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Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd is a  
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Printed By  
Advent Print Group  
Andover

Hi-Fi Plus is published seven times a  
year by: Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd

ISSN 1465 5950

# editorial

**T**his is the last issue of 2009. It's been an 'interesting' year, in the style of Chinese curses. The hi-fi industry has been challenged by the economic uncertainty of recent months; it has had to streamline and change, belts have been tightened. Whether what survives this economic storm proves to be stronger than before remains to be seen, but there are some small signs that signal hope.

Perhaps the biggest and best sign is from you, the readers and the buyers of hi-fi. Yes, you recognise that things get rationalised in these difficult times, and sometimes that process is uncomfortable. But many are shaking off the gloom that seems prevalent in the news and enjoying music again. This year's round of audiophile shows (and there are many, dotted around the world this time of year) have seen unexpectedly high attendance figures and people taking interest in hi-fi in all its guises once more. And people are taking the time to shake off some of their long-held prejudices and test their beliefs and opinions; hard-core valve types turning their mind to solid-state (or vice versa), box speaker fans trying out panels... there are even die-hard CD users looking kindly upon music servers, computer audio and the Squeezebox.

There's also a rare spirit of camaraderie among the people making the next generation of products you will want to own. People normally at loggerheads with one another are working together, bitter rivals solving their differences (sometimes even without the use of alcohol) and striving to make the audio experience better than ever

for their customers. The cynic inside me says this happy-clappy togetherness will last about as long as it takes to find the next client and will all be just a dim memory when the recession comes to an end. But right now, the optimist is winning the war and hopes this is a sustaining force for good in the industry.

Part of the reason for the working together comes down to current economic forces. But not all; the ingress of computer audio technology leaves some amplifier and speaker makers scratching their collective heads and those in the know are often collared by those wanting to know about tomorrow's audiophile source components.

Hopefully, that's where we come in. Onwards to 2010!

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Are classical music patrons  
the new audiophiles?

# music matters

by Alan Sircom



**AUDIO'S 'DIRTY LITTLE SECRET'** is that it's singularly failing to reach anyone outside of its own little circle. Many audiophile brands are making audiophile products for audiophiles; this may perfectly target the right niche, but it doesn't bring high-quality music reproduction to a wider audience. How to reach that wider audience though; that's the big question that few are trying to answer.

The AudioWorks in Cheadle, in the south of Manchester, may have the solution. AudioWorks proprietor Larry Ogden has long been a patron of Manchester's Hallé Orchestra, and also a regular advertiser in the inside back cover of Hallé programmes. The first part is because he's a music lover, rightly proud of having a world-class orchestra (and one that's currently going through something of a renaissance) on his doorstep. The second part is because he's in business to reach fellow music lovers, and the Hallé is something of a magnet for music lovers.

One Friday in mid-October (purely coincidentally, the night before the Manchester *Sound & Vision Show*), AudioWorks played its masterstroke. An audience of 50 fellow patrons were invited to a rehearsal of the Hallé Orchestra and Choir performing Elgar's *The Kingdom* (under conductor Sir Mark Elder) at the Bridgewater Hall. Having spent an hour in a sneak preview of the next day's presentation, the patrons were invited into the large Green Room for drinks, canapés – and the chance to listen to the Hallé once more, this time through one of the best audio systems around.

Larry, working with a team from both dCS and Focal put together a system

▶ costing well in excess of £100,000. It comprised a four-box dCS Scarlatti CD/SACD playing front-end, a Spectral DMC-30 preamplifier and DMA-100S power amplifier into a pair of Focal Maestro Utopia loudspeakers. Naturally, all the cables were from MIT (Spectral insists on this) and everything was resting on the award-winning MusicWorks ReVo acrylic support system. A laptop, containing recordings of the orchestra made in the previous day's rehearsal, was also connected into the Scarlatti.

This recording was played first, and in some respects this wasn't a good choice. With only a brief mixdown session, the raw data from the recording sounded remarkably unlike the sound of the Bridgewater Hall next door. Feet were shuffling and for a moment, I thought this was going to be an expensive mistake for the assembled audio team. Then, they admitted how raw this original edit was, and played a final SACD mix of the Hallé playing 'Mars' from Holst's *Planets Suite*.

*“The patrons were invited into the large Green Room for drinks, canapés – and the chance to listen to the Hallé once more, this time through one of the best audio systems around.”*

The result was a stunned silence, except for an upset mumble whenever a piece of music was turned off. The great and the good of the Hallé – those who regularly donate significant sums of money to the orchestra because they want to keep classical music thriving in Manchester – had no idea that reproduced music can sound that good. As more and more pieces of music were played to the assembled invited audience, so a new set of music lovers were beginning to discover just how good recorded music can sound.

Live vs. recorded demonstrations were popular in the 1970s, but fell away in popularity as the hi-fi audience moved from classical music. Now that hi-fi's in need of a new audience, the AudioWorks ambitious demonstration marks a much-needed return to that kind of demo. The listeners all quickly spotted that live is still far better than recorded – we still have a long way to go before recordings and replay equipment gets close to replicating what live instruments can do – but all were deeply impressed by just how much better a good system can sound compared to their home audio equipment, and that sometimes you just feel like listening to Mahler when the concert hall is ringing out to Mozart.

The conversion process was swift and effective and the music-lovers in the audience came away with the germ of an interest in audio quality. That hour-long music session quickly started sending ripples through the classical community in the region. It's the sort of demonstration that doesn't

necessarily end with immediate sales and a group of well-heeled music lovers putting their elegantly-designed Danish audio systems in skips that evening. These companies are playing the long game, here; making the Hallé's patrons – and in process, those regular concert-goers – aware of what good audio can do for them.

As you might expect, there are many musical patrons in the audio business. The love of music often extends beyond the recorded, and those who love music, usually love to hear it live. However, those patrons rarely capitalise on their 'in' with the musical fraternity, and in so doing are underselling their wares. While we don't need the foyer of every concert hall turning into a bazaar for high-end manufacturers and dealers, the concert-going music-lover can clearly become a receptive candidate for high-quality audio, if the job's done properly. So, kudos to Larry at the AudioWorks for getting the job done properly this time. I hope that the same thing can be performed by more than just the one store. Certainly, those I spoke to about this idea viewed Larry's 'eureka' moment with something more than jealousy; you could almost see the 'hmmm, I want a piece of this action' thought process forming. By the Sunday after the event plans, it seems, were afoot elsewhere.

There's a small plot hole in this plan; even though the AudioWorks demo reached new blood, it's not young blood; classical patrons make the typical fortysomething audiophile seem like a spring chicken in comparison. We're still not reaching a younger generation of prospective audiophiles here. But maybe the same idea can be adapted elsewhere, and that way we can bring those under the age of 35 into our little fold once more, too. Perhaps our 'dirty little secret' finally gets put out to pasture.+





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## Fancy components, fantasy prices

# the view from the other side

by the Hi-Fi Heretic

**ONE OF THE GREAT AUDIOPHILE GAMES** is “I’ve got better parts than you.” I’m talking about audiophile oneupmanship through high-grade parts. These under-the-hood brand names have become buzzwords for enthusiasts, and the hardcore hi-fi buff is more likely to know the names of the makers of components on the PCB – and even the PCB material itself – than the average electronics engineer. Even if they’ve never seen the inside of the product’s case or know one end of a multimeter from the other.

High-grade components typically cost tens, hundreds or even thousands of times more than their run-of-the-mill counterparts. A manufacturer might pay a few pence for an individual capacitor when buying in bulk, but might pay as much as £10 per component for top-grade capacitors.

Unlike much in high-end audio, the value of expensive components often justifies the price increase between standard and special editions of the same product. Just changing all the components in the signal path to top-grade ones really can double the end-user price of a product.

However, is there an improvement in performance when using these expensive components?

*“Just changing all the components in the signal path to top-grade ones really can double the end-user price of a product.”*

I’m not convinced. At best, by upgrading the components inside a CD player or an amplifier is akin to blueprinting a car’s engine. By using high-tolerance components, you are making a product more accurate to the original design. However, as it’s doubtful we can hear the difference between two non-identical amplifiers under controlled conditions, the chances of hearing the difference between the same product but with better components are slim indeed.

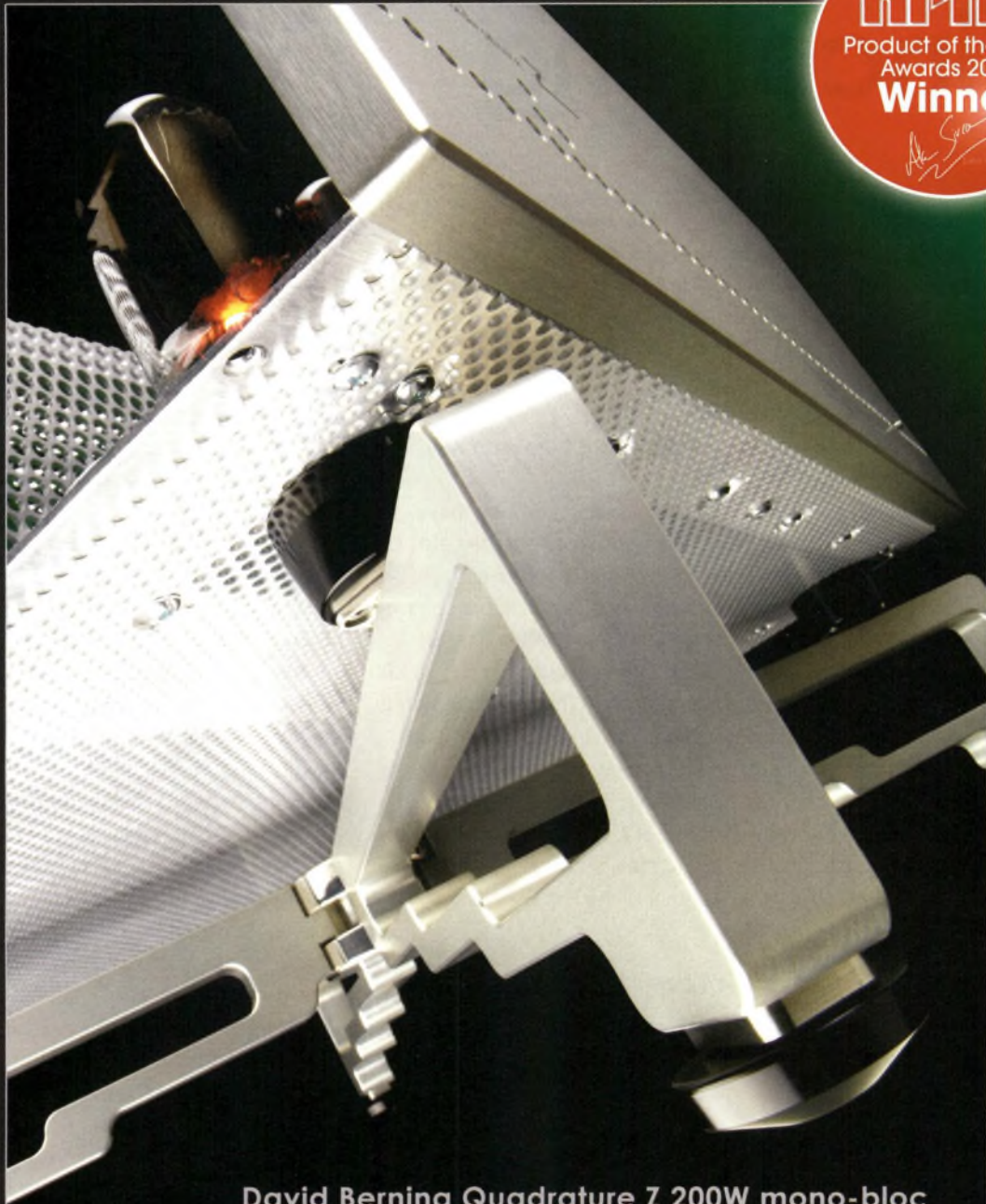
We are naturally predisposed to like the idea of being able to hear upgrades. If you spend £1,000 on a hi-fi component, then spend the same again on updates and upgrades, you are going to think you are listening to a better product. That holds whether the upgrades make no difference in any real terms. This is called ‘expectation bias’; you have invested time and money in the upgraded product, so you would be surprised if there was no difference. So, you will hear a difference, whether there is one or not.

This is problem enough if you’ve bought a component on the basis of the notional improvement brought about from a list of ‘famous name’ parts. It gets a whole lot worse if you were the one doing the upgrading and you’ve just spent the last few days replacing all the caps and the case wiring with something really expensive. Your product has been out of action for some time, you’ve forgotten how it sounds and you’ve just spent hours sniffing (lead-free) solder. You are almost guaranteed to like the end results, and pass your approval on to others.

The idea that an amplifier can be improved by the electronic equivalent of blueprinting isn’t bad on paper. And if it means an amplifier that started out having a 100dB signal-to-noise ratio ends up with a 101dB signal-to-noise ratio, that’s a good thing, isn’t it? Well, it’s not that simple in reality. The measured improvement will not make the sound worse, but neither will it make it better. Long ago, the combination of digital sources and solid-state amplifiers meant that the electronics could be removed from the list of products getting in the way of good sound. The limiting factor today is the intrinsic amount of distortion in a loudspeaker, and although things are a lot better than they were a couple of generations ago, it’s unlikely we will ever get a loudspeaker that will ever approach the fidelity of even the cheapest solid-state amplifier. Updating the components in an amplifier then (or any other modern electronic component) is an almost perfect modern definition of gilding the lily.

And yet, the audiophile landscape is littered with products sporting components with the sort of tolerances that would be excessive for use on the International Space Station or the kind of ruggedness that would make the product survive an hour in a cement mixer. Audio is just not that demanding.+

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# incoming

*We decided to scrap the Anger Management column a couple of issues back, because few long letters made the grade, and some readers didn't like the anonymity. Then we got this gem and decided for every rule, there's always an exception...*

## FLAT EARTH MEMORIES

I miss the simple times of the 1980s, when the earth was comfortably flat.

Life was easy then. You bought a Linn LP12 turntable, and then spent what's left on the rest. What if you had the money for a LP12, but not enough for an amplifier and speakers? Buy the Linn and start saving! It was not uncommon for someone to have spent hundreds and hundreds on an LP12 with the right arm and cartridge and play it through a £99 NAD 3020 amplifier and a pair of cheap Wharfedale Diamonds. Just so long as you used the right table (An Ikea LACK table with the bottom cut out, or a dedicated one by The Sound Organisation, ideally two 'Sound Org' tables; one – with the bottom shelf removed – for the LP12, one for everything else), the right stands (Linn Kan II) and the right cable (Naim NAC A4), you were officially an Aspirant of the Flat Earth Order.

*“We tapped our feet in time with the music, but only when the Linn came on. It didn't matter what was playing, I tapped my foot in time with the beat, whether there was a beat or not.”*

We had the Tune Dem on our side. In the Tune Dem, we tapped our feet in time with the music, but only when the Linn came on. It didn't matter what was playing, I tapped my foot in time with the beat, whether there was a beat or not. Tap, tap, tappity tap. At times, I wasn't sure if I was in a hi-fi shop or a dance studio.

The hi-fi shops weren't really shops though... They were shrines, cathedrals of Flat Earthdom. You were ushered in hushed tones to the dimly lit demonstration room, sat in the slightly sticky chair and confessed your musical sins to the High Priest of Tune. Only the truly penitent could withstand the ordeal and the 'coffee'. That's how I ended up with my first 'real' system and I spent many happy years with my LP12/Basik/K9, first-generation Naim Nait and Linn Kan speakers. I dreamed of the upgrade path, but things always got in the way. Little things like kids and mortgage payments.

I still followed the path, though. I refused to accept the Way of The CD, even getting people to remove their digital watches if they were to be presented before my altar to Tune. And woe betide anyone who had hi-fi equipment not from the anointed ones of Salisbury and Scotland.

It couldn't last. The rot set in with my usual dismissal and laughter at the notion of any turntable that was better than mine. This was always 'on their turf', because my turntable never, ever travelled (except to visit the Doctor of Setupology). This one time though, the guy rose to the challenge. He turned up at my place with all his strange gear – A turntable with no suspension! Valve amps!! Speakers that worked away from the wall!!! What strange hell is this?

It took nearly two years to react to this brief, but devastating, exposure to the land beyond the Tune. That time was spent pretending what had happened, hadn't. I even upgraded the LP12 and the Naim amplifier during this wilderness period, but the damage was done. I had been tested and I had failed – I lost my faith. Everything changed and changed again. I bought (Shock! Horror!) a CD player and loved it. I was using valves; at first only socially, but soon became a heavy user. And the deck changed and changed and changed again.

Sometimes though, although I know I could never go back to that simple Linn/Naim system, I long for that comforting reassurance that everything I did was right and all those other guys were idiots. A time where I didn't lie awake at night, thinking about power cables.

**“Giordano Bruno”, via email**

*Many of us in the audio industry started in a similar place to you. Some never left. The simple way with clearly defined upgrade path (and no weirdness) is always attractive. That being said, even Naim Audio makes a power cable these days... – Ed.+*



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# four weeks three shows

*Pictures and Words by Jason Kennedy and Alan Sircom*

We promised there would be no show reports in *Hi-Fi Plus*. We lied. Part of the reason why we lied is because for once, the shows (both in the UK and US) had exciting new products on display and demonstration. But also, these shows actually had some energy and interested people walking around and looking at stuff. This makes a big change from the usual 'you could roll a bowling ball down the corridor and hit no-one' hi-fi show of recent years.

So, if you didn't make it to Whittlebury Hall, Towcester or to the Marriott Tech Center, Denver (or even the Renaissance Hotel, Manchester) in the last couple of months, here's what you missed...

## The National Audio Show 2009

**W**hittlebury Hall is a large, low-rise hotel with a maze of corridors around open-air quadrants. Orientation was a challenge, but without too much reference to the map and compass I was able to find a stack of new products from brands old and new. The sound that exhibitors were able to produce varied a lot, but there were good and great sounding rooms.

ABC Audio had a great looking and technologically interesting Japanese amp called the Digital Do Main B-1a (£6,500). This long power amp with volume control uses V-FET output transistors to produce one of the most valve-like solid state sounds we've heard. In another room they revealed the latest units in the miniature Firestone range, including a digital amplifier with the great moniker Big Joe III.

Absolute Sounds had three rooms of closed door dems, highlighting the latest Wilson Sasha, the Crystal Arabesque and Magico V2 loudspeakers – and a stack of new exotica. The Studio room featured the latest from Metronome Technologie, including the Kalista integrated CD player, a one-box version of the bouncy, acrylic, Kalista transport. Krell announced two new more affordable power amps, the S150M monobloc (£2,650 each) and the bridgeable stereo S275 (£5,900) that both inhabit narrow but deep casework that's devoid of sharp edges.

Magnum Dynalab is branching out into the receiver market with its MD-209 (£4,995). This is a fully balanced design with discrete amplification boards and a 125 watt stereo output. You can augment the onboard FM with line and USB sources but unlike the hybrid MD-309 amplifier (tested in this issue) this is a pure solid state design. Audiofreaks also showed the latest addition to the Avalon loudspeaker range. Time is the company's new penultimate model and utilises a diamond diaphragm tweeter, concave ceramic dome midrange and two 28cm Nomex Kevlar bass drivers in its 117cm high cabinet.

Gamut made a big sound in the Audio Reference room using its new M250i monoblocs (£15,900 per pair) to drive the mighty

S9 loudspeakers (£64,450). The power amps have new balanced power supplies and Gamut's Wormhole wiring alongside mods both cosmetic and electronic. The EI Superior S9 has three 10inch bass units each with a damped solid wooden insert, these sit in a birch ply cabinet that sits on a high mass stainless base. It represents the pinnacle of president Lars Goller's speaker design achievements (and will be tested in the next issue).

Before making a name with Art Audio loudspeakers, Doug Dunlop was better known for making turntables. His new Systemdek 3D deck looks a lot more ambitious than its forebears, with an aluminium chassis, external motor and spring suspension. Price isn't fixed as yet, but don't expect much change from £10K.

