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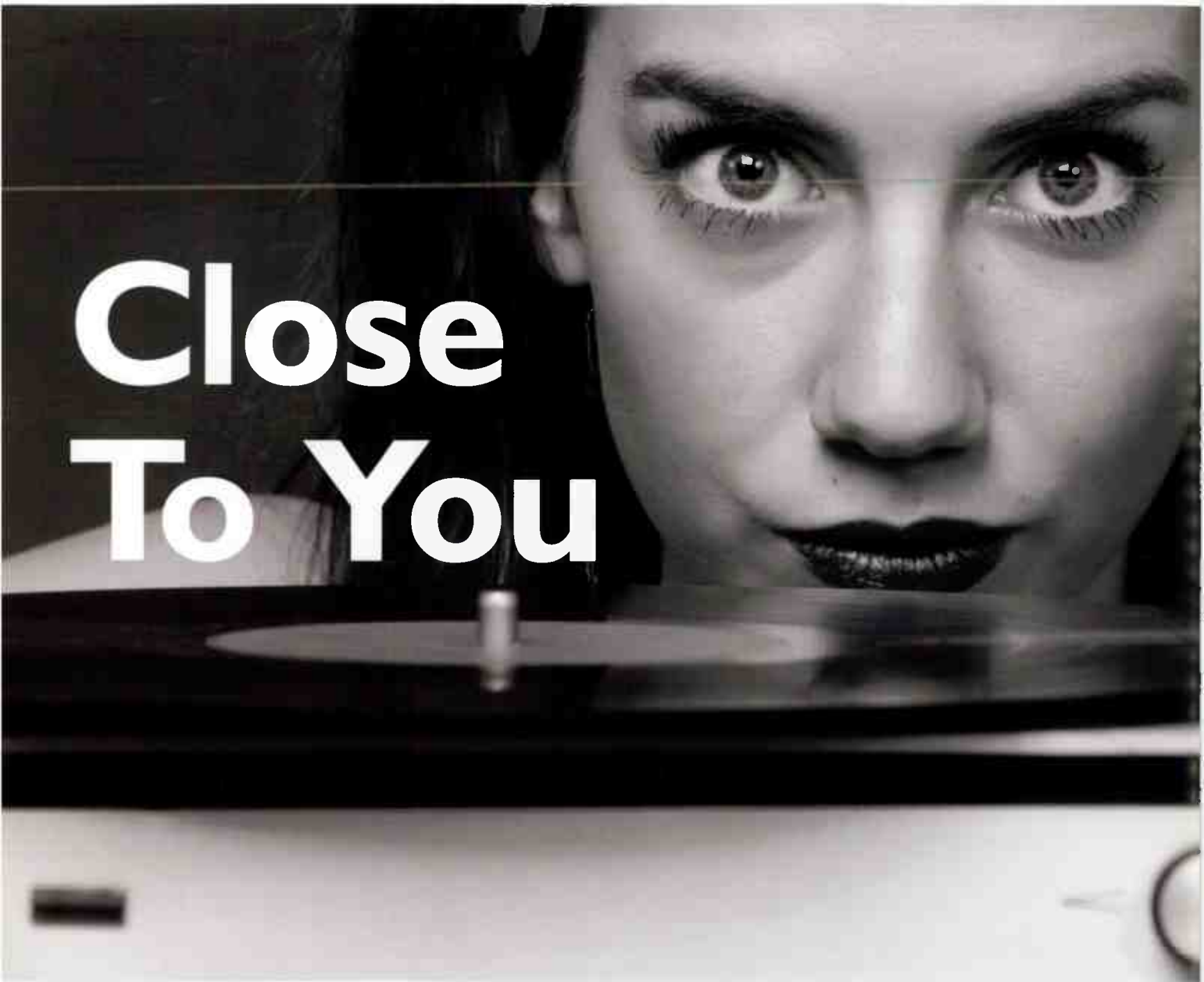
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Jon Myles, Martin Pipe



We received the much anticipated The Beatles in Mono box set, cabbled over to Hi-Fi World by Guy Hayden, Vice President of Apple Corps. Paul Rigby reviews it in this issue - see p83. Paul wasn't the only person to hear it, this box set has brought every Beatles fan out of the woodwork and I never realised how many there are. And it's been interesting to hear the various opinions on it. But a consistent thread has been that sound quality has been so much improved it brings their performance alive in the home.

This is the reason for pursuing high fidelity, so seems ample justification in itself, but it took the recording studio, in this case Abbey Road, to re-visit the original tapes and trust in proven audiophile re-mastering techniques, plus the use of audiophile 180gm vinyl, to make it happen. No surprise perhaps that Guy Hayden is an audiophile who takes sound quality seriously. The result is superb and quality has surpassed our expectations. Interesting that Sean Magee, responsible for cutting the new lacquers, warned me it was a "warts and all" transfer because digital editing techniques couldn't be used, but not one listener commented on this. Instead there was praise for the sheer life and vitality that comes through from the performances.

By the way, I show how these LPs rival CD in sound quality on our website, www.hi-fiworld.co.uk, in the front page News section 'The Beatles in Mono - delivered', or use <http://www.hi-fiworld.co.uk/index.php/component/content/article/684.html> in your browser. This is a long technical argument of course, one I rather disingenuously like having with those convinced CD is "better" than LP. My ears always told me otherwise and I'm glad to find yet again that old analogue systems managed very well, rather better than we know at the time. Looks like others think so too, as you'll find out when reading Tony Bolton's column this month on vinyl's revival.

Valve amplifiers continue to be popular around the world, but high cost puts many people off. The new Ekco EV55SE aims to deliver an elegant and reliable package at reasonable cost - and with great sound quality. You can see our review on p10.

I've just been chatting to an experienced measurement engineer who gets together with his friends for vinyl evenings. They're the CD generation but love what vinyl offers. They all understand digital but to them turntables are a dark art. What to buy and how to set it up is a challenge. You'll find guidance in our feature on spinning The Beatles in Mono LPs on p91. OK, playing mono is a little arcane but these systems will also play stereo!

And if you want to blow your mind with loud rock, go to p16 and our review of JBL's Studio 290 loudspeaker. A 1.2m high floorstander that'll blow the roof off for £760 has got to appeal - well - to some.

There's less hi-res digital in this issue then: mono analogue fights back. Enjoy!

Noel Keywood
Editor



testing (see www.hi-fiworld.co.uk for full explanations of all our tests)

To ensure the upmost accuracy in our product reviews, *Hi-Fi World* has extremely comprehensive in-house test facilities, and our test equipment - from big names like Rohde & Schwarz and Hewlett Packard - is amongst the most advanced in the world.

Loudspeakers are measured using a calibrated Bruel & Kjaer microphone feeding a Clio-based computer

analyser, using pulsed and gated sinewaves, in a large room to eliminate the room's influence. Pickup arm vibration is measured with a Bruel & Kjaer accelerometer.

No other UK hi-fi magazine has in-house testing, and none has access to such advanced tests across all types of equipment. That's why you can depend on *Hi-Fi World* reviews.



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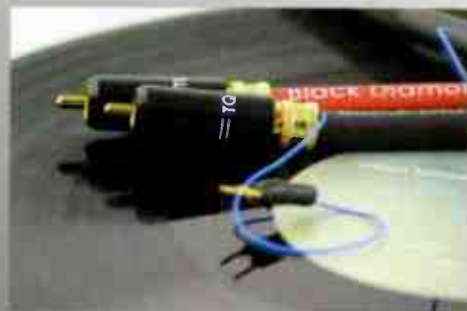
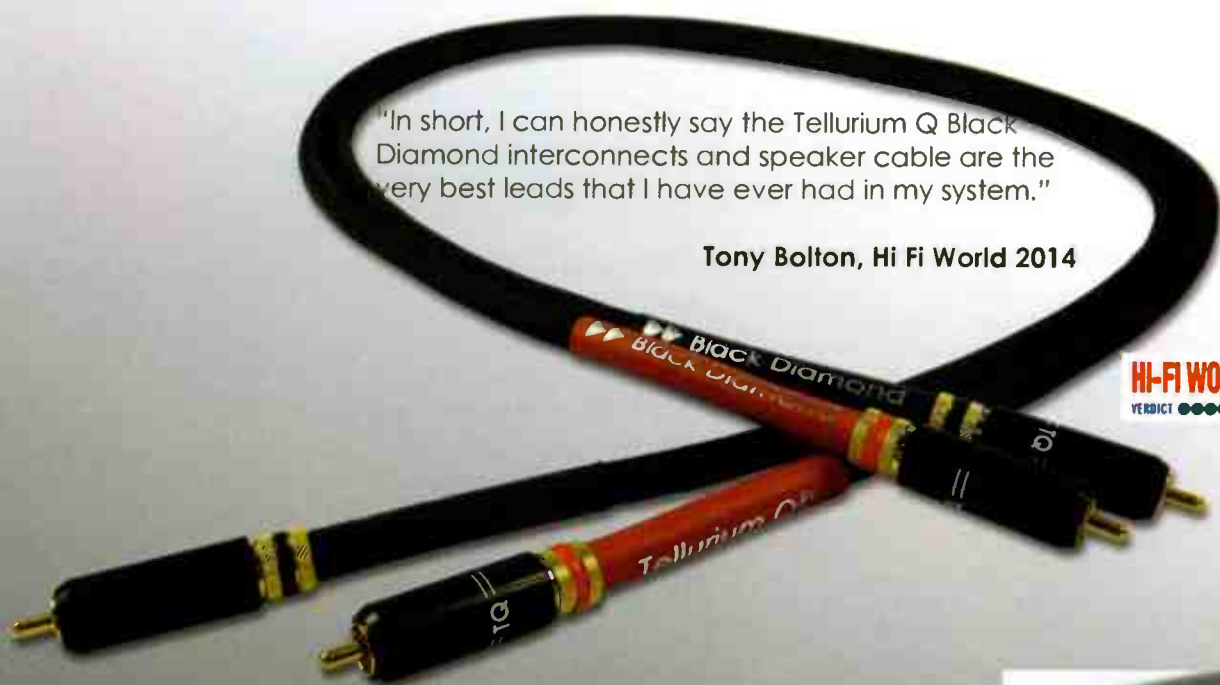
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Tony Bolton, Hi Fi World 2014

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HiFi Pig Review

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

"Nordost-with-substance"



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Dan Worth, Hifipig.com

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news

WHARFEDALE DS-1

The Wharfedale DS-1 is a new Bluetooth-capable, active speaker stereo system. The active design means that there is no need for external amplification. Instead the 19cm tall DS-1 features a DSP-based digital amplifier capable of 14 Watts per channel.

Wharfedale also builds-in aptX-capable Bluetooth technology, enabling streaming between suitably equipped devices, such as smartphones and tablets. Paired devices will continue operating at up to 10m barrier-free distance.

Pairing a Bluetooth device with the DS-1 is a simple process and an even simpler one for those with NFC-capable equipment, such as smartphones, including the Samsung Galaxy S5. Simply bring the handheld device into close proximity (no more than just a few centimetres) or gently touch the DS-1 with the device and the Near Field Communication technology establishes a secure Bluetooth connection. Price is £149.95.

Call 01480 447700 or log on to www.wharfedale.co.uk for more information.



DEVIALET ENSEMBLE

The Devialet Ensemble comprises the new Devialet 120 amplifier/DAC/streamer, a pair of special-edition GT1 speakers made for Devialet by fellow French company Atohm and a set of 3.5m Atohm speaker cables with connectors.

Music may be streamed wirelessly from a computer, tablet or smartphone via built-in Devialet AIR Wi-Fi technology or played on a CD player or turntable connected via one of the Devialet 120 inputs.

At the Devialet 120's core is the company's ADH (Analogue Digital Hybrid) amplification combined with a new proprietary technology called SAM (Speaker Active Matching). This digital processing enables Devialet components to be matched to a particular pair of speakers. SAM enables Devialet's power amp circuitry to feed the attached loudspeakers with a specific signal, computed in real time to drive them optimally. The Devialet 120 in each Devialet Ensemble package is preconfigured with SAM data for the Atohm GT1 speakers. The Devialet Ensemble system is priced at £6,290.

See next month's Hi-Fi World for a review of the system. Visit www.absolutesounds.com or call 020 8971 3909 for more information.

LORICRAFT PRC 6 & GARRARD STRIP

Loricraft has been looking hard at its pricing structure of late and has decided to drop the price of its PRC 6 record-cleaning machine. Utilising a very large vacuum pump, which is almost silent in operation, the price is now £1,799, down from £2397.60. (Walnut or Cherry veneer is down to £1,899, down from £3,025.04. A lid, hinges and shipping is extra.)

In addition, Loricraft is also now offering a strip down service for the Garrard 301 or 401 that includes the replacement of the cadmium and a plated linkage with zinc plated items, plus a Loricraft skeletal plinth and checking and refitting the in situ arm for £960 Call 01488 72267 or email loricraftaudio@btconnect.com



ONKYO DOLBY DEAL

Just weeks after announcing its Dolby Atmos-enabled home theatre AVRs, packages and speaker systems, Onkyo has confirmed that any customer buying a new TX-NR636, TX-NR737 or TX-NR838 Network A/V Receiver (between 1st August 2014 and 30th September 2014 from participating dealers) will get an Dolby Atmos-enabled SKH-410 speaker system from Onkyo free of charge.

Call 08712 001996 or go to www.onkyo.co.uk for more information.

RED WINE AUDIO'S ASTELL&KERN UPGRADES

Red Wine Audio is offering a range of upgrades to your Astell&Kern mobile player. The RWAK100 (\$250) and RWAK120 (\$250) is a modified version of the AK100 and AK120, respectively. Bypassing the 22 Ohm (AK100)/3.3 Ohm (AK120) resistors in the headphone output stage results in a less than 1 Ohm output impedance that can drive IEMs and headphones whose impedance is as low as 8 Ohms, while hardwiring the headphone output stage FETs directly to the pins of the headphone output jack provide the shortest, cleanest signal path. This also bypasses the tiny circuit board traces and the header that connects the main board to the smaller headphone jack board.

The goal of the RWAK120-S modification (\$595) is to transform to be used exclusively to send a line level output signal to your portable achieved by replacing the two stock Wolfson WM8740 DAC chips with the premium WM8741 chips, configuring the WM8741s to run in 'hardware mode', eliminating the digital volume control processing, configuring the WM8741s to use their 'minimal phase digital filter' option, hardwiring the stereo line-out signal to the 3.5mm stereo output jack (formerly the headphone output jack), hence completely bypassing the headphone output stage, removing the unused digital volume control wheel and installing a higher quality 3.5mm stereo line-out jack that is hard-wired to the line-out signal and installing a 1000uF super-low ESR capacitor across the battery rail for increased dynamics and noise filtering. This upgrade can be tweaked for users owning balanced headphone amplifiers too as a RWAK120/B (\$695). A similar RWAK100-S modification for the AK100 (using a single WM8741, instead) costs \$495.

For users of the AK240, the RWAK240 adds 2,000uF of super-low ESR power supply rail capacitance that is hard-wired directly to the headphone output stages plus pure Class-A biasing of the headphone input stages via an installed JFET cascaded constant current source (CCCS). The JFET CCCS's are bench-tested and matched to be better than +/- 0.5% tolerance. Price is \$495.

Finally, in addition to the above, you can add either a SE (3.5mm TRS jack) or BAL (3.5mm, TRRS jack) true line output jack. Total price is \$795.

Click on www.redwineaudio.com or call 001 774 234 0800 for more information.



SONNETEER ORTON MK IV

The Sonneteer Orton Mk.IV integrated amplifier incorporates improvements to the control system power supply (the Orton has three power supplies) with design changes to the circuit board mountings.

The Mk.IV also now sports a fully machined aluminium and stainless steel remote control handset. Featuring polished stainless steel ball-buttons, the handset boasts an internal rechargeable battery and an LED torch light. The battery charges from any powered USB port, be it on a phone charger or PC and should last at least a year from one charge under normal use.

Click on www.nunudistribution.co.uk for more information.



ONKK ISO EQUIPMENT RACK

This new support system is designed to separate hi-fi equipment from both ground- and air-borne vibrations. It sinks air-borne vibration down to the floor, while isolating the ground borne-vibration going the other way. Its four platforms have outriggers which use knife-edge contact points, slotting into self-damped Acetal washers via a cam system. The inner plinths use acetal cones against rising-rate sorbothane damping.

The 25mm platforms are made from specially selected MDF with the option of satin black or soft white. The uprights offer a variety of shelf spacings and come in a choice of Wenge or Oak.

The system has the no extra cost option of a top-table for those who don't wish to extend the system further upwards but the system can be extended up to eight tiers and can be configured to suit a variety of equipment heights.

The rear of the rack has three cut-outs for cable management if required. Price is £1,395. Extra shelves can be added using a menu system, £400 per shelf.

Click on www.mains-cables-r-us.co.uk for more information.



PRO-JECT STEREO BOX

The Stereo Box Phono combines an integrated amplifier with a phono stage to create a compact solution for vinyl fans on a budget.

Boasting three analogue line inputs alongside one MM-only phono stage, the amplifier section is based on the Stereo Box S making the power output 30W (into 4 Ohms) per channel. The Stereo Box Phono is available with Black or Silver faceplates at £199.95.

Also look out for My Audiophile Integrated Amplifier. The MaiA is designed to accommodate any modern source including turntable, CD player, network music player, computer and wireless device. It incorporates a DAC capable of handling up to 24bit/192kHz audio. A single coaxial and two optical sockets are situated alongside a USB Type-B socket for integrating computer audio.

The MaiA also accommodates wireless sources via Bluetooth with aptX. Price is £399. Call 01235 511 166 or go to www.henleydesigns.co.uk for more information.



MAGICO LIMITED EDITION 'M'

With production limited to fifty pairs, the M Project features a three-way, five-driver floorstanding loudspeaker borrowing familiar motifs from the Q series, the original Mini and the new S series. The M Project sports a newly designed curved shape which minimizes internal resonances. The front baffle contour incorporates edge-free top and bottom plates, integrating a new enclosure comprising aluminum skeleton topology, an acoustically optimized front plate and carbon-fibre sides.

The M Project features a new tweeter designed from the ground up using a diamond-coated beryllium diaphragm with optimized geometry.

The dome diameter has been increased to 28mm and a new motor has been installed while the midrange driver, derived directly from the Q7, has a 55mm voice coil coupled to a new Magico Nano-Tec cone. It utilises an underhung neodymium base motor system using an extra-large and a top stabilising magnet. Price is £130,000.

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

HRT AIRSTREAMER

HRT has produced a wireless USB DAC, the AirStreamer.

This two-piece wireless audio solution will allow the transfer of music from a host computer, tablet, smartphone or similar device to an audio system. Capable of moving 24bit, high-resolution audio at sample rates which include 32kHz, 44.1kHz and 48kHz, the AirStreamer is priced at £249 Call 020 8948 4153 or go to www.audiofreaks.co.uk for more information.



MIYAJIMA CARTRIDGES NOW IMPORTED

New into the country, every Miyajima cartridge is handcrafted in-house by a full-time team of six based in Fukuoka in Japan. The cartridge bodies are individually precision-milled from rare and exotic woods including ebony, rosewood and African Blackwood.

The generator system in the stereo cartridges features a patented Miyajima cross-ring design in which the cantilever fulcrum and coils are positioned in the centre of the magnetic field.

Similarly, the mono cartridges feature a unique design: Miyajima vertical axis concentration, which ensures that the cartridge responds accurately to the horizontal modulation of a mono signal.

All cartridges are then finished using diamonds of a type and size specifically selected for each application. Finally, every single cartridge is tested electrically, aided by high powered microscopes.

Prices for the stereo cartridges are: Takumi £1,295; Waza £1,450; Shilabe, £1,995 & Kansui, £2,395.

Mono cartridges range from the Kotetu at £295 to the Zero at £995 and, finally, for 78 users, the range starts at the Kotetu 78 at £335 to the Zero 78 at £1,125.

Call 01803 833 366 or log on to www.miyajima-lab.co.uk for more information.



Ekco return

The Ekco brand name returns to find itself on a new, inexpensive valve amplifier from the International Audio Group in China. Noel Keywood checks it out.



Every valve amplifier uses KT88 power valves these days, just like this one – the Ekco EV55SE – but that's fine by me. Put a good circuit around them and they sing, sounding gorgeous – and all for pennies. Well, not quite, but certainly by valve amplifier standards. That's the design rationale behind the Ekco: it's a straight-down-the-line, well made and elegantly finished amplifier that's affordable and quite handsome in its own way.

Affordable means £1700 in this case. For this we get an interestingly styled chassis that has soft curves and deep gloss lacquered wooden

side cheeks. The standard of finish is excellent, but then I haven't yet mentioned that this amplifier hails from International Audio Group (IAG), China, who also make Quad, Audiolab, Mission et al. Design and quality control is overseen by UK engineers who ensure all products meet very high standards.

IAG revived the Ekco brand name for this new line, to embrace designs created by their own Chinese engineers, rather than European consultants like Tim de Paravicini (Quad II-eighty), Andy Grove (Quad II-forty) or John Westlake (Audiolab M/Q-DAC). Chinese design can be somewhat 'variable', bad from

older ad-hoc designers with no formal training, excellent from a new generation of young designers who are well trained in China's modern universities.

Keeping all design work in-house reduces costs and helps toward the EV55SE's low price. But are there snags?

Well, IAG don't take an axe to facilities to keep the price down. The EV55SE has remote control of volume using a motor-driven Alps pot and Mute but not input selection. It has five sets of line-level inputs, through sturdy gold-plated sockets, but no Tape output or phono stage as you might expect (the Phono

inputs are for external phono stages; you cannot connect up a turntable direct).

Small toggle switches alter feedback level (Min/Max) and give Ultralinear or Triode operation. There's a rotary loudspeaker selector switch that selects A or B pairs, and around the back on the rear panel lie chunky gold-plated loudspeaker sockets. Unfortunately, also on the rear panel lies the power switch, a rocker type combined with the IEC power input socket, meaning you have to reach behind the amp to switch it on – and the rocker is beneath the IEC plug, which is awful. The (removable) protective valve cover will stop hands getting burnt however.

The reason for doing this is to avoid hum; it keeps mains wiring away from the sensitive input valves. The only alternative is a remotely operated power switch but they're expensive so at the end of the day it is a cost issue.

Why no 8 Ohm and 4 Ohm loudspeaker output options? This is actually the clever bit. It is possible to design an output winding that power matches 6 Ohms, so that it gives the same power into 8 Ohms and 4 Ohms. It won't be the maximum power obtainable but it will be off by only a few Watts; designer Andy Grove did this with our World Audio Design amplifiers. Measurement showed the Ekco gave 45 Watts into a 4 Ohm load and an 8 Ohm load so the output transformer has been proportioned well to achieve this result and 45 Watts is just what is

expected from KT88s in auto-bias mode, not over-driven.

Talking about power brings me to optional Triode mode, since this produces less power, 28 Watts we found. Triode mode produces a slightly easier, more fluid sound that some listeners prefer. Although I use a triode amplifier, equipped with 300Bs, this is more because of the valve than the circuit operation. I'm not quite convinced KT88s strapped as triodes sound a lot better to KT88s in Ultralinear mode – and they certainly don't sound like the big old triodes, like 211s or 845s. But then KT88s are inexpensive, easy to obtain, come in many varieties they are so popular and sound good too.

Also front panel switchable, like Triode mode, is 'NF Adj', short for Negative Feedback Adjust. We fitted a Feedback Off switch to our amplifiers way back in 1994 and the idea has stuck ever since. Valve amps are so good, by their very nature, they don't need corrective feedback and it can be switched off, with interesting subjective consequences. Under measurement performance



The power switch is placed under the mains plug – an awkward positioning. Input sockets are high quality and two pairs of loudspeaker outputs can be switched.

deteriorates a little but actual sound quality does not: it changes and many people may like it off for an easier and more spacious sound. Feedback on is arguably the best compromise, however since valve amps don't use much in any case.

But all this is a bit lost on the EV55SE because its modern day designer can't quite get his head around designing an amp and then making it 'worse' (I imagine!), so the feedback switch does little. Basically, this is a standard feedback amp, like most using KT88s (triode mode technically increases feedback too, I should note).

The EV55SE isn't too big as valve amplifiers go, measuring 35cms wide, and 40cms deep, and 24cms high. It needs height above to lift the valve cover off and to dissipate heat. It also needs a strong shelf, because it weighs a massive 28kgs, making it a difficult one-person lift. Obviously, there's a lot of iron in the transformers – always a good sign. There's no user-biasing, because this is a normal auto-bias design; they develop less power than adjustable-bias types but are hassle free.

SOUND QUALITY

The Ekco was hooked up to our Tannoy Kensington Gold Reference loudspeakers and driven from an Astell&Kern AK120 high-resolution digital player connected digitally to an Audiolab M-DAC. Valve amps need 30 minutes to come on song, so it was not run 'cold'.

Steely Dan's fast paced and sharp tempo'd 'Time Out of Mind' (24/96) showed the Ekco is what I expected: a clean iteration of a good KT88



Neatly laid-out internal circuit board, mains transformer and black PSU capacitors; Alps motorised volume control at right.

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World Radio History

amplifier. I know KT88s, having been involved in designing a few amps around them and they sound fast and clean in a good circuit. Think tidy, tight and well timed; there's no softness or warmth, no blur; they are focussed and modern in their sound, not big and open and romantically spacious like 300Bs, for example. What KT88s give you is a modern presentation, not too far removed from a transistor amplifier, but with better soundstaging – more depth – and a more natural, organic quality.

The EV55SE has solid bass and great bass pace, allowing the metronomic drum beats behind this track to beat out a clean rhythm. Ultralinear mode, with Max NF, gave the tightest result, switching to Triode mode and Min NF brought in an easier sound with less assertive

transients and a gentler nature. By any standards, though, the EV55SE has a thoroughly modern sound, but it is also conspicuously well honed and slick – and far from being warm and cuddly.

