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**Sonus Faber Liuto Monitor – BBC Music** (September 2009)

*"There is a graceful musicality about this speaker that marks it out as special"*

**Sonus Faber Liuto Monitor – Hi-Fi Choice** (August 2009)

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## The Toy collection

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It's easy to get caught up in the gloom and doom of the time. Winter blues, earthquakes, unexpected snowfalls, economic nastiness and music charts dominated by glorified karaoke acts and their high-trousered Svengali... it's enough to drag anyone down. But not everyone; for, despite the tales of woe, some companies are actually laying down roots for the future.

'Green shoots of recovery' is a parliamentary cliché, but the first such shoots (try saying that after 15 tequilas) can be seen in the audio industry. Custom Electronic Design of Egham in Surrey is that rare thing... a high-end audio and home cinema studio and custom installer that opened with a flourish at the beginning of 2010. And the regular front-of-the-year CES show was more successful than anyone hoped. And we too have something to shout about – in line with the growth of our business, we are moving to larger premises soon.

It's worth being pragmatic about this. This does not mean the whole world is suddenly waking up to hi-fi once more and for every one good step forward, the audio world seems intent on taking one half step back and one step sideways. But, these small positive signs show that some people are not willing to let audio go gentle into that good night. And hopefully these are not isolated incidents, but the start of people reengaging with the passion and the excitement of hearing music played properly once again.

A lot of that will come down to you, dear reader. It's time to stop being an audio apologist and start being an audio evangelist. We tend to underplay just how remarkably important music is to people and forget just how much of a life-changing thing hearing music played properly can be. So, we need to start telling people – when did you last invite

someone over to listen to some music? Next time you invite friends round, don't tell them to bring a bottle... bring a disc, and a bottle. You'd be surprised at how many people have remarkable audio systems and never play them to anyone apart from other audiophiles.

Just remember not to be a hi-fi bore; you may want to know who made the triodes in your phono stage, but you can guarantee your 'muggle' friends will not. At least, not at first.

It's a call to (tone)arms, because we, the audiophiles need to remind people that there's more to music. Because if we don't, no-one else will.

Finally, a correction: In a issue 69, we stated that Waterfall's loudspeaker designs do not use safety glass in their construction. This was incorrect; Waterfall uses safety glass in the manufacture of all its loudspeakers. The error was purely mine – I had croissants lodged in both ears when discussing this with the designer. Our apologies to those inconvenienced by this error.

Alan Sircom  
editor@hifiplus.com



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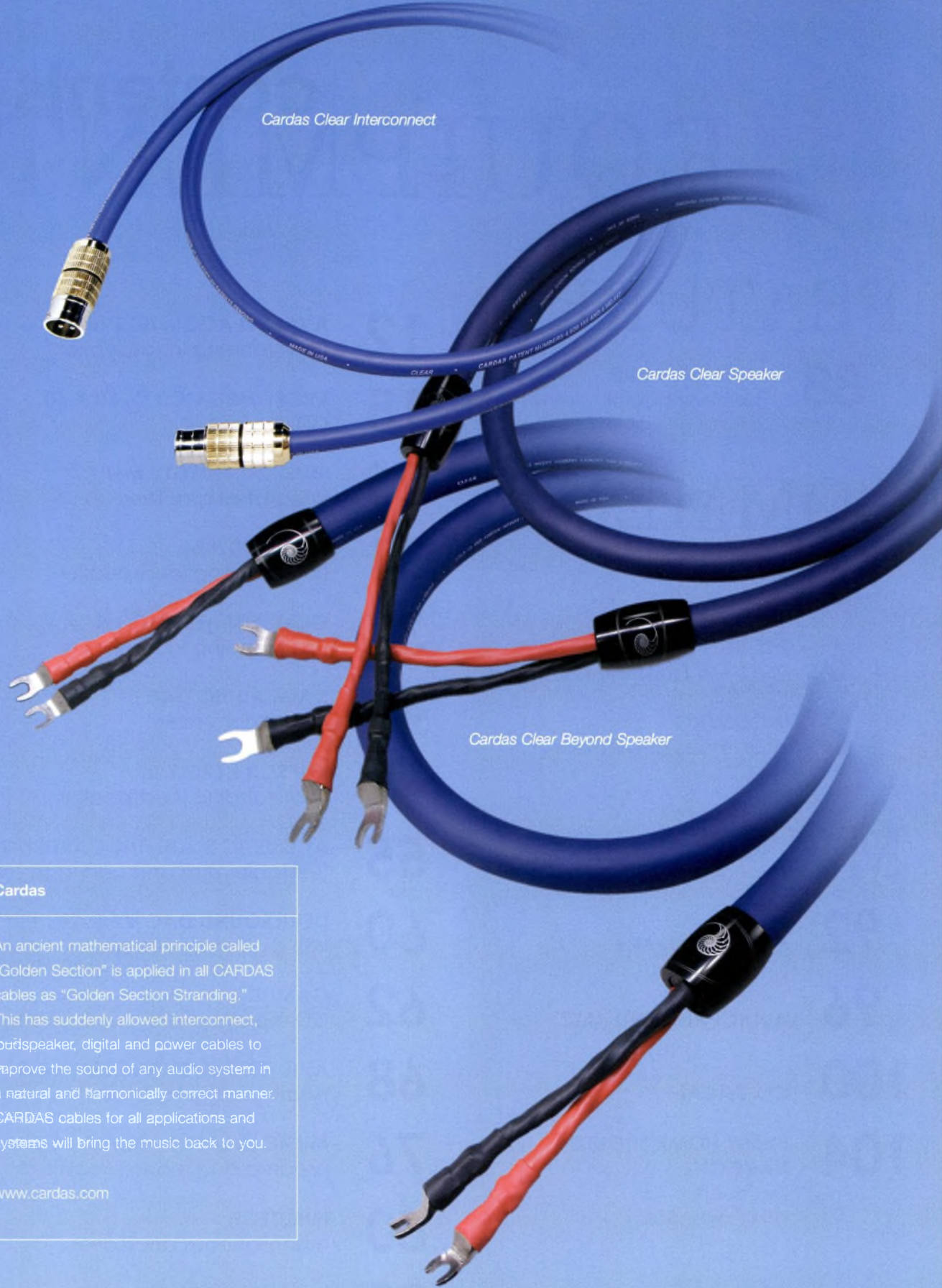
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## Back to Basics II – the test systems

# music matters

by Alan Sircom

**FOLLOWING ON FROM LAST ISSUE'S INTRODUCTION,** it's time to introduce some of the products we are going to use as the foundation stones for my investigation into the use and significance of ancillaries – cables, tables, power conditioners and the like. Last time, I asked whether I should choose just the one system or a 'good, better, best' approach to cover everything from the entry-level to the high-end? I wasn't sure and there was no consensus among readers, but in the end I decided upon two systems.

The first is a distinctly budget combination, comprising the excellent Cambridge Audio Azur 650C CD player and matching 650A integrated amplifier. These play into a pair of KEF iQ10 standmount loudspeakers. At full retail, but excluding any extras, this system costs £1,000, although you can probably buy it for somewhere closer to £875-£900. This system is a good example of typical entry-level components in 2010; this can tip over into brightness and the bass is restricted by the size of the main driver and the cabinet, but is both good for the money and ideal for small rooms. In short, you can do a lot worse and spend a lot more.

*“Buy yourself a notebook and jot down the music you listen to, when you listen and how long each listening session lasts.”*

Our second system is more geared to the upgrader, or the person with more money to spend and probably a bigger room to spend it in. It comprises a Lyngdorf CD-1 CD player, feeding into a Sugden A21se integrated amplifier and then to a pair of ProAc Response D Two standmount loudspeakers. This represents a good, typical middle ground system of the kind that's especially popular here in the UK. It costs close to £6,000, without the 'extras pack'. There's some enlightened self-interest here; I know the Sugden/ProAc sound well, having used variations on the theme for many years and I've had good results with the Lyngdorf into the same. In addition, I figure if I am to spend a year with a set of products, stripping them of all the extras and the luxuries, I may as well like the basic sound of the system.

Why no high-end superstars? I felt that adding a third set of variables into this mix could cause more confusion instead of clarify matters. Also, if we notice the effects of something on both the budget and mid-price system, it stands to reason

that it would also apply at the top end of things. Nevertheless, once the groundwork is done at these two performance levels, my intention is to introduce a high-end system to confirm (or refute) the notion that what applies at these levels, applies throughout. But that's a long way away.

Before that, we have two systems, divested of anything 'superfluous'... no special interconnects or loudspeaker cables, no exotic power cords or conditioners, no super tables, dedicated speaker stands or supplementary spikes, rods, cones or air bags. Nothing. Nada. Just the basic 'kit', plonked down haphazardly.

So, how do both systems sound? Even in denuded form, both are enjoyable and musically satisfying. Curiously though, the bigger system seems to lack more bass than the smaller one in this setting.

Now it's your turn. Buy yourself a notebook and jot down the music you listen to, when you listen and how long each listening session lasts. Do this every time you listen to music for the next couple of weeks (it's a good habit, anyway). Then remove all the custom ancillaries, replace them with DIY or generic, low-cost ones and live with the result for a week or two. Keep taking notes.

Now compare. How does the music make you feel before and after the change? Do you find yourself playing more music, or less? Have your musical tastes changed since the changes? What about your willingness to experiment with new music? Are you listening to more – or less – recordings in a single session, do those sessions occur at different times and have the number of sessions in an average week changed? As ever, let me know how you get on by emailing me at [editor@hifiplus.com](mailto:editor@hifiplus.com)

Next time: testing the tests. +

\* I did make one small concession. The amplifiers – especially the Sugden – run warm and are ventilated through the chassis. If you use this on a carpeted floor, you run the risk of blocking off the lower vents, so both amps took their turn resting on a piece of MDF, which is hardly the height of interior design, but got the job done.

# Is there more than ‘trophy’ hi-fi? the view from the other side

by the Hi-Fi Heretic

**FOR ONCE, I'M NOT ABOUT TO LAY INTO** some aspect of hi-fi mythology. Set that aside for the moment. Perhaps what's more important is right now is the unstoppable rise of the trophy product. This scares me, because it makes the audio business appear to only pander to a rich elite, who seem to buy audio for its status, rather than its audio quality.

Trophy products are the high and mighty of audio. The eight-footer tower speakers with curves like Gina Lollobrigida poured over a Birdcage Maserati (I'm showing my age now), finished in the colours of the flag of your dictatorship. Piano black and gold or Perspex and chrome electronic monstrosities hooked up with cables that wouldn't look out of place around the neck of a gangsta rapper. Somewhere down the line, we moved from the pursuit of quality sound (an overstated exercise, but a laudable one) to suppliers of bling to the world's oligarchs.

When I started along the high-end audio trail, precious few people could afford the price of admission to the club. But it was just within the reach of mortal man. A Krell KSA50 was a lot of money back in the 1980s, beyond the budget for an engineer with a young family in fact, but that hard to reach expense made it an aspiration, not an impossibility. OK, there were always the very occasional product that cost more than a house – the Infinity IRS Beta was a prime example – but for most of the best of hi-fi, you'd pay out the equivalent of a few months salary and get a bloody good system.

*“The products you aspire to are not available for the equivalent of a few months salary anymore; they cost second mortgage money.”*

What's happened now is an escalation in the typical system cost that is wholly unsustainable, in my opinion. There's no sense of a continuum anymore; budget and mid-priced equipment is readily available (but hardly discussed these days) and it's still possible to scratch the surface of high-end, but the prices soon rocket. What happens when the guy who spent £5,000-£10,000 building up a perfectly decent system wants to upgrade? Suddenly, he's faced with huge jumps in price. The products you aspire to are not available for the equivalent of a few months salary anymore; in the days when you could get second mortgages, they cost second mortgage money.

It's not all bad news. These top-end products do provide a trickle-down service for us mere mortals, just like the trillions of dollars spent on the Apollo moon shots trickled down to pens that write underwater and Teflon. I'm sure that the next

generation of great affordable loudspeakers are going to feature elements first seen in today's gargantuan loudspeakers that cost as much as a house. But do we need to fixate on these products at the expense of the ones real people can actually buy?

I'm reliably informed part of the reason for the polarisation in the audio world is down to buyers; there are those who buy budget equipment and those who buy high-end equipment and nothing in between. This may be so, but it doesn't explain why suddenly the high-end has gone from the carriage trade to the bullet-proofed limousine trade in the last few years. Did every audiophile suddenly win the lottery?

People will always drool over the true top end, even in the certain knowledge that they will never own such luxury. There's nothing wrong with that; it happens regardless of what luxury market people are excited by – I can't imagine a time where there aren't people with faces pressed up against the jeweler's window staring at the diamonds and the Rolexes. Problem is, unless there's something in between a Timex watch and a solid gold Rolex, those who aspire to wearing something better will struggle to keep the faith while they are saving and saving and saving for the best possible product. Eventually if all that's left is Timex and Rolex, even Rolex goes away, because the jump is so great people start aspiring to more attainable goals.

This is one of the big problems that are destroying interest in good sound right now. “If it ain't broke, don't fix it,” goes the maxim. Well, it's time to fix audio. We need to break the obsession with the trophy products and need to make products that people might be interested in owning today and aspiring to tomorrow. Some companies are doing this... but not enough. +



[ sometimes ]  
technology meets art...



We're knocked out by the response to the call for questions about our little survey. This is just a cross-section of the responses. But please, keep 'em coming, to [editor@hifiplus.com](mailto:editor@hifiplus.com)

# incoming

May I offer you my congratulations on your proposal to 'test the tests' and investigate how much ancillary items actually affect musical reproduction. It will be interesting to see whether we are able to marvel at the Emperor's finery without fear of mockery and not, perchance, get a glimpse of his stained and frayed Y-fronts.

I would suspect that like the majority of your readers (i.e. fully paid up members of the Church of the Latter Day Tweakologists) I am hoping it is the former. That way, I can look my children in the eyes as they cry in hunger and say, "Be quiet my darlings, for daddy is trying to determine the level of inky blackness that has now enveloped his system," for instead of shopping for food, I spent the money on the little black box plugged into the socket next to the (now) empty fridge.

What I would really like to see is how these small objects of desire perform in a system like mine. A real world system, sited in a shared living room with assorted daughters (including boyfriends), sons, cats, a dog, assorted toys, Nintendo's and all the other detritus of modern life. How about setting up a form of control and sending out some of these items to see how they perform in the provinces? Let them be judged by some of your readers ears.

**Guy Powell**

I love the idea that you are proposing. Yes, it is worth the effort. Yes, stick to one system. Use a mid-priced system. (Actually it should be sufficient to use an entry-level system, but a mid-priced system will shake off some of the gripers out there.) Bravo! I am looking forward to each *Music Matters* column during 2010!!!

**Jon P Beck  
Upstate NY**

I am writing to applaud your intention to test cables, supports, etc., using the same CD player, electronics, and speakers. I believe that what you will find is that everything affects the sound, sometimes in a musically meaningful way, most times, not. But, that is only speculation.

Regarding the choice of equipment, I recommend something between mid-price and high-end because most of us subscribers are probably beyond the entry level. Further, I think there is virtue in having all the equipment designed and manufactured by the same company, since this should do away with electrical mismatches, obvious and otherwise.

Have fun!

**Leroy B. Schwarz**

Having read your proposed game plan for the 'back to basics' it sounds a good plan, but what system to use, entry level, mid-price or high-end, this is a conundrum; using an entry level system, changing interconnect and speaker cables, even mains cables from the basic 'wicks' would show various improvements I am sure, however the entry level system would eventually become the limiting factor in demonstrating any improvements. Objectively and I believe subjectively too.

Conversely, a high-end well chosen and well balanced system will always provide a good performance, and most likely these improvements would be more subjective than objective.

However, the mid-price system would be the choice I would go for, as it would theoretically have a greater scope for and therefore performance for demonstrating improvements with various cables, stands and tweaks.

I did find some thirty years ago, changing the mains cables to 12 AWG on my then Sansui AU 999 integrated amplifier and later my then B&O 4000 receiver brought noticeable improvements in the bass and midrange regions, though this improvement was confirmed by hi-fi friends at the time, it was subjective – as well as nullifying their respective warranties!

I consider myself to be a serious audiophile, though the other half would prefer the word 'fanatic', I still use reel to reel, cassette and of course vinyl – which I am glad to see is enjoying something of a considerable renaissance, tuner wise, an MD 109, nothing to touch it!.

I have read the magazine from launch, and am sure I shall continue to read and enjoy the many articles and reviews for very many years to come – I like the new layout too, but being an old dinosaur am not too sure of computer audio though.

**John Ellis**

I've been inspired to respond after reading your *Music Matters* column in issue 70. Firstly, I should begin by saying I don't normally buy this publication, being 31 with a small family and big mortgage means my love for hi-fi far out weighs my budget and I was perhaps under the misconception that *Hi-Fi+* only reviewed – and discussed – issues relating to serious high end equipment. (The heart of my system is an Alchemist Forseti amplifier and Pink Triangle Export record player, which are as high end as I'll be getting for some time. But the bug bit nearly twenty years ago and it's been a passion ever since.) Therefore to read the beginnings of such an invigorating debate that applies to all levels is refreshing and I'll be following with interest.

Anyhow, down to business. I suppose my first point would be that if you are simply trying to discover if interconnects, equipment stands and mains leads make a difference, at a basic level I'd suggest that the answer will be 'yes'. But that's missing the point. What I'd like to see is how much? Is it proportional to cost? Does one generically produce more benefits than another and should act as a starting point (ie £30 on an interconnect will bring proportionally greater improvements than £300 on a mains cable).

Secondly, will you also be testing fundamental differences in approach? For example at a recent listening night I heard a high-end (Consonance) CD player placed on a purpose made 18mm piece of marine ply (and Sorbothane feet) which seemed to improve the sound far more than both the floor and the expensive, dedicated hi-fi rack it was previously cited on. I was surprised to say the least. I suppose what I'm hoping for is some basic principals and parameters to emerge that either justify or cut through the foo.

Lastly – and I've already touched on this – will this review be limited to 'products', or will it include ideas and concepts around the periphery including home made solutions (particularly around equipment and speaker supports). As regarding the latter, Wickes also sell speaker stand kits in the form of large diameter hollow tubing, threaded rod sharp sand and MDF (I make them to order)!

**Andrew Simpson**

Back to basics at last. Yes it will definitely make a difference to do some independent research and see if power cables, digital wires, stands, cables touching each other, etc, etc can improve sound/music. It has divided audio lovers for many decades, for far too long now. Please:

- one step at the time, first focus: is there any audible difference between £1 and £10,000 equipment. This alone would already be a giant leap.
- test the theory (measuring output data and music) and practice (human hearing)
- invite a researcher/mathematics expert who can make an official result
- randomly swap the piece/cable, let listener point out the one he/she prefers each swap
- make it a true blind test, listener can't see the equipment used
- no communication between listener and person who does the swapping (ie behind curtain)

- listeners one by one (prevent influencing each other)
- make at least two categories of listeners (ie: audiophiles and non-audiophiles, some women would be nice. I wouldn't be surprised when they have a better hearing)
- invite a psychologist (ie behind mirror)

**Fred Mulder**

I think your idea is absolutely fantastic! I very much like your idea of using a high-end, mid-priced, and entry-level audio system. This allows your testing to demonstrate if cables and resonance control are relevant at any or all of these levels. Perhaps using the credibility of *Hi-Fi Plus* your articles will reduce the amount of acrimony between those that believe cables and resonance control do matter and those that do not.

Having attended one of Roy Gregory's "System Setup and Tuning" seminars at 2008 RMAF, I did hear significant differences between the same equipment as cabling and resonance control was improved. But I believe RG also used power conditioning. It will be very interesting to read whether you come to the same conclusions.

**Leonard White  
Palm City, FL**

Great idea!

I have been reading *Hi-Fi Plus* for about 4-5 years now but can never afford any of the electronic stuff as it is too expensive. I did however stretch to a Nordost mains cable about 5 years ago feeding a Russ Andrews Silencer Block. Since then, I have bought decent mains cable for my kit (Denon DVD 2910/Rega 3/Cambridge 740C & A/crap Sony speakers).

As such, I would be a lot more interested in what cables can do for a low end system!

I look forward to reading future issues re this.

**Mark Vaughan ▶**

► I feel your proposal is laudable. It does not take much involvement with Hi-fi equipment and resellers to realise that whatever the investment in hardware the same again and more can be spent on passing electricity and signals along wires.

I applaud the concept of a standard reference against which all changes, often that is all the differences are, can be measured. My belief is you will find many more changes than improvements.

I would steer clear of polarities. Few of us would spend tens of thousands on an individual item even if funds permitted. By the same token those who are likely to be reading your reviews with interest will have moved on from basic equipment. My choice would naturally have you using all of my equipment and gradually pointing me in the next direction. Reality suggests the choice of equipment likely to be found reasonably readily across the country and beyond. To be avoided at all costs would be items from small businesses where research budgets could be meagre and costs out of line through small production runs.

Thus you find yourself arguably in the territory of Cyrus et al. The key question has to be whether the chosen combination is actually capable of revealing any changes other than those produced with the proverbial sledgehammer.

Finally good luck because several people have attempted this before but have always left questions along the lines of “but what if?” unanswered and serving to reduce the article’s credibility.

**David Johnson**

While I admire the goal of determining if cables, etc. really matter. I think your approach is deeply flawed. Every 4th page of *Hi-Fi Plus* has an ad for one of the very products you propose evaluating. And, should you determine say interconnects do not make any difference compared to a “give away” cable, you would undermine a very significant source of revenue to your magazine. Do you honestly expect most of your readers to believe you can provide an unbiased review of such things? It’s almost laughable.

In addition, the only fair way to conduct such an evaluation is to remove subject bias via a properly executed double-blind listening test. So even if you did not mind losing lots of ad revenue, your subjective bias will still cloud the results if it is not a proper blind test. It is human nature to expect a cable costing 50 times as much to sound better.

I dare you to prove me wrong and publish you can hear no difference between a low-end cable and a high-end one. But I strongly believe that will never happen. What you’re proposing has been done many times over, but the high-end audio industry cannot be bothered by the truth. They have far too large of an investment in fiction, hype and myth. And magazines like *Hi-Fi Plus* make too much money furthering the fiction to change the status quo.

**Michael Nelson**

Re your ‘Back to Basics’ editorial in issue no 70, you set your readers some homework and asked us to let you know what we thought of your plan. My comments below for your consideration:

I think it’s a good idea. I believe there are benefits to be had in all the areas you are intending to evaluate (power cords, power conditioners, cabling and equipment racks). However, there must be a point where the law of diminishing returns kicks in, as some of the items I suspect you’ll be testing will cost an arm and a leg and out of reach of most mortals. So Value

For Money must be your watch phrase during these tests. Not everyone can afford huge sums of money on what could be regarded as ancillaries, albeit essential ones. These have to be kept in proportion to the components people can afford and own.

Alongside the systems I’ve acquired over the years, I have purchased several equipment racks, power cords, interconnects and speaker cables from all sorts of manufacturers and currently have a bit of a hotch potch of a “wiring loom”. I’ve always thought that using the same cables throughout would prove beneficial, but have never managed to achieve that state, so your tests on this point will be of great interest to me. Strangely I have only ever bought one power conditioner, which may indicate my scepticism about such items, or just a lack of funds? So for me, I hope your tests/evaluations will help me focus on extracting the best from my system.

To keep it simple, I think you should stick to CD player, amplifier and speakers for all systems. I think you need to undertake your tests using systems at high end, mid price or entry level price points. The prices of items you test should be commensurate with the system price points. There is no point in testing a £3k power cord in a £2k entry level system, as it is unlikely to make it sound like a £5k system.

The next question I suppose is what price is a mid price and entry level system. I think most of us know what a high end system would cost! May I suggest that your entry level system is priced somewhere between £1k to £2k and the mid price system somewhere between £5k and £10k depending on whether you intend to include turntables in the test, in which case the price points could be uplifted. Turntables are more fickle and susceptible to what they are stood on, so keep it simple. But I suspect there are a lot of turntables out there.

**Bryan Parsons**

I sincerely welcome your plan to test some of the basics. A wonderful idea and be sure that we as your devoted readers will stay with you. I wanted to pull your attention to two things, which might be interesting on your way doing so.

1. The German magazine "Studio Magazin", being a pro audio magazine started a similar project in 2007 which went on until March 2008.

They have published their results here:

<http://www.studio-presse.de/fileadmin/freizone/Kabeltest%20komplett.pdf>

Maybe you have a German speaking colleagues to translate you the most important parts? Keep in mind it was really not about hi-fi but about studio cables.

2. I was very much pleased to read this:

"Along the way, this should be a chance to experiment and test the tests, to see if there have been any new developments (or even potential developments) in audio testing that need to be evaluated and rated."

With all this debates about blind testing, I – being myself a psychologist – often wondered, if we actually missed something by using this technique so blindly. I found a while ago an interesting hint in an article called "God lives in the nuances". In this article the author quotes from a PhD work of another psychologist Jürgen Ackermann. What I really found amazing was that he concentrated on the emotional reaction the music was creating via different audio setups versus what the respondents thought what would be "good" sound. Besides questionnaire he also used observation methods to learn more what impact systems made. You can read more about this study her:

<http://www.stereophile.com/features/203/index2.html>

One of his main findings in my view was, that the emotional reaction often can be different than what you believe is good sound. So you might be emotional touched by a sound system (as you sung a long and you mood increased as shown by pre post questions in a questionnaire) but tell the interviewer that the system sounded "too ..." whatever. While a system you would call "great sounding" would actually bring you in a very bad mood.

These kind of findings goes very good along with the results of the Nobel price winner Daniel Kahneman, which have proven that we have two different brain systems. One we could call the Pilot and the other the Autopilot, one system being more explicit and one more implicit. When we talk with people we tend to get answers on the explicit level, so the emotional part is very often left out. I was able to track Mr. Ackermann down and telephoned with him about his study. Unfortunately he started working and never found time finishing his PHD. But maybe you could consider this aspect in your work: watching less for hi-fi terms like soundstage, clarity etc. and more for the emotional impact of music.

**Reiner Grootenhuis**

PS: If something sounds awkward in this email it might be due to my English skills, since I am German native.

I think your initial idea for reducing complexity when testing and evaluating hi-fi gear is most purposeful. But I think there should be an easier way in realizing the idea.

If you accept the idea of hi-fi as "high fidelity" reproduction of recordings and if you take the example of the "digital world" with its "lossless data conversion" and "exact audio copying" techniques why do you not simply make an analysis of the input and output signals both in the frequency and phase/time domain. Or, invert the sound of the test product compared to the reference, and note any audible deviations. Every deviation means: sound degradation, reduced "fidelity".

I think today's powerful computer software (with Fourier analysis, MLISSA and more advanced measuring techniques) is available to make these kind of comparisons. However, concerning loudspeaker output signal the problem becomes more complex due to the room interactions. The solution simply is to define standard test signals and standardized listening conditions.

This will also allow to better judge the psychoacoustic effects described in the article about 'Acoustic System Resonators' by Chris Thomas in your last issue or the influence of cables and vibration damping devices.

I think psychoacoustic science knows very well how our ear-brain-computer works and how sensible this system is to changes in basic parameters as ITD and ILD (see: [www.ambiophonics.org](http://www.ambiophonics.org) <http://www.ambiophonics.org>)

I cannot see any other approach that is not free from individual, subjective assessment effects.

**Michael Graw, Luebeck**

I think this is a great idea, I'm a bit of a skeptic (especially mains leads and supports). Yes, stick with the one system. Use a mid-price system; one most of use can afford.

