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

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

"For such bijou speakers, the Toy's audio performance is immense"

Sonus Faber Toy – BBC Music, Best Loudspeaker of 2008

Sonus Faber has always believed that owning a pair of speakers should be a total aesthetic experience. Technology honed over decades to turn every piece of music into a special auditory occasion is part of the story. But equally important is the meticulous styling and natural materials chosen for the cabinets which house the drivers. Inspired by the craftsmanship of the original makers of classical instruments such as the lute and the violin, Sonus Faber's blend of fine woods and leather adds up to the last word in aspirational Italian elegance.

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Sitting alongside the Liuto range, Sonus Faber's Toy series sets out to destroy the notion that small speakers can't deliver wonderfully engaging sound. The warmth and responsiveness of their performance would challenge speakers three times their size, whilst never losing the sense of the fun and joy that the name evokes. Clad from head to toe in barred leather, these lovingly designed speakers are set to become style icons for the musical fashionista whilst simultaneously satisfying the audiophile.

Both collections have been specially selected for you by Absolute Sounds, the UK's leading importer and distributor of the finest, most desirable audio equipment the world has to offer.



The Liuto collection



The Toy collection

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Welcome to the *Hi-Fi Plus* loudspeaker spectacular! We've rounded up some of the unashamedly best loudspeakers on the planet for this issue, as a challenge to the gloom and doom expressed everywhere else. Who cares if the world is going to hell in a handcart that it can't pay for, when there are hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of loudspeakers to savour!

Aside from top transducers, we are approaching the end of our *Back to Basics* series of investigations. This has always been about your perceptions to the performance of cables, power products and other elements in the audio chain. Now it's your turn to get involved. We will be running a series of timed demonstrations at the National Audio Show '10, on the 25-26th September at Whittlebury Hall, Northants (details from www.chestergroup.org). Tickets for the demonstrations will be available on the day from our foyer booth, where you can subscribe to the magazine and even complete your set of back issues. Come early to avoid disappointment.

Meanwhile, this month sees the 20th anniversary of the death of Stevie Ray Vaughan, and as a tribute a two-disc Legacy edition of that audiophile standard *Couldn't Stand the Weather* has been remastered and reissued. And it's a pleasant surprise to find that the remastering process left the original album relatively unscathed. The implications of being so surprised then dawned on me; we've become so used to 'hot' masters and 'everything louder than everything else' CD releases over the last decade, that to find a reissue that actually still sounds pretty good these days is a rare treat. In fact, some point to the new-found interest in LP to be a reaction to

the trend of pushing CD mastering to the edge (and beyond in some cases), because vinyl pressings are less likely to be mastered so loud. And the vinyl revival is not simply wishful thinking on the part of the enthusiast; industry figures show that – for the first time in almost 20 years – sales of standalone record players outstripped CD player sales in the first half of 2010. Perhaps the Loudness War and its clipped, compressed sound has its benefits, after all.

Of course, there are different types of compression (good and not so good) in recording, and this is something we will cover in an upcoming issue, but as *Hi-Fi Plus* approaches its 75th issue (which coincides with our annual awards special), it's worth considering just how much things have changed in music – and hi-fi – over the years.

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com



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contents ISSUE 74 EQUIPMENT+

FEATURE

78 **MEET YOUR MAKER**
Noel Lee – Head Monster

COMMENT

5 **ALAN SIRCOM**
Music Matters

6 **JASON KENNEDY**
Equipment preview

10 **INCOMING**
Your letters and emails

MUSIC

82 **CONTEMPORARY**

87 **AUDIOPHILE AND JAZZ**

91 **CLASSICAL**

96 **EVERY HOME SHOULD
HAVE ONE**
Louis Prima
The Wildest!



93 **ADVERTISER INDEX**

12 **MAGICO Q5**
floorstanding loudspeaker

18 **DYNAUDIO CONSEQUENCE ULTIMATE**
floorstanding loudspeaker

24 **NOLA BABY GRAND REFERENCE**
floorstanding loudspeaker

31 **ECLIPSE TD712z MK2**
standmount loudspeaker

37 **EPOS ENCORE 50**
floorstanding loudspeaker

43 **KEF REFERENCE 201/2**
standmount loudspeaker

46 **GRYPHON MIKADO SIGNATURE**
CD player

52 **HART EVO-1**
dual monitor loudspeaker

60 **BERGMANN SINDRE**
air-bearing turntable and tonearm

65 **ROGUE STEALTH**
phono preamplifier

68 **MERIDIAN SOOLOOS 2.1**
music server system

75 **MY AUDIO DESIGN ROYAL SALUTE**
power cable

76 **MONSTER TURBINE PRO COPPER**
earphones

80 **CARDAS CLEAR BEYOND**
loudspeaker cables

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music matters

by Alan Sircom

I WAS PLANNING TO DEVOTE THIS ISSUE'S MUSIC MATTERS TO POWER PRODUCTS, but at the last minute I decided instead to break down the forth wall and expose an intellectual problem I have with cable 'looms'. This, in a way, highlights one of the objective-subjective dichotomies that exist in audio in microcosm.

I've come to the conclusion that the great cable conundrum is entirely intractable; those who think cables do or don't make a difference hold to that as much as doctrine as through listening tests. Saying "You can hear the difference" will not convince those who counter with "I don't trust my ears." And vice versa. So, adding my name to those who can hear what cables does is almost academic. Nevertheless, I have spent many months living with giveaway interconnects and bare-ended Wickes 79-strand speaker cables and now it's time to see if there's any difference.

After a lot of testing, I found that if improving equipment supports reduce hi-fi system 'bad hair days', then better interconnects extend the amount of listening time per session. Meanwhile good loudspeaker cables 'get out of the way' of the sound more than cheapies. Unlike equipment supports, though, cables do have tonal qualities that help shape the sound, albeit mostly fine-tuning than large tonal shifts.

Once again, how you demonstrate this to yourself shapes your results. You don't notice that one cable gives you hours of extended listening and one doesn't in a five-minute session. Extended listening sessions make you realise these differences are significant. The best way I can liken this is the difference between a bad ham actor and Richard Burton reading *Under Milk Wood*; the words may be the same, even the inflection and diction might be similar, but one makes Dylan Thomas' script sound like doggerel, and one makes it sound fascinating and magical.

I wanted to use the super-cheap cables as a benchmark, because it was possible there would be cables that sound better and ones that sound worse. That didn't happen. Those I tested (Audience, Townshend, Cardas, JPS, Crystal) all sounded 'better'; different, but better. At least, at first.

That's not exactly breaking new ground with cable sound; most of those who have heard a difference would more or less concur with some or all of these conclusions. What interests me, however, is the cable 'family sound'. From listening tests I have run on both speaker cables and interconnect cables, there is a distinct set of qualities that apply more or less universally. If you compare, say, Cardas with Crystal cables, you'll find one set sounds relaxed and extended, where the

other sounds smooth and dynamic. Cardas has the deep bass, Crystal has the taut bass. Neither is intrinsically 'wrong', but some will find one more neutral than the other depending on their priorities. This will apply whatever the system, unless you use them with components that are so out of band they hiccup with the basic design of the cables.

Of the cables I tested and mixed and matched, the only 'mix' that worked as well as the 'one-make' cable set was using Audience and Crystal. Most seemed to disrupt the overall performance compared to either one-make system and one mix (Townshend and Cardas) almost approached the freebie/Wickes cheap cable set in performance terms. This was surprising, the whole being considerably worse than the sum of the parts.

This is hard to deal with from an electrical standing. The output impedance and input impedance of any two sets of source and amplifier will differ, and these differences should account for greater changes in sound than the character of different cables. So, there should be no way that what applies between the Cambridge Audio 650C and 650A should also apply between the Lyngdorf CD-1 and Sugden A21SE. And yet, they do. And, crazier still from an electronic standing, the same applies with the speaker cables and the combination of interconnect and speaker cable from the same 'family' adds a consistency that shouldn't be there.

It's easy to dismiss this as fantasy, but, the fact remains that the system with the underwhelming cable sets led to less listening than the same system with the good stuff... and the right mixes.

So, instead of homework, let's open this up for debate. Is it just wishful thinking extending listening sessions over the weeks and months, or is there something deeper? If so, what? +

EQUIPMENT PREVIEW

Sonus faber Fenice

by Jason Kennedy



Sonus faber has placed itself firmly on the super high end map with a product that you cannot buy – unless you are one of the lucky 30 who has already bought. In June, this most Italian of loudspeaker companies chose the Punta Della Dogana museum in Venice to launch its most ambitious speaker to date. The Fenice or ‘phoenix’ is a 1.7 metre tall, 300kg creation that incorporates some completely new thinking and delivers a sound that is likely to totally change our ideas about Sonus faber, and what might follow, so the Fenice is a preview of future events, as much of a review of effectively unattainable products.

What, you might wonder, has prompted this well-respected maker of refined and beautifully built loudspeakers to branch out in such radical fashion. This is almost certainly a consequence of new management which was introduced to the company by its owner Quadrivio SGR, an Italian private-equity firm that purchased Sonus faber in 2007 and which also owns Audio Research. Sonus faber’s CEO Mauro Grange has achieved remarkable things with the company’s turnover in the year that he has been there, and he has clearly inspired the R&D team to


“He has clearly inspired the R&D team to push the limits of loudspeaker technology.”

push the limits of loudspeaker technology as far as it could; cost no object seems to have been the theme. Something that has resulted in a variety of radical ideas that are being introduced in this €140,000+ loudspeaker. Of which only 30 pairs are being made and these have all apparently been pre-sold, which doesn’t come as a surprise given that Sf has more than 30 distributors worldwide.

So what makes a Sonus faber cost this much? The most unusual thing about it is the clamshell design of the cabinet. Sf’s head of R&D Paolo Tezzon told us that he wanted to create a “silent case, a cabinet that introduces ▶

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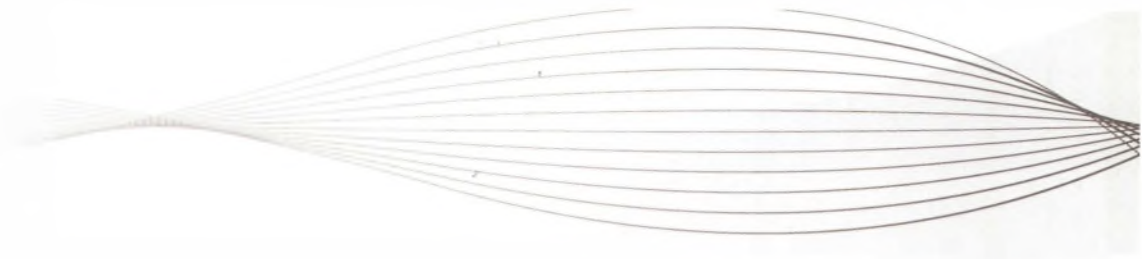
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▶ no spurious noises or distortion to the sound.” In order to do this his team combined curved side panels in laminated wood with cast aluminium endcaps which clamp the wood. A shaft is used to pull the endcaps together and Tezzon describes this as a ‘soul pole’, it allows the 40kg endcaps to form a tuned mass damper. Such things are usually found at the top of skyscrapers to stop them swaying in the wind and in F1 cars to keep them glued to the road but are equally useful in stopping resonances in a loudspeaker.

Those laminated sidepanels are not all they seem either, they are in fact two sections with a visco elastic layer in between which creates that most fashionable of resonance killers a constrained layer damper. Engineer Joseph Szall introduced the drive units for the Fenice, the tweeter is a Larsen/Goeller ring radiator which is decoupled from the cabinet with visco elastic, approach also seen with the distinctive looking 6.5inch midrange. This has a pulp cone that uses papyrus in its construction and is driven by what Sf describes as a ‘well hung’ magnet system. What really differentiates it however is the chassis that is machined from avional and bronze gun metal, it looks so good it’s a pity to hide it. Bass is provided by a pair of 10inch sandwich drivers using cellulose pulp skins and a syntactic foam core to create a stiff but light cone. A three inch voice coil ensures plenty of control. For the lowest octaves each Fenice has a side firing infra-bass driver in the ‘king of diameters’ which according to Sonus faber is 15inches. This is also a sandwich unit but with nano carbon fibre skins and a four inch voice coil.

In most speakers that would be more than enough drivers but this is not most speakers. Umberto Nicolao also from R&D explained the soundfield shaper which is a two way loudspeaker that’s built into the back of the Fenice and designed to add depth to the soundstage. A soundstage that you can adjust at that, a panel on the back offers variable depth and azimuth as well as the output level of the infra bass driver.

To stop this monster speaker from shaking the house down the machined aluminium base sits not on spikes but on magnetically isolating feet, or ‘zero vibration transmission technology’. The first example of this approach that I’ve seen on a production loudspeaker. Another technology that Sf has developed for the Fenice is its ‘stealth reflex system’ which it is in the process of patenting,

this is described as a para-aperiodic tuning system which provides the usual advantages of reflex loading but nullifies port noise.

The aesthetics of this beautiful beast were created by Paolo Villa who describes the idea the design thus: “The lyre shape is also the shape of opera houses such as La Fenice in Venice. The Phoenix element, along with its analogies with the sphynx, were important sources of inspiration.” The lyre shape can be found if you look at the speaker from above but you are more likely to be distracted by the superb finish on the wooden panels, the leather trim on the baffles and the machining of the endcaps. All elements that are produced by Sonus faber and its partners in north east Italy. The company is very keen to emphasise the craftsmanship of its products and feels that the skills of its workers are the lifeblood of the company. Something that’s true of other companies within this industry but not something that gets enough credit because so much focus is placed on technology.

The Fenice represents a huge amount of work for Sonus faber and you can be sure

“Mauro Grange promised four new speakers and if those models don’t feature the ideas seen in the Fenice, I’ll eat my hat.”

that it will follow a trend started by B&W when it trickled down its 800 series technology into more affordable models. Mauro Grange promised another launch this year and a further three next year and if those models don’t feature the ideas seen in the Fenice, I’ll eat my hat. As the company says in the lavish tome it produced for this speaker “A Sonus faber has never previously been design considering such a multitude of ‘points of view’.” While the Fenice is hardly rising from ashes it has raised the status of this Italian company to a whole new level. +

Please send your letters to Hi-Fi Plus, Unit 22, Sandleheath Industrial Estate, Sandleheath, Hampshire, SP6 1PA, United Kingdom.
Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming

I've been calling for responses for my Back to Basics columns. And this is exactly what Giles did. We were so impressed with his methods that we devoted the whole Incoming! section to his email... and spoke to those nice chaps at Vertex AQ, who donated a Silver Jaya Mains Filter (worth £500) to Mr Morrison, to take his investigations still further. Congratulations!

My system, comprising Cyrus CD8x, Sugden A21SE and Sonus Faber Signum on Ironwood stands, has grown without any systematic process applied to the mains or interconnects, and my venerable Target stand had remained uninvestigated in service for 20 years. I recently found myself with a couple of free days to deconstruct this system to experiment, as the first step in the process of upgrading.

All listening was done with the volume control at the 9 o'clock position. The room is about 4.5 x 5.5m with a pitched roof, as it's under the eaves in the attic. The floor is large sheets of chipboard and very live.

So, to begin, I stripped 'back to basics': Giveaway mains and interconnect cables; generic speaker cable as supplied as 'starter cable'; multicore copper with no termination; the system assembled with the amp on an MDF sheet on floor, with the CD player stacked directly on top. Speakers are 'bookshelved' without any toe-in and the tweeters at ear level. What does this sound like?

The soundstage is two dimensional without any sense of depth, pitched well forward into the room; abrasively sibilant with strident vocals. The bass is significantly enhanced, as would be expected from the near the wall position, but very boomy, with excitation of the room's resonant modes.

If only ever used for musical 'background', with selected albums at lower volumes, these shortcomings might just be overlooked. In fact, the increased bass and forward presentation might even enhance the overall impression.

The first change was to place amp and CD side by side on a glass shelf, joined by a VdH D102 Mk III Hybrid, with all else unchanged and no care taken to segregate mains and interconnect

Immediately there is space and separation between instruments and greater integration of the musical whole. The soundstage has some depth, with instruments occupying more defined places in space. While still giving a very forward presentation, bass and HF are

much better controlled, though the former still booms and the latter bright and ringing at times. The dynamics are much improved, but complexity leads to a raucous loss of integration.

The overall presentation is dynamic and lively, but, quickly becomes wearing. Any hint of harmonic or dynamic complexity and the whole quickly disintegrates, so no significant improvement over the first set up.

Next were some chunky mains cables from the same 'brand' (a generic eBay supplier), this time taking care to segregate them from the interconnect. All else remains unchanged. This delivered better control of dynamics, and significantly improved separation of instruments and depth to the soundscape. Subtle musical detail is starting to come out of the background. However, while it led to better bass depth, it now overwhelms the music.

Experiments with a Nordost Vishnu power cable on the amp provided such significant changes to the overall quality that even my wife could clearly hear the improvement!

As Alan Sircom started tweaking in *Back to Basics IV* Jenga blocks featured as his starting point for isolation. I couldn't find ours, but I have some draughts pieces and a couple of blocks of dense foam to play with.