A wry variation on the SET theme appeared in GT Audio's room. The Tron Voyager (£10,000) is not only single ended... it's single valve. One Emission Labs 1605 triode is all that sits between in- and output on this heavyweight chassis, ▶



**Avalon's Time  
loudspeaker**

**EMM Labs XDS1  
CD/SACD player**



▶ the only other tube onboard is a rectifier. The digital source in this room was the stylish Acoustic Plan Vadi (€8,800), a German tube powered CD player that eschews oversampling and is built into a resonance resisting cubic case.

One of the shockers of the show was a six grand Rega CD player! Signalling its commitment to the high end the Isis is a heavyweight top loader with twin Burr Brown DACs and class A I/V conversion (an Osiris amplifier follows soon), while one of the most desirable digital sources on dem (both in the UK and in the US at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest) was the new EMM Labs XDS1 (£18,000). Despite it costing roughly about as much as the company's transport/DAC combo, this single box CD/SACD player is the company's new top model. The XDS1 is a wholly new design and uses the latest Esoteric all metal transport mechanism.

Symmetry Systems took a couple of rooms, including one demonstrating the colourful Trilogy hybrid amplifiers and Kiso Acoustic's HB-1 speaker (£11,000). A small Japanese design based around musical instrument cabinet building techniques, the HB-1 is actually built by guitar maker Takemine. Trilogy launched a range of compact components in heavyweight casework and the option of lustrous car paint finishes, including the 908/992 (£1,795/£1,695 each) pre/monobloc with tubes and transistors in the power amps, and the 907 phono stage (£1,595) housed in a case hewn from solid billet.

Tom Tom Audio was demonstrating the QM60 floorstander in a sexy zebrano veneer and an Extension Module (£2,250 projected) for the Guru QM10 standmount. This increases this entertaining speaker's dynamic capability thanks to a rear firing ten-inch bass unit.

The award for best music at the show has to go to Decent Audio (good name too) who were playing the KLF through a big pair of Magneplanar MG3.6 panels (£6,000) driven by some lovely tube amplification from Melody.

In all, NAS 09 proved a lively, upbeat show that surprised and entertained with the variety of kit and people that turned up, I for one will be going back. **JK**

## The Rocky Mountain Audio Fest 2009

**T**he Mile High City hosts one of the most friendly audio shows on the planet. Three days of seminars, demonstrations and some of the most exotic equipment you'll ever get to hear under the one very large roof of the Marriott Tech Center, Denver, CO.

It's hard to find a star of the show among hundreds of exhibitors and thousands of products. There were so many stars. One of the new and exciting products might cause a bit of a stir in a stereo magazine. Ayre announced its new DX-5 play-everything machine. Part heavily

modified Oppo Blu-ray player, part exciting new QB-9 USB converter; the stereo-only player was one of the few video sources in use outside of the ESPN-locked televisions behind the bar. Price (in \$ or £) is not fixed yet, but expect it to be somewhere between £7,000-£10,000.

Despite nearby turntable loyalty (to local boy Galiber Design), two turntable names kept cropping up everywhere; the VPI Classic and the Artemis Labs SA1. This last is interesting, because the company – best known for its valve preamp and phono stage – has not only made a fine deck, but is the first turntable brand deemed good enough to build a special Frank Schroeder arm under license. This deck was in the Artemis Labs room (naturally), but also in Stillpoints' fascinating demo, with an Allearts MC1B cartridge into a prototype David Berning preamp and the new ZH-230 power amp into Sentient Acoustics F200A loudspeakers. Firing across the room and set in the nearfield to keep the room out of the equation, there was only one seat because there was only one point where everything is in focus. But wow, what focus!

There are times when you just got to break some rules. Denver dealer Audio Alternative Ltd did just that by combining a Linn turntable and Naim electronics with Wilson Duette loudspeakers. That's the sort of system ▶



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turntable**



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▶ you are never supposed to put together, but no one really knows why. Especially when you hear some Jimi Hendrix played on the Linn. Even Jimi never knew he sounded this good!

Nelson Pass' latest project is the First Watt J2 power amplifier. This \$4,000 stereo model is a 25 watt design, running in Class A mode. The simple two-stage circuit sports JFET devices at the input and power stages, in a design known as a 'mu follower' among tube enthusiasts.

On show but not demonstration, the \$5,995 Audio Research DSi200 integrated amplifier represents a bold new departure for the company is a solid-state 200 watt (400 watt into four ohms) design using a unique switching MOSFET output stage coupled with a passive preamplifier in one new slimline chassis. This is the first

## MANCHESTER SOUND & VISION

The last of the trio was the Manchester Sound & Vision show. Although very successful in its own right, a lot of the equipment on demonstration there had already



appeared at Whittlebury Hall. Some companies (like Audio Note and Naim Audio) had even attended all three shows – that's practically one a week. There were exciting new products –

such as the replacement to the ProAc Studio 140 (and the promise of a new carbon-fibre based flagship from the brand next year) and the new Cyrus 8 XP d integrated amp and DAC.

Most interesting of all though, Russ Andrews has struck up a very clever deal with Meridian Sooloos, which could be the perfect model for supplying music servers around the world. In addition to the standard cost of product and installation, and providing an option to upload the owner's collection, Russ Andrews supplies a pre-loaded collection, taken from the *1001 Albums You Must Hear Before You Die* book (and its classical counterpart), as an option. These albums – less the ones you already own – are ripped in FLAC and stored, at a cost of £10 per disc. The CDs can then be bought back from the owner for £5 each. Many companies offer a disc-ripping service, but few also offer the discs as well and, as the collections of albums are comprehensive and intelligently collated, it seems this is one collection people might want to buy into. **AS**

## Audio Research DSi200 integrated amplifier



product in a soon-to-be-announced Definition range, and sports ARC's new silver-handled livery.

There were several rooms that more than made the grade for best sound. Vandersteen's new Model Seven is a time and phase correct four-way loudspeaker, with a built-in 400w amp for its subwoofer, extensive room compensation, constrained layer damped panels, a unique and patented carbon-fibre/balsa sandwich mid-bass unit.

The YG Acoustics room was the weirdest, because it was at once the best and the worst sound, depending on the volume level. Those giant Anat Reference speakers were more than capable of making the room shake apart when the volume was turned up, but when calmer, the sound of both the Anat and the Kiphod were astonishing.

Another great sound was coming from Nola. Three times. The Baby Grand Reference, the Micro Grand Reference and the impressive at any price but it's \$1,500 Boxer standmounted speaker also sounded great, being driven by an open reel deck (really!) from United Home Audio and a flea-power Jolida amp.

There was also a sublime sound from a system comprising a Rega turntable, Ayre digital electronics (including the new QB-9 DAC), VTL amplifiers and Avalon Indras, all fed with Cardas Clear cable. While the Nordic Tone speakers from Electrocompaniet just sounded better and better each day.

No audio show would be complete without its left-field grandmaster, and the prize for being the most 'out there' must go to the On A Higher Note room. Whether it was the \$90,000 Synergistic Research Galileo cable system with active shielding, the Acoustic Art room treatments, the excellent magnetic direct drive/magnetic bearing Brinkman Oasis turntable, the Luxman amps or the Vivid Giya G1 loudspeakers, the result is an experience you'll never forget.

The seminars are always packed and exciting at the RMAF, but this year there was something special; the first ever keynote speech at the event, by none other than Harry Pearson. The most golden of golden ears left Sea Cliff to deliver two special presentations on audio, past, present and future. He felt that – just as audiophiles had to develop a language to make common identifiable problems like distortion and coherence – now we need to make a language to identify new problems such as noise pollution, because many of the problems that beset early products are now history. He also discussed multichannel and computer audio, and how they could be the future for the audiophile. Fascinating stuff! **AS +**



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Wadia 781i CD/SACD player

by Roy Gregory

In the world of product marketing, brand value is hard won and should be jealously guarded. It's something that Wadia have done well and few products are as instantly or unmistakably identifiable as those emanating from their factory. The 860 CD player that first appeared in Issue 4 of *Hi-Fi+* was not a new product then, but it is virtually indistinguishable from this model under review. My own 860 evolved through 861 and 861SE guises without so much as turning a hair, surviving for many a year at the top of my own personal digital tree, seldom surpassed (and then only by players at a far higher price) and only once equalled by a machine that might be considered a serious competitor. But whilst that longevity and upgradeability are both commendable and reassuring, they also masked a worrying reality. As good as the 861 is, should it really take ten years to better its performance? And while that reflects a degree of design atrophy on the part of the competition, it also reflects something of a hiatus for Wadia itself, a decade of uncertainty and shifting fortunes that created the first cracks in what had been an industry edifice. Things were moving fast and the digital landscape was shifting rapidly – only Wadia wasn't. Suddenly, that four-square casework didn't seem quite such a virtue. Stuck with aging if still impressive products, the sharks began to circle – only to receive a bloody nose. Wadia is back and in a big way; and best of all it's still the Wadia that was.

First indication was the 581 CD/SACD player reviewed in Issue 60, which quickly re-established its benchmark status. Pure Wadia, it shared the casework, essential operating principles and functional versatility on which its predecessors

built their considerable reputations. It added an entirely new clock design, a massively reengineered and heavily regulated power supply section, SACD replay (with its own dedicated decoding algorithm) and a new discrete Class A analogue output stage. Add in the optional digital inputs and outputs along with the necessary switching and a cleverly executed digital volume control, and you had a thorough going update on everything that made Wadia what it was – including the sound. But the really sly move, the sucker punch if you like, was the i170 transport, a neat little iPod dock with a difference; it didn't just connect a portable player to your system, it was able to extract a digital signal from the little beast, transforming it in one fell swoop into a potential audiophile plaything. After all, WAV files encoded on a solid-state memory combined with the 581's decoding capabilities make for pretty serious sound quality.

And just when you thought it was safe to revisit your record collection, along comes the 781i, essentially a tuned and tweaked 581 that offers the latter's input, output and switching options as standard, adds a larger power transformer, more reservoir capacitance and regulation, and tops that off

by extending the inductive filtering to embrace the analogue sections as well, whilst also adding additional mechanical damping to deal with the vibrational energy generated by all those extra PSU components. This is as good as it gets in a single box, at least as far as Wadia are concerned.

Digitally speaking, the heart of the DAC remains a dual processor driven gate-array, running Wadia's Digimaster 2.5 decoding software. With a sampling rate of 1.4112 GHz and 24bit resolution, this offers three alternative algorithms for CD replay (which could be summed up as A – standard, B – crisp and dry and C – warmer and a little rounded) and Wadia's own SACD algorithm, which they claim restores rise-time deficiencies in the original encoding. In current production the AT&T glass optical input has been replaced with the now essential USB connection, making the Wadia more computer audio compatible and, therefore, future-proofed.

*“It is actually that precision when it comes to the timing, placement and weighting of notes that makes the musical and expressive difference.”*

Consider the 781i as a DAC, digital pre-amp and control centre, which happens to have a darned good transport section tacked on and you start to get the picture. It really has got pretty much everything you could require. Wadia even offer a separate A to D converter that could be used to route the signal from an occasionally used turntable through your digital pre-amp and, who knows, onto a hard-drive or server-based system – such is the way of the hi-fi of tomorrow.

But the real question remains, does it justify the price hike over a 581ise on sonic grounds? The answer to that is a resounding, “Yes!” All that work on the power supply has really paid off, with the 781 delivering a noticeably lower noise floor, expressed as greater transparency, focus and dimensionality. Backgrounds are blacker, stages deeper and more dimensional. But what really tells is the increased sense of stability, both in the way that images and the acoustic stay anchored in space and the added jump and faster rise time on dynamics, large and small. These differences are neither particularly subtle nor unimportant. Indeed. Anybody familiar with the 581 is going to immediately recognize the significant increase in musical authority and communication that flows from the 781's output sockets. Straight from cold its qualities are manifest (although they do blossom over the first 48 hours or so, and the review machine was already well run-in) hardly requiring side by side comparison. Having said that, I've been fortunate enough to have the 581 in-house for quite some time and it stayed throughout the 781's extended visit too. Do you get the sense of a certain reluctance to part with these players?

The Lim K2 CD re-master of the Solti/LSO recording *Romantic Russia* is a perfect example of the 781's clear sonic and musical superiority. Even an orchestral pot-boiler like 'Night On The Bare Mountain' benefits from its advantages. As impressively present and dynamic as Solti's reading is on

the 581, the 781 adds a greater sense of acoustic space, orchestral layering and dimensionality. Instruments have more body and shape, with the identity and tonality of the bass instruments in particular being far more natural and floating in a more convincing way, the floor clearly audible beneath them. Timing and phrasing improve too, meaning that even when you know what's coming the drama and impact of the orchestral tuttis still thrill, the dynamic contrasts are still extreme. Solti takes the piece at a fair old clip, contrasting that with pauses between passages, and the torrid, almost frenetic pace which sounds hurried, tumbling and two-dimensional on the 581 gains poise and a driven purpose on the more accomplished player.

While the spatial differences are perhaps the most immediately apparent effect of the 781's internal improvements, it is actually that precision when it comes to the timing, placement and weighting of notes that makes the musical and expressive difference. Take a listening to the Esoteric SACD re-master of Curzon playing Mozart's Piano Concertos 20 and 27 (Britten and the ECO). With the 781 doing the talking, the almost crystalline clarity ▶



▶ and beautifully judged shaping of Mozart's melodic lines are perfectly poised against the orchestral backing of the ECO, Britten conjuring colour and texture from the modest forces available to coax every last ounce of drama from the intricate score of Mozart's final piano masterpiece. Curzon's playing is both brilliant and sensitive, with a delicacy and intimacy that is almost magical. It is the Wadia's ability to reveal this extra depth in the reading and beauty in the playing that sets it apart. Never artificially warm or excessively polite, the brilliance here is clearly artistic, the advantage over the 581 (and other players) in the expressive range it allows the performers. It simply digs deeper into their technique, their playing and the performance as a whole, taking you closer to its sense and purpose.

This ability to unravel the structure and direction that underpin a musical performance is central to the 781's appeal, whatever genre you choose. And whilst there are plenty of machines that will pull a performance apart, the 781 simply reveals its layers and relationships, an exercise in clarity rather than dissection, one that increases musical communication and involvement, qualities that become even more obvious once you start to play SACD discs. As impressive as the 581 when it comes to SACD replay, the lower noise floor and dynamic advantages enjoyed by the 781 really show what the format is capable of; doubters should form an orderly queue...

But the 781i is nothing if not democratic or generous with its abilities. A perfect piece of *pop de jour* like Lady Gaga's 'Poker Face' gains just as much as Puccini or Astor Piazzolla. The heavily layered and manipulated vocals that open the track are easily separated and understood, their manipulation and the almost Meccano like constructional symmetry of the hard-edged techno beats is laid bare, adding momentum to the rhythmic imperative and offering up the perfect lead into that telling hesitation that heralds the Summer's most sublimely catchy pop chorus. That brief pause is what adds barbs to the hook. Now you know – not just that 'Poker Face' is one of those perfect cultural collisions where style, fashion and ennui all combine at a single point in time to create a pop phenomenon (think Britney and 'Baby One More Time'), but now you know the how too. And yes, if the 781i can unearth the drivers and emotional tags of bubblegum pop, then believe it can do the same for

*“But the 781i is nothing if not democratic or generous with its abilities. A perfect piece of pop du jour like Lady Gaga's 'Poker Face' gains as much as Puccini.”*

Beethoven or Brahms, Coltrane or Cannonball Adderley. This is all about access and intent, not the 'definition *über alles*' control freakery that robs music of its life, energy and flow. The slashing guitar riffs that tumble across the Cure's *Head On The Door* carve rents across the soundfield, Basie's brass section rips out in perfect unison. The 781 is one of those all too rare products that deals not just in the what and the where, but also in the how and the why – a level of musical insight that escapes all but the best hi-fi equipment.



The 581 retains its benchmark status because of its price-point. It's not that it is necessarily better than players like the Audio Research CD8 or dCS Puccini, but it is the mark against which they should be measured or assessed. The 781 sits on a higher step altogether and yes, in this case it is better than these other machines: it needs to be better than the 581 and easily justifies the difference in price; the Puccini is perhaps closest in style and also offers the option of an external clock to bridge the price and quality gap; but perhaps ironically it's the Red Book only CD8 that offers the most enlightening comparison.

Take something that's played with real passion; the BBC live broadcast recording of du Pre and Barbirolli performing the Elgar Cello Concerto in Prague is a perfect example. At first it's easy to conclude that the CD8 delivers more body, a richer woodier tone to du Pre's instrument, but as attractive as that rounded warmth and body is, you'd be wrong. The clue lies in the clarity and ▶



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▶ sense that the Wadia makes of the acoustic space, something you'll pick up in the air as the mics come up, in the incidental noises and shuffles of the orchestra and audience. With the 781 there's much, much more information – about the hall, about what made that noise and where exactly it was. du Pre's opening notes are focussed and held in space, not leaner or paler than the CD8 delivers, but more concentrated and with greater texture and attack, a fact that becomes abundantly clear in the pizzicato sections. So as impressive as the CD8 is – and when it comes to sheer orchestral sweep it's impressive indeed, with real weight, colour and body, the 781 matches it and builds on those qualities. Colour and harmonic tone may fall short of good analogue sources but are more than a match for any of the players mentioned here. Likewise, absolute immediacy isn't in the same league as a good record on a good record player. But having said that the stability, resolution, transparency and dynamic contrasts are up there with the best. So, despite initial impressions (and possible assumptions) while the Audio Research has romance running through its veins, the Wadia tempers it with a little less excess and more finesse, texture and dynamic discrimination, allowing the orchestra and soloist a wider emotional palette, a more sophisticated range of expression.

It is this ability to deliver both detail and the sort of instrumental identity and warmth that makes players like the CD8 so appealing that moves the 781 so close to the digital ideal. Switch to SACD hybrid discs and the Wadia's superiority over standard Red Book replay becomes even more apparent. Yes, there will always be even more detail, more natural colours and more immediate, more lifelike micro-dynamics; we are, after all, a long way from the live event. But the 781's innate sense of balance and unexaggerated presentation belie its capabilities. It doesn't sound warm or rich until you compare it directly to a player like the CD8. It doesn't sound massively dynamic until you hear other machines struggling to match its sense of musical purpose. It doesn't sound like it's digging deep, deep into the recording until you realize just how much



detail and insight other players are leaving behind. What it does sound is right – and that makes it engaging and satisfying in equal measure. The whys and wherefores might take some working out but the immediate musical appeal of the 781, the absolute authority with which it delivers a musical performance, cuts straight to the heart of both that performance and what hi-fi should be all about – the music rather than the means by which it arrives.

If you are in the market for a top one-box optical disc player then the Wadia 781i should be on your must hear list. It ticks all the musical boxes,

offers significant added value in terms of its versatility and ability to handle more than one digital source... and it plays SACD too. Having been happy for so long with the 861se, the GNSC mods giving it a timely boost in performance to match the challenge of the 581, it is sobering to acknowledge just how soundly both machines are trounced by the musical dexterity and expressive range of the 781i. I guess negotiations start now... +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** One-box CD/SACD player

**Decoding:** Wadia Digimaster 2.5

Algorithm running on a dual processor gate array with 24bit resolution and a sample rate of 1.4112 GHz

**Digital Inputs:** 1x S/PDIF (BNC)

1x USB (B type)

1x Toslink Optical

1x AES/EBU (XLR)

**Input Data Rate:** <96kHz

**Digital Outputs:** 1x S/PDIF (BNC)

1x Glass Optic (ST)

1x Toslink Optical

1x AES/EBU (XLR)

**Output Impedance:** 51 Ohms

**Output Level:** 0.3V – 4.25V internally adjustable

Digital volume control

**Weight:** 25kg

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 432 x 184 x 420mm

**Finishes:** Black or silver

**Price:** £14,999

**Manufacturer:**

Wadia

URL: [www.wadia.com](http://www.wadia.com)

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Magnum Dynalab MD-309 integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

Oh yeah, Magnum Dynalab... the tuner company. Except the MD-309 is entirely free from tuners. Our ability to neatly compartmentalise companies might mean the MD-309 hybrid amplifier never gets the recognition it deserves, because Magnum Dynalab is 'the tuner company' and not even thought about as a maker of anything not directly tuner related. Which is a crying shame because it's a really good amplifier.