**Dave Dinenage**

In response to your "back to basics" suggestion in *Music Matters*, I think this is an excellent idea. In fact, now that you've mentioned it, I shall complain bitterly if you don't go ahead with it!

One of the strengths of this magazine is that it often extends our horizons and challenges our preconceptions. So it will be interesting to take stock of the relative merits of cables, power conditioners, etc and view the lot through a controlled perspective.

I think your start point should be simple single system – best not to change too many variables at once. Later, you could add a second, higher level, system to give an extra layer of comparison, as long as the objectives don't get lost in all the variables.

**Richard Bafford**



# EQUIPMENT REVIEW

## The Avalon Time Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

**A**valon's has long held a reputation for delivering astonishingly low levels of distortion with commensurate neutrality, but the emergence of the flagship Isis (and the budget NP 2.0) signaled a new mastery of the time domain. The Isis was a stunning achievement, but it was simply too big or too expensive for many UK homes. The new Time, on the other hand, fits right in...

The Time inhabits a cabinet that is a few inches taller but otherwise virtually identical to the company's various Eidolon models. But remove that grille and you'll reveal yet another familiar view, a large diameter diamond tweeter being paired with a 120mm ceramic bowl midrange driver and a pair of the 275mm Nomex/Kevlar bass units, although in this case it's a case of hybrid DNA, the 25mm concave tweeter and twin bass driver configuration being drawn from the Isis, while the bass and mid drivers themselves come from the Eidolon Diamond. The bass drivers are reflex loaded by a downward firing port that is enclosed by the U-shaped plinth with its rear-facing opening – again, an Avalon trademark. The whole configuration that hints at the Time's dynamic potential and bandwidth.

The Time was happy with anything from a good 100 Watts up. Amps used for the review included the Gamut M250i monos, the Bernings and even the Hovland RADIA, whose modest rated output underlined the fact that in this instance it is subtlety and quality that count. Audiofreaks supplied Cardas Clear interconnects and Clear Beyond speaker cables along with the Times and these proved a good match, delivering a coherent and holistic sound, big on acoustic space and presence.

The alacrity with which the Time tells you all about early reflections and asymmetries in the listening room (and its acoustics), coupled to its bass power and resulting ability to excite a room's low frequency resonances, make this a speaker that's easy to set up (in the sense that you clearly hear the benefit – or otherwise – of every shift in position) but also one that will dictate its placement literally to a matter of millimeters, along with most of the things around it.

That set up process is also going to tell you an awful lot about these speakers, simply because it goes straight to the question of low-frequency performance, fluidity and communication – which in turn goes straight to the heart of music itself, everything resting as it does on those lower registers. Yes, the bulk of the usable information is in the mid-band, but it's the bottom end that tells you where it should all

go, when it should get there and whether or not it's right. I've never heard a speaker yet in which that relationship is quite so obviously apparent. Indeed, bigger speakers – like the Isis or Focal Grande EM, that exceed the Time in overall achievement, seem to make this close coupling less obvious; or to put it another way, you can hear that it's not quite right – you just can't necessarily say why. The Time on the other hand, once you start adjusting it, leaves you in doubt at all about both the what and the why of optimum set up. In the process it also demonstrates just what an uncannily natural and evocative performer it can be.

An example: one of my key set up discs is the Analogue Productions re-issue of Duke Ellington and Ray Brown's *This One's For Blanton*. Sparse to the point of asceticism, the upright bass/piano combination is incredibly demanding, both instruments individually presenting any hi-fi system with a stern test, in combination they are ruinously critical. Not only does the system have to deal with the depth, power and independence of the bass, it has to let that instrument breathe, which means dealing with its almost contradictory sense of attack and decay, along with its physical volume and layered harmonics. Then throw in the sheer range and complexity of the piano, the need to reproduce its percussive quality without it becoming harsh or strident and you can begin to see the problem. Add the fact that there's no rhythm section per se, filling in the background and mapping out the steps, that the two instruments operate for so much of the time at opposite ends of the frequency range, and that with so little inherent structure, reproduction of the time domain is absolutely crucial if you are to avoid the whole thing collapsing into meaningless (and frankly, irritating) noise, and this recording's value as an almost instant litmus test for bass alignment, linearity and rhythmic integrity soon becomes apparent.



*‘And so the odyssey began – and along the way, quite an education as to just why this album has proved so invaluable over the years.’*

as small a step as you can manage to finalize things, that’s quite a trip, and each step of the way was marked by progressive changes in the integration and projection of the music and instruments.

From its diminished and detached beginnings, Ray Brown’s bass grew in stature and physical volume. First you heard the body, gradually growing in front of you, then the strings, their length developing as the speaker zeroed in. This isn’t about imaging as such – although that clearly benefits – but the scale and sense of the instrument, the particular and instantly recognizable way it shapes notes and drives energy into the room. Listen to live jazz (or classical music) and you never have any problem hearing what the bass is playing, or the way it’s being played. Listen to jazz on most hi-fi systems and the same instrument is often indistinct and barely audible. Here, the Times deliver the poise and shape of Brown’s intricate lines with effortless clarity. The contrast between pluck and release, the physical difficulty of some of his runs, are beautifully captured and projected, the notes floating clear of the floor as he picks and places them. Meanwhile, Ellington’s piano has fallen into tune. No more cracked upper register or thuddy left hand: as the speakers approach their sweet spot the harmonic complexity and percussive clarity allow Ellington’s delicacy and touch to open like a flower, the precisely placed chords blooming in the body of the instrument, anchored by a new authority and sonority that has come to the instrument.

But the emergence of instrumental character is only a part of the story. The really impressive think is the developing relationship between the instruments – and with the space they occupy. As the positioning locks in, so does the music, the performance drawing you in, the almost telepathic relationship ▶

With the Times, roughly positioned and happily playing away to bed them in, I’d been really rather enjoying the results. But when the time came to go to work and really dial them in I was in for a shock. Sure enough, cueing up track one of the Blanton, the problems with the set up were all too starkly highlighted, Ray Brown’s bass sounding small, wooly and muffled – as well as limp and well off the pace. At the same time, Ellington’s right hand sounded horribly glassy and exposed – a bit like a poorly tuned pub upright. This was definitely not correct! And so the odyssey began – and along the way, quite an education as to just why this album has proved so invaluable over the years.

Painstaking adjustments, fore and aft (with a little sideways thrown in for good measure) and then again with the cones in place, wrought dramatic changes in the musical integrity and sense of performance\*. In comparison, the minimal degree of toe in required to snap the image into focus was simplicity itself. But the educational aspect of the process is all to do with the way the music’s presentation changes and evolves. From that unpromising start, a half-centimeter grid movement quickly established a position that was forward and wider, the speaker clearly telling you when you were moving in the right direction – and when you weren’t. Final placement ended up about 40mm further apart and 60mm further forward than my original speculative positioning – along with considerable care taken ensuring symmetry relative to rear and side walls and the positioning of the first reflection pads. It might not sound like much, but when you are working in 5mm steps to start with, and

\*Just to put this in perspective, the final position on the cones was around 20mm further forward than without – and with this speaker that’s a BIG difference.

▶ between these two master musicians reflected in the way they pass the initiative back and forth. Suddenly you are listening to instruments and people, in space, to what the musicians are doing and saying – their conversation on a note-by-note, phrase-by-phrase basis. The speakers, the driving system – they’ve effectively disappeared, leaving just the music. Yes – it is a small and undemanding recording (at least in terms of absolute dynamics and scale) but the two instruments involved are far from easy to reproduce, placing deeply conflicting leading-edge and timing demands on a loudspeaker, while the stark simplicity exposes any shortcomings in timing or tonality with ruthless efficiency. I’ve heard two speakers do a better job than the Time with this disc: the Isis and the Focal Grande. One costs three times as much and the other needs at least three times the power. And I’m not sure that either gets quite as deeply into the groove as the Time...

It’s all about chemistry, that strange fusion reaction that turns noise into music and musicians into a band. Let’s talk about bass of a different kind and a bit of Elvis – Costello that is, *Live At The El Mocambo* and in his pomp on the *My Aim Is True* tour: Set closer ‘Pump It Up’ depends on the deep, deep, driving patterns played by Pete Thomas’s bass, and even given the space of a slow build up and Elvis toying with the crowd, the propulsive energy in the playing is both present and correct. Even under the combined assault of keyboards, drums and guitar, you never lose track of the track, and the track never loses its sense of purpose and direction. Switch back from this murky live recording to the de luxe Edition re-issue of the album and it’s a case of “Wow!” The comparison tells you just what a great job the speaker did of sorting out the densely packed and dirty bottom-end of the live disc, it also tells you just what an awesomely driven and energetic recording the original is, the re-mastered CD finally capturing the sheer life and intensity of the analogue original. But playing the live disc also reveals two other things about the Time: it has that ability to reach out and include the listener in the soundfield of the recording, making for a much more immersive and involving listening experience. Ohhh... and it likes to play loud. In fact, it positively invites it. Whereas older Avalon models would certainly play loud, it was hard to escape the feeling that they did so with a slight frown of disapproval. The Aspect tore up that particular set of rules – the Time stomps on the shreds; “enthusiastic” barely covers the willingness with which it embraces the more energetic musical offerings... and no – we’re not talking Bach here.

One night – long, long ago – and in a club – far, far away – I saw, heard and felt the power of Steve Earle in overdrive. Recorded for a BBC live session the tape has finally seen a CD release – and playing it on the Times carries me right back to the overheated, sweaty, smoky fug of the Town and Country, effortlessly capturing the excitement, the sticky floor underfoot, of a band (and an audience) that knows it’s on a roll. From Earle’s nasal drawl, rough round the edges from too much abuse and too many loud nights, to the sheer enthusiasm of a band feeding on crowd frenzy, the Avalons put you there – right in the middle of the whole, heaving, hyper event. You see, it’s not just about the bass (although that’s critical to the whole question) but the way the low frequencies are integrated with the rest of the range – and the overall coherence that results.

In this respect it is just like a Symphony Orchestra; it is not enough for all the bass instruments to play at once – that’s just loud. Real impact and drama comes from them all playing at exactly the same moment and just the right moment as defined by the rest of the instruments. That way a massive, monumental work like Shostokovich’s 11th Symphony (from the fabulous new Vasily Petrenko cycle on Naxos) can build tension and drama, contrast



*“It has the ability to reach out and include the listener in the soundfield of the recording, making for a much more immersive and involving experience.”*

light and shade by the measured application of instrumental force, the long, reflective passages of the first movement never meandering but building with wonderful inevitability towards the shattering crescendo. It’s a masterfully controlled and directed performance, with the Times retaining and delivering every last ounce of that musical intent, right up to the sonorous chimes of the cataclysmic finale.

It is this connected quality, the directness with which they present the musical event that makes the Time such a special speaker. The way it delivers musical energy, the immediacy and suddenness of instrumental transients has something of the best horns about it, but coupled to the uncannily even and extended bandwidth, the tonal and spatial honesty that’s always been an Avalon hallmark. It certainly invests the speaker with the ability to excite, but it also opens the palette of intimacy and delicacy too. Back to the Blanton, let’s appreciate the deftness with which Ellington balances and weights his playing to build off of or in support of Brown’s bass. Shawn Colvin’s ‘Shotgun Down The Avalanche’ has all its familiar intimacy and ▶





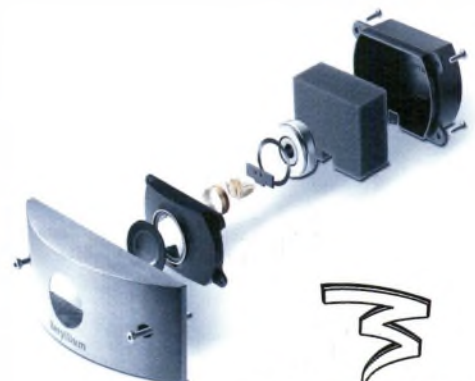
## Electra 1000Be 2 - small details, great effects.

How do you improve a range that has been as successful as the Electra 1000Be? These, after-all are the speakers that brought the benefits of beryllium to the audiophile masses.

With over 30 years of expertise in loudspeaker and drive unit design, Focal have always been aware that attention to detail is paramount, and a fine example of that resolve is here in the new tweeter diaphragm of the 1000Be 2. Only 2 millimetres larger, and artfully re-profiled, this remarkable dome (identical to that used in our flagship Grande Utopia) is a large contributor to the greatly improved performance.

Simply put, you'll hear more music, and less loudspeaker. And for movie fans, the matching centre, subwoofer and surround speakers provide a cinematic revelation - every nuance that the producers intended. Focal Electra 1000Be 2. Experience every emotion.

Available in three standard finishes - *Champagne* (pictured), *Basalt* and *Slate Grey*.



  
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## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Three-way loudspeaker

**Driver Complement:**

1x 25mm concave diamond tweeter

1x 120 ceramic bowl midrange

2x 275mm Kevlar/Nomex bass drivers

**Bandwidth:** 20Hz – 20kHz ±3dB

**Sensitivity:** 89dB

**Impedance:** 4 Ohms

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 30 x 117 x 48cm

**Weight:** 75kg

**Finishes:** Quilted Cherry, Curly Maple and Figured Walnut Optional wood finish (at extra cost): Birdseye Maple, Walnut Cluster Burl, Myrtle Cluster Burl

**Price:** £47, 995/pair (standard finish)

**Manufacturer:** Avalon Acoustics

**URL:** [www.avalonacoustics.com](http://www.avalonacoustics.com)

**Distributed by:** Audiofreaks UK

**URL:** [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)

**Tel:** +44(0)20 8948 4153

▶ “she is here” immediacy, but it also has a more solid, rooted quality than I’m used to, a bigger sound without losing any of that fragile detail and intricacy.

Which sums up the Time’s achievement quite nicely. It manages to present its musical information in the right place and at the right time, irrespective of pitch or power required. This temporal accuracy is no coincidence (it’s not called the Time for nothing) and the result is an almost preternatural quality that makes recordings astonishingly accessible and engaging. This inner balance, built from the heart of the performance outwards, extends across enough of the range to produce remarkably convincing results, almost irrespective of recording quality. They dredge the music, whole and intact, from the murk of the worst discs you own, while the best will be simply breathtaking. The Time can’t match the really big speakers I’ve already mentioned, or a speaker like the GamuT S9, for sheer scale or ultimate loudness, but it does more than enough in this regard that most of us will never feel the lack (either quantitatively or qualitatively). It doesn’t float the massed basses of a well recorded orchestra, or establish the acoustic space quite as well as the Isis, but it gets awfully close and brings its own special qualities to the party instead. It’s easier to accommodate and much easier to drive, which means that more listeners are going to actually realize more of its performance potential out there in the real world. Musically forgiving it also brings the best from partnering equipment. Don’t think that makes it unfussy; you’ll still need stellar equipment to extract all of the performance this speaker is capable of, but the range of options that embraces is now wider than ever before.

Which brings us, finally, to a parting shot. We’ve just enjoyed a purple patch when it comes to advances in speaker performance. Not so much when it comes to technology, you’ll note, which has merely evolved or been refined, with new materials rather than revolutionary new approaches, but more what we do with it. It has resulted in new levels of musical coherence, less

intrusive transducers and greater access to recordings. It has also started to realign the focus of audio attention, away from front-end heavy approaches to a more system-orientated understanding, built back from the speaker. The Avalon Time represents the pinnacle of that progress, embodying the musically communicative sensibilities that have finally, significantly advanced the state of the art in loudspeakers – and doing it in a manageable and deliverable package.

What the Time stands for is more music for more people. Undeniably expensive it may be, but it is still cheap at the price, simply because musical performance like this was almost unattainable at any price before it arrived. By mixing a distinctly real world practicality with superb musical performance, the Time establishes a significant new benchmark for competitors (and customers) to aim for. Of course, some will already be closer than others, but pole position has to rest with all those Eidolon owners out there: you’ve got the system; you’ve got the space; all you need now is the cash. +



# Music Store

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Naim HDX

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Micromega CD10, CD20, and CD30

by Malcolm Steward



**W**hen Micromega relaunched in the UK I immediately telephone Absolute Sounds and requested a review sample of one of the new players. I was pleasantly surprised to be asked if I would prefer to receive all three so that I could write a comparative review of the range instead, detailing the progress as one moved from the least expensive unit up through the ranks. It sounded a fascinating proposition and I readily agreed.

The first player in the new line-up is the £799 CD10, which looks to be outwardly identical – bar a couple of tiny details – to the more expensive CD20 and CD30. All that gives the game away about the identity of any of these players are the small model designations printed on the top of the fascia, which were a very discreet grey on the silver review samples, and the display panel, which briefly flashes up the model number when the player is powered up.

Having learned from past mistakes, Micromega has elected to use mass-produced DVD mechanisms for these players – either the Sony KHM313 or the Sanyo SFH850 device – in the quest for the long-term reliability and consistent performance that rigorous quality control associated with high volume production items promises.

The mechanisms are controlled by the Philips SAA7824 chip and proprietary Micromega code featuring what are described as particularly efficient error correction algorithms specifically designed for audio reproduction.

If you happen to be as impatient as I am with contemporary electronics – i.e. an instantaneous response is just about fast enough to satisfy – one facility that is worth exploring is setting the speed at which the drawer mechanism operates. To effect a change hold the *Play* and *Previous* button while switching the machine on; then select fast, medium or deathly slow by pressing the *Next*, *Mode* or *Standby* buttons; then save your preferred setting by pressing *Disc*. That *Disc* button, if held while a CD is playing, will also extinguish the display if you find these things as distracting as I do. I guess I am old-fashioned but

I found this multi-function button approach rather confusing. I expect a button marked *Disc* simply to permit access to the disc, strangely enough, regardless of how long it is held or how many times it is pushed or what the machine happens to be doing at the time. And a button that controls the display really ought to be labelled *Display* to my way of thinking. I also found it unusual to have to press *Play* to cancel fast forwarding though a track. In truth, though, how many times would the typical user need these secondary functions?

While there is little externally to differentiate the players the internal differences are seemingly minor, too, centring upon the sophistication and configuration of the power supplies and, in the case of the CD30, the DAC Sample Rate Conversion. Only in this player does the AD1853 have its native sampling frequency ramped up to 132.3 kHz and its 16-bit resolution increased to 24-bits. This unusual sampling rate is simply 44.1 kHz multiplied by 3. Such integer up-sampling does away with the need for troublesome multiple clocks and processor-draining floating point calculations involving the rounding errors that are inevitable when you try, for example, to up-sample 44.1kHz to 96kHz or 192kHz.

As one moves up through the player range, the power supplies become increasingly sophisticated. The least expensive player, the £799 CD10, for example, uses a linear supply based on an R-Core mains transformer, whose narrow bandwidth was felt to be better suited to

rejecting incoming mains interference in this moderate current application than the much broader bandwidth of the typical toroidal type. The supply is made up of several discrete sections in order to avoid the problems of cross talk, in particular between the digital and analogue portions.

The digital supply provides the necessary power for the drive mechanism, the feedback circuits and the user interface section. Additionally, linear regulators with high power supply rejection capability deliver clean power, free of noise to all of the digital elements. The analogue section uses a different technique. After rectification and filtering, the regulation of the analogue supply is carried out by a sophisticated circuit, whose rejection level from 20Hz to 20 kHz exceeds 100dB. The digital section of the DAC features a constant power source and a shunt type, very low noise regulator.

Listening to the CD10 analogue output through my active Naim DBLs, Sia's track 'Academia' from her CD *Some People Have Real Problems* sounded fundamentally fine in musical terms. Even when judged alongside players that represent CD's aristocracy it stood proud, even if it could not equal the authority of their presentation. All the instruments were playing in tune and in time, and the music's rhythmic element was hard to fault. The presentation had real vitality; her voice in particular had a great sense of power and vibrancy. It was also very well articulated and showed excellent dynamic gradation, which combined to enhance the music's ability to communicate fluently. At the same time, though, the presentation lacked a degree of finesse and conviction. It would not have persuaded anyone that they were listening to Sia and her band because the presentation sounded obviously like a CD playing. However, that having been said, listening was still an enjoyable experience.

*“The presentation had real vitality; her voice in particular had a great sense of power and vibrancy.”*

The CD10 fared slightly less well with Beck's album *Guero* where the busier mixes with frequent 'noises off', such as 'Que Onda Guero?', introduced a vague sense of imprecision and slight muddle to the proceedings. Perhaps the Analog Devices AD1853 DAC sounded a little too unrefined within the context of a highly revealing system, but this was less apparent in a more appropriate mid-range system where the player is most often going to find itself.

At times the CD10 appeared to be sending contradictory messages: bass can be a little indistinct, loose and sloppy although the weight is okay. Rhythmically it's not as insistent and snappy as normal but it can still boogie. Detail seems to be getting lost on occasions when the mix becomes dense, but is far better when the arrangement is sparser and less busy. Running the player into a Cambridge Audio DACMagic delivered consistent and predictable results.

The situation seemed far more straightforward with classical music, listening, for example, to Tim Hugh and Olga Sitkovetsky playing Fauré's *Après un Réve*. Both instruments sounded splendid; the piano substantial, rich and natural, and the cello gloriously textured and dynamically wonderfully expressive. The music flowed with a stately poise within a credible acoustic. The digital output/DACMagic combination did extract

an extra degree of texture, body and dynamic subtlety from both instruments. The C string on Hugh's cello certainly appeared to have more prominence and Sitkovetsky's left hand seemed to be doing more work.

The number two player in the line-up, the £1,222 CD20 also has an R-Core transformer based power supply for its digital section, much like the CD10, while the analogue section benefits

## MICROMEGA EXPLAINS THE ACTS POWER SUPPLY PRINCIPLE

Micromega considers that *“There are very few companies today which pay extreme attention to the power supply of audio products. We could even say that most companies are turning to SMPS (the Switched Mode Power Supply) for the sake of simplicity and cost reduction. These supplies are all designed within the borders of today's regulation. However, none of these regulations has been set with audio reproduction in mind.”*

The company's ACTS® supply design is based on the inherent electrical properties of the construction of particular transformers. The idea is to tune the secondary windings of them to the quadruple of the mains frequency and to minimize instantaneous current demand from the rectifiers, cancelling their switching peaks and having them work in such a way that current and voltage are synchronous. This way, the rectifiers provide almost the same average current during the complete cycle of the rectified wave. A smoothing inductor with large reservoir capacitors gives a pure sinusoidal ripple whose value does not exceed 25 mV peak to peak.

This is fundamentally how the front end of the new ACTS® power supply works, while the back end (the active regulation stage) differs from one product to another. But, in all cases, ACTS® offers the regulators a very clean supply. Measurements indicate that the rejection of the ACTS® front end is better than 200 dB above 1 kHz. In fact, the ACTS® supply is, according to Micromega, the ideal solution for audio products where transparency is required.

▶ from Micromega's ACTS® power supply technology. This proprietary design aims to filter garbage from the mains – in particular, the nasty variety generated by switched mode power supplies, Ethernet-over-power-line devices and their malevolent brethren.

Like the rest of the range the CD20 uses the same value-for-money Analog Devices AD1853 DAC, so I guessed that any significant improvements could only be put down to the different power supply configuration. And significant improvements there most certainly were.

The player had considerably less rawness about its sound than the CD10, and low frequencies seemed better defined and tighter. It even had appropriate weight for tracks such as Beck's 'Girl'. Rhythmically it seemed more animated and exhibited noticeably more get up and go. Mixes – even busy examples – sounded more open and details were cleaner and easier to identify. It was not the most sophisticated performance I have ever heard, but it was excellent at this price and it sounded far more polished than the CD10 in a revealing system. Overdriven guitar, for example, didn't have me reaching for the Next button on the remote in search of a track that would be less challenging to audition. There was certainly a familial resemblance about the sound and presentation but the CD20 had a sense of sophistication, poise and composure that had eluded the CD10. Music sounded far better controlled with the result that the CD20 sounded like you were listening to a performance rather than a CD under appropriate circumstances.

The CD20 also fared better with female vocalist, Sia and her band. Bass guitar had more weight and more percussive impact to its leading edges. Drums and percussion had more attack, power, and follow through. They displayed a more complete and detailed note envelope. Piano sounded harmonically richer, more solid and secure. Most tellingly, though, Sia's voice had greater communicative ability: her phrasing made more sense and raised the hairs on the back of my neck far more readily. She sounded less like a facsimile and more like a woman, even if there was some minor emphasis to the nasal elements of her delivery at times.

Similarly, listening to the Hugh/Sitkovetsky rendition of Fauré's *Après un Rêve* the sound had more detail, and the performance had appreciably more energy. The presentation, as a whole, was more believable. The added substance and downwards dynamic extension the CD20 brought to the party simply made the performance sound more like a performance and less like a recording. Adding the DACMagic gave less dramatic improvements than it had with the CD10, but it still unearthed useful concealed subtleties: Hugh's vibrato was more evident even as notes decayed and his playing assumed greater authority and what I can only describe as a truly life-like vibrancy. So, it too makes a fine transport, as well as a CD player.

All round, the CD20 presented a far easier to audition and a more convincing portrayal of music. Musically and cosmetically it comfortably had

*“Rhythmically it seemed more animated and exhibited noticeably more get up and go. Mixes – even busy examples – sounded more open and details were cleaner.”*

the beating of the CD10 as, indeed, it ought, given the price difference between the two players.

And so, on to what one might expect to turn out to be the star of the show, the £1,599 CD30. This is in essence a CD20 with 132kHz Sampling Rate Conversion, which represents three times the native CD sampling rate of 44.1 kHz.

Instantly that Beck's album *Guero* started playing, it became abundantly clear the performance of the CD30 was in another league compared to that of its junior stablemates. That familial get up and go, and that inherent musicality and vibrant enthusiasm were still obviously present but its zeal was tempered by a refreshing sense of control and composure. Drums and bass guitar had greater impact and weight but notes also started and stopped with increased resolve and precision. The same was true at the opposite end of the frequency range where instruments and voices demonstrated far greater finesse than I had heard up to this point. There was no rawness or astringency but that did not mean that leading edge definition was reduced or transients softened. There was plenty of snap ▶





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▶ to the presentation so the rhythmic impetus of tracks such as Beck's 'Hell Yes' was not diminished one iota.

Despite the player sounding cosmetically smoother, there was also no loss of detail evident. The increased cohesion and authority it displayed seemed to weave that detail more tightly into the musical fabric rather than leaving it exposed like random loose threads. As a result, the CD30 was very easy to listen to even with exciting, invigorating music.

Songs like 'Little Black Sandals' on the Sia album sounded outstanding on the CD30. The bass, drums and piano provided a really solid foundation over which she could perform her sensual vocal gymnastics. The player made light work of exposing her lissome phrasing and its interplay with her band's playing. Timing, a real strongpoint in Sia and her band's performance, was entirely dependable, accurate, and fluent, coming across with an innate effortlessness. And that polish paid worthwhile dividends in portraying the richness and variety in her vocal timbre.

That superiority was especially evident in the Tim Hugh cello pieces, imparting a realistic weight and sonority to the accompanying piano, and giving his instrument an appropriately vibrant palette with which he could communicate his skills and animation. The range of expression and tonal colour he managed to coax from his cello during Paganini's *Moses in Egypt* was moving as well as technically impressive, and the CD30 had no difficulty in conveying either aspect of his playing. The player's speed doubtless helped it convey his extreme dexterity and fingering accuracy during the more briskly played sections. It all amounted to an enthralling portrayal of this wonderful recording.