Firstly, using the draughts pieces, the bass is tighter and drier, with room resonance less apparent, until the volume increases to the point where the isolation is overwhelmed.

With the foam blocks under the CD player, coherence and balance are markedly improved. Vocals have relaxed, losing the stridency found using the draught pieces. There's still a lot of bass and through the loud passages, while only by the fingernails,

the amp manages to keep a grip on the whole, without completely losing control, maintaining the timing and dynamics which up until now have been missing. It's not 'good' by a long measure, but it's no longer limiting you to certain volume levels and musical styles without biting back.

I also have a set of Nordost Titanium Pulsar Points, which when first heard, demonstrated a x2 multiplier effect. By this I mean that they allow a CD player to provide performance equivalent to an unisolated player twice the price. So these are positioned with one under the transformer and two to balance the unit.

This allowed the amp to maintain control as before, but released so much extra bass energy that I began to fear for the cones. This while also drawing the presentation back from in your face to somewhere between the speakers. The overall dynamic range has increased markedly, with changes from loud to quiet and back again happening between notes, compared to the smearing experienced in earlier configurations, but quite aggressively, suggesting that there is some overshoot with dynamic changes. All this at the same nominal volume, demonstrating how these changes result in the energy being routed around the system in different ways. In effect it allows the actual volume to be reduced so that the perceived volume is equivalent. This reduces the bass heavy balance so that the whole becomes still more musically integrated. All sense of the congestion experienced in the previous configurations with dynamic or complex pieces has gone. There's still some thickening in the mid-range, but with judicious use of the volume control this configuration is one which I could listen to comfortably for extended periods.

Because the Signum is designed as a stand-mount, I returned them to their Ironwood stands, and toed them in place. Without the reinforcement of the back wall the bass was tamed, but this now highlighted the brightness of the HF. The soundstage has opened out and now sits cleanly between the speakers, having lost the boominess which had previously overwhelmed all else. This allowed more dynamic detail, but without the aggression noted before.

At this point, the standard route would be sound control by rushing out and changing the interconnect, but we'll stick with the program and return the Amp and CD player, replacing MDF shelves with Perspex. The CD player remains on the Pulsar Points.

The effectiveness of this modification is startling. What happens is that loud/dynamic elements and quiet elements are all present in proportion, all clearly present. Space and air are further enhanced. Temporal coherence is significantly improved, with changes of pace and tempo becoming effortless.

It's now time to experiment with interconnect and speaker cable. First the interconnect. The sense of space around and air between each instrument, the sensitivity of vocal emotions is released. The

dynamic and harmonic envelope of each instrument is natural and unforced. The soundstage has gained width and depth, but has sat back between the speakers again.

Last step: speaker cable. Cleaner, crisper, more air and, if anything, a still wider soundstage. At no point have the Signums sounded 'boxy', but now they're invisible, allowing the music to immerse you. The soundstage has come forward again slightly, but there's effortlessness as instruments contribute without conflict, the synergy making more of the whole.

While this exercise was an entirely subjective process, reviewing the system development process over a relatively short timescale allowed recognition of improvements that are otherwise incremental and identified how my system performs at different levels of optimisation. Making systematic changes from a ground state to some level of refinement, making notes of what works or has the biggest impact is useful to ensure that system development follows the most direct path. One is addressing progressively lower order effects; these in themselves represent a complex interplay of factors.

However, I am painfully aware that it is still poorly optimised, and that just the inclusion of one high specification mains cable made it sound unbelievably better. For me, the next step is choosing a cable set with which to replace the existing loom and replace the equipment stand with something more effective. This will be a project for the next few years, but this exercise has convinced me that there are significant gains to yet be had without needing to change any of the components. +

Giles Morrison, via email



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Magico Q5 loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

The world of high-end loudspeakers is not without its drama and controversy. And Magico seems to engender both in great measure. A young and precocious company, fronted by the outspoken Alon Wolf, in some respects it's hard to imagine Magico not courting more than its share of controversy. It's worth remembering that the current captains of the high-end industry were once young, precocious and outspoken too, so sometimes controversy is a good thing.

Especially when it's backed up by products like the Q5.

Part of the controversy surrounds Magico's recent past. Only a few years ago, the company launched its M5 flagship loudspeaker. That product is still in production, but the difficulty is the Q5 is every bit as good – often markedly better – than the M5 flagship at a fraction of the price. Far from being received as a company simultaneously pushing the performance envelope, while saving prospective Magico owners money in the process, the chattering classes took umbrage on behalf of M5 owners, who they felt were left with a lesser product at a greater price. As ever with these things, people who actually owned Magico M5s were absent from this online grumbling session, as they were too busy enjoying their speakers to notice.

The Q5 is a five-driver, four-way design, featuring a custom 25mm MBe-1 Scan-Speak derived beryllium-dome tweeter, a 150mm NanoTec midrange driver, a 230mm NanoTec mid-bass driver and a pair of 230mm NanoTec bass units. Calling this tweeter 'Scan-Speak derived' is one of those journalistic short-cuts, because the reality is there's more Magico in there than there is Illuminator tweeter, and that also exposes the limitations of the 'beryllium=bright' idea. NanoTec (Magico's proprietary mix of Rohacell coated with carbon nano-tubes) gives the drive units all the benefits of Rohacell (almost unburstable, very dynamic) with none of the downsides (distinctive sound, especially in the midrange). As ever with Magico, the speaker drivers are bolted to the back of the baffle; this not only gives clean lines, but allows for the sort of tensioning that would tear many speakers apart. The tensioning bolts on the back of the M series models are hidden from view, but they are there. There are a series of little holes at the rear panel, but they are there for heat dissipation. The

two bass units are slightly offset, which helps to cancel break-up modes, and is known as Bass Mechanical Resonance Cancellation.

Nothing is left to chance, and that costs. So, the hand-made resistors in the crossover are a natural inclusion for the Q5, even though most sane designers would hesitate to use a custom-designed bulk metal film resistor that costs more than most loudspeakers inside their loudspeaker (in fact, many of the components inside the Q5 cost as much as a pair of loudspeakers, which perhaps explains why surprisingly few people start coughing when they hear that price tag, especially if they hear the speaker first). That

“Most sane designers would hesitate to use a custom-designed bulk metal film resistor that costs more than most loudspeakers.”

dedication to fine detail is common to all many loudspeakers brands and all loudspeakers in the Magico range, but its effect is an order of magnitude stronger here. And it's backed by good, solid engineering.

Why audiophile reviewers get heated about Magico simply comes down to respect for the 'no quarter given' approach to loudspeaker building. It makes for great copy. Take the drive units for example; most companies fall into one of three categories – buy them off the shelf, make your own, or get the OEM supplier to build to your own specifications. Not Magico. Instead it takes the component parts from the best OEM manufacturer it could find, sends them across the world to the best place for key proprietary treatment, and then back across the world to the people who are better at assembling complex structures than anyone else on the planet.

Take off one of those thick aluminium side panels and you are met with an aluminium spaceframe. It's worth learning ▶

- ▶ how to remove these panels if you have any friends who spent too long playing with Meccano or Erector sets; take off a side-plate (no easy feat – it's held on with 100 fasteners) and watch their reaction. They'll notice the 400 or so parts that go into holding the thing together, even if they aren't 'into' spotting the extreme components that pepper the Q5. It's a bit like leaving a bibliophile alone with a copy of the Gutenberg Bible for a few minutes... they are reduced to dumbstruck awe.



This aluminium skeleton is relatively light, but incredibly rigid and placed under great tension to help it stay that way. The drivers (with their vast magnets), the crossover and the half-inch-thick aircraft-grade aluminium panels add mass. And they add a lot of it; you'll begin to wonder whether the Q5 is only black because light cannot escape its clutches. The combination of satin black baffle, shiny black drive units and matt black anodised aluminium cabinet – bereft of any Magico markings, logos or even a speaker grille – makes this a loudspeaker of brutal charm. The anodised cabinet can be finished in almost any colour (but not, of course, wood veneers), but the black on black is appealing. It's like having a pair of scaled-down versions of the monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey* in your living room. Strangely, this works better than you might expect in unlikely rooms, but it is very 'man cave'; if you share your listening space with someone who has memorised the Laura Ashley catalogue, the 'none more black' approach might meet some resistance.

Installation is easy... just get someone else to do it! No, really – the speakers weigh enough that moving them to get good positioning isn't really an option, so it's better to get a team of experts to move and install the speakers. While it's probably somewhat impolitic to mention this, the best way of installing these speakers is 'vowelling in', a method of installation developed by Wilson Audio (it's also known as 'voicing the room' or simply WASP: Wilson Audio Set-up Procedure). This works by speaking to the rear and side walls at the point where the speaker would likely end up. At first, your voice sounds artificially chesty and thick due to boundary interaction. Mark where that point begins, and keep walking until your voice begins to sound thin and hollow. Do the same with the side wall and do the same to for the other speaker. Make an half-inch grid within these parameters and adjust the speakers for the best possible bass in the room, from the listening position. This gets less easy to do when you have a loudspeaker weighing in at close to 180kg per speaker (that's almost 400lb, or nearly 28st), so call in expert help.

The Magico needs that millimetre-tight installation precision – and necessitates good quality audio equipment feeding it – because it can give so much. The amplifiers need to be as quick as they are powerful when it comes to driving this. This is why successful partnerships are to be found in products from the Spectral and especially the DarTZeel range, but it was also more than comfy with the excellent Devialet D-Premier category-busting integrated power DAC. Of course, bolted on the end of night on £150,000 worth of DarTZeel monos, you'd expect something special. What you get a sound so dynamically unfettered that you expect to catch a cone or two as they go whizzing past your ears. This comes with a warning... do not play chicken with an amp that can go from zero to 1.5kW in an eyeblink and a speaker that can handle that sort of wallop; eventually something will give, but it's more likely to be you than the amp or speaker. I have heard a drive unit get fried this way, but only trying to recreate the sound and sound pressure of rock concerts that gave half the audience tinnitus. Otherwise, these speakers are fundamentally unburstable. I know... I tried and it hurts.

It's easy to lose the message in the medium when it comes to hi-fi and high-end in particular. We've become so used to having sounds with a distinct tonal balance, that when you hear something that's inherently flat, it can sound 'flat'. We struggle to get past remarkable flatness of frequency response, because it's not something we are used to outside of live events with unamplified instruments. So, at first flush the Q5 will sound laid back to some, edgy to others. The reality is, those first impressions actually don't count for a great deal, because they are tempered by our preconceptions and the albums played there.

A sure sign of that Q standing for 'Quality' comes in the Q5's shape-shifting qualities. It's as good as your discs, and no better. That sounds like damning it with faint praise, but is the key to quality, through the medium of unvarnished fidelity to the source sound. Swap from The Fall to Charles Mingus and there should be a huge change in recording quality; different production values, studios, engineers, musicians and mastering. That disc-to-disc differentiation stands out with uncanny clarity here. ▶



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Appearing at the National Audio Show -

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“If you are looking for the most accurate frequency response, the lowest distortion and the widest dynamics, this is your speaker.”

▶ The other side to this is plain; don't go expecting the Q5 to make a silk purse out of a Lady Gaga album. If it sounds congested, constricted, forward or laid back in the recording, the Q5 will make that apparent. This will mean some of your hitherto 'wonder' recordings will sound less 'wonderful' than you originally thought. And yet, curiously, this honesty doesn't get in the way of the musical content. That's the joy of really, honest loudspeakers; you get to listen through the recording chain. It sounds like nothing is acting as impediment. Of course, when you get the really, good recordings that happen to be musically significant too... then you start to see why music is such a vital aspect of so many people's lives.

Here's a perfect example. Among the line-up of recordings played, I pulled out the MoFi version of *Dixie Chicken* by Little Feat. I've heard this recording hundreds of times over the years; it's one of those albums – like Dylan's *Desire* and Traffic's *Shoot Out at the Fantasy Factory* – that keep cropping up in my life. It's rare to have that album to have the same affect it had when I first heard it almost 30 years ago round at the parents of a very cool hippy chick artsy girl, who I was sort of dating at the time. A combination of teenage-grade hormones and copious amounts of claret made that a monumental event, despite my complete failure to get anywhere monumental with said hippy chick artsy girl. No subsequent replay of that album can match the weighting of that first listen, but the Q5 gets as close enough to conjure up the heady mix of white musk and patchouli oil.

It's not just the time machine element that makes this such a significant loudspeaker. It's the absence of malice it presents to a recording. That last line is really playing to those who listen seriously to this loudspeaker; everyone who does will know exactly what this means. It does something to the midrange that is impossible to find elsewhere; a lack of 'sag'. This is strange, as I didn't know midranges could 'sag' and that almost all of them do until I heard what the Q5 is doing, but after spending some time with it, most other midranges 'sag'. By this, I mean there's a mild compression to the midrange that makes woodwinds almost blur into the viola and cellos. Trouble is, we're so used to this, it's hard to describe because that sound is so much a function of loudspeaker design to this time. Perhaps the best way of describing it is its one aspect of the difference between the sound in an auditorium and the sound of the recording of that auditorium. Granted, compression and amplifier rectification in the recording chain might undermine this slightly, but what's surprising is this is yet another hidden gem in recordings past and present.

The hardest thing here is to write, because you are pulled into the music. Gregorian Chant will root you to your chair just as much as The XX will. This upends some of the absurdities that can surround high-end; "some speakers are better for classical or rock". Some speakers are not so well designed as to make their limitations better suited for a rock or classical or jazz presentation. Not here. You could jump from heavy opera to easy listening to harpsichord to folk via death metal and back out through Beck's *Sea Change* album.

I've already said much about the Q5 on the AVGuide website, including, "this is the best speaker in the world" and "there's no magic in Magico". I still stand by both these statements, and they don't counteract one another. There *is* no magic here, just loudspeaker engineering by the book... except where the book says "compromise".

The 'best speaker in the world' call is a tougher one to argue, because some might counter with more sensitive, less demanding speakers, or designs that make music sound better than itself in some way. My contention is that if you are looking for the most accurate frequency response, the lowest distortion and the widest dynamics, this is your loudspeaker. Under such conditions other considerations are secondary, assuming the speaker isn't so demanding that it spends its years in search of better audio components. And under such conditions, this has to be the best speaker in the world. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Magico Q5 loudspeaker

Four-way sealed-box design

Driver Complement

1 x 25mm MBe-1 Tweeter

1 x 150mm Nano-Tec Midrange

1 x 230mm Nano-Tec Midbass

2 x 230mm Nano-Tec Bass

Single wired multi-way binding posts

Sensitivity: 88dB

Impedance: 4 Ohms

Frequency Response: 26Hz-50kHz

Recommended Power: 50-500 Watts

Dimensions (HxWxD): 119x53x30cm

Weight: 176kg each

Price: £65,000 per pair

Manufactured by

Magico LLC

URL: www.magico.net

Distributed by

Absolute Sounds

Tel: +44 (0)208 971 3909

URL: www.absolutesounds.com





EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Dynaudio Consequence Ultimate Edition

by Alan Sircom

Some high-end products change with the wind. Others adopt an 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' attitude to flagship models. Dynaudio very definitely takes the latter approach. The original Consequence loudspeaker showed what a drive unit company could do when it turns its hand to box building. It created such a stir, Dynaudio subsequently got into the speaker building game and did so extremely successfully. But the Consequence remained a fixed point, unchanging for a quarter of a century.

Eventually, the changes in materials science, drive unit technology, engineering and computer modelling meant a replacement, the Consequence Ultimate Edition, was called for, even though the original was still selling relatively well. This is no face-lift; it's a root-and-branch change to almost every aspect of the original design, the result of more than two years of R&D. But it's a tribute to the original Consequence to see just how close the old and new look. The distinctive ankle-level high frequency units, the series of fixed, yet separate boxes, that huge bass driver staring you in the face all look familiar. As does the Tardis-like cabinet: a very big, weighty squared off and physical presence that doesn't look as big as it should. Although it stands in free-space, and takes up a lot of room (especially a lot of depth), it doesn't 'seem' much larger than a pair of big PMCs and is certainly less of an imposing structure than many transatlantic flagship designs.

Nevertheless, staring at a whopping great 300mm driver where you expect to see a tweeter can be a little disconcerting. It's probably little comfort that the cabinet hides a second upward-firing 300mm driver at the bottom side of that box to help make both sections act in a manner similar to – but not identical with – isobaric loading, known as the Compound Bass System. You'd expect deep bass from a big speaker, but 17Hz deep is an impressive off-shoot of this clever design

The reason for the ankle-grabbing high-frequency units is down to time alignment. Rather than go for the backswept look beloved by the likes of Avalon for example, Dynaudio wanted an upright squared off loudspeaker, but one that didn't mean the sound from the bass units arrived slightly out of step with the mids and top. An inverted tweeter is not that uncommon – Mission uses the idea a lot in standmounters – but the Consequence takes this to new (Ultimate) levels.