It's a hybrid design, using one of Magnum Dynalab's special CryoValve 6922 tubes per channel in the preamp stage. This CryoValve treatment is a combination of grading and enhancement to the standard valves, involving a 100 hour stay at  $-196^{\circ}\text{C}$ , 100 hours of 'vacuum enhancement' and a 100 hour soak test/'annealing' at  $175^{\circ}\text{C}$ . After each stage, batteries of tests are run to determine the performance of the valve. Whether the cryogenic process has any tangible benefit or whether the process is just a series of very stringent gradings is moot, because the end result is said to be better preamp tubes than most, making a smoother, more dynamic sound and a longer-lasting one, too.

The power amp side is wholly solid-state, featuring 40 Sanken output transistors (10 per phase per channel), which give the MD-309 a rated power of 225 watts per channel into eight ohms. The big potted toroidal transformer that dominates the inside of the 309's case help give the amp a very stiff power supply, evidenced by the doubling of power (450 watts per channel) into a four ohm load. Of course, two rows of heatsinks to keep those 40 transistors cool, added to a dirty great potted transformer and a front panel that's an inch thick in places all adds up to one pretty damn big and heavy integrated amp design. One that's echoed in the remote handset; this is essentially a standard oval button design using the Philips RC-6

remote codes. However, instead of retaining the standard plastic fantastic handset, MD has rehomed the remote PCB inside a brushed alloy case that's nigh on an inch thick and weighty to boot. Overkill, perhaps, but it all adds to the experience.

This amplifier design (known as Hybrid-Acoustic Technology, according to the company's Director of Design, Zdenko Zivkovic) uses the output transistors to act as a current, rather than voltage, amplifier. This spells a hybrid amp without output transformers, and is uniquely different to other similar hybrid designs (such as Pathos' INPOL system), although those differences are not immediately apparent.

There's a common look between this and the company's top MD-109 tuner. Two big blue sideways VU meters flanking a large blue touch-screen and with two big knobs at either side of the centre panel. And yes, that faceplate is almost an inch thick of solid aluminium. Understated it might not be, but consistent... definitely. Both products add a clever level of digital operation to what is essentially an analogue product. In this case, individual sources (three phono and two XLR balanced) can be level matched at input, home cinema processors and diagnostic systems can be run at will.

The digital control unit is immediately apparent because of that inches wide dark

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▶ blue on pale blue touch screen on the front panel. This rivals Audio Research's Reference preamps for across the room volume level readability, but also has details of source and more on tap. You control source selection by the hard right knob, the volume by the left and all other operations (including power on) are controlled from the front panel. Which means – like Chuck Norris – the MD-309 does not sleep. It waits.

Power on takes about 20 seconds of warm up from standby to music playing. When adjusting volume level (or changing sources) there is a mild pitter-patter sound from the logic driven gain control. There's also the occasional clicking of relays as you move from analogue to digital or back again. This is nothing to worry about (in fact, it's something praiseworthy as this switching circuitry means less sonically deleterious components in the chain to get in the way of the sound).

Then there's the digital processor built into the amp itself. This is a Burr Brown DAC with three digital inputs, including USB for computer audio sources (sadly, this section is not in the photo sample). We suspect this is fast becoming one of the standards for integrated amplifiers in 2010 and beyond – in five years time, it might be virtually unthinkable to release an amp without a USB-supporting DAC on board, such is the delta-v of this part of the market.

This is a mercifully unfussy amplifier design. Fancy mains leads... who needs 'em? Exotic supports... pah! I'm not saying the MD-309 won't benefit from a spot of audiophile obsessive-compulsive disorder (especially as those plastic coated multi-way WBT speaker terminals cry out for thick wires to hang out of them), but it doesn't need such flummery to make a good sound. In that way, it's so Canadian in the manner of Bryston, Moon and co. And more power to it for that. It didn't seem to need much of a run-in, either. The tubes need a few minutes to come on song, but the amplifier sounded good out the box and stayed that way.

One functional niggles concerns the MD-309's back panel. The coaxial digital inputs are lined up in exactly the same direction as the line inputs, even to the point of using little red and white collets around the gold WBT phono sockets. This means if you are scrabbling round the back of the amp, you can end up connecting a line source to the two digital coaxial inputs by mistake.

A good sign of a fine amplifier is its ability not to change dramatically in performance when moving from input to input. Switching from a balanced

*‘All other operations (including power on) are controlled from the front panel. Which means – like Chuck Norris – the MD-309 does not sleep. It waits.’*

input to a single-ended one (both times using the outputs of the excellent Lyngdorf CD-1 and the Esoteric X-05 tested in this issue, using Cardas Clear for both XLR and phono connection) highlighted how remarkably well balanced this amplifier is handling both types of input. This is remarkably rare in reality; some amps (Electrocompaniet, for example) are essentially balanced designs with single-ended inputs coming along for the ride, others (Coda) seem to consider balanced as an afterthought. The MD-309 handles both with equal aplomb.

This is a very different sound to the typical smooth, effortless musicality of many products in the Audiofreaks portfolio. Those after a big, black version of the conrad-▶





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▶ Johnson sound will not find it here. Instead, it's a more rhythmic, up beat sound; not bright and not aggressive, but the kind of thing with a very taut, deep bass that makes you want to put tracks with a bit of boogie on the CD tray. It made even the most turgid white-boy reggae track ('Something I Do' from Robert Earl Keen's *The Rose Hotel*) sounds almost like Toots and the Maytals meets King Tubby.

It's not just a rock-hound though. There's depth, intellect and subtlety behind the power and very tidy, deep, powerful bass of the MD-309. This, coupled with plenty of detail, excellent dynamic shading and stereo separation and good stereo soundstaging, makes for an amplifier that can cope with pretty much anything you care to throw at it, whether that be Jack White performing cruel and unusual experiments on a 50 year old guitar, John Pickard's modernist *Flight of Icarus* scaring the capacitors out of most amps or Ben Webster helping to re-define the term 'cool' in jazz, the MD-309 takes it in its stride.

The built in DAC is extremely good, too. It's not a step-change product – no-one's going to consider sidelining their dCS converter for what goes on inside the MD-309, but it's more than good enough. It was every bit as good as the tones coming out of the Esoteric and improved on the basic Lyngdorf sound by no small degree. USB too is good, but this section loses something in comparison to some of the better USB-based DACs around; the little HRT Streamer + is a more confident and temporally tighter sounding converter. As a first outing to computer-based music sources, this is a fine introduction, but it left Lowell George sounding as if he'd had a mild groovectomy when playing 'Lafayette Railroad' from Little Feat's *Dixie Chicken* – something that wasn't apparent on either the regular digital audio or the analog inputs. Perhaps this wouldn't have been so apparent if the rest of the presentation was less funky, of course.

For most users at this time, I suspect the mild limitation of USB input will not be a great stumbling block. Instead, those who get past the fact that this is an amplifier from a tuner company will find themselves listening to one of the very best integrated amplifiers out there.+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Magnum Dynalab MD 309 hybrid integrated amplifier

**Inputs:** 5 Analog (2 balanced XLR, 3 single ended including Surround Sound Processor input), 3 digital (2 Coaxial, 1 USB)

**Outputs:** 1 line level pre-out

**Output sensitivity:** 1.2V RMS

**Tube compliment:** 2 x 6922 Cryovalve

**Power Output:** 225 watts into eight ohms, 450 watts into four ohms

**THD:** 0.05% at any power

**Frequency Response:** 2Hz-100kHz (+0dB, -0.25dB)

**S/N ratio:** -110dB, A Weighted

**Dynamic Headroom:** 3dB

**Operational class:** Class A/B (class A for 1-3watts)

**Input impedance:** 10K

**Output impedance:** 2K (pre-out, after volume control)

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 48.3x16.5x51cm

**Shipping Weight:** 29.5kg

**Price:** £5,995

**Manufactured by**

Magnum Dynalab

URL: [www.magnumdynalab.com](http://www.magnumdynalab.com)

**Distributed by**

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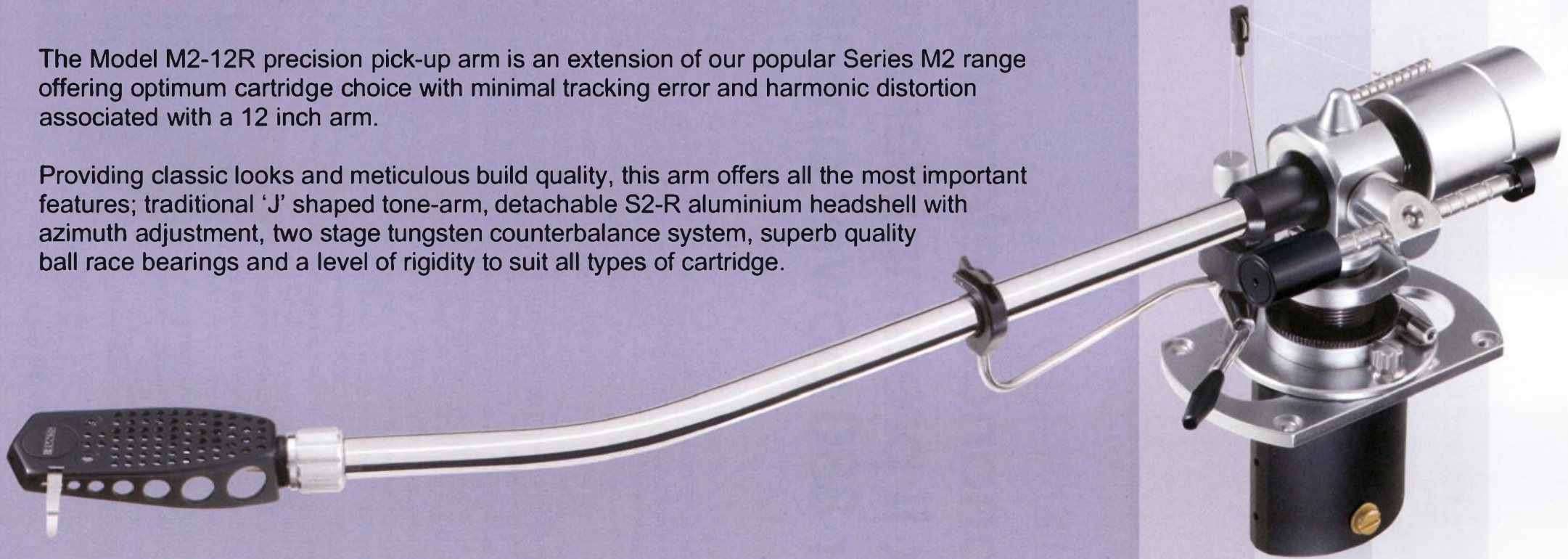
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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Consonance Reference 50 Mk II preamplifier and Cyber 880 power amplifier

by Alan Sircom

It's hard not to get a little impressed by Consonance. The products – designed and made in China by Eric Liu – cover a wide and useful range and combine practicality with high quality audio. The Reference 50 Mk II preamp and the Cyber 880 power amp are beautifully made, really look the part and sound fantastic. And they aren't that expensive either. What's not to like?

Starting with the Reference 50 Mk II preamp, that brushed silver front panel with shiny chrome buttons and curved wooden top-plate is distinctive, but elegant. It's a line-only valve design with four inputs, a volume a choice of two gain settings from the front panel and a bewildering remote. It's a 20dB gain product, using a shunt-regulated push-pull architecture with no global negative feedback. The circuit design is all hard-wired point-to-point, instead of PCBs (very old school, commonly selected as the best choice by hard-core valve users). Circuit boards are used, but essentially as a support frame for the components. The circuit's wiring itself is all done beneath the circuit board.

Opera Consonance has chosen Auricap capacitors in the signal coupling circuit (perhaps little wonder then that the two amps work so well with the Audience power conditioner elsewhere in this issue and the Audience cables from the same provider), while the filtering capacitor is a high-quality metallised polypropylene Solen MKP design.

The silicon steel EI power transformer and choke regulation are shielded from the main circuit, and the choke is designed

to deliver good high quality high frequency response. Yet, for all this hardcore audio quality, the Reference 50 is one of the easier valve products to drive. It comes with a useful remote and powers up gently, giving time for the pair of 12AU7 triodes and the EZ80 rectifier tube to come up to speed.

Moving over to the Cyber 880, this is a 100 watt all valve design, that's wonderfully elegant looking, perfectly matching the look of the Reference 50, thanks to the aluminium front panel and top panel finished in a hand-rubbed metallic silver lacquer and the matching wooden top plate. Using four 6550 beam power tubes for the output stage, an ECC82 input triode (plus a third as phase splitter) and a 5687 low-mu octal driver ▶





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▶ per side, that equates to a lot of heat and a not inconsiderable amount of power consumption at full burn. Biasing is easy, using a combination of screw holes on the top plate and a meter on the centre of the back panel where the transformers live. Output matching taps are provided for four and eight-ohm loudspeakers and the design uses a modicum of global negative feedback.

There's a lot of bedding in needed to make these amps come on song. We're talking hundreds of hours to turn good; it's pretty fine from the outset, but as those valves season they get better and better. According to the manual, by the time of the review, we were barely one-third of the way along the tube conditioning process, but the amp was already in something of a sweet spot. Consonance recommends a minimum of 3.5m and a maximum 20m for loudspeaker cables. There's no such recommendation for pre to power amp cable length, and for good reason; I found it worked well with relatively short runs of interconnect cables (up to about 3m), but some mild high-frequency attenuation kicked in when used with really long leads. This means the Consonance duo work best in the typical British configuration (short interconnects, long speaker leads) than the American (long interconnects, short speaker cables). As there are many who think the best thing between a pair of speakers is air and nothing but, the Consonance layout has its merits.

These are incredibly well behaved valve amplifiers. There's always going to be a higher background noise level from 'hollow state' components, but the noise floor here is admirably low in both products, a sure sign of good designs behind the mask.

Starting with the preamp, this exposes the 'valves sound warm' cliché as bankrupt. The preamp is not warm, cold, brown, round, vanilla or deep-fried Camembert sounding. It simply is a preamp. It does what it says on the tin. It selects the right source and makes the signal slightly larger or smaller for the power amplifier to turn into loudspeaker movements. It does this with very little in the way of coloration, dynamic compression or detail obfuscation. What deviations from the original are there, live mostly in the soundstage (which is slightly less wide and not as deep as expected) and a tiny amount of thickening in the upper bass region. This should be considered the bare minimum for all good preamplifiers; sadly, not all reach this mark.

Moving over to the power, I so wanted to draw analogies to 100 watt Marshall stacks, but this isn't that sort of amplifier. It's got the power to drive

speakers, but it's a refined power, not brute force. That makes the Cyber 880 the star of the show, because the combination of power and grace don't come cheap in valve amps; usually you get one, or the other. There are a few exceptions (the c-j LP66S and Audio Research VS60 being obvious ones), but even here they are usually lower powered (both 60 watt designs) or less beguiling.

*'It doesn't burble along, menacing the music and it doesn't act like the audio equivalent of a boat anchor. The music is surprisingly upbeat, fast and exciting.'*

"With great power comes great responsibility," said Spiderman's Uncle Ben, before dying of an enlarged plot device. The Cyber 880 was listening. The amplifier is one of those that never shows its power until it's needed. It doesn't burble along, menacing the music and it doesn't act like the audio equivalent of a boat anchor. The music is surprisingly upbeat, fast and exciting, just with a lot of power on tap when you need it. In other words, it's like having a 25 watt amplifier with a really big friend waiting to take over whenever needed.

Okay, the Reference 50 Mk II lacks some of the character of a good conrad-johnson preamp or the sheer musical integrity of the some of the best solid-state models, but remember that this is a £1,100 preamp. It's ▶



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- sins are mostly those of omission, lacking the vanishing quality of the best in breed, but at least the preamp is not adding its own faux coloration (a potential failing of valve preamps, especially those rare ones at this price). As such, the Reference 50 Mk II offers remarkable value for money, set against most valve preamplifiers. It's whisper quiet in operation, looks and sounds the part and is as unfussy as a preamp gets.

*“This is one of the best £10,000 valve pre-power combinations you can own... for less than four thousand quid.”*

The Cyber 880 is equally well sorted, but if anything faces even stiffer competition. It rises to the challenge. Once again, like the Reference 50 Mk II, its sins are mostly of omission, and in this case it's the omission of extending that typically solid-state like control over the lower tenor region down into the lowest notes of the bottom octave. For most users and for most music, this is not a problem. Organ lovers and those wanting to be punished by Tool (not meant to be as rude as it sounds) through difficult speaker loads might disagree, though. For the rest of us, the 'remarkable value for money' quote applies just as equally here.

Split up, the two can show their limits somewhat more easily, although this more shows how well the duo work as a team than showing up glaring flaws in the performance. The preamp doesn't have that sort of effortless dynamic

range or open transparency and the power amplifier is more velvet glove than mail'd fist, sounding slightly soft at the frequency extremes. But it's always musically on form. Perhaps the difference between the two is that the preamp could be improved still further with judicious tube-rolling, but the amount of potential upgrade to the power amp is ultimately limited by the transformers. You should still be able to squeeze out more from the Cyber 880 though, and best of all, unless you start scouring eBay

for top-price vintage NOS tubes (which can cost a small fortune), you'll still come in under the price of its direct performance rivals.

There's no such thing as a 'bargain' in high-end audio, in my opinion. Sorry, bargains are kilo tins of Azerbaijani peaches (best before date: this afternoon) on sale for 99p in Lidl. You get what you pay for, but sometimes you get that little bit more for your money; products that do their job better than rival products at their price point and beyond. Both the Reference 50 Mk II and the Cyber 880 fall comfortably into that category. This is one of the best £10,000 valve pre-power combinations you can own... for less than four thousand quid. How can you resist that kind of value? +



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Consonance Reference 50 Mk II preamp

**Inputs:** 4x line-level stereo phono

**Outputs:** 2x stereo phono

**Input impedance:** 100k ohms

**Controls:** Volume, -10dB cut, Input Select, Power On/Off

**THD (for 2V RMS at output):** 0.05% (70Hz-7kHz 4:1)

**Frequency response:** (at -1dB) 3Hz-150kHz

**Signal/Noise ratio:** 90dB

**Gain at 1kHz:** 20dB

**Negative Feedback:** None

**Valves used:** ECC82 x 2 (NOS)E280x1

**Power Consumption:** 40watt

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 32x21x44cm

**Weight:** 12kg

**Price:** £1,095

Cyber 880 Power amplifier

**Inputs:** 1x stereo phono

**Outputs:** 4ohm, 8ohm speaker terminals

**Power output:** 100 watt x 2, RMS 1kHz (Ultra-linear)

**THD:** less than 1% (50 watts, 1kHz)

**Frequency response:** (-3dB points at 50 watts) 6Hz-80kHz

**Input sensitivity:** 750mV

**Input impedance:** 100k ohms

**Signal/noise ratio:** 90dB

**Power consumption:** 300watt x 2

**Valves used:** 6550 x 8, 5687x 2, ECC82 x3

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 43x19x45cm

**Weight:** 35kg

**Price:** £2,895

**Manufactured by**

Opera Audio

URL: [www.opera-consonance.com](http://www.opera-consonance.com)

**Distributed by**

Alium Audio

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Electrocompaniet EMC 1UP, EC4.8 and Nemo system

by Alan Sircom

One of the great joys of Electrocompaniet – right from the earliest days of the company – is it has something of a giant-killing quality. By high-end standards, the equipment is not that expensive, but offers the prospect of performance far above the price of admission. It might not be budget equipment – that was never the plan – but the prices are not crushingly expensive either.

So what we have here is the top stereo products in the company's Classic Line. That means the EMC 1UP top-loading CD player, the EC4.8 stereo preamplifier and the mighty Nemo monobloc power amplifiers. These are all reference grade products from the company, but cost a total of £15,780 – in the somewhat lofty world of high-end audio, you could easily multiply that figure five-fold (or more) for other companies' 'reference' product lines.