The Berliner Philharmoniker playing 'Don Quixote, Variation 10' (24/96), had a grand sense of scale and power through the Tannoys driven by the Ekco; it has plenty enough power

to generate a sense of scale and bring rolling power to kettle drums. Horns in this piece blared out with a rich, metallic quality and this is where KT88s excel: they project with forceful cleanness and the Ekco captured this intrinsic quality really well; it gets the most from KT88s and I personally love the sound, even though I live with 300Bs and love 845s too!

It was when I played The Eagles 'Busy Being Fabulous' that I recalled the fact that upper treble rolls down, measurement had shown. Taken from the 'Long Road Out of Eden' CD there's plenty of treble in this recording but the Ekco took the emphasis off it. Bass was clean and powerful and again could be lifted a bit by moving to Triode mode and switching feedback off.

The Ekco reminded me just how much low frequency punch a good valve amplifier produces, and because of its quality output transformers bass came over as well formed and lacking the slight sogginess of those

valve amplifiers with less iron in their cores.

Glen Frey's vocals were made starkly clear and had a pleasantly liquid quality to their delivery. The Ekco makes rock sound big – and classical too – and this is a great strength.

CONCLUSION

Ekco's EV55SE is a thoroughly well-engineered classic KT88 amplifier that is just right for buyers that want excellent quality all round, at an affordable price – as valves go. It isn't cheap at £1700, but construction and standard of finish are superb and sound quality excellent. It does slightly de-emphasise high treble, so



the Ekco is no different from most other valve amps in this respect. It's also a good proposition in terms of service and long term reliability, so for those interested in the magic of valves, the new EV55SE is a solid place to discover it.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Ekco EV55SE produced 45 Watts in Ultralinear mode and 30 Watts in Triode mode. The former value is the maximum that can be had from KT88s in auto-bias mode without shortening their life and affecting reliability (due to the anodes overheating and warping). Driving 4 Ohms, power output was the same, so low loads are coped with; the amp is optimised to power match 6 Ohms I suspect.

Frequency response was wide at full volume, stretching out to 54kHz, showing what the output transformers are capable of. However, turning down volume rolled down treble, limiting

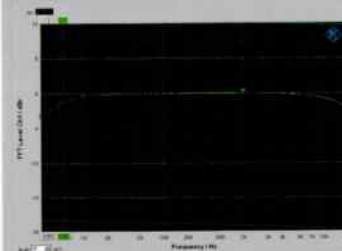
frequency response to our quoted 14kHz (-1dB) value that will be experienced in use, and will give an 'easy', if not overtly warm sound balance. This effect is a function of volume control value and its load capacitance.

Input sensitivity was a useful 300mV for full output, enough for most sources, although volume will need to be turned up high with low gain phono stages that barely produce 200mV. The feedback switch had little effect on sensitivity (10mV) so alters feedback by an inconsequential amount, obvious also when measuring distortion, frequency response and output impedance (damping factor), all of which changed little.

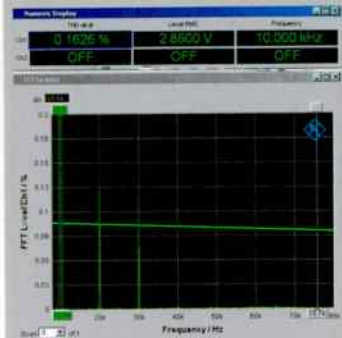
Distortion levels were low and full bass output was achieved with ease, so the transformers work well at low frequencies where saturation can be a problem. However, damping factor was peculiarly low at 0.6, KT88 amps with feedback commonly managing 4.

In all the EV55SE measured well, if with a few minor blemishes. As budget valve amplifiers go though, it is basically an effective design well load matched, offering plenty of power. It will sound clean but 'easy', as expected. **NK**

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



Power	45 Watts
Frequency response	5Hz-14Hz
Separation	82dB
Noise	-96dB
Distortion	0.17%
Sensitivity	310mV
Damping factor	0.6

EKCO EV55SE £1700



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

Well designed KT88 amplifier that sounds clean and punchy – and looks good too.

FOR

- styling and finish
- remote control
- clean and dynamic

AGAINST

- soft upper treble
- ineffective NF Adj
- awkward mains switch

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MB30 Absolute Simplicity 16 watts Triode or 27 watts UL

For many Hi Fi fans the idea of a single triode output valve (SET) is very appealing for its seamless musical truth without the stark mechanical properties that so amplifiers have. Hitherto limited to those who can put up very low power, or with pockets deep enough for exotic high power valves.

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The MB30 is an ideal match to our MFV (Made For Valves) and new Full Range loudspeakers. See our website for details.

Our four cornerstones are Quality Performance Value, and future. Service when you need it. In this age of "built in obsolescence" it may be unfashionable to talk about repairs and spares but our commitment to future service means you should be able to enjoy your amplifier for at least 20 years. All of our amplifiers are designed and finished in Leicester and serviced by the people who designed them so you can be sure of our quality control and long term performance. Our new series of "Low Distortion Tertiary" output transformers are the best we have ever made, enabling us to reduce global feedback by about 40%. All our amplifiers are hand made using "point to point" soldering without using printed circuit boards. We are convinced this sounds better. It also allows for easy servicing, upgrades and modifications. High quality components are used throughout.

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WIN

A SUPERB ALPHA DESIGN LABS X1 WORTH £395 IN THIS MONTH'S GREAT GIVEAWAY!

Here's your chance to win the superb ADL X1 we reviewed in our April 2014 issue. Read the review excerpt below and answer the questions.

"The X1 is a portable, battery driven headphone amplifier that works from USB. You charge it, plug in your portable digital doo-dah using a USB cable then listen to music that's passed through its top quality ESS ES9023 DAC chip that works right up to 192kHz sample rate. It's asynchronous, meaning its on-board clock takes control of ops to reduce jitter, eliminating the player from this role. The idea is to provide very high quality output for headphones of all sorts, including high-quality types that need power.

For those that don't or can't use the USB digital input there's also an analogue input, that'll accept the headphone output of a portable player and amplify it. It has a little

gain (+3dB), so will make headphones go a tad louder - but not much our measurements showed. One of the two analogue 3.5mm jack inputs accepts four-ring plugs, and the headphone output is four-ring, to transfer in-line mic signals from Apple and Sony devices.

And finally there is a 'DDC', or Digital-to-Digital Converter - a new term to me. This converts packetised USB digital to continuous (contiguous?) S/PDIF digital so that X1 can accept digital from a portable device and send it to a traditional hi-fi DAC, or perhaps a 'digital amplifier' (one with an on-board DAC) or an AV receiver, that has only S/PDIF inputs.

There's a short four-ring 3.5mm jack terminated analogue lead for connection to a player's headphone output. There's a 19pin Apple connector (old style) to USB A for connection of an iPhone (etc). There's no Apple Lightning lead, but the USB A-to-Lightning charging lead with my iPad Mini worked, so an adaptor is



not needed it seems.

Measuring 123mm high overall, including the volume knob, 67mm wide and 17mm deep the X1 is pocketable. Weighing 150gms on our scales it is light, but overall being bigger than an iPhone it isn't small, but it isn't large either!"

For a chance to win this great prize, just answer the four easy questions at right. Send your entries on a postcard only, by October 3rd to:

**October 2014 Competition,
Hi-Fi World magazine,
Studio 204,
Buspace Studio,
Conlan Street,
Notting Hill,
London W10 5AP**

QUESTIONS

[1] What make of DAC is used?

- [a] Philips
- [b] Burr Brown
- [c] National
- [d] ESS

[2] How much gain is available?

- [a] +3dB
- [b] zero
- [c] large amount
- [d] -8dB

[3] What does DDC stand for?

- [a] Distinctly Dead Cat
- [b] Digital Domain Copy
- [c] Direct Digital Converter
- [d] Dirty Dancing Cabaret

[4] The X1 weighs -

- [a] 4 kgs
- [b] 2lbs
- [c] 150gms
- [d] 4 cwt

RULES AND CONDITIONS OF ENTRY

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Studio masters



JBL's Studio 290 loudspeaker is a big four-driver floorstander for a small £760. Jon Myles finds it's excellent value for money.

Long-standing loudspeaker brands frequently get pigeon-holed in the eyes of many consumers. Traditional, safe, typically British sound? That'll be Spendor's. Exotic, exquisitely-built units with a penchant for classical and opera? Roll out the Sonus Fabers. Big, bold, brash and built to rock the house? Ah, you'll be wanting a pair of JBLs, sir!

It's a shame these stereotypes exist – as they are usually wrong and often close minds and ears to experiencing some exceptional products simply because of their image or reputation.

Take JBL for example. They're often seen as the quintessential American rock speaker – built to go loud with plenty of bass and little subtlety. Yet we were mightily impressed earlier this year with the sub-£300 Studio 230 standmount speaker – both for its smooth delivery and natural balance. No mere rocker this one!

So we were understandably keen to see if the floorstanding 'speakers in the Studio range could repeat that impressive performance – especially for

those looking to fill a bigger room.

And, let's be fair, the Studio 290s were undeniably engineered for rooms of the larger variety. This is the largest 'speaker in the 10-strong Studio range, which also includes two bookshelf models, a pair of smaller floorstanders as well as a centre speaker for home cinema duties along with sub-woofers and surround sound speakers.

The '290s are big – a 1.2m high floorstander. Or in Imperial measure, four feet tall and 13 inches deep; they weigh in at 25kg each. A true three-way loudspeaker, bass duties are handled by a pair of 8-inch drivers. These are made from JBL's proprietary PolyPlas material – essentially a polymer-coated cellulose fibre construction – as is the four-inch mid-range unit which sits above them.

The 25mm tweeter is again of JBL's own design, being a ceramic metal matrix (CMMD) unit that sits in its own sculpted waveguide, said to improve imaging and natural balance.

Around at the back are a pair of quality loudspeaker binding posts which enable bi-wiring for those who desire, and there is also a large bass port.

All in all, the Studio 290 is an impressive and purposeful-looking package. Just as impressive is the price, the '290s coming in at £760. Being part of the giant Harman International audio group obviously helps JBL keep costs down – but you are still getting an awful lot of loudspeaker for your money.

Not, of course, that that matters if they don't sound good...

SOUND QUALITY

The 290s don't just look imposing – they sound it too. The first thing you'll notice when you fire them up is just what a wide and deep soundstage they throw out. If any loudspeaker deserved the definition of 'room-filling sound' then this is it.

Images extend way past the edges of each cabinet while instruments and voices extend well in front of the loudspeakers.

Play something with real depth and scale – such as Kraftwerk's classic live 'Minimum-Maximum' collection and the music really does envelop you with an excellent sense of atmosphere. The group's electronic excursions see effects scatter from the left and right speakers while vocals hang right in front of you. It really is as though you are in the first

"the JBLs have a scale and power that makes music truly exciting with an impressive evenness to the sonic spectrum"



few rows of the audience with the music swirling around and about the auditorium.

Part of this is down to the fact that the 290s' combined tweeter and waveguide unit projects exceptionally well and has an unusually prominent sound. The CMMD high-frequency unit is crisp and detailed but undeniably forceful in its nature. On 'Definitely Maybe' from Oasis, the guitars are razor sharp and teetering on the edge of harshness. This has always been a rather searing recording – and the 290s let you know all about it.

Having said, that the JBLs were strong in the bass on this recording.

Those twin 8-inch woofers pump out prodigious energy but in a controlled and tuneful manner. Put on Jah Wobble and Evan Parker's 'Passage To Hades' and the agile, dub-like bass lines are sufficiently low and ominous yet still retained speed and punch. Indeed, here the prominence of the tweeter paid dividends – sending Parker's free-form saxophone lines soaring above Wobble's insistent bass promptings to great effect.

It's a quality that also works well on simple acoustic material, giving the lie to any thoughts that JBL 'speakers are primarily for rockers or up-tempo music fans. The PolyPlas mid-band driver is smooth and even with little hint of harshness. Sinéad O'Connor's 'Nothing Compares 2 U' had rich detail and emotion, her voice projected into the room, while the initially understated backing swells with real passion as the song progresses. I've heard much more expensive loudspeakers suck the life out of this track but the JBLs convey it with all the emotion it deserves. Again, that wide soundstage really helps giving a true sense of occasion to the music.

Similarly, listen to Ornette Coleman's live 'Sound Grammar' and the band are laid out in a wide arc in front of you. Close your eyes and you can pinpoint exactly where each player is on the stage – even to the extent that when Coleman shifts position the movement is clearly noticeable. It's a subtle effect but impressive nonetheless.

It's worth noting, too, that the Studio 290s can go astonishingly loud with very little effort. A 91dB sensitivity means they don't need powerhouse amplifiers to give of their best. Indeed we tried them with Simple Audio's Roomplayer+ combined amplifier/streamer (see review this issue) with its 24Watt (8 Ohm) output and got wall-shaking levels of bass from the likes of James Blake's 'Limit To Your Love'. This track has real subsonics that can tax any loudspeaker and while the JBLs don't quite reach down into the very lowest octaves they do get close

Vena

Compact Digital Amplifier



Quad celebrates 77 years of audio innovation with the launch of Vena: a compact integrated amplifier sporting a wide range of digital and analogue inputs, plus superior-quality wireless streaming over Bluetooth with aptX support. D/A conversion is handled by the same high-performance 24-bit/192kHz chipset used in the company's acclaimed Platinum CD players and, as one expects of Quad, the Class AB power amp section is of the highest quality. With a range of finish options to suit any setting, Vena is an exceptionally neat solution for superb sound from any source: from smartphones, tablets, PCs and Macs to traditional hi-fi separates.

 Bluetooth



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QUAD

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enough to hit you in the stomach.

But while absolute power is not an issue, they do respond well to a move up in quality of amplification. Connecting them to Hi-Fi World's reference Quad QMP monoblocks and the difference was immediately obvious. The QMPs are smooth and refined with an innate sophistication and those qualities seemed to suit the JBLs well – bringing out all the 'speakers good points, but to a much greater degree.

Listening to a 24/96 recording of Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony performing 'Mahler's No 2', the JBLs really did bring out the scale and majesty of the music. They managed to switch between quieter passages and crescendos without missing a beat. The gigantic drum rolls in the final movement were portrayed with such percussive power it almost blew me off the sofa. In truth the Quads are using just a fraction of their 260 Watts per channel output here but their clean, unsullied power delivery pays dividends with the JBL 290s.

On the downside there is a hint of box colouration in the lower registers – a sense of the cabinet joining in with the music at times. There's also not quite the filigree detail and delicacy that you'll get from more expensive loudspeakers. Violins, for example, can sound a tad sharp and edgy and lacking in absolute richness and tonality. Although, to be fair, it's nothing untoward for a loudspeaker at this sort of price.

The JBLs counter those criticisms with a scale and power that makes music truly exciting and involving. There's an impressive evenness to the sonic spectrum with a smooth, balanced overall response and excellent integration between the bass and mid-range units. And while high-frequency response may be prominent, the tweeter is not harsh or unpleasant and projects well.

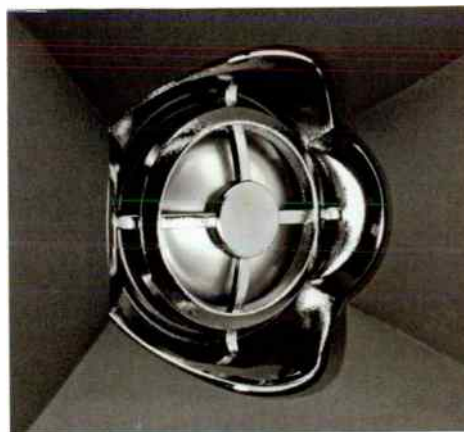
You are getting a hell of a lot of loudspeaker for just over £750 while the wide dispersion really does set them apart from their rivals and really helps to draw you into the music in a way few others can manage at this price point.

CONCLUSION

Big, bold and brash? Well the JBLs are certainly big – and some may say they have a bold sound. But they're certainly not brash. Instead the Studio 290s are an eminently

enjoyable loudspeaker and represent excellent value for money. They can give prodigious bass from relatively few Watts and go loud with ridiculous ease, which should please devotees of lower-powered valve or Class A transistor amplifiers. The mid-band is also smooth and even-handed, adding a sense of sophistication to the sound. It does have prominent treble which may not suit those who like a more laid-back presentation but it does mean they seemingly project detail.

They need room to breathe to give of their best. Too small a room and you risk the forceful bass becoming boomy while the wide dispersion means they are best sited well away from side walls. But if you have the space to accommodate them then the Studio



The JBL tweeter is enclosed in a proprietary waveguide to help overall dispersion.

290s are definitely recommended. For what they do do well is make all forms of music from folk to classical and all areas in-between sound vital and alive with a great sense of energy and verve.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Our frequency response analysis shows the Studio 290 has a flat and even output across most of the audio band, suggesting low coloration. There is no crossover suckout around 3kHz to soften the sound and treble from the tweeter is +2dB above median levels of the bass and midrange units, so the '290 will have forceful treble and be strongly detailed and insightful too. Dispersion was wide and very even, frequency response changing little on-axis to far off-axis, so the '290 can be pointed straight down a room and listened to off-axis. The only down side is that listening off-axis will not soften its strong treble.

There are some strong pertur-

bations in response around 150Hz and this sort of disturbance indicates phase addition/cancellation caused by internal standing waves, suggesting coloration. A 200mS decay analysis revealed a number of overhangs related to this, at 200Hz, 100Hz, 70Hz and 40Hz, so the box is internally lively, but then bass output is very strong, our response shows, +4dB up no less. This means back-radiated energy into the cabinet is also strong, partly explaining the lively box and its overhangs.

With a port peaking at 40Hz the Studio 290 will have very strong deep bass, although the speaker cuts off sharply below 30Hz so it will not have rumbling subsonics.

Sensitivity was a massive 91dB sound pressure level from one nominal Watt (2.8V) of input so the Studio 290s will go enormously loud from 20-40 Watts; little more is needed.

A high DCR bass unit (6 Ohms) helps toward a high-ish measured impedance of 7 Ohms. This means the 'speakers will not load transistor amps and are a perfect match for 8 Ohm valve amps. In fact, the '290s look to be a fine match for valve/tube amps pushing out 40 Watts or so, as many do.

The Studio 290 is going to sound massively powerful, measurement shows. It has prodigious bass and needs little power to produce it. The box is a bit lively, but otherwise coloration is low. Treble will be strong and very obvious.

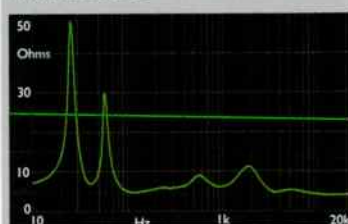
NK

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

Green - driver output
Red - port output



IMPEDANCE



JBL STUDIO 290

£760



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT

The JBL 290s are excellent value for money with good strong bass, smooth mid-band and strong treble. They also go loud with very little power. They do need a big room, though.

FOR

- bass performance
- need little power
- smooth midband
- price

AGAINST

- strong treble
- need a large room

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Tony Bolton listens to the new Canor CD 1.10 valve equipped CD player and DAC.

DACs the way to do it!

There has been a lot written in the press, both hi-fi and mainstream recently, about the rapidly declining sales of CD and its imminent demise, so it is a brave manufacturer who bucks the trend and introduces a new CD player, especially one priced at £3,295.

Except this is not just another CD player. The Canor CD1.10 incorporates a DAC that is fed both by the onboard transport and by external digital devices, and since

it has a complement of valves at various points in the circuit, as you can imagine, it more than took my interest.

After unboxing it, the first impression is one of substance. This is a physically big player, measuring 435 x 170 x 370mm and weighing in at 15kg. There are two finish options. All black as in our review sample, or with a silver fascia that has a black stripe across the middle of it where the CD drawer and the control buttons lurk. As I would expect of a

product costing £3295, the finish was excellent and detailing, such as the fit of the CD drawer into the fascia, were first class. When the drawer was closed the shut-lines were nearly invisible, and when open, it proved to be a substantial affair with none of the flimsiness that so many drawers exhibit. It felt solid and moved smoothly.

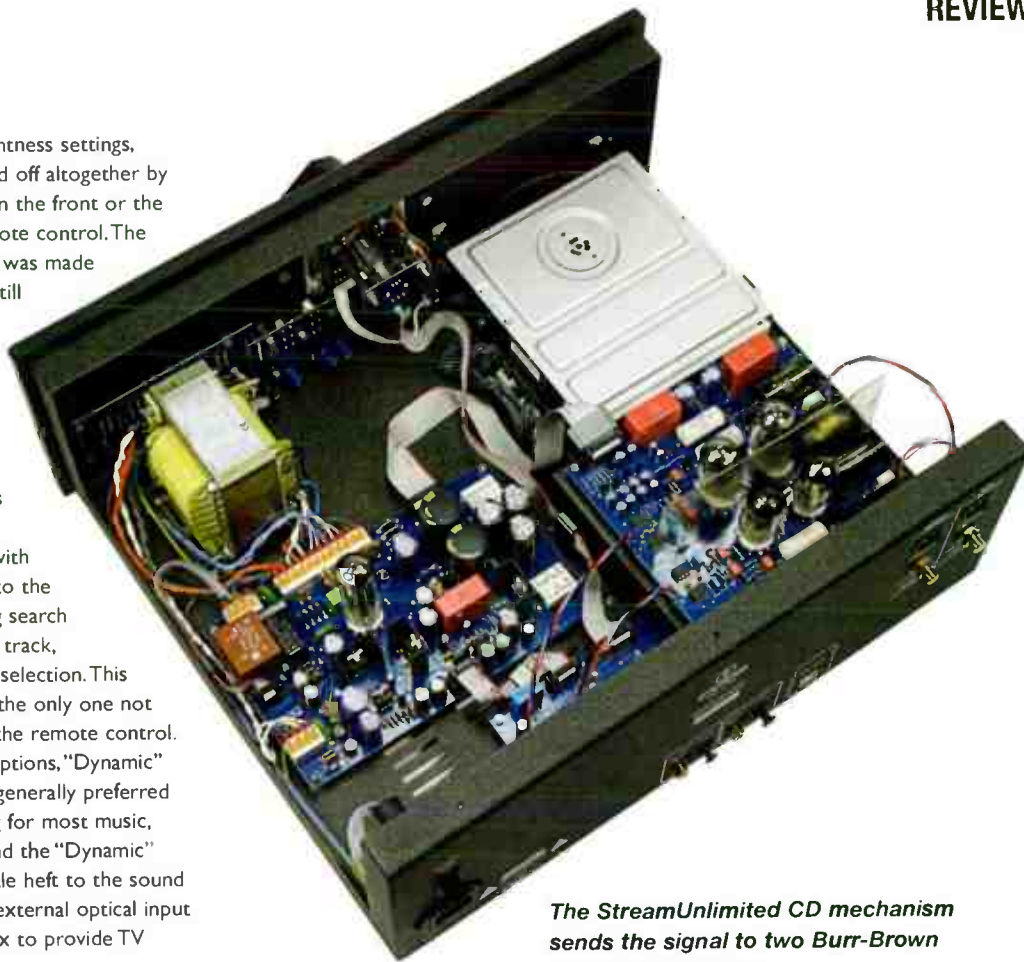
On the opposite side of the fascia was a big dot matrix display that was big enough to be read at a glance from the far side of a

This has five brightness settings, and can be turned off altogether by either controls on the front or the alloy topped remote control. The underside of this was made of plastic, but it still felt solid, and the action of the buttons was positive.

A large knob in the middle of the fascia controls play, pause and track selection, with smaller buttons to the side of it offering search facilities within a track, repeat and filter selection. This latter control is the only one not accessible from the remote control. There are two options, "Dynamic" and "Natural". I generally preferred the latter setting for most music, although I did find the "Dynamic" filter added a little heft to the sound when using the external optical input from our Digibox to provide TV sound.

Inside, the valve complement includes a 6CA4-EH rectifier on the mains input, with two 6922 and a pair of 12AX7LPS in the output stage. The digital decoding is carried out by two Burr-Brown PCM1792 DAC chips which offer 24bit/192kHz performance.

Rear connections include coaxial and optical inputs and outputs, alongside a USB (2.0) input and both balanced and unbalanced analogue outputs, so most connection options are catered for.



The StreamUnlimited CD mechanism sends the signal to two Burr-Brown PCM1792 DAC chips

SOUND QUALITY

Having rearranged my shelves to take account of this machine's size I connected it up with the aforementioned Digibox and my MacBook Pro and proceeded to listen to a range of material from both internet and TV transmissions of the Proms as well as normal TV programmes.

In both cases I found the sound to be very good, offering a smooth and very detailed rendition of both music and speech. I felt that the tonal balance was slightly on the warmer side of neutral, but not in the cloying way that some less well thought out valve designs offer. This is very much a 21st Century take on how valves sound, with firm edges to the bass sound in particular that stopped deep notes bleeding into each other.

Mid range definition was excellent, with voices being projected slightly forward on a very substantial soundstage. Although

not hugely deep it was very convincing in scale and tonal colour, making the recent Proms transmission of Elgar's 2nd Symphony a suitably immersive experience.

The CD section also provided very engrossing sounds, whether dissecting the gentle harmonies of the Mamas and the Papas singing 'Safe In My Garden', or the more strident tones of Etta James informing me that "I just want to make love to you". The rasp in her voice, which paralleled the raw saxophone sound, was beautifully captured, and the rhythm had a thoroughly engaging swing to it that instantly got my feet moving – something that doesn't happen as often with digital sources as it does with analogue.

I won't go so far as to describe this as an analogue sounding player,



The alloy topped remote control will also operate any Canor amplifier. It operates over quite a wide arc and has a good range.