There's another, equally logical reason that many overlook – first reflections. Unless you rest this speaker on a

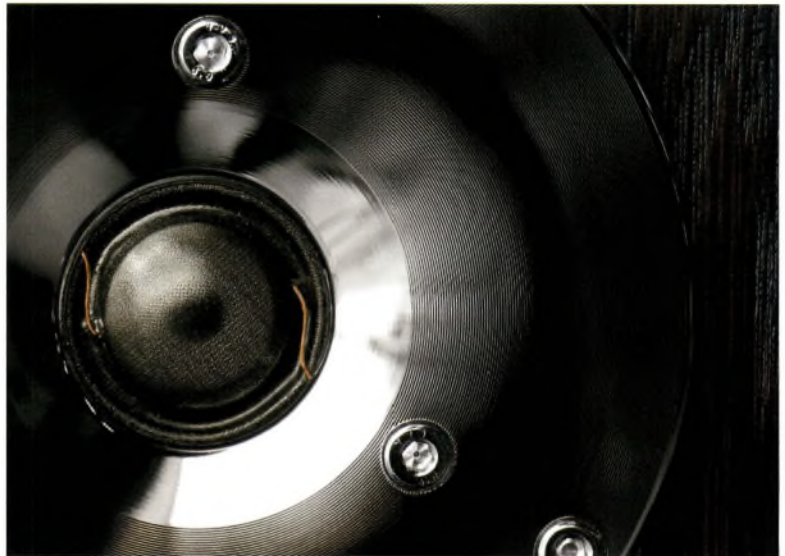
diffusion panel, a 300mm drive unit set low in the speaker is going to play havoc with the first reflection point off the floor almost right in front of the speaker. By placing it at about chest height, the floor and ceiling first reflections are further from the Consequence and can be managed slightly easier. The fact that it also makes sense from a position of building that Compound Bass System was probably a consideration, too.

A five-way design, from the bottom up, the Consequence sports supertweeter, tweeter, midrange dome, midwoofer cone and those 300mm woofers. These cross over at 15kHz, 2.7kHz, 1.4kHz and 800Hz respectively, which shows how much work the bass driver takes on. Naturally, given the fact that Dynaudio is also a drive unit manufacturer of some renown, these are custom made devices from the brand itself. No OEM drivers here. Dynaudio is not a fan of the metal dome tweeter or the paper cone bass driver, so it's soft domes and MSP (magnesium silicate polymer) bass cones all round. As drive unit geeks are known to go misty-eyed at the mention of the Dynaudio Esotar2 tweeter (along with the ScanSpeak Revelator and the Morel Supremo), the company is very much on the right track. ▶

“Staring at a whopping great 300mm driver where you expect to see a tweeter can be a little disconcerting.”

▶ The first four drivers all sit on a separate baffle plate, but are separated into chambers to limit the interaction from unit to unit. Those chrome – or gold plated – surrounds are not just for show and act as optimal wave guides for each drive unit. The loudspeaker is put together like a giant wooden Lego set in your room, resting on four whopping great adjustable feet. With so much cabinet on offer, it's little wonder the crossover network is huge, featuring giant air-cored inductors that most speaker designs would simply not be able to accommodate. This is all wired together with the impedance-matched OCOS coaxial speaker cable as internal wiring – another popular choice with the Dynaudio people across the board.

Some big loudspeakers are surprisingly easy to drive and come with a benign impedance load. The Consequence Ultimate Edition isn't one of them. It's not an amp-crusher, but its low sensitivity (claimed to be 85dB, but I suspect one or two dB below that), and a four ohm nominal impedance means prime amplifier beef is the order of the day. We tried it with a Naim CD555 CD player into a NAC 552 preamp and a NAP 500 power amp,



and a Chord Electronics Red Reference CD player, CPA8000 preamp and SPM14000 mono power amps, both times fed entirely by top Chord Company Sarum cables. The Naim kit gave a gutsy performance, but was beginning to run out of steam next to the unstoppable force of more than a kilowatt of Chord. That this speaker was demanding enough to highlight the limits of the Naim shows just how much power is needed to give the Consequence what it wants. If this were a cheaper design, the review would end there, but when you get to discuss speakers at this level, the expectation is for no-compromise amplification. Still, if you are planning to use the Dynaudio flagship to show off how good your 5W SET amp sounds, something's gotta give.

This is the sort of speaker that doesn't shout about its virtues in a flashy, immediate manner. Perhaps this is part of the reason for the original Consequence's quarter-century lifespan. Instead, the Dynaudio plays the long game, slowly seducing you with a sound that has longevity. Even that subterranean bass is not ostentatious or impressive, just convincing in its power and precision.

Such a mannered presentation makes demands upon the listener, because you quickly discover the difference between true bass depth and the enhanced boosts, booms and blooms used to make people think they are getting deep bass from a smaller speaker design. Comparing dub with real-world sounds is a fascinating exercise through the Consequence Ultimates; for all its sound system energy, dub is centred round the 40-80Hz range, with not a great deal of bottom octave action taking place. Tympani and the bottom end of a piano keyboard goes deeper and it shows here. Paradoxically, the bass honesty of the Consequence Ultimate will make those wanting some bass grunt from their dub records feel almost disappointed. On the other hand,

the rooted, real world solidity the naturally extended bass brings will provide more than a little solace, especially for anyone with a penchant for acoustic instruments. The sense of performers in their own spaces makes for exciting listening.

The ability to reach below 20Hz – and it is a real sub-20Hz, no more than 3dB down at that 17Hz point – is an odd experience. It's not what you expect, not the roller coaster of subsonic trouser-flappery you might have been led to believe from the home theatre 'Explosions R Us' brigade. It's not like someone gut-punched you, it doesn't leave you doubled up or fighting to catch your breath. It's like a palpitation, a whole body palpitation. You just stop, and it feels like the air around you dropped by about 10°. For that brief moment, time stands still – and you are off again. Cinema soundsmiths used to know this and the really low frequencies with great care, as accent for the one or two really intense moments in a movie. Not any more. But fortunately, musicians still respect the subsonic and when bass hits this sort of depth, it's there for heart-stopping effect.

In audio terms, this kind of bass needs near-endless power on tap, but you are served up with the moments of sheer danger and thrill in music. So, when the music stops sounding like a badly de-tuned radio and ▶

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- ▶ kicks in properly (and far later than most people expect) on 'Bury Pts. 1+3' from The Fall's *Your Future Our Clutter* CD, the sound of the kick drum that suddenly appears after two minutes of not-quite-right grungy introduction shocks you. Not in a jump out of the seat shock, but in a creepy Mark E Smith unleashed upon you kind of manner.

I've concentrated on the bottom end because the sort of full-range the Consequence Ultimate Edition offers is not normally available this side of six-figure speakers these days. But it's not just about bass. The whole package has an effortlessness that is hugely alluring. OK, so it's an effortlessness that takes an awful lot of amplifier effort to deliver, but the result is a sonic confidence of the kind you normally get in studio environments.

“This is where the Consequence Ultimate Edition excels. The sense of scale is wholly dependent on the piece of music played.”

People who buy big speakers, often buy them for their sense of scale, where they should be looking at them for their scaling ability. This is where the Consequence excels. The sense of scale is wholly dependent on the piece of music played. This can sometimes be disconcerting – a close mic'd Leonard Cohen from the first *Rare on Air* album sounds like you are faced with an eight foot tall depressed head reading poetry at you – but is remarkably honest to the original source. Change that big-headed Laughing Len for the live recording *King Curtis at Fillmore West* album and you are faced with a thirty foot stage in front of you. Replace that with John Pickard's *The Flight of Icarus* and real-sized percussionists beat merry real-sized hell out of real-sized tympani in front of a real-sized orchestra. The acid test for a big speaker is girl-with-guitar music; it can so easily scale up too large, but on the Consequence Ultimate Edition, the balance was just about perfect. Some of that must rest with the tweeter and supertweeter, which have to be producing perhaps the smoothest sounds from a loudspeaker. Not smooth in a 'softened, blunted' way, but smooth in an accurate, but 'I can listen to this forever' manner.

It's impossible not to draw comparisons with the other loudspeaker Titan I tested this issue; the Magico Q5. However, they move in such different circles and do such different things, I suspect this might be the only time a comparison of this kind is drawn. The two go after different interpretations of honesty. The Magico Q5 has an uncanny ability to portray the passion of the musicians and the wonderment of music with an honesty and accuracy that is unparalleled. In contrast, the Dynaudio Consequence Ultimate Edition has that studio like honesty to the signal across the board that makes you think you are in the mastering suite. In brute force terms, the Consequence has the edge in terms of a wider frequency response (sort of; the Magico's Q5 bat-eared 50kHz beats the Consequence's dog-whistle 30kHz, but

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Five-way Vented Compound System speaker

Drive Units: 21mm soft-dome supertweeter, 28mm soft-dome tweeter, 52mm soft-dome midrange, 170mm MSP midwoofer, 300mm MSP woofer

Frequency Response: 17Hz – 30kHz

Crossover Frequencies:

800Hz/1.4kHz/2.7kHz/15kHz

Sensitivity (2.83 V/1 m): 85 dB

Impedance: 4 Ohms

IEC Long Term Power Handling: > 400 W

Dimensions (W x H x D): 43x133x63cm

Weight: 11.4kg per speaker

Finish options: Wengé/chrome or Rosewood/gold. Real wood veneers

Price: £45,000 per pair

Manufactured by

Dynaudio

URL: www.dynaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)7970 074717

where it matters at the heavy-lifting end, the otherwise-impressive 26Hz of the Q5 is no match for 17Hz of heart-stopper), but both speakers are much more than the sum of their specs. Both are beautifully engineered, well-thought out loudspeakers that have a great deal in common sonically, and my respect for both designs is deepened by the consistency of sound they deliver.

There's something inherently right about Dynaudio's approach here. The Consequence Ultimate Edition makes all the right 'flagship' noises; it's big, powerful and possessed of the sort of bass and dynamics that few loudspeakers can deliver, yet couples that with the sort of classy refinement that Dynaudio's more affordable models are praised for. In fact, the only odd thing about the Dynaudio Consequence Ultimate Edition is that it has so low a profile among high-end loudspeaker aficionados. That must change. +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Nola Baby Grand

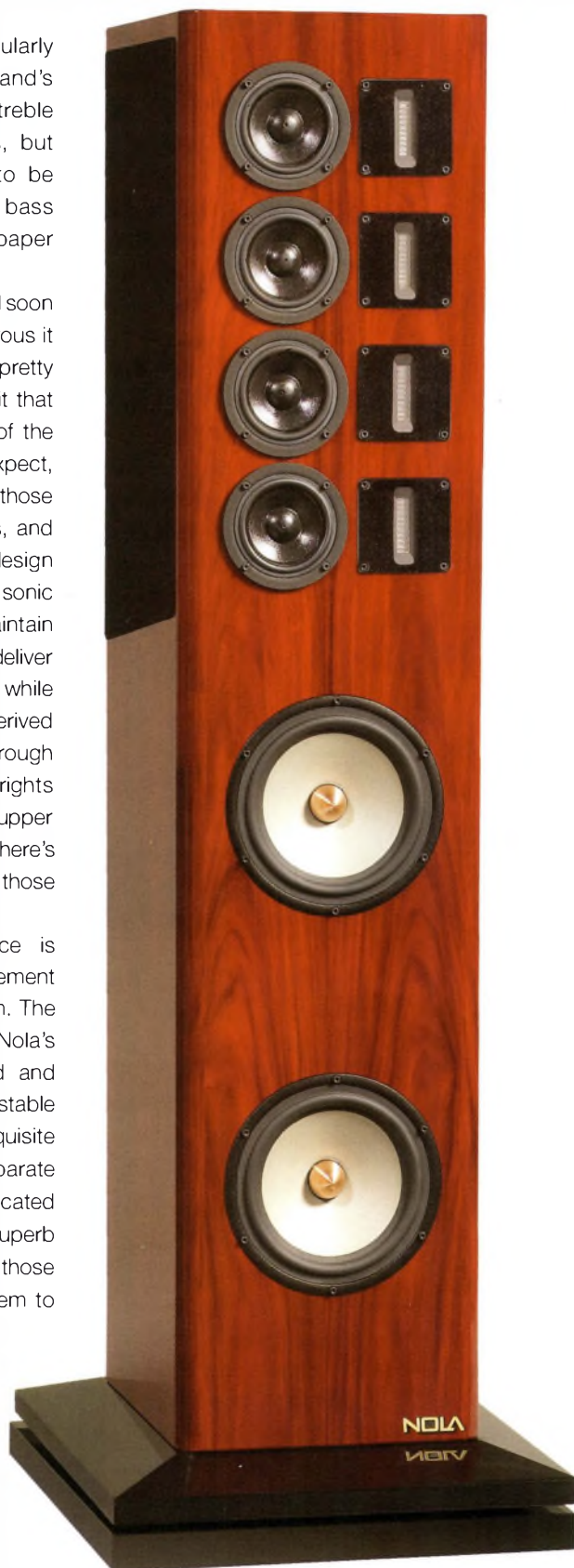
by Roy Gregory

On the face of it there's nothing particularly rare or unusual about the Nola Baby Grand's driver line up. Yes, the multiple mid and treble units are arranged in short line arrays, but the drivers themselves don't appear to be unusual, the well-regarded SEAS magnesium coned bass driver being teamed with a conventional looking doped paper mid¹ and the familiar Raven ribbon tweeter.

Take a closer look at these Nola Baby Grands and you'll soon discover just how emphatically they underline how dangerous it is to judge a book by its cover, as well as demonstrating pretty conclusively that it's not what you use but how you use it that matters. Those of you who remember previous reviews of the Pegasus and Viper Reference models will know what to expect, but for those who missed out, here's the low down: both those speakers used AlNiCo magnets for their midrange drivers, and disposed those drivers on a flying, or open baffle, unusual design decisions, but ones clearly reflected in their excellent sonic performance. Despite appearances, the Baby Grands maintain the family tradition, those AlNiCo motors being said to deliver more linear magnetic fields and thus more natural tonality, while the open baffle is claimed to reduce boxy colouration derived from the cabinet and rear wave energy reflected forward through the driver cones.* How performance is affected by the uprights and top plate that frame the grilles and fill out the Baby's upper reaches, concealing the flying baffle, is a moot point, but there's no escaping the fact that the speaker sounds better with those grilles removed.

The Baby Grand's more conventional appearance is underlined by the plinth base on which it sits, an arrangement that conceals a cup and ball mechanical grounding system. The result is proportionally far more pleasing to the eye than Nola's previous efforts, the speakers looking refreshingly solid and planted in appearance, as well as being significantly more stable than those previous designs. And it's executed with the requisite care and attention to detail, as evidenced by the large, separate cabinet for each speaker's crossover, also resting on dedicated cup and ball support platforms. Less obvious are the superb sounding Cardas, un-plated copper binding posts used on those crossovers, the micro mono-filament jumpers that link them to the speakers proper, and the revised and improved spikes that support the main cabinets. AlNiCo fell out of favour because it offers relatively low levels of flux density; more powerful magnets make for more efficient drivers, but Nola considers the trade-off worthwhile.

The end result is a speaker that might look superficially conventional, but even a cursory inspection will suggest otherwise.



Anybody building a speaker this big and heavy is going to pay particular attention to the practicalities of installation and set up. The Nolas are not the largest or even close to being the heaviest speakers that I've had to deal with: However, with the sole exception of the recently reviewed Gamuts, they are by far the most awkward. Each cabinet is a single piece construction that weighs around 150lbs. The plinth system needs to be positioned first and then the cabinets lifted and then lowered vertically into place on top of them. That's a pretty considerable and very awkward dead lift, without the benefit of any easy hand-holds or lifting aids – those with weak backs take note! Once perched in place, the resulting assembly is almost impossible to shift. Standing the spikes in skates on my wooden floor means that the speakers can be shifted, with considerable care and as long as you are not too precious about your flooring, but a carpet would render any positional adjustment impossible. Likewise, the stacked nature of the construction makes adding spikes after the event impractical, while positioning the speaker without the base, marking the position, removing the speaker and then replacing it atop the base is both laborious and a fools errand, given the effect that the base has on the bass.

Likewise, the platforms for the crossovers are too small for the cabinets they support, while their efficiency is impaired by the torsion applied by the stiff links to the speaker cabinets. The company may claim that the smaller platforms sound better than larger ones, but they undermine the elegance and perceived value of the package, well and truly emphasizing the extent to which this speaker sacrifices appearance and practicality on the altar of ultimate performance. Bottom line? The Nolas simply can't match the architectural or engineering elegance of speakers like the Focal Utopias or Wilsons.

“These Nolas are neither difficult to drive nor have any difficulty projecting musical energy into the listening space.”

Big speakers aren't necessarily hard to drive but three-way designs with wide bandwidth and multiple driver arrays often are. The Nola Baby Grands are definitely the exception that proves this rule. Despite a fairly modest efficiency of 89dB and a claimed bandwidth that extends from 20Hz to 45kHz (although they're unbecomingly coy when it comes to defining the limits that go with it) these Nolas (just like the Pegasus before them) are neither difficult to drive nor have any difficulty projecting musical energy into the listening space. Indeed, even with the 25 Watts of my JA30s doing the driving, the Nolas were more than comfortable. Yes, bigger amps like the Berning or Aesthetix monoblocs (both close to 300 Watts per channel) offer more level and greater low-frequency authority, but the little Jadis amps offered a beguiling sweetness and had no problem keeping the bottom end both in place and moving in the right direction.)

