence	●			33/45	●		203
BB	Reson RS1	600	Supplied set-up and ready-tuned, this unconventional deck is packed with mid-band detail	●			33/45		●	159
R	Roksan Radius 3/Tabriz zi	890	Elegant-looking turntable with a tidy, ordered sound. Bright and breezy if a shade lightweight	●			33/45	●	●	159
EC	SME Model 10A	3,333	Elegant and extremely capable design with Series V/309 hybrid arm, superbly built	●			33/45	●	●	195
EC	SME Model 20.2A	4,863	Beautifully built, extremely neutral damped and suspended deck with superb sound. Inc V arm	●			33/45/78	●	●	186
BB	Thorens TD166 VI/UK/RB	400	Refined, solid sound with well-focused imagery; suitable for use with good MM/MC budget cartridges	●			33/45	●	●	103
	Thorens TD146 VI	550	Tonearm not quite up to turntable's potential; this semi-auto is much pricier than manual TD166	●			33/45	●	●	203
	Thorens TD2001	700	Balances convenience and sound well, but deck lacks detail and bass could be better controlled	●			33/45	●	●	159
R	VPI HW19 Junior	650	A notably large and handsome turntable with good sound quality and considerable upgrade potential	●			33/45	●	●	203
R	Well Tempered Record Player	850	Intriguing and challenging. Musically not ideal, but its limp quality and lack of artificiality set standards	●			33/45	●	●	136
EC	Well Tempered Reference	5,500	Superb mechanical stability and unflappability result in a clean reproduction	●			33/45	●	●	205
BB	Wilson benesch The Circle	795	A beautiful turntable with a sumptuous sound, all at a very reasonable price – a clear Best Buy	●			33/45	●		192