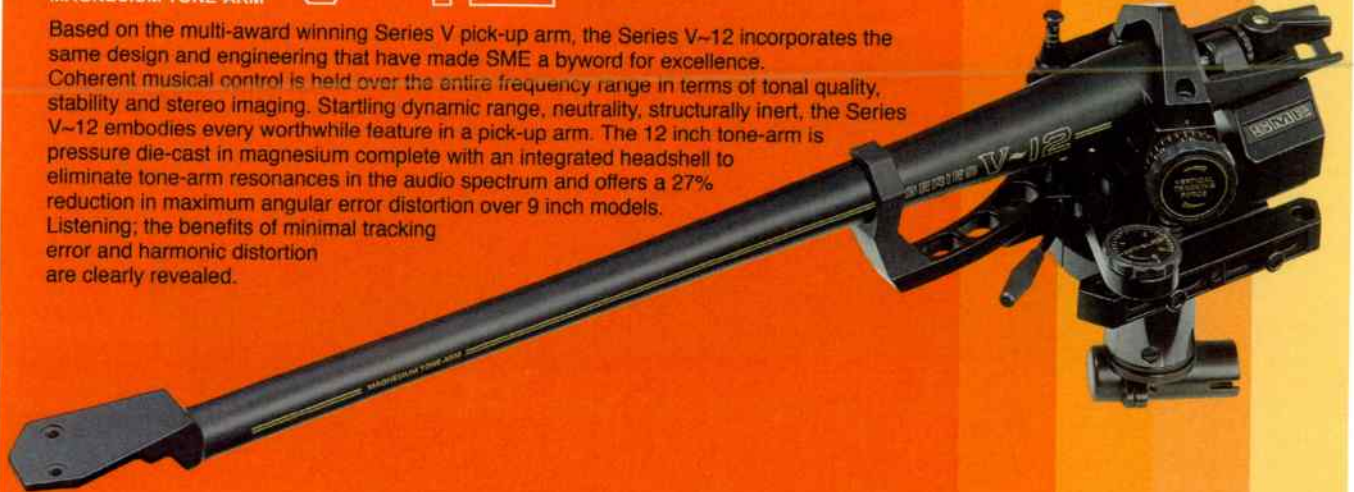


The 6CA4-EH valve (equivalent to an EZ81) acts as rectifier for the incoming mains.

SERIES V-12

MAGNESIUM TONE-ARM

Based on the multi-award winning Series V pick-up arm, the Series V-12 incorporates the same design and engineering that have made SME a byword for excellence. Coherent musical control is held over the entire frequency range in terms of tonal quality, stability and stereo imaging. Startling dynamic range, neutrality, structurally inert, the Series V-12 embodies every worthwhile feature in a pick-up arm. The 12 inch tone-arm is pressure die-cast in magnesium complete with an integrated headshell to eliminate tone-arm resonances in the audio spectrum and offers a 27% reduction in maximum angular error distortion over 9 inch models. Listening; the benefits of minimal tracking error and harmonic distortion are clearly revealed.



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The well populated but still spacious rear panel houses optical and co-axial input and output sockets as well as the USB input. A choice of balanced or RCA analogue outputs is provided. The mains IEC socket and power switch are on the left.

"this is a 21st Century take on how valves sound, with firm edges to the bass"

but neither is it a digital sounding one in the conventionally accepted sense. There is a smoothness and couthness to the sound that most digital sources will benefit from. Even dodgy YouTube sources sounded acceptable, while uncompressed digital sounds were rendered in such a way that

It is expensive, but the sound and presentation seem to justify the price and I can thoroughly recommend auditioning this product. I will be amazed if you are anything less than impressed with this combination of valves, good DAC chips and good connectivity.

MUSIC USED

BBC Proms 2014 transmissions.
Various Artists. 'Divas of Jazz'. Universal Classics and Jazz. 0394222. 2003.
The Mamas and the Papas. 'Creeque Alley. The History of the Mamas and the Papas.' MCA Records Inc. MCLDD 19124. 1991.

SYSTEM USED

MacBook Pro.
Digibox
Leema Acoustics Tucana II amplifier.
Chario Ursa Major loudspeakers.



The pair of Sovtek 12AX7LPS and the two 6922 valves act as the amplification for the analogue output stage.

they were thoroughly enjoyable and quite difficult to criticise.

Although CD sales are in decline, Canor have recognised that the format still has some life in it yet, but have also realised that external digital media need to be catered for. In doing so they seem to have attempted to future-proof this player and made a very good job of it.

CONCLUSION

The Canor CDI.10 is well made and finished, sounds lovely and can connect to most types of media.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

There was a large difference in dynamic range between the Phono socket (unbalanced) output of the CD 1.10 and the XLR balanced output, suggesting the latter passes through quieter solid-state circuits, because even the quietest valves like the ECC88 are noisier than modern transistors. A figure of 108dB EIAJ Dynamic Range (24bit) at the XLR

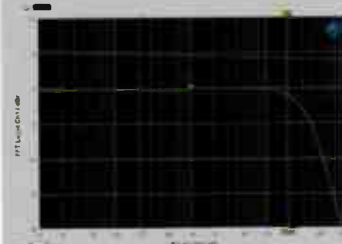
output socket was good, if unexceptional, whilst the 97dB value at the phono output (24bit) was on the low side, likely due to valve noise.

Frequency response rolled off slowly above 10kHz, measuring -1dB down at 19kHz, enough to ensure the player has no treble sting and is 'valve-like' in its sound balance. With CD the Natural filter best extended treble, whilst Dynamic rolled off highs (-1dB, 15kHz) smoothly. The filter had little affect upon the audio band above 48kHz sample rate.

Both the optical and electrical S/PDIF inputs accepted 192kHz sample rate digital, showing a good optical receiver has been used. Distortion with 24bit was low at 0.06% (XLR) at -60dB and 0.0008% at full level (0dB).

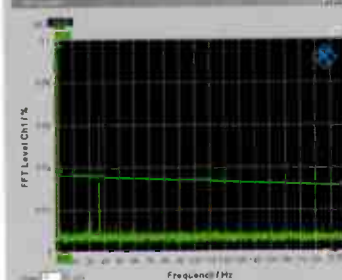
The Canor CD 1.10 measured well in all areas, although its valve phono output stage has a little noise, like all valve output stages, if not at a level that will be overtly audible. NK

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION

0.0576 %	4.1632 mV	997.00 Hz
OFF	OFF	OFF



Frequency response (-1dB)

CD 6Hz - 19kHz

Distortion	CD
0dB	0.0008
-60dB	0.06
Separation (1kHz)	105dB
Noise (IEC A)	-107dB
Dynamic range	108dB
Output	XLR 4.2V / Phono 2V

CANOR CD 1.10 CD PLAYER £3,295



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

Superbly smooth sounding, valve driven CD player and DAC from respected Slovakian manufacturer

FOR

- big open sound
- tightly timed bass
- good vocal projection
- excellent connectivity

AGAINST

- nothing at the price

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

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

LETTER OF THE MONTH PRIZE



KEF Q100 LOUDSPEAKERS

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

A pair of KEF Q100 loudspeakers are on their way to **ANDREW ENTWISTLE**, Letter of the Month winner in our September 2014 issue.

Letter of the Month

PLAYING DSD

When I last wrote to you in September 2013 it was about the best way to play DSD files into my dCS Puccini DAC. It wasn't very easy then but, thanks to software developments and Hi-Fi World keeping its eye on the ball, things are now a lot clearer. I use the latest iteration of JRiver on my Windows PC which can not only send DSD over USB but can also convert PCM files in real time (or so it appears to me) and send them as DSD files (not sure how it does this).

The reason why I write today is because I am setting up a second system in my office and need a second DSD-capable DAC. I was all set to go for the Teac UD-501 to join up with my Creek Evolution 50A and KEF LS50s: after all it was your product of the year in its class last year, and with a nice, balanced XLR output to match the Creek.

Recently, though, two things have happened. Firstly, as reported in the August issue of Hi-Fi World, Teac has announced the UD-301 with a similar specification to the UD-501, at least on paper, right down to the balanced output, but costing £400 instead of £700. Secondly, the Chord Hugo has arrived.

Like many, I am sure, I was most impressed with Rob Watt's FPGA approach which is intended to improve the "sampling resolution" of the signal to beyond that of the human brain.



Teac's new UD-301 DAC handles DSD as well as normal digital (PCM). It has balanced outputs too – all for £400, says Chris Corrigan.

There are some similarities here, as I understand it, with the dCS "Ring DAC" approach. Of course Hugo costs £1400, has a wall wart power supply and no balanced output.

In your review of the device in the July edition of the magazine you pointed out its wide dynamic range, which somewhat compensates for that missing XLR output, and its unique ability to bring DSD files to life, but I was not left with the impression that you were "blown away". In contrast, David Price, another experienced reviewer writing in another hi-fi magazine with which I am sure you are familiar, spoke of a "revolution" and of the Hugo as one of those advances one comes across on only a few occasions in a lifetime.

So, Noel, having had the opportunity to listen to both products extensively, may I ask please which you would choose, and particularly for DSD

files? And what of the discounted Teac?

Many thanks, and congratulations on the magazine which I look forward to seeing and thoroughly enjoy every month.

Chris Corrigan

Ah, I have to talk about apples and oranges here – even chickens. Meaning some DACs are similar, if different, whilst others are very different, and any choice between them may well be personal.

Teac's DACs are superb and they come with Teac's own software player for DSD so this looks like a great route to go – but we haven't tested the UD-301 yet.

The UD-501 was extraordinarily complicated, with a handbook that explained little about its many and various options. Talking to journalists on press trips at the time I found no one understood it; we did solely

because our Rohde&Schwarz UPV spectrum analyser clearly sorted out the best settings to choose – and then it flew. However, one of our star reviewers snatched it before measurement and after a brief listen returned it saying he was unimpressed. He was right too; mis-set it did not sound special; set properly it did. It was – and is – a great DAC, providing you know how to use it.

But time moves on – and very rapidly in the world of digital. Since then Audiolab have introduced their superb M-DAC and Q-DAC – but no DSD. And now Resonance have introduced the Invicta Mirus, based around two ESS Sabre32 chips no less, one per channel. This is as good as it currently gets and has DSD but the price is way above most else at £4499 and likely more than you'll want to spend.

Then we have the fascinating and impressive Chord Hugo at £1400. This did, with digital wound up, measure better than all else. However, this is a tad academic as it can only be used with CDs recorded at a low level when set like this and most are compressed up to peak level.

With gain set so peak level CDs can be played without overload occurring, dynamic range was very high, but not better than the M/Q-DAC and well below the Invicta Mirus. Listening to it, the Hugo was in some areas exceptional but it is a portable and I suspected that a good, on-board linear power supply like that within the Teacs would bring more weight and body to its sound. So what, might we guess, will Chord introduce next? And what will it cost? The answer isn't a new turntable!

I hope that puts it all into perspective for you. If you are wondering why I haven't talked about radical differences in sound quality it is because I haven't heard any. Generally, all the latest DACs sound full bodied and creamy smooth with PCM, almost warm (yes!). Some listeners don't even like the sound because it lacks that old digital sharpness and jitteriness.

DSD sounds big and open: it bursts from the speakers – quite frightening! But then DSD is a whole different ball game to PCM and impossible to process without going to multi-bit. Which brings us to DXD. Will the world ever move to

The Invicta Mirus DAC is the best we have reviewed to date but it is expensive. It uses two ESS Sabre32 chips, one per channel, each with all eight channels paralleled for maximum performance. Ex-ESS employees run Resonance and have made a top job of this.



DSD/DXD – it seems unlikely. But then, if a sound quality war breaks out in an attempt to leverage, say, iTunes, you never know.

I think you may conclude the Teac UD-301 looks like excellent value but I have not heard it. I hope that helps and does not confuse!

As always try to listen if you can and don't forget to download the handbooks too because they can say quite a lot when read closely, often about what the product doesn't do, as well as what it does do.

NK

FOXED BY BOX

This is just a brief query on the The Beatles box set. I've been following your Beatles remastered articles and I want to ask you about the new Mono set if you don't mind.

My dilemma is as follows: like most music lovers I have the complete Beatles – some mono, mostly stereo and, of course, the complete Anthology series. All vinyl, of course.

I also have three copies of the

White album – Japanese, American and last year's stereo remaster. None of them come anywhere near my American copy. The other two lack bass and life/presence which the American copy has in spades. It's not perfect but it's the best I've got :-)

The same with last year's stereo Hard Days Night – my mono copy blows it to smithereens! For that reason I didn't bother with the rest of the remasters.

Now I'm hankering after the Mono box, despite the fact that they're being made available separately which has thrown me completely! I definitely was not expecting that!

What I want to know is, do I throw caution to the wind and buy the complete set, or do I just go for the monos I don't have, like the White Album, Sgt. Pepper, Revolver, etc? Decisions, decisions!

Anyway, I sincerely hope you'll proffer some words of wisdom my way. Take care,

**Dermot Bell,
Eire.**



The Beatles in Mono box set eclipses all that has gone before in sound quality. We suggest Dermot Bell buys it.

Hmmm... difficult one Dermot. What you must bear in mind is that this new set comes from the master tapes, onto new lacquers and stampers, and is impressed onto super quiet 180gm vinyl. As a result, they offer better quality than all the LPs that have gone before and better also than the CDs with their limited 16bit resolution. My suggestion would be to go for the complete box set, rather than bits and pieces. I too have heard that the U.S. albums are better equalised and less compressed, but have not heard them...so it's over to our music expert Paul Rigby who has heard the U.S. CDs. **NK**

Hi Dermot. I'm answering this one partly blind, I'm afraid. Despite my not having heard the US LPs, I would still throw caution to the wind and buy The Beatles In Mono vinyl box set. I have just completed a direct comparison between the original A Hard Day's Night (UK mono pressing) and the new Mono version. The latter is superior to the former in every way, especially in terms of the detail it delivers in the top end, but it also enhances the bottom end. Listening to a range of LPs from the box set, the new Mono editions are superbly transparent too.

In many cases, in fact, the new pressings are a complete revelation. The box set is that good. Which backs up my hunch that the new Mono set will be superior to your US LPs.

My guess is that you will feel that you are listening to The Beatles music for the very first time. I certainly did.

PR

HIGHER RESOLUTION

Welcome to the world of higher resolution music. As Neil Young says, "hear music like we do in the studio". Get right up close to the real thing. Apple are going to be in on the act as well. In fact, if you look around at the moment, you could almost be forgiven for thinking that the industry has gotten together as a whole and decided that it is now time for the next big money-making venture.

I always used to wonder what hi-fi enthusiasts used to mean, when years ago they used to state that the purpose of a good hi-fi system was to be able to get as close to the live sound as possible.

Well, records are not generally recorded like you would hear music at a live event, whether at a concert or



The Beatles US albums were equalised differently to the UK and Dermot Bell prefers them, as many do.

gig or even in the studio. They are not usually recorded in one take and once it gets 'produced' it sounds different to how it did before it went through the producer's hands. So how on earth can a record that is manipulated to such a degree in the studio, ever truly reflect what an owner of a £10k hi-fi system might try to tell themselves, is a direct copy of a live event or sound? It can only be a reflection of what comes out of the recording process, which is hardly exact, as the sound is altered slightly or considerably after that treatment.

I once heard John Lennon sing in a studio (on television) and believe me, you would not want to listen to that voice for too long without it being thrust through the mixing desk and therefore being 'produced' and mixed so that it sounded its best for the record.

I, for one, want to hear what the artist wants us to hear after it has been cleaned up, produced, recorded, mixed, and generally prepared for consumption as per the requirements of the artist, which seems to me to have very little to do with sounding like a live concert event or indeed actually standing next to the artist in the studio when they are recording it.

In any event, keep the music coming in any and all resolutions, as long as we all remember to enjoy it.

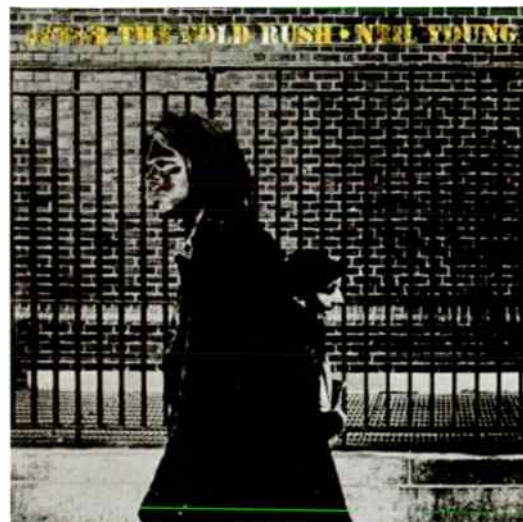
Yours,

James Beaumont.

Enjoyment of music is very important, that is true, James. On your last point, however, we must still keep the technicalities in mind and not trust the entire farm to the prospect of subjective opinion.

You mentioned Neil Young. Now there is a man

who keeps his eye on 'resolutions'. He is a man who is aware of sound quality. For him, the lack of recent technical direction and commercial shortcuts certainly affected his 'enjoyment'. Here he is on one 'limited resolution' sound carrier. "CDs were a mistake from the beginning because of the sampling rate" Young declared. "The numbers were too low. To achieve the promise of digital... it just wasn't there. At first, everyone was impressed - as I was - by the lack of surface noise, but shortly after that, I became aware of the lack of sound and the lack of everything you associate with the air. That's where the surface noise and the tape hiss lived: on the sound floor. It's not the loud stuff that gets affected, it's the quiet stuff. When you take something like a long fade and turn that up on a CD, if you've got a big amp, by the time you get to the end of that fade, you're listening to some of the worst sound that's ever been sold". **PR**



Neil Young appreciates good sound quality - just listen to After the Goldrush. "CDs were a mistake from the beginning" he said.

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Quad's famous "Closest approach to the original sound" slogan, once used in their advertising. But is there an 'original sound' with rock music?

I suspect it is Quad's advertising slogan "Closest approach to the original sound" that prompts people to observe that most rock is not original, as you say: it is heavily produced, with added reverb and what have you to give a sense of depth and dimensionality.

But I don't think we should get too literal about this; it is the idea that counts, meaning what you hear from your speakers is a pure and undistorted version of what went into the system – and if that had been an unadulterated and natural recording then that's what you would be presented with from your loudspeakers.

Modern recordings commonly have the life and soul wrung from them in the studio, they are over-produced. Many people enjoy old recordings, where artists sang live straight into the microphone – and that was it! Thank heaven there is a vast archive of music produced like this in which lie brilliant performances. I'm thinking of early rock, till the end of the Sixties, big bands from the fifties, Elvis of course. The modern desire to iron out imperfections because digital enables this is a deep misunderstanding, where technology takes precedence over artistry. But I suspect Tony Bolton will have much more to say about this than me...**NK**

Hi James. Thank you for raising a point that has been a subject of some contention within the hi-fi world over the years: what exactly are we trying to replicate?

As I understand it, the concept is of trying to reproduce accurately

whatever is encapsulated in your chosen playback medium, be it vinyl, digital or tape. How accurately that recording reflects how the performers sounded live is another matter altogether.

I have the Beatles Hollywood Bowl concert on vinyl. Some purists decry this recording because of the technical limitations that are quite obviously present in it, but as a representation of the experience of hearing the group live, it is invaluable. Their studio recordings are of a far higher technical quality, and the early ones, such as the Please Please Me LP seem to capture a lot of their live energy because it was recorded over a short timespan, with a limited number of takes, and very limited mixing thereafter. As Noel says, this would apply to most recordings made up to the mid-to-late 1960s. The expansion of studio technology after that era allowed for very creative ideas to be employed, and the digital recording media that were introduced during the 1970 and 80s further increased this so that modern electronica artists, in particular, can create and mix sounds that would have been impossible to even imagine 30 years ago.

However, the caveat to this is that modern recordings of more conventional music can be over edited so that they may be technically very accomplished but lack the feeling of

humanity that is present in most older examples.

In my Opinion Column in the June 2014 issue of Hi-fi World I mentioned a discussion that I had with the members of an opera company who I had just seen perform. They all united in disliking modern classical recordings because they were over-edited and over-produced, resulting in a product that they felt had little resemblance to what had actually happened in the studio. Their preferences for listening at home were for artists recorded in the 50s, early 60s or even earlier, since they felt that these recordings, whilst not as technically accomplished perhaps, were far truer to the real performance that had taken place.

There are a few contemporary companies, such as the Swedish company Opus 3, whose Sampler Tape I have reviewed in this issue, who record in an old fashioned manner where the artists all play together, the tracks are laid down in one take and the recording environment is carefully chosen to eliminate the need for later studio trickery.

One of the things that I love about old recordings, laid down in the pre-tape/microgroove era (so pre circa 1950) is that these were recorded direct to the wax master. There were no editing facilities. If you got it wrong then the entire side had to be recut. So the listener is hearing a truly live performance captured on disc. Even with the limitations of the media of the time, there is a life to these recordings that very few modern cuts can match and I



"The Beatles' Please Please Me LP captures a lot of their live energy because it was recorded over a short timespan, with a limited number of takes, and very limited mixing thereafter" says Tony Bolton.

thoroughly enjoy hearing what Louis Armstrong or Sergei Rachmaninoff sounded like playing live. I stick to playing old lumps of shellac because the modern reissues are invariably cleaned up and this process robs the recording of the human element present in the original.

So perhaps we should view hi-fi as a method for trying to extract the most accurate information from the recorded medium and to choose the recordings that we listen to for those that were made with as little studio interference as possible. **TB**

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

As a newbie to hi-fi, most music and the simple art of listening, together with a grand old age of 45, I find myself in possession of a small stack of separate units and a little tangle of cables, courtesy of a new work colleague. Sansui, Thorens, Acoustic Research, Micromega.

I'm told it is Stone Age but it all works and is very engaging. Up until now, music to me was all about the odd 80s CD in my car or when I use the vacuum cleaner, or if I had a small gathering of friends around. I never really paid that much attention, too busy talking or working – music being a background concern at best.

I'm also a hoarder, so when I had the chance to take, and had to promise to use, the Stone Age separates for pennies, I did so.

I have just finished listening to Sheer Heart Attack by Queen all the way through without stopping. I have never simply laid back and let the music wash over me before. The two part track Lap of the Gods is something I could – at this moment – listen to forever.

Hi-Fi World magazine? Well, several back issues were given to me with all the hi-fi, and yes, apparently my benefactor does own some of the products you have reviewed and the cost of some of them is frightening. One month ago I would have said, frightening and silly. Now, it's frightening but enticing.

Regards,
Michael Broadbent.

Glad you are a convert Michael. I think a great number of us came into hi-fi this way: it made music exciting and involving. Trouble is, the bug is impossible to eliminate! **NK**

KEEPING CONTROL

I've been interested in hi-fi for over 40 years now (I'm 53), and although I might lose interest for a few years I



An old cast-off system like this one that contributor Adam Smith assembled from a rubbish dump (!) can give real musical enjoyment, says Michael Broadbent.

regularly return to see what's changed – hoping in particular that tone controls become accepted again. Every amp I've ever owned (Leak, Rotel, Quad, Arcam, Cambridge, Cyrus, Marantz), for me has had to have tone controls.

Now, before I'm told I shouldn't need them in a properly set-up system, or that they degrade the sound just being in circuit, I would like to point a few things out. Yes, in the 'flat' position amps sound better with defeat on but it still doesn't sound as good (to me) as with tone on and both controls at +dB for example.

Oh, I'm not hearing as the producer intended you might say ...true I'm hearing it as I like it and that's all that matters. Nearly all instruments have gone through umpteen EQ processes during recording and mix down anyway, and who knows, maybe the engineer had a cold that day and compensated the treble etc.

Recording issues and personal preferences aside, there's still room acoustics/speaker positioning etc to contend with. Why tell someone to invest £200 on a speaker cable because they want more bass or less treble when it's mostly just personal taste in tonal balance people are seeking anyway?

I see now everything has to come in a separate box as well... phono stage, headphone amp, D/A converter, pre-amp, power amp, power supply...oh and times by 2 as it's stereo.

This I'm OK with (to a degree), but please can someone offer a tone control box that's better than a secondhand 1980s graphic equaliser off eBay?

If of decent quality and between £200- £600 it would be a godsend, as at the moment I feel many won't buy any of the amazing minimalist amps out there without it. Oh, don't forget to put the tape loop back in as well so I can use it on all inputs.

To be honest, many of the other amps out there do offer better sound (more spacious sound in particular I crave) in flat position than amps I've owned, but with only a touch of user adjustable lift at the extremes facility added they would have been right up



Listen to Queen's Sheer Heart Attack through a true hi-fi system and there's no looking back.

my street. I want to be in control of my sound at any time depending on my mood, music choice, or volume.

OK, there's the 'loudness button',

it increases bass and treble alike to a diminishing degree as volume is increased to compensate for our imperfect hearing. Why is it I can buy a £270 Marantz PM6005 with loudness and tone controls that sounds truly great with them turned on, or a £10,000 McIntosh with built in graphic equaliser – but virtually nothing inbetween. Credit to McIntosh for being bold enough to include it at this level. Maybe I'm just saying what a lot of people out there are thinking anyway but are too scared to say?

Best regards

Roland Gardiner

Plus 8dB on both controls is extreme Roland. Around +3dB is enough to gently alter tonal balance to suit room conditions or re-balance a recording. If +8dB to you defines a "truly great" sound then so be it, but it flies against the notion of high fidelity.

All the same, tone controls, when designed properly, do have their uses and Arcam always specialised in this, designing controls that alter only frequency extremes. I used them effectively when reviewing the AVR750 in the last issue.

It was early Japanese controls that skewed the whole frequency band and gave them a bad name; had manufacturers used Baxandall controls (Wireless World, 1952 - Google it) with well defined levels of lift and cut, they may have been seen as useful; a bypass (off) switch helps.

You'll find AV receivers have comprehensive tone controls, including graphic equalisers, or you may want to buy an external graphic equaliser and put it in your tape loop. StudioSpares have a wide range of them. See also Richard Brice's valve equaliser, at <http://www.phaedrus-audio.com/philter.htm>. **NK**

OPPO IGNORED

Some years ago, moving against the grain, I decided to invest in the scrapped technologies of DVD-A and SACD while the media at least were to some extent still available, so I bought myself an Arcam DVD 137 and happily played away with my collection of SACDs and DVD Audios in both stereo and multichannel, playing through three Cyrus integrated amp stereo amps, back channels old Cyrus 7, front channel Cyrus XP and centre Cyrus 8vs2. Recently I passively bi-amped the two front channels with the addition of a Cyrus 8 power amp. (it didn't make a lot of difference but in made me



Here's an unusual valve equaliser designed for hi-fi systems, the Phaedrus. Go to <http://www.phaedrus-audio.com/philter.htm>. It may be what Roland Gardiner is looking for.

feel better, if only for the increase in dedicated powers supplies) all feeding two Spondor SP2/3R fronts and SP2 originals at the rear, with a Spondor infinite baffle dedicated centre channel. All of this was strung together with Chord Odyssey 2 cables.