Everybody knows that, when it comes to hi-fi, there are two immutable laws: “less is more” and, “hybrid designs don't work”. Everybody knows that – don't they? Well, the Baby Grands definitely question that wisdom. Ten drivers a side and mixing metal and paper cones with ribbon tweeters, they appear to break both those cardinal dictates, yet their musical performance

says otherwise. Whether it's the fact that the mid and treble adopt similar short, line-source arrays, helping to match their forward dispersion, or the secret lies in the careful engineering of the external three-and-a-half-way crossover, the Nolas deliver an uncannily seamless output across their range. But then, to anybody familiar with the marque, that will come as no surprise. By now it should be clear that the Baby Grands carry their full complement of family DNA, and that has definite performance implications.

Every Nola speaker that I've spent time with offers this same, seamless integration, coupled with natural instrumental and vocal tonality, and excellent spatial coherence. It's a combination of virtues that gives them a natural sense of unforced musical fluidity and pace, a structural integrity and order to performances that sets them apart from the hi-fi crowd: a musical place for everything and everything in its place. In the face of a fashion for ever-higher definition and a grip that squeezes the very life from recordings, Nola speakers breathe in an organic, almost live fashion. So, when Martin Stephenson flickers between the cynical humour of 'Crocodile Cryer', the poignant insight of 'Caroline' and the lilting pathos of 'Coleen', the Baby Grands change, chameleon like to embrace not just the scale and instrumentation of each song, but the mood too. In one sense, that first Daintees album (*Boat To Bolivia*) can't make up its musical or emotional mind, presenting a hotch-potch kaleidoscope of apparently unrelated social snapshots. It's a severe test of any speaker's ability to stand aside from the music, letting the performance speak for itself – and one that the Nolas pass with flying colours, unearthing Stephenson's underlying personality, that sardonically perceptive persona that binds the fragments together.

The question then becomes how far a given model can extend that essential musical truth from the center of proceedings: how high it goes, how low, how all-encompassing is its acoustic reach? Which brings us back to that question of integration and why the fact that the Nola speakers tie their drivers together so that you can't hear the join is so musically important. Contrary to popular belief, it's generally not tonal changes between drivers that draw attention to crossover points, but changes in dispersion, differences in the way

¹ “Looking” is the word. Actually, these hand-built Scan speak units are double doped with two, different plastic layers, a solution that delivers better performance with lower mass.

² I know the ribbon tweeters are also mounted on the open baffle, but their closed rear design negates any potential advantage to be gained from their rear wave output.

Nola Baby Grand Reference loudspeakers / EQUIPMENT REVIEW-

▶ that the drivers project energy into the room. Again, all Nolas, but the Baby Grands in particular, seem to have this ability to project musical energy not just remarkably evenly but more effectively than their paper specs would suggest (see my comments on efficiency above). Familiar albums like *This One's For Blanton* take on a proper sense of musical purpose, Ray Brown's bass lines delivered with pace, energy and direction, a sure footed sense of pitch and shape that balances perfectly with Ellington's poised and beautifully weighted and understated piano phrases. The glassy stridency that the Duke's incisive right hand can provoke from some speakers is entirely absent, the complex harmonics of the piano readily apparent. Likewise, the impassioned playing of Jacqueline du Pre in her live Elgar, captured in Moscow and released on Testament. It might not be as clean as the EMI album, but the dramatic tension and emotional release in the performance are laid bare by the Baby Grands, true to this musical and emotive tour de force. The evenness of the acoustic energy projected across the entire bandwidth brings a natural presence and immediacy to proceedings that are both attention grabbing and musically convincing.

Make no mistake; when it comes to musical communication, the ability to transport a listener to the heart of the recorded event, these speakers stand in a very select group indeed – a group in which most of the other members are both larger and more expensive (to buy AND run). But now it's time to get picky; what is it that the Nolas don't do and where do their weaknesses lie?

Back to the Blanton and you'll note that, although Ray Brown's fingering and the shape and attack on his notes stand testimony to the agility of the Nolas' bass response, the instrument itself lacks dimensionality, while the distance between it and the piano is foreshortened. The drum beats that punctuate the second movement of the Elgar are certainly explosive, but the overall acoustic space lacks depth, volume and clearly defined boundaries compared to the best, while the Thin Red Line OST has scale and beautiful layering of its slowly building crescendos, but lacks the literally room shaking weight that underpins this soundtrack on a speaker like Nola's own Grand Reference. The live acoustic of the Gorecki 3rd Symphony on Polski Radio fails to reach forward and envelop the listener, surrounding him (or her) with the rest of the audience.

What you are hearing here is down to the voicing of the speakers' bottom end. It's fast, tight and as I said above, musically agile. It also goes low, but the compact, sealed box loading will always carry a penalty in terms of weight and sheer impact when compared to larger, reflex loaded speakers like the Avalon Isis or Focal Stellar Utopia. "Compact? Didn't you say that these speakers are big?" Well, yes they are, but only around 60% of their apparent volume is devoted to the bottom end, making them far smaller, in acoustic terms, than they appear. It also denotes a conscious design decision, a preference for a more accurate, detailed and informative presentation over the alternative "most available" option, not least because the absence of bottom-end flab leaves that glorious mid-band free and unimpeded.

Combine that limited volume, sealed box approach with the same low-frequency driver complement as the Viper Reference and yes, there are limits to what can be achieved. Whether this is a problem will depend on the listener, their taste in music and chosen source format. It will also depend on the available space, and there's many a listener who will be glad to discover that, although the Baby Grands prefer to be free of boundaries, they'll also be comfortable in surprisingly small rooms. Those who listen to the largest of large-scale orchestral works and demand a walk-in, immersive acoustic will miss the absolute dimensionality available from larger, genuinely full-range loudspeakers – assuming of course that they can both afford and accommodate them. Perhaps it's no coincidence, but it is also a bass balance that is far more attuned to, far less obviously lean, when coupled to an analogue front-end. Whether it's a turntable or a really good FM tuner, the greater generosity these components tend to deliver lower down dovetails perfectly with the Nola's quick, clean but harmonically complex nether regions. The result is exactly the sort of weighty foundation that lucid and musically expressive mid-band is crying out for.

But like I said, I'm getting seriously picky here, and doing it from the privileged position of one who has played with those bigger speakers without having to write a cheque to do so. The rest of us (including my real world, owns his own system self) will probably never know what we are missing. Instead we'll simply revel in the sheer life, energy and immediacy of a track like 'Look Down, Look Down', the direct emotional connection that these speakers make to a song like Janis Ian's 'Some People's Lives'.

Ribbon tweeters – especially the Raven – have a spectre of brightness hanging over them. I suspect this has more to do with ▶



when is a distribution block not a distribution block? when its full of essential wire, RFI and acoustic absorption technology!



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▶ poorly executed crossovers or coupling transformers than inherent failings in the ribbon topology – although if the designer gets a ribbon wrong you surely hear its failings. Unfortunately, in this instance it's hard to disagree – at least if the statement is based on the performance of these speakers as delivered. In fact, initially there was a glare and halo around lower treble information and a real splash on brushwork: Sibilants sizzled and piccolos pierced in a really quite unpleasant fashion. But prior experience with Nolas led me to believe that designer Carl Marchisotto would never release a speaker with a top-end like this, so investigation was clearly called for.

“The Nola Baby Grand Reference is a speaker system that will polarise opinion.”

The Raven tweeters are fitted with really nasty, bright gold plated thumb screw terminals and laced together with thin, stranded cable. Both seem like bizarre choices given the attention that's been paid to the terminals and cabling for the crossovers, but that's not what concerns me here. The review speakers arrived with all of the tweeter terminals loose. It's easy enough to tighten them (and boy will you hear the difference) but you do need to be aware of the problem before you can fix it. Once I'd cranked the thumb wheels down the improvement in the speakers' top-end was little short of revelatory: clean, clear, unforced highs accompanied by space, depth and focus. Instrumental tonality became far more identifiable and natural, transients had a lovely pace and attack to them while the dimensionality of instruments and their location within the soundstage improved dramatically. All from tweaking up those terminals. It makes me wonder what would happen if the same binding posts and wiring employed on the crossover were extended up to the high-frequency drivers. Just how much those terminals are contributing to the Raven's reputation for brightness is also an interesting point, given that in most cases those thumb screws are located inside a cabinet!

Oh, and while you are about it, take a 9/64ths Allen key to all the driver fixing bolts. Every single one was loose on the review speakers, some by as much as three or four complete turns (just don't over tighten them or you'll strip them out). The result was another huge sonic improvement; not as dramatic as the tweeter terminals, but put the two together and you've got yourself a whole new speaker. And yes – the glorious sonic performance described above refers to the Nolas with everything battened down tight like Hurricane Sally is about to arrive...

Like every really great hi-fi component, the Nola Baby Grands are a bundle of contradictions. Unashamedly dedicated to the single goal of musical performance, their fit, finish and the practicalities of their installation can't compare with the competition, even if sonically they have little to fear. Having said that, credit where it's due; these are the best looking and best presented speakers that I've ever reviewed from Nola, so the company is moving in the right direction. Whether they've moved far enough will be in the eye (and ears) of the beholder. But, particularly if you favour acoustic music, be that jazz, classical or the folkier end of roots, and you prefer to play it on a turntable, then the Nola Baby Grands could be hard to resist. Fed with care, there is no escaping the power of their compelling, infectious musical enthusiasm and if that's your sole criterion for judgment I can't think of a speaker that matches both their performance and versatility at this price. So, whilst the Nolas are undeniably expensive, they are also, paradoxically, something of a bargain,

both to buy but also in terms of the demands they place on partnering equipment. Perhaps the most obvious competition comes from Avalon's Time, a speaker that can match both the tonal and musical capabilities of the Baby Grand, while exceeding it in terms of bass weight and impact, and the acoustic coherence and soundstaging that goes with them. But, the amplifiers necessary to extract that performance from the Times start pretty much where the ones required for the Nolas leave off – which translates to a major difference in the cost of ownership.

The Nola Baby Grand Reference is a speaker system that will polarise opinion. Few will fail to be impressed by their performance, but some will reject their lack of engineering and aesthetic sophistication while others will simply reject the possibility of any speaker being worth this much money. But for a select few, I suspect that their particular blend of virtues will prove irresistible simply because, if it really is the music that matters to you, these Nolas might well put you closer to the performers than you thought possible. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

The Nola Baby Grand Reference

Type: Three-and-a-half-way hybrid loudspeaker, with open baffle midrange.

Driver Complement: 4x 50mm Raven R1.2 ribbon tweeters, 4x 110mm double, differentially doped paper cone midrange, AlNiCo motors, 2x 220mm magnesium cone bass units

Bandwidth: 20Hz – 45kHz

Efficiency: 89dB

Dimensions (WxHxD):

Loudspeaker: 310 x 1475 x 400mm

Plinth: 470 x 100 x 560mm

Crossover: 265 x 165 x 410mm

Price: £42,995 per pair

Manufacturer: Accent Speaker Technology Inc.

URL: www.nolaspeakers.com

Distributor: Artisan Audio

URL: www.artisanaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1494 858471

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Eclipse TD712z Mk2 loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

The thing with Eclipse speakers is either Eclipse is right or everyone else is. An off-shoot of the Fujitsu corporation, the Eclipse TD project – of which the TD712z Mk2 is the current ultimate expression – is an ambitious attempt to make recorded music “like it’s meant to be heard”.

Most audio equipment – and practically all loudspeakers – is geared toward improving the system’s performance in terms of frequency and amplitude response. The flatter the frequency response, for example, the better the speaker, goes the logic. Eclipse disagrees... instead, time domain is key. How the speaker deals with changes in a signal over time (in other words, impulse response) defines sonic accuracy, rather than the (in Eclipse-world, at least) mistaken goal of better frequency and amplitude performance. To achieve this, Eclipse deliberately chose a single, small-diameter drive unit per channel, a cabinet with a construction designed to minimise internal vibration and reflections (normally damped in conventional speakers, but this is diametrically opposed to what Eclipse is trying to do) and the teardrop shape, designed to maximise the impulse response of the speaker.

Eclipse isn’t the first company to think along these lines. Rehdeko, Konus Audio, 47 Labs and others have all delivered loudspeakers that go for timing over frequency accuracy, but arguably none have taken the time domain concept to its logical extreme like Eclipse TD.

In a way, the time domain idea is completely understandable on a fundamental level. I call it the ‘hold button’ effect; if you are put on hold, the tonal and dynamic properties of the music can be degraded to frightening levels, but so long as the temporal information is intact, you will be able to identify the piece of music playing. Break up the temporal information (such as a signal with lots of dropouts, or a cassette tape on its ten millionth play) and no amount of accurate tone or dynamic range will reconstruct the signal. An overexaggeration and oversimplification, but an example of why the time domain is so potentially important in audio.

The TD712z Mk2, then, is a single-driver design in a pod. In its silver finish, it looks surprisingly like a jet engine, resting on a small, cleverly designed dedicated speaker stand. The speakers come with a choice of tall or short stands. Either stand allows a considerable amount of vertical and horizontal adjustment of the loudspeaker, with only a single over-sized knurled thumbwheel operating the whole event. Installation is key to getting a good sound; level the stands first, then



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“Eclipse posits that audio has taken a wrong turn, obsessing as it often does on ‘tone’ rather than ‘time’.”

► loosen the wheel and adjust the speaker so that the front of the drive unit is perfectly vertical. Room placement is of less importance because the teardrop shaped baffle design, although the sheer mechanical limits of the amount of air the loudspeaker can move suggests really big rooms are not a good match.

The white, 12cm full-range drive unit is Eclipse's own design. The rear-ported speaker is claimed to deliver a frequency range starting at 35Hz and ending at 26kHz, although unusually these figures are quoted at -10dB limits. As most loudspeakers give -3dB limits, we'd likely be looking at a loudspeaker with nearer 120Hz-12kHz under the same conditions. A low sensitivity of 84dB coupled with a suggestion not to use an amplifier that exceeds 70W maximum power output means a loudspeaker that will never raise the roof. So headbangers looking for ear-shattering treble and bowel-loosening bass at ear-shattering levels will be disappointed. On the other hand, those who hear and like what the TD712z Mk2 can do will likely say something along the lines of 'who cares?'

The deliberately curtailed bandwidth coupled with the sort of speed of delivery these speakers bring gives them a sense of vibrancy that few speakers can muster. They are the antithesis of what most high-end loudspeakers – especially American high-end loudspeakers – stand for. They don't go particularly loud, don't have extended treble or deep bass and they aren't designed to work with giant powerhouse amps. As a consequence, that probably puts the TD712z Mk2 off the wish list for more than half the audiophiles out there. More's the pity.

That teardrop/jet cowling speaker shape isn't just decorative. It does wonders in making the TD712z Mk2 remarkably room insensitive. In this, it ranks with the stunning Gradient Helsinki 1.5 for dialing out room conditions. I don't think either design would sound great in a room made of glass, steel and stone, but they'd make a better fist of that kind of room than most other loudspeaker designs.

What the Eclipse excels at is a kind of directness between you and the music. They are incredibly fast and it really does seem like you are bypassing dozens of links in the audio chain and direct-injecting yourself into the mixing desk. It's an uncanny experience. The nearest you get to this in the home is a pair of blisteringly detailed in-ear headphones. This is time domain loudspeaking in action.

It's also completely at odds with what you are used to from almost every other loudspeaker on the market. Deliberately so. You get the attack, decay, sustain and release of notes presented perfectly – more accurately than virtually any loudspeaker you can mention, but at the expense of what many would consider limitations and colorations of frequency and amplitude. In other words, the timing's more 'right' than usual, but the frequency and dynamic range are different from the norm. And this is wholly deliberate. In fact, I'd



suggest the midband of the speaker is utterly transparent, but we are so used to it being overpowered by the frequency extremes that we forget what real sounds sound like.