If I had to be brutally honest I would have to say that while these players are nowhere near perfect – that is far too much to expect at these prices – they are so inherently musical and communicative that it is easy to forgive them their sins, which are mostly benign and highly unlikely to spoil anyone's listening. If you want the finest go for the CD30 but if your budget dictates that you spend less you will not feel dramatically short-changed by the CD20. And if times are truly tight you could do very much worse than consider the CD10, which, although not the most authoritative player you are ever likely to hear, is still intrinsically musical and conveys what truly matters in a performance with disarming ease.

I feel that the CD30, though, is the best of the bunch by a substantial margin. It combines musicality with poise, and fluency with finesse to deliver an engaging performance that sounds reassuringly analogue. And, if nothing else, it proves that cranking up the sampling frequency on that value-for-money DAC was certainly a worthwhile exercise.

Micromega appears to be back with a vengeance. These new designs pay homage to the strengths of its earlier models. There was always an intrinsic rightness and fluency about the way those early players conveyed the emotion

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Micromega CD10, CD20, and CD30

Type: Single-box CD players

Chipset: Analog Devices AD1853

Three-times oversampling in CD30

Dimensions (WxHxD): 6.9x26.5x43cm

Weight: 3.5kg (CD10)

4.5kg (CD 20 & CD30)

Outputs: Analogue RCA

Digital RCA

Finish: Silver or black

Price: CD10 – £799

CD20 – £1,222

CD30 – £1,599

Manufactured by: Micromega

URL: [en.micromega-hifi.com](http://en.micromega-hifi.com)

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

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

Tel: +44(0)20 8971 3909

and meaning in music, and I am delighted to hear that characteristic has been maintained in the latest generation.

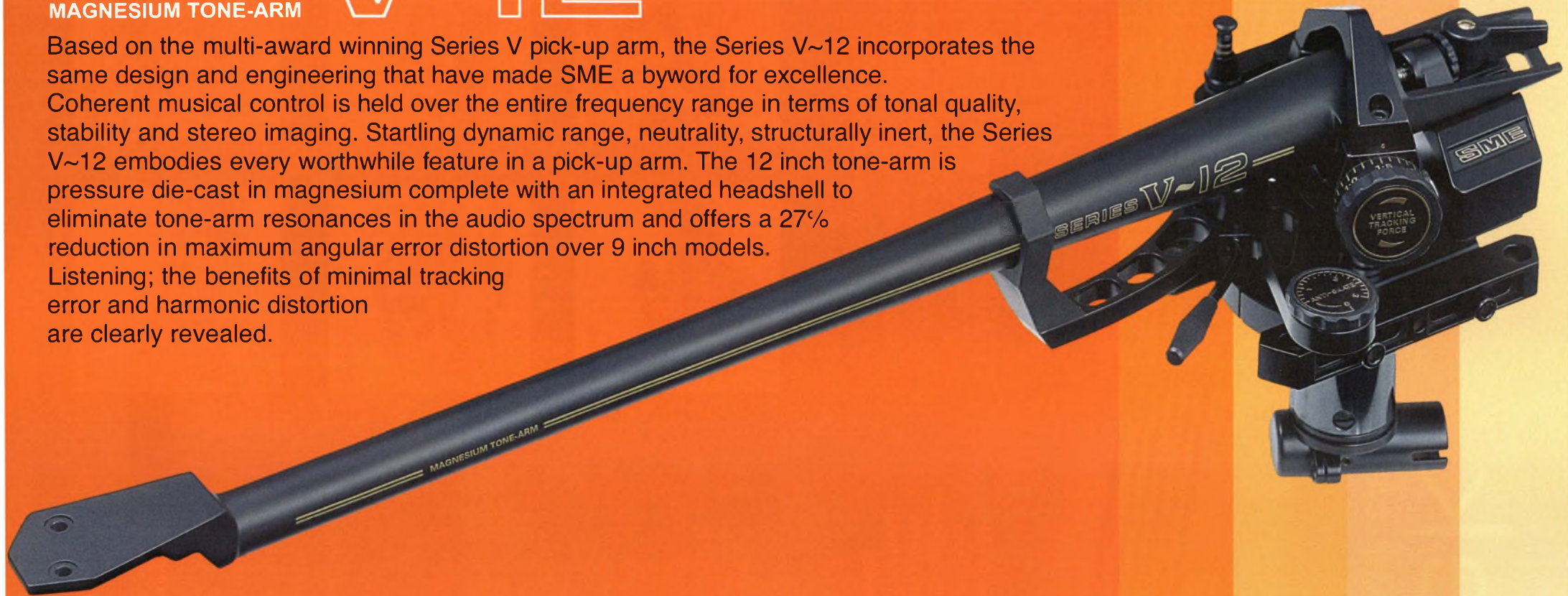
I will just wait now is to see if the company intends to reconsider the *Performance* models and perhaps bring those fantastic machines up to date. That would be a truly thrilling prospect if these budget and mid-fi boxes are anything by which to judge the company's developmental progress over the past decade. It will be interesting to see if Monsieur Hamdi considers high-end CD players to be a viable proposition or if, like Linn, he decides that his company's future will rest with streaming products. I have to say that Micromega's interpretation of a digital streamer ought to be a fascinating product and if one ever emerges from Paris, I would very much appreciate being first in the queue for a review sample. +



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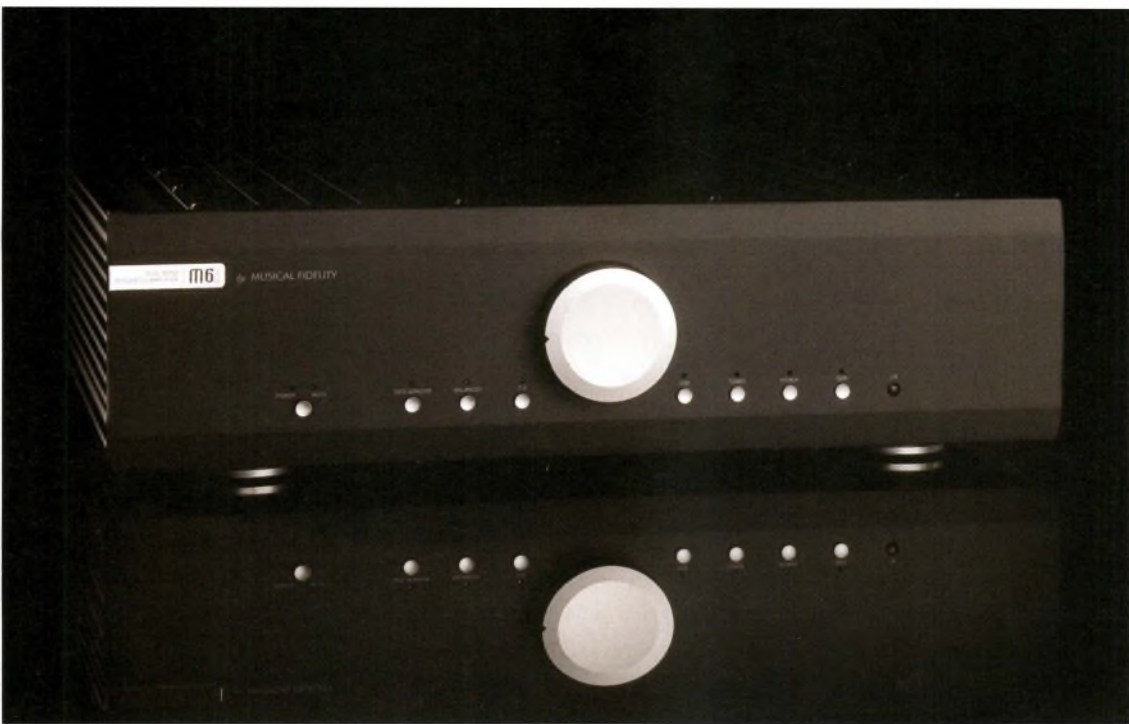
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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Musical Fidelity M6i integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

**A**ntony Michaelson, *Grande Fromage* of Musical Fidelity, is nothing if not forthright. “We messed up,” is the PG version of his assessment of the last few years of MF twists and turns. Having spent time and energy convincing the audiophile world that we all need an amp the size of Norway to accurately portray the dynamic range of a mouse fart, MF’s next product was, of course, a revisit of the A-1, a classic low-powered Class A design. Good – and, it must be said, not so good – products drifted in and out of the Musical Fidelity catalogue at speed. It got to the point where you asked for a product for review and in the few weeks between getting it and printing it, the product disappeared from the line up. Not a good way of keeping the client base sweet.

So, Michaelson made one of the boldest decisions a man at the head of a company can make. He killed off product lines and walked away from whole swathes of audio business that hitherto included MF products. Traditional MF heartlands were suddenly without one of the biggest names in their sector. In other words, Michaelson took stock, Scarface style! He recognised (correctly, in my opinion) that the lower and middle parts of the audio bear pit are already filled to bursting with components (but there is still room for well-designed accessories, like DACs, phono stages and headphone amps). So, neat little high-volume V-series products and more glitzy X-series components remain true

to the cause first kicked off with the X-10D tube buffer all those years ago.

Products that can capitalise on the strengths of Musical Fidelity, Michaelson thought, start further up the price points. And so, Musical Fidelity today concentrates on the M6 series (for rank and file audiophiles) the AMS series (for the hardcore collector) and the Titan power amp (for the no quarter given statement product lover). The M6i integrated amp therefore represents the foundation stone of nu-Musical Fidelity.

It’s one heck of a foundation stone, too. Dual mono construction, chucking out a healthy 200 watts per channel into eight ohms and 45 amps peak-to-peak current, that puts it up in the beefy mono power amp class. The preamp stage has four phono single-ended inputs and one XLR balanced input, but like many audiophile products sings at its best in single-ended mode. There’s nothing intrinsically wrong with balanced, and the XLR sockets work well here, but single-ended is a better route overall. No idea why particularly, I just liked the sound of single-ended a fraction more. ▶

- ▶ Two sets of single-ended phono outputs (one tape, one preamp out) and a pair of speaker terminals complete the deal. It's worth noting there's a switch at the back to select between AUX and HT (home theatre) – if used in HT mode, the amp becomes effectively a power amp and signals are at a very high level. If you have a surprisingly loud tuner with no volume control, that's probably the reason.

It's a sign of change in the industry that phono is not included on the M6i, but the amp includes a Type B USB input for a computer. It's clearly an amplifier with one eye on the future. It doesn't need a driver (the DAC is both Mac and PC chummy) but will need you to select it for output. A cynic might say the reason for the lack of phono stage is the availability of Musical Fidelity's V-LPS and X-LPSv8; a realist would point out that as the V-LPS is

*“This is not a whizz-bang-fireworks kind of amplifier – it can do all that, but it also has staying power.”*

pretty much the best value phono stage on the market at this time, there's not much to moan about.

The amplifier is a very physical beast; big and big boned, in black or silver with a large central silver knob and a row of silvery ball-bearing push-buttons with accompanying LEDs. As is often the case, the remote control is more basic; just a plastic handset that's been standard MF issue up and down the product lines for years. Functional and useful, yes... but low on bling. Some bling would be good, though; those basic speaker terminals look a bit too basic on this class of amplifier.

There are some products that are best summed up by Macbeth; “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” These products come and go, passing through the audio system “like a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.” This is not that kind of product. This is not a whizz-bang-fireworks kind of amplifier – it can do all that, but it also has staying power.

I've sat in on blind tests of amplifiers before, and Musical Fidelity amps are the ones that get spotted quickest by listening panels. The reason for this is the deep, tuneful bass. No change here, then, because the M6i delivers some of the most solid and 'likeable' deep bass notes you'll hear from an integrated – at least from an integrated that doesn't come with a sharp intake of breath when

discussing price. It's an abstraction, but some amplifiers sound like a 'top down' design – the final listening stage begins by getting the treble right and then the amp is tweaked and adjusted to fit – while the M6i is very much a 'bottom up' design. The bass works to provide an underpinning of what comes next up the frequency range. This applies across the board; whether it's the tympani of an orchestra, a close mic'd cello, the complex interplay between contrabass trombone and bass on 'Track A – Solo Dancer' from Charles Mingus's *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* or a Bootsy Collins layin' down some funk phatness on James Brown's 'Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nothing'. Don't mistake this for a strong bass character, though; the amp isn't bass-forward, or anything-forward. It just has a better class of bass than many of its peers. At the top end of things, it's almost a calming influence over wayward metal dome tweeters. Once again, this is not a laid back sound, but one that is only raucous and aggressive when the music demands such things.

Whether it's due this control over the sound is almost moot, but you get a feeling of unshakable authority, meaning that something really complex (whether intellectually complex – like the aforementioned Mingus cut – or simply a room full of instruments playing as one, like the opening to Mahler's Eighth) is left completely unfazed. This is not the sort of amplifier that limits you to well-recorded small groups, it likes to get its hands dirty playing music at volume with right sort of scale each piece of music deserves. ▶





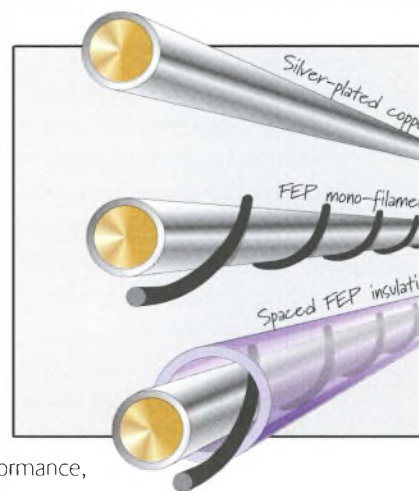
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that is finally revealing just why cables have such a profound impact on system sound and musical communication. You can visit our web-site to learn more, or you can visit a Nordost dealer to experience Micro Mono-Filament technology for yourself. But don't be surprised if you get carried away because, when it comes to the musical performance, this isn't just technological trickle-down – it's more of a torrent!



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► There's two kinds of 'effortless' in audio. The first is the effortless charm of a flea-powered SET amp... musically enticing. This is not that sort of effortless; this is the sort that makes you think there's no running out of steam, that your ears, your neighbours or your loudspeakers will wimp out long before the amplifier does.

The word 'unfussy' kept appearing. It's not source fussy – it makes a good fist of music whatever you use and however you use it. Even the USB input was nicely balanced in this respect, and didn't demand the absolute pinnacle of carefully looked after lossless files (although the better the recording, and the better the quality of MP3, the better the sound). It's not speaker fussy, although as with any amplifier that doesn't double up as a welding torch, use with crushing loads is not a good idea. It's not music fussy and you can throw everything from Chopin to the Clash at this amp without a problem. And it isn't fussy-fussy, meaning the usual power conditioner, cable demands made by most products are not so important here. Just think 'good' rather than 'outstanding' and you'll get surprisingly fine results.

If you are expecting a revolution (or even an evolution) in amplifier design, this isn't it. There is a lot of the Musical Fidelity genome in the M6i, but that doesn't make it a bad thing. Indeed, some of the best amplifiers available today are essentially not dissimilar to the best amplifiers of a generation ago, just recast in 2010 garb. This is belt-and-braces, no-nonsense audio for those who like their amps unflappable. It's what Musical Fidelity has always done well, with designs like the A300 integrated of a decade ago – a powerhouse that delivers and is cheap relative to the performance it delivers.

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Musical Fidelity M6i integrated amplifier

### Connections:

Line level inputs: 1x XLR, 4x phono line level outputs: 1x phono, 1x tape phono output, 1x preamp outputs

**USB input:** USB type "B" (square) socket

**Speaker outputs:** 3-Way Binding Posts

**Output Power:** 200 WPC @ 8 Ohms (23dBW)

**Voltage:** 45 Volts RMS, 20Hz to 20 kHz; onset of clipping (126 Volts peak-to-peak)

**Current peak-to-peak:** 45 Amps

**Damping factor:** 170

**Output devices:** 2 pairs per channel

**Line Input THD+N:** <0.01% typical, 20Hz to 20 kHz

**Signal / noise ratio:** >100dB 'A'-weighted

**Input impedance:** 38k Ohms

**Frequency response:** +0, -0.1dB, 10Hz to 20 kHz

**Power consumption:** 680 Watts maximum

Black or silver finish

**Dimensions (WxDxH):** 44x12.7x40cm (including terminals)

**Weight:** 16.5kg

**Price:** £2,500

### Manufactured by

Musical Fidelity Ltd

**URL:** [www.musicalfidelity.com](http://www.musicalfidelity.com)

**Tel:** +44 (0)208 900 2866

So here's the challenge to Musical Fidelity on the M6i – don't change nothin'. This is a fine amplifier, capable of delivering a performance that leads the listener out of the need to go box-swapping. I want to be able to recommend this product as a fine example of a good integrated amplifier for the next half-decade, not have to read its obituary in the next half-year. The M6i is in it for the long term; it's an amplifier that will be used by listeners for years and years... but only if MF keep it on the order books for years, too. +



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## The Focal Electra 1028Be Loudspeaker

by Steve Dickinson

**S**hortly after completing the review of the Focal 1027S floorstanders for issue 59, a pair of the (£1,000 more expensive) 1027Be model arrived. These sat very happily indeed in my system, for many months. Their revealing nature made them ideal reviewer's tools, their lucidity, transparency and sheer musicality made them a joy to have at the noisy end of my system. A review was never forthcoming, but they informed my view on virtually everything else that passed through my hands from then-on.

Now they have gone, replaced by the Electra 1028Be. Visually, virtually identical to the speaker it replaces, this is nevertheless quite a different beast. The changes are comparatively subtle but, in musical terms, very significant. The beryllium tweeter is replaced by a variant with a slightly larger diaphragm, similar to that found in the current Utopia models, but the key difference is in the porting of the bass units.

Let's back-track a bit, as there's no point discussing what's changed if one is not at least somewhat conversant with what went before. In the 1027 models, the -S variant had a single, rear-firing port and the -Be version a single, downward-firing port which vented, rather in the manner of a flatulent penguin, between its feet. The analogy refers to the configuration, not the sound, by the way. The 1028Be has both ports, but the downward-firing port is now modified by a horizontal web which extends between the feet, about a centimetre from the floor. According to Focal, the new porting arrangement is not to augment the bass, but to control it. The ports are not tuned primarily for output, but to improve the loudspeaker's impedance in the lower bass and therefore present an easier load for amplifiers.

It works.

The outgoing 1027 models have a wonderfully even and coherent sound, each driver integrating particularly well with the others, but in the lowest couple of octaves the 1027Be could still get a bit headstrong, unless your amp was very powerful or particularly grippy. To be fair, particularly in the later versions of the 1027Be with precision-cut bass driver cones, this only ever manifested itself on particularly bass-heavy material, where the results could get a tad fruity or slightly boomy on occasion, but the overall levels of musical communication still ►

► remained well-above the norm for the price. In the new model, these matters have largely been consigned to the past. If I had to sum up the performance of the Focal 1028Be's in one phrase, I would suggest that they behave more like a small two-way standmounter with added bandwidth.

That presents, to my mind, something of an ideal compromise. You get the fleet-footedness, vitality and pinpoint imaging of a well-designed small loudspeaker, with the scale and authority of a full-range design. If you are already familiar with the sound of the 1027Be, first impressions on hearing the 1028Be are likely to include the notion that the bass is lighter. Dismiss that thought quickly from your mind. The bass on the 1028Be reaches just as low and digs just as deep as that of the earlier model, as any moderately extended listen makes abundantly clear. There is, however, somewhat less of it, in much the same way that Baby Bears' porridge had less heat than Daddy Bear's. Accepting Focal's explanation, the reduction in bass weight, if not depth, is largely down to the easier amplifier load.

This also manifests itself as faster and more tuneful bass, with better textures and timbral subtlety. Plucked double-bass, for example Reynaud Garcia Fons on 'Berimbass' from *Arcoluz* (Enja Records: ENJ-9478 2) is not only agile and tuneful, but one is acutely aware of the stunning quality of the instrument and the way it is played, all of which brings me back to the analogy of a two-way floorstander with added *ccjones*.


*'All the above simply contributes to making the Focal 1028Be the most musically communicative, engaging and involving loudspeaker I've heard at the price.'*

Bass performance alone, of course, does not a fine loudspeaker make. I have commented before on the phase-coherent approach adopted by Focal in their crossovers. If you have heard any good single-driver speaker design, for example pretty much anything by Eclipse, one thing which can hardly fail to strike home is the immediacy, solidity and stability of the sonic picture. Any compromises, in bandwidth for example, are quickly forgotten and forgiven, because the musical message is in the coherence of the signal: the timing, the almost total lack of smear, overhang or delay within the sound. These are artefacts of the reproduction process we scarcely notice, until they are taken away. And the one ace a single-driver design has up its sleeve is the lack of a crossover. One is apt to assume that the audible effects of a crossover will mostly be in a lack of integration between drivers and, to a large extent, that is probably true. But integration isn't simply a matter of rolling-off one driver smoothly as the next kicks in; as Focal understand only too well, it is vital to preserve the phase relationships in the signal as far as possible across the entire frequency spectrum. This is a relatively controversial topic from a psychoacoustic standpoint; we may not perceive phase directly (making this very difficult to test under laboratory conditions, which makes some dismiss the topic out of hand), but the ear-brain system seems to be remarkably sensitive to it and if the phase relationships in a musical signal are not treated with care, the brain refuses to be fooled.



Taking all these factors into account, the increase in bass control and the almost uncanny integration between drivers, the result is a loudspeaker with such immediate and compelling appeal that lesser designs can simply sound broken in comparison. I could bang on about the effortless high frequencies from the beryllium tweeter, the open, lucid and intimate midrange and, well, I've already wittered on about the bass quality quite enough. There is also the astonishingly vivid and stable imaging and soundstaging. The fact is that all the above simply contributes to making the Focal 1028Be the most musically communicative, engaging and involving loudspeaker I've heard at the price.

I've played a lot of jazz, during the work-up to this review. Quite a lot of rock, too; some pop and some more leftfield stuff, such as *One Second*, by Yello (Vertigo 06024 9830758) and, on reflection, probably rather less orchestral and choral music than might normally be the case. This is not because the Focals are not well-suited to 'classical' ►



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► music. Quite the reverse. It is just that they are better at jazz and other rhythmic, dynamic music than most speakers in this price range so that, all of a sudden, this stuff sounds so much more vital than it did before and it is hard to tear yourself away when you're having such a good time. Listening to some large-scale orchestral material, however, and the Focals reveal a level of discrimination and subtlety that quickly banishes any thoughts that these might be simply a good jazz-lovers' loudspeaker. Actually, I think the notion that loudspeakers may be permitted to have a bias towards jazz, rock or classical is invidious, if it is good with one type of programme, but not with another, that is a weakness, not a strength.

I played some Tchaikovsky; Symphony no.6 and was immediately struck by the way the system portrayed the pathos and yearning in the first movement. Here was an electric atmosphere, conjured from less, rather than more, and a tension which held me in thrall. So much so that the bomb Mr T. throws into the mix about ten minutes in (sorry if I've spoiled the surprise) was all the more powerful and dramatic in consequence. This ability to turn on a sixpence, to go from barely a whisper to a full-blooded assault without breaking step is not only down to the loudspeaker, of course, but even the best amplifier will struggle if the speakers it is driving are at all wayward. Similarly, the lack of overhang when going abruptly from *fortissimo* to *pianissimo* (the man does like his cheap thrills, doesn't he?) is a feat many speakers can't manage with any sort of panache but the 1028Bes are astonishingly accomplished. Their sheer manoeuvrability means you can forget about the system's capabilities and just enjoy the music. The Naxos recording I used is nothing special, (nor is it by any means substandard) but I have never enjoyed Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony more through my system, and that's not just because of the blood and guts bits, but because the contrasts and contradictions worked into the piece have never been better resolved.

This exposes one of the most interesting aspects of modern hi-fi life. Focal designs like this one seem to polarise opinion in the audiophile community. Some love them, some don't. And the further up the catalogue you go, the more the opinion diverges, it seems. However, this must be tempered by the 'I heard them at a show' effect. A great many of those on the 'nay' side of the Focal debate are those who have experienced them at shows or in very short demonstrations. If you attempt to seek the opinions of those who have spent a little longer in front of a pair of good Focal designs like the 1028Be, the balance shifts toward the 'yay' side. A lot of this comes down to the tweeter design; an initial reaction to it is often to think it fierce and bright, especially on percussion instruments like gongs and cymbals. I suspect this is something of an audiophile conceit, because these instruments are fierce and bright in the flesh. It's that epiphany – that the real instruments often don't sound as 'nice' as many audiophile loudspeakers can make them – that can lead you on a path that ultimately ends with a pair of Focal loudspeakers.

Another interesting aside is that most Focalites started out with the same reservations as those who flit from room to room at a hi-fi show. The only difference being that somewhere along their audiophile journey, they spent a few hours in front of a pair of good Focals, then presumably listened to some live music and a switch flicked over in their audiophile perceptions. I've been reliably informed that those who listen to Focal speakers without the preconceptions built up from years of listening to audiophile loudspeakers seldom dismiss them as quickly as those steeped in audio folklore. Whether this comes down to a keen set of ears in the newcomer, or a keener set of

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Three-way bass-reflex floorstanding loudspeaker

**Driver Units:** Two 16.5cm 'W' sandwich woofers

One 16.5cm 'W' sandwich midrange

One 27mm pure beryllium IAL inverted dome tweeter

**Sensitivity:** 91dB

**Impedance:** 8 Ohms, (3.5 Ohms minimum)

**Bandwidth:** 34Hz – 40kHz ± 3dB

**Crossover frequency:** 350Hz / 2.2kHz

**Recommended amplifier power:** 40-300 W

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 1110x264x350mm

**Weight:** 33kg

**Finishes:** Basalt, Champagne, Slate Grey

**Price:** £4,700/pair

**Distributor:**

Focal-UK.

**Tel:** 0845 660 2680

**URL:** [www.focal-uk.com](http://www.focal-uk.com)

**Manufacturer:**

Focal-JM Lab, France

**Tel:** 00 33 4 7743 5700

**URL:** [www.focal-fr.com](http://www.focal-fr.com)

prejudices in the long-standing audiophile, remains unclear.

If you want your music to be well-mannered and polite, look elsewhere. Sure, the Focals can do it, but it feels like warning a kid to be on its best behaviour: pointless and slightly cruel, and the ebullience is never far from the surface even so. Compared to many other loudspeakers, the Focal 1028Be is refreshingly confident, open and honest. It stands out like a speedboat at a yachting convention and if the rest of your system is in any way nervous, nerdy or shy, it'll home in on that characteristic and let you know in no uncertain terms. Some people might be uncomfortable with that. Me? I just wish more hifi was like this. +

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Gradient Helsinki 1.5 loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

**H**i-fi keeps getting better, but even the best falls foul of a fundamental limitation – the room. Our rectangular living spaces can mess up the sound of many a wonderful system; bass booms and reflections from the walls, floor and ceiling all undermine the performance.

We can help reduce these problems using either DSP or room acoustic treatments. Both can transform an audio system, but come with 'baggage'. DSP systems vary; some great, some not so great, and a lot comes down to installation. Room treatments can also work wonders, but in a small room, they can be intrusive; it's bad enough to have a floor full of audio gear, ice forms on the long-haired general's upper slopes when your hobby takes up the walls and corners too.

A more consistent and domestically chummy arrangement would be to design a product that overcomes many of the intrinsic problems with using a loudspeaker in a room. And that's where the Gradient Helsinki 1.5 comes in. That distinctive shape isn't only for decoration; it's designed to make the speaker room 'independent' (the reality is 'less dependent' rather than truly 'independent'... but that's enough to make a big difference).