The quality – to me anyway – was quite exceptional, until I decided to buy an OPPO BDP95 Blu-ray player. Having home trialled a Cambridge 747 to replace the Arcam I was disappointed, the reproduction was crap even compared to the Arcam which I quickly reinstalled, leaving me somewhat reluctant to take a risk with the Oppo. However, after a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, I purchased one and left the thing in its box for nearly a week before being tempted to try it out. After installation and the usual software/firmware upgrade I fired it up with a favourite SACD disc and hey presto - another stunning moment in my audio life time!

This unit, the Oppo BDP 95 and

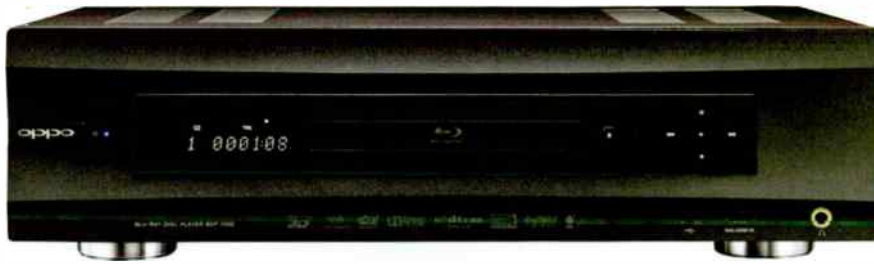
its latest incarnation the 105, has installed the ESS Sabre DAC - all two of them, one for multi-channel HDMI and analogue and one dedicated to analogue stereo, both according to the software and the Oppo engineers I spoke to, output DSD over analogue outputs (let's face it, the DSD has to be converted to analogue at some stage so we can all hear it).

It's for this reason that I am so surprised at the difference in impact these players have had on the UK and US markets, The US mags such as Stereophile and specialist music websites such as AIX records absolutely love this player. Given the usual excitability of the Americans some may say this is just hype, but John Atkinson in his reviews seems to give it a glowing reference and he is renowned for taking no prisoners.

Conversely over here we read Noel Keywood, the very venerable and much respected equivalent of Mr Atkinson, stating in a letter to a reader that the



Cambridge Audio products are designed in the UK so distribution here is good. Oppo have not, until recently, had UK distribution but now they can be contacted in the UK.



Oppo BDP105. "I fired it up with a favourite SACD disc and hey presto - another stunning moment in my audio life time" says John R Walsh.

Cambridge and Oppo Universal Players output surround sound primarily via HDMI and are purposed for use with AV receivers. He goes on that you get reasonable results from the analogue stereo outputs.

Well, I would hotly dispute this as I have never used or liked receivers of any kind, most are made for movies and I have yet to hear or see any true hi-fi manufacturer make a real attempt to produce a hi-fi receiver, mainly because it would be so expensive no-one would buy it.

Further the Oppo 105 has HDMI inputs, is an asynchronous Dac and its latest firmware can decode DSD files. Meaning in my estimation it is the closest thing to a true hi-fi receiver that the industry has thus far produced, why it seems to have warranted so little attention from the major players in the hi-fi press is probably because it's another Chinese thing and not a Ming Da with heated bottles, so beloved of Hi-Fi World.

Once again I find myself depressed that any advances in affordable true hi-fi are ignored on the altar of commercial out of price reach for everybody esoteric products, of which the electronics part of hi-fi is so overpriced as to be a scandal in itself, something that can be confirmed by just taking the top cover off any mid-priced CD player or tuner to reveal a minuscule little PCB, probably produced on mass in China for pennies (but don't tell everybody they will all start making hi-fi amps). Even top-rated components are relatively cheap, especially if you take a look over the computer industry graphic card technology which uses them all the time and still manages to produce a stunning graphics card with HDMI Audio decoding of DTS Master Audio etc.

Yet when an affordable produce that does so much and so many things also uses top-rated DACs and sounds to my ears anyway (and I have been listening to high fidelity systems a long time) a significant improvement on the mainstream, its just sidelined or ignored,

same as Quad, multichannel, SACD and DVD Audio before it.

Rant over!

Kind Regards

John R Walsh

The case of Oppo is one that came up at a press conference held for their new PM-1 headphones. Who are Oppo? was a question bandied about in the hotel's lobby by the assembled journos, including me. Having secured Oppo DVD players in the past from a very pleasant gentleman in Sweden, I thought they were Swedish, as did others. In fact, it turns out that was Oppo's European distribution centre back then; the company is in fact Taiwanese.

Our contact with Sweden petered out, making chasing a review sample difficult. And that explains why in the overwhelmingly important U.S. market Oppo players were getting coverage whilst here they were not: it was an issue of distribution. Nowadays, Oppo have distribution in the UK so the situation has changed for the better.

By way of contrast. Cambridge Audio are UK based and so both availability and service of their universal Blu-rays are, or were, better. Since the '747BD' (do you mean the 650BD, 751BD or 752BD? Boeing make 747s, not Cambridge Audio) uses the same Mediatek (also Taiwanese) platform as Oppo, under the skin their players were similar. However, the Oppo BDP105 you describe, of which we have no experience, does sound very interesting and we'll try to get it in for review. So thanks for the rant!

NK

HOW WE HEAR THINGS

Having recently read *Perfecting Sound Forever* by Greg Milner, and then reading DP's piece in the July '11 issue about Hi-Fi World being non-mainstream (for suggesting that valves were better than solid state and also that CDs were, shall

we say, not as good as vinyl), I got to thinking about what is real sound, and when we hear something that is claimed to be perfect sound (as Edison did with his recording and playback devices) what are we actually hearing?

I suggest there is a human element to this, in that a new sound (shorthand for any new playback or recording device), if it is something different, may well be perceived positively just because (a) it is new and (b) because we've been told to expect something special (the old Power Of Suggestion coming into play, almost a placebo effect). However, when that new sound has bedded in simply because we're more used to it, like familiarity with an album that once sounded new and revolutionary but now is mainstream (I'm also thinking of the riot at Stravinsky's *Rite Of Spring* premiere); its sounds pretty tame today. We have become more critical and realise there are actually flaws in the reproduction.

So, making the assumption that live music without any sort of non-acoustic amplification is the only real source of perfect music (ignoring the sound of the room), it therefore follows that all recorded music - even Edison's *Hill And Dale* cutting of grooves (apparently it's slightly superior in fidelity to what we regard as normally-cut sideways grooves) - is a ghost of what happened, be it a simple microphone-direct-to-cutting-lathe or 32bit/384kHz digital recording, and sometimes we only like the sound of the equipment being used to playback this recording, rather than the recording itself.

This sounds like I'm criticising the reviews in this august magazine; not a bit, because it is occasionally mentioned that the whole recording chain is dependent on the quality of all the links in that chain, and if one part like the mic is sub-standard then there's nothing that can be done to restore what is lost, despite lots of digital fiddles and other tweaks that can give the impression of reality, just like over-sharpening a photo can give it a cut-out quality.

Whether we have the hearing (and even the training and experience?) to differentiate between a well-recorded piece and something that has been Auto-tuned and Pro Tools tweaked beyond all recognition is debatable, or even desirable, because if you do have such golden hearing (such as having Perfect Pitch) this may be a curse rather than a boon for day-to-day living.

OK, so hi-fi is not about day-to-day listening (background) but occasionally sitting in a dedicated room, having serious programme/sleeve notes on your lap as you listen to every nuance of a recording, almost just waiting for a phased/distorted note or a slightly wrong boom on a drum sound (yes, I'm being facetious a bit) so you can find something to criticise and therefore spend yet another fortune on upgrading your amp or mains cables or whatever. The law of diminishing returns has been mentioned before in *Hi-Fi World* and it's up to an individual to decide when what they have is good enough.

Me? I love reading about exotic equipment that I will never be able to own (or would I hear the difference if I did?) and have been doing so for the best part of forty years. My Yamaha CD player (bought thanks to a *Hi-Fi World* review) is better than my old Sony in sound but not in ease of use and my 30-odd year old B&O speakers suit me just fine with my Marantz amp, so I have reached my good enough level, but I feel sorry for people chasing their tail just to gain that extra 1% (or even less) of perfect sound, when there is little such stuff available for home use, apart from (say) a guitar or piano and having a professional singer performing personally. Having said that, the price of some kit makes the idea of hiring a musician tempting – at least they might do requests!

Yours thoughtfully

John Malcolm

Hi John. Thank you for your letter which raises some interesting points, some of which I have discussed in my reply to James Beaumont's letter elsewhere in these pages.

To start with, I don't think there is any such thing as perfect sound, unless you are listening to the sound being created live.

The skill of the performer creating that sound is a different matter. Every recording medium that man has yet come up with has inbuilt limitations and compromises. A listener's choice of media, be it vinyl, CD, tape or whatever, is dependent upon what compromises they are



After reading *Perfecting Sound Forever* "I got to thinking about what is real sound" says John Malcolm.

prepared to put up with, and which ones do not seem offensive to their hearing.

I was not impressed with CD from the first time that I heard it in the mid 1980s. I felt it sounded hard and impersonal, whereas my preferred listening format of vinyl has always sounded closer to the live sounds of instruments and voices, to me at any rate.

In the same way, I have a preference for valve-driven equipment for its lucid flow, and to my ears, more natural handling of such details as the decay of a note. Having said that, both of my systems are currently mostly solid-state, but with carefully chosen components that have that lucidity and flow.

As the Canor CD1.10 review in this issue demonstrates, CD players have come a long way in the last 30 years and I recognise this and use the medium at home, but if I can find a vinyl option I will gravitate to it and mostly find it preferable to listen to because its compromises are more palatable to my ears.

I would disagree with you that "hi-fi is not about day-to-day listening (background) but occasionally sitting in a dedicated room, having serious programme/sleeve notes on your lap as you listen to every nuance of a recording".

Both of my systems are used daily for my own and any guest's enjoyment and both have the TV sound running through them, which certainly brings an added dimension of involvement into the process of

watching a programme.

The type of listening that you describe is what I do when assessing a piece of equipment for a review. My normal style of listening is to sit back and enjoy the music either on my own or in company, and any following discussion rarely mentions the equipment but the performance that has just been heard and whether or not the music was enjoyable or to the listeners personal taste.

I listen to a range of older equipment regularly. I know that a lot of it is not as technically accomplished as most modern items but if it is set up properly, and the technical limitations of its performance are within the areas of compromise that we all have to accept with all equipment, then there is as much enjoyment to be had from older units such as your Marantz amp and B&O speakers as there is from the latest items.

I can enjoy the sound of a well set up exponential horn acoustic gramophone as much as I enjoy the sound of either of my hi-fis.

I know it has limitations, but, as long as it is doing the best that it can, I am prepared, in that circumstance, to accept the required compromises. The more sophisticated the equipment, the less compromise I am prepared to accept.

We all hear things differently, and one person's response to a piece of equipment will be different to another's. This is why there are so many different types of hi-fi out there.

Each of the makers has tuned their kit to what their ears tell them is correct. As I see it, it is the job of magazines like this is to try to advise the readers of how these things sound to us, and to proffer a series of suggestions that the potential purchaser can then compare in an audition situation, before making up their own mind.

The days of truly awful sounding equipment seem to be thankfully long gone, and the majority of products that come into us for review generally reach a good standard of acceptability.

The nuances that separate designs could be summed up quite simply; do you like tea? Do you like sugar in your tea? If so, how much? It is still a cup of tea, but the fine tuning of the flavour is a personal thing. As is our response to sound and the equipment that reproduces it.

TB

Tellurium Q

Tony Bolton listens to two new models from the Tellurium Q range of speaker cables.



the bass sound in particular having considerably more impact. In an AV

for AV systems, but for a well-balanced hi-fi system would give a more natural balance to a singer's relationship to the band performing with them.

Moving from this to the Silver cable was very interesting. The latter offered a tighter, almost vice-like grip on the timing of the music, combined with a very deep, although not overblown, presentation of the bass sounds.

The soundstage gained a little in depth as well as width and there was noticeably more air between the performers, creating a more cohesive overall impression.

Vocals lost a certain plummy, especially to lower-pitched female voices and treble detail increased hugely. Crash cymbals demonstrated a more realistic ring to their sound and the multiple harmonics created by hitting one hard were well defined.

Although quite expensive, this cable seems to be able to justify its price with an air of quality to the sound which is often missing, even when spending considerably more than this. Both leads timed well, but the Silver was exemplary in this area and the effect this can have on the perceived drive to music makes it well worth listening to.

In the last few years Tellurium Q have expanded their speaker cable selection quite rapidly and have recently introduced two new models, the Ultra Blue, retailing at £31 per metre, and the Silver priced at £96 per metre.

As is always the case with this company I was unable to get any details of the architecture of the cables or materials used in the design of either lead, beyond the fact that the Silver model has plugs that are plated with 120 micron of silver. So without more ado I settled down to do some listening.

The Ultra Blue, as its name suggests, is a development of the Blue speaker cable (£16.50 per m.) which is Tellurium Q's entry level model.

Paul Rigby reviewed the Blue in the August 2010 issue of Hi-Fi World and was very impressed with it. I was supplied with an example for comparative purposes and found that the Ultra Blue offered a bigger sound in all ways.

The soundstage was considerably wider than that of the cheaper model and moved the sounds closer to me, almost as though I had moved from the back of the stalls in a theatre to about five rows away from the stage. I felt much more in contact with the music being performed in front of me and able to explore the differing strands more easily.

All of the frequency extremes seemed to have been enhanced,

environment this added to the drama created by a film soundtrack.

Overall I felt that it was a slightly 'rich' sounding cable that will certainly enhance the sound of home cinema systems and in the hi-fi world would beef up the sound of an anaemic sounding system.

The Silver speaker cable has its roots in the Company's first cable, the Black, which received a Hi-Fi World Globe Award in 2010. So again, I had an example of this to hand so that I had a reference point for comparison purposes.

I found the Black (£49.99 per m.) improved upon the performance of the Ultra Blue with a deeper bass sound but mid-band projection was a little more restrained.

This would not be so effective



TELLURIUM Q ULTRA BLUE SPEAKER CABLE £31 PER M



EXCELLENT - extremely capable

VERDICT

An affordable cable that offers a big sound that will suit lean-sounding systems or the home cinema market

FOR

- rich tonality
- good sense of timing
- wide soundstage

AGAINST

- vocals could be over-projected in some systems

TELLURIUM Q SILVER SPEAKER CABLE £96 PER M



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

A very well-balanced and smooth sounding cable that will enhance the sound produced by quality electronics

FOR

- excellent timing
- very deep bass
- open sound

AGAINST

- could be too revealing of some systems

Tellurium Q
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Zero Hero

Robson's Voltaire Zero loudspeaker uses a ribbon tweeter to deliver heroic treble – and Noel Keywood is impressed.

Robson's new Voltaire Zero loudspeaker aims to deliver the razor-sharp clarity and speed of a ribbon tweeter, underpinned by the bass heft provided by an 8in Volt bass unit. It's an intriguing prospect, a loudspeaker that is conspicuously strong at both ends of the spectrum, in a stand-mounted cabinet that is less visually intrusive than a floorstander. And to make the Voltaire Zero accessible to more potential buyers, Robson are offering this model direct at a price of £1350.

I've always enjoyed the civil yet refined nature of Robson loudspeakers. The Regis I reviewed in our June 2011 issue we all thought

was easily worth a full five globe rating; it did things other speakers did not do and at £2500 wasn't a silly price either. The Voltaire Zero isn't so slick in its finish and takes a different approach. It sacrifices finish for functionality, the cabinet being a chunky 1in thick MDF affair spray-painted with a satin textured black finish. Each speaker is quite heavy, weighing 13kgs, but that means they sit firmly on a stand. The cabinets measure 470mm high, 238mm wide and 260mm deep and are quite large. The rear panel carries chunky gold-plated WBT screw terminals that accept 4mm banana plugs, spade connectors and bare wires, bi-wiring not being possible.

The long ribbon tweeter sits close to the bass midrange unit to minimise phase error between them, crossover being quite low at 1.8kHz our measurements show. This is a lot lower than smaller ribbon units that typically reach down to 4kHz, making crossover difficult. The 234mm doped plastic cone Volt bass/midrange unit is loaded by a rear 50mm port.

SOUND QUALITY

After a weekend running in and a final de-tox from our Monitor Audio detox CD the Voltaires Zeros were hooked up to our resident Quad QMP monobloc power amplifiers, fed by an Invicta Mirus DAC receiving high-resolution digital from an

Astell&Kern AK120 portable player. The speakers were pointed down our room and not toed in, since measurement showed this is how they work best.

The large ribbon tweeters endow this loudspeaker with sublimely sweet yet lightning-fast treble. With Tom Petty's 'Refugee' (24/96) the soundstage stretched in an arc – up and over – between the loudspeakers. The height perspective was surprising because our listening room's ceiling is 13ft above the speakers at a steep slant, so there's no useful ceiling reflection. The Voltaire Zeros manage this feat without outside help then (!) so it will – or should – be audible in any room. Their semi-celestial imaging was an attractive feature. And with a recording that sometimes sounds a bit harsh and muddled the Voltaire Zeros sounded sweet and easy with that lovely clarity and incisive quality that ribbons have.

I'll mention quickly that ribbon tweeters shame domes by sounding liquid clear, smooth, fast, very concise and brimming with fine detail – and that's broadly what I heard from the ribbon of the Robsons. Strummed guitar strings were razor sharp yet the effect wasn't aurally painful; the speaker sounds very composed.

The big bass unit has plenty of low end weight and a fruity, full-bodied sound, making the strong bass line in Diana Krall's 'Narrow Daylight' (24/96) strong and obvious.

There was some bloom from the box, but then the Robsons produce strong bass from a medium-sized cabinet so this is to be expected. Diana Krall's enunciation was utterly concise, perfectly captured, yet gloriously easy on the ear at the same time – a difficult feat. I loved the relaxed demeanour of these loudspeakers, yet they conveyed detail aplenty; ribbons always do.

There is, subjectively, a mild disconnect between the bass/midrange unit and tweeter in character terms but at the same time this gave them their laconic air and made for relaxing listening. Measurement showed nothing is missing.

Their ever-so-smooth nature delivered Nigel Kennedy's violin with a svelte sense of realism that made the tortured strings of his Stradivarius a lot more easy for me to appreciate than is possible from dome tweeters. This is why so many German loudspeaker manufacturers

now use ribbon tweeters, I should say, whilst British companies remain reluctant (they're expensive).

The Bruckner Orchestra Linz, playing Tchaikovsky's 'Waltz of the Flowers' came over as large and lush, violins again sounding easy and sweet, yet well separated. Plucked bass was obvious and the box had a small contribution to make, but these are compact loudspeakers with a generously proportioned sound that's velvety smooth on the ear.



CONCLUSION

The Voltaire Zero is an interesting proposition. It offers fabulously pure treble, clearly better than that from a dome tweeter – and if you look around, that means most other loudspeakers. Add in a big, bold sound from the

large bass unit and you come up with a unique loudspeaker.

There's a change of character between the drive units and the big Volt, that covers much of the midband, has a mellow quality not commonly encountered these days. It sets the tone, as it were. Bass was full bodied, giving a meaty sound with plenty of low end weight.

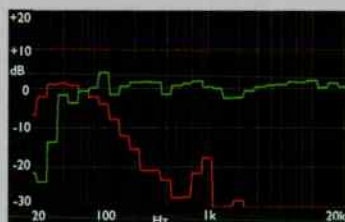
There are precious few loudspeakers around with such gorgeous treble at the low price of the Zeros that – if you'll pardon the alliteration – makes them heroes. Nor are there any that offer such concise rainbow imaging. The Voltaire Zero has unique strengths, is great value and is well worth hearing I feel.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Our frequency response analysis shows an even trend across the audio band, with no peaks. The ribbon tweeter is very smooth in its output, as most are - they don't peak like dome tweeters. The crossover dip around 2kHz isn't very pronounced in our analysis, which is taken off-axis by 15 degrees or so. Measured on-axis this dip is more obvious, so the Voltaires work best when pointed straight down a room. They should not be toed in. The ribbon tweeter doesn't lack output so subjectively it will be obvious, but its output

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

Green - driver output
Red - port output



IMPEDANCE



doesn't peak so there will be no undue sharpness in the sound. Upper midrange detailing should be very good.

The large bass/midrange unit works smoothly down to 40Hz and the port (red trace) both damps it well and provides some low bass output around its tune frequency of 38Hz. With no bass peaking the Voltaire Zero will not sound bass heavy.

Sensitivity was average at 86dB sound pressure level from one nominal Watt of input (2.8V), largely because a 7 Ohm DCR bass unit is used, keeping impedance high, measuring out at 13 Ohms overall. As result high power amplifiers are needed for high volume, at least 60 Watts.

A 200mS decay analysis underlines how clean the ribbon tweeter is, with virtually no overhang, and the bass midrange unit puts up a respectable performance too. There is a long cabinet mode at 60Hz that causes bass overhang but box speakers that produce bass always overhang because the energy they produce is never fully absorbed internally.

The Voltaire Zero measures well. It is accurate, peak free but will have super clean and incisive treble from the ribbon tweeter. Bass will be in good proportion and well damped. It does need power to go loud however. **NK**

ROBSON VOLTAIRE ZERO £1350



EXCELLENT - extremely capable

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT
Superb ribbon treble and full bass, at a great price. Superb.

FOR
- concise and clear treble
- easy midband
- fulsome bass

AGAINST
- some bass bloom
- a little boxy
- lacklustre finish

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Direct To Berlin

Germany's respected classical label Berliner Meister Schallplatten talks to Paul Rigby about its Direct-To-Disc recordings.

In the last issue, I looked at Rock's attempt to tackle Direct-To-Disc technology, with Third Man in the USA. In this issue, I'm examining classical music's approach to the resurgent technique but, this time, in Europe. Germany, to be exact and Berliner Meister Schallplatten (BMS), which records in the Emil Berliner Studios.

To recap, Direct-To-Disc (DTD) is a simplified vinyl recording technique. Instead of recording music in the studio to tape, to be then mixed and mastered and eventually pressed to vinyl, DTD does away with all of that. As the music is played it is sent direct to the cutting lathe, with mixing done on the fly.

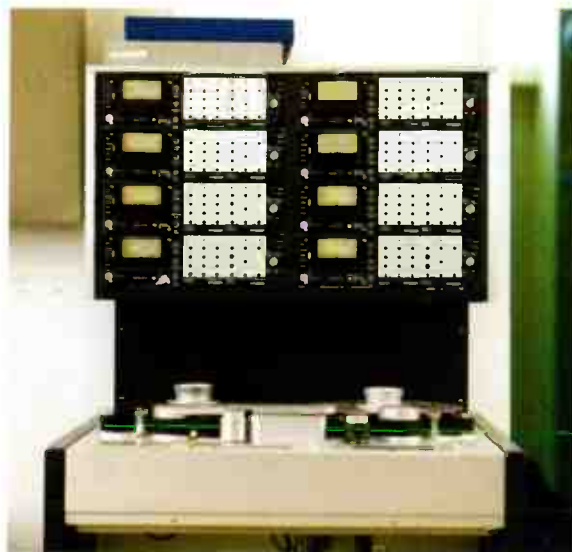
The technique was popular in the early to mid-seventies but is now resurgent with several companies investigating the process.

This German company is arguably the most venerated to adopt the technique.

The studio is a former recording facility for Deutsche Grammophon and has been in the DG fold for 100 years, although Rainer Maillard, recording engineer/producer and owner of both the label and studio, has been attached to the company for rather less time.

"I started as a recording engineer in the eighties, handling recordings of Bernstein" he said. "In 2008, Universal/DG decided to out-source all recording activities. They asked us to buy all of the equipment and so we did. We still record for DG but we also connect with other companies. At this time, the

This Studer A80, reel-to-reel tape player, is used as a back-up to allow artists to hear their performance.



FEATURE

recording business was totally digital. We had one analogue facility, based in an office in Hanover”.

The reason? Emil Berliner, who was the founder of Deutsche Grammophon and also EMI and the inventor of the gramophone, was born in the city. In 2009, that facility was moved to Berlin, into a building with recording rooms and a small concert hall attached. Maillard looked at the combination: recording facilities, vinyl cutting machine and concert hall and wondered how they could be best utilised.

“Because cutting machines were comparatively rare we thought that Direct-To-Disc recordings would be a good idea” said Maillard. “Not many studios can do this. The other point was that I was educated in analogue. Soon after I began working, though, everything converted to digital. Initially, it was great to edit and mix in this way. We were proud to use digital equipment. DG was strong in this area for classical recording. During the last few years, though, I began to have doubts”.

These doubts didn't surround the hoary old question of analogue vs digital or vinyl vs CD. The problem was centred more on the work flow.

“With digital tools, almost everything is possible” said Maillard.

Maarten de Boer, in-house mastering engineer.



It's pure analogue all the way through. That includes the mixing desk, microphone and even echo effects.



Rainer Maillard, recording engineer/producer and owner of both the label and studio.

“You can manipulate, edit and mix. The trouble is, in recording sessions, musicians tend to think that, ‘I don't have to be so well prepared, it can be sorted out in post production’. Last year I made a recording of one of Beethoven's Sonatas but the artist couldn't record a whole movement all the way through. It was recorded step by step. The digital tools took over the process of doing the record. Not a good thing. Some artists have become lazy”.

With digital, the very fabric of how we view recorded music and its structure, has changed. Now, you don't need to source good recording locations any more, for example. If it doesn't sound great, digital plug-ins will improve that. You don't need as many recording hours because editing will take care of that. If the singer is not well then you can do an overdub later. In the analogue world, all of this was not possible, of course.