I think the TD712z Mk2 holds the key as to why hi-fi is so notoriously unpopular with musicians. Eclipse posits that audio has taken a wrong turn, obsessing as it often does on 'tone' rather than 'time'. A musician wants to know how the music was played, rather than how it sounds, in part because the tonal balance of a recording is as much down to the engineer as it is to the musician. By focusing on the temporal accuracy, the Eclipse gives the musician a helping hand in hearing what the music *is* like, not what it ►

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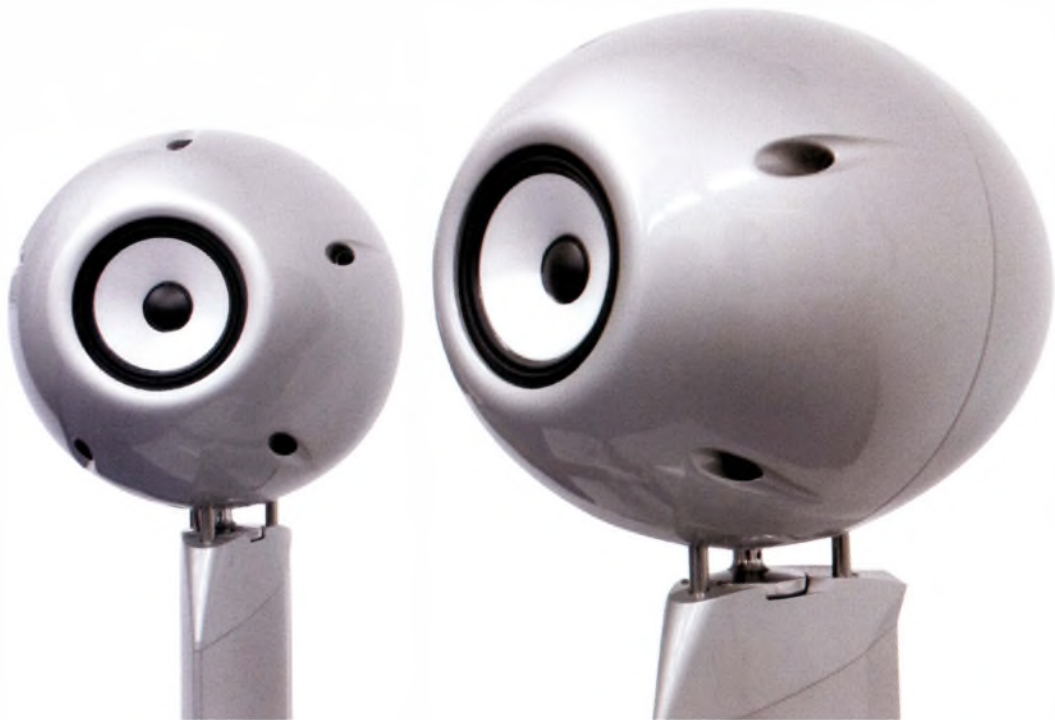


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Ken Kessler Review – Hi-Fi News, March 2009

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▶ *sounds* like. Little wonder then that the likes of Brian Eno, John Williams and Michael Nyman and others are fans.

There is a downside, irrespective – or likely because – of the obvious bass depth, treble extension, dynamic and volume level limitations. Some instruments just don't sound like how you expect them to sound through audio equipment. Interestingly, to those who love the sound cite this as their reason too, because they feel it sounds more like the real instruments, instead of the analogue we put up with through conventional loudspeakers. Nevertheless, you will spend time listening to instruments saying 'that doesn't sound right'. At least at first. But it's what happens next that's telling.

Here's the thing. There's no half measures here. Spend an hour or three listening to the Eclipse TD712z Mk2. At the end of that time, switch back to your existing loudspeaker. One of two things will happen... you will either breathe a sigh of relief, or buy a pair of Eclipse loudspeakers. Your old speakers will either sound like you have gone back to full-range music, or they will sound hopelessly arch, artificial and focused on the wrong parts of the music. This isn't a reviewer's get-out clause, a try-it-for-yourself way of avoiding a conclusion – I seriously don't know how any given person will react to the sound of the Eclipse flagships, except I can guarantee there's no such thing as sitting on the fence... you will either love them or hate them.

I'll be completely honest here and express a problem this causes me, specifically. I'm one of the 'love them' types. What they do in terms of directness to spirit of the music engages me in a way that I could easily sacrifice the extremes of bass and treble to achieve. But, because they are so out of the ordinary in audio terms, using a pair for reviewing would pose problems. Although these speakers allow you to listen into the music (and the equipment) well, using them would make it difficult for me to discuss the treble or deeper bass performance of a product connected to the Eclipse TD712z Mk2. Also, the limited power handling would make it hard to determine the performance of a 250W amplifier in full throat. A more conventional design is ultimately called for to evaluate most audio components. Which is a crying shame, 'cos I love these perfect pods. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Eclipse TD712z Mk2 loudspeaker

Drive unit: 12cm full range driver unit

Single-wired speakers, no crossover

Frequency response: 35Hz-26kHz (-10dB)

Efficiency: 84dB

Impedance: six ohms

Input resistance (rating/max): 35W/70W

Adjustable head angle: 0°-12°

Dimensions (with stand, WxHxD): 35x99x43cm

Weight: 25kg

Colour: Silver, Black

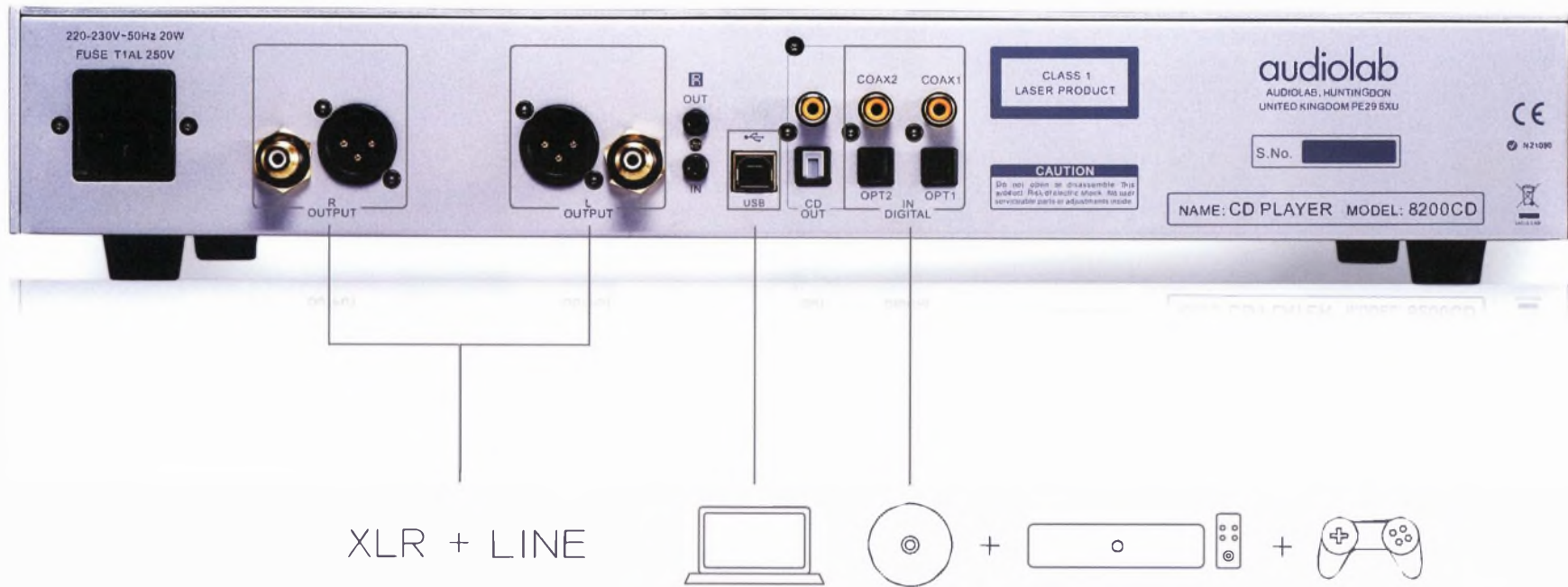
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Epos Encore 50

by Paul Messenger

Form follows function' is a fine maxim for designing virtually any product, but it does leave out one crucially important ingredient – manufacturing costs.

The enclosure is responsible for much of the performance of a loudspeaker – probably more than 50 per cent, truth be told – and there's more than one good reason for creating irregular and/or curved shapes. But curved and/or unusual shape enclosures cost money, so there's a strong financial case for keeping things simple, with flat panels joined at right angles.

I can't say whether or not that was a factor in the creation of the Epos Encore 50, as a key part of its construction is a double-thickness enclosure that deliberately combines

plywood and MDF for optimum performance, which would be very difficult to achieve without adopting a rectilinear shape. Whatever the motivation, the net result is one of the larger and heavier floorstanders around, standing well over a metre tall and weighing 45kg. Which goes some way towards justifying a pricetag just short of £5,000/pair.

No-one would call this speaker neat, pretty or discreet. Rather it's a bit of a monster, making an unambiguous statement about its intention to deliver serious hi-fi sound quality with considerable bass and loudness capabilities. ▶

“The driver line-up is clearly high quality and looks conventional enough, though it breaks with Epos plastic cone tradition.”

- ▶ Dressed all over in good quality cherry or black real wood veneer, with slightly rounded vertical edges, it is a very nicely finished monster, and a purposeful looking one too, thanks in no small part to the similarly monumental plinth which is part of the package. This substantial and well shaped slab of black MDF not only considerably enhances the stability footprint well beyond that required by EC legislation, but is also supported on a magnificent set of spikes – very heftily built, top adjustable and with every flexibility one could need. Epos even supplies something called a ‘skateboard’ to help move the speaker around – useful for those who don’t already possess a Black & Decker Tough Truck! A bonus is that the plinth and tall enclosure lifts the midrange and treble drivers well up to and even a little above seated ear height.

There’s also considerable flexibility in the crossover arrangements too, with wire jumper links accessed through the base for both the midrange (+1/0/-1dB) and treble (+1.5/0/-1.5dB) drivers, and three pairs of socket/binder terminals with removable brass links. The whole crossover unit is mounted in its own sub-enclosure, and isolated from acoustic and mechanical vibrations. High class passive components are used throughout, including an auto-transformer feeding the midrange unit, and care has been taken to avoid magnetic field coupling between inductors.

It’s mounted on a substantial removable panel, so that the speaker may subsequently be converted to active operation (Creek/Epos has plans to introduce a “custom DAC, with programmable digital crossover” sometime soon). The crossover/terminal back panel even has louvres to help keep components from overheating.

The driver line-up is clearly high quality and looks conventional enough, though it breaks with Epos’ plastic cone tradition in using paper-based cones (with added Kevlar and carbon fibres) for both bass and midrange drivers. The tweeter is the more familiar mesh-protected 25mm metal dome tweeter, albeit with a number of modifications to reduce the resonant frequency and improve power handling for this application. The twin 220mm bass drivers each have 140mm diameter cones, and are loaded by a 43 litre enclosure and a large rear port tuned to 30Hz; the 158mm midrange driver has a 100mm cone, and operates within a separate sealed 8 litre enclosure.

The enclosure is perhaps the most interesting element of all, since it was found that birch plywood and MDF had specific advantages over each other – plywood sounding smoother while MDF had the lower noise floor. Putting the two together, along with extensive bracing, could provide the best of both characteristics.

Measurements confirmed the effect of adjusting the crossover jumper leads was much as promised, but the specified 89dB sensitivity seemed like a considerable underestimation. With the preferred ‘+1’ setting on both sets



of jumpers, and measured under realistic far-field in-room averaged conditions, a generous 92-93dB seems a much better estimate, though it should also be noted that the amplifier load is very demanding through the mid-bass, falling below 3ohms around 100-120Hz.

This is obviously a speaker that should be kept well clear of walls, and it has plenty of bass to fill much larger rooms than our 4.3x2.6x5.5m space. Indeed the sub-60Hz bass is theoretically about 5dB too strong in my room, but because it’s clean and well formed this didn’t seem to be any problem subjectively – in fact it was rather nice! ▶



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NORDOST
MAKING THE CONNECTION

Initially measured with the crossover set 'flat', the overall frequency response (far-field, in-room) showed a steadily falling characteristic amounting to around 9dB from 200Hz up to 4kHz, followed by a recovery of about 3dB in the treble proper. In truth this looked (and sounded) a bit too laid back, so the midrange and treble levels were both set to '+1', which proved much more satisfactory, objectively and subjectively, and was therefore adopted for most of the auditioning.

This was carried out using Naim NAC552/NAP500 amplification and Vertex AQ Moncayo speaker cables. Sources were Rega Valve Isis and Naim CDS3/555PS CD players, Magnum Dynalab MD106T tuner and Rega/Linn and Funk/Linn hybrid turntables with Soundsmith Strain Gauge cartridge to play vinyl.

And once the midrange and treble outputs were maximised, the true – and indeed impressive – qualities of this speaker quickly became apparent. Its two most obvious strengths are an exceptionally wide dynamic range, thanks to very effective cabinet coloration control, and an unusually smooth sonic delivery across the midband and treble in particular.

It does retain something of its laid back character, and while that does mean that voices can sound a little 'shut in', speech remains clear and articulate even at very low levels. And because the presence band is quite restrained, the volume can be turned up as high as you like without any real tendency to sound aggressive.

This is a speaker that likes to be played at a high level, not only because it has the right sort of tonal balance, but also because of that marvellously effective enclosure. The more time I spent with these speakers, the more their undoubted charms won me over. They're exceptionally free from any fatigue inducing character, and therefore very easy to listen to over the long haul. One might perhaps wish for a little more dynamic brio and tighter transients, where it does fall a little short of the best, but it's certainly no slouch here either, and its all round musical communication skills are very effective.

Imaging is precise and well focused, providing good depth where this is available from the source – a live BBC Prom featuring Elgar's Symphony No1 gave fine Albert Hall orchestral perspectives, in part because the wide dynamic range is maintained right across the band.

The Encore 50 deals with all kinds of music without fear or favour. Radio 3's Choral Evensong sounded excellent, with impressive rendition of the gothic cathedral's marvellous acoustic, but the Grateful Dead's *Anthem of the Sun* was equally enjoyable, and the speakers clearly laid bare the substantial differences between the two turntables used.

While the high sensitivity provides ample practical recompense, the low impedance in the bass region does rather suggest a preference for solid state amplifiers with low source impedances and ample current delivery. While I daresay push-pull thermionic amplifiers with appropriate output transformer taps will work fine, the single-ended variety are probably better avoided.

I think it's rather too easy to underestimate this speaker. The whole unpacking and installation procedures are enough of a chore to undermine its appeal somewhat, and while aesthetics are a personal matter, I don't think many would consider it a design classic. And the sound quality is also arguably a little too laid back in the 'flat' setting.



However, select '+1' on both the crossover network jumpers, wind up the volume, and the Encore 50 really starts to get into its stride and show its mettle. Understatement is still very much part of the package, but many may find this welcome, and few if any alternatives will match its combination of smoothness, wide dynamic range, ample bass and good sensitivity at anything like the price. This is a genuine high-end speaker at well below current high-end prices. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity: 89dB claimed; 93dB measured

Impedance: 4ohm nom claimed; 3ohm min measured

In-room frequency response (best settings): 60Hz - 15kHz (+/-4dB)

Bass extension (in-room): -6dB@20Hz

Crossover frequencies: 250Hz, 3.5 kHz

Drive units: 2x 220mm bass with 140mm cones

1x 158mm midrange, 100mm cone

1x 25mm aluminium dome tweeter

Size (wxhxd cms): 26.5x123x38.5

Weight: 45kg

Finish: cherry or black real-wood veneer

Price: £4,995/pair

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

KEF Reference 201/2 loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom

KEF's Reference range is a 30+ year benchmark in loudspeakers. It has changed several times, but the line represents the pinnacle of what KEF can do with a production line. In the light of its excellent Blade concept loudspeaker, it's clear the company can make a speaker of jaw-dropping performance for the show crowd, but what about something closer to the real world. The Reference 201/2 shows just how good the company's real-world high-end sound can be.

The baby of the range, the 201/2 is a three-way standmount. By using the top-spec version of the Uni-Q coincident or coaxial drive unit, the 201/2 manages to make the speaker seem less large than many three-ways, presenting two 165mm cones to the listener. The first is a fibre-reinforced paper bass unit, with a crossover point at 450Hz. The second (and third) are a flared 165mm polypropylene cone midrange with a 25mm titanium dome tweeter in its acoustic centre and these cross over at 2.5kHz, the crossover network being a fourth-order, 24dB/octave design.

Coincident drivers are potentially a blessing and a curse; they act like a point source (excellent imagery and fewer room interaction problems), but there are potentially two drivers acting very differently at the same time and thereby clashing with one another. KEF's way to get round this is to make the midrange unit behave like a waveguide for the tweeter, thanks to careful cone shaping. This optimises the dispersion of the tweeter relative to the midrange, without sacrificing performance of either. I have to admit that some seem to find the limitations of coincident drivers more troubling than I do and even before this über-Uni-Q design, I remained something of a fan. That this iteration reduces the effects of those limitations is not lost on me, but it does make me want to make a few 'told you so' phone calls to the nay-sayers. ▶



“The exception can end up standing out like a straight man at a Justin Bieber concert.”

- ▶ The reflex-loaded loudspeaker is moderately insensitive at a claimed 86dB, but a relatively easy eight ohm load (with minimum impedance hovering around four ohms). Rare in these times of a return to single wired performance, but the Reference 201/2 is tri-wired, with a set of screw in ‘caps’ to gently tailor high and low frequencies in room. You can leave the speaker flat, put a 2dB cut in the bass or a 0.75dB tilt up or a 0.75dB or 1.5dB down-tilt in the treble. You need the manual to decode this because there’s not much in the way of indication on the back panel. It comes with a 0.75dB treble tilt out of the box. I found this (or flat) to be the best setting in my room.