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	CARTRIDGES					ISSUE NUMBER
				MM	MC	REPLACEABLE STYLUS	OUTPUT (mV)	MASS (g)	
EC	Allaerts MC1B	1,295	Highly capable and entertaining Belgian cartridge that warrants the finest turntable and phono stage you can afford		●		0.5		203
BB	Audio Technica AT-95E	20	Clear and dynamic, though richly balanced	●		●	2.8		48
	Audio Technica AT-OC9ML	330	A well-finished cartridge with a sound that's smoothly detailed, but also rather unexciting		●		0.4	8	192
BB	Clearaudio Signature	1,495	A great all-round performer with fine dynamic vitality and a seductive midband intimacy		●		0.55	11.5	175
BB	Denon DL110	70	A fine all-rounder, this high output MC model is likely to perform well		●		1.0	6	48
	Denon DL103	100	Good performance in bass and good 'life'. Is seriously let down by its spherical stylus which kills subtle detail		●		0.1	6	103
BB	Denon DL304	200	Uncoloured, detailed, tracks superbly. Top notch altogether, and a bargain at the price		●				103
R	Dynavector DV-20X L	299	Articulate-sounding, with impressive treble resolve, though lightweight at times. Needs a high quality turntable and arm		●		0.25	8.6	192
	Dynavector Karat 17D2 mk2	450	Clean and controlled sound with taut, tuneful bass. Detailed and musically cogent		●		0.15	5.3	158
R	Dynavector XX-1L	998	Very clear, very detailed; a response lift around 20kHz seems to do no harm		●		0.25	12	84
R	Dynavector Te-Kaitora	1,698	A real smoothie, but pricey. Worth checking out for its delicate laid-back transparency and low needle-talk		●		0.25	8.5	175
EC	Dynavector DRT XV-1	2,500	Capable of conjuring one of the most tactile, three dimensional sound stages on the vinyl planet. Extremely entertaining		●		0.3	13	208
R	Goldring Elan	19	A lightweight and frisky-sounding MM apparently based on Nagaoka MM4 body	●		●	5.0	7	67
R	Goldring 1012GX	79	Slightly harsh but plenty of life and detail. Some high frequency coloration apparent	●		●	6.5	7	85
R	Goldring 1022GX	99	As with 1012, a touch harsh; detail and transient purity improved	●		●	6.5	7	85
R	Goldring Eroica LX	110	Not the most subtle cartridge in the world: can sound edgy at times, but lively and informative		●		0.5	8	84
	Goldring 1042	120	Not terribly subtle, and not such good value alongside 1012 and 1022. Quite lively, though		●	●	6.5	6	91
	Goldring Elite	220	The basics are right, and it will cheerfully tackle any source material, but its sound is not the cleanest		●		0.5	8	103
	Goldring Excel VX	525	Good bass drive but dull and imprecise higher up. An old-fashioned sound that falls short of the true high end		●		0.45	8	175
BB	Grado Prestige Gold	149	Rich sounding with an unusually refined top-end for a moving magnet-type cartridge	●		●	4	6	158
	Grado Reference	995	Loads of tracking headroom but treble is limited. A prospect for mid-oriented valve amp users	●		●	1.7	6.5	175
BB	Linn K9	125	Linn improved this model by beefing up the Basik's bodywork and adding a super stylus	●		●	4.5	5	Col
	London Decca Maroon	259	Now manufactured under the London brand name, this Decca cartridge is as iconoclastic as ever	●			5.0	6	67
	London Decca S Gold	399	Immediate and detailed, but coloured and nonlinear, with a questionable effect on records	●			5.0	6	84
	Lyra Lydian Beta	599	A thoroughly enjoyable cartridge – smooth, agile and dynamic in character		●		0.5	8	192
R	Lyra Lydian	649	Superbly capable all-round musical performer that improves markedly when its body cover is removed		●		0.3	7	158
BB	Lyra Clavis Da Capo	995	A stable tracker, and one of the finest cartridges we've heard		●		0.1	7	143
	Lyra Parnassus D.C.t	1,895	A real little jewel of a cartridge, with many good qualities, but handicapped by a rather too obvious treble peak		●		0.22	10.5	175
BB	Ortofon 510/P	38	For the price, a good blend of virtues – weight, clarity and neutrality	●		●	3.0	5	85
R	Ortofon 520/P	65	Sensitive to load capacitance, but the 520/P has a lively, effervescent sound	●		●	3.0	5	67
R	Ortofon MC3 Turbo	130	The 3 Turbo is bright, cheerful and bouncy, but subtle – take it as it comes		●		3.3	4	103
BB	Ortofon MC15 Super II	130	A good all-rounder, with outstanding resolution, if slightly bright and close up		●		0.35	7	103
	Ortofon MC25E	180	An excellent upgrade for a mid-price turntable		●		0.5	11	139
	Ortofon MC25FL	250	A bit too stark and honest, but faithful to what's on the LP		●		0.5	11	139
BB	Ortofon MC 10 Supreme	300	A full and cultured-sounding cartridge, with collective attributes far outweighing its shortcomings		●		0.5	10.7	192
	Ortofon MC30 Supreme	525	Highly detailed and even-sounding cartridge that has a special affinity with female vocal recordings		●		0.5	10.7	158
BB	Ortofon Rohmann	1,000	A class act in nearly every respect, with fine groove security and a very smooth and even-handed sound		●		0.25	8.5	175
R	Ortofon MC3000II	1,100	A real ear-opener. Nothing to criticise anywhere – one of the very best		●		0.12	10	84
	Ortofon MC5000	1,500	Limited tracking ability, bright and forward sound, but good stereo		●		0.12	10	91
	Rega Bias	39	Difficult to mount in some arms due to its shallow body, but the Bias offers a gentle, refined sound	●		●	5	4	67
R	Rega Elys	85	Clearly superior to the Bias, the Elys is more detailed, accurate and convincing	●		●	5.0	5	67
R	Reson Recca	250	If you're after a high quality moving magnet cartridge, they don't get much better than this	●		●	6.5	6.3	192
	Roksan Corus Black	130	Recognisably related to the Corus Blue, but smoother and more civilised	●			6.5	5	91
BB	Sumiko Blue Point Special	250	A no-nonsense performer with engaging musical properties – one of the best around for less than £300		●		2.5	9	192
R	van den Hul MM-1	250	If woody midrange could be tamed, imaging and security would pull it through	●		●	5.5	6	103
	van den Hul DDT-II	600	Outstanding stereo imaging and neutral balance are appealing, but rhythmically the DDT-II is a bit lazy		●		0.35	7.6	158
R	van den Hul MC-10	750	A neutral, balanced performer, gives fine depth and focus and a firm, extended bass		●		0.4	6	60
R	van den Hul MC-One	900	This extends all the positive qualities of the 10, but adds greater authority and scale – worth all the extra money		●		0.4	6	60
R	van den Hul MC-Two	1,200	MC-Two rewards with a highly detailed yet fluid and musically convincing portrayal		●		0.4	6	72
R	van den Hul Frog	1,500	Seems to control/suppress surface noise better than its rivals. This delicate and subtle performer has great charm		●		0.65	7	175
R	van den Hul G' hopper IIGLA	2,800	Undoubtedly one of the finest cartridges available. It has tremendous bandwidth, energy and finesse		●		0.4	6	122
R	Wilson benesch Matrix	786	Extraordinarily well balanced cartridge: neutral and detailed yet lively and rhythmically assertive		●		0.58	6	158
R	Wilson benesch Carbon	1,573	Carbon fibre body contributes to a delightfully clean and open midrange, and a quick, lively and coherent sound		●		0.45	7	175