It may look like a designer chair for a hobbit, but the Finnish Helsinki 1.5 is actually an open-baffle design, made with sustainable woods and a large clear glass spine and base, using conventional 'cone and dome' drive units. Each drive unit has its own unique construction methodology; the tweeter sits in a moulded polyurethane wave-guide 'donut', the midrange unit sits in a cardioid baffle (it's another rounded, 7cm thick recessed moulded polyurethane pod filled with absorbent material) and the bass driver is sitting effectively an open baffle, at 90° to the listener.

That means the listener sits on the null point of the bass driver's dipole's radiation pattern. In theory, that makes it the worst placement possible, but that's kind of the point of what Gradient calls 'controlled directivity'. The trick is instead of trying to eliminate the first reflection from side walls for the bass, the Helsinki 1.5 makes a feature of it, while effectively eliminating the first reflection from above and below. In many rooms, you have the magnets pointing toward one another (so ▶





## THE HELSINKI SPEAKER TOPOLOGY

The speaker was designed for rooms around 300-400 sq ft (30-44sq metres) and to be within a foot or so of either the front or side walls. This set-up typically gives adequate bass without a sub-woofer; if the speaker is far from the room boundaries then a subwoofer becomes more beneficial.

One can consider the speaker as divided in two parts; the bass below 250Hz is handled by an open-baffle 300mm driver, which has the classic 'figure-of-eight' radiation pattern, while the midrange and HF have cardioid (heart shaped) radiation patterns, with almost no energy going behind the drivers/toward the back wall.

The first thing to note about this topology is the lack of the typical speaker cabinet/ported box colorations as there is no box! The second observation is how the midrange and tweeter drivers are tilted up. This dials out the first reflection point from the floor. In addition, the upward drivers provide excellent imaging whether the listener is sitting or standing.

▶ the bass cones pointing outward) and give the speakers a sharp toe-in; the bass effectively relies on those side walls. How sharp a toe-in? Think 45°, which puts you sitting in the near field. In very small rooms, the speakers are swapped over so the bass units fire at each other, with the speakers pointing directly down the room; this cuts down a lot of bass, but not enough bass is rarely a problem in a small room.

Frequencies above 200Hz are handled very differently. The placement (particularly the angles) of the midrange and treble drivers are designed specifically to minimise first reflection issues. The tweeter is a perfect example of this; the back-swept pod is not just time alignment and styling, it means the first reflection point on the ceiling is actually behind the listener. That makes a huge difference to the sound. There's also the incredibly tight tolerance in the speakers meaning the pair matching is excellent and the speaker is flat to within a decibel from 200Hz-20kHz. That's almost unheard of in domestic speaker designs.

This combination would make measurement on and off axis very difficult to get right. You have a treble and midrange that will deliver incredibly accurate on and off-axis performance, coupled to a bass that only really works off axis.

The review pair of speakers were supplied with a set of DNM speaker cables, in part because the Helsinkis are internally wired with DNM and in part because the speakers use the pro-grade Speakon terminal and DNM was first to step up to the task.

The big question is whether the Helsinki 1.5 achieves the goal it sets, eliminating (or at least substantially reducing) the effects of the room on the speakers. The answer – for frequencies of 200Hz and above is a resounding 'yes'. There's none of the blurring and blooming of random frequencies

bounced off the side walls and ceiling. Instead, the Gradient design seems to give you all the precision and dynamic range of a good dynamic speaker with all the directness of a good pair of headphones... in the free field.

The Helsinki is almost perfectly designed for 'problem' rooms. Beastly concessions to architecture unwilling to make compromises for audio are effectively dialled out of the sound. Furniture in inopportune places, alcoves, fireplaces, TV sets, coffee tables, marauding wives patrolling the room... none of these things make the slightest difference. As a consequence, speaker position both is and isn't critical; the need for the loudspeakers to be equidistant from the rear and side walls is minimised, although your position relative to the loudspeakers is completely vital if the bass is to give of its ▶



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- Esoteric D-07 digital to analogue converter
- Stax SR-404 and SRM-600 limited edition earspeaker system
- Brinkmann Bardo magnetic direct drive turntable
- Esoteric E-03 phono preamplifier
- Sumiko Palo Santos Presentation moving coil cartridge

▶ best. You can experiment with toe-in up to a point – a less powerful toe-in gives a more uniform sound for more listeners, but the tonal balance changes slightly, as if using a tilt control from an old Quad preamp – either treble down and bass up or bass down and treble up. Ultimately, there's a sweet spot for the room, and the user.

Its sound is both astonishing and a little bit disturbing for many listeners. Unless you've spent a great deal of time in well-engineered studios or listening rooms that have been very carefully corrected (with mechanical methods, rather than DSP), you'll be used to hearing your loudspeakers, plus the singalong from the walls and ceilings. Simply removing that singalong is like injecting sound direct into the ears. Soundstaging opens out, instruments have their natural tone and ambient information is portrayed with uncanny accuracy.

That's astonishing because so much 'disappearance' of loudspeaker box is usually a function of panel designs, but the Helsinki is more dynamic than any panel. But, short of a few dipole designs (Jamo, Lyngdorf, Linkwitz kits), you won't find a set of dynamic drivers without some (even residual) box coloration. The absence of box coloration is disturbing because we're used to it.

The result is a remarkably accurate sound, most unlike the sort of 'hi-fi' reproduction we have come to expect from most audio equipment. In particular, the presentation of stereo is beyond reproach. Your recordings are replayed with precisely the same stereo information they had in the control room. Large, ambient recordings are just that, close mic'd recordings are pushed in front of you and anything in between is, well, somewhere in between. This is the 'disturbing' part; when you remove the room and the speaker from the equation, you need to spend some time getting used to the sound.

You might also need time to adjust to box speakers afterward. This is the clincher whether the Gradient Helsinki 1.5 is for you or not. Spend a few hours (ideally a longer term) in front of them and then go back to your box loudspeakers. If the immediate reaction is "isn't this artificial sounding?", Helsinki has got its hooks in you.

The big downside is the bottom end. Or rather, the lack of it; there's not a lot of energy below 50Hz. In musical terms, this is equivalent to the last couple of notes of the 'first octave' (40-80Hz), and all of the bottom octave (rumbles, thunder rolls and deep organ pipes). In perception terms, this underpins the sound and gives music its force. The roll-off is smooth and clean enough to allow for a subwoofer to fill in the blanks at the bottom end of things. Those who see the charms of the loudspeaker for what it is will see no problems in moving to 2.1 channels. In addition, as the speaker was designed for rooms up to about 400 sq ft and to be use a foot or so from the wall, a sub might not be necessary (because the loudspeaker behaves so different from the norm, we've broken with *Hi-Fi Plus* tradition and included comments by Tim Ryan of SimpliFi Audio on this important design).



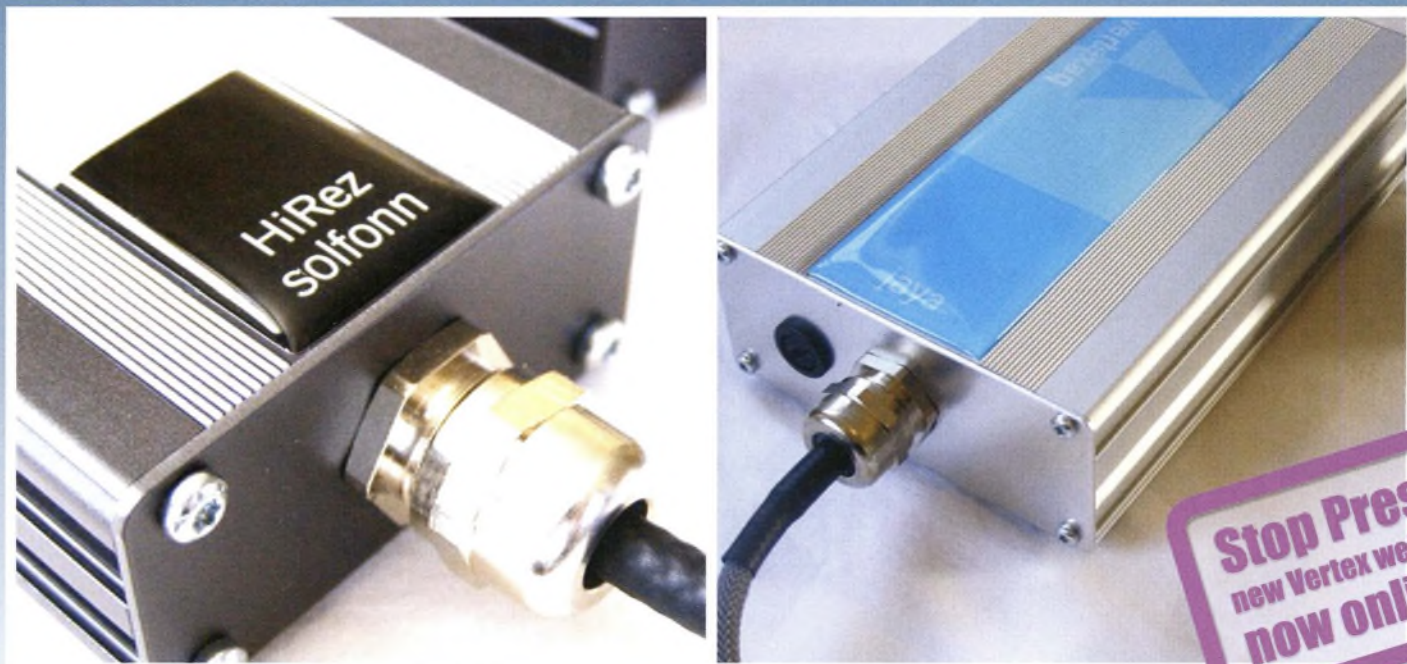
*“Its sound is both astonishing and a little bit disturbing for many listeners.”*

Eagle-eyed readers might notice an almost complete absence of references to pieces of music in this review. This is because pieces of music are generally used to highlight good points and bad in a component. That's not relevant here because the Helsinki 1.5's sound is relevant to all music. If you like how it sounds, you like how it sounds on all music.

The Gradient Helsinki 1.5 is a remarkable and successful way of virtually removing the loudspeaker box and the room from the sound. This makes it ideal for those who have decided to call time on box coloration but can't use or bring themselves to learn to love panels. While some will demand more bottom end, this still doesn't stop recommending what is one of the most exciting and realistic-sounding loudspeakers money can buy. ▶

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# Vertexaq



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Gradient Helsinki 1.5

Three-way loudspeaker

**Loudspeaker units:**

**Tweeter:** 19mm SEAS aluminium dome in wave-guide housing

**Midrange:** 125mm paper cone in cardioid housing

**Bass:** 300mm paper cone on side-firing open baffle

**Impedance:** Nominal 6 ohms (minimum above 4 ohms )

**Sensitivity:** 85 dB/2.83V / 1 meter

**Connections:** Speakon connector, bi-wirable

**Amplifier recommendation:** 50-250W

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 35x92x50cm

**Weight:** 23kg

Speaker body available in Birch, oiled walnut, oiled oak and Matt black and white

Midrange and HF modules are available in matt black and white (special finishes on request)

**Price:** £4,500 per pair

**Manufacturer:**

Gradient

**URL:** [www.gradient.fi](http://www.gradient.fi)

**Distributor:**

SimpliFi Audio

**Tel:** + (001) 724 712 0899

**URL:** [www.simplifiaudio.com](http://www.simplifiaudio.com)

sending very little energy to adjacent surfaces such as the side walls.

The Helsinki has a flat on-axis response of +/- 1 db from 200Hz-20kHz, so if you want to hear precisely what was laid down in the mastering session one should listen on axis. However, as one goes off axis, the extreme HF diminishes and gives a softer presentation.

[tim@simplifiaudio.com](mailto:tim@simplifiaudio.com) +

## ► IN-ROOM BASS

Similar to organ pipes, a room 28ft long produces a resonance/room mode at 20Hz, a room width of 14ft produces a mode at 40Hz and a room 7ft high produces a mode at 80Hz. The most audible of these room modes is the one due to shortest room dimension (typically the room height) and has harmonics at twice and three times the fundamental frequency (in our example at 160 and 240Hz, which is right up in the lower bass/midrange).

A characteristic of dipole bass is the 'figure-of-eight' radiation pattern. If one puts a microphone on-axis with the bass driver you will measure maximum bass. However at 90° to the driver you will measure a null. Likewise directly above the speaker you will also have a null – the **speaker** is not sending bass to the ceiling and therefore exciting the most audibly damaging room height mode.

With the speaker perpendicular to the front wall, the in-room bass is primarily a function of the room width. Rotating the speaker through 45 degrees excites both the room width and length modes. In this way, rotating the speaker is like using a tone control; minimum bass is achieved with the speaker perpendicular to the front wall, maximum at 45 degrees.

On the other hand, a dome tweeter and cone midrange have different geometries and hence very different dispersion patterns. As the Helsinki is designed to give both drivers the same cardioid radiation pattern, one can think of them as headlights of a car with strong output +/- 30° and very little energy outside this area. As such, the speaker is

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Naim DAC digital converter

by Alan Sircom and Malcolm Steward

**N**aim Audio never made a DAC, in the same way that it never made a CD player. In other words, it doesn't bring out a product just to fill a range or even because it's fashionable to do so. It brings out a product because it can finally add something substantial to the line-up. Which is why Naim Audio has its first DAC.

The development of the DAC shows just how much commitment the company has to its future. This is a product designed to bring out the best in its computer-side sources (such as the HDX hard disk player tested last year, or with a plug in drive, any passing PC or Mac or even the much-loved and much-under-rated Squeezebox). That it can be used with a CD transport or an existing Naim CD player is almost a secondary consideration.

The DAC itself uses a pair of PCM1704K chips by Burr-Brown, a regular feature in Naim players. But before the data makes it to the DAC itself, the datastream is read into a SHARC DSP that acts as data receiver, filter for out-of-band artefacts and acts as a 40bit, 16x oversampler and a buffer. This is aided by a tin of salmon and a Blackfin DSP chip, which controls both USB and the DAC, and a reclocking gate circuit directly prior to the DAC chip (I'm lying about the tin of salmon). It's also the first high-end DAC with an Apple Authentication Chip, meaning it will talk to iPods and iPhones.

Cleverly, the DAC makes jitter a thing of the past, without resorting to asynchronous sample-rate conversion. Instead, it references the datastream to one of 10 fixed frequencies and the SHARC chip picks out the right oscillator to clock-lock the signal. If the signal doesn't fit one of those 10 frequencies, then it falls back on ASRC. Naim did this by hiring a pair of the sharpest-tool-in-the-box mathematicians to write some extremely elegant code.

The key thing to the DAC is its simplicity, inside and out. That being said, the five buttons on the front make it one of the most button-heavy DAC out there. These can work to control the files on a USB thumb drive, or select one of eight S/PDIF and additional USB digital inputs on the rear panel. The

DAC's big feather in its cap (aside from the uniqueness of it being the first DAC from hitherto DAC-deniers Naim) is it can handle recordings at a sample rate of up to 768kHz and at 32bit resolution. Of course, you have to ask whether this makes a difference to mere mortals armed with 44.1kHz, 16bit CD files transferred to computer, but it suggests that Naim's own music label is going to start moving from big high resolution downloads to really big, really high resolution music downloads soon.

But forget the sort of high-res files that only studio engineers can get a hold of right now. How does it sound with regular music, off regular music CDs? Jolly damn fine, really. It's immediately obvious and recognisable as an upgrade of the first water. It's obvious because you listen to something played perfectly fine without it, play the same thing with the DAC in place and wonder how you could ever live with the sound you had liked or even loved a minute or two before. It's more three-dimensional, more detailed, more transparent, more musical and most of all more likeable than before. That doesn't mean they were 'nice sounding'; play a piece of music that was rough-edged and it sounds just as rough-edged, but you want to listen to the music more.

A key recording that demonstrates all of the above is 'Butterfly' by Jason Mraz. It's a wry, deliberately syrupy-soul track with some of the most dodgy (and downright rude) sounding lyrics you've heard since the 1980s. And on through the DAC, those lyrics stopped sounding like soft-core porn and started sounding like sarcasm. Other tracks were given the same treatment through the DAC. It just gets more out of the music. Whether you flipped between DAC and no-DAC within a single track or spun out whole albums, the difference was clear and hard to live without once heard.

*“Adding a beefy power supply adds a lot more to the performance, although more in the ‘audiophile’ direction than the ‘Naimophile’.”*

But there's that other great Naim concept, too – the upgrade path. Adding in a beefy power supply adds a lot more to the performance, although curiously I'd say more in the 'audiophile' direction than necessarily the 'Naimophile'. The upgrade gives even more image space, solidity and separation and could get even the flattest of flat earthers starting to talk about micro-dynamics. The improvement is noticeable and significant, although it must be said so is the hole that added power supply makes in your bank balance. The upgrade doesn't have to happen at time of purchase and is an easy fit (simply remove the Burndy plug protector and connect in the PSU, the power feed to the DAC remains in use), allowing you to buy a five or even seven grand DAC in stages.

Here's where it gets a bit twisty. I compared the DAC fed from a Naim HDX and a Naim CDX2 player, in the context of an all-Naim system into Focal loudspeakers at Infidelity, in Hampton Wick. The HDX alone was not as exciting as the CDX2; the HDX+DAC was a lot more dynamic, musical and exciting than the CDX2, but the CDX2+DAC sounded muddled compared to the HDX on its own. This was true whether or not the DAC was had been through the 'pimp my power supply' upgrade. Given the DAC was fine dealing with USB sticks, HDXs and more besides, I suspect this is down to a simple mismatch, probably on the CDX2 side. I don't think it means 'not for use with CD'!

My only real grumble about the Naim DAC is that it will spend most of

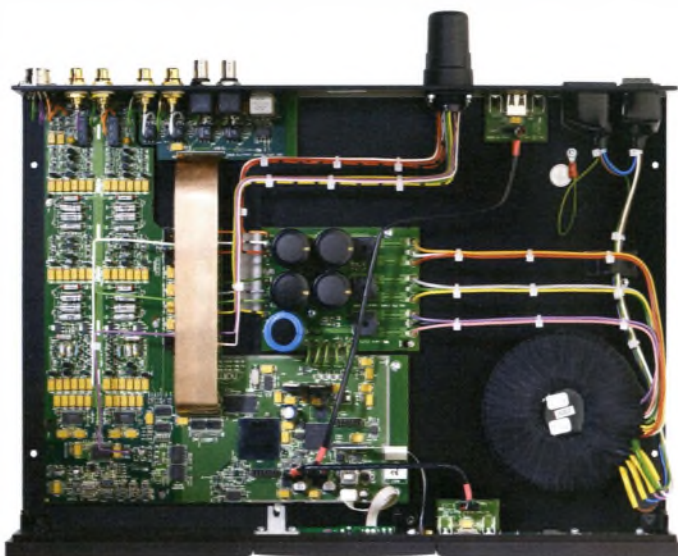
## SECOND OPINION

Naim refuses to produce "me too" products; those that exist merely because every other manufacturer has one in its portfolio. On the contrary, Naim insists that its products perform better, fulfil more requirements, or, ideally, meet both of those criteria. The DAC is no exception.

Listening proper began with rips of Jose Carreras performing Ariel Ramirez' 'Misa Criolla', starting with the Kyrie. On a bare Naim HDX, the presentation was excellent. Adding the DAC was dramatic to say the least. Carreras came closer to the listeners and his voice gained in terms of detail and expression: not only could I visualize him and the choir behind him much more clearly but the music began to communicate with me far more effectively. Adding the XPS to the DAC, and the transformation of the performance was astonishing.

Sure, the DAC was digging out far more information and was constructing a three-dimensional acoustic, but the biggest leap forward was in terms of the sheer communicative ability. Every element in the mix, especially Carreras' wonderfully pure upper registers, was making its presence felt and establishing its relevance to the music. The DAC performed real magic with this striking 1987 recording, transforming it from being excellent on the HDX to downright bloody magnificent on the full Monty, HDX/DAC/XPS.

The next album was an old favourite that I had recently ripped to the HDX, Los Lobos' rather... experimental Kiko. The DAC enjoyed this greatly, because it gave it so much to work with. The upshot was that after listening to the entire album – several times – I came away with a new-found respect for David Hidalgo and the boys. Their rhythmic cohesion suggests that there is some sort of telepathic communication going on between them. The DAC highlights this aspect...





► its first year or two being demonstrated in the context of Naim electronics. Nothing wrong with that... except people not in the Naim camp might wrongly think of it as a product for Naim users only. That's missing the point altogether – think of this as a gateway DAC.

You see, the DAC has all the usual attributes of the Naim sound (a very ordered, dynamic and musically-focused presentation) but also comes with the sort of performance aspects that would charm any other brand of audiophile (great stereo, image depth, scale and tonal accuracy). You'd struggle to imagine a guy with a system comprising single-ended triodes and horn speakers signing up for a Naim CD player, but you'd struggle to imagine them not liking the sound of the Naim DAC. Yes, it's a product that every Naim HDX owner will be salivating over and the queue to hear and buy one among that user-group is growing almost hourly. However, it's also the DAC that would make non-Naim 'muggles' start to think kindly of products like the HDX. Pretty soon, they start using black boxes on a daily basis and begin upping the dosage with an amp, then a power supply or two.

That's the thing about the Naim DAC... it's addictive. +

## SECOND OPINION (CONTINUED)

...of the band's performance not just because it is especially adept at resolving leading – and trailing – edges but because of its control at the frequency extremes.

Listening to music through the Naim DAC proved it could be both an educational and a visceral experience: not only does it reveal exactly what is being played but it also strongly suggests why the performer played it that way. It is a facility that is infrequently encountered with DACs – or, indeed, any other components. Little hi-fi displays such genuine true musical empathy. Even less understands there is so much more to creating a satisfying performance than simply putting the right notes in the correct order. It takes far more than that to allow a listener to forge an emotional connection with a recording... and whatever that 'more' element is, the Naim DAC has it in spades.

One final point, I tried connecting the DAC with an early sample of Naim's DC1 Digital cable but comparison with the Chord Company's Indigo Plus digital showed that the latter sounded distinctly superior in my system. In truth, I felt that Naim's cable did the DAC no favours at all.

Chord cable or not, the departure of the review DAC was a harrowing experience and I am finding the wait for my own sample seemingly interminable. I only hope that those in front of me in the queue appreciate just how very fortunate they are.

Malcolm Steward

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Naim DAC digital converter

**Audio Outputs:** 2 (RCA and DIN,

selectable) Line output Fixed: 2.2V RMS Frequency Response: 10Hz to 20kHz +0.1dB/-0.5dB THD: <0.002%

**Inputs:** Digital Inputs: 8 (2 coaxial BNC, 2 coaxial phono, 4 optical Toslink) USB: 2 (one front one rear, the front overrides the rear)

**Control:** IR input: front and rear panel IR output: rear panel socket

**Formats:** Audio files supported: USB = WAV (LPCM up to 768kHz / 32bit)

**Sample Rate:** USB 32kHz to 768kHz, 24bit S/PDIF 32kHz to 192kHz, 24 bit iPod, iPhone 48kHz max

**Supply Voltage:** 100V, 115V, 230VAC, 50/60 Hz Power Consumption: <30VA (max inc iPod charging)

**Shipping dimensions (H x W x D):** 240 x 590 x 500mm

**Dimensions (H x W x D):** 70 x 432 x 301mm

**Weight:** 5.6kg

**Colour:** Black

**Finish:** Anodised fascia, painted case

**Price:** £1,950

**Manufactured by**

Naim Audio Ltd

**URL:** www.naim-audio.com

**Tel:** +44(0) 1722 426600





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- Leben RS100 Pre-amplifier
- HRS Nimbus Damping System
- Audio Analogue Puccini Settanta REV2.0 Integrated Amplifier
- Audio Analogue Maestro 192-24 REV2.0 CD Player
- Leben 660P Power Amplifier

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Klipsch Heresy III Loudspeakers

by Jimmy Hughes

**T**he legendary Paul Klipsch was one of the pioneers of Horn loudspeakers. His original Klipschorn dates back to the 1940s, and (with updates) remains in production to the present day. Any speaker still being made after more than half a century has to have *something* going for it.

The Heresy model dates from 1957, and was originally built as a centre speaker for stereo users of the Klipschorn. These require corner placement, which led to the enclosures being too far apart in some rooms. The Heresy was intended to cure the weak centre image 'hole in the middle' effect.

A compact three-way *floorstanding* design some 54cm (21ins) tall and 34cm (13.25ins) deep, and offering high sensitivity of around 99dB for 1W, the Heresy III was brought up to date for the company's 60th anniversary in 2006. Updates include bi-wiring, a titanium dome horn-loaded midrange, and compression-driver tweeter. The bass unit – a healthy 300mm in diameter with 100mm voice coil – is not horn-loaded, however. So low frequency output is somewhat limited. Unfortunately, horn loading, high efficiency, and deep bass are not compatible with small size.

Mindful of their restricted bass output, I fancied partnering the Heresy IIIs with a Klipsch active subwoofer. I got the speakers and expected the sub to follow a week or so later. It didn't, but this was a good thing. It forced me to listen to the Heresy IIIs solo for an extended period – longer than I probably would have done had the sub been around. First impressions were very positive – I liked the Heresy III's presence and detail very much. They sounded crisp, immediate, and engaging – lively and energetic.

On the debit side, I noted an absence of tonal richness and weight. The sound lacked the sort of warmth and fullness I take for granted from the H1s. At least that's how it struck me at first. But, curiously, the more I listened, the less this seemed to matter. After a couple of weeks, the lack of bass/tonal warmth hardly registered...

Actually, there's nothing massively wrong with the quality of the Heresy III's bass – it's more a question of quantity. The speaker offers well-behaved low frequency performance, and sounds clean. It's just that the bottom end is a bit meagre when contrasted with the sparkling energy and presence of the mid range and top.

The Heresy III produces a forward immediate sort of sound; crisp, sharp, and very tactile – it doesn't hold

back. I found this took a little getting used to. Driven by my regular Musical Fidelity kW750 'muscle amp', the sound initially seemed almost a bit too sharp and up-front – albeit quite exciting.

Switching over to a Shanling MC-30 resulted in a smoother more relaxed sound. Being a transformer-coupled tube amp, the Shanling sounded less 'in your face'. Its inherent refined sweetness reigned things back a bit, making the Heresy III's 'brightness' and lack of tonal richness less of an issue.

The Heresy III is excellent on most types of music, but it's particularly adept at reproducing instruments with fast transients – percussion for example. It creates a remarkably 'big' sound for what is a relatively small enclosure, producing room filling presence and dynamics without needing to ▶



▶ be played loud. I found it especially good on classical vocal music – whether a solo singer, operatic, or massed chorus. It proved able to delineate each vocal strand in a (say) a Monteverdi *Madrigal*, while allowing separate voices to sing out with great individuality and presence. You could hear every word; every breath; every tonal nuance. Although the Heresy III has a somewhat forward tonal balance, it sounded surprisingly natural on voice. Choral music exhibited the sort of power and presence you hear live – the sound confidently projects out into the room and comes over to greet you, rather than seeming to stay ‘behind’ the speakers.

At the same time, voices sounded free of obvious coloration. There is perhaps a slight emphasis in the presence region (3-5k), but spend time with the speakers and this is hardly noticeable. Indeed, once you get used to Heresy IIIs, conventional speakers sound ‘wrong’ – small and recessed, with voices and instruments too far away.

The Heresy III achieves its ‘presence’ by virtue of horn-loaded mid and top drivers. In particular, the mid-range horn has an extended throat some 10ins or more deep, with a mouth measuring 9x3ins. The tweeter mouth is 4x2ins. This improves coupling to the air, creating the detail, attack, and efficiency horns are renowned for.