I also found the loudspeakers worked best with no toe-in whatsoever, but very accurate positioning in the room. I found a slightly staggered approach best, with the left speaker three inches behind the right in room, compared to the norm. But here’s the good part. The loudspeaker sounded good enough fine ‘plonked down’ in roughly the right place. There was a point where the sound suddenly improved, but the amount of effort finding that spot was not a vital component of good sound. Interestingly, having found that position, changing back to my regular ProAc Response D Two, I found the half-step forward position for the right speaker worked best with that speaker too. It simply wasn’t so obvious with the ProAc.

The Reference 201/2 is as good a speaker as you feed it. Put it on the end of good equipment and it will return a good performance, but put it on the end of remarkable equipment and it sounds... well, remarkable. That is something

of a double-edged sword, because put the speaker on the end of something vexatious and it won’t hold back in giving you an honest assessment of that grade of performance too. In that respect, the KEF Reference 201/2 is the perfect reviewer loudspeaker. It brings nothing but honesty to the party and if products further up the chain don’t hold to the same ethos, it will expose them.

That doesn’t make the Ref 201/2 an unsatisfying speaker and it isn’t a loudspeaker in constant search of an amplifier, it’s just that you could use it on the end of a grand’s worth of Arcam amplifiers or more than £150,000 worth of DarTZeel and it will not short-change either. But it works best with a lot of power squeezed up its speaker terminals, and the recommended 50-150W specified by KEF should be taken as a starting place, because much lower than 50 watts is something of a struggle. The single best sound in my arsenal was from the Devialet D-Premier (reviewed next issue), which is nearly 100W past that upper limit, and an fine KEF life-partner.

Listening notes read like a *Life of Brian* script, as yet another positive aspect of the performance unfolded. So, apart from the integration, detail, vocal articulation, sumptuous finish, dynamic range, ability to play at almost any practical volume level, neutrality, flexibility and surprising amounts of bass for such a relatively small speaker... what have the KEF Reference 201/2s ever done for us?

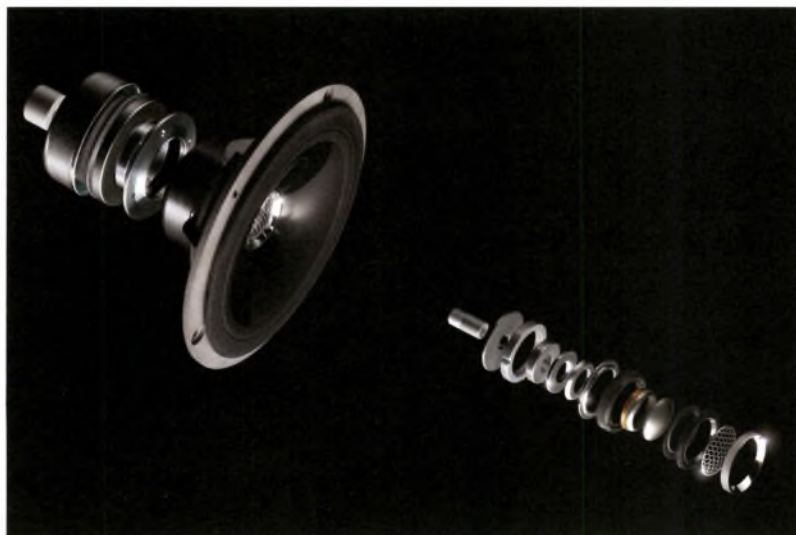
Integration is a key feature in a three-way standmount, because it’s easy to get wrong. Especially when two of those three drivers are coincident, the exception can end up standing out a straight man at a Justin Bieber concert. Here though, the sound is a cohesive whole from bass on up. A fine way of checking this is solo piano, ideally one that hasn’t been recorded for the audiophile. You hear a common tonality in left and right hands and a smooth transition as the pianist travels up – or down – the registers through these speakers, as opposed to having a small tonal change as the bass and midrange cross.

Detail is a given at this level, but even here the Ref 201/2 surprises. It’s incredibly clean and articulate, precise and transparent. Not electrostatic transparent, but transparent nonetheless. It presents a good balance between detail simply for the sake of it and

excitement. The speaker allows you to listen into the mix and the electronics well. Previous Reference ranges were excellent detail retrievers too, but gave you that detail 'warts 'n' all', which led some people to partnering the speaker with sumptuous sounding valve amps and capacitive speaker cables, that can lead to some gentle sonic tailoring. The tailoring is all in-speaker now, so no such system matching is important. That being said, these speakers on the end of a rich-sounding valve amp is a very heady and beguiling mix.

In a small to medium sized room – where the bass roll-off matches the untreated limits of the space – the speakers deliver a really powerful punch. They are extremely dynamic and go very loud with the right equipment. This means in most British living rooms, you and your windows will complain before the speaker. And it's an entertaining dynamic range, too. 1950s Jazz takes on that rooted in the room feel, orchestras have the sort of weight and energy that makes you wonder why they invented rock music. Then you turn it up to hear Bonzo's drum kit on that ultra-rare Japanese CD Led Zep pressings that actually sound good and find yourself catatonic and shaking in a corner waiting for the big man with the loud noises to go away. In short – wow!

The only real drawback to the KEF Reference 201/2's sound is that it is so good, it doesn't suffer musical fools gladly. Clipped and compressed casualties of the Loudness War are not given an easy ride here... they sound loud and distorted, with the lack of dynamic range on such recordings laid bare. How big a problem this is to you falls down to how much music you have that suffers from Loudness War distortions – but if your collection includes *Californication* by the Red Hot Chili Peppers or the CD version of *Together Through Life* by Bob Dylan, playing them through the Reference 201/2 is a



discomforting experience. If only more people had speakers like this, clipped and compressed loud albums would simply go away. But when you think it through, if the biggest criticism of these speakers is the state of modern recordings, that's really a good sign for these loudspeakers.

We don't all have a collection of bad recordings and many of us would like our good albums to shine through regardless. This is where the KEF Reference 201/2 really makes the grade. It's an intensely analytical experience, but also an intensely musical one. Even those Loudness War victims are musically valid, even if they make your system sound like the world's loudest iPod.

Playing around with large loudspeakers that cost as much as a shiny new BMW, it's no great leap to become myopic and forget that people who love hi-fi aren't all able to drop £50,000 on a loudspeaker and even if they

could, they'd have a struggle to shoe-horn it into a typical listening room. Which is where the KEF Reference 201/2 comes in. It's a speaker that delivers a sublime performance for real-world people in real-world homes using real-world systems at something approaching a real-world price. And, as that puts it in the same league as some of the very best standmounts around, it comes in as the best value option of the lot.

Under such conditions other issues, such as its demands on source, amplifier or environment are secondary, assuming the speaker isn't so demanding that it spends its years in search of better audio components. And, under such conditions, you will struggle to find something better. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

KEF Reference 201/2 loudspeakers

Magnetically shielded bass reflex three-way bookshelf loudspeaker

Drive Units: 1 x 165mm (6.5in.) LF, 1 x 165mm (6.5in.), Uni-Q MF including a 25mm (1in.) titanium HF

Connections: Tri-wire binding posts, adjustable screw in balance adjustments

Crossover Frequencies: 450Hz, 2.5kHz

Sensitivity (2.83V/1m): 86dB

Input Impedance: 8 Ohms (4.2 Ohms min)

Frequency Response (+/-3dB): 55Hz - 60kHz

Bass Extension: 44Hz (-6dB)

Maximum Output: 110dB

Amplifier Requirements: 50 - 150W

Dimensions (H x W x D): 417 x 248 x 405 mm

Weight: 12.3Kg

Finishes: Piano and satin black, two high gloss and three satin real wood veneers. 12 custom gloss lacquer finishes

Price: From £3,500 per pair

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Gryphon Mikado Signature

by Alvin Gold

One school of thought is that hi-fi components are strictly functional devices, there to do a job, and that what they look like really has no bearing in the grander scheme of things. What they sound like is what really counts, and of course this an undeniable truth – as self-evidently so as the non-existence of a deity for example. But I wouldn't buy if I was spending my own money, or at least I would do my best to avoid buying if my purchase was going to end up an aesthetic liability, and upset either myself or (if I had one) my better half. So here is the first thing I'd like to tell you about the Mikado. It is absolutely gorgeous. I would go so far as to suggest that it has that rarest of all qualities in high fidelity of inhabiting that no man's land between being strikingly good looking and unequivocally beautiful. It's also extremely expensive for what after all is essentially a simple disc spinner, but the way it is turned out is so gorgeous that it will continue to impress long after the financial pain has been forgotten. It is hard to think of many players that are as well turned out, but one example that was even more impressive and as painstaking in every minute detail was the Classé Omega, an SACD player, now defunct, that dates back to before the takeover by B&W.

But it is just a simple disc spinner. It plays CDs, and near relatives like CD-R or CD-RWs. But unlike many other ambitious CD players, especially at this price level, it won't play SACDs, for which there is a market if you happen to like acoustic music or classical, and given that the market for such discs is quite buoyant, this is a cause of real regret. Of course the overwhelming majority who don't listen to this kind of music and may not notice the omission, or realise its significance, but I do, and my experience is that the proportion of discs that pass through my hands that

are not hybrid SACDs is surprisingly small. In Gryphon's own words, the Mikado Signature focuses exclusively on CD playback with 'no compromise and no concessions. When you choose the Mikado Signature, you know that its CD performance is not a mere afterthought. It is the player's very reason for existing'. Although they don't spell it out explicitly, the clear implication is that including SACD would have compromised Red Book CD performance, but while this is a point of view, it is not one that would be subscribed to by Marantz, EMM Labs, Accuphase, Krell, Class (the aforementioned Omega), dCS, Esoteric and others.....

“(It inhabits) that no man’s land between being strikingly good looking and unequivocally beautiful.”



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imagine...

if somebody built an integrated amplifier like no other...if that integrated Amplifier had its 20 military spec mosfet outputs housed in an acrylic case alongside its complete input stage...no pre-amplifier required, no additional expensive connection ...no additional signal stage...if all internal signal wires were made from pure silver...if this amplifier had one power supply per channel each housed entirely separate in two screened metal cases some 2 meters away and connected via silver wired umbilical cords...if those two power supplies were 700 Volt amps each...if those two power supplies were of an isolating design with in built mains conditioning...if a third pure DC battery power supply was added solely to power the input stage, housed again in its own shielded metal case and connected via one of those silver umbilical cords...if that DC battery had full power management for its charge cycles...if the amplifier had over a million micro farad of buffering capacitance...if this amplifier was capable of delivering a constant 60 Amps and would sustain 120 amps for ten second long peaks with absolute load stability...



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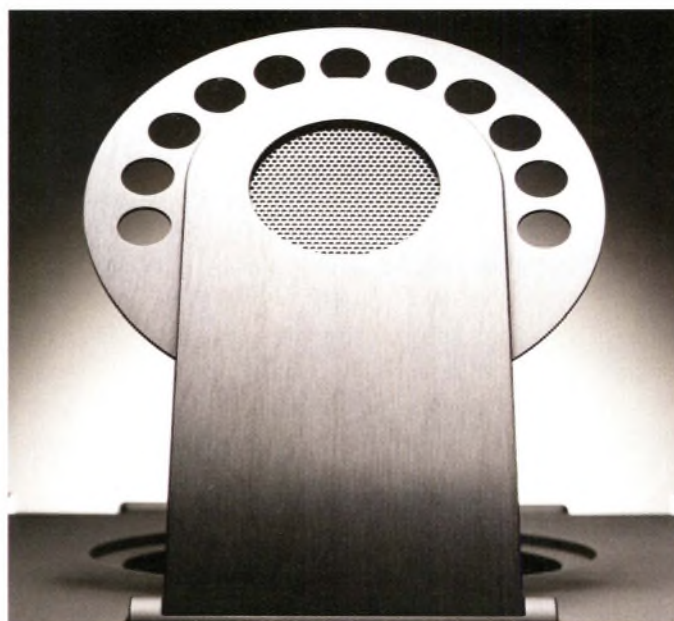
▶ From the beginning of Gryphon's involvement with compact disc, the company has pioneered and promoted the idea of upsampling, in the first instance to 16 bit/88.2kHz with the CDP1, which dates from the late '90s, which was said to be the first single box player to feature this technology. Shifting aliasing noise up the frequency band this way allows more gentle acting anti-aliasing filters to be constructed, which have less effect on the audio frequency band. The predecessor to the Signature, the Mikado, introduced 24 bit 96kHz sample rate conversion, and now with the Signature, the arithmetic is performed at 24 bit/192kHz. A key benefit is the relaxation of the potentially tricky brick wall filter requirements, which in this case is replaced by a single, high quality silvered ceramic capacitor providing a gentle first order (6dB/octave) slope, which means the usual sharp knee in the response curve is almost flattened out. As a result it has very little influence on in-band phase or amplitude response. As Gryphon points out in its rather extravagantly flowery prose-cum-propaganda, in comparison with conventional 44.1 kHz digital-to-analogue conversion and lesser implementations of upsampling, asynchronous sample rate conversion in the Gryphon Mikado Signature offers 'enhanced impulse response, greater resolution of fine detail, sharper image focus and extended high-frequency response'.

Other technical highlights of this player include full balanced as well as single ended operation, and a digital conversion stage that uses four (two per channel) dual differential AKM Delta Sigma DACs from which a balanced signal is derived. The signal path downstream of the DACs is fully discrete Class A arranged mirror image fashion with zero negative feedback, with particular attention paid to minimising signal path lengths, reducing structural resonances, and banishing as much ferrous (ie magnetisable) material from the player as possible. The player mechanism is Philips a heavily modified version of the top loading Pro mechanism. And proving motive power for the player

is a complex power section that uses four custom designed toroidal transformers and multiple regulated supplies.

One intriguing feature of the Signature is a superb and unusually ergonomic diecast remote which has a form factor similar to a clenched fist, but this turns out to be an OEM design, rather than being made by Gryphon themselves. But the real head turner with the Signature is the loader for the transport, with has a motorised hinged cover that opens to accept the disc and an impressively engineered magnetic puck that clamps the disc. A ring of LEDs illuminates the disc area like runway landing lights, and the touch activated control panel that adorns the front of the player can be angled to optimise visibility. Impressive. But then just about everything related to this player is impressive.

The Signature was used in various system combinations (which for a while included the matching Atilla integrated amplifier), using both single ended and balanced interconnects, in both cases Nordost Valhalla, chosen in an attempt to reduce the number of variables as much as ▶





► for any other reason. It quickly became apparent that the balanced options gave a better result, with a more solidly defined and tuneful low frequency performance, and at least similar levels of dynamics and imagery. The difference wasn't big, though clearly worth having, but experience shows that balanced operation using well designed electronics and cables usually ends up delivering the goods.

Leaving cabling to one side, the Mikado Signature is an impressive player in various ways. It is fast, sure footed and assured. It has real authority, and superb levels of resolution. Overall there are few players that outperform it, though there are one or two that do things that are beyond the capabilities of the Gryphon. One is a long discontinued model which long ago earned its status as an authentic classic, namely the Krell KPS25. This was a player that had devastating weight and authority in its presentation, and a level of dynamic ability that leaves most others, probably including the Gryphon, gasping for air. Another more relevant alternative, is the remarkable Kalista Reference from Metronome Technologie, which from an all too brief audition with and without its internal upsampling (which cannot be turned off in the case of the Gryphon), gave some intriguing results though I did not form a clear preference between the two operating modes in the limited time available.

Leaving this issue to one side, the Gryphon delivered some remarkable results with discs that benefit from high standards of resolving ability. It was able to reproduce, apparently intact, the distinctive warmth and the round, even voicing that distinguishes the Fabbrini version of the Steinway Model D used the beautiful recording on ECM of Beethoven's *Appassionata* by Andras Schiff. The difference between this and a 'standard' Steinway are fairly subtle, and it takes a special kind of resolving ability in a disc player to reliably distinguish the two. I was equally impressed however by a recording of Bartok String Quartets (specifically the opening *Lento* from No 1) by the Alban Berg Quartett on EMI, which dates from a time when EMI was a real record label. In more general terms, with a wide range of recordings, the Gryphon has a slightly lighter balance than I sometimes expected. But it is finely detailed and extremely expressive – full of personality if you like – and stereo imagery is broad and explicit. Instruments and voices are firmly located in space and remain stable as musical dynamics and pitch change.

The bottom line is that the Mikado Signature is a superb player. Yes, it cannot be denied that the pricing is not unrelated to its elaborate physical construction, but good players are invariably well built. The other obvious criticism is that it is limited to Red Book CD and variants (CD-R., CD-RW etc) but it is hardly alone in that, and this is a player that clearly sets standards. Very impressive. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Connections:

Analogue out: Single ended (phono).
Balanced (XLR)
Digital out 75 Ohms S/PDIF (BNC), AES/
EBU balanced output (XLR)

Compatibility: CD-DA, CD-R, CD-RW
Mains detachable IEC lead, Front
panel standby switching, main power
switch under front panel

Dimensions: 481 (W) x 100 (H) x 374 (D)
mm

Weight: 10kg

Price: £11,995

Manufactured by: Gryphon Audio
URL: www.gryphon-audio.dk

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Hart EVO-1 loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy



You meet some interesting characters in the hi-fi fraternity and David Hart qualifies as one of them. How many people do you know that gave up a career as a barrister to follow their dream and build a no-holds barred loudspeaker? Perhaps that is why he spent four years coming up with a loudspeaker that incorporates some pretty radical thinking.