Electrocompaniet can make the products relatively cheaply because it's part of a far bigger organisation. It also does it by clever industrial design. The gold and blue on black logos are placed behind a thick piece of clear acrylic, which gives the front panel an elegant and timeless – although somewhat 'John Player Special' – appeal. Behind the fascia though, there lies slightly resonant, powder-coated pressed panels with more than their fair share of exposed bolts. It's very well made, but it's not sublime industrial design from tip to tip. Plus, unless you fork out for the optional ECT 2 hybrid RF remote controller, with its fancy OLED display, you are supplied with a handset that does not do the products justice. Still, ultimately it's what's inside the box that counts.

Starting with the EMC-1UP, this top-loading design has the CD sitting in a centre-mounted silo (built around the Philips Pro2 transport mechanism) with a heavy manual silo cover and a choice of pucks. The standard puck is a regular magnet, the other optional one sports a star-shaped outrigger to help stabilise the disc when in play, but that was not supplied. Irrespective of puck choice, this bestows on CD something akin to the ritual of LP replay, in a manner not unlike a Naim player. This is not just for show, though; Electrocompaniet's engineers have spent many, many hours developing a mechanical filter arrangement in the EMC-1UP to essentially wick internal and external vibration away from the laser assembly. This wouldn't be possible without using the top-loading mechanism.

The player sports 24bit, 192kHz digital conversion and is claimed to give a 10dB reduction in the noise floor compared to rival systems. It's fed by Electrocompaniet's Floating Transformer Technology system, which isolates and feeds power to the drive, display, digital and analogue stages. These are all hallmarks of top-end players, and often the hallmarks of players far more expensive than this one.

It feeds out either AES/EBU or coaxial digital outputs and either balanced XLR or single-ended phono analogue to the next product in line. Which, in this case is the EC4.8. Although this has phono inputs and outputs, this is classed as a high-performance balanced preamplifier. Line only and a one-box design, the EC4.8 is Electrocompaniet's 'missing link' – for decades, the brand had a world-class power amp, for the last decade, that was joined by a very highly respected CD player. But no world-class preamplifier, until now. The EC4.8 is a fully dual mono design with two balanced and three single-ended inputs (one of which is a tape input). It includes the oddly-named SPAC connector to power allow products connected to the network to power up or down in sequence and it includes an RS232 slot for upgrades. The inputs are each given names on the left-hand 'Navigator' display panel, but these are not user assignable; if you want 'HD/AUX' to be called 'phono', or if you decided to use a single-ended CD player and wanted to rename 'Tuner' accordingly, forget it.

Both player and preamp share the company's distinctive four-button control diamond on the right hand side of the front panel. In the preamp, this is basically all you need in most cases – north to south controls the source selection, east-west sets the volume. Balance would be nice, though. On the left side, a blue display shows the results of your choices. The CD player allows play, pause, track and skip controls, but not much else. Again, not a problem for day-to-day operation, but somewhat limiting if you want to delve deeper into CD control.

If you know your Jules Verne, you'll know that Nemo was the captain of the Nautilus in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (and played by James Mason in the 1954 Disney movie of the same name). This is relevant because the Nemo amplifier was designed to control the B&W Nautilus, essentially a loudspeaker in search of an amplifier powerful enough to pilot it. B&W's longstanding Nautilus flagship requires eight monobloc amplifiers to drive it – ideally 500 watt monoblocs – and that has been rumoured to be one of the reasons why the B&W/Classé link-up began, as the company's Omega monoblocs were one of the few products capable of taming the

Nautilus successfully. Of course, that meant the bill for the amplifiers dwarfed the cost of an already strikingly expensive loudspeaker, so Electrocompaniet took on the task of building a more real-world unstoppable force to meet B&W's immovable object.

*“If you can achieve clipping on an amplifier like the Nemo, you must be using it with a loudspeaker that has solid concrete drive units.”*

The Nemo specs are deeply impressive. Each 41kg box delivers up to 600 watts to an eight-ohm load, successfully doubling that power output into four and again into two ohms. It can deliver 150 amps peak current, has a frequency response that can cope with anything high-resolution sources can throw at it and has a noise floor below -110dB. For the record, like the other power amps in the Electrocompaniet range, the clipping point is set at a total harmonic distortion of 0.2%; I say 'for the record' because if you can achieve clipping on an amplifier like the Nemo, you must be using it with a loudspeaker that has solid concrete drive units.

Part of the reason for the huge case is the amp runs largely in class A, and there is a lot of heat dissipation going on inside the case. Strangely, for those of us used to low-power class A designs acting as some kind of amplifier-shaped heating unit, the Nemo is not hot running in regular operation. In part, that's because most loudspeaker loads pose no threat to the Nemo; eight of them getting to grips with a Nautilus would likely heat up the average listening room. Of course, eight Nemos would also likely fill up a fair proportion of that average listening room, such is the size of the beast.

The preamp has the word 'balanced' written in gold letters across the bottom ▶

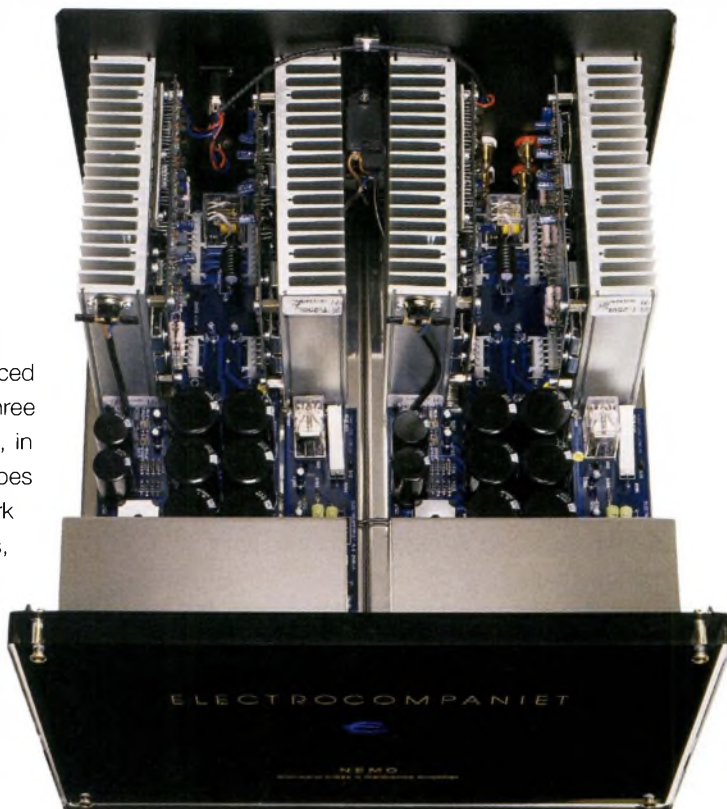


▶ and, although it doesn't make as big a deal of the balanced side of things on the panels of the other products, all three are most comfortable in balanced operation. The Nemo, in fact, runs balanced only, although Electrocompaniet does supply connectors that allow single-ended phonos to work with the unit. Some products have balanced connections, but are basically single-ended products with a set of XLR sockets for good measure. Some products are designed to run in both single-ended and balanced mode, but single-ended wins out. Electrocompaniet's finest do not fall into these camps. These are balanced products with a vestigial single-ended option. This is not a function of a 'weak link' in the signal chain; the player, preamp and the power amps all benefit from being used balanced. This might make you think twice about thinking outside the Electrocompaniet box, because other brands with XLR connectors might not take balanced so seriously.

*“Once more, an album flies by, this time with the foot gently tapping along. Whatever you put on this system, you play in its entirety.”*

I suspect this could be the root of some failed Electrocompaniet demonstrations, and those who dismiss the equipment as 'bland'; there's some inertia in using balanced operation among dealers, in part due to other equipment sounding musically unexciting in that mode. So the default setting for the demonstrator is "don't use balanced" and in so doing leaves the Electrocompaniet equipment playing at half mast. This is the 'benefit of the doubt' version; the 'conspiracy theory' version suggests that Electrocompaniet in single-ended mode can be used to sell expensive cables to act as filters, where the balanced mode is entirely untroubled by cables and the cheapest XLR will work just as well as the most expensive.

As a complete system, the three are consummately musical, with an elegance and grace to the music that entices and seduces. Start with something small and acoustic – Gillian Welch's *Time (The Revelator)* album, for example, and you are drawn into the performance, not the recording. Time quickly passes and you find yourself listening to the whole album. So, you move over to something more orchestral and modern – John Pickard's *The*



*Flight of Icarus* – and once again, the whole album stays on the platter. Out goes Pickard, in comes Grant Green and his cool, yet funky jazz geeetar noodlin'. Once more, an album flies by, this time with the foot gently tapping along. Whatever you put on the system, you play in its entirety. Some of this is pure refinement; this isn't the sort of system for collectors of albums by Pavement, Suicide or The Fall. But, if you want your music cerebral, you won't find a better system at this money.

The whole package (and I suspect most will buy EC systems as whole packages) is wonderfully detailed, precise, articulate and open-sounding. The soundstaging the system creates is particularly sublime, but it should be pointed out that it's not an up-front kind of soundstage presentation. The images are beautifully presented, but don't actively project sounds into your lap. ▶





[ sometimes ]  
technology meets art...





▶ And then there's the Nemo. This bestows upon the listener the chance to put together some seriously 'mullet' systems (those that have a pair of extremely expensive speakers hanging off the end of less pricy electronics). You can really go to town, here. We used everything from a pair of ProAcs that cost a grand less than the preamp to a pair of Hansens that cost more than the whole system put together and could have gone a lot, lot higher up the food chain without a struggle. Nothing, repeat nothing with drive units, bothers this amplifier; even the most punishing load leaves the Nemo on cruise control.

As a consequence, there's an authority, grip and control to the sound that you seldom hear unless you are used to handling really big power amps. This doesn't mean endless bass, although the bass is certainly there when it's needed. What this does is tame the wayward bass of loudspeakers that can get slightly overexcited at the prospect of lots of bottom end. This happens at both ends of the loudspeaker performance scale; cheaper speakers expecting a comparatively weedy amp flap about to compensate and expensive speakers anticipating something more powerful can overawe weaker amps. Put the Nemo in place and all that stops; the cheaper speakers are put in their place, the more expensive ones respond to the power. The result is tighter, tauter and more accurate.

You begin to hear this in the bass, underpinning dub beats on the Gorillaz vs Spacemonkeyz *Laika Come Home* album could still be used for excavation and road digging work, but the absence of 'farty' artefacts in the lower bass is more than welcome. Pretty soon though, you begin to discover that what applies down deep, applies everywhere. Your speakers just got more refined, more extended top and bottom and more dynamic thanks to the Nemo.

There might be times when the Nemo amps are overkill. The smaller AW400 delivers much of what the Nemo offers, but with less weight and less financial outlay. In some circumstances, the smaller amp will also add some perception of air and speed to the sound (an amp with the control of the Nemo gives such accurate and deep bass, our brains take a little longer to process that info, making amps with less cavernous bass delivery seem faster by comparison). But what you gain with one speaker cable, you lose with the other; in this case, you lose that absolute confidence that only this much grip can give. If you have a big room and big speakers, you need the Nemos.

The extreme end of the audiophile world is populated by stratospherically-priced products that often perform wonderfully, but are somewhat idiosyncratic. As you move into calmer waters, the weirdness (and the 'take a deep breath'

prices) fall away, but so too does the stellar performance. The Electrocompaniet system offers a practical alternative; they offer a good percentage of what the extremophile demands, and yet do so without either costing as much as a small island in the Bahamas or demanding six months of cable swapping and tube rolling to make things sound better. Perhaps not the most exciting conclusion I can draw, but the Electrocompaniet system strikes me as being one of the most sensible options open to today's high-ender. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

[Electrocompaniet EMC-1UP CD player:](#)

£3,690

[Electrocompaniet EC4.8 preamp:](#)

£2,590

[Electrocompaniet Nemo monobloc](#)

[power amp:](#) £4,750 per channel)

[Total System cost:](#) £15,780

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URL: [www.electrocompaniet.no](http://www.electrocompaniet.no)

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Usher Mini Dancer Two floorstanding loudspeaker

by Chris Martens



**A**s some *HIFI-Plus* readers may know, Usher's Be-718 stand-mount monitors have found considerable favour in the US, receiving particular praise in a review authored by Robert Harley, editor-in-chief of our US-based sister magazine, *The Absolute Sound*. In fact, the Be-718 has earned a commanding reputation as one of those magical products that successfully caters to listeners with (very) high-end tastes, but whose price fits within sensible, real-world budgets. What's not to like about that?

Well, good though the Be-718 is, it does have a few acknowledged limitations such as adequate, but not great, low bass response as well as a somewhat limited dynamic envelope (the Be-718 offers serious dynamic punch as traditional standmount monitors go, but — let's face it — it is *not* a full-sized floorstander). To understand the mission of Usher's new Mini Dancer Two, then, picture it as a floorstanding speaker that leverages the design and core sonic strengths of the Be-718, but that addresses customers' expressed desires for deeper bass and more expansive dynamics.

The Mini Dancer Two uses the same exotic metal dome tweeter as the Be-718 plus two of the 718's mid-bass drivers, placing them in a D'Appolito array and housing them in a tall, deep, reflex-loaded floorstanding enclosure with curved sidewalls. The resulting speaker is quite large ('Mini' in name only) and strikingly handsome, with an overall level of fit and finish that makes the Mini Dancer Two appear more expensive than it is. As you'll discover in a moment, the theme of value that belies price applies to the sound of this speaker, too.

Like the Be-718, the Mini Dancer Two is a highly detailed and revealing speaker, yet one that never sounds cold, sterile or overly analytical. Instead, it presents layer upon layer of subtle sonic details and musical textures in a natural and unfussy way, almost as if saying, "retrieving tons of musical information takes no great effort on my part; can't *all* speakers do that?" It also possesses tonal purity in spades and is blessed with a rich, vibrant, evocative sound that pulls you deep inside the music. On most material there's an overarching quality of ease about the Mini Dancer Two that represents, I think, a step forward from what the Be-718 can do.

Imaging and soundstaging are very good, although the Mini Dancer Two gives a different and slightly more distant perspective on the music than the Be-718 does. Unlike many of the other Usher models I've reviewed, the Mini Dancer Two seems to image best with the speakers facing straight ahead and not 'toed-in' toward the listening position. Be aware, ▶



Blue Horizon is a design and manufacturing company specialising in professional-grade audio accessories. The Proburn cable burn-in accelerator is the first in a new range of audio products from Blue Horizon, developed for music lovers who enjoy high-quality sound and wish to achieve an even greater level of sonic performance.

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### **CABLE BURN-IN** An acknowledged problem in need of better solution.

It is a well-known fact that high-quality audio and video cables improve over time when used in a hi-fi or home cinema system. A hard, closed-in sound with a distinct lack of bass are the qualities most noted when a cable is new; a cable that has been 'burned-in' will sound more open, extended and three-dimensional, with a more natural, less sterile performance overall.

Unfortunately, most high-quality specialist cables only get close to realising their full potential after months of use. Playing wide-bandwidth music gradually improves the performance of speaker and interconnect cables, yet technically they will never reach optimum performance with music signals alone.

The problem is quite simple. Real music has very little high-frequency energy, and thus will have a limited ability to improve a cable. Research shows that musical instruments may produce energy above 20kHz, but there is little sound energy above 40kHz. Also, most microphones do not pick up sound at much over 20kHz.

Furthermore, even the best burn-in CDs have a limited effect, owing to the limited frequency range of a CD player. A typical CD player has a sampling rate of 44.1kHz (Red Book standard). Digital theory (Nyquist) suggests a maximum frequency of 22.05kHz; the highest frequency is always half the sampling frequency. In reality, 20kHz is about the maximum because of the need to filter within the replay device.

Therefore, while it is accepted that sound, be it composed music or carefully generated frequencies played through an audio system, will improve a cable's performance over time, it must also be accepted that the overall effect is limited technically. Cables conditioned in



Blue Horizon Proburn Cable Burn in machine

*"I have absolutely no idea why it does what it does, but it does it all the same." "...the conditioned set sounded like they'd grown more base, the soundstage increased in width and the treble seemed more alive."*

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this way will never reach their true performance potential. Thus, an alternative method is required. The challenge is two-fold: burn in time and burn in effectiveness. How can a cable be fully conditioned, and the time required to undertake this conditioning decreased from several months to just one day?

Proburn's patent-pending technique fully prepares cables for audio or video use in a way that no amount of music ever can. To put this into context, Proburn produces 10,000 times the upper frequency limit of a typical CD player, which not only dramatically reduces the burn-in time for new cables but also fully prepares and conditions your existing cables. Proburn will also keep your cables performing to their full potential; condition them for 24 hours every six to eight weeks and your cables will remain free from negative charges and static problems.

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▶ though, that the speaker needs some run-in time (50-100 hours) before it fully opens up. As playing time accumulates the sound becomes noticeably smoother, more expansive, and more three-dimensional, while bass impact and pitch definition also improve.

As promised, the Mini Dancer Two's bass reaches lower and with greater impact than the Be-718's does — down to a claimed 28Hz (the same cutoff frequency Usher specifies for some of the larger, more expensive Dancer models, by the way). A particular strength of the Mini Dancer Two is its smooth, seamless way of handling transitions from lower midrange frequencies (think cellos or baritone saxophones) on down into the bass region—an area where some competing speakers can sound a bit 'woolly' or overblown. Whereas some US listeners have chosen to augment the bass output of their Be-718s with subwoofers, I think that, on most material and in most rooms (especially UK-sized room spaces), the Mini Dancer Two offers all the bass output and extension most listeners would ever require.

*“The Mini Dancer Twos are never more fully in their element than when playing well-recorded acoustic jazz material.”*

In terms of dynamics, the Mini Dancer Two builds upon the strengths of the Be-718, offering a bolder, more expansive and, yes, more explosive sound overall. I found the Mini Dancer Two to be a sensitive speaker and one that was easy to drive, though with one caveat. The Mini Dancer Two presents a relatively low four ohm load, which some amplifiers can handle beautifully, but others cannot. Assuming your amp is amenable to low impedance loads, it should have no trouble making the Mini Dancer Twos sing with real gusto.

One small word of caution is in order, though. Because the Mini Dancer two can play

very loudly without apparent distress, it can be tempting to turn up volume levels higher than is wise. The Ushers will let you get away with this, up to a point, but when really big crescendos come along with volume levels already cranked to the nines, it is possible to overload the speakers, causing them to sound congested and, if further provoked, to take on a somewhat raw edge that tells you it's time to back things down.

The Mini Dancer Twos are never more fully in their element than when playing really well-recorded acoustic jazz material, a great example of which would be Jen Chapin's delightful *reVisions* Chesky SACD, which features reinterpretations of classic songs of Stevie Wonder as performed by a masterful jazz trio. I put on 'Master Blaster (Jammin')' and was floored by several aspects of the performance.

First, the Mini Dancer Two's gave a powerful and breathtakingly nuanced rendition of Stephan Crump's nimble, syncopated acoustic bass lines. The Usher's not only conveyed the size and resonant qualities of the instrument's wooden body, but also let me hear subtle cues that let me know when Crump was leaning forward to dig in and apply more pressure as he plucked the instrument's strings—giving some phrases an extra bit of 'pop' or others greater emphasis by teasing out a deeper, more sustained 'growl.'

Similarly, the Ushers did a phenomenal job with Chris Cheeks' gorgeous sax performance.

Cheeks stands to the left front side of the stage, as the Ushers clearly revealed, and the speakers exposed even the subtlest shifts in his dynamics, revealing delicate reed sounds and mouthpiece noises, Cheeks' ▶





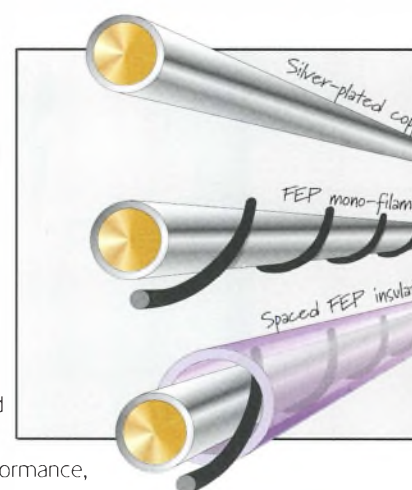
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*“Usher’s Mini Dancer Two is a wonderful speaker that gives you a big taste of what ultra-high-end speakers can do, but at a less than stratospheric price.”*

► breathing between phrases, and the sound of his fingertips flying from one fingering position to another on the horn.