Eventually, a Klipsch RW-10d sub arrived. This is a medium/small sized active unit offering bass down to about 24Hz (-3dB point is 28Hz). It’s easy to install and offers adjustable volume level, frequency turnover, and phase to help you get the sub perfectly integrated with your main speakers.

The Heresy III’s lack of deep bass is actually an advantage when partnered with a sub. It means the sub can handle the low frequencies without too much overlap between it and the main loudspeakers. Adding the RW-10d sub took the Heresy III to a new level – it transformed the sound, as I hoped it would.

I immediately noticed increased richness and weight. There was greater warmth that enhanced tonal colour and bloom. At the same time, the high frequencies seemed more spacious and airy, while the soundstage had greater depth and a more holographic dimensionality. Heavy bass drum thwacks now had an impressive weight and power that hadn’t been there before. You heard a delicious subterranean ‘woompf’ that came and went, without adversely influencing the overall clarity of the sound. The air seemed to move with effortless ease, without affecting the midrange and top.

Adding the sub definitely improved the bass/treble balance. The trouble with a speaker like the Heresy III is its mid and top are so tactile and immediate, it needs similar qualities lower down to achieve equilibrium. I’m not saying Heresy IIIs can’t be used on their own – they can. But adding a sub helps equalise things.

Another major benefit of the Heresy III is the way its high efficiency makes amplifier power a non-issue; it pretty much tears up the rule book as to what you can and can’t use. The Shanling MC-30 being the perfect partner in crime here.

But with sensitivity close to 100dB, this option becomes distinctly viable – output power is no longer a deciding issue – though amplifier quality needs to be high. In this context, the sound of the MC-30 – smooth relaxed and refined - suits the crisp immediate tonal balance of the Heresy III perfectly. It’s a symbiotic match.

But I also used the Heresy III (with a high powered solid-state Bryston pre/power amp, and my own tube/transistor hybrid Musical Fidelity amps. If you prefer an even more immediate ultra-tactile sort of sound, big solid-state amps (like these) perform well. And the Heresy offers outstanding power handling.

Because of its high sensitivity, the Heresy III does not place excessive demands on the driving abilities of amplifiers that partner it. At the same time, its’ sharp focus and crisp detailed sound make it a very revealing transducer. It’s a contradictory mix – in some ways easy-going, in other respects very revealing.



It’s the same with recordings. Heresy IIIs are highly revealing of tiny details that other speakers mask, yet (paradoxically) it isn’t a picky speaker that exaggerates or emphasises flaws. For the most part, it plays to the strengths of each recording – it is revealing of faults but doesn’t make matters worse by emasculating the sound.

Recordings that seem cramped or muddy on ordinary loudspeakers, sound clear and full-bodied on Heresy IIIs. For all their brightness and immediacy, Heresy IIIs rarely sound coarse or grainy. Being horns, the midband is solid and firm, minimising the limitations of recordings with poor frequency range and limited dynamics. ▶



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



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#### **Hi>Fi+**

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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As a result, they're very good with old recordings. Perhaps surprisingly, they don't emphasise things like tape hiss. You might expect a bright/forward speaker like the Heresy III to highlight background noise, but instead the music seems to be projected over any noise that might be present, making it subjectively less apparent.

The Heresy III is great on natural simply-miked recordings that aim to capture the music without exaggeration. With conventional loudspeakers, such recordings can sound a bit plain and underwhelming. But Heresy IIIs reveal lots of detail, and the speaker's sheer presence ensures the sound is not emasculated.

They're perhaps not so good on heavily compressed rock/pop, where the already 'loud' nature of the recording is made to seem even louder by the forwardness and presence of the speakers. The Heresy IIIs inherent forcefulness is not perhaps ideal for such material – though you could, of course, argue it enhances the impact!

Heresy IIIs are actually neat floorstanders, intended to sit on small plinth-like risers that tilt the front of the speaker back slightly. It would also be possible to use the speakers on small stands that lift them clear of the floor – or even wall shelves. This being the case, they might appeal to those listening in small rooms.

But while these speakers should perform well in a limited space, I fear their exceptional immediacy may prove a bit over-powering if heard too close-up. Like most horns, the Heresy III benefits from a degree of distance between loudspeaker and listener. So, try not to sit too close – give the speakers space to breathe. I sat about 3.6-4.5m back – sufficient distance to give the sound a chance to blend and integrate better. Horns tend to be at their best in medium/large rooms, and the Heresy III is no exception. You get a more holographic 'out of the box' kind of 3D soundstage as you move further back.

Of course, everything depends on the sort of sound you like. With Heresy IIIs, you're effectively sat closer to the musicians. The H1 is akin to moving back 10 or 15 rows. Both speakers sounded very convincing, albeit different. The Klipsch is exceptionally involving – very good at recreating the excitement and drama of a live music event.

It has something of the electric immediacy you experience when you hear music played live. It really engages you – involves you in the action. It's not, perhaps, a speaker for background listening, though the sound proved surprisingly easy to 'talk over', even when loud. It's forceful and dynamic, but not brash or hectoring.

While I'm not quite ready to chop up my H1's for firewood, the Heresy III definitely highlighted areas where my regular speakers could do better – showed me aspects of my own sound that might be improved. As a result, I made a few changes to my home system.

Even the fact that comparisons were invited is in itself remarkable. When you take the combined price of the speakers and sub, plus the fact that something like a Shanling MC-30 can be used, a pair of Klipsch Heresy IIIs (with or without the RW-10d sub) is a real high-end bargain.

Partner a pair of Heresy IIIs with an MC-30 and a Klipsch Sub, and you've an amazing system for just under £3k; a combination that punches well above its weight, if you like its basic sonic signature. It's a system you might have to spend £6k (or more!) just to equal. So, definitely try to hear this combination before you spend £2k-3k on a set of speakers. +



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Klipsch Heresy III Loudspeakers

**Frequency response:** 58Hz-20kHz(+/-)3dB

**Power Handling:** 100 w max continuous (400 w peak)

**Sensitivity:** 99dB @ 1watt/1meter

**Nominal Impedance:** 8 ohms

**Crossover Frequency:** HF: 5000Hz  
LF: 850Hz

**Maximum Acoustic Output:** 116dB SPL

**Tweeter:** K-107-TI 1" (2.54cm) Titanium diaphragm compression driver

**High Frequency Horn:** Tractrix Horn

**Midrange:** K-53-TI 1.75" (4.45 cm) Titanium diaphragm compression driver

**Mid Frequency Horn:** Exponential Horn

**Woofer:** K-28-E 12" (30.48cm) Fiber-composite cone

**Exposure Material:** MDF

**Exposure Type:** Sealed

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 23.81" (60.48 cm) x 15.5" (39.37 cm) x 13.25" (33.66 cm)

**Weight:** 44 lbs unboxed

**Finishes:** Walnut Lacquer, Cherry Lacquer, Black Lacquer

**Price:** £1,500/pair

Klipsch and Shanling equipment supplied by Real Hi-Fi Company

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**URL:** [www.realhi-fi.com](http://www.realhi-fi.com)

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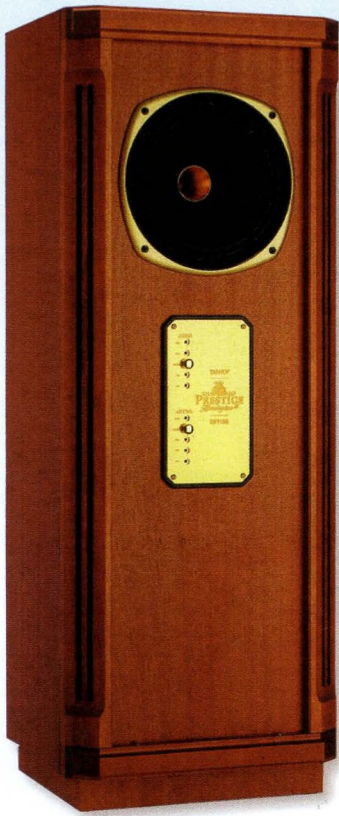
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# Acoustic Solid Solid One, The Cartridge Man The Conductor and MusicMaker Classic LE

by Alan Sircom

**W**hat's amazing about vinyl is that it doesn't just refuse to die, it positively thrives in the face of seeming adversity. The music business may have written the format off two decades ago and yet it looks like it will outlast its polycarbonate replacement. But best of all, the products used to replay vinyl just keep getting better and better.

This trio of Acoustic Solid Solid One turntable with two products from The Cartridge Man – The Conductor parallel tracking air-bearing tonearm and the MusicMaker Classic LE cartridge – explains why. Were you to have tried to achieve what this system can do when vinyl was in its heyday, the cost would have been truly astronomic... and you wouldn't have got near what these products can do. And yet, although not exactly bargain-basement prices, we're far from pushing the boundaries of LP playback costs.

The Solid One lives up to the name; 'Bloody Heavy One' might be more appropriate. Acoustic Solid makes a range of non-suspended turntables, all from the drawing board of German engineer Karl Wirth. For an industry filled with 'interesting' takes on good engineering, the Solid One is a paragon of down-to-earth mechanical principles. Think mass

meets high quality, almost interference fit bearing. Most of the deck is solid aluminium alloy. The non-inverted bearing is a plastic-coated oversized brass affair and turns on a highly-polished ceramic ball. It all sits on three adjustable feet with a fixed position outrigger for the tonearm and two free-space components for the motor and the speed control. You can use two extra arm bases if you want to multi-task your vinyl replay and almost any arm can be accommodated. The only deviation from the Solid One norm was that the supplier HiAudio chose to forgo the suede leather mat and go instead for The Cartridge Man's own £85 Music Mat, which is very good, but feels like you are plonking your music on a slice of carefully-cut liver.

The deck is joined by The Conductor; a low mass airbearing parallel tracking arm. Simple in execution, the carbon fibre arm tube sits atop an aluminium collar and this floats along the tangential air beam, which is ▶

▶ connected to a low-pressure air pump (with a smoothing tank) that you can locate somewhere in the house. This fishtank pump is smaller, easier to hide and a lot less noisy than the usual compressor option. The arm 'floats' on a series of holes atop the air beam – think 'air hockey'. The advantage to this system is it's essentially self-cleaning, as dust is pushed out of the air holes in the beam. The output wires poke out of the top of the arm and these look deceptively thin, but work well.

The last link in the chain was the MusicMaker Classic LE cartridge. A moving iron design combining the output of moving magnet with the lower moving mass of a moving coil, the Classic is unique among non-moving coil cartridges in its use of pure silver conductors, hand wound by Len Gregory himself (The Cartridge Man of the title). It is based – like the MusicMaker III – on a Grado Prestige cartridge. Again, like the deck and arm, there's a sense of no-nonsense rightness to this. Even the Isolator (two slivers of stainless steel separated by a compliant material, designed to sit between cartridge and arm) helps push arm resonance out of band.

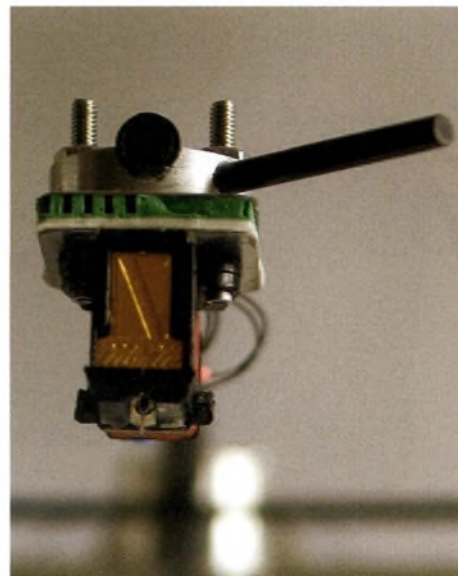
The whole shebang took several days to run in, then the outside world got cold, and it took several days to run in again, and again. Even from semi-frozen, the sound was remarkable, the sluggishness of the deck notwithstanding. When the ambient temperature was high enough not to have ice form on the cartridge tags over this winter, it turned into something remarkable, and when those 50-60 hours of record playing were over, it went into world-class mode.

*“There’s a sense of active balance going on, a synergy that makes all the components add up.”*

In some respects, this is a package that dare not be separated. It's almost dynamically balanced to work and work brilliantly, but change one of the parameters and you risk losing all in the process. For example, change the Music Mat with something more felt and less squidgy and the sound pitches toward the treble – not badly, just enough to make Frank Sinatra's voice slightly edgy in his Paris concerts, and Frank Black's Telecaster go from 'brrrang' to 'Brrranggg' on the Pixies *Surfer Rosa* album. In other words, not a deal-breaker, but not totally accurate. On the other hand, even without the Music Mat in place, the sound was still possessed of excellent bass depth, dynamics and definition.

The whole package though, that's a different thing altogether. There's a sense of active balance going on, a synergy that makes all the components add up to more than the sum of their parts. And that's saying a lot, because the individual parts are pretty damn wonderful. Taken individually, the cartridge delivers a consummately musical performance, one that doesn't grace or favour any aspect of the performance and comes across as fundamentally neutral and accurate. There might be better cartridges out there, but you really need to do some searching to find them... and they won't come cheap.

Then, the arm. You have to remember, most vinyl fans have an automatic reaction to air bearing arms; they are either crushingly expensive or should come



with a maintenance engineer on 24 hour call-out. Or both. Then along comes Len Gregory and makes one that is neither; OK, £1,500 is not exactly loose change, but compared to the likes of Air Tangents or Forsells, it's virtually being given away. Even keeping the arm clean is relatively easy – if dust gets into the airholes (and it will), simply pushing the collar over the holes a couple of times when the air pressure is on will fix most problems (failing that, a quick wipe with a sable brush should do the trick). The Conductor arm is simply excellent – managing to deliver the sort of bass energy and dynamics pivoted bearings are best known for, with most of the musical 'bounce' you'd attribute to a unipivot, all the while making an incredibly precise sound completely free from end of side distortion. And it doesn't stop tracking properly when faced with a record with some warp. What's not to love?

The tired cliché of a floor strewn with album covers is unfortunately based in truth. This deck did end up making a lot of albums come out of their sleeves, many for the first time in years. What was particularly attractive about the combination was just how quiet the background noise was... unless you had a disc that had been through the wars in its former life. ▶

# DEFINITIVE AUDIO



1. KSL Kondo M7 Line Preamplifier
2. Living Voice OBX-RW Loudspeaker in Ebony
3. New Audio Frontiers 845 SE Integrated Amplifier
4. KSL Kondo Neuro Integrated Amplifier

5. SME 2012A Turntable with KSL Kondo iOJ Cartridge
6. New Audio Frontiers KT66 Legend Integrated Amplifier
7. Kore-Eda LLA-1 Control Amplifier  
PLA-1 Power Amplifier



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KSL Kondo | Living Voice | New Audio Frontiers | Van Den Hul (cartridges) | SME | CEC | Kore-Eda | Sugden | Art Audio | Western Electric | Resolution | Esoteric | Reson

▶ A particular strength of the package was its solidity, and the way it could pick individual instruments out of the soundstage. Vocals in particular were spectacular; detailed, accurate, and possessed of a feeling of a singer sitting right in front of you. This applied whether the singer was the late Kate McGarrigle singing *a capella* or a massed choir backed up by an orchestra; the sense of individual voices in their own real spaces was hard to miss.

There's not much to hold this back. OK, those who want every tonearm to look like an SME will find the 'utility' appeal of The Conductor hard to stomach. Finally, those with pets may find they get strangely obsessed with the put-put-put sound of the fish pump; my two cats dug up some atavistic need to connect with a fishtank and were found trying to chew through the blue air pipes. These are not what you'd call 'criticisms', though.

There is no one answer to the turntable question. But you could roll out a hundred different combinations of turntable, arm and cartridge and not have as great a hit as this combo. It all balances perfectly.

It would be hard to pick out a star from this firmament, because they are all in extremely good company. On the other hand, perhaps the true star of the show is the MusicMaker LE cartridge, because it manages to combine the best properties of a range of excellent cartridges without introducing any weaknesses and tracks like a masterpiece. In comparison, the Conductor is merely 'excellent' and the Solid One barely makes it past 'fantastic'. Or, if you look at it from another angle, the Conductor makes air bearing arms a practical (and excellent sounding) reality for more people than ever before and that makes it the best of the bunch. Then there's the Solid One, which shows just fine good but basic engineering can sound, without any of the BS that surrounds many high-end decks. Put it this way, if you are looking for a great turntable, tonearm or cartridge, all three are here. If you are looking for a great turntable package, this is it. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Acoustic Solid Solid One turntable

Suspensionless design

**Platter:** 50mm aluminium billet

**Plinth:** 80mm aluminium body, on three adjustable feet

**Motor:** synchronous 24v AC motor, with separate speed control

**Drive system:** thread drive, independently housed motor

Optional additional tonearm outriggers

**Dimensions (in cm):** 43Wx43D

**Weight:** 37kg

**Price:** £4,750

**Manufactured by** Acoustic Solid

**URL:** [www.acoustic-solid.de](http://www.acoustic-solid.de)

The Cartridge Man Conductor arm

Air-bearing parallel tracking pickup arm

**Spindle centre to centre of mounting pillar distance:** 215-225mm

**Arm tube mass:** low

**Cartridge fixing:** standard two hole (untapped)

**Total assembly weight:** 560g

**Air inputs:** 2

**Price:** £1,500 (£2,000 with Cardas wire)

MusicMaker Classic LE

Variable-reluctance stereo phono cartridge with line-contact stylus and silver coils.

**Output:** 4.0 mV output

**Loading:** 47K ohms (not capacitance sensitive.)

**Tracking Force:** 1.6 grams.

**VTA/SRA Alignment:** Front face of cartridge perpendicular to record surface (viewed from the side).

**Price:** £1,650

**Manufactured by** The Cartridge Man

**URL:** [www.thecartridgeman.com](http://www.thecartridgeman.com)

**Tel:** +44(0) 208 688 6565

**Distributed by** Hi Audio

**URL:** [www.hiaudio.co.uk](http://www.hiaudio.co.uk)

**Tel:** +44(0)4850 525259

cartridge perpendicular to record surface (viewed from the side).

**Price:** £1,650

**Manufactured by** The Cartridge Man

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Lineflux (RCA)



Powerflux-18UK

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Jumperflux-S



Jumperflux-B



Flux-50filter

## Silver Arrows-12 & Ag-12 Phono Cable



Silver Arrows-12 (DIN.RCA)



Ag-12 Phono Cable

The Silver Arrows Pure Silver Phono Cable achieves its remarkably quiet soundstage and elegant, nuanced sound with pure silver conductors, four - layer shielding and external ground wire, even a specially engineered cable clamp to improve grip and avoid any distortion whatsoever.

*"The award for best performance and highest build quality at the lowest price goes to the Furutech AG-12."*

— Michael Fremer, Stereophile July 2009 Vol.32 No.7

## CF Series



CF-102 (R)



CF-201 (R)



CF-202 (R)

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Devilsound v2.1 DAC

By Alan Sircom

One of the great joys of the computer audio revolution is that you can approach it with as much or as little OCD as possible. You can ensure every last checkbox is ticked, isolating the computer from the rest of the system, spending weeks trying every possible USB cable, media player software and compression rate, or you can take a computer, plug it into a DAC, and plug that into your amp. The amount of effort you put

into the process dictates the ultimate performance, but everyone's got to start somewhere, and the Devilsound DAC is the ideal launch pad.

It comes in a box not much larger than a CD jewel case and comprises USB socket at one end, a pair of silver cables terminated in Eichmann Silver Bullet plugs at the other and in between is a digital converter about the size of a book of matches. The whole thing is seven foot long, with an additional 10 foot USB-USB connector available. It couldn't be simpler to use, as it doesn't require drivers for Mac or PC; just plug it in, select the relevant control panel on screen and you are good to go.

The Devilsound takes its power (regenerated, thanks to a MAX8614 DC-DC converter chip) from the PC. Inside the box is a Burr-Brown PCM2706 as low-jitter USB receiver, a pair of Analog Devices AS1851 DAC chips and a custom Xilinx logic device for bit and channel splitting, with a single op amp output stage free from coupling caps. All of this is explained in healthy amounts of detail on the Devilsound website, and is well worth checking out as a model of clear information about a relatively complicated subject. Version 2.1 brings cryo-chilled cables to the party.

There's an interesting comparison between the Devilsound and the Naim DAC. The Devilsound is how you might expect the Naim to sound; it's lively, up-beat and possessed of a wicked sense of rhythm. The comparison ends there, because the Naim product has more detail, a more accurate balance and more poise than the Devilsound (as you'd hope, given the more than seven times price differential).

The convertor is extremely good at playing well-recorded music (like Johnny Cash's *American III*), with a big, immediately impressive soundstage, a strong and deep bass and lots of energy from top to bottom. Less well-recorded music (like Vampire

Weekend) is also big and impressive, even when it isn't. This is not a big complaint, and the smooth mids and top more than make up for the overt impressiveness, especially when price and convenience is taken into account. And what remains especially good about the Devilsound is its ability to handle vocals with ease and detail – Ali Farka Touré's final *Savane* album is a perfect example, handling the frail power of a dying man's voice with exceptional grace.

DACs that take both datastream and power from USB are compromised next to a converter that has its own power supply. And, although 'compromised' doesn't seem like the right word here, that holds with the Devilsound too. This is a quality product in a very small package that represents the perfect starting place for computer audio without tears, and you do have to go very far up the DAC list to find better. +



### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Devilsound DAC v2.1

16 bit, non-oversampling USB DAC

**Recorded frequencies covered:**

32, 44.1, 48kHz

Regenerates power from PC

Integrated unit with cryo-frozen silver

cables and Eichmann Silver Bullet plugs

**Price:** £269

**Manufactured by** Devilsound

**URL:** [www.devilsound.com](http://www.devilsound.com)

**Internationally Distributed by**

On a Higher Note

**URL:** [www.onahighernote.com](http://www.onahighernote.com)

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# The whole GamuT...

by Roy Gregory

**F**or most readers, GamuT is a name more often associated with electronics, their D200 power amp attracting considerable attention when it was launched (originally as a studio product under the Sirius brand) back in 1999. What's less well known is the company also has a good reputation for ambitious loudspeakers, like the new El Superiores 9.

GamuT's loudspeaker line came about with collaboration with Lars Goller, formerly of ScanSpeak. This led to Goller first joining and subsequently buying GamuT... so he finds himself an OEM customer for his own driver designs.

This is a genuine no-compromise implementation and extension of the Goller low-loss philosophy, first seen in his distinctive slotted cone ScanSpeak drivers. Cutting the cones and then sealing those cuts with a dissimilar material keeps things light and rigid while breaking up the dominant resonance that might store energy. The S9 is also an entirely phase coherent system, with minimal hybrid first-order crossover slopes and very long overlaps between the drivers. In fact, the whole design revolves around maximising the in-phase output of the mid driver and minimizing damping materials in the system.

Despite the large size of the cabinet, it represents a single enclosed volume, the expressed intention being to extend the fundamental resonance of the mid-driver (and hence its in-phase output) as low as possible. By adding a tapered tap from the bass leg of the crossover, that actually extends down from flat at 200Hz to a -10dB point at 28Hz. That requires a genuinely long throw driver and GamuT's midrange unit employs a generous

roll surround to handle all that LF energy.

The rest of the drivers are the familiar ring radiator high-frequency unit and a trio of identical, pulp coned bass units, allowing the S9 to move serious amounts of air. A low-ish overall efficiency of 88.5dB and the size of the cabinet serve notice of serious low-end intent. But, with no shortage of bass impact and weight despite a modest -3dB figure of 26Hz, this is more about deliverable power than ultimate extension.

The drive units and electrical topology are only part of this story. The cabinet is designed to operate almost without mechanical damping. Instead, the walls are built from a combination of 10mm of solid wood bonded to 20mm birch ply. The grooves cut in the outer walls are similar in function to those slots in the midrange drivers. What you can't see is a fan of similar grooves cut into the inner faces, which in conjunction with those on the outside, subdivide the large panels into much smaller, irregularly shaped sectors or zones. Internal wadding is confined to layers of different density synthetic wool positioned to impede internal standing waves. Driver/cabinet interaction is handled by notch filters in the crossover rather than



mechanical damping, GamuT feeling that this has a less intrusive effect on the energy spectrum of the music. Likewise, the wooden plugs used in the centre of each bass driver are individually tuned to the driver in question.

The attention to detail and singularity of design extends to all aspects of the S9. The reflex ports are turned from brass and mounted to stainless steel plates that act to inhibit resonance in the rear panel, while the solid steel base adds mass and stability, along with four spiked feet for levelling, along with integral skates for hard floors – when a speaker weighs this much spikes become superfluous! Even the purpose built terminals are unique in execution and philosophy, their massive conical faces designed to maximise the contact for Goller's preferred bare wire termination. Don't worry; they take 4mm plugs too... The vestigial grilles are removable and I actually prefer the appearance without them, although there's no sonic benefit to their absence.

As well as the speakers, and in keeping with the 'system solution' approach, GamuT also brought a set of matching electronics, consisting of a CD3 CD player, D3i line-stage and a pair of M250i mono amps. These are not exactly bargain basement items, although their combined cost pales when compared to asking price for the S9s, something akin to heresy in the UK. Yet, in practice, the notion that loudspeakers should once again receive rather more of your budget is once again gaining traction.

*“Fire up the GamuT system and there's no mistaking the sheer power that's on offer. So much so, I found myself lamenting the lack of a volume level readout!”*

In depth discussion of the electronics is beyond the scope of this review, but they all share the same clean, uncluttered aesthetic, their brushed aluminium front-panels sprinkled with blue LEDs and circular knobs and buttons. The overall effect is techy without being overbearing, Scandinavian without being painfully austere – and for what it's worth, I rather like it. GamuT prefer balanced connection throughout the chain so that's how I ran the system. One fact to conjure with: rated at 250 Watts into an 8 Ohm load, the S9s are a nominal 4 Ohms with a fairly benign minimum at 3.1 Ohms. That makes this a system with an awful lot of headroom – and an equal degree of temptation!

Lars Goller himself set the system up, with the electronics installed on the finite-elemente Master Reference rack and the speakers set with an unusually wide stance and firing virtually straight ahead in the room. And I wasn't about to risk trying to shunt them around, not with each one weighing so much. I mention this because, ultimately I can't help feeling that the set up actually impacted on the sonic and musical results achieved.

Fire up the GamuT system and there's no mistaking the sheer power that's on offer. So much so, I found myself lamenting the lack of a volume level readout! The GamuT is definitely a LOUDspeaker. Driven by the unflappable M250i amplifiers it will play at prodigious levels; in fact, it will play louder even than you think, so clean is the sound that apparent volume is deceptive due to the lack of strain, glare or harshness. But pull out an SPL meter and the truth is quickly revealed.

Along with the available level comes an almost visceral sense of presence and musical substance. There's a solidity and intensity to instruments and voices, an almost palpable sense of drive and energy that projects the music

into the listening room, making for dramatic musical performance, full of contrast and vivid colour, an expressive richness that transcends the cool, collected balance of the driving electronics. This is no lush, rounded or overly warm sounding system – but it is a system where instrumental colours seemingly vibrate with sheer energy. Indeed, at low-frequencies, the combination of power, presence and texture is absolutely first class. The Avalon Isis go deeper and deliver greater transparency and definition, but the S9s are spectacularly capable of reproducing convincing bass instruments and separating them out when they overlap.