The Hart EVO-1 is a substantial speaker system that consists of two cabinets per channel, stacked one upon the other. One box contains eight bass drivers and is designed so that these drivers face the wall. The other cabinet features a 300mm dual concentric drive unit built around a Tannoy chassis. Hart has modified it and fitted a different magnet, so it's no longer the same beast, but it's an expensive piece of hardware nonetheless. On the back of this head unit box is an active amplification module, which drives the eight units in the bass cabinet.

“The (other) cabinet features a 300mm dual concentric drive unit built around a Tannoy chassis.”

These 'bass' drivers are only 115mm across, so are normally something that only makers of sound-docks would describe as a bass unit. But get enough of them together and stick a 500 watt amplifier on the end and they deliver bass that is faster, cleaner and deeper than pretty well any passive speaker on the market and quite a few active ones at that.

David calculates that these eight drivers are equivalent in area to a 330mm cone but the combined magnet power is equal to a 300mm magnet, something that would only work effectively on a 450mm driver.

The amplifier module looks like something from a sophisticated subwoofer, it has inputs for a high level signal and it has both XLR and RCA phono inputs for a low level signal such ▶

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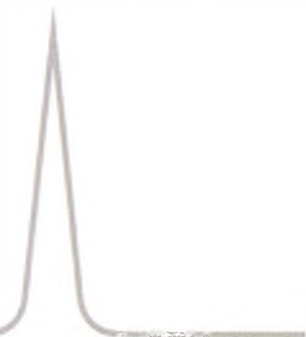
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We're often asked this question. At Cool Gales, we're fortunate to be able to audition a huge range of high-end hi-fi gear, from the well-known "usual suspects" to obscure exotics, from components with eye-watering price tags to those that are eminently affordable, from classic vintage gear to the latest cutting edge.

Little wonder, then, that our customers frequently ask us to distil our experience, curious to know what exactly we fire up in the evening when we want to listen to music.



At the other end of the range is the baby TD307II PA system, a steal at £440 for a pair of speakers plus a little conical integrated amp and cabling, perfect for desktop or small bedroom systems. For more mainstream listening, the range continues with the TD508IIs and the TD510s. All have the same sonic signature, with added resolution, weight of sound, frequency extremes, and depth as the range progresses upward.



One constant here is the Eclipse TD range of speakers, particularly the flagship TD712z Mk 2s. Why? Remember your first encounter with vintage electrostatics? Well, Eclipse TD speakers have that same uncoloured purity, immediacy, and magical clarity, but without any of the drawbacks. For instance, there's no need for a mains connection, no need to be careful with the volume control, and no narrow sweet spot. Indeed, they have one of the widest soundstages we've ever encountered, with colossal dynamics, and even bass—very, very precise bass—that defies the single-driver design. Moreover, unlike just about any other speaker we've ever heard, they sound the same no matter what the volume level, loud or soft, a boon if you're listening late at night and don't wish to disturb neighbours or family.

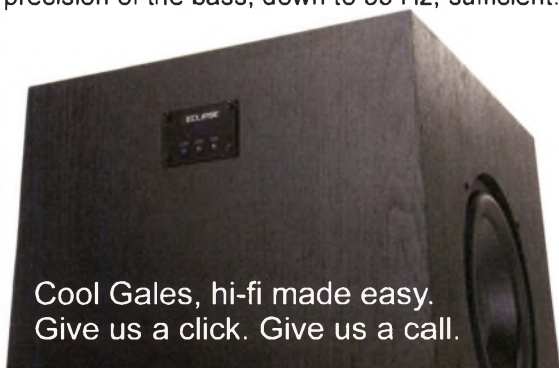
Reviews have reflected the revolutionary nature of their sound: "more life-like and cohesive than just about anything you can buy" (*What Hi-Fi?*), "unusually life-like" (*Hi-Fi Choice*), and "an almost shockingly pure sound" (*The Financial Times*).

Lovers of church organ music, heavy metal, or audio-visual applications may wish to add the TD725sw subwoofer, which Roy Gregory at *Hi-Fi+* described as "exactly what extended low frequencies should be about," but most audiophiles will find the precision of the bass, down to 35 Hz, sufficient.



What do *you* listen to? If your system beguiled at first, but now proves tiring over an evening's listening, why not give us a call? We can arrange for an audition either here at Cool Gales or in your home.

For more information, reviews, and brochure downloads, visit www.coolgales.com/eclipse



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▶ as is usually used in 'point one' systems. Hart recommends the high level route – this way you have the same character of signal going to both halves of the speaker, and it also makes the amp module's job easier. The amp module has controls for phase, frequency contour, high level and low level gain all of which have solid wood knobs to match the speaker's finish.

The veneer on the sample I had was a superb book-matched walnut burr with beautiful figuring, Hart offers a number of stunning veneers which are laid up by a local company. Stainless cups for the rubber ball cabinet separators offset this finish. These balls started off as large bearings but have become very hard rubber spheres because of the damping that this approach affords. Remarkably these balls can survive the 62kg mass of the top cabinet and still retain their shape. They are also used between the bass cabinet and the 10mm steel plinth that forms a base for the system.

The bass system is designed to work into the corners of the room and use them as a crude horn, thus you need to angle the tower so that the eight drivers are firing in that general direction. I preferred the balance of the mid and treble with the speakers set square to the wall but that does undermine absolute extension or at least it seems that way. The quality of bass that this speaker delivers is so clean and articulate that you don't get the same degree of room excitement as is normal, as if room modes are not being set off to the same extent as is usually the case with big speakers. It has phenomenal speed, which means that bass instruments come through with the subtlety and definition we associate with those pitched higher up the scale. This makes for awesome groove factor on anything with rhythm, be it Steely Dan's 'Bodhisattva' or Mofro's *Blackwater*.

I tried a variety of amplifiers with the Harts and each made its mark, not least the Digital Do Main B-1a with its VFET output stage. This radical Japanese amp loved the high sensitivity on offer and rewarded me with some of the finest and most atmospheric results encountered in a long time. John Abercrombie's gentle *Wait Till You See Her* ECM album can sound a little bland with less



revealing systems, but here both the tune and the presence of the musicians is placed front and centre. The realism is spine tingling, and this is not merely because of the bass system of course, that coaxial driver works phenomenally well as a mid/treble system despite its size. So well in fact that noise levels seem lower than usual. This could be because of the sensitivity on offer but in many ways that should have the opposite effect and reveal any hash at the bottom of the amp's output range, but with something as refined as the Digital Do Main that doesn't seem to be the case.

Credit should also go to the Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD playing source; via the DDM and Hart the older and notably multibit player is the source of choice. After using the system for a while David Hart told me that at home he uses the boxes the other way around – with the bass system on top and the base plate sitting on its front spikes only so that the main driver faces upwards. This he says works better for vinyl and I was going to give it a go until I discovered how hard it was to lift the main driver/amp pack cabinet.

Moving over to the Quad II Classic amplifier proved that despite the active bass drive the low frequency performance of the amp has a clear influence over this end of the spectrum. Now the bass was richer and softer but with plenty of energy if not so much power or snap. The overall result ▶

► was attractively easy to enjoy but full of detail and, if not as sharp edged as the solid state alternative definitely more natural, double bass coming through in woody and timbrally rich form. The system also seemed to untangle the densest compositions and reveal the inner beauty of the music rather better, it had a more positive and optimistic view that brought out the message in the material rather effectively.

Moving over to my reference amp, the Gamut D200 MkIII brought back a high degree of analysis to the speaker, the way that a vocal has been treated is laid bare in a completely clean fashion. Often highly analytical systems can be a bit on the incisive side for my tastes but so long as the main drivers aren't pointing straight at your ears this isn't the case here. Of course if you want a sharper sound then the speaker can be set up to deliver it, likewise the bass can be adjusted to suit the room with the controls on the amp pack. The key ones are phase and roll-off both of which can be tuned quite easily, especially if there are two of you to do the job.



“Playing the same tracks resulted in a very similar level of detail with more powerful and substantial bass.”

Back with the music Arab Strap's vocal is almost laser cut because clarity and presence are so strong, then the drums come in and their reverb stretches way off into the distance. All of which makes for very powerful and engaging listening with material that's as intense and intimate as that album provides.

Around this point in the proceedings I spent an evening listening to JBL's new K2 horns at a friend's house, he was raving about the detail coming out of these megabucks speakers and it wasn't hard to hear why, however returning to the Harts and playing the same tracks resulted in a very similar level of detail with more powerful and substantial bass. Clearly the active element played a part here but there's no getting away from the transparency on offer across the band.

Putting another amp into the mix, Chord's compact Cyan Click revealed just how sensitive the speaker is. The Chord's level indicator didn't get out of the teens whereas with my B&W 802s some tracks warrant an output of twice that. By rolling the main driver off at around 70Hz and taking bass drive out of the equation, Hart has delivered a true high sensitivity speaker without the difficulties inherent with horn systems – no wonder the Quad amp sounded so sweet.

When David came to take his speakers away I was very sorry to see them go, the EVO-1s are extremely revealing and engaging speakers that revel in a high quality signal. They are clearly more than worth the asking price even if the aesthetics are a little challenging. This would not be such an issue in a larger and lighter room than mine perhaps but if there is any justice it's the only thing that should stand between them and world domination! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

System: 3-way active bass

Mid/treble: 300mm paper dual concentric with compression tweeter

Bass driver: 115mm polypropylene cone (x8)

Bass amplification: 500 watts

Bass controls: phase, frequency contour, high & low level gain

Sensitivity: 97dB

Impedance: 8 ohms

Dimensions HxWxD: 125x44x44cm

Weight: head unit 62kg, ABM 38kg, plinth 22kg

Magnetic grilles

Finishes: maple, walnut, vavona burr, eucalyptus, lacewood

Price: £14,975 per pair

Manufacturer

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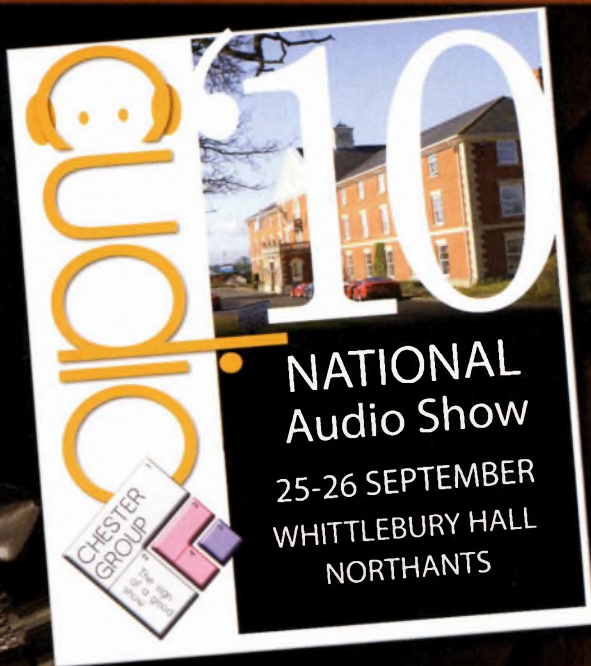
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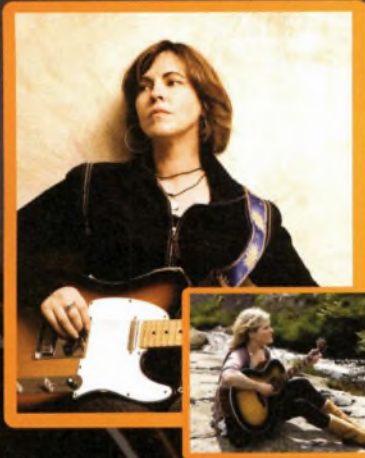
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Bergmann Sindre turntable and arm

by Alan Sircom

Air-bearing tonearms are rare, air-bearing turntables are very rare. The combination, especially from one company, is as rare as hen's teeth viewed by the light of the blue moon. So Bergmann's Sindre pairing is one of the most important new decks to have hit the UK in some time. It would be important if it looked as ugly as a sack of hammers, but the fact that it is seriously elegant makes it a vital addition to the high-end scene.

The Sindre is a complete three-box package; deck and arm, speed controller and pump box. All three are finished in a matt black with a contrasting flat silver for the arm, feet and logo. The acrylic platter blends in well, too. The net result is refined and sophisticated, but not a garish money-screamer. As with seemingly everything audio these days, the Sindre is Norse named – Sindri was Odin and Thor's metalworking dwarf (and, confusingly, it's also the name of the hall dead warriors dwell in after Ragnarök; I suspect mistakes were uncomfortable for the dwarf) – but given a lot of good hi-fi is coming out of Nordic territories and Johnnie Bergmann is Danish, the mythological nomenclature is forgiven.

The Sindre's slick looks and prosaic description hides one of the turntable's biggest selling points for anything air-bearing'd – the disturbingly silent air pump. Air-bearings in

audio tend to use pumps from paint sprayers, pressure washers, occasionally kidney dialysis machines or fish tank aerators, but they all have one thing in common... The phut, phut, phut of the pump motor. Inevitably, this pump noise is loud enough to warrant removing the pump into another room. Not with the Bergmann, because that pump housing cuts out almost all the noise. If you can put your ear to the pump housing and its sound is drowned out by the hissing of the air evacuating the tonearms (itself hardly a loud hiss, the sort of thing that would be almost inaudible in all bar the quietest rooms). That is little short of incredible.

The platter is a thick, 4kg slab of semi-opaque acrylic. This – and the aluminium sub-chassis – float on air. This works by introducing a thin cushion of air between two aluminum plates, while the spindle itself sits in a vibration damping engineering plastic housing. It's essentially designed to sit 'soft' until a record is placed on the platter and the clamp screws the platter, subchassis

and record together to form a complete unit. The assembly is easier than it sounds, although the belt connecting the platter to the DC motor requires someone with several hands and experience as a circus-trained blindfold knife thrower to get right. The third box of tricks – the speed box – comes with two tiny front-mounted recessed trim pots to get the speed control just right. The usual plan with DC motors is to let the record player spend three days continually playing to allow the motor to bed in.

The parallel tracking arm works in exactly the same way as the Cartridgeman's Conductor, a hollow tube with air holes along the top allowing the tonearm sleeve to travel freely (think of an air hockey table top, but with the hockey puck constrained to travel back and forth). But where the Conductor is quirkily Best-of-British shed-fi in its looks, the Sindre arm is elegant and minimalist. The Sindre's tonearm lift/lower lever for example is a knurled knob built into the arm base, not something bolted onto the side of the arm (in fact, the Conductor ultimately works better, because this lift/lower arrangement is damped... it's just the Bergmann looks the part). Like any parallel tracker, it looks delicate – the thin carbon-fibre arm tube and the hair-thin tonearm wires make it something close to the anti-SME (you could defend a small village from marauding bandits and dig your way out of a POW camp with an SME V, and still play records afterwards) – but unless you cue up your music with a pick-axe, the Sindre arm is rugged enough for the job. You get to choose phono cables too, as the deck terminates those lead-out wires with a set of WBT phono sockets at the rear of the plinth.

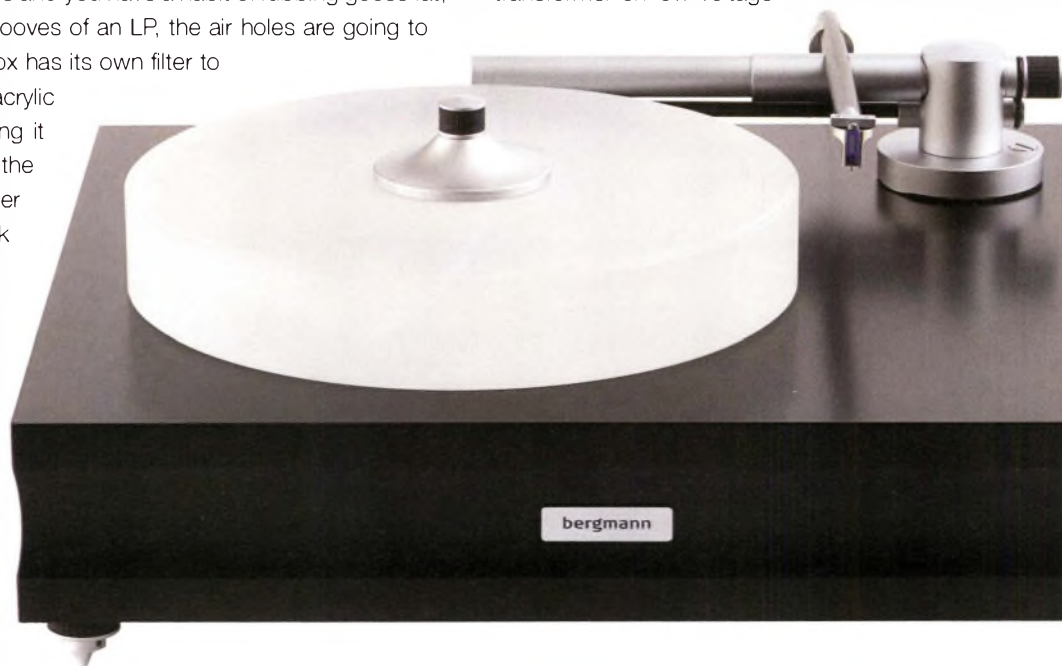
“The sound was, quite simply, stunning. Stunning more for what it didn't do than for what it did.”