TONEARMS

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

STANDS & SUPPORTS

EQUIPMENT SUPPORTS

SPECIFICATIONS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	HEIGHT	TOP PLATE SIZE (cm)	FILLABLE	WELDED	NUMBER OF SHELVES	SHELF TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	Aavik C4	200	Attractive wood finish stand with a very large footprint but sound is a little coloured	77	47			4	MDF	206
R	Aavik Furniture A4	350	Good sound and stylish Scandinavian looks at an affordable price	80.5	47			4	Wood	193
	Alphason GR 17/17-AS	275	Great looks but sound can be bettered for the money	36	60,39			4	Glass	181
	Apollo Symphony	245	Simple steel and glass stand which majors in excitement factor but lacks precision	73	46.5		●	4	Glass	206
	Apollo Soprano	275	Uninspiring looks and sonic performance that can be beaten at this price	68.5	45.5			4	Glass	193
R	Atacama Europa	240	Stylish, expandable modular design with agreeable full-bodied sound – great value	67	48.6			4	Wood	193
BB	Audiophile Furniture Base	615	Price is justified by its earth-shattering sonic abilities – a worthy upgrade	82	43			4	MDF	193
R	Avid Isosshelf	1,100	An enthusiasts equipment support stand free from coloration if a little fiddly to set up	87.5	48			5	MDF	193
R	Custom Design Aspect650	270	Smart looks and practical thanks to adjustable shelves. Sound is fair with some loss of detail	66	46		●	4	Glass	206
R	Elemental Isotube x 4/Ref	1,199	Blockbusting size and build. Super sound quality	92	45,49		●	4	Marb	181
R	Elemental Audio Isotube X4	849	A hefty stand that demonstrates just how much difference a good support can make	90	49		●	4	Glass	193
BB	Frameworks H500/H175	404	Two-shelf stand and isolation platform combo in tubular steel – made a spectacular impression on audition	70	52,34		●	3	Glass	166
	Ixos Deadrock 704	250	Looks unassuming but sound is full and inviting		46,39			4	Resin	181
	Mana 4-tier	500	The ultimate statement in steel and glass; adds resonance in a way you'll love or hate	87	45		●	4	Glass	206
R	Optimum Int 2000 OPT490	299	25kg stand with shelves between variable-height tubular uprights. Sounds smooth and relaxed with sturdy bass	50	60,40			4	Glass	166
R	Optimum Int 2000 OPT660	349	Glitzy style isn't reflected in sound, which is wholesome	82	60,52			5	Glass	181
	Projekt Furniture A4	215	An elegant support stand that blends in to any home environment with a laid-back sound	56	48			4	Wood	193
R	Quadraspire Q4	280	Simple but modestly effective and very attractive	52	49			4	MDF	206
	Sonus System Elite	330	Rather ugly and seems to offer little over and above cheaper steel and glass stands	68	50		●	4	Glass	206
BB	Sound Organisation Z560	160	Welded and bolted members give structural integrity. While performance is not up with the best, it's great value	90	46,36		●	5	Wood	166
	Sound Organisation Z545	160	Budget price and great looks make this a great value stand	73	46		●	4	Glass	193
R	Soundstyle X100	230	Looks lovely, sounds lively but slightly bright	64	49,28		●	4	Glass	181
	Soundstyle XS100	270	Less character than other similar strands, but sound is somewhat short on transparency	72.5	49.5		●	4	Glass	206
	Soundstyle Radius SR100	280	Stylish looks and a smooth sound	63.5	49.5		●	4	Glass	193
	Soundstyle Finewoods W105	320	Veneered shelves clamped between tubular uprights. Delivers with classical material	82	48,27			4	Wood	166
BB	Standesign Design 4	190	An all-in-one support at a budget price with good sonic performance	88.5	50.8		●	4	Glass	193
R	Townshend Seismic Sink AV1-4	600	Gives significant isolation for turntables and seems to add little character otherwise	74.5	45			4	MDF	206
BB	Townshend Seismic Stand	1,245	It's big, it wobbles and it's pricey. But this is the ultimate equipment support	72	58,45			3	Wood	181
BB	Wilson benesch Asside	590	Sounds even better than it looks. And it looks wonderful	72	37,50			4	Wood	181