“Three years ago, I thought, ‘What are we doing here?’” said Maillard. “The digital processing was not good for the product. More time was being spent in post-production than in the initial production. It took away from the performance”.

This meant, when Maillard undertook his first Direct-To-Disc performance, he had no post production to look forward to: none.

“In DTD, you do the recording and it goes directly to the lacquer disc. It's similar to a live recording. If the groove is cut, it is finished. Everything you want to achieve is then done before the recording begins or while the recording is happening. You have to start to practice, decide on the order because of the vinyl space and the different sides. It's the opposite of digital recording” said Maillard.

While Maillard and his colleagues

perfected the technique, initial business forays stumbled. Possible clients showed plenty of interest but no commitment. So Maillard decided to form his own label, BMS, and do it himself. The company has released ten records so far.

There are problems, though. For example, some musicians will not take part. You can guess why. “You must perform very well”, said Maillard. “You cannot remove mistakes. You have to play on the beat or sing in tune”.

Direct-To-Disc, therefore, separates the men from the boys, as it were. Those with genuine talent



The Neumann VMS 80 lathe, part of the analogue-only chain.

and those that depend on technology to fill in their inadequacies.

“With DTD, you are restricted to special musicians. Secondly, you cannot move the machine out of the studio so that means that you're restricted by space, which means no operas. In theory, with enough money, you could do it, but it's a large undertaking” said Maillard.

During the DTD process, Maillard shuns any digital equipment, it's pure analogue all the way through. That includes the mixing desk, microphone and even echo effects. For the latter, you would normally use a Lexicon unit or plug-in. Maillard uses his own staircase.

“The preparation has to be



precise" he said. "Everything has to be clear. The levelling, the length of the pieces, the mix, the solo and so on. You need more man power for a DTD recording too. Even someone to stop other people running into the studio. With a digital recording, you could stop and make an edit. With DTD, everything is lost. You also have to be sure that no one has a mobile phone on. Basic things like that.

In the digital world, you can put your feet on the table and press a button. With DTD, that is not possible".

BMS also utilises a Neumann lathe but, because tape is not used, there is not room for the important preview facility within the recording process, which is used in conjunction with master tape. The latter improves efficiency, changing the space in between the grooves on the disc depending on what type of music it sees coming down the 'pipe'. Without the preview facility, all of the grooves are evenly spaced along the vinyl side,

taking up more physical space and reducing playing time from around twenty-four minutes to nineteen.

Initially, no 'archive' except the cut disc itself was retained. Now, a parallel recorded master tape is created to enable the artist to hear the recording after the event and a CD version is also made to help BMS monitor the test pressing and the performance of the cutting plant facility. Neither the tape or CD is ever commercially released, however.

So what is the industry's response to DTD, now they have seen it in action and releases 'in the wild'?

"A lot of people are very interested" said Maillard. "Some musicians, when I talk to them...think. They think about how they could do such a recording. A lot of musicians are fascinated but others are wary. The big companies, DG for example, know what we do but they don't think that this is a product for them. They do clean productions and they see this as a very small market in a small market".

So what about the public itself? "You have to explain it. There is a difference between sound and pictures, you don't have to explain production in pictures. If you see a movie, you see an edit. There is an Oscar regularly available for best movie editing. With audio, it's almost impossible. If it's good, you are not supposed to even hear the edit. It's hard to gauge the work of the engineer in DTD and the fact that there are no edits compared to the many inserted to a typical CD production. Hence, to explain the advantages and disadvantages of DTD is not so easy in editing terms".

"At the moment, the sales are not great but I love the results of DTD. We give something to the music lovers that is more than a



UNEXPECTED INCIDENTS

"We had a band with a singer in to record DTD. They were from New York" said Maillard. "We rehearsed for two days and then was just about to do the recording when the guitar player said that he was hungry. He said that, when he was hungry, he couldn't perform at 100%. So we said, OK, we eat first. Before we could arrange for food, though, the bass player then said, 'If I order a pizza I will need a two-hour gap to be able to perform 100%.' They then started to discuss what time they could make the recording. This kind of discussion you will never find in a normal production".



mere file. We are offering a unique performance. It's an original. A bit like buying an original Picasso etching (DTD) or buying a poster of the same (CD). There is more joy to be had in the original".

As you can see, DTD is still in its infancy for both the industry and the public. The question is, though, is it really worth the effort? The toil, the investment, the preparations, the mistakes, the retakes, the extra man-power, the extra hassle and money involved? In terms of the final sound output, most certainly. Firstly, you get a sparkling performance. The artists are on their game. This is live, it's one take and they know that one mistake ruins the entire take. So there is more energy and more adrenalin in the performance itself. In terms of the technical aspects, you hear less distortion, more drive, greater dynamics, enhanced detail, especially at the ends of the sonic spectrum. If you get the chance, buy Direct-To-Disc. You won't regret it.

CHANGING MICS

Maillard said: "For the DTD production, we had a completely new microphone set-up. For example, for the piano, there are phase issues cutting direct to a groove. With CD you can use A-B microphones but the vinyl groove doesn't like phase or deep frequencies because the vinyl pick-up moves up and down instead of right and left. The cutting is not so easy without distortion and there is a risk of the cutter jumping out of the groove. All engineers in the sixties tried to avoid this. These days, modern productions are difficult to cut to a groove because of deep frequency phase plus power in the high frequencies. We have to avoid all of this. The microphone set-up is the first method of tackling this, not the mixing".



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Play it Simple

Simple Audio's Roomplayer+ combined streamer/amplifier aims to make networked music as easy as possible. Jon Myles finds it also makes a sweet sound.

Like it or not, the way people listen to music is changing rapidly – and at a rate almost unimaginable just a few short years ago. Yes, CD and vinyl still have (and most likely will continue to retain) their adherents, but the fact is for many listeners streaming is becoming the predominant way to access music – both for convenience and sound quality reasons.

After all, while vinyl aficionados will always eulogise over the advantages of a well set-up record deck over a CD player, digital enthusiasts will similarly trumpet the greater depth, clarity and musicality a streamed 24bit/192kHz file will give you over a standard Red Book CD.

And streaming also brings other advantages – such as minimising storage space through computer or NAS-based collections, tablet/smart phone control of playback and multi-

room functionality

No wonder, then, the likes of Sonos quickly became such a success story and at the higher end of the market Linn caused a stir when the company announced it was ceasing production of CD players to concentrate its efforts on its family of integrated streaming products.

Since then, no end of other companies have jumped into the market including Cyrus, Pro-Ject, Chord and Arcam – and now there's another name to add to the list in the shape of Simple Audio and its Roomplayer+ range.

While the name may be relatively new, the company has a wealth of expertise behind it, having been formed by a group of former Linn designers and engineers a few years ago.

Two models are on offer, the basic £599 DAC/streamer or its bigger brother on test here which

also packs in an IcePower Class D amplifier (B&O) for an extra £100. Simple Audio rates the amplifier module at 50 Watts per channel – but as our Measured Performance shows this is into a 4 Ohm load with the figure being 24 Watts into 8 Ohms.

Both come in identical (apart from the speaker terminals on the amplifier-equipped model) Mac Mini-style aluminium black boxes, a tempered glass top being adorned with the company logo.

Aside from a tiny pairing button there are no manual controls to be seen and nor is a remote control supplied. Instead, everything is done via Simple Audio's desktop software for Mac/PC or the free iPhone/iPad app (an Android version is said to be on its way soon).

Inside the unit is a Wolfson DAC capable of handling file sizes up to 24/192 as well as all the usual





Rear connections include digital S/PDIF and coaxial out as well as USB, sub-woofer and RCA jacks.

formats such as MP3, FLAC, AIFF, WAV, AAC and Apple Lossless. There's also support for third-party streaming services such as Tunesn radio, Rhapsody, Deezer and WiMP (depending on your country).

Around at the back, as well as 'speaker outputs there are coaxial and optical S/PDIF outputs, RCA analogue inputs, a preamp out facility and USB and ethernet connections.

SET-UP

Getting the Roomplayer+ going is relatively straightforward. First connect the unit to your speakers, wire it into your network and then hold down the pairing button until the small LED on the front panel flashes green.

Next download the Simple Audio software to your MAC/PC (Apple OS-X 10.8 and above, so Mountain Lion upwards only), name your player and let it scan your network for music files housed on NAS drives, computers or laptops. Our review unit also prompted us to do a software update to the latest 3.2.30108 version.

Finally get the iPhone/iPad app. You can control the Roomplayer+ from the computer alone but the smartphone/tablet option is a much more elegant and convenient way of doing it.

Once up and running there's a variety of options available. Simple Audio's control interface lets you create individual profiles and playlists, tailor libraries so the big beat-loving member of your family's tunes don't pollute your classical collection or create a list of favourite radio stations for rapid access.

If a friend pops round with a laptop full of music and joins the network the Roomplayer+ will

also create a new library for that collection.

MULTI-ROOM

For multi-room capability simply add more slave Roomplayers to the network – either the amplifier-equipped module into a pair of 'speakers or the basic streamer/DAC into an existing hi-fi set-up.

Simple Audio uses its own Powerline audio

anywhere in the house no matter how large the abode, without any fear of thick walls or other obstructions interfering with the signal.

Once more than one Roomplayer+ is operating, Simple Audio's control software allows different music to be played in various rooms, different areas being grouped together, or the same selection played everywhere.



The Roomplayer+ is built around a Class D IcePower amplifier and a Wolfson 24/192-capable DAC

streaming technology that sends data over a home's mains electricity network to connect the various units. This may cause some controversy in certain quarters – but the company says this method is more robust than wi-fi with faster transfer speeds which reduces the chances of drop-outs and avoids excessive buffering with high-resolution material.

It also means various Roomplayers can be located

SOUND QUALITY

Considering the Roomplayer+'s small size allied to all the software innovation crammed into it, you'd be forgiven for thinking actual sound quality may have taken a back seat in the design process. Thankfully, you can think again.

The Simple Audio device instead has a very clean, clear and articulate character. The sound is not clinically drab and dry in the way of some Class D amplifiers, that present music in a mechanical and emotionless way. Instead there's a slight warmth on show which gives it a more easy-going nature than many other streamers at this price point.

Indeed Roomplayer+ seems to

major on getting the most out of whatever format it is playing – be that a compressed MP3 or a high-resolution 24/192 file.

Streaming a 24/96 FLAC file of The Smiths' 'The Queen Is Dead' and Johnny Marr's guitar was crisp and detailed, with Morrissey's vocal inflections sounding suitably impassioned.

Most impressively the Simple

"It has a natural, detailed sound with just a slight degree of warmth which helps add some sweetness across the midrange while the bass is fulsome"

Audio had an admirable sense of rhythm, bass and drums pounding along and sounding deep and solid.

In fact its bass is a particular stand-out element, being taut and tuneful at all times. For evidence, a CD rip of The Chemical Brothers' 'Block Rockin' Beats' really drew some power from our resident Tannoy Kensington GR loudspeakers (see exclusive review next issue) without sounding lumpen or out of control.

Admittedly, the Tannoys are a bit of a mis-match for the Roomplayer+ and its Class D amplifier – highlighting its relative lack of absolute detail and lack of the sort of expansive soundstage you'll get from a more expensive standalone Class A/B powerhouse.

But pair them with something more realistic – like a pair of Acoustic Energy 101 standmounts or the JBL Studio 290 floorstanders reviewed elsewhere in this issue – and the sound becomes considerably more suitable. Indeed the JBLs wide, expansive soundstage and powerful presentation particularly suited the Roomplayer+. Playing Beethoven's Symphony No 2 through this combination there was a real ebb and flow to the music, with a lush and deeply textured feel to the orchestra. The violins perhaps lacked a little bite – at times sounding slightly rolled off – but not so much as to ruin the overall musical presentation.

And let's not lose sight of the fact that the Roomplayer+ is not just an amplifier but also a streamer and a sophisticated music management



A discrete front panel includes a headphone socket as well as a 3.5mm input for mobile devices

system rolled into one.

And in the latter task it performs better than almost any other device at this price. The menu system is easy to operate and, once used for a few hours, is admirably intuitive. The ability to create individual libraries and profiles for various users will also prove a boon for families with multiple music-lovers.

CONCLUSION

Simple Audio's Roomplayer+ is an impressive and welcome addition to the streamer/amplifier market. There's no doubt its small Apple-like form factor will win many fans outside the hi-fi community – but its overall sound and ability to amalgamate all the music on your various digital storage devices will win just as many within the audiophile community. It has a natural, detailed sound with just a slight degree of warmth which helps add some sweetness across the midrange while the bass is fulsome and well-controlled.

Its ability for multi-room networking also means users can expand it to suit their circumstances.

Pair it with the right speakers and you have an all-in-one streaming system that is exceptional value for money.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Simple Audio Roomplayer+ amplifier (SMPS) produced 24 Watts into 8 Ohms and exactly double, 48 Watts into 4 Ohms, showing very good internal regulation from the Switch Mode power supply

Via the Auxiliary input distortion was minimal at full output and at 1 Watt (0.006%) with no sign of the usual distortion and noise from Class D amplifiers. Frequency response shut off hard at 20kHz though, suggesting an input ADC with 44.1kHz sample rate – unusual. Treble rolled down slightly at high frequencies our analysis shows, so the Roomplayer+ amplifier will sound clean but a trifle warm, or 'easy'. Input sensitivity was very low at 1.2V, but can be increased.

The internal DAC, tested via ethernet from a MacBook Pro running digital test files, was linear, obviously 24bit since distortion at -60dB measured a low-ish 0.09%, although 0.02% is possible, this result being compromised by noise. Noise also resulted in EIAJ Dynamic Range measuring 107dB, good but not exceptional. **NK**

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

DISTORTION

THD+N	0.0938 %	23.578 mV	0.9970 kHz
Dynamic Range	OFF	OFF	OFF

Power	24watts
Frequency response	6Hz-20kHz
Separation	89dB
Noise	-105dB
Distortion	0.006%
Sensitivity	1.2V

SIMPLE AUDIO ROOMPLAYER+ STREAMER/AMPLIFIER £699



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

Supremely accomplished streamer/amplifier/DAC with combines innovative control options with a sweet, natural sound.

FOR

- natural sound
- good bass
- customisable user options
- multi-room capability

AGAINST

- ideally needs iPhone/iPad to operate
- no remote

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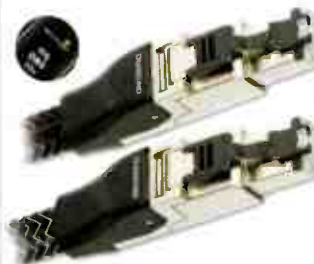
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NATIONAL AUDIO SHOW 2014 PREVIEW

Paul Rigby takes a quick look at what we can expect to see at the forthcoming National Audio Show, held at Whittlebury Hall hotel, UK.

For more details see p56 or go to www.chestergroup.org/nationalaudioshow/2014

Taking place on the 20th-21st September, Hi-Fi World is proud to be sponsoring this year's busy National Audio Show at the Whittlebury Hall Hotel. Here's a smattering of what you can expect to find at this prestigious show...

KEF

The first UK demonstration of the KEF Blade Two. With all of the original Blade's acoustic signature and design but on a slightly smaller scale. Where space is at a premium.

Click on www.kef.com/html/gb or call 01622 672 261 for more information.



ISOTEK

The company will be showing its EVO3 version of the Titan, current power conditioner. Designed to deliver clean power for power-hungry amplifiers, mono-blocks, active loudspeakers and subwoofers.

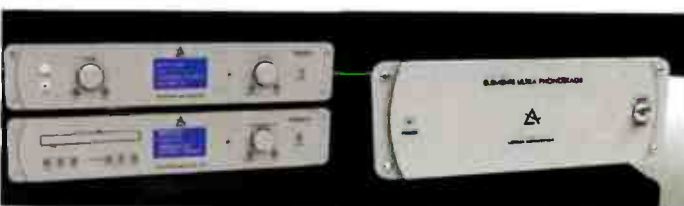
Click on www.isoteksystems.com or call 0118 981 4238 for more information.



LEEMA

Look out for the Libra DAC supporting 24bit/192kHz, DSD and DXD, the Elements Ultra Phono featuring comprehensive electrical matching, the 200W Pulse IV integrated amplifier and the Stream IV, CD player/streamer.

Click on www.leema-acoustics.com or call 01938 559 021 for more information.



CHORD

Check out Chord's 'Hear The Difference' cable demonstration showcasing its Tuned Array cables. The demonstration will be displaying the new digital and analogue Signature and Sarum Tuned Array cables.

Call 01980 625700 or click on www.chord.co.uk for more information.



THE RIGHT NOTE

Featuring the 300W, Vertex AQ HiRez Taga Balanced distribution blocks for source components, the Aneto 'DC blocking' mains conditioner, preventing buzz and core saturation and LeadingEdge's Spline Diffusers panels.

Call 01225 874728 or click on www.rightnote.co.uk for more information.



STRAUSSMANN

The company's new system features the Control Centre, the MC-Phono 2010, featuring symmetrical signal processing and thermionic valves and the E-50 mono amplifier with fully symmetrical signal processing.

Call 0049 30 8058 6120 or click on www.straussmann.com for more information.



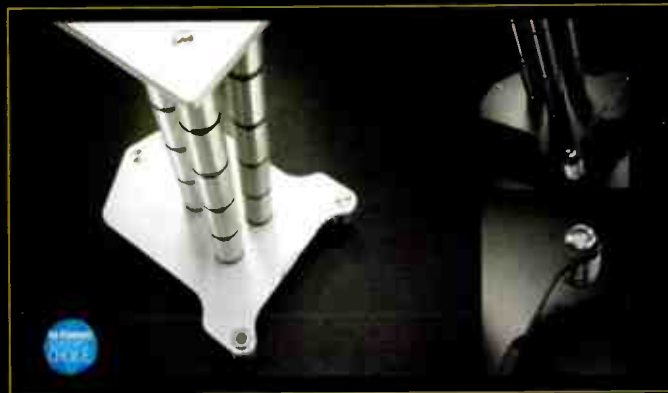


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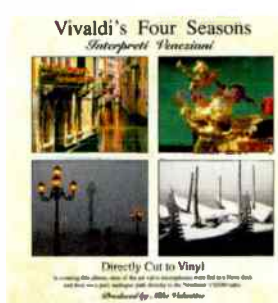
TEDDY PARDO

Look out for the i80a, 80W integrated amplifier, composed of the PR1 pre-amplifier and a boosted ST60 power amplifier, in a single case. The PHN1 phono stage will also be on show.

Click on www.tedypardo.com for more information.

MIKE VALENTINE

Mike Valentine will give a lecture on 'Live versus Recorded' sessions and will also be presenting three of his newly-created LPs, one of which is a Direct-To-Disc cut of Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons'. Email valentinefilms@clara.net for more information.



ANALOGUE WORKS

In this room check out AW's own turntables: Turntable One and Two; Rogue Audio phono stages and amps all the way from the USA, and the Eggleston Works speakers.

Click on www.analogueworks.co.uk or call 01536 762211 for more information.



HIGH FIDELITY INTERNATIONAL

Will be showcasing the Merrill-Williams Real 101.2 turntable. The deck will be kitted with a Tri_Planar Mk V11 tone arm together with an Ortofon Black Cadenza cartridge.

Click on www.soundaudio.eu or phone 020 3372 4237 for more information.



ALBARRY MUSIC

Showing its complete product range, Albarr will highlight its new variation of the M1108 mono bloc amplifiers, which were originally released onto the market thirty-five years ago.

Click on www.albarrmusic.com or call 07984 354130 for more information.

PLUTO SPEAKERS

The new Pluto omni-directional speakers will be available to see. The company says that its cylinder shape is the most rigid structure, while eliminating the standard design 'box-sound'.

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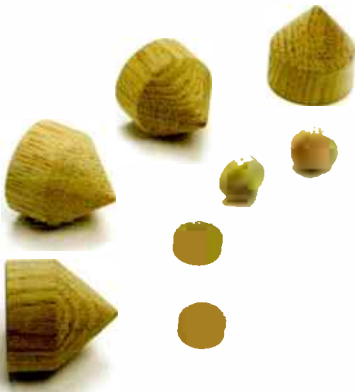
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MCRU OAK CONE FEET. FROM £13.50 A SET OF THREE

Over the years many substances have been tried for supporting hi-fi equipment and protecting it from external disturbance. This is because a lot of audio equipment will pick up vibration and as the electronic components get shaken, this movement gets turned into an electrical signal that is then amplified and is heard in the background to the music that we are trying to listen to.

As is so often the case, the listener is unaware of the fact that this is happening until a product is inserted into the system that eliminates the problem.

MCRU of Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, sell a range of oak cone feet that are to be placed underneath audio components to help control and eliminate this disturbance.

They come in four sizes: small, measuring 15 x 10mm at £13.50 for three, medium (30 x 30mm) at £19.50 a set, large (38 x 31mm) costing £22.50 for three and extra large retailing at £35 for three.

They are sold in these quantities since a tripod mounting is inherently more stable than placing one at each corner.

The finish of the examples that I had here was excellent with no sign of any machining or sanding marks and no unsightly roughness on the grain of the wood.

There is no provision for fixing them to a component, the weight of most audio equipment should be

enough to hold them in place but if there is any doubt about the fixing then a blob of Blu-Tak should do the job very effectively.

I tried them under a variety of kit, ranging from 1980's budget turntables through to modern heavyweight valve amps and found a similar improvement in the sound in all cases.

The amount of improvement varied, depending on how well the resonance problem had been addressed by the equipment manufacturer.

Benefits included a more solid and better timed bass sound, improvements to vocal projection, and in the higher frequencies a considerable tidying up of the sound, leading to greater clarity around violin notes and the sound of cymbals and other percussion.

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SOUNDBITES



VALVE DAMPENING RINGS £9.95 FOR 10

The effects of resonance, and its deleterious effect upon the sound of a hi-fi is something that has come to the fore in more recent years, hence there are a vast number of isolation

products on the market. One area that is often overlooked is the microphony of internal components with a product. Some items are more prone to responding to external disturbance than others and the thermionic valve is one of the worst for this.

Within the glass case there is a vacuum - which goes some way to protecting the components inside from being disturbed by vibration.

Unfortunately the glass casing itself acts as a very effective magnifier of any vibration that reaches it, resulting in a sound that has a sensation of slight clouding around small details.

To combat this, West Yorkshire-based MCRU market Valve Dampening Rings at £9.95 for ten.

They advised these are made from a high-temperature silicone elastomer which will not deteriorate with age or exposure to heat up to 250C, they come in various sizes

to fit most valve types.

MCRU have a full data sheet listing nearly every valve known to man so that they should be able to supply the purchaser with the correct size for the relevant application.

Fitting is simple. The rings are slid over the valve. I found that two rings per valve seemed to produce noticeably beneficial effects, resulting in deeper and darker silences between notes and an increase in the smoothness of the treble sound.

Bass notes also benefitted, seeming to stop and start more precisely.

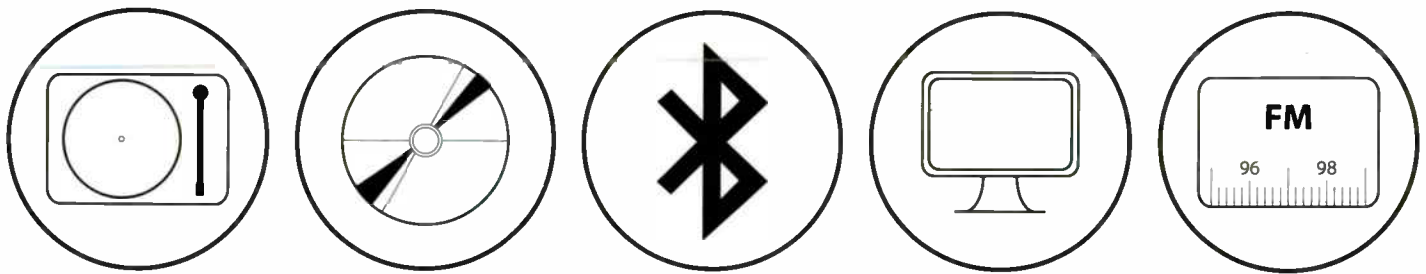
This is a very effective and cheap fix to a problem that a lot of hi-fi users are unaware that they have.

Once you have heard the difference these rings make you will be surprised as to how you lived without them for so long. **TB**

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

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

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No limits

Jon Myles plugs in Audio Technica's latest limited edition headphones – and likes what he hears.

Japan's Audio Technica has a well-deserved reputation when it comes to high-fidelity equipment.

Their latest ATH-A900X Ltd Edition over-ear cans are an update of the closed-back A900Xs – featuring the same 53mm drivers but with scarlet housings and gold lettering on the outside. Like their counterparts they also come equipped with a 3.5mm terminated heavy-duty cable and a 6.3mm adapter to facilitate both home and on-the-go listening.

Sound-wise it's an impressive headphone. There is a real sense of a wide and open soundstage as well as plenty of detail. Their large drivers deliver in terms of bass punch, detail and overall sonic quality.

Listen to the likes of Magazine's 'Shot By Both Sides' and there's a real vibrancy on offer. There's a slight warmth but this helps to ameliorate the harshness some other headphones can display.

Similarly, on a 24/96 rip of Bruce Springsteen's 'Badlands' the piano, guitar and bass were held in their own space – making tracking individual instruments easy.

Part of this is due to the design of the Audio Technica's headphones. It has two wings – dubbed '3D Wing Support' – which sit on either side of your head and are said to minimise vibration and improve comfort.

What it means is that the actual earphone pads sit slightly off your ears – which can take a little getting used to at first as there is no way to tighten the fit as on other headphones. That said, though, once you've got used to the positioning there's little to criticise.

And the arrangement means long listening sessions are extremely comfortable.

Indeed, plugged in to a Naim Supernait 2 with its Class A headphone output circuit the Audio

Technicas came over as well-balanced and nicely focussed. Bass was full and rich without being overly prominent whilst treble sounded smooth and detailed.