But in the centre of the stage, standing a few feet behind her sidemen is Jen Chapin—a vocalist whose evocative and at times feisty style fits Wonder’s music to a ‘T.’ The Ushers quickly revealed Chapin’s gift for modulating both the dynamics and pitch of her voice to turn lines some singers would pass over lightly into unforgettable hooks. At some points in ‘Master Blaster (Jammin’)', for example, the Ushers let me hear Chapin wind up, like an athlete preparing for a surge of exertion, and then explode into a musical phrase with full force, giving certain lines an intense burst of exuberance.

Finally, throughout *reVisions*, the Ushers showed how the acoustics of the recording space (St Peter’s Episcopal Church in New York City) were, in a sense, ‘phantom performers’ that contributed much to the overall feel and vibe of the recording. Because the trio is so open and exposed in this record, you can easily hear how individual musical lines and phrases momentarily energize the room and then gracefully decay back into silence. In all the ways I’ve outlined above, the Mini Dancer Two’s served and enlivened, but did not embellish upon, this spectacular recording.

To test the Mini Dancer Two’s low bass capabilities, I put on the third movement (‘Landscape: Lento’) of Vaughan Williams’ *Sinfonia antartica* (Bakels/Bournemouth; Naxos, CD), which serves as a pipe organ *tour de force*. The Ushers acquitted themselves beautifully, never flinching or faltering as organ pedal notes descended lower and lower. I’ve played this movement many times on systems with and without subwoofers, and my sense was that the Usher’s offered sufficient depth and power that a sub wasn’t necessary (though I suppose low bass aficionados might wish for a sub to extract the last few ounces of low frequency ‘shudder’ from the pipe organ). My only criticism would be that the Ushers were perhaps very slightly under damped down at the very bottom of their response range.

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Usher Mini Dancer Two floorstanding loudspeaker

**Driver complement:** one 32mm (1.25-inch) beryllium/titanium dome tweeter, two 178mm (7-inch) mid-bass drivers  
**Frequency response:** 28Hz – 40 kHz (± 3 dB)

**Sensitivity:** 90 dB

**Impedance:** 4 ohms

**Dimensions (H x W x D):** 123 cm x 35.5 cm x 48 cm

**Weight:** 41 kg/each (including plinth)

**Warranty:** Three years (drivers)/one year (cabinets), parts and labour

**Price:** £3,500/pair

### Manufacturer

Usher Audio Technology

URL: [www.usheraudio.com](http://www.usheraudio.com)

### UK DISTRIBUTOR

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Usher’s Mini Dancer Two is a wonderful speaker that gives you a big taste of what ultra-high-end speakers can do, but at a less than stratospheric price. This speaker is detailed, nuanced, and expressive, essentially delivering full-range frequency response in a package that looks good and offers solid value for the money. More importantly, the Ushers are simultaneously communicative and informative, meaning that they show you what’s going on within the structure of the music, and then help you grasp—on an emotional level—why that structure matters. Who could ask more than that? +



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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# VPI HW-27 Typhoon record cleaning machine

by Roy Gregory

**T**he facts might be shrouded in the mists of time but certainly VPI can lay serious claim to having produced the first domestic 'wet and dry' cleaning system for records (the Keith Monks Record Cleaning Machine is the obvious challenger and has an even longer history than the VPI, but until recently remained a distinctly 'not for domestic use' product). The original HW-16 soon transmogrified into the far more capable and efficient 16.5 and that machine remains the benchmark for affordable performance to this day. It was later joined by the semi-automatic HW-17, with or without "f" suffix and fan-cooling to allow longer running times – although how anybody can withstand the tedium of cleaning more than 10 records at a time escapes me!

And so things might have stayed except that the demise of vinyl as a mainstream music carrier increased the onus on hunting out second-hand records – and cleaning them. Increase the size of the market and you'll increase the interest amongst manufacturers. Indeed, it seems that nowadays, everybody and their wife offers a record cleaning machine. Don't underestimate the importance of good cleaning for today's vinyl hunter. The old story, about the best way of cleaning a record is to simply play it, is just that – a story. To get the best out of that copy of *Top of the Pops 14* or *The James Last Christmas Album* you just found next to 64 pairs of old shoes in a charity shop, it's going to need some serious restoration work. That means a good cleaner.

Few cleaners can match the simple, cost effective efficiency of the HW-16.5, with its manual fluid application and vacuum removal. But few noticed in the past, because you kept your new records pristine or you paid someone with a Keith Monks machine to clean the odd ancient gem for you. The problem there is as those with Keith Monks machines became more and more rare, there was more call for a DIY approach, ideally one ►

*“Don't underestimate the importance of good cleaning for today's vinyl hunter. The old story, about the best way of cleaning a record is to simply play it, is just that – a story.”*

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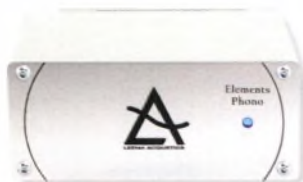
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*“This allows for a far more measured approach to fluid dispersal, while the brush does an effective job of working the cleaning agent across the record’s surface.”*

▶ that didn’t turn the cleaning process into a 10-minute per disc rigmarole. This is where the 16.5 scores highly. The key is the sprung loaded turret, which pivots across the wet record surface and is sucked down into contact, irrespective of the thickness of the vinyl or how flat it is, the vacuum tube simply riding up and down with any undulations. Add in the ability to swap turrets for different diameter records and at £550 the 16.5 trumps the competition.

But it’s not perfect and perhaps its biggest flaw is that overly energetic fluid application allows liquid to escape beyond the bounds of the vacuum tube, resulting in damp patches that if left unattended become smears across the playing surface when the disc is placed in the new sleeve – an essential step in the cleaning regime. Enter then, the HW-27, or aptly named Typhoon. This is essentially an updated, uprated and improved HW-17. The record

platter and vacuum turret remain the same, on the basis that there’s no need to fix what ain’t broke... So too does basic arrangement of internal reservoir and applicator brush for cleaning fluid, operated by the central button on the control panel. This allows for a far more measured approach to fluid dispersal, while the brush does an effective job of working the cleaning agent across the record’s surface. Swing it across the record and it snaps smartly into place, allowing you to revolve the disc in both directions.

What’s different is that there’s none of the sloppiness that I remember from the similar arrangement on the 17 and this version is smooth, positive and precise in operation\*. In fact, that comment might be applied to the machine as a whole, and the

*\* I believe the new brush design is also now standard on current 17s, which constitutes a huge operational and ergonomic improvement. The 17F remains in the range, priced at £1,150, but the Typhoon is more than worth the £500 premium of the older model.*



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*“If you are serious about vinyl, you need to get serious about cleaning it, and the HW-27 is just that: one serious machine.”*

▶ new steel casework and lift-off lid is altogether more convincing, attractive and reassuringly solid than the rather down-home laminate and MDF construction of the 17. It's the sort of cleaner you can imagine being used to work through this afternoon's trawl through the local Oxfam.

But the real change and the source of the machine's moniker, is the vacuum pump charged with drying the disc. This is twice as powerful as the one used in the 17 and while one vacuum pump might seem much the same as another, believe me, you can really see the difference. Combine it with the more accurate dispensation of fluid and the result is really clean, really dry discs in (ahem!) record time.

Can I hear the difference between a disc cleaned on the 27 and one washed with the 16.5? No (that would be hard to test, anyway). Is it quicker and easier to use overall than its baby brother? Absolutely. Am I cleaning more records more often as a result? Definitely. Is it going to last longer, looking better than the 16.5? No question.

It's the last two of these points that seal the deal. The HW-27 is much more expensive as well as bigger than the 16.5 and it's the baby machine that remains the bargain purchase. But if you want something better, more durable

or you've got a grown up record collection, then the Typhoon is what you want – and need. Used with L'Art du Son or Disc Doctor fluid (especially if you store the cleaned result in fresh anti-static sleeves) and you'll not get a better sound from your records, new or secondhand. If you are serious about vinyl, you need to get serious about cleaning it, and the HW-27 Typhoon is just that: one serious machine.+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Price: £1,650

### UK Distributor:

Analogue Seduction  
Tel. (44)(0)1733 344768  
Net. [www.analogueseduction.net](http://www.analogueseduction.net)

### Manufacturer:

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Esoteric X-05 CD/SACD player

by Alan Sircom

**T**here's a trend among some audio buyers to decry the importance of the CD transport mechanism. A disc is merely a data carrier, and the transport mech is nothing more than a means to extract that data. The Esoteric X-05 thus represents the case for the defence of the transport.

In essence, the Esoteric X-05 is a good DAC sitting being fed by a spectacular transport mechanism and being housed in similarly spectacular surroundings. Put another way, this is what all those midprice Japanese CD and CD/SACD players want to be when they grow up.

Not that the DAC and associated circuits are mediocre and low-end. It sports a pair of Cirrus Logic's CS4398 chips in dual differential mode, delivering 24-bit word lengths and 192kHz upsampling. That's more or less identical to the internals of Esoteric's own entry-level SA-10 player and not far removed from the sort of chipset deployed in the mid-grade Marantz SACD stock. What's not so common in budget players is the whopping great toroidal transformer, and it seems Esoteric has gone the linear rather than switch-mode power supply route in the X-05, a move we heartily recommend.

The key is the 'X' prefix, though. That means this Esoteric uses a vibration-free, rigid-disc-clamping system transport, or VRDS (in contrast, the SA-10 uses an altogether more down-to-earth VOSP (Vertical-aligned Optical Stability Platform) mechanism. To accommodate SACD, TEAC's Esoteric engineers moved from VRDS to VRDS-Neo, but the same basic solid chunk of transport mechanism structure that has been common to top TEAC and Esoteric CD players remains. And it puts the rivals to shame in most cases.

The X-05 features the newest version of the VRDS-Neo mechanism, dubbed VMK-5. A heavyweight mech of aluminium and polycarbonate (although not as massive as the X-03's VMK-3 it is derived from... but the X-05 is the jumping off point for the X-series, remember), it features a polycarbonate disc clamp, sitting in a frame of aluminium, with an aluminium cross bracing that locks to the platter to help eliminate resonance across the whole surface of the disc.

This is an elegant enough operation for Esoteric to decide to make it a theme, and the little window atop the X-05 shows the clamping mechanism in action. Like the VMK-3 mech, the laser assembly is mounted on a shaft instead of a simple armature, making it too more immune to resonance and vibration. ▶

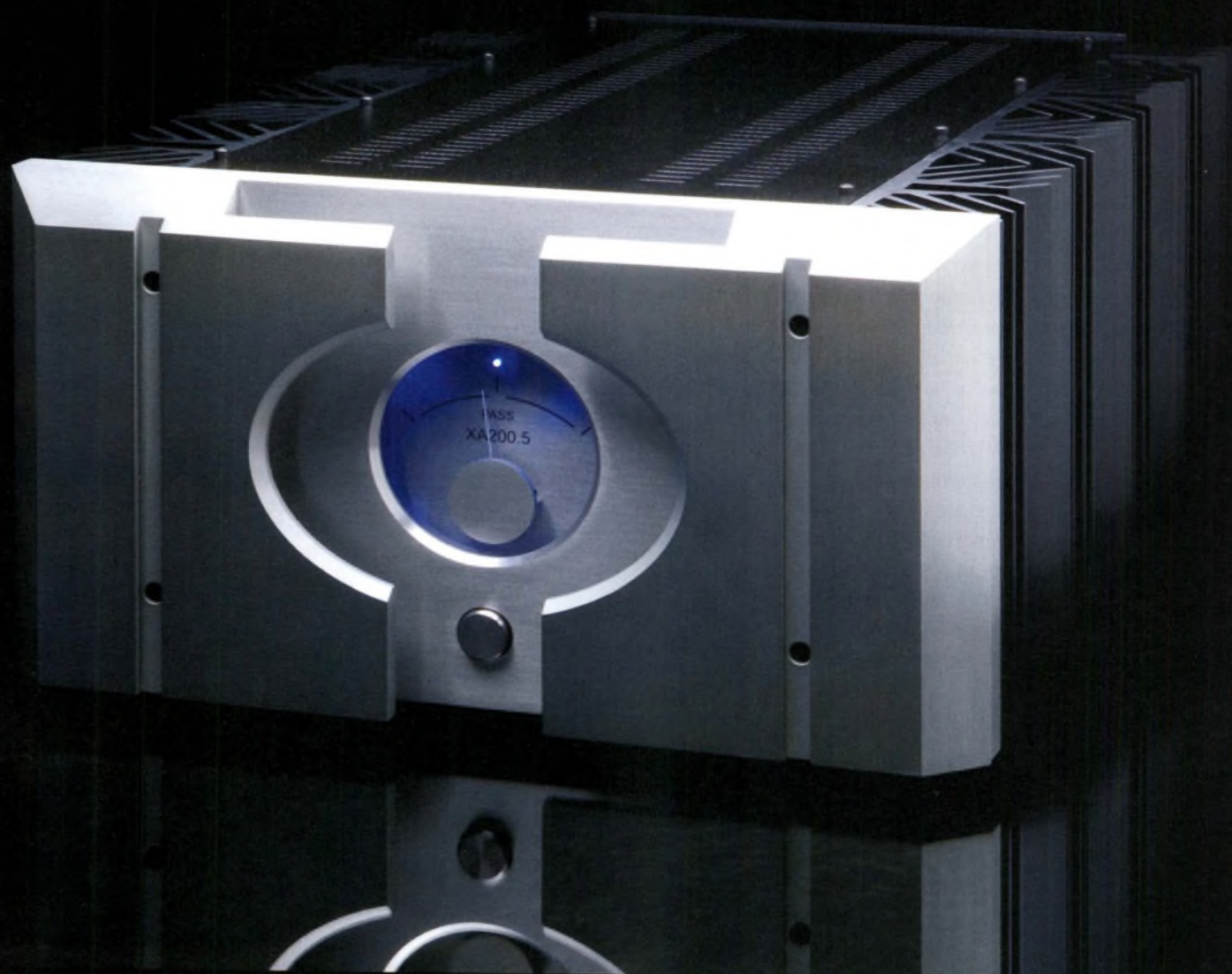
*“Put another way, this is what all those midprice Japanese CD and CD/SACD players want to be when they grow up.”*

pass

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*"This is up there with the flippy-over Nakamichi cassette deck used in 9½ Weeks for industrial-grade mecha-naughtiness."*

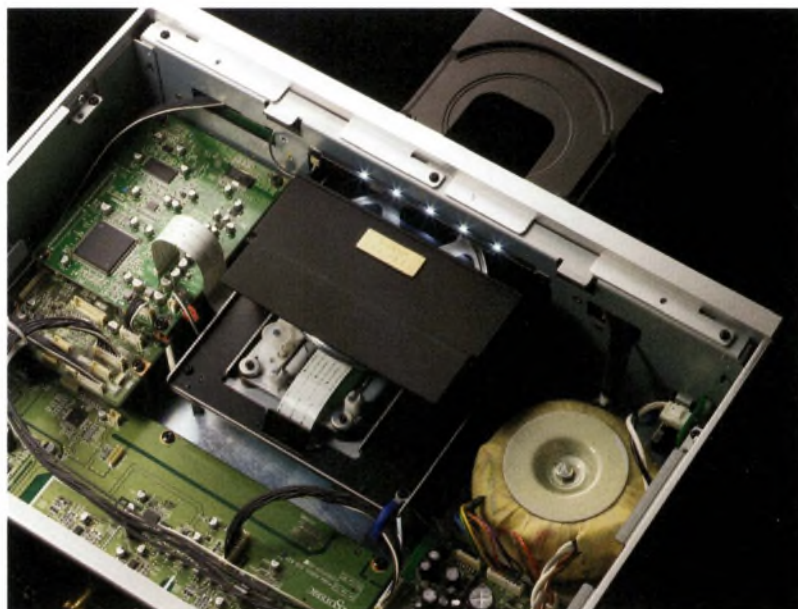
▶ The sublime build of the transport is echoed in the way it handles your discs. This is pure audio porn. The drawer opens with purpose, making a low purr (think cat discovering what 'sushi grade' is all about). You watch your disc disappear into that beautifully-finished 17kg squared off box, see the clamp lower over the disc as the lights inside the observation panel dim, and away you go. This is up there with the flippy-over Nakamichi cassette deck used in *9½ Weeks* for industrial-grade mecha-naughtiness. And for many, the buying decision has already happened here; the robust build, the meatiness of the overall player and that transport mechanism – plus a heavy, illuminated leather-backed handset – will win people over, even before a disc is played.

It's more than just solidity of build; it's attention to detail. The three footers are knurled and height adjustable, with little encased ball-bearing standoffs below to decouple the player from its surroundings still further. The usual Toslink optical and coaxial electrical digital connections, an earth tag (!) and a blanked out plate for upcoming iLink/Firewire connections (allowing the possibility of multichannel audio, for example) join the XLR balanced and single-ended phono outputs. Then there's the little BNC socket to the far side of the back panel. This allows connection to a master clock, to improve the performance still further (this has been documented in other Esoteric players, but was not tested here. I suspect there will be few G-03X-clocked X-05s due to the price of the upgrade). The lack of a digital input is a grumble that will become more irksome over time; right now it's a minor niggle, but two years down the line, you'll be wondering why there's no USB or digital input to keep the computer in line.

This is also a deeply configurable player, despite its minimal eight button front panel. One of those eight – marked 'mode' – delves into a series of adjustments that are not commonly found on disc players. Of course, with the external clock option, there's provision for the X-05 to slave off that product, and an iLink connection option

should you have that particular upgrade. More interesting perhaps are the DF and DSD settings. DF stands for digital filter and the two options are 'Wide' (slow roll-off, more immersive, wider soundstage) or 'Narrow' (sharp roll-off, deeper, better defined, tighter soundstage). DSD in its 'Normal' guise puts up a 50kHz brick wall, while 'Direct' leaves the DSD signal without a cut-off in place, and output is 3dB lower than the standard setting. The DF setting can set to suit the overall performance of your system, or used to dial in the optimum settings for a specific piece of music (broadly speaking, string quartets and small jazz combos sound best through the 'Wide' setting, dynamic orchestral passages sound more impressive in 'Narrow' mode and rock tracks vary depending on the quality of the mastering process). On the other hand, the DSD settings are purely equipment-specific; amps not designed to accept the extended frequency range of DSD (such as a number of valve amp designs) can sound a little flustered when trying to cope with frequencies far above 50kHz; the 'Normal' setting helps considerably – check your amp's manual or experiment. Full marks to Esoteric for being so usefully pragmatic about this; when SACD was at its peak, this was one of the most oft-repeated grumbles.

It's going to be hard to discuss whether the X-05 needs much in the way of run-in; our sample was delivered at the Whittlebury Hall show for use in our demonstration and ▶





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► the first few days of replay were spent there. It sounded good from the get-go, but like most systems improved over the next day or two. Whether it was due to its first outing being so performance-heavy, or down to the product still having some days to warm up is unclear, but it got distinctly better over the first week in the system.

All well and good, but gorgeous build and a transport mechanism to die for is as nothing if the performance doesn't live up to the same. Even at the beginning of the run-in session, it was clear Esoteric's on to something fundamentally right here. It's a very different sound from some of the more 'brightly lit' players further up the X-series; this is a more earthy, back to basics sound with the sort of pinned down solidity that's hard to live without. With the right system and the right music, the X-05's powerful and deep bass coupled with the rock-solid images could send children and small pets running for cover. That evil demon inside all of us takes command for a little while early in the joy-discovery honeymoon period with the X-05. Out go the regular discs, replaced instead by dynamic, earth-moving music. Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*, the *1812*, Wagner at full tilt, Ornette Coleman assaulting his sax, Aphex Twin's *Come to Daddy*, Slipknot. Mwah-ha-ha-harr.

Then you begin to calm down, and realise there's more to this player than just confidence and energy, depth and darkness. It's actually a damn good

*"It'll make you weep in record shops, looking at all those CDs and wondering what they'd sound like in SACD."*

player, all over. It's very honest to the music, as well as the disc of course. But mostly, it's honest to the music first. So, don't expect sumptuous, rose-tinted wonderful sounds. It's not a bland player and it certainly doesn't make music sound like a laboratory experiment, but if you are looking for something that softens and blunts the edges of spiky music, look elsewhere. Instead, you want to hear music with the dynamic authority and detail of a studio... look no further.