SPEAKER STANDS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	HEIGHT	TOP PLATE SIZE (cm)	FILLABLE	WELDED	NUMBER OF SHELVES	SHELF TYPE	ISSUE NUMBER
	Alphason Akros II	65	A well-specified budget stand but the sound is as subtle as a house party	60,45	16.5		●			202
	Alphason HDS	85	A reasonable stand with a smooth but rather bland sound balance. Good finish options	45-60	15.5, 15.5		●			189
	Apollo Olympus	75	A popular stand and a decent performer, but unremarkable by today's standards	40-60	15, 12.5		●			189
	Apollo A4/6	82	A pretty and robust design that sonically fails to stand out from the crowd	51,40,51	18		●			202
BB	Atacama Nexus 6	50	An excellent all round performer and a genuine hi-fi bargain	60,50	14.5, 18		●			202
R	Atacama R724	150	Atacama uses its market strength to deliver a superbly appointed product at a very reasonable price	60	15, 17		●	●		189
R	Custom Design R/S300 MkII	100	A solid stand improving on the original with better focus and detail	61,56,51	16.5, 18		●			202
R	Elemental Isotube S2se	599	Stands of distinction, able to free the speaker's sound from its box in a way budget stands simply can't	61	23,27		●	●		189
R	JPW H51	120	A purposeful stand, a touch dry-sounding but particularly strong with bass. Great for rock and dance music	61	19,21		●			189
R	Mana Sound Base	175	The Sound Base plinth simply improves the sound of every speaker placed on it	8	29,32					202
	Mission Stance	100	Detailed and open but needs a firm foundation to give its best	60	19, 15		●			202
BB	Partington A-4	119	An oddball stand with a sound that's sheer class. More open and focused than almost anything below £150	50-100	19,22		●	●		189
R	Partington Dreadnought Ult.	299	Super heavyweight stand that is an open window to the speaker placed on it	63	20.5, 23.5		●			202
	Russ Andrews Torlyte	599	Subtle and musical-sounding stands, though a touch more 'pizzazz' is need for Recommendation at this price	61	33.5, 24					189
	Sonus Systems Excel	110	Strong performance when filled with sand but design flaws let it down	65,45	20, 22.5		●			202
	Sound Organisation Z524	69	A coherent-sounding stand with particular strengths in the midband, though quality drops at the frequency extremes	61	16, 17					189
BB	Sound Organisation Z522	89	Easy going and likeable performer straight out of the box	59	16, 17		●			202
	Sound Style Select	95	OK but not as good as its cheaper brother the Z522	59	16, 17		●			202
	Target HM60	106	A solid and well-built stand laid-back to the point of coma	40-70	16.5, 19		●			202
R	Townshend Seismic Sink	499	Unique inflatable plinth that works well with decent floorstanders as well as standmounted speakers	4	38,48					202

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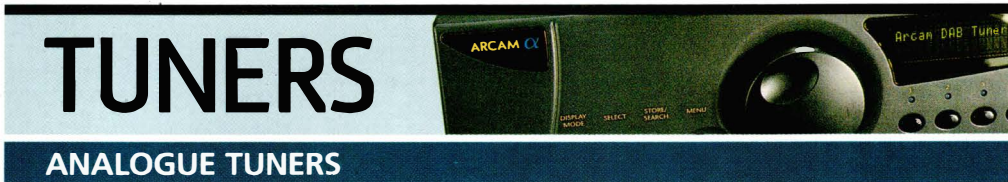
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SPECIFICATIONS

ISSUE NUMBER	ROT. TUNING KNOB	SIG. STRENGTH METER	REMOTE CONTROL	RDS	PRESSETS	WAVEBANDS
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TUNERS