They are also sensitive enough to deliver true volume from the likes of an iPhone or other portable devices. Connected to an iPhone 5 on my daily commute, the Audio Technicas sparkled with the likes of Tom Petty's 'American Girl' – being just smooth enough to take the edge off some of the bright treble on this recording but without losing the essential thrust of the music.

Not all headphones can do this; some sound bright, others too bass heavy and yet more somewhat dull. The Audio Technicas, however, tread a delicate path between these various options and end up sounding clean, detailed and

vibrant.

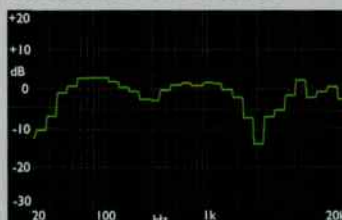
Get used to the rather individualistic fitting and you'll find them a delight to listen to.



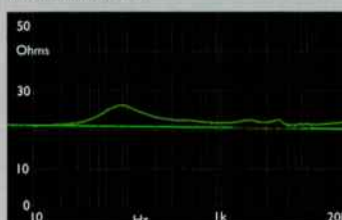
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Our frequency response analysis (no HRTF) shows the ATH-A900X LTDs are evenly balanced across the audio band, although they are less smooth than some, such as the Oppo PM-1s. The

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



IMPEDANCE



usual earpiece cavity suckout is a little wider than some so this may soften the sound a tad against other phones, but upper treble is kept in good relation to lower frequencies so there's unlikely to be the sharpness many phones suffer. Lower bass rolls away below 40Hz but this is unlikely to be very obvious in use. Overall bass level is fairly strong below 100Hz, +2dB up in fact, so bass will be strong but not overpowering.

Impedance measured 42 Ohms, as quoted, which is quite low. However, this contributes to a very high sensitivity figure of 90dB from a true 1mW (0.2V) input. The 0.3V or so available from mobile phones and budget music portables will be enough to develop loud volume, where other high quality designs struggle, needing 1V-2V.

These phones look good under measurement, balanced if not quite as smooth in response as some, and with high sensitivity. **NK**

**AUDIO TECHNICA
ATH-A900X LTD
£389**



EXCELLENT - extremely capable.

VERDICT

An extremely well-engineered set of headphones that delivers a smooth, detailed sound and works well with both home and portable hi-fi.

FOR

- good bass
- large drivers
- sensitivity

AGAINST

- slightly loose fit
- not the smallest

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Boxing clever

Arcam's new irDAC builds on the success of its predecessor to make a good thing even better – as Martin Pipe discovers.

Arcam was one of the first manufacturers to realise the potential of external DACs. Its original Delta Black Box was launched in the late 1980s. At that time, more and more digital audio gear were being equipped with audio outputs.

The spirit of those Black Boxes lives on – only the boxes are now rather smaller, better-connected and more advanced inside these days. Here, we feature the diminutive irDAC; it may measure only 160x100x40mm physically, but this replacement for 2010's well-received £300 rDAC boasts no fewer than six inputs and the ability to deal with sources up to 24-bit in resolution with sampling rates as high as 192kHz.

Power is sourced from an external 12-volt DC wall-wart which brings into the practical realm alternative power sources. However, DC-to-DC conversion circuitry inside the unit provides the op-amp based analogue circuitry with a proper split-rail supply. Arcam told me that within the irDAC are eight

different regulated supply rails.

The DAC chip is a TI/Burr-Brown PCM1796 and it's all neatly-built into a solid aluminium case/heatsink, the only visible control being a top-mounted button that cycles through the inputs.

Arcam say many of the design elements have been inherited from the company's no-compromise £2k FMJ-D33 'super-DAC'. Indeed, the handset supplied with the irDAC is identical to the D33's. That the irDAC can have its sources remotely-changed is a practical boon – so too is the number of sources available. Whereas the rDAC only gave you USB, coaxial and optical, its successor gets close to the D33's connectivity. You don't however get the more expensive model's AES/EBU input or digital filter selection.

Four digital audio inputs – two coaxial, two optical – are on the rear panel, along with a pair of USB ports. The first of these is intended for use with Apple products like the iPhone and iPad. Audio is streamed

digitally over the USB link, thereby bypassing the internal Apple DAC. The irDAC's handset provides basic control over what you hear (play, stop, pause, next/previous track). Your iThing is charged by the irDAC while it's connected. Compatibility stopped short of my 5th-generation iPod, which – beyond charging – failed to work at all with the irDAC.

The second USB input allows the unit to be used for computer audio. Macs and Windows are compatible and the irDAC also works with Linux Xubuntu once the playback device has been changed. It operates in asynchronous mode to reduce jitter.

There are two USB modes, which are selected by a rear-panel switch. The first, Class 1 (compatible with USB 1.1), supports sample-rates of up to 96kHz but needs no drivers. The second, Class 2 (which requires the faster USB 2.0), goes all the way to 192kHz. Windows users need to download and install drivers.

The analogue outputs are gold-plated phono sockets. The level is fixed, meaning that you'll need at the



very least a passive preamp if you want to drive power amps or active speakers. A coaxial 'loopthrough' digital output, contains the selected audio source. It will be useful for owners of digital recorders or home-cinema systems with digital surround decoders. Even USB sources are converted, although it should be noted that no sample-rate or resolution upconversion occurs. Indeed, whatever you listen to with the irDAC's analogue outputs is of the format (e.g., the 16-bit/44.1kHz of CD) the device is presented with.

SOUND QUALITY

Arcam have managed to pack lots of useful features into a tiny and affordable box, and musical prowess hasn't taken a back seat. Indeed, it's amazing how good the irDAC sounds, heard with a Roksan K2 BT integrated amp and Acoustic Energy AE109 speakers. Sources included the Parasound CD1 disc player reviewed last month, a budget Sony CD player, a Squeezebox Touch and Windows/Linux PCs.

Kicking off with up-to-date music, the irDAC failed to be overwhelmed by Skrillex's latest 'Recess' (CD, via the Parasound). This take-no-prisoners dubstep album is full of fast samples, bass and insistent rhythms, the furious energy and pace of which are effortlessly-conveyed. For all their prominence the basslines don't sound overblown – if anything, the opposite applies. Maybe Arcam has addressed criticism of the original rDAC, which was reckoned by some to be biased slightly towards the lower frequencies.

Next for something rather more subtle, Suzanne Vega's 'Solitude Standing' (again, via CD). Originally, I listened to this with the cheap Sony player being used as a transport. This album's balance is on the bright side but Suzanne sounded a little raspier and more brittle than she should. Switching to the Parasound improved the situation; the computer-based CD1 uses a lot of clever tricks to get jitter-free audio off the disc and these are denied to the Sony. It proves that you'll get the best from the irDAC with decent digital sources.

BBC Radio 3 does a sterling job and our review period happily coincided with the Proms. It was an absolute pleasure to enjoy a selection of Proms concerts with the irDAC via the 320kbps stream.

Take the Shostakovich Tenth Symphony, performed by the BBC



Four digital inputs alongside two USB ports give irDAC outstanding connectivity.

Symphony Orchestra. The sheer drama and urgency of this work gripped me and didn't let go. Soundstaging proved to be realistic and even during the orchestral onslaughts the subtleties didn't disappear.

John Tavener's 'Ikona of Light' was performed by the Tallis Scholars in a later Prom. The music here is a stripped-down mixed-choir-and-strings work with powerful emotion. Through the Arcam I got a palpable sense of the acoustic space and the shimmering ethereal textures of the singers were bestowed with definition, grace and depth.

And 24-bit material, played out with a PC in USB Class 2 mode also fared well. A 24/96 LP transfer of Jon Mitchell's Blue balanced her unique soulful voice and its instrumental background with integrity and intimacy. For what many will consider to be a budget product, the irDAC punches well above its

weight. Other tracks I tried, ranging from John Mayer to Atoms for Peace, demonstrated this unit's smoothness and agility. Even MP3s proved to be more listenable than I expected, despite the lack of compressed-music enhancers and other DSP tricks.

CONCLUSION

Those with a limited budget who want to make the most of their digital material are well-advised to give the irDAC a try.

For what is an affordable unit, the connectivity is plentiful; here is something that could also be used to improve TV sound (most set-top boxes have a digital audio output) as well as transform computers and Apple products into viable musical sources.

There's certainly little to criticise sound-wise; the irDAC is consistently good, whatever your tastes in music and to better it you would probably be spending closer to £1,000.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

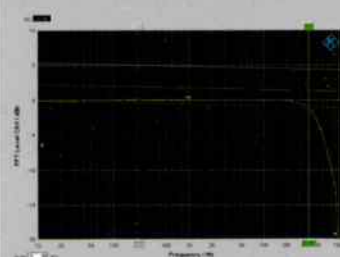
Frequency response was flat to 40kHz with 192kHz sample rate digital, and flat to 20kHz with CD's 44.1kHz sample

rate. The optical input receiver accepted 96kHz sample rate maximum, which was disappointing as some sources, such as Astell&Kern's AK100, have only S/PDIF optical outputs delivering 192k.

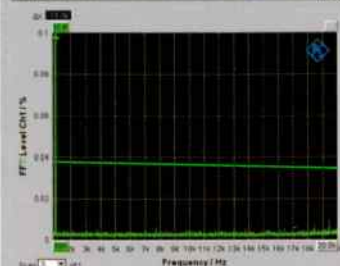
Distortion and noise levels were very low with 24bit, distortion at -60dB measuring just 0.024%. From an unbalanced low voltage (2V) phono output – there is no balanced XLR output – this is very good. As a result EIAJ Dynamic Range measured an impressive 120dB, almost comparable to Audiolab's class-leading Q-DAC.

The irDAC offers a neat set of figures from a small package. In particular it has a wide dynamic range and should sound smooth and open as a result. **NK**

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



Frequency response (-1dB)

	4Hz - 40kHz
Distortion	24bit
0dB	0.0012
-60dB	0.024
Separation (1kHz)	108dB
Noise (IEC A)	-120dB
Dynamic range	120dB
Output	2.2 V

ARCAM irDAC £400



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

Another affordable winner from Arcam. Well worth seeking out.

FDR

- effortless musical performer
- versatile in connectivity and features
- commendable attention paid to computer-audio

AGAINST

- won't work with iPods (except 4th/5th-generation Touch models)
- no 192k via optical

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Got it taped

Tony Bolton has his ears opened when listening to an open reel tape made from the studio master recordings of Opus 3 Records of Sweden.

Opus 3 Records, based in Jarna in Sweden, have built themselves a reputation for some of the finest contemporary analogue mastering in the recording industry since their founding in 1976. Their principles lie in keeping the recording process simple and in recording acoustic instruments and the human voice in as natural a way as is possible.

To this end recordings are made in venues appropriate to the genre of the music. Thus a jazz ensemble will be recorded in a small club, whilst an orchestra would be recorded in a concert hall or a church. Microphone positioning is a major consideration for this organisation. Most modern recordings are made with a microphone in front of each instrument. This gives a very intense presentation of a sound, which then is often electronically manipulated to restore a sense of ambience and space to the recording.

Opus 3 use a very different

technique employing the traditional crossed pair, or Blumlein technique of microphone placing. Since the microphones are further away from the performers, the sound incorporates the natural acoustic of the venue as well as the direct sound of the instruments, which is a more realistic representation of what an audience member is going to hear

when attending such a performance. This process also captures the natural timbre of an instrument, where the sound radiated from the entire body of the instrument is recorded, rather than just the direct sound emanating from, for example, the bell of a trumpet.

Opus 3 also believe that positioning a microphone too close to an instrument affects the recording of the dynamic range of the sound; i.e. the difference between quiet and loud passages. Short microphone distances can artificially exaggerate this, which is then electronically corrected in most studios. Using the Blumlein technique places the microphones further away from the instruments so that their dynamic range is preserved intact. There is also the added benefit that the spatial presence of the sound is accurately captured so there is no need for later studio work leading to an artificially introduced positioning of performers on a stereo sound stage in the final mix.

The recordings were made using AKG C-24 microphones running into Opus 3's own mixing desk, a simple



The Telefunken Magnetophone M28C that is used to make the tape master copy for all Opus 3 analogue recordings.

four input affair that uses EF86 valves, and thence to a Telefunken Magnetophone M28C machine.

Opus 3 now offer direct copies of their master tapes, including the sampler tape reviewed here for 1900 Krona for the sampler and 2900 Krona for the complete albums. These are copied from a Technics RS 1500U recorder (see Hi-Fi World, September 2014 issue) that has been modified from the usual NAB equalisation to IEC/CCIR.

I borrowed a Technics RS1500U for this review that was unmodified, so my listening using the standard NAB EQ resulted in a slight treble lift (approximately 2 - 3dB at 10kHz) compared to the original recording. This was relatively inconsequential compared to the yawning gap, in every form, from the clarity and detail in the sound through to the realistic impression that I received of the type, dimension and character of the different recording venues showcased on this tape, when compared to even fairly high end

“.. to have this demonstrated in this way in my own listening space was quite jaw dropping.”

vinyl reproduction. In short it was far and away the best sound that I have ever had in this house and left me in awe of the real sonic capabilities of my system.

I have spent a fair amount of time over the last 30 years in both amateur and professional studio



Eric Bibb, featured on track 4 of the Sampler Tape, recording into the AKG C-24 microphone that is used by Opus 3 for most of their recordings.

environments so am well aware of the gap between good studio sound and that obtainable in the home, but to have this demonstrated in this way in my own listening space was quite

Whilst the artists are probably unknown to most UK based readers, the performances are excellent, and captured in a way that will, I am sure, entrance most listeners.

I found my attention drawn to so many aspects of the sound that they are impossible to list here but of particular note was the slapped bass sound on 'Black Beauty', the building acoustic and its effect upon the decay of notes from both choir and organ on track 7, an excerpt from Bach's 'Nun komm der Heiden Heiland', and the differing character of the guitars on track 6 'La Maja de Goya'.

The 2-track stereo tape runs at 15ips (38cm/sec) and readers equipped with a suitable machine really should obtain a copy of this tape, or any of the others in the Opus 3 range. I can assure you that your audio perspective on what is good sound, and the abilities of your system will never be the same again.

Photos courtesy of Jan-Eric Persson, founder and owner of Opus 3 Records.

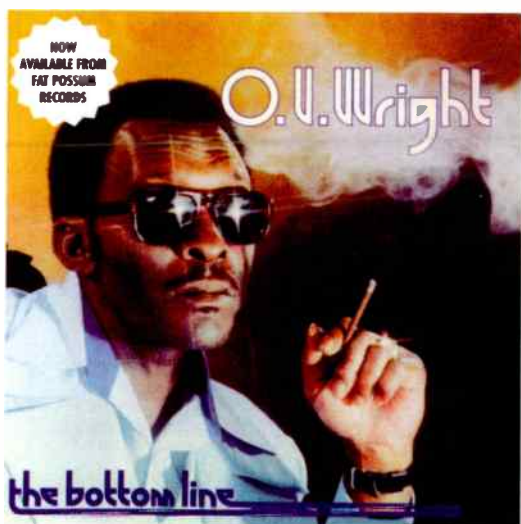


The Technics RS1500U used to playback the mastertape when recording copies, such as the tape used in this review. It is modified to have IEC/CCIR equalisation, rather than the NAB equalisation of the standard machine.

SYSTEM USED

Technics RS 1500U open reel tape recorder.
Leema Acoustics Tucana II amplifier.
Chario Ursa Major loudspeakers.

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O.V. WRIGHT

The Bottom Line
Fat Possum

Wright was an important and dynamic soul singer in early 70s, especially after he teamed up with the Hi label rhythm section organised by Willie Mitchell.

Overton Vertis Wright was an experienced gospel singer with the Sunset Travelers but it was only in 1964 that he considered moving towards a more secular market. He chose the passionate ballad 'That's How Strong My Love Is' for Goldwax, in Memphis. Otis Redding was so impressed, he covered it, killing any chance of Wright's version being a hit. Wright had a measure of success after that but it took that Memphis producer Willie Mitchell to get the best from Wright and to do so consistently over long period of time.

Mitchell's signature house rhythm section provided a perfect foil to Wright's Southern soul presentation.

His early-'70s Backbeat singles

rank among the very best Southern soul of their era.

This release was the second in a series of three Hi studio albums, O.V. Wright was allowed to record. It's not one of his very best, Wright has lost a little tightness in the vocal delivery but his qualities as a vocalist largely overcome that issue.

Mostly made up of ballads, the single 'I Don't Do Windows' is the one concession to that list that holds its head up high. There is also a nice cover of 'That's the Way I Feel About Cha', a Bobby Womack track, that Wright coats in Southern soul emotion and keeps the song lingering with repetitions of the title that forces you to sing along.

Fat Possum has reissued the final two albums from this great deep soul performer before his death in 1980 at the stupidly young age of forty-one, due to drug abuse.

The other CD release, this month, is 'We're Still Together'.



VARIOUS

It Takes Two
Fantastic Voyage

The compilation is a breed of record release that has been rather mauled in terms of reputation. Mention the word, 'compilation' in polite company and most music fans will exclaim, "Ah, I'd rather have the original album". For many compilations out there, these sentiments are wholly appropriate because they add nothing to the musical firmament and stink of merely shovelling house label tracks onto a silver disc to rake in as much money for as little effort as possible.

But there here are a few reissue labels who do take rather more time and consideration in their collections. Fantastic Voyage is certainly one of them. This 3CD collection packs seventy-five tracks featuring performances from musical duos. A great idea because it offers plenty of scope for squeezing rarities into the fray. The first track, 'Swingin' Together',

is sung by Bobby Rydell and Chubby Checker, two independent artists who came together for this brief alliance. Then there was Jackie Wilson and Linda Hopkins. The pair would have a hit with 'Shake A Hand' in 1963 but had an early flirtation with 'I Found Love', included here.

Then there's the 1958 single release, 'Hey Boy - Hey Girl' from Oscar McLollie and Jeanette Baker, the only time jump blues artist Oscar McLollie got into the Billboard top 100. Baker was another stalwart of the Los Angeles music scene, late of the Dots on Huggy Boy's Caddy label. This is a fun song with each vocalist taking turns and also singing together.

The best compilations are creative sources, like a reference book, introducing you to new artists or new song variations, taking you off onto tangents of discovery. This is certainly one of them.

In the past, whenever I've considered Jim Reeves, I've thought of charity shops full of his discarded LPs. That, in itself highlights his incredible, initial, national popularity – this mellow baritone country singer, who swept through a ballad as easily as Bing Crosby, was arguably more popular in the UK than he was in the USA.

Reeves died in a plane crash in 1964 but continued to have hits in the seventies and eighties. He was part of a movement. He was, in some ways, a political figure or, rather, his output was part of a conservative backlash. Middle America's answer to the edgy and dangerous rockabilly and rock'n'roll. The Grand Ole Opry's evolution of music into the Nashville Sound, along with people like Patsy Cline.

This 3CD box set looks at his work with the independent label Abbot from 1952-1955 featuring seventy-six tracks comprising twenty-nine single masters,

unissued and alternative takes, false starts and demos. As a bonus, there are four sides from the small Texas label Macy's (his first commercial recordings).

The joy of a package such as this is the intimate atmosphere of the creative process. The false starts and the studio chatter provide an obvious fly in the wall but they also give the performances themselves an added honesty.

We are reminded that this is a real person singing this song and not a jukebox holding a guitar. The jaunty 'Let Me Remember (Things I Can't Forget)' is a good example with its "One more try" exclamation from Reeves when the introduction breaks down as is 'Penny Candy' with the comment "hit it," when the band try to record the track for a second time after a breakdown.

Essential for fans, this beautifully produced set also arrives with an informative 123-page souvenir book.



JIM REEVES

The Complete Abbot Recordings, plus Bear Family

When you think of Frankie Valli And The Four Seasons you tend to think of, well, Frankie Valli. Valli was the voice of the group. That impressive, soaring tenor that stamped a unique personality on every song that the collective ever tackled.

The fact that Valli could then click into an uplifting falsetto, took the delivery into another dimension: one that only a select number of creative artists have ever visited.

As Brian Wilson was the true heart and creative source of The Beach Boys, however, Four Season Bob Gaudio played a similar role for this group. A songwriter, arranger, producer and more, Gaudio wrote hits such as 'Sherry', 'Rag Doll' and 'Dawn', all of which appear in this box set. Gaudio placed almost fifty of the group's singles in the Billboard Hot 100 chart between 1962 and 1995.

As for the box set itself? A solid, clamshell affair, it includes eighteen albums, each in a card sleeve. Though packed with brilliant music and offering excellent value for money, the package does rather skimp on extra information. There are LPs which you will not find in this box set, either, such as best-selling 'The Four Seasons' Greetings' (1962); top quality hits compilation, 'Edizione d'Oro' (1968), that provided alternative song versions, the excellent, Motown-produced 'Chameleon' (1972) and 'Reunited Live' (1981). Also look out for the similarly-designed 'Frankie Valli – Selected Solo Works', which covers his solo career from 1967-1980 and includes eight albums plus the 2CD collection 'Audio With A G: The Music Of Bob Gaudio', ideal for fans. This set includes his works for the latter plus the likes of Frank Sinatra, Nina Simone, Diana Ross and more.

FRANKIE VALLI and THE FOUR SEASONS

the CLASSIC ALBUMS box



FRANKIE VALLI AND THE FOUR SEASONS

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AGAINST
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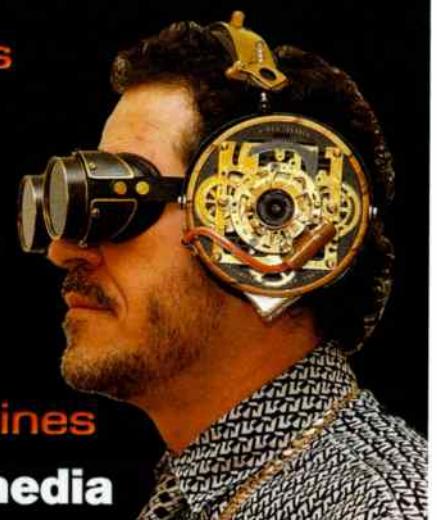
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Two-in-one

Offering two products in one chassis, Paul Rigby reviews the Epiphany Acoustics EHP-02Di headphone amplifier and DAC.

There is always demand for a small footprint DAC. Too often, in our day-to-day music listening, it is space that is the dominant issue so Epiphany's miniature chassis, spanning 108.5x30x82mm and available in any colour as long as it's black, is particularly flexible in these terms. The EHP-02Di, powered by an external wall wart, is not just a DAC, though, it also features a headphone amplifier that adds to its inherent usability.

The EHP-02Di is based on the older EHP-02D but the power input has been moved to the rear of the unit and there are now rear-mounted RCA sockets which double up as the line input for the headphone amplifier circuitry and the line output from the DAC section.

As MD, Oliver Freeborn

commented, "The original amplifier board design catered for portable use and so the power socket (and all sockets) were put on the front. But when it comes to desktop use, it is clearly more convenient to have rear entry power to keep everything neater on your desk. It is something that customers commented on so seemed a logical and natural improvement to make. In addition, RCAs are a natural development to make it more suited to its new desktop environment."

The DAC, which is clocked via a crystal controlled oscillator, uses a TE7022L UAC1 engine and ES9023 chip offering performance up to 24bit/96kHz (according to Freeborn, a higher specification to 24bit/192kHz would have demanded a price hike). On board filtering for the power supply is included

while additional sockets include a 3.5mm headphone connection and a plug'n'play, mini USB digital port.

SOUND QUALITY

To begin the sound tests I focused, initially, on the headphone section of the Epiphany and brought in, for comparison, the compact Furutech X1 headphone amp.

Playing a WAV of Billy Joel's 'My Life' through the USB port and the audiophile software player, Decibel, via my SSD-powered MacBook, I moved from the cultured, spacious X1 to the EHP-02Di and, for the price, was pleasantly surprised at its performance. The headphone amplifier stage offered a sense of real fun, taking you in amongst the musicians though, on occasion, piano did expose the midband on the Epiphany, which seemed to be



ortofon

accuracy in sound



Q uintet

Since 1948 Ortofon have introduced nearly 100 different moving coil pick-up cartridges to the hi-fi market. Their latest models in this long and proud heritage are the Quintet Series.

All Quintet cartridges use the same ABS thermoplastic bodies and neodymium magnets, but each model in the range has its own sonic expression that reflects its status. From the well-rounded **Quintet Red**, through the smooth **Quintet Blue** and spacious yet dynamic **Quintet Bronze** up to the pure audio excellence of the **Quintet Black**, this series offers something for every discerning listener at a very attractive price.

The Quintet Series also includes a true-mono cartridge, for accurate reproduction of older mono recordings.



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"the Epiphany offered superb all round performance"

on the verge of shouting at higher volumes. The more expensive X1 easily isolated the rather subtle accompanying acoustic guitar and funky bass right from the off. Surprisingly, so did the Epiphany. Detail, on both of these instruments, was incisive from the latter. The acoustic guitar offered delicately plucked strings while the rhythmic bounce of the bass was easily in evidence. Treble was rather recessed on this track but, what there was of it, was relatively smooth via the Epiphany.

The dynamic 'Hedonism' from Skunk Anansie had an 'in your face' midband but Skin's considered vocal delivery but it also highlighted, to a great degree, the secondary percussion of the tambourine while the lower frequencies, although they could have been a little tighter and more controlled, still offered power and slam.

Moving to the DAC stage of the Epiphany, I hooked up the Epiphany to my Rega Brio-R and Acoustic Energy Radiance One stand mounted speakers and played a WAV of Stacey Kent's delicate jazz classic, 'Les Eaux De Mars' while comparing the Epiphany to my similarly priced Musical Fidelity V-DAC reference. Immediately, Kent's vocals exhibited an intrinsic honesty. She stood alone, an airy figure, high in the sound stage while plenty of space surrounded the delicate percussion and guitar backing. Yes, the treble and upper mids lacked the complexity and diversity of information heard by more expensive DACs but the Epiphany, for the price, offered superb all round performance, allowing the piano to glide through the piece while plucked guitar strings were precise and resonant.