All this applies to CD replay. Move to SACD and things get even better. Better enough to start pleading with faceless companies to relaunch their commitment to the format for the good of audio. Good enough that it'll make you weep in record shops, looking at all those CDs and wondering what they'd sound like in SACD. Not that the CD replay is bad – far from it, in fact – but the SACD performance lifts the sound from 'great' to 'excellent'. Imagery and air especially take on sublime qualities that you'll struggle to find on CD.

Most of all though, whether on CD or SACD, it's the sense of balance the Esoteric brings to disc spinning that makes it a hugely capable player

of the first water. It's not a matched system in any price perspective, but the sound the X-05 brings is a perfect match for the equally well-built DarTZeel CTH-8550 elsewhere in this issue.

It's ironic that the products that best show what a format is capable of happen after everyone else has written off that format. The good news is that vinyl shows such products can extend a format long past its expiration date. The Esoteric X-05 shows the same could be true for SACD, and CD too.+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Esoteric X-05

**Supports:** Super Audio CD/CD/CD-R/CD-RW

**Output terminals:** XLR (2 channel), RCA phono (2 channel)

**Audio output (analog audio):** Maximum output level 2.2 Vrms / 10kΩ (1 kHz, full scale)

**Frequency Response:** 5 Hz to 80 kHz (SACD, DSD mode direct)

**Signal-to-noise ratio:** 130 dB (SACD, CD)

**Dynamic Range:** 107 dB (SACD, CD)

**Total Harmonic Distortion:** 0.001% (SACD, 1 kHz)

**Audio output (digital audio):** 1x optical digital, 1x coaxial digital, 1x BNC input terminal. Optional i.Link/FireWire four and six pin sockets Input frequency Word synchronization input format 44.1, 88.2, 176.4, 100kHz (rectangular wave) Input level TTL level / 75 ohms

**Power consumption:** 15W

**Dimensions (W×H×D):** 44.2x15.3x35.3cm

**Weight:** 17kg

**Price:** £4,495

**Manufactured by**

TEAC Esoteric

URL: [www.esoteric.teac.com](http://www.esoteric.teac.com)

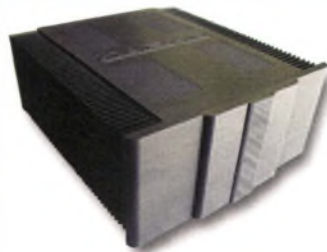
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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# DarTZeel CTH-8550

by Alan Sircom

Know what you're thinking: Sixteen Thousand, Five Hundred Quid... for a fucking integrated amp! It's a big, scary number. Especially when you actually listen to the damn thing, because then you start thinking about how you get it past the other half without a problem.

That's impossible, because this is no shrinking audiophile violet, if indeed the words 'audiophile' and 'shrinking violet' can ever sit comfortably together. The DarTZeel CTH-8550's power amp sized case, its gold and scarlet livery, 15mm thick CNC-milled front panel and a volume knob marked 'pleasure control' (which is, of course, a pleasure to use) isn't going under the domestic management radar, no matter how hard you try. There is an all black version that might take the edge off, but that's still a big slab of darkness on the equipment shelf. Besides, it loses something in translation from the original bling.

*“The amp looks expensive, feels expensive, weighs expensive and even smells expensive.”*

Forget the well-known 'hand-written invoice' (the one your friendly dealer pens for you at about a tenth of what you really paid to appease the other half) while you are at it too; the amp looks expensive, feels expensive, weighs expensive and even smells expensive. Plus, you just know that somehow they'll discover that Swiss legend at the back... and then you are screwed. The only way to get past this is to buy them something equally Swiss at the same time; think expensive or you'll be wearing it someplace unmentionable, so we're talking Patek Philippe... not a Toblerone or a cheese fondue.

No, if you are going to own a DarTZeel CTH-8550, be loud and proud. Even in a time where conspicuous spending

is distinctly out of fashion, this is something to shout about. Take the handset for example; I defy anyone to handle this heavy slab of richness without quoting lines from *Goldfinger*, Mishtah Bond.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the CTH-8550 is its protection circuitry. Not protection from blowing up speakers, but preventing any rogue elements from running off with your shiny new DarTZeel in transit. You have to register the amp online and this sends a little file that you need to plug into your amp through a USB stick. No registration, not much of a music session. This also gives you insight into how much microprocessor control is on tap; a front panel screen controls a 50 page menu allowing all manner of adjustments and configuration states. You can even program the DarTZeel to act as the Alarm Clock of the Rich and Famous. This micro-control is a major change, when compared to the discrete-component charms of the pre and power amplifiers. Fortunately, in most cases, the standard settings are the best ones.

The microprocessor is also a self-diagnostic system, designed to keep the extremely simple amplifier circuit in rude health. In many respects, this is its key job. The amplifier is designed to constantly check and adjust the circuit in some fundamental ways; the parallel transistor, dual mono design is made to run cool and be very stable, but this keeps even the implication of

instability at bay. As a consequence, this relatively powerful, yet simple, circuit acts unfazed by almost anything you can throw at it, speaker-wise.

This all solid-state, no feedback design has a tomorrow-chummy nine inputs each with its own ball-bearing press stud, comprising four phono inputs, two dedicated for the optional phono stage, an XLR input and two sets of the balanced, BNC-toting Zeel connections (used to connect pre- and power from the range). As nothing else speaks Zeel, this holds the promise of future DarTZeel sources, perhaps. There's a set of phono and Zeel outputs, as well as monitor phonos for recording. The power amp section delivers 200 watts per channel (into eight ohms, 330W into four and even two ohms is possible) and is effectively run dual mono. The preamp section is completely dual mono right up to the power transformer. Cleverly, DarTZeel uses separate transformers (one on top of the other) for the demands of the preamp and power amplifier sections, so it really is like two amps in one. It also means one of those menu options not only turns off the power amp stage, but turns that big transformer into a paperweight for the duration.

It goes without saying the amp is absurdly well-built; anything that costs so much that it could take nearly an hour for a Premiership footie player to earn enough to afford it is supposed to be well made, but this takes high-quality build to new levels. Forget production lines and think hand-made instead. It is built on a motherboard/daughter card layout though, allowing plug in optional cards for moving coil or moving magnet cartridges. And it's hand-built too, to the kind of uncompromising standards that kept Swiss timepieces at the forefront of engineering for hundreds of years.

The motherboard/daughterboard layout and the stacked power transformers go some way to explain the height of the amplifier. Of course, it's not that different from the equally tall, equally impressively priced rival Krell FBI. But somehow, the overall aesthetic is very different; where the FBI is integrated Krell writ (very) large, this is more like a classic computer chassis, like the IMSAI from the late 1970s. The IMSAI was revolutionary, moving computing from lab-coateds acolyte appeasing the IBM god with regular tributes of mag tape to the *War Games*-like home computer geekosphere. Although the DarTZeel doesn't democratise audio amplifiers in the way the IMSAI and its progeny did for computing, in a way it's just as revolutionary.

It's hard to think of this as a mere integrated amplifier; it successfully makes a sound like a hulking great pre/power in a single box. And, once you've spent some time with the CTH-8550, it's hard to go back to other

one-box amplifiers irrespective of price and spec. Little wonder then that the number '8550' is reputed to mean 85 per cent of the performance of the DarTZeel pre/power, at 50 per cent of the price. Designer Hervé Delétraz is apparently well-known for his wry sense of humour.

The sound is somewhat different from the original DarTZeel schema. The original power amplifier was one of the fastest-sounding solid-state devices around, at least in the context of amplifiers with any real-world power delivery. The CTH-8550 loses some of that speed, it must be said, but in the process gains some extra heft and possibly even dynamics. And it's still fast; faster than many in fact. It just loses the bordering on psychic speed of attack of the NHB power amp.



There's a newly minted audiophile cliché surrounding big, good amps. Like any good cliché, it's built on several nuggets of truth. This one's to do with the quietness of very good amplifiers. And it fits here; the CTH-8550 produces a sound that rises out of a very deep, very still, quiet place. This is not something you can explain easily, because it sound trite, but the easiest way is to draw ▶

*“In this case, the Swiss amplifier is good for ‘music’ and it’s as neutral as, ahem, Switzerland.”*

▶ an analogy; even the best double-glazing can never totally isolate people from the sounds of the big city. They might be effectively inaudible and the city dweller can overcome them, but they never go away. Move that city dweller into the middle of nowhere for a night and the silence is palpable. It’s that sort of absence of background sound you get with the CTH-8550.

Otherwise, the CTH-8550 is difficult to pin down, sonically. There’s a fractional trade-off between air and bass depth, and the Electrocompaniet Nemo power amps in this issue represent almost the diametric opposite (more bass, less air) to what the CTH-8550 does. One is not better or worse than the other, though, just differences in taste, like the difference between a really good curry and a good Chinese meal... if you are in the habit of treating everyone in the restaurant to a free meal for the next month or so.

It just does everything well. It’s the sort of amplifier that laughs in the face of those who want to call amps ‘cold’ or ‘warm’, a design a ‘classical’ or ‘good for rock’ model. In this case, the Swiss amplifier is good for ‘music’ and it’s as neutral as, ahem, Switzerland. That almost forgotten concept of an amplifier being a ‘straight wire with gain’ sees its best expression here, in that the amplifier imposes no character on the music, it merely plays it. Imagery, dynamics articulation, transparency, detail... if it comes out of the source that way, that’s how it plays. A trivial inspection of amplifiers would suggest this neutrality is easy; the harsh reality is that the reverse is true and those truly neutral amps are rare enough to be worthy of note.

The DarTZeel CTH-8550 is one such amplifier, and that all but takes the edge off the price tag.+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

darTzeel CTH-8550

**Nominal output power:** 200 watts RMS (230 watts peak) @ 8 ohms

330 watts RMS (360 watts peak) @ 4 ohms

330 watts RMS (400 watts peak) @ 2 ohms (software limited)

**Line Gain :** 12 dB nominal, up to 22dB

**Power Stage Gain :** 26 dB @ 8 ohms

**Input impedances :** MM: 47 kohms.

Neumann RIAA 4th pole included

MC: 1 kohms. Neumann RIAA 4th pole included

**RCA:** > 30 kohms

**Zeel BNC:** 50 ohm

**XLR:** > 15 kohms between Pin 1 and 2  
> 15 kohms between Pin 1 and 3

**Line output impedances:** RCA = 75 ohms, darT BNC = 50 ohms

**Speaker output impedance:** < 0.33 ohms, from 20 Hz to 20 kHz (measured under 8 ohms)

**Frequency response:**

3 Hz to 300 kHz, +0, -6 dB

20 Hz to 20 kHz, +0, -0.5 dB

20 Hz to 50 kHz, ±0.5 dB

**Rise time:** < 0.8 μs

**Slew rate:** > 88 V/μs, peak-peak

**DC output voltage:** < ±15 mV max

**Total Harmonic Distortion (THD):** < 1 % from 7 Hz to 77 kHz

**Crosstalk:** < -90 dB from 20Hz to 20kHz

**Signal to noise ratio:** > 115 dB (A) @

nominal power

**Power consumption:** 3 watts Standby, 40 watts @ idle, 1000 watts @ maximum output power

**Dimensions (WxHxD) :** 44x33.5x17cm

Total depth with handles: 41.5cm

**Net weight :** 28 kg

**Price** £16,500

**Manufactured by:** Dartzeel

URL: [www.dartzeel.com](http://www.dartzeel.com)

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Waterfall Victoria Evo loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom

**W**ith new products like the Crystal Cable Arabesque appearing recently, using glass is clearly (groan!) becoming a popular choice of cabinet material for European loudspeaker designers. In fairness to Waterfall though, the company has made glass speakers out of its factory in the South of France for many years.

Take the Victoria Evo floorstander for example. It was originally launched a decade ago, but a couple of years back, the range (along with its smaller Iguasçu floorstander) got the Evo treatment. The designs retained Waterfall's clever ADT (Acoustic Damping Tube) system and basic footprint, but

shifted from Triangle drive units to in-house Athom designs. Like Triangle though, it's best considering the loudspeaker from the midrange out; it uses a pair of 150mm LD 150 cones, allied to a 20mm soft dome SD20 tweeter above and a 210mm UFR 210 down-firing passive radiator below. You also get a set of round grilles for each one of the bass drive units in the box.

Of course, the drivers aren't the first thing you notice about the Waterfall Victoria Evo; that's the see-through cabinet. The ▶

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▶ speaker box is made from 6mm thick glass panels, with a distinctive additional chamfered glass panel on the front. The glass case is solid, but isn't toughened and it has a relatively high centre of gravity, so if you have kids or pets that treat your listening room as a jujutsu dojo, this might be a consideration. It's a surprisingly small floorstander too, with a small footprint from the plinth and the glass speaker towers smaller still.

The box is totally sealed. Each piece of glass is held in place using a UV-treated glue that should be good for the next century or so. It takes a long time to put together though; each one of those glass-glass joints takes an hour to treat and the cabinet is built on a custom jig, making the process far slower to make than all but the most intricate wooden box. The result is a stiff, dead and thin-walled cabinet, not unlike a BBC design. Except in glass.

Of course, filling a transparent loudspeaker with wadding would defeat the elegance of the design, so each drive unit has its own back box to achieve the same goal. Dressing those drive unit wires to keep them perfectly even inside the cabinet is a neat touch.

The base unit is where things get interesting. This plinth holds the single-wired terminals, the crossover network and a down-firing passive radiator; this is the aforementioned Acoustic Damping Tube. Where this gets really clever is the radiator comes with two optional brass weights that change the bass characteristics of the speaker relative to the room. With no weights, the speaker has a distinct 4dB boost at 50Hz (good for very small rooms), with the smaller M7 weight there's a slight 1dB lift at 45Hz (best for rooms of sheetrock construction) and with the larger M27 weight, things are linear down to 40Hz, which proves best for larger rooms and typical brick-built listening rooms both here and in France.

The speakers are best used a couple of feet or so from the rear and side walls if possible, but once again the rear tuning kicks in. The speakers come with four rubber feet for mounting on wooden floors, but these have M8 threads for spikes if you want some carpet-piercing action. In a relatively small (11x14.5x9) carpeted room, these speakers worked well on M8 spikes, two feet from the rear wall and three from the sides with a mild toe-in and the M27 weights on both ADTs. Move them back a foot though and the bass really begins to boom.

This is sort of described in the 'manual', if a single sheet of A4 constitutes such a thing. Still, it is concise and accurate and not filled with mistranslation, although it can get gnomic at times.

Waterfall is not a fussy company and the loudspeakers are not particularly snobby about what they work with, either. I'd hesitate using the loudspeakers with a set of

*“The glass case is solid, but isn't toughened... if you have kids or pets that treat your room as a jujutsu dojo, this might be a consideration.”*

valve amps – especially single-ended valve amps – simply because the bass needs a stiff power amp driving it. But that doesn't automatically spell 'power'; the 25w Sugden A21SE integrated was more than happy powering this speaker, as was a 200w Coda power amp, although a 200w pair of Belles monoblocs bordered on the aggressive in this setting. I suspect this has more to do ▶



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- ▶ with the nature of the Waterfall speakers rather than any intrinsic apple-cart upsetting in the grand power scheme of things.

The move from Triangle to Athom drive units has made for a considerable improvement in design. The mid-forward Triangle drivers work very well in MDF, but sound inconsistent in a glassy setting. Athom – being a part of the Waterfall family – designs its drivers specifically for Waterfall (and therefore glass cabinets) and the results are considerably more focussed than before.

I sort of gave the game away at the very outset of this review by saying that it's best considering the loudspeaker from the midrange out. This is a loudspeaker that concentrates on getting the midrange right, and it succeeds at that task well. That doesn't mean bass is thin, fat or inconsistent and treble is not dulled, forward or uneven. It just means that the midband is the first part of the tonal range that grabs your attention.

Vocals in particular are easy to understand with the Victoria Evo. John Rutter's *Requiem*, for example, is perfectly defined from the vocals out. This also helps give the speaker a good sense of pace, tempered in some respects by the way the base section is interacting with the surroundings. At best, this gives a great, seamless presentation with relatively deep bass and an unforced sense of dynamic range.

The speakers greatest strength is imaging, no matter where the Victoria Evo is placed in the room (it's pretty transparent, too, but the transparent-glass puns would be too hard to resist). The loudspeaker makes an impressively precise soundstage, one that's best suited at replaying the acoustic of a jazz club or small string quartet instead of the full scale and size of an orchestra.

I suspect these two strengths (midrange clarity and soundstaging) are related, and related to the stiffness of the cabinet construction. Even though this is basically a rectangular box with no bracing or complex enclosure to break up internal standing waves, the cabinet appears not to add to the mix (glass in this case 'disappears'). There's precious little cabinet coloration to speak of (or perhaps more accurately, the cabinet resonance is out of band, adding nought but a little zing to the treble) and the speaker is remarkably free from the sort of stray resonance that gives short-lived immediacy to some small cabinet constructions.

The glass cabinet does impose some limits on the design, but in most cases these aren't too prominent. Wiggy loud sessions, churning out lots of grunge and dub isn't going to make the Waterfalls bring out their best, so if you like to play at club levels, the Victoria Evo will leave you unmoved. However, the speakers that do this well routinely look dreadful in comparison to the Victoria Evo's elegantly fashionable appeal. As this is one of the few loudspeakers at anywhere near the price that delivers the sonic goods as well as the aesthetic ones, this is a loudspeaker many will be drawn to.

It's somewhat difficult to draw comparisons between the Waterfall and other speakers. Comparing a speaker made of glass to one made of MDF is rather like comparing a fish with a banana. But in other ways, a speaker is still a speaker and comparisons are fair. The speaker in some respects sounds like a tall, elegant LS3/5a; refined, articulate and detailed, if not the last word in frequency extension (at both ends), high volume replay or dynamic freedom.

The trend in glass loudspeakers is set to continue, and the models are in constant improvement. Even a few years ago, glass loudspeakers were almost

the subject of ridicule in audio circles. Today – thanks to the likes of Waterfall - the sound is in every way comparable with MDF cabinet design speakers, and in some respects (resonance control, absence of midrange and treble coloration) far better than many traditional cabinets. Even the dynamic nut is being cracked, although those after a loudspeaker with plenty of dynamic swing and capable of being cranked up will still look toward bits of tree for their loudspeakery. Ultimately, the Victoria Evo is an excellent design that is more than just a pretty glass case, although the elegant style does help too. The end result? It's *clearly* impressive.+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Waterfall Victoria Evo loudspeakers

**Type:** three-way, four drivers  
loudspeaker

**Tweeter:** 20mm silk dome

**Mid/bass:** 2x 150mm cone

**Bass:** 1x 210mm passive radiator

**Recommended amplifier:** 40-250 watts

**Peak power handling:** 500 watts

**Impedance:** 6 ohms

**Efficiency:** 89 dB

**Frequency response:** 40Hz-28kHz

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 21.5x101x21.5 cm

**Weight:** 17kg

**Price:** £2,700

**Manufacturer**

Waterfall Audio

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Audience adeptResponse aR8 power conditioner

by Alan Sircom

**O**h dear. This product marks my transition to the Dark Side. I've joined the ranks of the audiophools now, and the problem is... I just don't care. I'm listening to, and thoroughly enjoying, the sound of music played through the Audience adeptResponse aR8 power conditioner, and that's me marked for the rubber room by hi-fi's pragmatist quarter.

Audience is the brainchild of John McDonald and the late Richard Smith (who's soldering iron has now been passed on to designer Roger Sheker). The Californian company made its name with high-res Auricap capacitors, but is also known for its cables, power conditioners and 'auric illuminator' disc treatment (it also makes loudspeakers, and an amp system is waiting in the wings). Although some of its products have a distinctly left-field stance, Audience is considered one of the good guys delivering an honest product, born out of actually wanting things to sound better. And John McDonald is reputed to have some of the best ears in the business.