ANALOGUE TUNERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	FM, M, L	64					
R	Cambridge T500	180	Very capable tuner suited to good and less good reception conditions	FM, M, L	64					193
R	Creek T43	399	Quality UK-made tuner offering classy sound in all areas at a very fair price	FM, M, L	64					193
R	Cyrus FM7.5	400	Beautifully made and presented, with sound that's a small but worthwhile advance over budget models	FM	7					211
BB	Denon TU-260L II	130	The return of the all-time favourite, now enhanced with RDS and sounding as fine as ever	FM, M, L	40					193
R	Denon TU-1500RD	250	A well balanced and clean sound with good bass and treble extension	FM, M	40					184
	Magnum Dynalab FT11	499	All-analogue tuner: receives weak or tightly packed stations but loses out on noise and sonic neutrality	FM	3					184
BB	Harman/Kardon TU950	200	Bulky but effective, delivering fine RF performance and good sound for the price	FM, M, L	30					166
	Leak Trough Line - GTA	300	A renovated classic with a style all of its own coupled with an emotive and gutsy performance	FM	0					206
	Linn Pekin	545	Smart and high-tech tuner which integrates well with Linn systems but offers less appealing performance out of that context	FM, M	80					211
R	Linn Kremlin	2,600	Controversially good sound at a very high price	FM	80					142
BB	Marantz ST-48	120	A classic budget model which manages a performance only just behind much more expensive models	FM, M	60					184
	Marantz ST6000	150	Another budget killer from Marantz, with sound well above its class and useful features	FM, M, L	90					211
R	Myryad T-30	400	Attractive product that produces attractive sounds too: capable of very musical performance with a good aerial	FM	29					193
	Myryad T-10	530	A very smart unit which works well and offers good rhythmic drive and vitality, albeit at a price	FM	20					184
	NAD C440	200	Rather polite sound, a little vague at times, that seldom offends but never excites	FM, M	30					193
	Pioneer F-504RDS	250	Cable-friendly with advanced RDS and excellent RF performance; slightly disappointing sound	FM, M	40					166
	Roksan Caspian	595	Neat fascia with great ergonomics, but sound is not really any better than models at half the price	FM	50					184
	Sony ST-SE500	140	A lot of features for the money, but sound lacks detail and has some coloration	FM, M, L	30					193
	Roksan Kandy KT-1	375	Well made but sound is a bit lacklustre and lags behind some budget models	FM, M, L						211
	Rotel RT-935AX	160	Good ergonomics and sound quality at a realistic price, but limited features and RF selectivity	FM, M	20					166
	Sony ST-SA3ES	250	Clean, lean presentation but needs a quality aerial to perform at its best	FM, M, L	30					157
R	Sony STS-B920S	180	A little hiss and image compression don't detract from the clean performance of this feature-packed tuner	FM, M, L	30					184
	Thorens TRT2000	499	Not exactly neutral sounding, but nonetheless makes listening fun	FM, M	59					157

DIGITAL TUNERS

STATUS	PRODUCT	£	COMMENTS	DAB	7					
R	Arcam Alpha 10 DRT	800	The first DAB tuner and arguably still the best, but the system's still not perfect	DAB	7					199
	Arcam FMJ DT26	1,000	Metal-cased version of the Alpha 10 DAB, not so competitive now DAB prices are dropping	DAB	7					211
	Cymbal C-DAB 1	1,000	The first 'high-end' DAB tuner, although format is the ultimate limitation. Gorgeous finish	DAB	8					199
	Psion Wavefinder	299	Bizarre-looking DAB tuner that requires a powerful PC to operate - great gadget, sound variable	DAB						211
	Sony ST-D777ES	550	Smart and useful with DAB and FM in one box, but neither band really shines	DAB, FM, M, L	99					211
R	Technics ST-GT1000	500	Handy tuner that combines DAB, FM and AM in one unit and substantially lowers the price bar for DAB entry	DAB, FM, M	97					199
	VideoLogic DRX-601E	299	Cheapest DAB tuner to date, and concedes little if anything to dearer models	DAB	10					211

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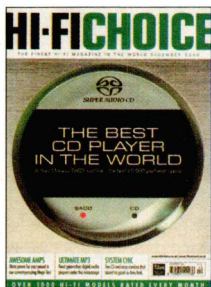
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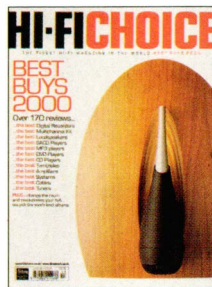
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Our Bench Test next issue turns its ears to a dozen pairs of speakers priced between £200 and £600. Featuring representatives from the likes of Infinity, Dynaudio, KEF, Mission, Mordaunt-Short, and Tannoy, you'll be sure to find something that fits snugly into your system – and at a reasonable price, to boot!

MULTICHANNEL POP SHOP!