Which brings us in turn to what is for me a presentational problem with this GamuT system. With many speakers or components under review, a particular disc seems to encapsulate their character, often revealing both their strengths (or style) and their weaknesses. For the GamuT system that disc was the Polskie Radio recording of the Gorecki 3rd Symphony. This live, hybrid SACD, with its tremendous atmosphere and emotional intensity, built on the bass heavy scoring of Gorecki's popular work plays straight to the power and presence of the Gamut system. As the conductor (Gorecki himself) enters the hall, you can hear an explosive reception of considerable warmth, one that should reach out and envelop the listener. Only with the Gamut system it doesn't. The spatial spread is good, but the applause never reaches out to encompass the listening seat. It also lacks some of its explosive quality, with fewer individual claps breaking out of the whole. Likewise, the shuffling as the orchestra settles is disjointed and lacks the spatial coherence I'm used to. It becomes discrete noises, rather than a single group of distinct but unified individuals, laid out on the stage.

The bowed bass melody is beautifully resonant and purposeful, despite the measured tempo, while the organ pedals are superbly separated and sonorous: The gradual layering of instruments as the piece builds, the increasing intensity of the playing – both are wonderfully captured. But spatially the acoustic is vague and instrumental position is poorly defined. While wide, the soundstage lacks depth and continuity across its width. ▶

▶ Now, all I can report on is the sound that I experienced in my room, while the impracticality of manoeuvring the speakers meant that any kind of exploratory or corrective action was impossible. In other words, listen in your own environment, with your set up and you could get wildly different results. What is also important to consider is that, spatial aspects aside, this system has some very impressive qualities to enjoy and admire and there's no escaping its musical impact or emotional communication.

Reach for Joe Cocker's *Sheffield Steel* and you are in for a treat. Right from the very first snare beat the solid, tactile bottom-end that came out of Compass Point Studios, the mobile, fluidity of the bass guitar, the substantial presence of the drums, are physically projected into your room. Cocker's impassioned vocals are driven forward, underpinned by the solid, propulsive rhythms and instrumental arrangements, leaving you in no doubt either of the power of this performance or Joe's status as one of the great soul voices. It's also music that thrives on the GamuTs' urgency and desire to be driven, just as much as the speakers respond to the dynamic demands of the signal.

Nothing I threw at the GamuT set-up, no matter how dense, loud or dynamic, phased it or threw it off balance. Even the thunderous opening to the *Thin Red Line OST* failed to disturb their calm. Instead, the stability and substance brought an almost hypnotic quality to the music, the gentle melodies stark against the rolling power of the backing, the fragility of humanity against

the unstoppable, surging power of the Pacific Ocean crashing on the reef. As the piece opens out and develops more space and texture the melodies descend to the bottom end of the cello register, bringing drama and the sense of impending doom. The third track builds more slowly but if anything, reaches an even more thunderous crescendo. It's a powerfully memorable performance in every sense. The S9s didn't manage to threaten the structural integrity of my listening room, but they were mightily impressive even so and I can't honestly say I felt any lack of scale or power.

So, it's safe to say that they do big, but can the S9s do small? How about Shawn Colvin's 'Shotgun Down The Avalanche', a track of almost preternatural immediacy and life. It's complex rhythmic stutters and hesitations are handled with ease, the drum beat trip-hammer solid, the shape and attack on the guitar chords keeping things tight and under control. But that vocal delicacy and the dexterity in the fingering are gone, the tiny micro dynamic details that breathe life into the recording. It's almost as if the system is selective in its musical delivery, cleaving to structure at the expense of the finer details and delicacies.

Just as it's the speakers that draw the eye (and, given the chance, pummel the ear) it's hard to resist the temptation offered by alternative amplification – especially as there's a Briston 14B SST sitting idle in the corner of the room...

Now, in price terms this is something of a mismatch, the 14B SST weighing in at around a third of the price of the M250is – a factor that was all too apparent when it came to the degree of detail and finesse on offer – but what it does have on its side is about twice the rated output (900 Watts into the S9's 4 Ohm load). It also has a more fluid delivery. Yes, there's less definition, particularly at the frequency extremes, but there's a greater sense of midrange coherence, at least in purely temporal terms. Musically, this translates to a more convincingly present vocal from Ms. Colvin, at the expense of a loss of detail and definition on the bells and other percussion which litter the album; a greater sense of building drama in *The Thin Red Line* at the expense of scale and power. ▶





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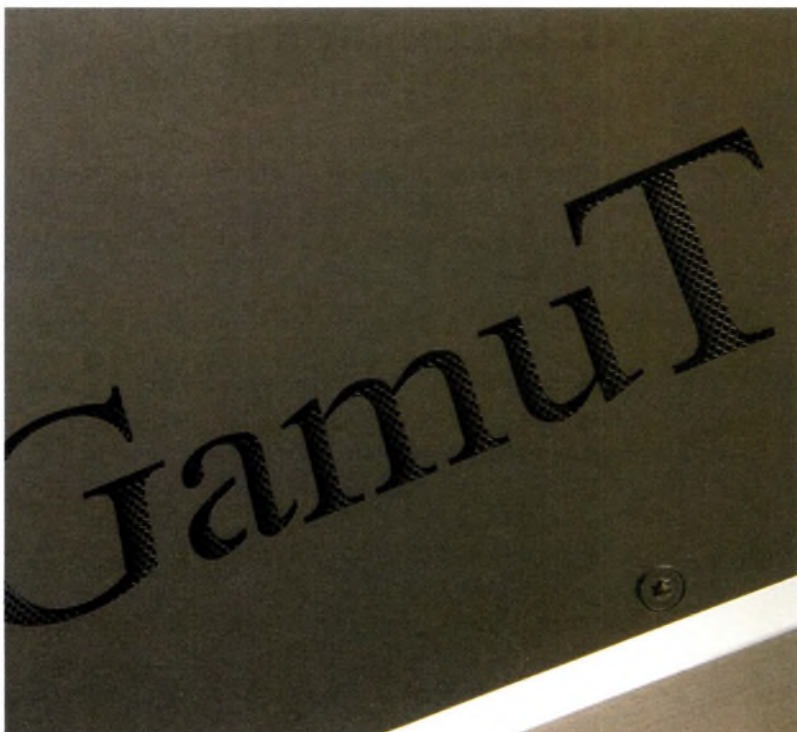
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## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

GamuT El Superiores S9 Loudspeaker

**Type:** Three-way, reflex loaded loudspeaker

**Driver Complement:**

1x ScanSpeak ring radiator HF

1x ScanSpeak 180mm slotted paper cone MF

3x ScanSpeak 250mm fibre coned LF

**Impedance:** 4 Ohms nominal

**Sensitivity:** 88.5dB

**Bandwidth:** -3dB @ 26Hz

**Price:** £64,550 - £75,950/pair

GamuT CD3

**Type:** CD player

**Price:** £4,700

GamuT D3i

**Type:** Line stage preamplifier

**Price:** £5,000

GamuT M250i

**Type:** Mono power amplifiers

**Price:** £15,900 pair

**UK Distributor**

Audio Reference

**URL:** [www.audioreference.co.uk](http://www.audioreference.co.uk)

**TEL:** +44(0) 1252 7027051

**Manufacturer**

GamuT International A/S

**URL:** [www.gamutaudio.com](http://www.gamutaudio.com)

- It's almost as if the GamuT amps are spending their power on controlling the entire musical spectrum and holding it all in line, while the Bryston is simply throwing itself behind the mid and trusting that the rest will follow. And that seems to be the nub of the question: do you want detail and definition or do you want flow and momentum? Different listeners will definitely lean towards a different solution or balance of virtues.

The Bryston experience is enlightening on two counts: it demonstrates just how even and controlled the GamuT electronics are, very models of balanced operation and reproductive precision; but it also shows their inherent character and reveals the inevitable costs that come with any approach. Bear in mind that the Bryston offers a tighter and more controlled view of events than most. Perhaps it really is just about power and the relative virtues of these two solid-state heavyweights simply reflect that. The bottom line in any case is not which I might prefer, but what you should expect when listening to the GamuT system and in that respect the answer is only too clear.

Standing as it is, the GamuT equipment delivers a performance of phenomenal power and scale, with a seemingly unburstable appetite when it comes to wide bandwidth signal and propulsive musical energy. It stands squarely in the high-definition corner of the hi-fi ring, and if this was a cage fight, I'm not sure the SETs trying to stare it down from the opposite corner would be attracting much money. What you get is solid slabs of sound that fill the end of your listening room and advance towards you with an unstoppable sense of the inevitable. Musically speaking, you want power? You want to be almost physically moved? This will do it every time. Whether it's the searing guitar riffs of Cheap Trick's *Live At The Budokan* (definitely the number one air guitar album of all time) or the stacked power chords of Echo's 'Forgiven', the GamuTs deliver sound that's seriously solid. If the price you pay is at the micro end of the scale, charged in terms of intimacy and musical sleight of hand, there are many listeners who will happily pay that bill.

The first rule of buying hi-fi is to be honest to yourself. Don't do a Desert Island Discs and select some obscure and impenetrable piece of 20th Century

chamber music just because it makes you seem intellectually equipped. When it comes to music, emotion wins out every time – and if that means The Clash and 'London's Calling' then the GamuTs will deliver in style. Joe might not have liked the price, but boy would he have approved the performance! While the S9 is big and expensive, GamuT offer a whole range of products at more affordable prices – and this is one company with a very clear idea of exactly where it's going with each of its designs. Sign up and I'm sure they'll take you there. +

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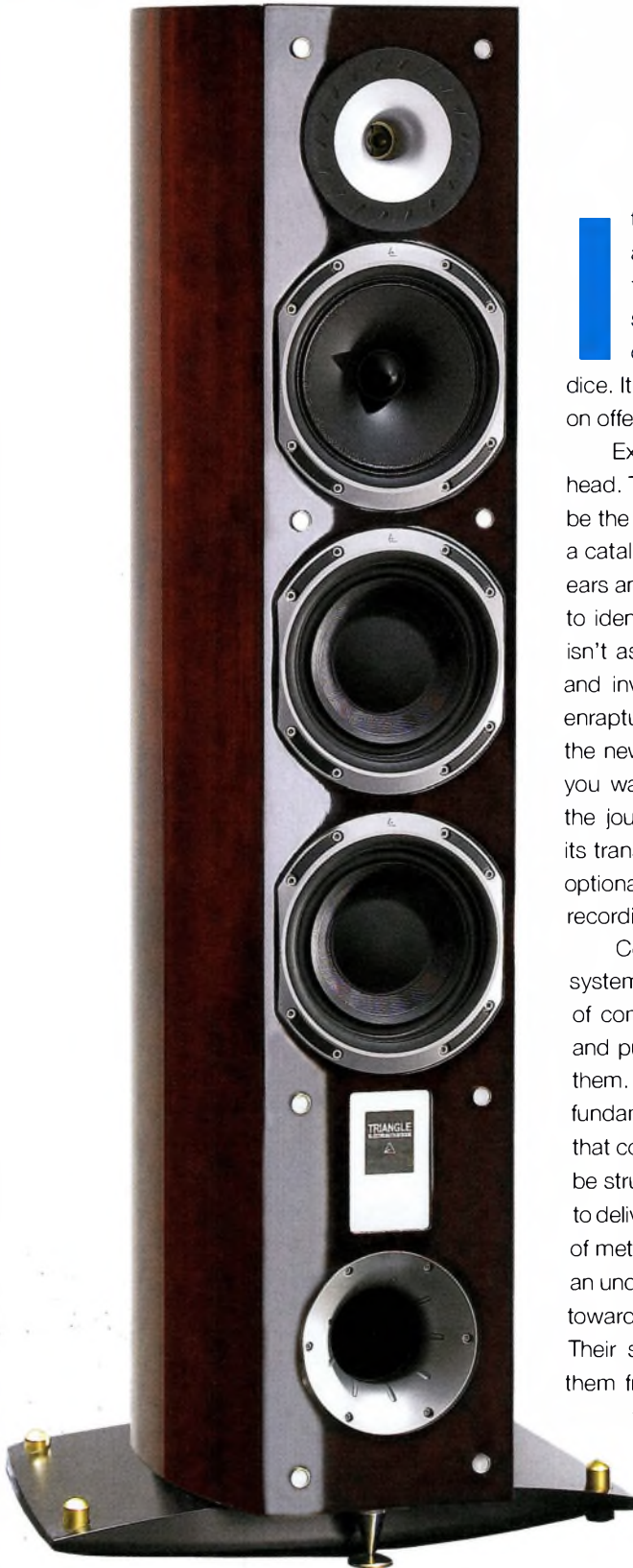
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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Avid/Emillé/Triangle system

by David Vivian



It seems obvious – but is strangely under appreciated – that a hi-fi system only works if someone is listening to it. Being in the same room while it's playing doesn't count. Being in the same room while it's playing and prising the cap from a bottle of Corona doesn't count either. Reading the newspaper? No dice. It's a kind of non-binding contract. To get the most from what's on offer, the stipulation is you have to pay attention.

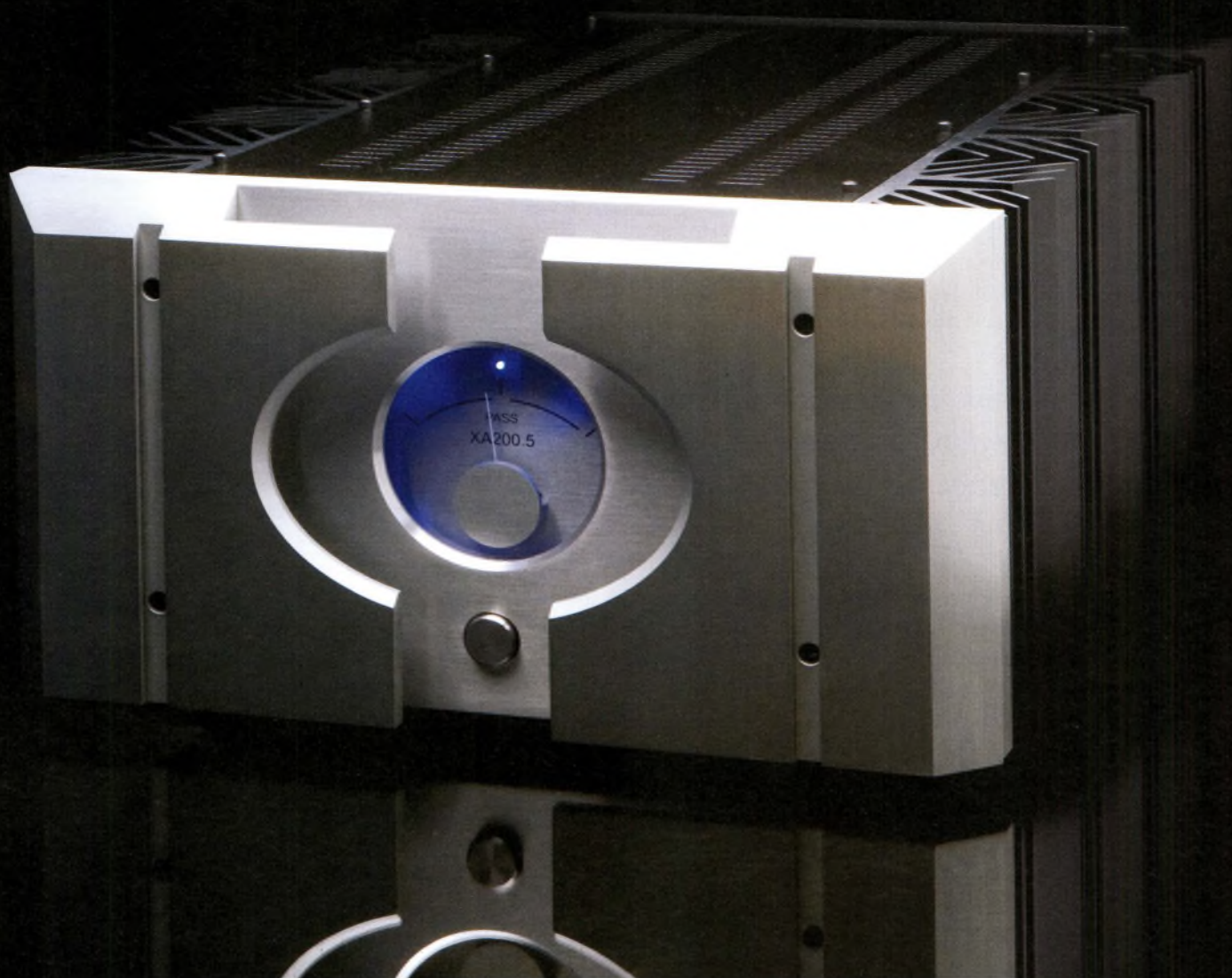
Except, of course, you don't. No one's holding a gun to your head. The world is full of hi-fi that's used but isn't listened to. It might be the provider of high-quality background music. It might serve up a catalogue of subtle sonic 'ticks' that only those with experienced ears and a deep core obsession with audio hardware would be able to identify. But that isn't listening, it's analysing. Take it from me, it isn't as much fun. No, for a hi-fi system to work, it must engage and involve the listener: charm, seduce, shock, thrill, mesmerise, enrapture – whatever the music dictates. That means sitting on the newspaper and not noticing. It means being acutely aware that you want to drink beer but finding yourself unable to embark on the journey to the fridge. It means being immersed in music and its transformative power. Pretending to play a non-existent guitar is optional but usually a good sign (so long as there's a guitar on the recording).

Connection is crucial, and it's amazing how many mega systems fail to make it happen. This handsome, imposing coalition of components drawn from the UK, Germany, Korea and France and put together by UK cable specialist Merlin Cables isn't one of them. And I'll posit one theory before I've even switched it on. Its fundamental aim is true. Beneath all the myriad layers of hi-fi minutiae that contribute to a system's sonic signature, there is a basic deal to be struck between excitement and refinement that has the potential to deliver more enduring listenability and satisfaction than any amount of meticulous sonic tweaking and titivation. High-end systems have an understandable – but, in some cases, musically debilitating – bias towards over-arching refinement. In many ways it's their calling card. Their sumptuous reserves of couth and smoothness differentiate them from less expensive componentry, so it's hardly a surprising trait. There are some notable exceptions that deliberately rail against the caramel tide by ramping up the thrill- and grit-factors, but usually at the expense of subtlety and fine detail. Either way, you know you're being sold a style of presentation designed to tickle your fancy. It can work, ▶

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► too. But from the moment you're 'hooked', chances are the countdown to niggling dissatisfaction and boredom has begun.

Time to introduce the band. This is a binary-free system, by the way, so when I say front end first I mean a turntable. And they don't come more and potently unfrilly and sharply focused than the Avid Volvere Sequel SP. One of the true avatars of the analogue revival, Cambridge-based Avid's founder Conrad Mas went into business with the belief that there had to be a better way to build a turntable and several clean sheets of paper. The result was the Acutus, a formidable Optimus Prime of a sprung sub-chassis, precision engineered deck that embodied his 'best principles' thinking, particularly with respect to the way vibrations caused by the stylus during playback are dealt with by the rest of the structure.

According to Mas, the key to a turntable's performance is the path this vibration takes and, ideally, it should be transmitted to the sub chassis directly

*"The result was the Acutus, a formidable Optimus Prime of a sprung sub-chassis, precision engineered deck that embodied his 'best principles' thinking."*

through the main bearing and not be allowed to be absorbed into the platter itself. Avid claims to achieve the desired vibration routing by using a 'unique' single point carbide/sapphire bearing, a special matting material and a very substantial two-piece clamping system. Other notable tenets of the Avid approach realised in the Acutus include a three-point suspension system which combines strong vertical springs with 'O' rings positioned to discourage any lateral movement and a very high torque twin-belt drive system utilising a purpose designed power supply, incorporating DSP signal generation for truly accurate speed setting. The good news is that the Acutus's much more affordable 'baby brother', the Volvere Sequel, shares precisely the same design – albeit in 'bulked-down' form – and that most of the evolutionary improvements to the flagship model (most notably the DSP vari-speed power supply, twin-belt drive and special single-point bearing) have been trickled down to create this latest, up-graded 'SP' edition. Of course, it isn't as good

as the standard Acutus (never mind the more recent Acutus Reference and Anniversary models), but Mas reckons that, despite the less massive build, the design and fine tolerance engineering gets it remarkably close considering that it's less than half the price. In keeping with the Sequel's function-first ethos, the immaculately engineered SME IV tone arm and svelte, sprightly Benz Micro SLR Gullwing moving coil complete the synergistic trinity.

Next on stage, unpacked from some unnecessarily large, handsome and sturdy transit cases shipped in from Korea, are Emillé Labs' hardly petite Allure MC/MM phono stage and frankly gigantic Cha'am integrated amp. As we've come to expect from our previous encounters with Emillé – the unlikely uber-purist valve audio offshoot of Kwangwoo Electronics Co Ltd, a company that produces cathode ray gun parts for Samsung – size does matter, as do presence, weight, solidity, tactility and show-off, spotlit quality. All this is right on the serious high-end money, even though the actual bottom line is some way shy of it. The Allure has a four-pillared anodized aluminium chassis that would do justice to a meaty, rack-filling integrated and retro-tech styling straight out of the past-meets-future sci-fi set design handbook. It weighs an immodest 20 kilos but then 'lavish' hardly covers the span of its build and component complement which includes large and visible film capacitors for the regulated DC power supply, a Lundahi MC step-up transformer, gold-plated glass ►



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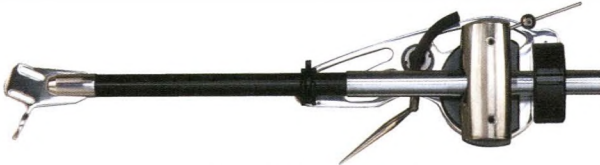
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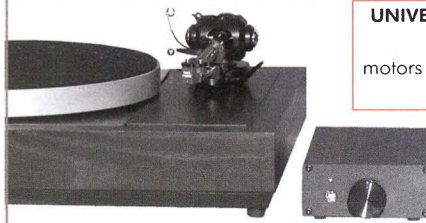
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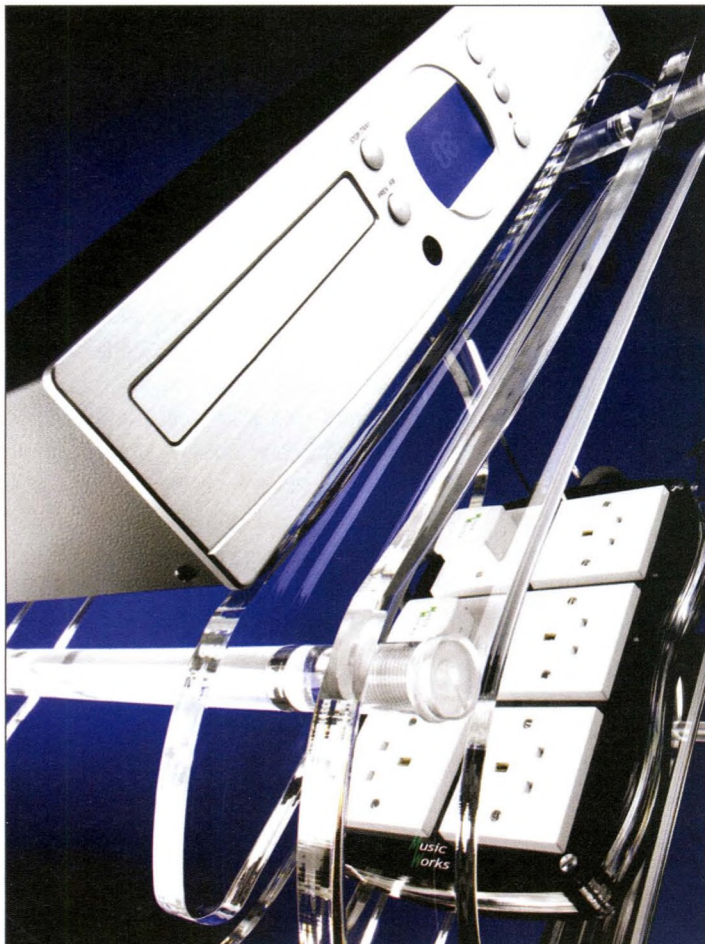
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► epoxy PCBs, silver-plated wiring, gold-plated sockets for the four 6DJ8 valves, Jantzen Superior silver/gold coupling capacitors and WBT connectors. There are just three controls: the power-up button, MC/MM selector and six-stage attenuator gain control. It is dwarfed, however, by the Cha'am, a dual mono integrated amp of such unfettered stature and weight (44 kilos) that it takes two people just to lift it onto its dedicated low-rise perspex and aluminium anti-vibration platform. Its aluminium plate chassis is similar to the Allure's inasmuch as the electronics are cradled between four solid aluminium pillars, but with the open valve decks flanking a central 'saddle' that houses the switchable twin output/bias meters and volume control. Located beneath the valve decks are the on/off control and input selector (CD, tuner, aux and balanced). The chunky aluminium remote has just three buttons: volume up and down and input selection. Fortunately, the Cha'am's imposing size and weight carry the promise of some serious speaker-driving wallop with a claimed power output of 70 watts a side delivered by the four 6550 fixed bias output tubes looming over the front-end complement of six 6350s and two 6DJ8s. Emillé quotes a frequency response of 10Hz to 30 kHz +/- 1dB. And, as with the Allure, there's a reassuringly uncompromising and expensive ring to the sound of the supporting components which include M6 transformers hand-wound in house, hand-picked precision resistors, an Alps Japan blue velvet remote volume control, Jantzen Superior coupling resistors, silver-plated wiring and silver contact relays and gold-plated RCA connectors and binding posts. All in all, a class act.

Just the sexy French accent missing. Easy call. The Cello SW2 maybe the smallest floorstander in Triangle's top-drawer Magellan line-up, but it's an impressively statuesque speaker nonetheless. And utterly gorgeous to behold. If anything, it nudges the bar for meticulous build and exquisite detailing set by the Emillé duo to a still more rarified level. A front-ported 4-driver 3-way design with curved cabinet cheeks, parallel bass drivers and the crossover points set at 400 and 2800Hz (2nd and 4th-order slopes respectively), it claims 91dB sensitivity, a 35 Hz to 20 kHz bandwidth and 200 watt power handling. The 25mm titanium tweeter is hornloaded and phase-guided and teamed with an exponentially shaped paper-cone midrange unit and twin woofers that combine a paper core beneath glassfibre skins with 'aerodynamically

optimized' baskets and heavy-duty thermal power management. Which goes some way to explain this speaker's known love of ballsy amplification. But it's the Cello's reputation for sonic vivacity and elan that could hold the key to how the system sound shakes out and whether it nails that elusive sweet spot between silky and sparkling.

So, first up, jazzier Julian Joseph's big old Steinway grand and a rush of two-fisted ivory tickling. And there they are, a palpable, full scale presence locked in space just to the right of centre rather than spread across the room like a railway track. Joseph is a large man who can extract amazing dynamics from his Joanna. It's the cornerstone of his playing style. And nothing here is standing in his way. The piano's timbre sounds convincingly rich and woody and conveys a real sense of size and weight. The sheer muscularity of the man's playing is just as easy to appreciate, as is Joseph's command of rhythm, which isn't just tight but has a metronomic certainty. Yet expression and the subtlest of inflections are laid bare with equal ease.

It's a control and composure thing. And you sense that the whole system is pulling in the same direction, settled in the same groove. The presentation is natural and coherent with a believable soundstage and stunning image solidity. Dusting off an old Dave Weckl drumkit blitz on the GRP label underlines the deft touch with timing. However much Weckl winds it up, this system never feels compromised or strapped for pace: it's wonderfully agile and can start and stop on a pin head.