The adeptResponse aR8 conditioner is built in a very robust box (in business-like matt black or almost Jeff Rowland-like brushed silver). We 240V UK types get two versions; the four socket aR4 (at a cool £1,999) and the eight-socket aR8 (for a grand more). Both are designed to sit in a conventional hi-fi rack, but the bigger aR8 comes with a big magnetic power breaker throw switch and a red voltage LED read-out on the front panel. The smaller one just has the carved logo. If you are prepared to put up with Schuko sockets (as in not the three-pin 13A sockets used in the UK), the two boxes accept six (aR6) and a dozen (aR12) components respectively. Both come with a six foot length of the company's powerChord e mains lead as standard; the downside is this is terminated with a Neutrik PowerCon socket at the conditioner end, so comparisons are difficult to say the least.

The conditioner is designed to strike at what Audience feels are the three biggest problems with power as it reaches your system; power factor correction, filtering and transient suppression. Isolation is also a key issue that's addressed in the aR8. Power factor correction means the aR8 tries to bring the mains current and voltage into phase, which means better power transfer.

Transient suppression is an interesting aside. Dynamics in most power conditioners are actually held back by the use of a metal oxide varistor as a clamp, grounding high voltage transients. Problem with MOV devices is they are said to degrade and act more like a capacitor, and a noisy one at that. The adeptResponse design features a unique (and highly proprietary) no-wear system instead, so one audible distortion is effectively eliminated. The filtering mechanism used by Audience is also proprietary, but it filters each output and double filters the outputs from one another to help isolate them.

Open the aR8 up and inside is the grand master of passive conditioning packages. As you might expect, the aR8 is packed with the company's Auricap capacitors inside. There's some cryo-treatment, too. These components are specially designed to produce no significant series resistance, and thus a low impedance path to the electronics. A special hot rodDED version is available in the US, which replaces the standard caps ▶

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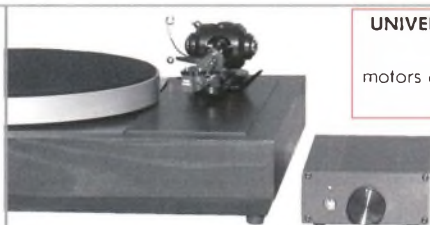
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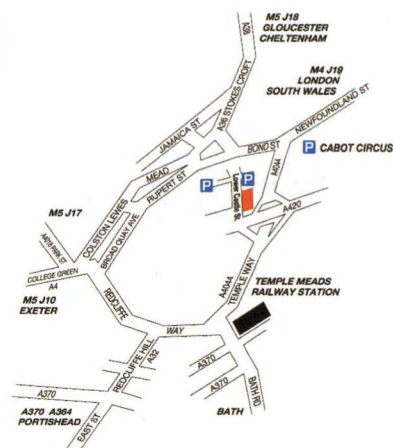
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with Audience's Teflon designs, at pretty much double the cost. Rumour has it, the aR12T raises the bar still further. If so, it must be something truly magical, because the standard aR8/aR12 is one of the most significant upgrades you can make. But only after a lengthy run-in.

Dropping into Gloria Gaynor mode for a moment, at first I was afraid. I was petrified. Kept thinking why do people love this piece of crap that's by my side. But then it spent so many hours just running in to prove me wrong. It grew strong. And we learned how to get along.

Enough with the disco paraphrasing. It sounds OK at first (even if 'crap' scans better) but transforms significantly over the next 100 hours or more. In fairness, I don't know whether this is a slow improvement or major change somewhere along the continuum, as I was out at shows for almost the whole run-in period. I just heard something sounding OK one day, went away, came back to find the same thing sound remarkable. This is capacitor conditioning. Remove the aR8 from the juice for a few days, discharge those caps and you are back where you started, apparently.

The great thing about the Audience aR8 is that once you get past those first hours, it makes a big and obvious change. That can lead to absurd reviewer-only systems that no-one in reality would ever consider – who else would use a £3,000 power conditioner to healthy up a £350 Cambridge Azur 650A amplifier? – but it means the aR8 is one of the most immediately understandable mains conditioners out there. Valve amps? No worries. Apparently, Audience is one of the few mains conditioner purveyors that even gains friends among the Naim fraternity (in the US at least), which is high praise indeed. And yes, because of its passive nature, you can use it with a bunch of other power products if you want.

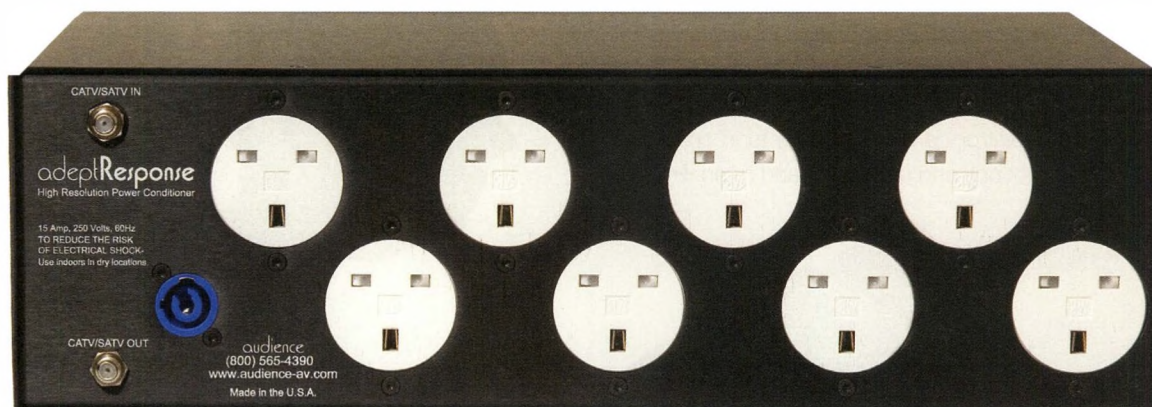
The usual mains effect of lowering the noise floor is in full effect, but without the dynamic compression or softening of transients that accompanies most mains conditioners. In fact, instead of compromising these two key elements of the sound, in many cases, it improves them. A lot.

This is at once a subtle change and an obvious change; that sounds contrary, but it's the only way I can describe what happens here. The subtle change is the way it gets all your audio ducks in a row, making the sound more dynamic, more encompassing, filling out the bass notes and the image depth, making the coherence between instruments and

*“But then it spent so many hours just running in to prove me wrong. It grew strong. And we learned how to get along.”*

the phrasing of those individual instruments stand together well, giving the sound a sense of organic flow, increasing detail, lowering coloration and all the rest. The obvious change is it does this so powerfully, that you feel like your system has been running at half-power prior to inserting the aR8.

What happens next is surprising. It makes the sound as if the amp and speakers were upgraded. Sibilant, spitchy vocals and too-splashy cymbal sounds are given special treatment, opening up unheard levels of detail and articulation (my German is extremely limited – I can ask for directions to bar, brothel and hospital and not much else ▶



- ▶ – but I found myself following along to Rammstein as if I'd just spent a month under a fraulein). This happened almost regardless of musical genre; it brought you closer to Miles Davis' mute, conveyed Ashkenazy's virtuosity when playing Mozart with more verve and made Ray LaMontagne's breathing patterns all the more noticeable (and yet, not uncomfortably so). It also stops you considering music as background; this makes you play more music at a single sitting and focuses your attention on the music playing, not the shopping list, the state of shoe design in the 21st Century or whether QPR deserved to win last week. All that from a power product... surprising!

*“My German is extremely limited... but I found myself following along to Rammstein as if I'd just spent a month under a fraulein.”*

The acid test of a product in many cases is what happens to your system when it is removed. Here, the aR8 proved its mettle and showed what it was really doing. The sound became less seamless and less dynamic. Transients were blunted, and the bass line was significantly less timely. Vocals may have been more distinct and extended and separate from the backline, but this robbed the sound of its 'PRaT'. Albums returned to being just a motley collection of tracks, instead of being a distinct whole that you wanted to play from end to end. That underpinning threat level of Slipknot was lost, too. You get a handle on why the Naim guys approve of the Audience when you plug it back in; it's more rhythmically cogent and, although not every Naim-ite is a headbanger, the aR8 unlocks more of the volume dial without removing the smile factor in the process.

No product is perfect, but the aR8 gets damn close. On very high-res and exceptionally neutral equipment, the sound took on a mild boost in the lower part of a tenor's register, while the bat-eared part of the treble was smoothed off and rounded down. But on most products it improved audio across the board – from the insanely cheap, to the sort of products likely well-matched to a conditioner of this magnitude and on up to the insanely expensive. The level of improvement in most cases was good enough to make you draw breath.

It's strange; if a change this large is laid at the door of a CD player, preamp or power amp, few quibble. Even saying changing the interconnect cables produced this big a difference might be accepted with scant question, but to attribute these sort of improvements to a power product is always viewed quizzically. The fact remains that the Audience adeptResponse aR8 makes a big, important difference to the sound, every bit in line with three-grand upgrades to electronics further up the food chain. So, set aside your preconceptions and prejudices and listen.+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Audience adeptResponse aR8 power conditioner

**Current/Voltage:** 15A or 20A/120V, 220V, 230V, 240V

**Power Outlets:** eight high conductivity power receptacles

**Satellite/Cable TV:** Ground loop isolation transformer for hum reduction

**Indicator:** Front panel digital LED incoming voltage readout

**Chassis:** Heavy duty, rack-mountable

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 48.3x12.7x22.9cm

**Weight:** 7.45kg including powerChord

**Finish:** Grained and satin anodized aluminium Silver or Black

**Price:** £2,999

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# VPI Classic upgrade path

by Roy Gregory

**T**he VPI Classic – with its close-coupled drive system and solid plinth – could be considered innovative or retrograde, depending on your point of view. Whichever stance you take, it's hard to disagree that it represents something of a 'back to the future' movement – but then, this is hi-fi and that is as it ever was. What it's even harder to ignore are its sonic capabilities, which combined with its sheer musical enthusiasm (something of a VPI trademark), seem set to redefine the performance parameters for high-end turntables. The entry ticket for analogue ownership remains surprisingly reasonable – the benchmark Rega P3/24 costs around the £400 mark without a cartridge – but at the other end of the scale, exotic record replay systems seem to be shooting higher and higher in price. Against the background of 'tables reaching well into six-figure territory, a serious contender that starts out at £2,139 might well be greeted with incredulity, yet that's exactly what the Classic represents.

Of course, for a little over two grand you are 'only' getting what might be described as the basic package – despite which you'd best prepare for a shockingly powerful and authoritative performance. But a very real part of the Classic's appeal lies in its inherent upgradeability, the option to ransack additional parts and performance from the rest of the VPI range. Yes, they add to the price but they also add to the performance and as we'll see, even a fully loaded Classic remains remarkably affordable, as it plays in a league usually populated by five-figure decks.

The secret behind the Classic's performance is a fundamental reassessment of what matters to turntable performance. If all a record player has to do is revolve at the right speed and do it quietly then the logic governing its assembly should be simplicity itself – except that for years a single conundrum has laid buried at the heart of turntable design; speed stability requires a closely coupled drive system while the motor is itself the single loudest source of noise ▶



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▶ in the system. For years designers have been throwing ever more mass or increasingly sophisticated suspension systems (and sometimes both) at this mechanical impasse. But what if that central supposition is wrong? Or, more precisely, what if the inherent assumption of balance that lies at the heart of that supposition isn't reflected in practice? It's a question that VPI's Harry Weisfeld dared to ask; it's a question that the Classic resoundingly answers.

What if, wondered the ever-inventive Weisfeld, speed stability is actually the more important factor – not least because changes in the motor itself, the way we drive it and the structure of turntables and specifically their main-bearings, have reduced its destructive impact. Not only have turntable motors become a premium product but the use of better and better power supplies to drive them have had a significant impact on the noise they produce. But perhaps most critical is the advent of reduced contact main bearings. Once you've heard (or rather, not heard) a zero contact bearing such as the bi-axial air-bearing employed by Rockport, you realize just how much noise, grain and low-level grunge emanates from the average mechanical bearing. Now, whilst air bearings are expensive and impractical, recent years have seen significant developments in the realm of magnetically elevated bearings that, whilst they don't eliminate bearing noise completely, attack the vertical axis and the greater proportion of the problem. Likewise, the use of softer thrust pad materials –such as PTFE or PEEK as used in the Classic – have a similar impact. But on top of that, they also break the direct path between motor and platter, via the main bearing, that allowed motor induced noise to reach the stylus groove interface.

It becomes worth wondering whether we've advanced the quieting measures to the point where we can actually pay more attention to the issue of speed stability – and that's exactly what the Classic does. Even in basic, straight from the box form, the rigidly mounted motor and short belt keep things tight. But once you start looking at options, things get really interesting.

First up is the SDS power supply, a double whammy that should attack the twin spectres of speed variation and motor noise. First introduced in this form to partner the TNT the externally power supply has always been an option across the VPI range and the Classic is no exception – although you need a 115V motor fitted to the deck, a standard option on all VPI tables. Installation is simplicity itself, with the unit plugging straight between the turntable and the wall, using the supplied US to IEC lead. As well as electronic switching between 33 and 45 RPM, the SDS also offers incredibly fine control of overall speed which, when used with a product like KAB's Speedstrobe with its battery operated lamp, ensures that you get things absolutely spot-on. While you can get an initial setting straight from cold, it's worth letting the SDS warm up properly for a day or so and then run the deck for an hour before finalizing the adjustment.

What the SDS brings to the Classic mix is a combination of poise and focus, partly the result of a lower noise floor, partly the ▶

*“Even in basic, straight from the box form, the rigidly mounted motor and short belt keep things tight. But once you start looking at options, things get really interesting.”*



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 Hi-Fi News: Highly Commended September 2008

**GAMUT DII50**  
 Hi-Fi Choice Editor's Choice: January 2006  
 Hi-Fi Choice: The Hi-Fi Awards 2006 Bronze Award

**GAMUT CD3**  
 Hi-Fi Choice Editor's Choice: January 2007  
 Hi-Fi Choice: The Hi-Fi Awards 2007 Bronze Award

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- ▶ result of a far more positive sense of exactly where each note is placed (and how it is spaced). As impressively powerful and stable as the standard Classic package is, adding the SDS brings a level of refinement and precision to musical proceedings that makes a mockery of the £950 cost of the upgrade. Vocals are held more separate, with enunciation and inflexion much, much clearer, their meaning more direct. Musical phrases are more coherent and the "sentences" fit together better into a more comprehensible and effective overall shape. Play 'The Real Life' from John Cougar Mellencamp's *Lonesome Jubilee* and you'll immediately realize just how effectively the SDS controls the pell-mell rush of energy that drives this track along. Rather than a headlong rush the pace becomes purposeful and directed, the points where it slows or hesitates taking on greater musical significance, adding weight to the chorus,

*"Together with the SDS, the peripheral clamp elevates the performance of the Classic to a level where it challenges the values of top-flight analogue offerings."*

the message of the song. All that percussion detail is easier to pick out and so too are the subtle guitar accents. More to the point, their insistent prompts that keep the pace high are more effective, as is the way they carry the song through its lulls, almost highlighting the gaps. Never a great recording, *Lonesome Jubilee* is definitely great music, something the SDS makes far more apparent.

Next up is the peripheral clamp, a precision machined ring of stainless steel that has a narrow lip running around its inner edge. This can be added to the platter of the Classic, beneath the record, or used to clamp the edges of the record itself. This latter might seem like a faff, having to remove and replace the clamp each and every time you change the record, but it's remarkable how quickly this becomes second nature and believe me, once you hear what it does you'll want to make the effort.

Adding the peripheral clamp adds a real sense of stable solidity and clarity to the sound, anchoring images and helping define the space between and around them. Even densely layered mixes like 'Supper's Ready' from *Foxtrax* are much easier to unravel, whilst losing none of their drive and power. But delicate instrumental detail really shines, with the texture and shape of notes much more apparent. In part that has to be down to the blacker background, although whether that's down to the flatter surface of the record, its closer coupling to the platter surface or the increased flywheel effect of all that mass at the edge of the platter is anybody's guess. But reaching for piano, whether classical, jazz or even '*Captain Fantastic...*' (yes, I'm on an 70's kick here) the weight, sonority and anchored authority that the clamp brings to the instrument

and musical performance transforms the musical effect and range of this most difficult of instruments, suggesting that it's actually the further increase in speed stability that's responsible. That is indeed a large part of the equation – further underlining the premise that we've been unduly neglecting this aspect of analogue reproduction – but don't ignore the benefits that come from clamping the disc. Running the peripheral clamp as a weight only, below the level of the record does reduce its impact, rendering up subtly less focus, separation and detail. Whatever the reasons for the clamp's success, the added stability, substance, life, colour and micro-dynamic detail that results make it more than worth the £385 asking price.

Together with the SDS, the peripheral clamp elevates the performance of the Classic to a level where it challenges the values of top-flight analogue offerings, if not their absolute performance. Add in the availability of adjustable VTA and interchangeable arm-tops (allowing users to run more than one cartridge) and this versatile and capable package is in a class of its own. As good as the basic Classic is, the add-ons are much more than just icing on the cake. Record lovers and record collectors alike owe it to themselves to hear just how much performance their money can buy.+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Prices:

SDS Power Supply - £950

Peripheral Clamp - £385

### UK Distributor:

Analogue Seduction

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\* Email October 2009; these and others may be inspected by personal talk+rs

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# record reviews

## How To Read Them

The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and – where possible – serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information, the scale rates a standard, good quality pop recording as slightly below average.

*This issue's featured reviewers are:*

- RC** – Richard Clews
- DH** – Drew Hobbs
- RSF** – Richard S. Foster
- JK** – Jason Kennedy
- RP** – Reuben Parry
- AS** – Alan Sircom

### Key to Icons

|   |             |  |                        |
|---|-------------|--|------------------------|
|  | CD          |                 | 120g LP                |
|  | Gold CD     |                 | 150g LP                |
|  | HDCD        |                 | 180g LP                |
|  | XRCD        |  | 10" LP                 |
|  | Double Disc |                 | Availability As S/H LP |
|  | DVD         |                 | Vinyl Double Album     |
|  | SACD        |                 | Multi-Channel          |
|  | Hybrid SACD |  |                        |



### The Echo Hunters

#### Cabin Fever

She Wolf Records  
SWEH002

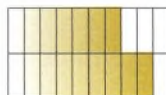


Canada's not short on talent, as evidenced by The Echo Hunters, a band blessed with not one but three lead vocalists – Larry Cassini, Gordon Fleming and Kirk Fontaine.

Most of the songs on *Cabin Fever* are written by the three vocalists with the standard being very high indeed. These guys know how to make a song stick to the walls of the memory. The slow throb of 'Crumbling Into Rust' caresses the senses with a truly memorable chorus, honey-soft harmonies and haunting violin – courtesy of Sylvian Dan-Causse. The pumped up, race-to-the-finishing line 'Chester' is bluegrass with a rocket up its backside, Daniel Lanois' 'O Marie' is French Territories romance with a capital 'R', and Penny Lang's 'Ain't Life Sweet' heralds its arrival on the back of a charming mandolin whilst dripping harmonies of gold through every pore. 'Bloody Big World' is the Echo Hunters' statement to ecological meltdown and pulls no punches lyrically or musically.

This is one mother of a band, one of the tightest and tastiest to come out of Canada for some considerable time. Their particular brand of fever will transcend the cabin. **DH**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



### JJ Cale

#### Roll On

Because Music  
BEC5772458



Hard to believe, but JJ Cale's been making music for nigh on 50 years. This is his 16<sup>th</sup> album, a horizontal jog through his particular brand of shuffling, countrified, bluesy roots and rock. Aside from a brief flirtation with jazz on two tracks, it's business as usual. Eric Clapton has long championed JJ's cause and the royalties from 'Cocaine' alone must keep Cale in considerable comfort! The two collaborated on the Grammy-winning 2006 release *The Road To Escondido* and the title track here finds them joining forces again. The guitars blend seamlessly together, everything's underpinned by the legendary Jim Keltner on drums and it's the fastest track on the album, which means an occasional trickle of sweat must have materialised in the studio! Running a close second for pace is 'Oh Mary', a shuffle he's repeated countless times before, but amazingly it still sounds fresh.