Playing the 24bit/96kHz of 'Let Us Garlands Bring, Op.18' via Marianne Beate Kielland and Sergej Osadchuk, I was surprised how competent the Epiphany was in tackling the soaring vocals. The lack of slurring or blurring during crescendos, along with measured control over piano gave the performance a sense of command.

Despite the simplification of the presentation and a lack of layering that a more expensive DAC might have provided, the low cost Epiphany allowed the emotion of the performance to remain intact, as the Epiphany concentrated upon the essentials of the performance: the upper mid detail, low frequency solidity and enough emotive nuance to engage the listener.

CONCLUSION

It may only offer a rather prosaic design – and the layout and controls are 'functional', but where the Epiphany EHP-O2Di scores is under the hood. This is where the budget has been spent and, if you are an audiophile looking for bargain, for that you can be thankful.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

- MacBook with SSD
- Rega Brio-R amplifier
- Music Fidelity V-DAC
- Tellurium Q cables
- Audio Fidelity Radiance 1 speakers
- Sennheiser HD800 headphones

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Epiphany EHP-O2Di delivers a high 1.9V at full volume, plenty enough even for insensitive magnetic planar headphones. With a 24bit digital input, noise was low at -110dB and this allowed the unit to deliver a respectable 112dB EIAJ Dynamic Range. It is enough to provide clear benefit from hi-res digital, if below what is possible from top

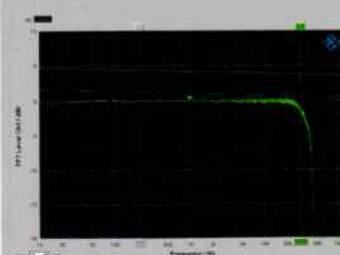
DACs. With low level digital signals the gain switch can be used to give x5 gain (+14dB) to the headphones only, but the unit will overload with high level signals in this condition.

Frequency response with a 96kHz sample rate digital input – the maximum accepted – measured 30kHz (-1dB) our analysis shows, with a smooth roll-off up to the 48kHz upper limit. Distortion was low, measuring 0.08%. Any value below 0.1% is good so the Epiphany slides in below this limit, whilst not matching the best that can manage 0.02%.

The phono output sockets give identical results to the headphone output, but the volume control and gain button do not work here.

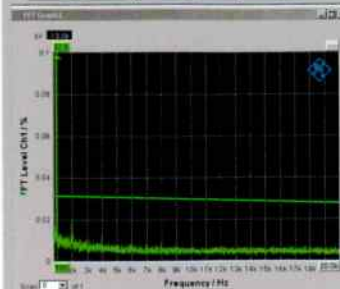
This little headphone amplifier delivers a good result, like the small Epiphany I use almost daily, because it is such a simple accessory, yet sounds snappily clean working from my Mac. The EHP-O2Di is similarly well engineered, measurement shows. NK

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION

THD	Level (dB)	Frequency
0.0749 %	1.8930 mV	997.02 Hz
OFF	OFF	OFF



Frequency response (-1dB)	
24/96	4Hz-30kHz
Distortion	%
0dB	0.002
-60dB	0.08
Separation (1kHz)	104dB
Noise (IEC A)	-110dB
Dynamic range (EIAJ)	112dB
Headphone output	1.9V

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"Weiss used to relieve her tension by destroying crockery, a skill she learnt from Dusty Springfield"



Paul Rigby

What is it with creativity, eh? Why does it attract so much destruction? It's an eternal Ying and Yang thing, isn't it? In music, there are so many wonderful tunes, so many incredible performances, poignant lyrics, dazzling guitar solos, innovative song structures, heart-wrenching vocal deliveries, complex arrangements and boundary breaking, culture forming images. Yet, with all of these things comes the dark side. The drug taking, the tragically early deaths, the destructive drunkenness, the heartaches, the violence and the scars.

Why does one have to come with the other? Well, of course, it doesn't have to and many artists seem to pass through their careers with nary a mental scratch or physical scar to show for it. There are many whose creativity is a battleground, however. If they manage to balance on this edge, they achieve their ambition, their need...to create. Once they tip, they fall into big trouble.

Pick up any pile of CDs and you'll be sure to find such occurrences. I did that very thing with a batch of CDs from the record label RPM. A great choice because you won't find obvious problem people in this pile. There's no Jimi Hendrix, Sly Stone, Ozzy Osborne, Kurt Cobain, Amy Winehouse or Syd Barrett here. That would be far too easy.

So who do we have to prove my point? How about a member of The Shadows? Bad choice. Got to be. I mean...Hank Marvin? Cliff Richard out front singing his little Christian heart out? Safe as houses, surely? Well, no. Not if you talk about Jet Harris. The band's greatest bass player and a pioneer of the electric bass,

Jet 'Terence' Harris on the CD I have here with Shadows drummer

Tony Meehan ('Diamonds And Other Gems') is a retrospective of all the duo's Decca cuts but Harris was a significant force within The Shadows, playing big hits like 'Apache', 'FBI' and 'Kon-Tiki'.

He would leave the band for a solo career but music venues were not his only public appearances. There were also several court appearances involving drunkenness and violent behaviour and a serious injury in a car accident involving a vehicle in which he was travelling with the pop starlet Billie Davis. He later confessed that, "The car crash shook me up horribly. I became a physical wreck and turned to the bottle...or rather two bottles of vodka a day".

In contrast, moving to the USA and from boy to girl, The Shangri-Las (appearing here on 'Myrmidons Of Melodrama', featuring hits and rare tracks) produced legendary songs such as 'Leader Of The Pack' where lead singer, Mary Weiss used to famously tote a Derringer pistol at the age of sixteen while the band's producer and songwriter was a gang member who had been stabbed during one encounter.

Weiss used to relieve her tension by destroying crockery, a skill she learnt from Dusty Springfield, apparently. "She would get frustrated so she would go out and buy a couple of hundred bucks' worth of cheap crockery" said Weiss. "At the Brooklyn Fox Theatre they had these long corridors that echoed and we would stand at one end and throw plates to the other. We would let off a lot of steam that way. That was how I met Marvin Gaye. He was trying to get out of his dressing room. He stuck his head out and all of these plates went flying past his head".

Even non-musicians are represented. In this case Joe Meek, innovative early rock'n'roll music

producer and genuine English eccentric who worked in his cramped bedroom facilities creating many a cult favourite.

Heard here on 'I Hear A New World' (including bonus Meek documentary and interview footage) shot his landlady with a shotgun. Meek then walked into his control room and reloaded. A few seconds later Joe Meek turned the shotgun on himself.

For others, trouble seemed to dog their steps. Here's 'Songwriter', a Sharon Sheeley CD of 1960-1962 demo songs sung by the likes of Glen Campbell, Leon Russell and David Gates. Sheeley was Eddie Cochran's girlfriend when she was injured in the same crash that would kill Cochran.

And then another CD, 'Irrésistiblement' by another sweet lady, Sylvia Vartan, an original 'Ye-Ye' French pop girl, covering her works from 1965-1968. She was partly responsible for the first violent scenes in French theatres, as male rockers in the audience of her shows, would start violent scuffles.

From often chaotic, troubled minds and those that drag trouble along with them like a honey-coated bear attracts a swarm of bees, often comes an ordered, attractive suite of musical creations that, more often than not, trigger feelings and moods opposite to the anarchy boiling in the creator's heads.

Of course, the reason why we listen to these artists in the first place is because they are different and attractive. Notably unlike to "the rest".

Don't envy them, though. We must remember that there is often a price to pay for such talent.

More of Paul Rigby's considered thoughts can be found at www.theaudiophileman.com. ●

“from starting recording, to the record being sold, took 3 hours, 55 minutes...”



Tony Bolton

I recently came across an article in a newspaper discussing the ongoing rise in sales of vinyl records. The figures quoted seemed remarkably impressive until I read further into it and discovered that the figures quoted were for the US market. By this time I was curious so decided to do a bit of research to find out just how well, or badly, the vinyl market is fairing.

I am pleased to report that things look very positive on both sides of the 'Pond'. Starting with the UK, using figures supplied by the BPI (British Phonographic Industry) vinyl sales are at their highest level for 15 years with just over 780,000 LPs sold during 2013. This is a rise of 101% over the 2012 figure and the best sales figures since 1997 when 817,000 LPs were sold.

At the same time digital album sales were up by 6.8%. In 2012 CD sales accounted for 76.8% of this market, but in 2013 that share fell to 64%. So although CD sales are in decline, it is still the foremost digital music carrier. However, subscriptions to digital streaming sites such as Spotify and Deezer rose above £100 million for the first time. Overall revenues from music sales topped £1 billion.

These all seem to be very healthy looking figures but they pale into insignificance when compared to the figures for America where in 2013 vinyl sales reached 6,100,000 which is a 33% increase on the 2012 figures of 4,600,000 (figures from SoundScan). This accounted for 2% of the total album sales in the USA. CD accounted for 57% of all sales and digital and streaming reached 41% of the market.

Vinyl's worst years in the American market were in 2005 and 2006 when approximately 800,000 units were sold. It increased to 1,000,000 in 2007 and then began to

rise sharply, nearly doubling in 2008 and increasing very steadily ever since.

The current best selling LP in the USA is Jack White's "Lazaretto" which was released in June and has sold 60,000 copies on vinyl out of total album sales of 238,000, making it the biggest selling vinyl album since the release of Pearl Jam's "Vitalogy" in 1994. To put this in perspective, British rock group the Arctic Monkeys' "AM" was the best selling LP of 2014 up to this point, with sales of 29,000 copies since its release in September 2013. The biggest selling LP of 2013 was Daft Punk's "Random Access Memories" which sold approximately 49,000 examples.

Jack White also managed a 'first' this year with the "Lazaretto" single, which now holds the record (excuse the pun) for the fastest pressed and released record ever. Recording took place at White's own Third Man Studios, starting at 10 o'clock, where the band recorded a live version of the track. The masters were then driven to the United record pressing plant in Nashville where 7" copies were stamped and taken directly to the Third Man Record Store. The entire process, from starting recording, to the record being sold took 3 hours, 55 minutes and 21 seconds – a truly impressive feat.

All of this seems to be good news for us vinyl junkies except for one thing. Vinyl may end up being a victim of its own success. That there is the demand for the product is not denied, however, whether the supply will be able to keep up with that demand is another matter altogether. A good example of this is the problems that we have had in trying to get a copy of "The Beatles In Mono" to review for you.

I haven't been able to get figures for the UK and Europe, but in America there are roughly a dozen record pressing plants, of which

the largest is United in Nashville (who pressed the Jack White single mentioned above). They operate 22 presses making 30 to 40,000 records a day. In California there are Rainbo Records and Erika Records which are of a similar size. There are smaller outfits such as Record Technology Inc, with nine presses and Gotta Groove records with six presses. The other plants operate between one and five presses. As demand is increasing, so the lead-in times to pressing are going up. Whereas a year ago there was a month lead-in time, it can now take up to three months before the record is available to the public, and a lot of industry pundits seem to see this situation as only getting worse.

The trouble is that there are only a limited number of presses in existence and the cost of making new ones would be prohibitive. So quite how this situation will be resolved remains to be seen.

On a more upbeat note, there are an increasing number of ways to buy records. The majority of sales are now from online sources, due to the gradual demise of local record shops, although events such as the annual Record Day events are proving ever more popular. In the UK, Diverse Vinyl are operating 'Pop-Up-Shops' in hi-fi retailers all over the country. Visitors to UK hi-fi shows will be familiar with Diverse's wide range of stock, and this travels with them to a retailer who allows them to take over their shop for the day or a weekend. I suggest checking the 'Links' page on their website for more details (www.diversevinyl.com).

With a variety of new ways of buying vinyl, and sales increasing steadily, the only problems likely to arise are those of the supply meeting the demand, which is a very good state for the format to be in given the gloomy outlook of less than a decade ago. ●

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"this vinyl box set has changed my appreciation of The Beatles"



Noel Keywood

Beatles tunes were fast, catchy and engaging: they stormed the charts, and were staples in Forces Favourites – they had universal appeal. But insightful sound quality of the new The Beatles in Mono box set has shown me The Beatles were also experienced and talented musicians who could deliver an excitingly fast, yet tightly-controlled performance in one take. This was forged in the nightclubs of Liverpool, then Hamburg.

We don't get one-take live performances like this now. I'd never appreciated that The Beatles had slogged it out for years before they finally managed to get into a studio in 1963. At this time John Lennon was 23 but he'd been singing in Hamburg since he was twenty – and the nightclubs of Hamburg's Reeperbahn were not an easy place to make a living. "I was born in Liverpool, but grew up in Hamburg" he said. The band had sweated to learn their skills and were fluent professionals by the time they reached Abbey Road. And you can hear this in their first LP, 'Please Please Me', from the new mono vinyl box set.

This first album was recorded in one day using basic studio equipment the new LP reveals. Whilst I could better hear into their one-take live performances, the limitations of the recording equipment used for this session were made obvious too. At the end of the title song 'Please Please Me' the wow of the tape machine and whooshing tape hiss are briefly obvious before the track ends.

But that was their first LP, which is known to sound a little iffy. Mono Masters, an LP in this box set that covers singles and their B sides, reveals that by November 1963 their status had improved dramatically at Abbey Road.

Spinning 'This Boy', recorded just eight months later, I heard one of the most impressive tracks, sound quality-wise, in this whole box set. Gone is the wow and tape hiss, also the mid-range coarseness of 'Please Please Me'. In its place is a sense of clarity and "being there" you cannot get from modern, highly-processed recordings. There's a full frequency range too, all of which suggests Abbey Road were now using their best tape machines.

The change in quality is dramatic. The 'Please Please Me' tape was noisy by any standards, even those of the time, suggesting it was low grade stock used for an – at that time – unknown band. The generally coarse quality comes from this tape and its modulation noise I suspect – and there's nothing that can be done about it. 'This Boy' is a completely different listening experience. And what intrigued me about it was that it has a wide frequency range. In particular treble is extended: cymbals and triangle in Ringo's drum kit are strong and clear, vocal sibilance obvious too.

This track sets an interesting standard, one later tracks don't – subjectively – always meet, because as time goes on and production becomes complicated by multi-tracking and over-dubs, upper treble becomes less apparent. My suspicion here is that we have a classic tape azimuth problem; the tape machines were not well aligned, or tape guidance inadequate; this lops off high treble sharply.

If this was the cause of high treble loss then simpler early recordings would have a broader frequency range than later ones and this is the case. Their second album, 'With the Beatles', has plenty of treble and 'Hard Day's Night' has too much at times, but by the time we get to Sgt Pepper's, highs are less

obvious. I thought I'd investigate.

On our Rohde&Schwarz UPV audio analyser 'This Boy' had strong energy all the way up to 12kHz, harmonics falling away above this point. With 'Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' highs are a tad more curtailed; now there's little above 8kHz. So as time goes on and production becomes more complicated, sound quality alters, not necessarily for the better.

Also, the raw excitement of early performances is largely lost as multiple takes become the norm, in pursuit of 'perfection'. The songs become more complex in musical structure but lose their immediacy.

The superb sound quality of this new vinyl box set has changed my appreciation of The Beatles. By bringing me closer to the performance I became more aware of their early skills and more aware of how their situation in the studio changed too as their songs became more sophisticated in construction.

The downside is that these new LPs cast a shadow over all that has gone before, including early original mono LPs that have a less dense and well-anchored sound, as well as noisier vinyl; the new LPs are astonishingly quiet (for measurements showing these LPs rival CD, go to <http://www.hi-fiworld.co.uk/index.php/component/content/article/684.html>).

It's great to hear vinyl sounding so good and I'm thankful that Apple Corps and Abbey Road have got so much more from The Beatles master tapes.

I was doubtful such improvement could be had from fifty year old tapes, but the new audiophile box set shows I was wrong and has changed my view of The Beatles. This is a great box set to have and one to go for, I'd suggest, because it eclipses all that has gone before. ●

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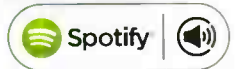
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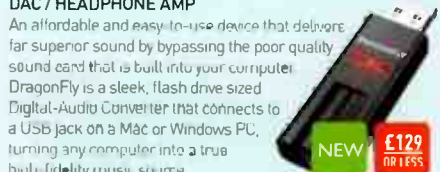


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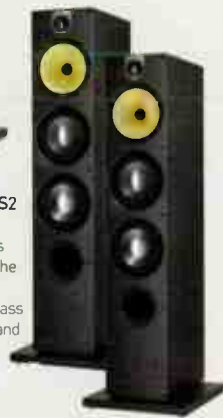
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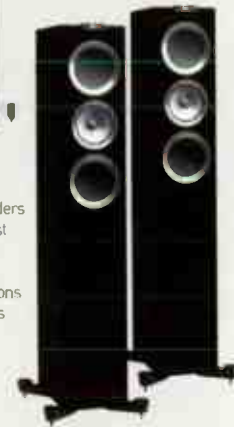
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vinyl section

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OCTOBER 2014

www.hi-fiworld.co.uk**THE BEATLES IN MONO LP REVIEW 83**

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Paul Rigby gives you the low-down on all The Beatles vinyl releases

PLAYING THE BEATLES IN MONO 91

Three turntable systems for playing The Beatles In Mono LPs

ORTOFON 2M MONO SE CARTRIDGE 92

Noel Keywood reviews Ortofon's new and special 'Beatles' mono cartridge

news

**LET THEM EAT...LIVE**

To live cuts from Let Them Eat Vinyl (www.letthemeatvinyl.com) The fascinating Jeff Buckley 2LP release, 'Dreams Of The Way We Were: Live 1992 Radio Broadcast' via WFMU-FM from Upsala College, New Jersey.

A year before his debut album, this vinyl features covers and two songs later to appear on 'Grace': 'Eternal Life' and 'Unforgiven' (re-titled 'Last Goodbye').

Also look out for the 2LP Tom Waits 'My Father's Place: 1977 Radio Broadcast'.

**DOXY ON DISC**

Three releases from the Italian-based Doxy feature Nina Simone's classic '...At Carnegie Hall: the Complete Concert.' (1963) over two LPs, adding a disc and nine bonus tracks.

Etta James' self-titled, ten-track, LP (1962), including a free CD, originally released on Argo features the single 'Something's Got A Hold On Me'/'Waiting for Charlie to Come Home': the latter written by Burt Bacharach.

Also including a free CD is the under-stated, eclectic, Jorge Ben's 'Samba Esquem Novo', his 1963 debut, featuring his smooth vocal style.

MORE FROM MOV

Music On Vinyl (www.musiconvinyl.com) has issued a host of classics and welcome obscurities.

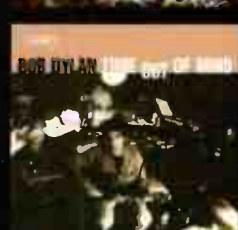
Warlock's 'True As Steel' (1996) reflects their Iron Maiden/Judas Priest influences while the classic, although overly wordy, Meat Loaf album, 'Bat Out Of Hell' (1977) is produced in its original guise for once.

Onto Bob Dylan's 'Time Out Of Mind' (1997), his then first album for seven years. Bitter and resigned songs with grit to spare.

Another solo effort but this time via ex-Traffic man Dave Mason. 'It's Like You Never Left' (1973) was under-rated and features vocals from Graham Nash plus contributions from George Harrison and Stevie Wonder. Catchy tunes abound.

From Gram Parsons comes the rarities compilation 'Sleepless Nights' featuring straight honky-tonk covers, pre-Flying Burrito Bros. departure and three superb tracks with Emmylou Harris during the recording of 'Grievous Angel'.

Also look out for two LPs from the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop: 'Fourth Dimension' (specifically Paddy Kingsland) and 'Through A Glass Darkly' (an ensemble piece produced by Peter Howell).





A SPECIAL TIME

From Warners is a classic pair of LPs from the Specials. The 1979 self-titled classic brings the band's live set onto the studio LP, a bitter reaction to life and politics in Britain while the more adventurous, satisfying yet not quite so hard hitting, 'More Specials' (1980) struggles to contain the group's ambition.

PUNK AND POST PUNK AND PUNK

Post punk first and four from Rave Up (www.raveuprecords.com). Italy-based Morrowyellow was formed in 1983. 'My Colours 1985/1988' presents a cold wave outfit with vaguely Sisters of Mercy vocals. Beautifully sparse.

Red Wedding's 'Anthology 1981-1985' offered proto-glam rock post punk with a Broadway vocal delivery. Fabulous!

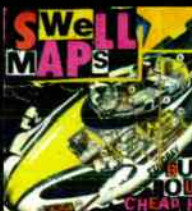
Aus Decline's 'Fluxion' submits superb new wave output from 1980-1982. Germanic in tone with early Ultravox sparsity and krautrock instrumentation.

Onto punk and Blitzkrieg Pop's 'Studio Stuff' a Teeside outfit formed in 1977. This LP includes their three singles plus rarities.

The punk/post punk of the chaotic Swell Maps, featuring Nikki Sudden and Epic Soundtracks, is explored in 'Archive Records Volume 1: Wastrels And Whippersnappers' (www.munster-records.com) while John Peel favourites, the Nightingales' 1982 debut, 'Pigs On Purpose' (Vinilissimo; www.munster-records.com) offers a between-the-eyes vocal delivery with naïve, yet rhythmic, backing.

Three from Let Them Eat Vinyl (www.letthemeatvinyl.com) and back to punk. The Anti-Nowhere League were a bunch of disgusting, disgraceful, filthy (in all senses) second-wave punk outfit. 'We Are... The League' is the band's gloriously offensive 1982 debut. Lead singer Animal is the guy largely responsible for the reprehensible behaviour. Another 2LP release, 'Punk Singles And Rarities 1981-'84', is a fan's paradise.

Finally, check out the UK Subs' 'Left For Dead: Alive In Holland 1986' spread over 2LPs.



LET'S ROCK!

Starting with the swampy, rootsy, power blues of North Mississippi Allstars and their new album 'World Boogie Is Coming' (www.soungsofthesouth.net): classic country blues through a modern filter.

ZZ Top's 'Tres Hombres' (1973; Warners) takes blues to the sleazy/dirty level and made them stars.

Launched in 1981 and their first album in six years, cult, female-fronted, thrash metal outfit, Holy Moses' 'Redefined Mayhem' (SPV; www.spv.de) adds metal-core to the thrash roots. Also from SPV is Mekong Delta's 'In A Mirror Darkly', a German response to prog thrashers Vovoid.

Onto the classic, quirky, prog punk outfit the Cardiacs and both Vol. 1 and 2 of 1996's, limited edition, 'Sing To God' (www.cardiacs.net) in one gatefold package. Takes a while to get into but then it will change your life.

Now, the pomp and glam rock of Space Elevator's new, self-titled, self-published, LP (www.spaceelevatorband.com). Big rock with Spinal Tap-esque flavours.

Two from Hawkwind, 'Church Of Hawkwind' (1982; www.backonblack.com) sees the band drifting, overly synthed and overly NWOBHM. This edition does offer excellent rarity additions on a second disc, though. Speaking of rarities, 'Mighty Hawkwind Classics 1980-1985' is a 2LP set featuring Flicknife label archival tracks such as the 1969-70 era 'Hurry On Sundown'/'Sweet Mistress of Pain' and later, alternate takes, of 'Kings of Speed' and 'Motorhead'.

Finally, check out the alternative Steve Wilson mixes on the Gentle Giant prog classic 'The Power And The Glory'. Abrasive, dissonant and difficult it might be but it remains a complex and addictive classic.





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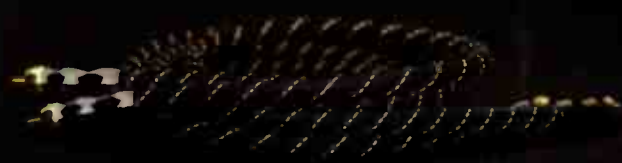
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The Beatles in Mono

Paul Rigby reviews 'The Beatles In Mono' new vinyl box set.

Delivered by Apple Corps Vice President Guy Hayden to Hi-Fi World, I was excited by this seemingly definitive fourteen LP box set that includes the group's first nine UK albums, up to 'The Beatles' (The White Album), the American-compiled 'Magical Mystery Tour' and 'Mono Masters', a collection of non-album singles and tracks. All are pressed on 180gm virgin vinyl featuring replicated artwork plus an LP-sized, 108-page hardbound book.

Each mono LP will also be available individually.

SOUND TEST

I began the sound test by selecting the title track to 'A Hard Day's Night' from the new 'Mono' set and comparing it with 'The Beatles In Stereo', 2012 vinyl edition. A tough test because the album, even in its original form, has always been thought of as 'lively', in hi-fi terms. The comparison, meanwhile, is not as odd as it might sound. The 'Stereo' LP was able to offer lots of interesting



Guy Hayden, Vice President of Apple Corps, with The Beatles in Mono box set he has overseen. Guy is an audiophile, championing high quality in this box set.



For the majority of The Beatles' discography, mono was the priority. Witness the album, 'Beatles For Sale' where five of the featured songs were remixed to stereo, on 27 October 1964, in half an hour!

EQ information that revealed the core of the mastering.

Playing the 'Stereo' LP was revealing because I was immediately faced with a measure of midrange lift. Experiencing that initial, iconic, dramatic chord from the guitar of George Harrison was harsh enough to induce a wince at high volumes. By the time I recovered from this, the song was already ten seconds old.

The harshness of the 'Stereo' pressing was noticeably gone when playing the new 'Mono' version. That same Harrison guitar chord now teased the ear and beckoned

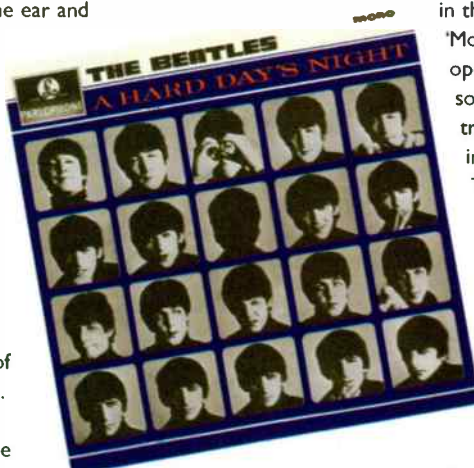
me further into the mix that the 'Mono' revealed as being noticeably 'produced', lacking the clarity and sweet treble of earlier albums. As the track progressed, the 'Mono' edition continued to expose the true nature of the music on the original master tape, baring all in quite dramatic fashion.