Bass isn't quite as well extended as you might hope from the size of the enclosures but it is phenomenally taut and tuneful and displays a propulsive quality that suggests it's being driven by an amplifier of real authority. ►



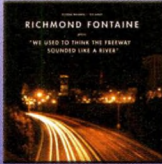
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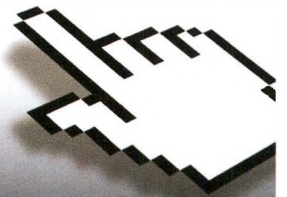
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▶ At the other end of the frequency spectrum, treble has speed, shape, pitch precision and tremendous extension but nothing detectable in the way of spray-on “sparkle”. The horn-loaded tweeters are no shrinking violets but integrate superbly, avoiding any hint of manipulative emphasis. The mid-range is just as beautifully judged, eschewing hyped presence for a realistic sense of proportion with believable solidity and acoustic specificity.

It's the ability to present fine detail in a musically uninhibited manner that distinguishes the great from the merely good. On paper, this isn't an especially powerful system but, when you listen to it, it's got that special talent for proportion and scaling again, a feeling of spatial coherence that ranks with the very best.

It ties in perfectly with the idea of a system you can live with. This isn't to say it doesn't impress on first listen, but more about its ability to hold you in its thrall for hours on end without any residual fatigue. In purely objective hi-fi

terms, it eschews the grandstanding cliché. It plays music; If it's a fabulous recording, it will sound fabulous. If it's a lousy recording it will sound lousy, and you'll hear why. It's this system's ability to deliver the whole event that makes it so enduringly satisfying, lifelike and emotionally replete.

It's not just a technical compatibility – finessed by interconnects, speaker cable and mains blocks/cables from Merlin – but a unity of design philosophy and purpose. All things considered the price doesn't seem all that high. The rewards, however, are very special indeed. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Avid Volvere Sequel SP turntable  
33/45rpm  
High mass platter  
Inverted stainless steel bearing with tungsten/carbide thrust point  
Modified 24 volt AC synchronous motor  
Twin belt drive  
Sprung subchassis construction  
3-point suspension system with springs (vertical) and 'O' rings (lateral)  
External power supply with DSP vari-speed control  
Price: £4,600

Manufactured by Avid Hi-Fi Ltd  
URL: [www.avidhifi.co.uk](http://www.avidhifi.co.uk)  
Tel: +44 (0)1480 457300

Emillé Allure phono preamp  
MM/MC phono stage  
Input impedance: MC 50 K Ohms, MM 47 K Ohms  
Equalisation: RIAA  
Tube complement: 6DJ8 x 4  
Gold-plated connections  
Dimensions: 318mm (w), 330mm (d), 170mm (h)  
Gross weight: 20kg  
Price: £8,500

Manufactured by Emillé Labs  
URL: [www.emillelabs.com](http://www.emillelabs.com)  
Tel: +44 207 099 6096

Triangle Magellan Cello SW2 speakers  
Type: 3-way, reflex-loaded floorstander  
Bass Drivers: T16GM110c x 2 paper/glassfibre cone  
Midrange driver: T16PG110oc paper cone  
Treble Driver: T22900 horn-loaded 25mm diam titanium dome  
Frequency Response: 35 Hz - 20kHz +/- 3dB  
Sensitivity: 91 dB  
Impedance: Nominal 8 Ohms Minimum 3 Ohms  
Finishes: Mahogany, piano-gloss white  
Weight: 34kg  
Dimensions: 114cm (h), 42cm (w), 37cm (d)  
Price: £7,975

Manufactured by Triangle Industries SAS - Manufacture Electroacoustique  
URL: [www.triangle-fr.com](http://www.triangle-fr.com)  
Tel: +33 323 753 820

Merlin Scorpion Mk 3 mains cable, 1m  
Price: £350

Vivaldi Mk 3 interconnect, 1m stereo pair  
Price: £300

Dragon Mk 4 interconnect, 1m stereo pair  
Price: £500

Scorpion Twin Mk 2 speaker cable, 2m stereo pair  
Price: £700

Manufacturer: Merlin Cables  
URL: [www.merlincables.com](http://www.merlincables.com)  
Tel: +44 (0) 870 321 0215



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Musical Laboratory Paeonia and Maedeup amplifiers

by Alan Sircom

**T**he audiophile aesthetic is a minimalist one. Products often have just what they need to do the job. This is usually accompanied by an equally strong need for some kind of Puritan austerity; many electronics components come in a choice of black, silver, black, champagne gold... and black.

Musical Laboratory is the exception. It shifts the balance in favour of minimalism and away from austerity. One toggle switch and two volume controls (and a power button) along with one little LED on each power amplifier represent the sum total of user interaction in this amplifier... but the cases the Paeonia passive preamplifier and the Maedeup mono power amps reside in are ornate and luxurious in the extreme.

Although the power supply for the two amps is housed in a well-made but standard aluminium box, the preamp and power amplifiers are both housed in small and elegant lacquered jewel-boxes from Korea. The preamp has a completely removable top plate (to expose the toggle switch and the two shiny knobs from Audio Note), but to gain access to the power amplifiers means using a small, tasselled key, to open a clever little silver lock.

The Paeonia passive preamplifier is a two-source device with separate Vishay Sfernice P11 modular potentiometers for each source used as shunts, silk insulated silver and gold wiring, silver RCA connectors. It attenuates the signal of the input, rather than add gain using active circuits, and the signal running through the Paeonia only passes through one component (a resistor) from source to power amp.

That minimalist component count is echoed in the power

amplifier chain of the Maedeup monos. It uses the LM3875 op-amp from National Semiconductors as the driving force, coupled with vintage and rare resistors and capacitors chosen for their high quality performance. Not that there are many of them; if you count the chip as a single component in its own right, the parts count barely gets into double figures... including the heatsink and the PCB itself.

If this sounds familiar, it's a 'gainclone', a design similar to the ultraminimalist Gaincard amplifier designed by Jinji Kimura of 47 Laboratory. Musical Laboratory makes no secret of this. The dual mono power supply that feeds this is a switch-mode device in an alloy case, connected to both amps by Neutrik connectors.

A curious aspect of the approach, specific to Musical Laboratory, arises when dealing with speaker terminals. Instead of wiring the terminals through the lacquered case, the Maedeup sports little silver foils that wrap over the edge of the case and terminate in plastic screws. This is fine for spade lugs, and bare wire, but does leave the foils exposed and ready to tarnish.

With a claimed 38 watts on tap (18 watts ▶



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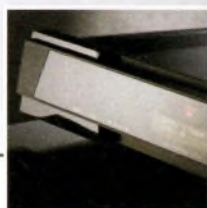


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▶ in smaller the Bosangwha) the Maedeup appears not that limited in speaker selection, but on-paper specs can be deceptive, and efficient, single-driver designs are recommended.

The advantages of an efficient single-driver, crossoverless design is that it's fast, detailed, precise, immediate, almost warm and enticing and extremely exciting sounding. The disadvantages of such a system are that it lacks extreme bass and some very high treble. There is a commonality of purpose and sonic character then between the single-driver speaker and the gainclone sound, and that is (of course) echoed here.

Everything seems to snap into focus through the Musical Laboratory products. There's a sense of living, embodied musicians rising out of a complete lack of background noise (although RF breakthrough can be an issue, perhaps thanks to those exposed silver foils). If a recording is made in a natural ambience, the amps will play that ambience perfectly. It effectively disappears from view and makes many other amplifiers sound fat and slow or lean and overbright. It's like other designs have an underlying distortion that is almost too low to detect.

Perhaps the most uncanny rendition I heard while playing the amplifiers was with choral music. John Rutter's *Requiem and Five Anthems* (Reference Recordings RR-57) came to life, with a feeling of really sitting in among exceptional singers. Although, when the huge Fisk pipe organ kicked in, I kept waiting to hear it roar. It purred instead. A loud and deep purr, yes, but none of the thermonuclear pressure wave it can do at full tilt. On bigger, less Zen speakers than single-driver designs, there was more bass depth, but this was a limitation of the amp as much the speaker.

The passive preamp is a true star. It almost demands short runs of shielded, not very capacitive cable. A metre or more of something capacitive can strip out a lot of high frequencies. But used appropriately it's a remarkable window into the source, and used combined with the power amps is truly a glorious and happy marriage.

Although we sometimes call the best hi-fi 'investment grade' pieces, the reality is the investment is often mid-term and of little real return. OK, so a Marantz 10B tuner is today worth many times what its original price tag commanded, but products like this are the exception not the rule. This could be different, those who appreciate fine *objet d'art* will appreciate the Musical Laboratory kit for a lot more than just another amplifier. If you are fed up with austere amplifier boxes and want something that sounds good too, Musical Laboratory could be the perfect choice. +



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Paeonia preamplifier

Input 1 / Mute / Input 2 toggle switch control

Audio Note chrome-plated brass volume controls

Holographic counterfeit protection

Vishay Sfernice P11s used in shunt - fake law configuration

2 x solid silver RCA input connections

1 x solid silver RCA output connections

or 2 x RCA output connections

(ML1401A)

Silk insulated Silver Gold wiring throughout

Price: £2,820

Maedeup power amplifier

2 x elegant lacquered enclosures depicting cranes (a national symbol of Japan)

38 watts per channel

Child-proof locks decorated with traditional macrame knots

White LED power indication

Holographic counterfeit protection

High-speed PCB substrate

Vintage and exotic resistors in the signal path

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Solid silver RCA inputs

"Dual" switch-mode power supply

Low mass non-metallic non-magnetic speaker terminals

Price: £4,650/pr (inc PSU)

Manufactured by

Musical Laboratory

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Real Hi-Fi

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Tel: +44(0)1257 473175

# EQUIPMENT REVIEW

## Furutech accessories

by Chris "doubting" Thomas

**F**urutech is a company that takes audio accessories very seriously indeed. Take its PC-2, a £35 CD and DVD spray-on anti-static fluid that comes with a micro fibre cleaning cloth. The company claims its formulation of enzymes and ions allow its cleaning powers to maximise the laser reading capabilities, leading to a better sound with improved viewing clarity. PC-2 is certainly the best cleaner I have tried. It leaves no visible residue and after cleaning, the disc performance is improved. I doubt anyone will clean each and every disc before they play it but an occasional once-over certainly works.

Likewise, the £55 T 13A/25mm Rhodium plated replacement fuse does what it says on the tin. I power my whole system of CD player, preamplifier and monoblock amplifiers through one mains plug into a Quantum QX4 and then a Thor distribution box. Think about the power for all those boxes passing initially through that one fuse and it's not hard to imagine that an improved replacement could bring benefits. In an ideal world, I would need identical 'performance' fuses for every mains plug and over a period of time, I might be able to convince myself that this was financially viable. But the added sharpness and clarity that the fuse brings, together with a lowered noise floor means that it is well worth considering.

Nano Liquid addresses the microscopic hills and valleys of our interfaces by offering a suspension comprising of nano-meter technology formed by pure gold and silver particles 0.000008mm across. These are incorporated within 'Squalene Oil' (made from shark's liver, apparently). The liquid is applied with a small brush to audio connections and Furutech claim that the molecules 'fill up' the air bubble holes left during the manufacturing and plating processes. The oil also has the extra benefits of acting as a de-oxidising agent, cleaning the surface and forming a protective film. When you paint the connections it takes a long while to dry and leaves a brownish-gold residue that vanishes with use, so use extremely sparingly. Perhaps the £126 Nano fluid is better suited to reviving old connections, but was doubtful as to whether I could detect any improvements, so the jury is still out on this exotic liquid. In fairness, I've never had much luck with contact cleaners... and I've tried a few over the years.

If you remember the old Zerostat gun and its effectiveness at removing the static from vinyl, then the £395 battery-powered (4xAA) Furutech DeStat will have a ring of familiarity about it. It looks like a small hair dryer though internally there is an Ion Flow Generator and a fan. Hold the DeStat at about four-inch distance over what you want to treat and push the side button. A smooth, controlled breeze blows gently and 10 seconds later the static charges have been dissipated. It is simple and very



effective. You can remove the static from CD, vinyl, DVD and equipment. Once a week or so gently move the DeStat across your entire system starting at the mains cables, the CD disc tray, turntable and then through to the speakers, including all cabling. It works and I guarantee you will hear the improvements. It also forms a system maintenance procedure that continues to be effective so leave it next to your source and individually treat every CD or record as you play it. I also found it to be excellent at removing dust from TV screens and speaker cabinets. Battery life is short at about an hour but treating a whole system takes less than a couple of minutes. I really like the DeStat although it is quite pricey but I can see a couple of friends sharing the cost and use, making it more viable. +

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# My Audio Design (MAD) Silver Cables

by Jimmy Hughes

**T**he use of silver as a conductor for audio cables goes back quite a long way. It was being offered commercially as far back as the late '70s – possibly earlier. Yet there have always been doubts. Some listeners 'like' silver, others don't.

The usual complaint is that silver cables sound bright and harsh. My Audio Design opts for very high 99.9997% ultra-purity silver. This is about as good as it gets – a purity level of 99.99997% would be achievable – but at a huge increase in price (it's the kind of silver NASA uses).

The range of silver interconnects from MAD consists of the entry-level My Pleasure, followed by My Sweety, Diamond Signature, and My Queen, which is also available as a loudspeaker cable. MAD cables are sold on a 30 day no-obligation trial basis, allowing you ample time to reach a decision regarding their worth. This is a good thing, because some of them are worth a lot of money!

### My Pleasure

Is the entry-level cable, and is all-silver. It costs £288 for a 0.5m run. It produces a clear, focused, solid sound that's free of HF hash and nasties. While I did think the more expensive MAD cables had the edge, My Pleasure proved very very good.

### My Sweety

This is MAD's middle range cable. It costs £459 for a 0.5m run, and consists of 4 x 0.4mm Diamond-Die Super-Pure Litz Silver conductors of 99.997% purity. Construction is Quadcross Golden Section, with Constant Q Crossfield. Each cable is terminated with Cardas Rhodium over Silver-Plated RCA connectors, using Cardas Tri Eutectic Copper/Silver solder.

My Sweety has a lovely open pure sort of quality that sounds crisp and tactile, yet free from tonal hardness and 'grain'. It's well-balanced and very clean, yet with a nicely spacious 'airy' top end and clear bass, and seems more refined than My Pleasure.

### My Diamond Signature

Sits near the top of the range, and costs around £517 for a 0.5m stereo pair. Specifications are similar to My Sweety, except slightly thicker 4 x 0.6mm conductors of 99.9997% ultra-purity are employed. Can you hear 0.001% purity?

Where My Sweety has a bigger 'airier' sort of presentation, while My Diamond Signature is a touch less glossy and glamorous, but sounds even cleaner and more solidly focused.



### My Queen

Is the top cable in MAD's Silver Series. It costs around £1,494 for a 0.5m stereo pair. The manufacturer claims it's as good as any current high-end interconnect. My Queen produced an impressively refined yet tactile sort of sound that had presence allied to a gorgeous transparent purity.

My Queen seemed effortless detailed and crisp, while at the same time sounding smooth and clean. We're getting into Diminishing Returns territory here, but there were definite gains in purity and refinement.

My Queen is also available as a speaker cable, and costs £2,241 for a 1m stereo run. This increases to £3,735 for a 2m run, and £5,228 for 3m. I need 10m runs for my speakers, which puts us into the region of nearly £18k! But I was still able to sample the 2m cable sent for review.

As with the MAD silver interconnects, My Queen speaker cable proved to be very very good – sonically, more of the same; increased transparency and greater purity, with increased definition and superior fine detail over the similar length of expensive high-quality copper cable I'd been using. +

## CONTACT

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# David Berning Quadrature Z Power Amplifiers With Stillpoints Stand-Offs

by Chris Thomas

**T**here has been debate over whether a review should be a personal experience that contains references to the emotional side of musical enjoyment, or a detached third-party appraisal. For me, the music is the message and as far as equipment goes, sometimes it moves me and sometimes it doesn't. But in 2008, I found something to really get excited about in the shape of the David Berning Quadrature Z monoblock power amplifiers.

Last year, I discovered that David Berning was going to offer a special version of the amplifier equipped with a new stand-off designed by Paul Wakeen of Stillpoints. Stand-offs are the fittings used to mount PCBs to an amplifier's chassis. The design is an advancement of the ceramic-ball systems found in Stillpoints excellent ESS rack. It seems as though Paul has been able to reduce the technology in size to create what he claims is the world's only vibration-isolating stand-off.

Technically the Berning QZ is unlike any other design currently on the market. Their sole objective is to bring music in all its glory into your life and the new 'special order' version with the internal Stillpoints is even more fluent, transparent and energetic than ever. It may just have added a touch more gloss to the tonal balance but it has lost none of its striking, rich presence or the excitement of its musical message.

The powerful articulation as the music grows and subsides in volume makes for some of the subtlest expression I have ever heard from an audio system. The Stillpoint equipped version takes this to new levels of colourful resolution and explosive dynamics and their potential to project such a seamless, grain-free and animated picture with such clarity is totally addictive. Where most high-end amplifiers are content to portray impressive levels of detail like a painting on a canvas, the Bernings really are like wandering through the mix; so striking is the vocal and instrumental positioning. There is no flat backdrop onto which the music is projected, just time and lots of space.

Control down at note level is truly exemplary. Through the entire envelope the Bernings are never vague, the sense of transition and progression of movement that was so beautiful with the standard version is perhaps even more lucid with the this amplifier. The speed of these Stillpointed amplifiers is epic but speed without control is worthless and these have a feeling of natural and unforced grip and that means the tension is in the music and not the system.

So, there's no question that this amplifier adds a degree



of extra sharpness to the already impressive performance of the standard QZ. If you are lucky enough to be able to afford either of them, the special order version could well worth the extra outlay. I can't hide my enthusiasm for these Bernings. They are fabulous and very serious amplifiers and have power a-plenty for most situations. They address and bring clarity and musical beauty to areas of system performance not immediately associated with power amplifiers, but remember my thoughts about the suitability of matching speakers that are truly capable of answering the questions they will certainly be asked. This is a very notable consideration indeed and should not be underestimated. +

### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Prices (per pair):

Standard version: £23,000

Stillpoints version: £24,500

Finishes: Silver or black

Importer: Blade Audio

Tel: 01252 737374

URL: [bladeaudio.co.uk](http://bladeaudio.co.uk)

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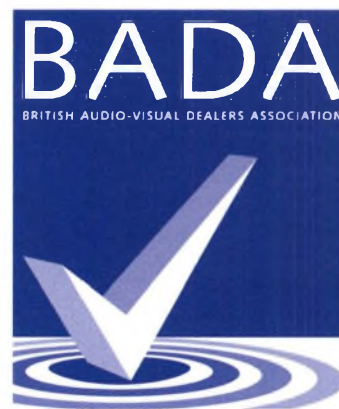
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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Isol-8 Substation Vogue power conditioner

by Alan Sircom

**W**hen it comes to power conditioning, there are two main schools of thought; passive products, that isolate and protect products from surges, spikes and each other, and active models that essentially rebuild the mains from scratch. The former can be made up of a series of chokes, inductors or even capacitors, the latter anything from a dirty great transformer to some pretty clever regenerating circuitry. Isol-8 makes both kinds of power conditioning, and the Substation Vogue is the best of the passive type.

It's big and heavy and takes up two 20A Neutrik power sockets in its own right – one for the two high power 13A sockets, one for the quartet of lower power 13A sockets designed for sources and preamps. These two sides are entirely separate, even down to different trip on/off switches and blue LEDs at the front. Each socket is further isolated from one another and each unfiltered input is screened from the filters themselves.

The pathway for the high and low power products is different, as reflects their slightly different needs. High current sources are served from large air-cored copper foil inductors with very low series inductance. The low power sources trade inductor size (still using copper foils) but add custom chokes for each output, and two have a further set of filters specifically for digital sources to keep EMI and RF in place. Everything is star earthed and sitting on floating acrylic boards, to keep ground loops and vibration away from the action.

Think of the Vogue as the isolation ward of hi-fi. All those nasty noises from around the mains are kept out of harm's way, while all the potential for each source to play havoc with its compatriots is also kept to a minimum.

These are commonplace claims by power conditioner companies, but the Isol-8 actually does it. It's one of the

few products that can actually allow a bog-standard PC to come into contact with the system without it ruining the performance of that system as a whole. This is becoming increasingly important as computers, music servers and the rest begin to intrude on our audio happy place.

The Substation Vogue makes products sound more consistent... which in the process makes them sound better. You hear a little more 'blackness' and more air around the instruments as a result, because the electronics are not combating wide-spectrum mains noise. Just how big a change does really depend on your mains supply.

The Substation Vogue is not one of those do-good, sound-bad power products. It's doing the sort of good work you only really notice when it has gone, because you want it back right away. A fine choice for any small-to-medium high-end system. +

### SPECIFICATIONS

Isol-8 Substation Vogue

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 44.5x14.2x41cm  
(plus connectors)

**Weight:** 20.5 Kg

**Price:** £2,295

**Manufactured by** Isol-8 Technologies

**URL:** [www.isol-8.co.uk](http://www.isol-8.co.uk)

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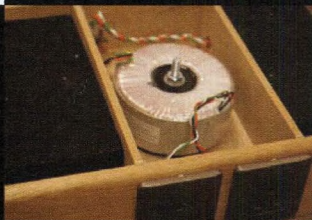


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# interview: **katia labèque**

by Jason Kennedy

**K**atia Labèque is an internationally renowned pianist who made her name playing classical duets with her sister Marielle. Born in south west France and taught by their mother Ada Cecchi, the Labèque sisters got their break whilst at the Paris Conservatoire where Oliver Messiaen heard about them playing his *Visions de l'Amen*. What set them on the road to an international career was the release of a four handed interpretation of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* which went gold. As a result they have been playing professionally for the last 35 years. They have worked with many of the leading conductors of our time including Charles Dutoit, Sir Simon Rattle and Esa Pekka Salonen with whom they performed the premier of Louis Andriessen's *The Hague Hacking* at the Disney Hall in Los Angeles. Katia and Marielle played the UK premier of that piece alongside two other appearances at this year's BBC Proms.

Katia has also played jazz since the early seventies and was part of John McLaughlin's band in the 1980s, her influence extended to Miles Davis who dedicated two pieces to her on his *You're Under Arrest* album. She's not the type to relax between hectic bouts of touring and has been recording and playing contemporary jazz with the Katia Labèque Band since 2001 and more recently formed B for Bang with drummer Marque Gilmore from her band to play the music of the Beatles. Katia and Marielle started the record label KML Sonic Invaders for projects like these and now release their classical work through the label as well.

Katia's latest album *Shape of My Heart* contains collaborations with artists including Sting who sings the title track and a reworking of 'Moon Over Bourbon Street', Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea and Cuban pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba. The album contains 12 recordings from a number of different sessions, those with Hancock, Corea and Rubalcaba date back to 1995, and makes a good introduction to her non-classical work. It contains Dave Maric's arrangement of Radiohead's *Exit Music* played by the Katia Labèque Band, B for Bang's version of Lennon and McCartney's 'Because' and a beautiful rendition of Erik Satie's *Gnossienne No 3* which also features on new album of Satie made with Marielle.

For an artist in her late fifties, Katia is remarkably energetic (and, it has to be said, glamorous) so when the chance to speak to her about the new album came round they didn't have to ask twice.

**JK: What was the concept for *Shape of My Heart*?**

**KL:** The album is a little compilation of everything I love, everything I like, everything I've been doing. There are three old songs with Herbie with Chick with Gonzalez from a period when I was playing with jazz musicians. I still love jazz music

except now I have my own band and I'm doing all kinds of music. Before I go on to other things I wanted this album as a reference for the people who would not have heard about me before. An introduction.

**JK: The Sting pieces are very unusual how did that collaboration come about?**

**KL:** Those were recorded at his place in Italy and they were special arrangements, I commissioned two fantastic young composers that we support with our foundation. Dave Maric who is English and the other is an Italian called Nicola Tescari. Sting was so happy with Nicola's arrangement that he



*"It's sometimes interesting to take the same material and to give it a new vision."*

commissioned him to do the orchestration of some his pieces with the Chicago Symphony recorded in Chicago last May. It was nice to take out everything and have just his voice and the piano, taking out all kinds of effects and electronics. I love that kind of thing and I'm doing it with my band but with Sting his voice is just so unique.

**JK: The way he sings *Moon Over Bourbon Street* is very different to his original version.**

**KL:** It's sometimes interesting to take the same material and to give a new vision, a new life to the same piece. You have two ways of doing it, you can add a lot of things or you can take out a lot of things. In the case of Sting we just took out everything, we left just the melody the voice and

the piano. He's an exceptional musician. The thing with Sting that's interesting for me is that he knows all music. He knows classical and he's never afraid to go in all kinds of different directions and to experiment. In a way it's like he's lending his voice, he trusts you and in this case he trusted me and would agree to try things. It was amazing to record it, it was very fast – we did everything in two hours. He was following me, I wanted to use a kind of rubato, a kind of freedom in the piece and he'd say play it again and I will follow you. In his very calm and quiet voice 'I will follow you'. It was hard to choose what to use because all the takes we did were totally different and all very beautiful.



**JK: I liked your version of Exit Music, it's a great interpretation.**

**KL:** I love Radiohead they're definitely my favourite group. Their albums all manage to bring different things and interesting things. Even the last album *In Rainbows* is just fantastic. I've been following them all the time and I find them very exceptional. I listen to a lot of different music, not only classical and I have to say that Radiohead always comes back on my play lists. I find this piece very close to a Chopin prelude, they don't imitate they don't need to but what I like in their music is that you can feel all their background, all their knowledge, knowledge about classical and contemporary music and that touches me very much. That's why I wanted

to use the Chopin Prelude as a prelude to Exit Music because the end of that piece is almost like a reminiscence of the Chopin. I can hear a classical influence in almost all their records.

Johnny Greenwood is a fan of Messiaen and he knows a lot about the French school, Nadia Boulanger and all that. It's a very cultivated tradition.

**JK: Have Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock played duets with other people or are you the first?**

**KL:** They've played piano duets together. But those tunes were done a while ago and it was beautiful to be able to play with them but in a way I had to go in their way, they didn't come into mine, but now apparently they do. Both of them are playing some classical music. The experience was really nice, again they're also good friends and nice people and it's important, if you want to make music you might as well choose people you get on well with.

**JK: How long have you been playing non classical music?**

**KL:** As long as I remember, I had my duet with my sister but I was always part of experimental jazz bands. Originally I was very much a sideman, I started in a jazz band a long time ago called Pandemonium in France and then later I played in the John McLaughlin band in the eighties and then I toured with Gonzalo Rubalcaba who has a huge knowledge of classical music. He grew up in Havana, Cuba where they had a lot of Russian classical teachers. We had a duet in the nineties. In 2001 I decided to form my band with Dave Maric and Marque Gilmour called the Katia Labeque Big Band, we played Exit Music then and all kinds of music and a lot of Dave's own music. Then I created B for Bang with David Chalmin and Nicola Pescari and that was two years ago. We played concerts in Italy and little by little the idea was to get musicians from completely different musical backgrounds. David is really into rock and roll guitar and Nicola is a contemporary composer, he comes from a really serious classical tradition of writing music, he also composes film scores. We also took Massimo Pupillo the bass player from Zu who plays with Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth and with Mike Patton (Faith No More etc), his style is really more like rock noise, and 'Reeks' (Fabio Recchia) a fantastic electronic artist. I kept Marque as my drummer, I've worked with him since 2001 and I wanted to keep this kind of groove, Marque is really drum and bassy not at all jazz or rock. Some of the pieces on this album like Because are going to be on the next B For Bang album with the rest of the band, so it will be a different version. The album [*Shape of my Heart*] not only takes things that I have done before but prefigures things that I am going to do ▶

# interview: **katia labèque**

in the future. So the next thing will be a B For Bang album, we are using different singers and we have this beautiful girl called Nadeah, she's part of Nouvelle Vague then we're having an Italian singer called Meg and maybe Olivia from Zedo and we'd love Matt Elliott. The Beatles were almost like a purpose for me because their music was always at the top of everything. They made electronic before electronic existed and used classical and string quartets and everything so the material is good for us because it allowed us to do a lot of different things. On *Shape Of My Heart* I'm using one of the songs and there's one on the new *Red Velvet* album which is a duet with David and Reeks.