JJ Cale has bottled and drunk the elixir to career longevity and I wouldn't bet on him doing a further 25 years in the music business. If you are a fan then this is indispensable; if not, then this is as good a place as anywhere to get hooked in and hypnotised. **DH**

RECORDING  
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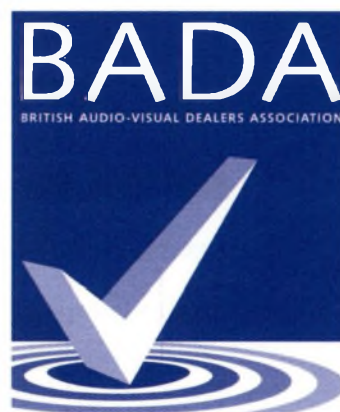
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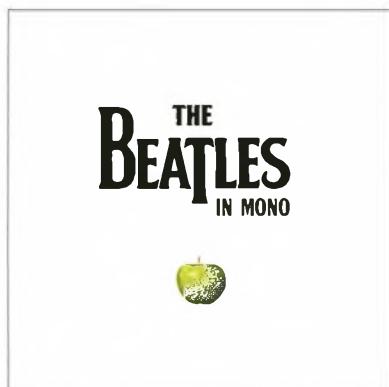
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## The Beatles

### The Beatles in Mono

CD box set

EMI 6994512



First things first: Yes, it is worth the money. Internet flame wars aside, sales of the stereo and mono Beatles box sets have justified Apple Corps' and EMI's release strategy. *The Beatles in Mono* – despite its supposedly more limited appeal – so quickly sold out on both sides of the pond, that EMI have ordered another production run. As such, we held off reviewing the box until such time as it became available again.

The mono box costs a lot more than the average box set, but as the manager of my local specialist record store pointed out, you are paying for Japanese manufacturing quality. Each album – from *Please Please Me* through to *The Beatles*, plus the collected *Mono Masters* – has been issued in superb 'mini-vinyl' style packaging that even includes the direction, "Use 'Emitex' cleaning cloth to preserve your microgroove records". Lovely!

From a technical viewpoint, the amount of care shown by Abbey Road engineers Paul Hicks and Sean Magee with the mono masters is commendable. The original BTR tape machines used to record the Beatles are no longer easily serviceable, so a Studer was used to transfer the music through a Prism AD convertor into ProTools. Once in there, very little was done to the music – no additional

EQ or limiting. So you are hearing the monos as 'neat' as possible, within the constraints of CD resolution.

Listening to the albums on modern hi-fi equipment is a strange experience. The music has immediacy, verve, surprise, innovation... all the Beatle qualities are presented more forcefully than ever before. Yet there is also a feeling that we are not really *meant* to listen to this music on modern (Fab) gear.

Take 'Taxman' from *Revolver*, for instance – proof positive that The Beatles could be bloody loud! Distortion from the microphones, desk and limiters is quite obvious, and Harrison's voice and guitar are biting sharp. The sound is almost proto-punk in its sheer aggression. Partnering the CDs with the right playback equipment, for the most enjoyable sound, could lead to some interesting combinations. A supercharged DAC running through a single vintage KEF springs to mind.

It seems a bit daft, in 2009, to lust after CDs of mono albums from

the 1960s fashioned to resemble a totally different format. But this is to underestimate the curious hold that The Beatles still exercise over music fans worldwide. The Beatles themselves preferred the monos; in the *Anthology* George Harrison stated the stereo mixes made the instruments sound 'naked'. Ironically, the mono mixes could also prove to be the most future proof, as they are better suited to headphone playback than the 'band on the left, vocals on the right' stereos.

Essential as *The Beatles in Mono* is for Beatles collectors and fans, it raises the question of the best way to appreciate the band's music, and despite all the above, I suspect this has yet to materialise. Despite being the preferred colour of their nemesis, the Meanies, The Beatles' ultimate vehicle may come not in yellow, but a nice shade of Blu. **RC**

RECORDING



MUSIC





**Jay Tamkin Band**

**Sorted**

Weinerworld Records  
WNRCD5045



There's a plethora of amazing young talent embracing British blues at present, and 19 year old Jay Tamkin is no exception. He got bitten by the blues bug listening to the Paul Jones show when he was very young, which led him to discover Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan. He's no copyist though, and what strikes on first listen is just how distinctive his sound is.

Tamkin, although clearly inspired by his grounding, remembered to put his own slant on things. He crosses boundaries easily, rocking hard on opener 'Get In Your Way' then effortlessly switching to acoustic for the flamenco-inflected 'Intermission One' and its sister track, the cleverly titled 'Intermission Two'. Sandwiched in between is a terrific blues shuffle entitled 'Troubles' that showcases this young man's extraordinary abilities on guitar. *Sorted* is not the complete debut but the potential for greatness is there for all to hear, and at 19 years of age there's plenty of time to grow.

Maybe, just maybe, Tamkin and the other young guns can start a much needed revolution by getting the blues played on mainstream radio. What a delicious thought. **DH**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**Rammstein**

**Liebe Ist Für Alle Da**

Universal/Pilgrim  
06025-2719515-5



The audiophile's best-loved German industrial metallurgists are back with what is possibly their finest album in a decade. And this time, Rammstein's talkin' lurve... but think 'gimp mask' love, not the 'puppy dogs' kind.

Rammstein are not breaking any patterns here, the same granuchy drop-D tuned guitars, the same huge sound, the same darkly humorous scare-the-children growly vocals from Till Lindemann (sung in German, with the occasional "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien" thrown in for good measure in 'Frühling in Paris') are all in full effect. It's all brilliantly recorded with near endless dynamics and best played loud enough to drown out the screams. It goes to prove that modern recordings aren't all compressed.

Sadly, there's still nothing quite matching 'Du Hast' (from 1997's *Sehnsucht*), although the anthemic opener 'Rammlied' comes close. The weakest track is arguably the single, 'Pussy' (which is deliberately controversial, but entertaining).

If you think music should scare you: if you like your music so visceral you need to take a shower after listening; if you aren't afraid of your dark side, then strap on Rammstein's latest. **AS**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**Eric Lindell**

**Gulf Coast Highway**

Alligator Records  
ALCD4928



Eric Lindell's a soul dripper, a funk'd up rhythm rocker with ants in his pants and diamonds on his dancing shoes. *Gulf Coast Highway* is the third offering from a man destined to blow the cobwebs away from the dowdy and downtrodden amongst us. Each release seems to up the vibe to new levels of fun and wonder; the sheer energy and vitality of this guy's music makes it almost impossible to remain seated whilst listening. It's pertinent to check the photos on the sleeve to find out if he's black, such is his ability to make music as infectious and sunny as James Brown at his peak. He doesn't sound like Brown, but he understands how to connect the ears to the feet and he knows how to make a song sizzle the way the great man did.

In amongst these 15 slabs of mainly self-penned material lies the perfect anthem for a long, hot, balmy summer. It's called 'Lullaby For Mercy Anne' and it deserves to be pumping out of every radio station and car stereo from here to Timbuktu.

Lindell's like a Van Morrison without the misery cloud, and this album pours rainbows into all corners of the soul. It's heaven on a silver disc. **DH**

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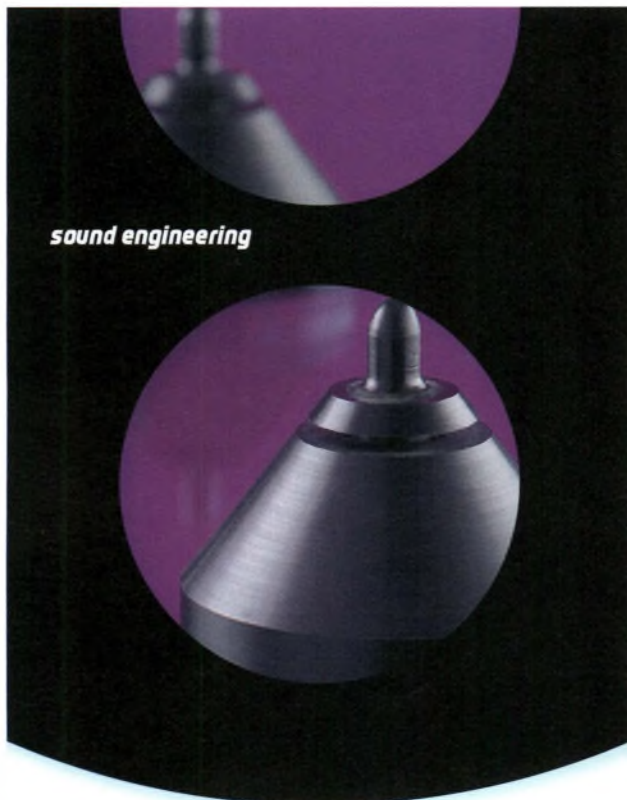
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*N Grove Manchester Aug 2009*

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*David Price Hi-Fi World Sept 09* **HI-FI WORLD**

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*David Price Hi-Fi World Dec 09* **HI-FI WORLD**

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**Dvorak: Violin Concerto in A minor, Op. 53; Romance in F minor, Op. 11. Szymanowski: Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. 35**

Rundfunk Sinfonieorchester Berlin conducted by Marek Janowski. Arabella Steinbacher, violinist.

PentaTone Classics PTC 5186 353



I heard last year that Julia Fischer had left PentaTone and signed with Decca. Simultaneously, they informed me of the signing of Arabella Steinbacher. I immediately purchased her Violino Latino disc (all that was available to me at the time) and was impressed with what I was hearing.

This PentaTone release is an out and out revelation. The playing of Ms. Steinbacher is out of this world. The recording quality is second to none. There is an exceptional blending of soloist and orchestra and not a second of unsatisfying playing by either to be heard. The dynamic range is spectacular and this is the finest Szymanowski I have heard. I have played this disc daily for the last two weeks and have been thrilled each time I hear it. The Dvorak concerto is given new life, and the sound of her Stradivarius is marvelous. This is a disc that belongs in every collection. While the CD layer is excellent, the DSD layer is exemplary in every way possible. Not to be missed. **RSF**

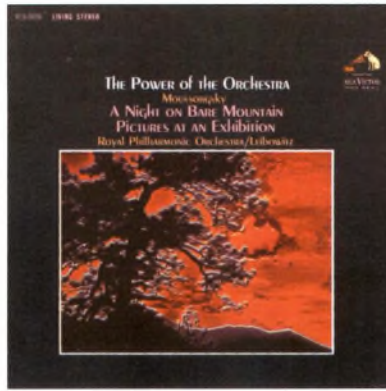
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[www.pentatonemusic.com](http://www.pentatonemusic.com)

RECORDING



MUSIC



**The Power of the Orchestra: Moussorgsky: A Night on Bare Mountain; Pictures at an Exhibition**

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Rene Leibowitz.

Originally Engineered and Produced by Kenneth Wilkinson and Charles Gerhardt. Hybrid Stereo SACD reissued by Analogue Productions CAPC 2659 SA

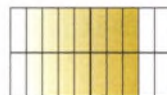


Way back when I was collecting my RCA Living Stereo catalogue, I came across two records, *The Power of the Organ* and *The Power of the Orchestra*. Originally packaged and released together in 1962, these recordings were to be the *ne plus ultra* of recorded sound quality. *The Power of the Orchestra* was always something you could count on to clean the cobwebs from your brain. It's an excellent performance and the remastering engineers have done an admirable job in refreshing this in modern day sound. Leibowitz alone is worth the price of admission. I think the Royal Philharmonic does quite an admirable job in its performance of *Pictures* and while given top quality sound, I still am partial to the Reiner performance after all these years. This SACD has also been released on 4-45rpm records for those whose predilection runs toward vinyl. I heartily recommend this disc. **RSF**

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RECORDING



MUSIC



**Tchaikovsky: 1812 Overture, "Moscow" Cantata, Slavonic March, Festival Coronation March, Festival Overture on the Danish National Anthem.**

Mariinsky Orchestra, soloists and chorus conducted by Valery Gergiev. Mariinsky Label MAR0503



Gergiev has to be one of the busiest conductors around and this disc will certainly open up your mind (and your ears) as to why he's so popular. The 1812 offered here has the prerequisite cannon fodder (as you could expect from the jacket) and yet these performances remind me what I loved about them in the first place. The playing by the Mariinsky is of Reference quality and the sound given us by the engineers is second to none. Now this is a disc I could impress my friends with. The "Moscow" Cantata offers an exceptional performance with Lyubov Sokolava, mezzo-soprano and Alexey Markov, baritone, whose wonderful voices shine through this work and make it truly special. The great Slavonic March takes on new life with and is truly a rousing composition. If you are looking to refresh your interest in some great Tchaikovsky, performed with a World Class Orchestra, Conductor and Soloists, look no further. **RSF**

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RECORDING



MUSIC



**Eddie Boyd with Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac**

**7936 South Rhodes**  
Blue Horizon/Pure Pleasure  
7-63202



Chicago Bluesman Eddie Boyd paid his dues recording singles for RCA, JOB, Parrott and Chess, racking up a number of classics recorded by many better know later bluesmen. In 1965, Boyd found his real home and moved to Belgium and eventually Finland, where he thrived but never became a superstar.

Perhaps his best recording is this Blue Horizon release from 1968 recorded at the CBS Studios in London. Recorded in stereo, but released by Blue Horizon only in mono, this is the first stereo release. Boyd's vocals and piano work team with Peter Green on guitar, John McVie on bass and Mick Fleetwood on drums. The original sold in tiny numbers and has become a collector's item.

A CD issue is long out of print, but an economy LP version is still available. It is likely to be a pale imitation of this fine mastering job by Ray Staff at Air Mastering in London, pressed on immaculate Pallas vinyl. Bravo to Tony Hickmott at Pure Pleasure continuing to take a chance on obscure titles worthy of reissue. This is a great sounding reissue of a worthy blues document. **RP**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**Camel**  
**Music Inspired By The Snow Goose**

2 disc CD set  
Decca/Universal  
531 4614



The 1970s was simultaneously the best and worst decade for progressive music. Best because of the open-minded spirit; worst due to the fashion. Just one peek into Decca's handsome fold-out reissue of Camel's *The Snow Goose* will drive this home. But don't let the visuals put you off... this is a gem of an album. Sorry, concept album.

Paul Gallico's 1941 novel *The Snow Goose*, a tale of friendship between a reclusive artist and a young girl – with support from the titular goose – does not sound like experimental rock album material. Yet Messrs. Latimer, Ferguson, Bardens and Ward were able to craft a tasteful, supremely melodic and ultimately haunting record from its subject.

It also sounds superb. Unusually for a mid-Seventies Prog album, distortion is kept at bay and there is a very warm and open sound. Once again, The Audio Archiving Company have delivered a remaster that just get things right – there's none of the limiting that robs 'vintage' recordings of their character. The remaster is a great starting point for anyone new to this much-loved band. **RC**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**Frank Sinatra**

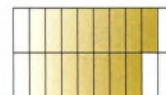
**Live In Paris**  
Reprise/Mobile Fidelity  
MFSL 2-312



This 1962 live recording was first released in the 1990s on CD only. Here, Sinatra is backed by sextet of mostly session musicians. *Sinatra At the Sands* is the obvious comparison, but Frank's performance at the Sands never quite works and the corny jokes are intrusive. Perhaps the French setting kept Sinatra more in check, or maybe he was on his best behaviour after being snubbed by JFK because of his hoodlum friends, but Frank keeps the off-key remarks to a minimum and turns in some excellent renditions of 25 tunes of the usual mix of Cole Porter, Johnny Mercer and Hart and Rogers – in other words, it's The Chairman of the Board's greatest hits.

What sets this especially apart is a spectacular performance of 'Night and Day', easily the equal of any other recording of that tune by Sinatra. Like *Sinatra At The Sands*, this set offers superior sound. The CD version was quite nice and it clearly deserved the lavish Mobile Fidelity treatment that raises it to another level altogether. This is the first vinyl release for the Paris performance. The half-speed mastering work of Rob LoVerde continues the label's solid record of fine work. **RP**

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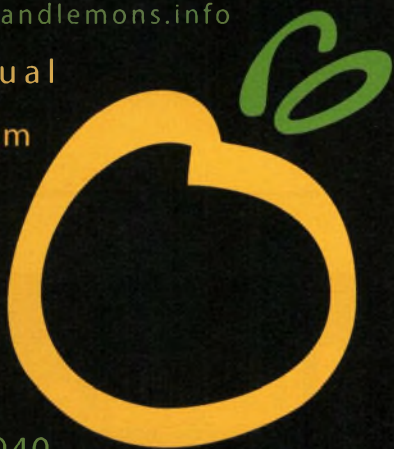
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# Big Star – Radio City

# every home should have one

by Alan Sircom

**WITH ALL THE HYPE AND HOO-HAH ABOUT THE BEATLES AND KRAFTWERK REMASTERS**, it's easy to overlook two reissues from one of the most important, influential and little known acts of the 1970s – Big Star. The Tennessee proto-punk, power pop pioneers first album – *#1 Record* – and its follow-up *Radio City* have both been reissued and remastered this year to great acclaim among the cognoscenti.

The band was relatively short-lived first time round. In 1971, Alex Chilton (absurdly young lead singer of the 1960s blue-eyed soul group The Box Tops) teamed up with guitarist Chris Bell, drummer Jody Stephens and bassist Andy Hummel to create a post-British Invasion act full of rich harmonies and jangly guitars. By 1974, it was all over (although two of the original band members reformed Big Star in 1993 and are still touring to this day). There were just three, commercially unexceptional albums released in that early period, of which *#1 Record* is the most complete.

But it's that second album – *Radio City* – that is the most culturally significant. *#1 Record* was perfect pop of its time, sounding like The Byrds meet Badfinger, but dismal sales (thanks in part to the band signing to the then-imploding Stax records) had created significant rifts in the line-up. Chris Bell had left after a fist-fight with Hummel, left, returned, had another fight (this time with Ardent studios founder John Fry) and left again, breaking the band apart. And all of this comes across in the music, which is at once more edgy and yet also distinctly pop-oriented. Having taken over Stax distribution, Columbia records had no interest in Big Star, and *Radio City* – distributed by the studio under the Ardent Records label – sold less than 20,000 copies on its original release.

Even with the untidy third album (*Thira/Sister Lovers*) in tow, Big Star was destined for the Remainder Bin of life... but something happened. In the 1980s, bands like REM and The Replacements began to describe the people that most influenced them in their early years, and Big Star was consistently praised. The Replacements even recorded a song called 'Alex Chilton'.

Today, it's not hard to see why *Radio City* was so important. Tracks like 'Back of a Car' and 'September Gurls' and could have been recorded by anyone from Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers to Teenage Fanclub, Matthew Sweet, Wilco and even late period Yo La Tengo. The combination of jangly guitars, a pure yet faltering voice and lyrics that presuppose a darkness not normally found in pop records is a perfect template for the last 30 years of indie rock. Even Big Star's

use of a William Eggleston photo for the cover set a trend followed by Green on Red, Primal Scream, Chuck Prophet, Jimmy Eat World, Silver Jews and Joanna Newsom.

Until recently, both Big Star albums were sold on the same CD, but the remastering process left much to be desired. The previous, early 1990s masters consequently changed hands for not-inconsiderable sums in some circles. The new Ardent/Stax remasters help restore Big Star's reputation and include previously unreleased single versions of 'In the Street' (*#1 Record*) and 'Oh My Soul' (*Radio City*). These are not audiophile recordings (both have a raw charm that suggests good audio engineering was not paramount in the process), but you can hear the lyrics now and the sound is not just band soup. If you want to trace the history of indie music, *Radio City* is the perfect place to start. +

## BIG STAR – RADIO CITY



Label – Ardent Records

Producer John Fry and Big Star

Recorded 1973; Released 1974

### Track Listing:

|                  |                         |
|------------------|-------------------------|
| O My Soul        | She's a Mover           |
| Life Is White    | September Gurls         |
| Way Out West     | Morpha Too              |
| What's Going Ahn | I'm in Love with a Girl |
| You Get What You |                         |
| Deserve          | Bonus Track             |
| Mod Lang         | (2009 edition)          |
| Back of a Car    | O My Soul               |
| Daisy Glaze      | (single mix)            |



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