While the rest of the world wants multichannel amplifiers for their home cinema set-ups, we're interested in which amps are the best carriers for new super-formats DVD-Audio and SACD. Next issue, we test six multichannel amps for their musical ability, including some of the latest models from Arcam, Denon, Rotel, and Marantz.

LIVE WIRES

Fancy a bit of a system upgrade for the price of a round of drinks (in the West End)? Then you'll want to look at our upcoming test of speaker cables priced between £2 and £15 per metre. Find out which ones can reveal more of what's in the mix, as we check out offerings from Ixos, Audioquest, QED, van del Hul, Chord, and SonicLink among others.

PLUS...

NAD's C521, its updated entry-level CD player, and Rotel's RC/RB1070 pre/power amp get the once-over in First Impressions... While the Lyra Helikon cartridge and Bryston processor go for a spin in High Performance.

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Everything Old is New Again

PAUL MESSENGER CONSIDERS THE FALL AND RISE OF VINYL...

So vinyl's on the up again! It's official, I suppose, 'cos it was on the BBC TV news. But for some of us, vinyl's never been away. The DJ scene has been a crucial factor in keeping the vinyl presses squashing, of course, but as a hi-fi source the 'official' upturn really began about three years ago. Turntable makers like Rega discovered that demand was starting to pick up, and distributors like Henley started finding the market for turntables and cartridges growing.

Vinyl's reputation had just about hit rock bottom when I first joined the industry in the mid-70s. The oil crisis a year or two earlier had persuaded the record companies to save on raw materials, so a proportion of 'recycled' vinyl was added to the 'virgin' vinyl from which the discs were pressed. Poor pressing quality had been a growing issue for some years, and 'recycling' only seemed to make matters worse.

But the pressing plants were only part of a much more complex problem. Crucially, vinyl pops, clicks and surface noise were much more of a problem for those who bought classical discs, with their wide contrast between soft and loud passages. Indeed, it's no surprise that the classical sector drove the new CD format hardest and fastest when it appeared a decade later.

But the hardware we were using in the mid-70s must also take a fair share of responsibility for the problems. As often as not, the equipment that was highly rated at the time seems, with hindsight, to have set out almost deliberately to make the worst of a bad job. Take the cartridges: almost exclusively moving magnet types, these tended to have high compliance in order to achieve the high midband 'trackability', which was regarded as the most important performance criterion. It is important too – at any rate when (or if!) you're playing grand opera or choral material.

The downside of high compliance cartridges, however, wasn't as widely appreciated. Generated by the fundamental

resonance between cartridge compliance and the arm/cartridge effective mass which it supports, this is a subsonic intermodulation effect that 'dirties up' the rest of the audio band. And a high compliance cartridge in a medium mass arm puts that resonance right in the zone where it's likely to be permanently excited by disc warps. Stiffening up the compliance (moving-coil style) lifts the resonant frequency above the main warp zone, reduces its excitation, and cleans up the sound. Tough for opera buffs!

Another innate problem with the moving magnet cartridges of the era came in the way they handled the top end of the audio band. To improve high frequency extension, most deliberately created an electrical resonance between the inductance of the cartridge and the impedance and capacitance of the amplifier input (and tonearm cable). Such a resonance is all too easily excited by disc pops and clicks, sometimes aided and abetted by coinciding with upper poles of the feedback loop in the amplifier's phono stage.

It wasn't until the mid-1970s that there was any real recognition in Britain that the turntable, the tonearm, or for that matter the amplifier had any real impact on sound quality (over and beyond that predicted by crude measurement techniques). By the end of the 70s, the 'subjectivists' were starting to represent the majority view, and *HFC* was pioneering some interesting measurements, especially on tonearms, to back up those claims.

There'd already been dramatic improvements in vinyl replay performance in the decade leading up to CD's 1983 launch, and progress has continued steadily to this day. As I trawl through a vinyl collection going back some 45 years, I'm constantly amazed at the quality and transparency of the medium. With today's top equipment, it's quite easy to hear the evolution of recording studio techniques over the years. The problem, however, is that the very best vinyl replay inevitably involves high precision mechanical engineering, which is necessarily costly. But worth every penny, naturally.

Paul Messenger is *Hi-Fi Choice's* Consultant Editor and a black belt in loudspeaker reviewing. He's also rather fond of vinyl.



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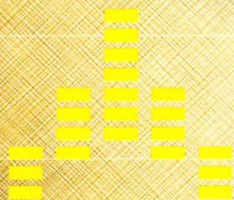
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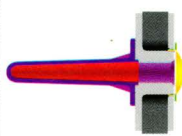
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