**JK: Are you going to bring B For Bang to England?**

KL: I would love to, we need your help [laughs]. We need the help of the press. Of course I have no problem coming and playing with my sister but bringing a new band confuses people; oh my god she's classical and now this. They're afraid of crossover, I'm afraid of crossover as well.

**JK: Did you start the KML Sonic Invaders record label specifically for projects like this?**

KL: Yes, to have the freedom. We want to play anything from baroque music to rock and roll and also to have a home for some of the musicians we like, to produce their own albums. Even if at the end it might not be distributed through our own distributor. Nadea, we helped her with the studio to record her first solo album which is really fantastic, except now she's going to try to find a major, a record company that can give her more visibility, more support but we're happy to take care of the artistic creative side. That's what interests me, there's no way to make money for us in the world of record labels we're not doing it for that. It's a way also to show where we are and what we're doing.

**JK: One of the artists on the label, turntablist Okapi seems to be different from the rest of the acts.**

KL: With the help of Massimo, of David it's a kind of collective label in a way, each musician brings along others and say listen to this and that's how Okapi came into the picture. There's not much we can offer, not in terms of royalty advance or whatever money from the sale and we don't take anything but at least it's a place where he can record his work.

We're preparing something on Bernard Hermann, the last piece on the CD which is *Meditation* is from a fantastic opera [Wuthering Heights] that is so beautiful. That's just a taste of his work, he did a lot of soundtracks for Hitchcock like *North By Northwest*, he was Hitchcock's favourite composer. But he was never recognised as a classical composer and his opera is just so beautiful. He paid for the recording of the opera, hiring the singers, paying the orchestra, conducting himself but it's rare to find copies of this album. Most of the film scores

don't belong to his family because the studios used to buy all the rights, so it's really difficult to put everything together because you have to search for all the various owners. That's the difficult part of having your own label without enough help, it'll take time but we'll do it.

**JK: You have included Satie's Gnossiene no.3 on the album, was this included in your recent album of his work that you made with Marielle?**

KL: We didn't want to do the complete album only with four hands so I took the Gnossiene and Marielle took *Sports et Divertissements* which are fantastic pieces. Each one is made up of 30 pieces and each of them last 30 seconds. Each of them are masterworks.



**JK: Do you have a good sound system at home?**

KL: I get all kinds of different stuff. Usually we have speakers called Amadeus which are French, Pierre Boulez used them at IRCAM\*. In the studio we have some Genelec 1031A speakers which give a clear, controlled sound and we use them the most because the studio is our home. A lot of time unfortunately we are listening through the iPhone and MP3 that drives me crazy because the technical side is more sophisticated but the sound has never been so poor, it's so compressed. Sometimes I try to rebel and say no, I'll wait until I can listen at home on my system there, I know that speaker. In Rome we have a Pioneer DVD player and an Onkyo amp because it's also used for film, but I'm not crazy about it.

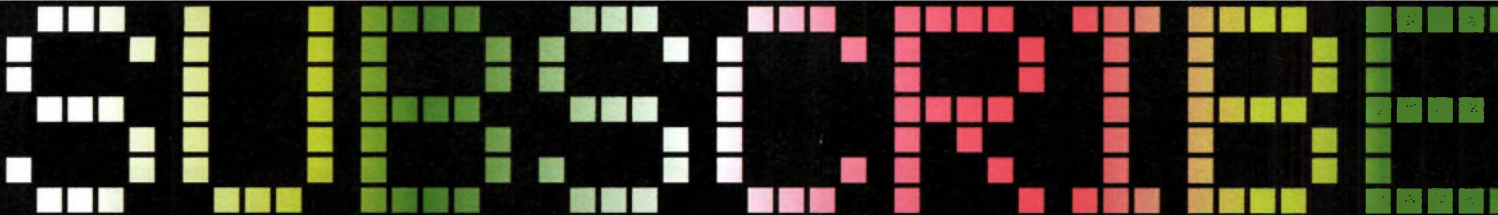
**JK: What are your plans for the future?**

KL: Next is Brazil in October and then Spain. Montpellier, Leipzig where we are artists in residence then we come back to Turin then in Paris and then an Italian tour playing all over.

**JK: Is this hectic schedule what keeps you young?**

KL: I'm sure it is, music gives so much. It has given me everything in my life. +

\*IRCAM the Institute of sound and music research in Paris.



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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.

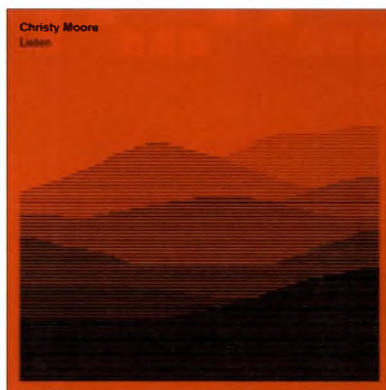
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information, the scale rates a standard,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

*This issue's featured reviewers are:*

- DD** – Dennis Davis
- RSF** – Richard S. Foster
- DH** – Drew Hobbs
- JK** – Jason Kennedy
- AS** – Alan Sircom

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	Double Disc		10" LP
	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
	SACD		Vinyl Double Album
	Hybrid SACD		Multi-Channel



### Christy Moore

**Listen**

Columbia Records: 88697480002



Traditional folk is a form I find hard to stomach. That said, there are a few artists out there who cross over handsomely. Christy Moore is one such artist. With his easy going voice and penchant for covering songs from all corners of the musical globe, his appeal is pretty far reaching. Moore's not a prolific writer of songs. The last album to feature mainly originals was 'Graffiti Tongue' and it wasn't graciously received by the press - a little strange, because it's a cracking effort. Still, one man's meat is another's poison, as they say.

*Listen* is Moore's first studio release for four years. It doesn't break any new ground, but if you love what he does, it doesn't have to. This is a brave performer; anyone who takes on a giant of a song such as Pink Floyd's 'Shine On...' has to be. Christy's stripped-to-the-bone version lets the lyrics come to the fore in a way they don't on the original; a pure masterstroke from a true master. He's also gracious enough to allow Declan Sinnott a lead vocal on a beautiful rendition of Dan Penn's 'I Will', and just for good measure there's a storming live version of 'Rory's Gone' as a bonus track. The electric solo from Declan is wholly irresistible – much like his employer's talent. **DH**

**RECORDING**



**MUSIC**



### Cougar

**Patriot**

Counter Records



Counter Records is that least likely of things, a rock label that was born out of dance label. Eclecticism is the way of the musical world these days and we have instrumental 'rockers' Cougar sitting cheek by jowl with Fink and the like. Of course, this is closer to Jaga Jazzist or Tortoise style post-rock but there are definitely muscular guitars on here and some phenomenally powerful drumming, they might mix it up but it's still built on the right solid foundations.

*Patriot* follows 2007's *Law* and ups the ante in terms of density and diversity. In places, its acoustic guitars and percussion suggest new folk but in others the weight and power of less subtle instruments sweeps you up in a torrent of energy. The tracks that inspire the most such as 'Florida Logic' build up gradually into a maelstrom that never quite caves into noise but is right on the edge. Cougar understands the power of light and shade, there is no shortage of variety in any musical genre.

The album is well recorded too with a decently open midband and reasonable dynamic range. Compression is apparent, but it's subtle and serves the listener as well as the music. **JK**

**RECORDING**



**MUSIC**

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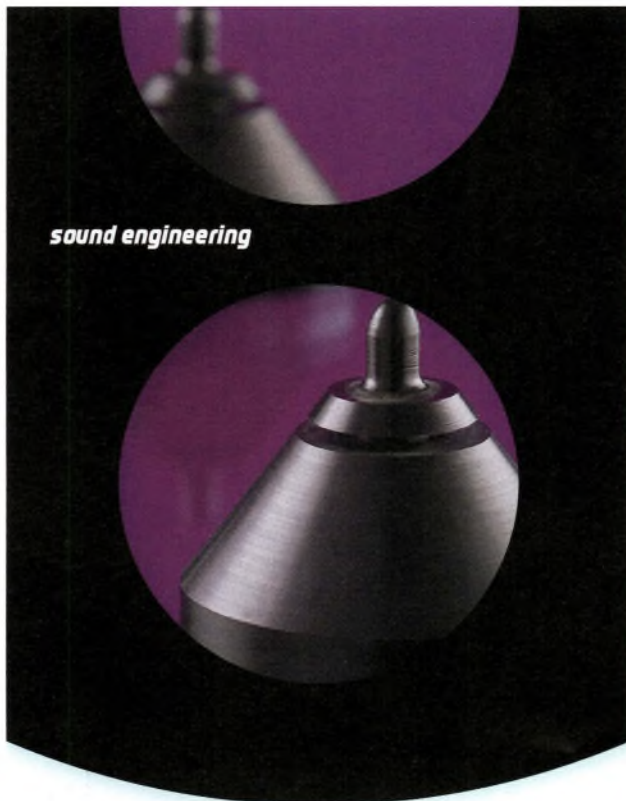
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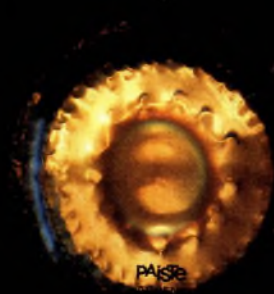
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**The Band**

**Music From Big Pink**

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2044 Stereo CD/SACD



What's to say about this seminal cut from The Band? It's such an important part of late 1960s culture that still resonates today. One of the best 'debut' albums of all time, with a laid-back country meets rock feel and a Bob Dylan painting on the cover (they were his backing band), and it influenced many, not least the recording of The Beatles' *Let It Be*.

Although apparently there is a multichannel mix of the album, MoFi chose to release a fine stereo mix on both CD and SACD layers of this disc. And what a mix! Transferred from the original two-track 1/4" master tape and put through DSD recording, this knocks spots off previous vinyl and CD copies (including the older and collectable MoFi gold Ultradisc). Age has not weathered the recording, and there's a depth and lucidity that previous versions lacked.

OK, so compared to the CD pressings, you lose the nine bonus tracks commonly bundled with the album, but instead you get an eco-friendly mini-LP sleeve, complete with the original gatefold artwork. This is one of the most important rock albums in anyone's collection... why not buy the best? **AS**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**Peggy Lee**

**I Like Men**

Capitol/Pure Pleasure T1131



Peggy Lee recorded dozens of LPs for Capitol over the years, and this release from three recording sessions in late 1958 is one of the great ones. It's not a greatest hits package—for that get *Bewitching-Lee!* Instead it's defined by its title, with mostly well-known songs from the likes of Cole Porter, Eubie Blake and Gus Kahn. Peggy hits just the right note on each of the twelve songs. The all-star jazz ensemble backing her and the arrangements by Jack Marshall are top notch. To top it off, Capitol achieved some of its best sound on this recording.

Fortunately, Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray are huge Peggy Lee fans also. Hoffman tapped into the Lee Capitol catalog while S & P Records existed, and now Tony Hickmott at Pure Pleasure has commissioned their remastering skills for *I Like Men!* And what a fabulous job they have done. This LP is a great place to start if you have never experienced a three dimensional sound stage in mono. This is about as good as it gets and Hoffman and Gray have taken it up a couple of notches. Great, fun music. Great sound that you pull out to enjoy AND show how good your system sounds. This goes on my desert island list. **DD**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**Tord Gustavsen Ensemble**

**Restored, Returned**

ECM



After three quite sublime and highly successful albums with a trio, Gustavsen's first Ensemble album came as a shock. However it would seem that time heals all wounds and having returned to *Restored, Returned* it's clear that there is a lot to recommend it, and not merely the pieces that sound most reminiscent of earlier work. In addition to a change of double bass player to Mats Eilertsen, there is tenor and soprano saxophone from Tore Brunborg and, more controversially, vocals from Kristin Asbjørnsen. So none of the 11 'songs' sounds exactly like the Trio, Eilertson's playing is more muscular than his predecessor. There are also many passages where Gustavsen's piano plays only a minor part in the proceedings, leaving centre stage to one of the extra 'voices' on hand.

Many pieces retain the serenity that's a key to Gustavsen's appeal but others, like 'The Swirl/Wrapped in Yielding Air' are more dynamic with a few of the fleeting moments that involve the whole Ensemble. Despite Asbjørnsen's undoubted talent, it's difficult for a voice to integrate well with this subtle band and it's the instrumental pieces that work the best. **JK**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



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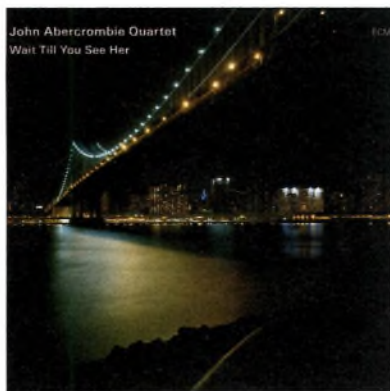
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**John Abercrombie Quartet**

**Wait Till You See Her**

Three Black Feathers

ECM



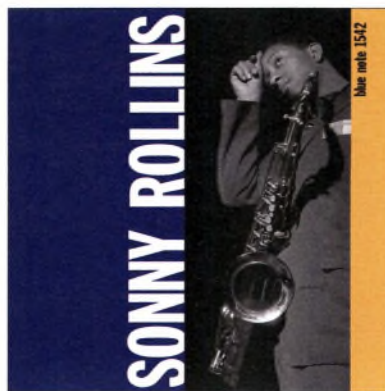
ECM guitarist John Abercrombie has been making music with this Quartet since 2000, but the roots of the band go back to his first project with violinist Mark Feldman in '98. The presence of this instrument in the band seems entirely natural most of the time and quite spectacularly right on certain occasions. Abercrombie describes Feldman's presence as "like having a string section behind you sometimes" but there is little sense of that here, in fact the guitar and violin combine to play as one to positive effect.

The tone of this album is pretty relaxed and expansive. It's a superb recording as ever with this label and one that can make the most gung ho of systems sound effortless. Thomas Morgan on double bass and Joey Baron on drums provide rhythmic guidance for the lead instruments to glide and soar over to great effect. There are a couple of tracks where things get a bit noodly, but the majority of the eight numbers are fine examples of atmospheric, varied and inventive playing with little attempt to impress with virtuosity, which is impressive in itself. The stand out numbers include the opening 'Sad Song, I've Overlooked Before' and the final 'Chic of Araby'. **JK**

RECORDING



MUSIC



**Sonny Rollins**

Blue Note/Music Matters 1542



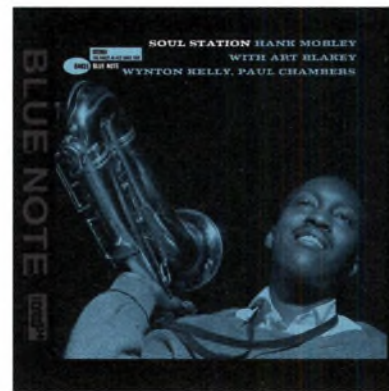
Rollins' first Blue Note release is sometimes referred to as "Sonny Rollins Vol. 1". Sonny is accompanied by Donald Byrd, Wynton Kelly, Gene Ramey and Max Roach and the result is far more than the "unpretentious session" described in the liner notes. For me, this is just another flavour of perfection and a flavor I never tire of. Most who purchase this set, however, will be in for a surprise because of the sound. This is an early Blue Note, recorded only in mono, and the sound is so good that the later stereo recordings pale in comparison.

Especially on the first cut, 'Decision', Van Gelder captured a spread among the instruments both in stage width and depth seldom captured by stereo recordings to this day. It isn't just stage presentation either—every nuance of Max Roach's drum kit is captured to perfection. Few recordings in my collection pull off the shimmering quality of the cymbals as well. The CD reissue of the session has done a disservice to this album, and I wonder that its reputation among today's critics may suffer as a result of its lackluster CD reproduction. Music Matters has righted this situation with the Hoffman/Gray team unearthing a sonic gem whose brilliance as a work of art can be truly appreciated. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



**Soul Station**

**Hank Mobley**

Blue Note//Audio Wave

ST 84031/AWMXR-0001



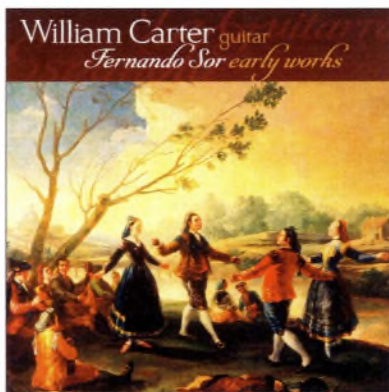
This is one of four Blue Note titles released by a new CD venture Audio Wave using the XRCD process. More are on the way, and they are stunning! Played side by side with the LP versions released by Music Matters these fall just short, but compared to any other Blue Note effort whether it be the Rudy Van Gelder or Connoisseur issues, there is no contest.

Had CDs sounded this good twenty years ago I'm not sure that the current LP renaissance would have taken place. The XRCD process owned by JVC consists of series of steps to in the mastering process involving careful choice of equipment and attention to detail similar to the attention lavished on remastering audiophile vinyl. Audio Wave is the brain child of Bob Bantz, owner of Elusive Disc, who brought in Joe Harley to produce the series and turned over the mastering to Alan Yoshida at Ocean Way Mastering in Hollywood, California. The packaging is splendid with glossy covers printed on top quality paper, folding out booklets of liner notes and classic photographs and a snap-in plastic insert to hold the CD that avoids the CD scratching potential of mini-LP type covers. **DD**

RECORDING



MUSIC



**Fernando Sor: Early Works. William Carter, guitar.**

Linn Records CKD 343 (SA<sup>51</sup>)

William Carter is an extremely accomplished guitarist. Here he explores the performance practice the composer used – using his finger pads rather than finger nails. Carter mentions this was a daunting task, likening it to “eating a steak without teeth.” Well, he’s really mastered the art. The sound quality is sumptuous and immediate and those listeners who are connoisseurs of the guitar will not want to be without this disc. For those who are unfamiliar with the works of Fernando Sor, especially these early works, Carter is really a magician. He plays difficult passages seemingly with great ease and the music is very accessible to everyone.

The sound according to Carter when played with his finger pads contains a warmer vocal quality that was also important to Sor. The selection of music includes three large scale works interspersed with shorter pieces - minuets and etudes. The disc contains phenomenal playing and I have spent several hours listening and re-listening to the quality of Carter’s playing. He’s a musical master and for those with the slightest interest in guitar, I strongly suggest you give this disc a spin. Outstanding from beginning to end. **RSF**

**Supplied by:**  
<http://www.linnrecords.co.uk>



**Francis Poulenc: Concerto. Concerto in D minor for two pianos and orchestra FP 61 (1932), et al**

Oehms Classics OC 637 (SA<sup>LD</sup>)

Recorded in Munich in 2009, this has become a favorite listening companion over the last little while. I’m a big fan of piano music and have a soft spot for French composers. This is a most fascinating disc as the music, while piano and concerto ‘driven’ has some of the finest percussive sounds I’ve yet to experience on disc. The timpani in the Concerto in G is strong and deep with a great attack and decay. The organ in all 3 works is spectacular and plumbs the depths of the lower registers with ease. There were several pictures in my listening room that vibrated right on cue. Poulenc’s music is very easy to listen to and even a listener with just a casual interest will be quite pleased with what is available on this SACD. The CD layer is outstanding so even those who may not have SACD playback capabilities won’t miss much. The Bach Collegium is the orchestra that has been recorded for these works and they are simply fabulous. Led by Hansjörg Albrecht, this disc will be a workout for your system. Great music, exceptionally well recorded and very easy to listen to. A must own disc. **RSF**

**Supplied by:**  
<http://www.oehmclassics.de>



**Lavinia Meijer, Harp: Visions. Harp Music by Britten, Patterson, Byrnes, Yun and Takemitsu.**

Channel Classics CCS SA 29709

(SA<sup>51</sup>)

This is Lavinia Meijer’s second disc for Channel Classics. She is a prodigious talent who has played in many famous venues worldwide. She was Born in Korea in 1983 and was adopted into a Dutch family. She now lives in The Netherlands. Her harp playing is sublime. The sound of her instrument is very special and if you think you knew what a harp sounded like in your own environment, you’re in for a big surprise. The music on this disc, while composed by 20th century composers is very easy to listen to and quite frankly, I find it very relaxing. It’s a big sound, something I wasn’t expecting, and the woodsyess of her instrument is captured perfectly by Jared Sacks. Sacks does some of the best recordings in the business and has been doing so for a number of years. This is a glorious disc and a great follow-up to her first release on this label. There are accolades from two of the composers in the liner notes and I can understand why. This is an artist who maybe young in years, but has a skill level that is far beyond her age. Do check this out! **RSF**

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**Sergei Prokofiev: Romeo & Juliet, Complete Ballet, Op. 64. Valery Gergiev conducting the London Symphony Orchestra.**

LSO Live: LSO0682 (SA)<sup>(5,1)</sup>

Valery Gergiev is a very busy man these days and yet the quality of his work continues to excel. Prokofiev's outstanding ballet gets a first-class treatment here, with demonstration quality sound by the engineers. The ballet, in its original form, was completed by Prokofiev in September 1935, on commission by the Kirov Ballet. This ballet in four acts is easily handled on two SACDs and it's been a joy to have this particular performance in a modern DSD recording.

Ballet music has always been one of my favorite categories of orchestral music because it is so dynamic. There is a wealth of innovative instrumentation here and you really owe it to yourself to hear how Gergiev presents this complete orchestration. The LSO Live releases have been uniformly excellent but this performance and recording, even on the CD layers, sets new standards of excellence. There is a comprehensive booklet enclosed which allows the listener to follow through very easily from the 'Introduction' on track 1 through to the 'Death of Juliet' on disc 2, track 52. A must own disc. **RSF**

**Supplied by:**  
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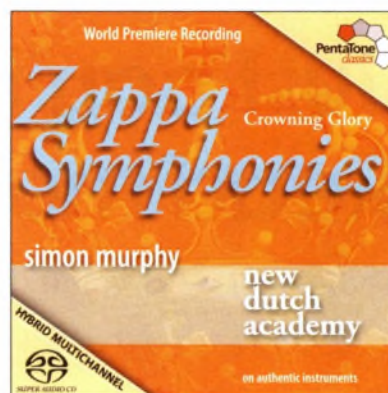


**Modest Musorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition (1874). Mariss Jansons, Chief Conductor Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.**

RCO Live. RCO09004 (SA)<sup>(5,1)</sup>

I am very particular about my 'Pictures' performances and not too many have really made the cut for me. I'm a big fan of Fritz Reiner's 1958/9 outing with the Chicago Symphony on RCA Living Stereo SACD (and of course, vinyl as LSC 2201). Well, all I can say is that this is one special performance and I rate it way up there with whomever you may think is the best interpreter of this piece. The engineers have given us demonstration quality sound that will help you get out of your apartment lease if that's your fancy. All kidding aside, it's a spectacular recording and a world class performance. Jansons leads his Concertgebouw skillfully from the Promenade through Gnomus and so on. The pace is perfect and allows you, with this great sound quality, to hear deeply into the music. I must admit that while I had some misgivings at the beginning based upon the timing of this disc, I do hope you don't let this hold you back from this purchase. The CD layer is a beautifully down-conversion from the DSD layer and the sound in either case is stupendous. Not to be missed. **RSF**

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**Zappa (et al) Symphonies: Crowning Glory. Simon Murphy conducting the New Dutch Academy.**

PentaTone PTC 5186 365 (SA)<sup>(5,1)</sup>

This is at least the 5th collaboration with Simon Murphy, the New Dutch Academy and PentaTone. They're all very good performances and as has become one of the hallmarks of this label, they are exceptionally well recorded. I was only aware of some of this music. I did not know Schwindl or Graaf and must admit also, I had no works by Francesco Zappa who was also an extremely accomplished violoncellist. The music is exceptionally well recorded and the string sound of the New Dutch Academy players is rich and lush but not overly reverberant. I enjoyed everything on this disc, especially the Zappa Symphony in B flat *The Cello Symphony*. Many of you will not have heard of some of the composers here, but do take a chance and try this disc. It's a delightful romp through the late renaissance and the music is most infectious. There is an early Mozart symphony here, No. 5 and a very entertaining 15 minute symphony by Carl Stamitz, which is extremely enjoyable. I'm pleased PentaTone has released this disc and it's a valuable addition to my collection. I'm sure if you give it a listen, you'll agree. **RSF**

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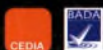
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# Kraftwerk / The Catalogue

# every home should have one

by Richard Clews

## KRAFTWERK'S *THE CATALOGUE* SEEMS RATHER PERVERSE AT FIRST GLANCE.

The band best known for giving voice to computers and robots, and using electronic beats to recreate the mechanical pulse of cars and high speed trains, have entombed their collected output in an outdated artifact. Why should the music that kept Detroit's 'wheels of steel' spinning be placed in a box you might find for sale in a pretentious art gallery store?



The reason is that the Kraftwerk concept is much broader than has often been presented. Robots, trains and bicycles are elements, not the totality, of the musical and visual landscape that Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider set out to create. The 'look' of Kraftwerk - the neon lights, smart suits and album graphics - is as crucial as the sound.

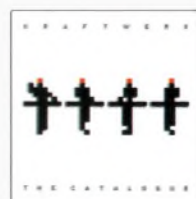
Inside the sturdy cardboard packaging is a sleeve containing 12-inch booklets for each album. The reproduction quality is first-rate, the bold colours of artist Emil Schult's graphics fully restored. Period photographs of the band help to ensure that former members Karl Bartos and Wolfgang Flur are not consigned to history. The albums themselves come in mini-vinyl sleeves, with new cover images to give a more consistent look to the collection.

The audio quality is, thankfully, archetypal Kraftwerk - pristine. The remasters keep the patina of the old mixers, mics and tape, but lose the hiss, lack of bass and occasional

'glassy' sonics of the original CDs. The remasters are cleaner without sounding de-hissed to death. The most dramatic improvements can be heard on the earliest albums, *Autobahn* and *Radio-Activity*. The former always suffered by comparison with later releases, but here the energy of Kraftwerk's playing and the ethereal atmospheres created by Conny Plank more than compensate for the rough edges.

There are some important changes to note: *Electric Café* has reverted to its original title, *Techno Pop*, and alongside the change of title is a change to the content. 'The Telephone Call' - Karl Bartos' finest hour with the band - features here in its seven-inch version, replacing the longer mix on the first issue. It is immediately followed by 'House Phone', a curiously charmless 'House' restyling that was included on the 'Telephone Call' twelve-inch.

*Tour de France Soundtracks* is now *Tour de France*, but the original song from 1983 is not included as a bonus. Hopefully, when the new album is complete - allowing for Kraftwerk's elastic time schedule - a complete collection of remixes, single versions and out-takes might be compiled. It would be the logical next step, as the classic Kraftwerk albums have now been done full justice. +



Recording: 9  
Music: 10

### KRAFTWERK *THE CATALOGUE* / CD BOX SET / MUTE KLANGBOX002 / COMPLETE REMASTERS OF:

Autobahn  
Radio-Activity  
Trans Europe Express  
The Man-Machine  
Computer World

Electric Café  
The Mix  
Tour de France  
(formerly Tour de France Soundtracks)



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