For similar EQ reasons, I then compared the new 'Mono' vinyl edition with the 'Beatles In Mono' CD version. Abbey Road might have had a 'hands off' policy for the 'Mono' CD edition, in terms of compression,

but there was still a distinct digital tension that ran throughout with an unfortunate upper mid hardening. Gone was the relaxed, expansive nature of the new 'Mono' vinyl edition. Shockingly, the new 'Mono' editions use vinyl of such high quality that the silences were quite startling in their inky blackness. Wasn't this supposed to be CD's unique trick?

Moving to the 'U.S. Albums' version of the song, the best available in any digital format, while the top end was definitely airy and spacious with extra solidity in the bass, the 'Mono' vinyl opened up the soundstage tremendously, in comparison. The new 'Mono' vinyl also emphasised that human beings made this song because it added emphasis behind the strings of Harrison's guitar, for example.

Finally, I returned to the source and an original 1964, mono version of the album. The title track on the original pressing was a little lively in the midband, shining a torch on both Lennon's vocal and Harrison's lead guitar that obliterated some detail. The new 'Mono' edition toned down the midrange and encouraged



smooth tones from the Lennon vocal, revealing greater emotion, along with a layered Harrison performance of greater complexity. Welcome additional benefits were a slightly more rounded McCartney bass guitar and lower bass from the Starr drum kit.

Moving to the original mono release of 'Sgt. Pepper' from 1967 and an oft-ignored track, George Harrison's 'Within You Without You', resplendent with variable percussion and string effects. How does the new 'Mono' edition sound, in comparison? Have you ever seen a cat's ears monitor the sounds around it? During the first few seconds of the track, I was moving my head and ears in various directions. My attention sped from one aural alert to the next. Not bad for a mono signal. So much information is thrust upon you, such is the new found complexity



heard within the gamut of percussive and string combinations. The original release failed to match the sheer smoothness of the midrange on the new 'Mono' edition, coupled with a high degree of detail and the relaxed, capacious nature of the Harrison vocal from the latter.

While the rendition of 'A Day In The Life', on the original mono mix was highly creditable, the new 'Mono' release now presented the initial Lennon vocal as positively vulnerable while Ringo Starr's treble-infused cymbals were fuller cloud forms of treble. This is a particularly busy track. The new 'Mono' release will reward you with a host of new, subtle, tiny details (the alarm clock effect, for example) and extra finesse on the larger noises (i.e. the final, building, crescendo).

Where this box set really wins, though, is when you play the early albums. Playing 'Please Please

'Me', for example, was an absolute revelation. Despite the technical drawbacks of the initial LP recording (see Noel Keywood's column), on 'I Saw Her Standing There', the lack of production and anything else that would presume to get between the band and your ears, provided an absolute feast of detail. The immediacy of the music was quite startling. Vocals were right there, up close, almost breathing down my ear while guitars and drums were awash with a detailed clarity and sheer freshness that put a large smile on my face.

'Anna (Go To Him)' benefited from a 3D spacious effect that belied the mono signal. It was also wonderful to hear ambient details such as the hum of the guitar amp, after the singing had finished and just before the track ended to enter the inky black silence of the virgin vinyl. While the song, 'Boys', was so clean in its presentation, it just flowed through the speakers. This album is a truly remarkable recording in terms of immediacy and energy.

CONCLUSION

Listening to 'The Beatles In Mono' has changed how I now think of The Beatles. As entities in themselves, I have a new appreciation of the early releases. The lack of production, the lack of studio trickery, the lack of

'bouncing down' from track to track and the lower risk of tape azimuth inaccuracies (see Noel Keywood's column, in this issue), all means that the early albums are more direct. The group is there, in the room with you. The blend of voices, the structure of the musical accompaniment and the arrangement is also so fine and, oddly, so natural, that hearing this music is akin to fine dining. That is, each element of the track is a taste in itself. You find yourself being delighted. Delighted at the treble in a guitar solo, delighted at the nuance of a vocal harmony, delighted at the energy with in backing percussion and more. As for the later albums? Beatles fans will be thrilled. Yes there are, we suspect, possible historical azimuth issues that have reduced some essential treble within the original master tapes, and, because of the track bouncing, there is an essential veil that screams "This track has been 'produced'!" but, when it comes down to it, this music has never been so approachable. Gone is the harsh compression of the recent Stereo releases, for example, but also you can hear the mechanics of the track there in front of you and the pluses and negatives of the restricted technologies that The Beatles had to use alongside the limitations of the processes. It's wholly fascinating.



'The Beatles In Mono' is the closest thing to 'The Truth', in terms of the group's musical output, that I have ever heard and, frankly, am ever likely to hear. It trounces any digital release. As for the other vinyl issues out there? 'The Beatles In Mono' set wins, hands down.

Have you been saving yourself before finally committing to a new suite of Beatles on vinyl? If so, grab yourself a copy of 'The Beatles In Mono' box set. That will provide your essential foundation. Then fill the gaps from the relevant individual stereo vinyl editions, released earlier, sit back and relax. Your mission to find the ultimate in analogue Beatles music has now been completed.

How we played The Beatles in Mono LPs



To play these mono LPs we assembled an 'authentic' system. At the front end was an Ortofon 2M Mono SE cartridge designed specially for these LPs – see our review on p85. This sat in an SME309 arm, mounted on a Timestep Evo turntable (improved Technics SL-1210 MkII Direct Drive). Amplification was provided by an Icon Audio PS3 valve phono stage feeding Quad II-eighty valve monoblock power amplifiers. These drove new Tannoy Kensington Gold Reference loudspeakers, that will be reviewed in our next issue. For Beatles CDs we used a Cyrus CD8t transport and Audiolab M-DAC, again feeding the Quads direct.

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Which Box Set?

Beatles' fans are faced with a host of box set choices. Here is a buyer's guide covering the more recent and popular box sets available on the market today.



THE BEATLES IN MONO (Vinyl)

FOR: The ultimate box set. The best way to hear The Beatles' music. All-analogue, direct from the master tapes.

AGAINST: Does not include the stereo albums, not a definitive Beatles collection.



THE BEATLES IN MONO (CD)

FOR: The only way to buy the entire mono discography on CD.

AGAINST: Reportedly, no compression was added but a measure of 'digital sound' does remain.



THE BEATLES IN STEREO (CD)

FOR: The best way to hear the complete stereo collection on CD.

AGAINST: Added limiting harshens the upper mids.



THE BEATLES IN STEREO (Vinyl)

FOR: Superb stereo renditions of the later albums.

AGAINST: Based upon a 44.1kHz suite of digital files. Compression adds a hardness to playback.



CAPITOL ALBUMS VOL.1 & VOL.2

FOR: Features the unique American output of The Beatles with all of the quirky EQ and mixes intact.

AGAINST: Of interest to dedicated fans only.



THE U.S. ALBUMS (CD)

FOR: The best digital offering, in terms of sound quality, of The Beatles music currently available.

AGAINST: Only focuses on the unique US catalogue.

Older sets

The Beatles collectables/memorabilia industry is big. Respected auctioneers, such as Bonhams and Christie's, see the band as the most collectable music outfit on the planet while, during the recent financial crisis, many people stopped buying stocks and shares and started buying Beatles memorabilia instead, to secure their pension investments. The older sets, listed below, have great collectable value.



THE BEATLES (CD)

FOR: Released in 1988. Original CD issues. 'Bread bin', box presentation.
AGAINST: Their early-digital 16bit sound quality was poor.



THE BEATLES COLLECTION MONO & STEREO (VINYL)

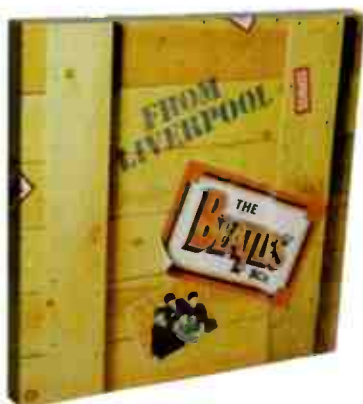
The stereo set (1978) was released in the UK, USA, Japan and Australia. A mono version (1982) was released in more limited numbers.

STEREO

FOR: Collectable investment
AGAINST: Rather harsh higher frequencies.

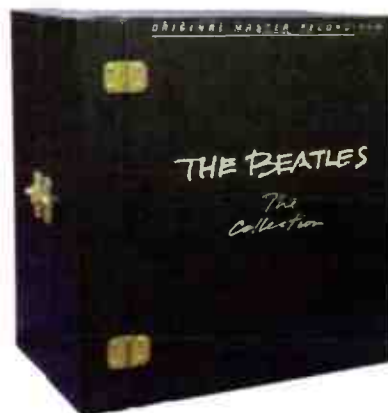
MONO

FOR: Collectable investment
AGAINST: Better sound quality but below par when compared to the new set reviewed here.



THE BEATLES BOX

Released in 1980 this eight LP collection lists 124 tracks in chronological order.
FOR: Hidden alternative track rarities.
AGAINST: Compared to current productions, mediocre sound quality, no original sleeve art.



THE BEATLES: THE COLLECTION

Released in 1982 on half-speed mastered vinyl by Mobile Fidelity.
FOR: Collectable investment.
AGAINST: Supposedly, the ultimate in audiophile sound quality. Not from Abbey Road master tapes though.



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How to spin Beatles Monos

Here are three turntable combos – budget, mid-price and no-budget – suitable for playing The Beatles in Mono LPs.

What may confuse you is the Icon Audio PS1 MkII phono stage. It is one of the few available with a mono switch. This is a more convenient way to play mono, using a stereo cartridge:

switch to mono! This sums the channels, cancelling out-of-phase stereo noise. You could use it, with a stereo cartridge, in our MID-PRICE and NO-BUDGET systems, eliminating the need to swap headshells, as well as the expense of two cartridges of course. It makes sense, but not to those who already have a phono stage without a mono switch, or prefer a transistor phono stage.

BUDGET

This turntable combo is a cheat but it makes a point. It's stereo but you can play these new LPs with any normal stereo cartridge. Ideally you need a mono switch to eliminate stereo groove noise but they are not found on budget phono stages. This system will play The Beatles in Mono LPs well because they have very little noise, so using a mono cartridge or mono switch to eliminate stereo noise isn't vital. A stereo cartridge still gives you a mono centre image too.

If you want to boogie in mono as well as stereo – and be able to upgrade to a moving coil – then add in an Icon Audio PS1 MkII, one of the few phono stages available with a mono switch. With an authentic valve sound, it's perfect for The Beatles in Mono.

MID-PRICE

This turntable combo is a little expensive, the sort of thing you may put together in stages, but offers top results from a compact package. It is based upon Ortofon's new 2M Mono SE moving magnet cartridge specifically designed to play The Beatles in Mono LPs. To play stereo as well you need an arm with a removable head shell, and a second head shell with a stereo cartridge – and an SME309 arm is a superb choice. At this level you'll likely have a phono stage equipped amplifier or an external phono stage of the many available from Creek, Cambridge Audio, Pro-ject, Avid, Graham Slee, Icon Audio et al.

NO-BUDGET

We start here with an Ortofon Cadenza Mono moving coil cartridge, mounted in an SME 312S 12in magnesium arm, on an Inspire Monarch Direct Drive turntable. An Icon Audio PS3 MkII valve phono stage would provide suitable amplification.

Moving coil cartridges offer a better sound with stronger depth perspectives but they are costly. SME's 12in magnesium arm offers a wonderfully smooth sound and Inspire's Monarch offers Direct Drive speed stability in a solid plinth having a great sound.



BUDGET SYSTEM PRICE

Pro-ject I Expression Carbon turntable with Ortofon cartridge fitted, £575

Pro-ject Phono Box MM (£50) or Icon Audio PS1 MkII valve phono stage £999.95

Total £625/£1625

MID-PRICE SYSTEM PRICE

Ortofon 2M Mono SE moving magnet cartridge £399

Timestep Evo turntable with SME309 arm £3200

Total £3599

NO BUDGET SYSTEM PRICE

Ortofon Cadenza Mono moving coil cartridge £825

Inspire Monarch turntable, £3970

SME312S arm £1800

Icon Audio PS3 MkII phono stage £1999

Total £8594



Mono special

Ortofon has produced a special mono cartridge for The Beatles in Mono vinyl LP box set. Noel Keywood charts its history and takes a listen.

There's a story behind this cartridge - quite a long one, so I'll keep it short. Some time ago, whilst arranging with Abbey Road Studios an interview with cutting engineer Sean Magee about the forthcoming The Beatles in Mono box set, I realised these albums raised a problem. On forums Beatles fans were confused about the whole issue of mono and especially about how to get the best sound from early Beatles mono LPs. I could see committed fans ordering a special mono cartridge for this new box set, understandably thinking this was good sense, only to find the cartridge sounded dull and mistracked, causing distortion and groove damage. Not good. This would set the forums alight.

Ortofon's 2M Black – acknowledged as one of the finest moving magnet cartridges available after years on the market and legions of users.

Happy about this idea, I suggested it to Abbey Road and they liked it. Next stop Ortofon – and they loved it. So here is the end result, the new Ortofon 2M Mono SE (Special Edition) cartridge purposed specifically to play The Beatles in Mono box set.

It will also play any modern stereo microgroove in mono if you so wish. The key point is that it does not have an old, large diameter mono spherical stylus that would mis-track a modern stereo groove and cause damage; it has the most advanced stylus profile available today. Ortofon have also given it silver-plated copper wiring to improve insight and definition. So it is a highly-tuned mono cartridge, not a budget slogger.

Tracking force, like that of the 2M Black, is low, being quoted as 1.4gms-1.7gms, with 1.5gms as optimum. I used 1.7gms for all tests and for play, because it improves tracking. I find 1.5gms getting close to dangerously light, even on my super stable Garrard 401 that is anchored into a huge plinth that sits on a marble slab. Cueing by hand or damped platform can see the stylus skate if a gnat flies past at the wrong moment.

The 2M Mono SE is made from low resonance Lexan DMX and has threaded holes in its body that make fitting very easy. Screws of different lengths are supplied, plus a screwdriver and stylus brush. In



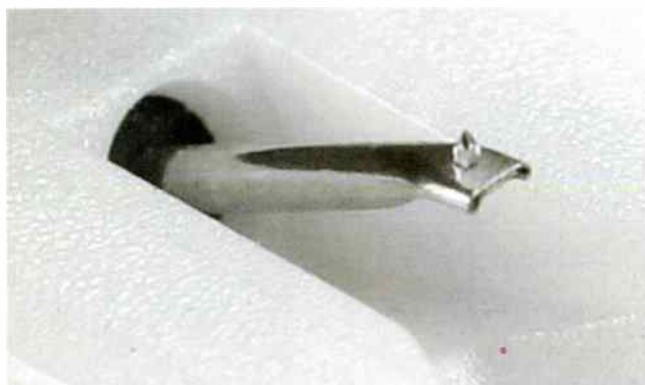
practice this cartridge may well sit in its own headshell, accompanying a stereo cartridge in a second headshell, but it is easy to change if need be. Weight is 7.3gms and this suits all arms, since most cope with 6-10gms minimum.

Being a moving magnet type, the stylus can be slid out for protection, or for replacement of course, should it suffer damage. And that's the big reason for buying a moving magnet cartridge like this one: it keeps cost under control. The 2M Mono SE costs Euros €499 (£395) through Ortofon's webshop. For the average LP spinner that's expensive but you get a deeply-purposed and tuned cartridge that will work with any Phono input for this.

Ortofon also make mono moving coil cartridges like the Cadenza Mono but you'll need deeper pockets and an MC preamp for a moving coil; it is audiophile territory – and they don't have user replaceable styli like the 2M Mono SE.

SOUND QUALITY

I refrained from reviewing early prototypes Ortofon sent me, with early mono Beatles LPs I have in my collection. Ortofon worked through a few iterations before settling on a final tune and it is final production I



The solution was simple: fit an Ortofon 2M Mono cartridge body with the Shibata stylus from the stereo 2M Black. Presto – a special moving magnet cartridge for a special set of albums. The real value of this lies less in its technical capabilities, more that it is a fully worked out solution for buyers of this rather special £288 box set. It removes fear of getting it wrong. Play the albums with this conventional but dedicated cartridge and Beatles fans will get the best result possible.

I say this because the stereo equivalent of this cartridge is

am reviewing here, not an unrepresentative early sample.

Listening was carried out in an SME312S 12in pickup arm on a Garrard 401 turntable at home, and a Timestep Evo turntable (Technics SL-1210 MkII tuned) in Hi-Fi World's office, fitted with SME309 9in pickup arm. Phono stage was an Icon Audio PS3 all-valve design in both locations.

I use Martin Logan Electromotion hybrid electrostatics at home driven by a World Audio Design 300B valve amplifier, but at Hi-Fi World the system comprised Quad II-eighty mono block valve amplifiers driving Tannoy Kensington Gold Reference loudspeakers, that I will be reviewing next month.

I used both The Beatles in Mono box set LPs for this review as well as older Beatles LPs and an Ortofon Cadenza Bronze moving coil cartridge, switched to mono on the PS3, as a reference.

'Taxman' from 'Revolver' (August 1966), put a smile on my face when it was played at Abbey Road's demo, with the lyrics "taxman Mr Wilson, taxman Mr Heath" that dates the song (and me!). With the Ortofon the backing vocals of John and Paul were forward, clear and intense. George sings lead on this track and his lyrics – "should 5% appear too small" – were starkly clear. Paul's bass line was tight and fluid; much like the 2M Black we use regularly, the 2M Mono SE keeps bass in tight control and good perspective with the overall performance.

How does it cope with 'Please Please Me', their first album (March 1963)? Again the midband is forward and clear, highlighting John's vocals, complete with reverb. Paul's slower bass line was also firm and expressive. The stylus keeps everything well sorted; there's no muddle and with 'Please Please Me', the last track of Side 1, inner grooves suffered no extra muddle, distortion or treble loss. And those chiming guitar chords sound meaty, rich and solid. The vinyl of the new LPs is so quiet though, that roar from the master tape (and wow) is audible for a split second at the end of the track, before sudden silence as the cartridge tracks the lead out groove.

Recording quality had improved dramatically by November 1963 however. 'This Boy', end of side 1 of Mono Masters, had me spellbound it was so clear, sounding every bit as good, arguably better, than any modern recording. John's controlled

delivery was picked out clearly by the 2M Mono SE, Ringo's hi-hats and triangle strikes clear and sonorous in the background, showing again how well the Shibata stylus tracks inner grooves, teasing fine high-frequency detail. There's no tape hiss on this track.

On the issue of noise, there was precious little to be heard. The vinyl of these LPs is so quiet, and the absence of ticks and pops from the mono cartridge so eerie, that with volume right up I could barely recognise the source as LP. Once I even cued down, then cued back up thinking the system wasn't working, it was so quiet. The 2M Mono SE 600 Ohm generator produces less hiss than most MMs, so at high volume there's no hiss from the speakers, cartridge cued up.

With my old, original Parlophones like 'Help' (August 1965), the 2M Mono SE kept surface noise down and brought solidity to the electric piano in 'The Night Before,' it fleshes out instruments well. It also showed how my disc is harsh across the midband, whilst the new one is smooth and clear.

CONCLUSION

Whatever way you look at the 2M Mono SE it is a fantastic cartridge. Ortofon's stereo 2M Black has a



There are two channels, allowing the cartridge to connect into a stereo headshell, but each channel gives an identical signal.

deserved reputation as one of the best moving magnet cartridges available; the 2M Mono builds on it. It has a tad less high-frequency sheen I fancy, but it similarly enjoys a fabulous stylus that reads even difficult inner grooves perfectly. It is easy to fit, easy to use and compatible with all arms too; there are no foibles. I was entranced when spinning The Beatles in Mono LPs: it plays them near-perfectly.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response was almost ruler flat to 5kHz our analysis shows (green trace), above which output slowly starts to fall away. This will remove harshness and soften the sound a little. With additional capacitive loading of 200pF the upper midband lifts to give a flat response to 10kHz, above which treble falls faster. There was little tracing loss on inner grooves (red trace), due to the excellent profile of the Shibata stylus.

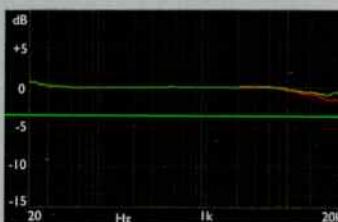
Ortofon quote a downforce range (VTF) of 1.4-1.7gms, with 1.5gms as optimum. The latter is very low by current standards, 1.7gms being common. Tracking at 1.6gms was very good, if not up to the highest standards. The SE managed 63µm at 300Hz but would not track the highest 90µm cut. At 1kHz it started to complain at 20cms/sec, whilst remaining in the groove. This is a good result, if not up with expensive moving coils that can manage 25cms/sec. Distortion was low, measuring 0.7% at 45µm lateral modulation, comprising mostly second harmonic which, subjectively, is innocuous.

Output was 5mV at 5cms/sec rms, so amplifier hiss will not intrude.

The 2M Mono SE worked well. It is tailored to avoid harshness and give a slightly easier sound, especially on inner grooves where its performance is unaffected by the short mechanical wavelengths, due to its excellent Shibata stylus profile. **NK**

Tracking force	1.4-1.7gms
Weight	7.3gms
Frequency response	20Hz - 20kHz
Tracking ability (300Hz)	
300Hz	63µm
1kHz	16cms/sec.
Distortion (45µm)	0.7%
Output (5cms/sec rms)	5mV

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



ORTOFON 2M MONO SE £399



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VERDICT

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FOR

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- ease of fitment
- no tracing loss

AGAINST

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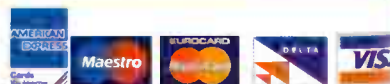
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SUGDEN A21a Class A amplifier, glorious, £950. Linn Pekin tuner, £145. REL T305 subwoofer, wicked, £145. Musical Fidelity M1Dac, £175. Tel: John 01952 728 773 (Shropshire)

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CHUCK BERRY

CHUCK BERRY IS ON TOP 1959



"Johnny B. Goode was the first great record about the joys of playing rock'n'roll guitar"

Jerry Lee Lewis is still riled that his own mother considered his fabled rival the real king of rock'n'roll. "I always thought I was," he objects, "only to be told, 'Well, you and Elvis are pretty good but you're no Chuck Berry'".

Chuck Berry had a wealth of great albums in his early days but, if you had to grab just one, then this would be it. The song line-up is a consummate list of great songs, forging classics like 'Maybellene', 'Carol', 'Sweet Little Rock & Roller', 'Little Queenie', 'Roll Over Beethoven', 'Around and Around', 'Johnny B. Goode' and 'Almost Grown'.

Then you get additional sweet meats such as the Latin-flavored 'Hey Pedro', the steel guitar run of 'Blues for Hawaiians', 'Anthony Boy' and 'Jo Jo Gunne'. This LP could almost act as a mini-greatest-hits package on its own.

Yes, you could say that all we have here is two sides of singles and filler – even though, by and large, that's what you got when you bought a rock'n'roll album in the fifties – but, at the same time, it is also Berry's most balanced, well-structured and perfectly formed LP.

So what is it, exactly, that sets this album and Berry himself, apart from the rest? Nadine Cohodas, author of 'Spinning Blues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records', commented on one of the above tracks, 'Maybellene', that, "With its opening guitar run – a rapid mixture of notes and chords – the song had a relentless energy, a similar feel to Bo Diddley's first single ('Bo Diddley') but with a different style and a lighter sound. And then there were Berry's unconventional lyrics, unusual words, perhaps, but creating an unmistakable mood".

In fact, it was 'Maybellene' that was largely responsible for Berry's stardom, reaching No 1 on Billboard's R&B chart and then moving to the pop chart, quickly selling a million copies and Berry then being named Most Promising R&B Artist in Billboard's annual disc jockey poll.

Signed to Chess Records, Berry would later damn the owners with faint praise. "They were great" he said. "They weren't honest but they were very helpful in my career. They gave me the first chance. That's a beauty. To rob somebody or to not give somebody what

belongs to them is not honest. So they're both, you know. But they were good to me and cool".

Maybe this is part of the reason that Berry later grew a reputation for being 'awkward', sticking to contracts to the letter and expecting the other side to do the same or pay a fine. For example, he demands a Fender Bassman amplifier to be supplied to him before a show and, if one is not provided, he demands a fine of \$2,000 paid before the show. This is one of his minor quirks too. Berry can be aggressive and controlling.

'Johnny B. Goode' would soon follow the famed 'Maybellene' along with many other tracks on the LP. He used to say that 'Johnny B. Goode' was the first great record about the joys and rewards of playing rock'n'roll guitar. It certainly features one of the best, if not the best, introductions to any rock'n'roll song on the planet.

But Berry always had a conscious commercial angle to his work, "I wrote songs white people could buy, because that's nine pennies out of every dime" Berry said. "I made records for people who would buy them. No colour, no ethnic, no political – I don't want that, never did".

In a similar way, he refused to allow segregation to hamper his progress, "You're looking at it like a white person would. Would it humiliate you if you went to a country where it said no person with black hair or dark brown eyes would be allowed? You pass it by. You know about it. It's not anything new to you".

You can grab this album, an original Chess release, on CD alongside another cracker, 'One Dozen Berrys' (1958) as part of a two-fer CD on Hoodoo from the UK outfit Discovery (www.discovery-records.com).

This issue also includes four bonus tracks from the same era: 'The Downbound Train', 'Run Rudolph Run', 'Brown Eyed Handsome Man' and 'You Can't Catch Me'.

Fans of Berry will also be interested to hear about another Hoodoo two-fer featuring 'Rockin' At The Hops' (1960), originally released on Chess, plus another Chess original, 'New Juke Box Hits' (1961).

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