What's surprising about the Sindre is it's essentially 'fit and forget', which is uncommon for products that sit on a cloud. OK, if you have pets that smoke and burn incense over your records and you have a habit of rubbing goose fat, motor oil and sawdust into the grooves of an LP, the air holes are going to gum up periodically. The pump box has its own filter to change, but investing in a good acrylic dust cover is an idea. As is playing it regularly; pump pressure through the air holes in the arm tube and under the platter should clear out gunk as it arises, but don't leave it to settle. And if that isn't the best

excuse to have regular listening sessions, what is?

Cueing up the arm is easy, once you get used to the undamped lift/lower. Gently raise the arm (apply too quick a twist and it feels like the arm is about to backflip), position it over the groove exactly where you want it, lower gently. The accuracy of the cueing process is always spot-on, because the arm stays in place. 'So what?' I hear the pivoted bearing folk cry, 'they all do that!' But the first time you try the Sindre, you quickly discover just how much wiggle room we put up with in reality. This is pin-point precision.

Used with a Transfiguration Axia cartridge, the sound was, quite simply, stunning. Stunning more for what it didn't do than for what it did. What it didn't do (of course) was the sort of end of side tracking error distortions you sometimes hear on pivoted bearings; these don't necessarily manifest as obvious graunching distortion, but are more akin to a not totally balanced transformer on low-voltage





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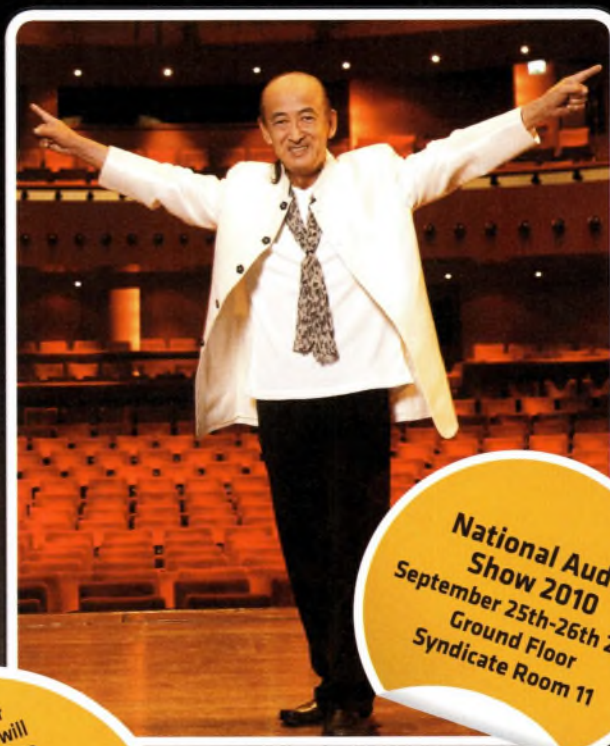
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► lighting. It's the sort of thing you don't notice until it's taken away. It just sounds more right. It's a texturing and layering of instruments – unamplified, amplified or even pan-potted – and a centre image that is controlled, solid and sitting right in front of you.

I went for an older pass through my record collection, playing albums like *Ragged Glory* by Neil Young and Crazy Horse. This wry slice of proto-grunge (released a year before *Nevermind*) revisits some of Young's work from the 1960s and 1970s with some fantastic wailing guitar from Frank 'Poncho' Sampedro. I put this away some years ago because the album can easily sound messy; raw and fun, but screechy. The Sindre shows that is more to do with tracking than recording or mastering. This time it was raw, it was fun and it sounded like a band in a studio. It has that ability to allow the listener to focus in on individual musicians at work, but never once taking your attention away from the whole event. This followed with track after track, from cool jazz to acid jazz to acid rock to classic rock to classical... how's that for a montage?

“But not the Bergmann. It just kept on playing. No fuss, no bother, no panic. And no distortion. How cool is that?”

It was also good at discerning the difference between pressing quality. Play a side from each of any two random LPs and the difference in noise floor, general tone and dynamic range of the two recordings should be clear to hear, as it is here. That's not always the case, even with some decks that cost a king's ransom. It's not hard on bad recordings, but a cheap Spanish copy of Dylan's *Blood On The Tracks* I played showed its limits all too easily. That said, this particularly undynamic print of the album should sound like that.

My main concern with parallel trackers – aside from the whole falling-to-bits thing that modern designs like this, the Cartridgeman and the Kuzma have cracked – is the lack of boogie factor. It's been a long time since I was a Flat Earther, but I still remember to check for the elusive 'tune' from time to time. In this setting, I used a Well-Tempered Amadeus with the regulation Dynavector cartridge as brief riddim comparison. And used Ivan 'Boogaloo' Joe Jones 1975 rare groove 'Sweetback' from the Luv 'n' Haight/Ubiquity *Bag Of Goodies* album to lay down the tunes. And, yes... the Flat Earthers have got a point – the sound from the Well-Tempered was just that shade more funky and the beat more obvious and even easier to follow. Both were more than entertaining and easy to live with, but where the W-T had a tauter bass and more rhythmic control, the Bergmann sounded more open, dynamic and less congested. This was an impressive confirmation of what the Sindre is doing right, because 'congested' is not something I would connect with the W-T under any normal setting.

The thing with air-bearing arms – and especially on air-bearing decks – is they are usually a frustrating glimpse at the best vinyl can do. Frustrating because for every record played, you spend twice as much time tinkering with the thing to make it play again. But not the Bergmann. It just kept on playing. No fuss, no bother, no panic. And no distortion. How cool is that? +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable: Airsupported platter, centred by a steel spindle/hardened low friction polymer bearing

Motor type: DC. Belt-driven

Plinth: Solid fibreboard

Platter: Acrylic, 4 kg.

Subplatter: Aluminium, 3,2 kg.

Dimensions (WxHxD): 50x21x47.5cm

Total weight: 23 kg

Tonearm: Linear tracking airbearing tonearm. Hard aluminium alloy/carbon

Effective mass: 10g

Speed box: Separate, 33 & 45 rpm

Airsupply: Silent, clean, dry and smooth airflow

Dimensions (WxHxD): 21x41.5x22cm

Weight: 8.4kg

Price: £11,995

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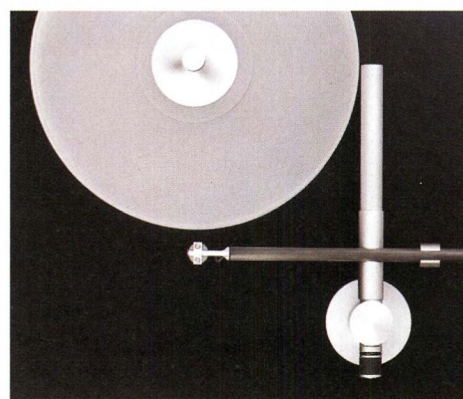
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Rogue Audio Stealth phono preamplifier

by Alan Sircom

LEDs – everyone’s got an opinion. Blue... cool, but garish. Red or green... old school, but boring. Yellow... different, perhaps not in a good way. But the Rogue Audio Stealth brings a unique spin to the LED colour debate. How about no LED? Armed with the most minimalist layout in audio history (a front panel with a screen-printed logo and labelling, and a rear with phono and IEC sockets and nothing else), this phono preamp must rank as the most minimalist audio product to date.

In fact, there’s good reason to choose a product without a LED, of any colour. Some think even this display of power too vulgar, and putting one in circuit just to show the juice is flowing undermines the sound of the component. Of course, the only way to really test this is to compare two otherwise identical products – one with and one without a LED – side by side. And that’s not going to happen readily.

Rogue Audio is perhaps best known for its reasonably-priced valve amplifiers, remarkably not made in China, but Pennsylvania. The Stealth is a fully adjustable MM/MC phono preamp, the only solid-state product in the range. The Stealth’s wide range of cartridge loadings can be accessed through a series of DIP switches on the main phono board, which means unscrewing the top-plate of the case. This is perhaps the one place where a LED could be useful; idiots – and reviewers – have a habit of not looking whether they have unplugged their products before they start unscrewing the case. With four gain, four impedance and two capacitance loading settings, the Stealth is a good match for a whole host of MM and MC carts. In addition, the very low noise floor

means even some of the more outlandish cartridge loads (like the Audio Note Io) are a possibility, even if a comparatively quiet one.

When you do take off the top plate, you are met with two circuit boards and a small toroidal transformer. The larger of the two boards (the one with the DIP switches) is the RIAA circuit, while the other is a fully regulated power supply. Neither circuit board scrimps on component quality, but the Stealth doesn’t bristle with famous name parts, presumably to keep the price down. Nevertheless, the combination of thick PCBs and Teflon coated silver internal wiring means the Stealth is far from a cut-price product.

The Stealth sits neatly between the budget phono stages and the serious money ones, both in terms of performance and functionality. Cheaper phono stages tend to lump all moving coil outputs into one generic ‘MC’, neglecting to allow adjustment of loading. More expensive phono stages often do without the moving magnet section altogether, offering sublime performance, but at a significant premium. The Stealth is the happy medium, with great flexibility and excellent performance. It has the thick aluminium front panel that typifies high-end equipment, but not the conspicuous consumption finish of the truly bling product lines.

That, of course, is predicated upon a fine basic sound. I have a cartridge that gets little use, because it’s such a low output design (just over 0.1mV) – the Ortofon MC7500. At ►



▶ the other extreme, the Cartridgeman Music Maker Classic moving iron. The former is an rarely-used torture test for a phono stage, because its low output demands an equally low noise floor, while the latter is an exciting, dynamic performer that can highlight any brightness further down the line. Turntables used were the SME 10 (for the MC 7500) and the Origin Live Resolution/Illustrious turntable and tonearm combination.

My concern with the Stealth – before hearing it in anger – was that it would be excessively bright in many circumstances, as it could be designed to dove-tail with a warm and cuddly valve amp (the only solid-state amp in a tubular range rang alarm bells). Wrong! The Stealth is full-bodied in the mids and top but with an orderly, taut bass and an extremely wide soundstage. That holds if you are using triodes or transistors in the rest of the system. The clean, dry bass gives a keen sense of rhythm; the legendary *Super Session*, with Al Kooper, Stephen Stills and Mike Bloomfield can fall flat on a system that emphasizes the soundstaging over ‘drive’ qualities. The Stealth has a lot of drive, giving you the relentless blues-rock pounding you should get from playing this LP at a fair lick.

It’s almost academic describing the Stealth as ‘accurate’ or ‘faithful’ to the RIAA curve, because almost every phono stage has that accuracy. Instead, the Stealth casts its spell over you because of that absence of noise floor. That, coupled with close matching with the loading of your cartridge, gives this phono pre ‘mojo’ that sets it apart from many of its rivals. You are drawn into the recording – whatever the recording. What this means in musical terms is you stop worrying about the audio quality, the quality of recordings or the vinyl and just start loving the music again. Normally, this ability to side-step the worst excesses of audiophilia nervosa only happens at the very cheap or very expensive ends of the market. The Stealth is one of the few ‘tweener’ products that makes you consider it the end of the upgrade path. In absolute terms, the bass could be more impactful at the very low end, but most would happily trade some bottom octave heft for the clarity of the midrange and treble.

When last we looked at the Stealth, it was a part of a Rogue Audio combination with the Chronus integrated amp. This in some respects almost ‘loses’ the Stealth, because it seems to tie the phono pre to a Rogue Audio solution. The reality is the Stealth is the perfect standalone device that fits into any system. This is high-end without the high-price. The old reviewer stand-by phrase of ‘it will out-perform more expensive products’ doesn’t hold here,

because the more expensive products have more to offer. But of the phono stages in its class, this ranks up there with the best in breed. There are those with more EQ tweaking – but not as much sheer enjoyment factor – and there are those with even more ‘mojo’... but need a trip back to the maker if you decide to change cartridges. The Rogue Audio Stealth represents the middle way, a top class performer that can handle any cartridge should be high on anyone’s wish list. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Rogue Stealth phono preamp

Moving magnet (mm) or Moving coil (mc) operation

Internal settings for 100, 300, 1000 and 47k Ohm loading

Internal setting for 150 Picofarad or zero capacitance loading

Four gain settings: 40dB, 50dB, 60dB, 65dB

Gold-plated RCA inputs and outputs
Silver and black front panel options

Price: £849

Manufactured by: Rogue Audio

URL: www.rogueaudio.com

Distributed by: Rogue Audio

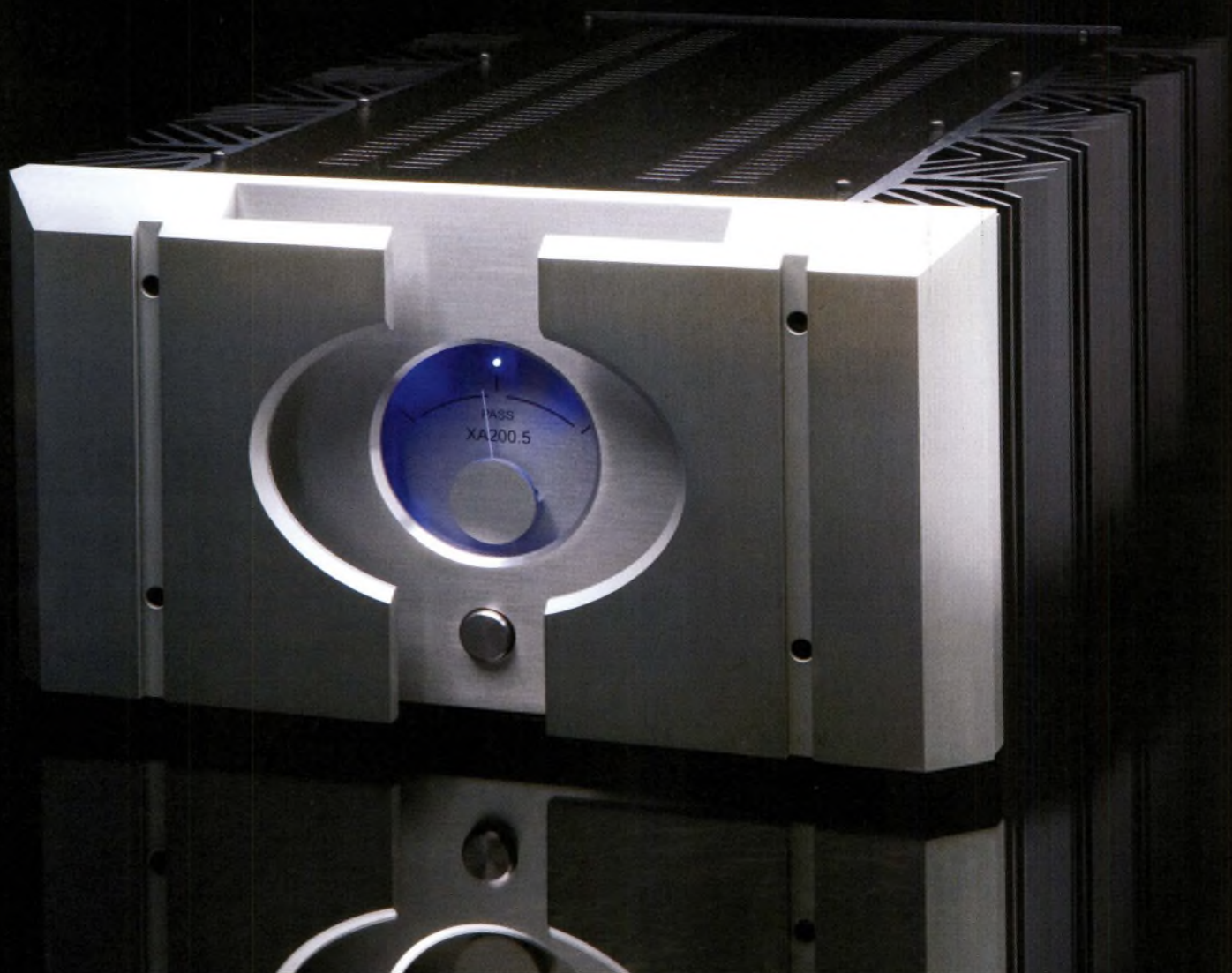
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Meridian Sooloos 2.1 Music Server system



by Alan Sircom

Meridian Audio's commanding reputation for digital audio wasn't just built upon CD, but Meridian and CD are intrinsically linked. Back at the very start of Compact Disc, Meridian was among the very first companies to make a player. Prior to CD, the company was noted for amps and loudspeakers, and it still makes a broad range of equipment and even licenses key technologies like Meridian Lossless Packing, but in the public domain Meridian is known for its CD players.

The trouble with that perceived link is what happens next, when CD's significance as a prime source begins to fall away? Meridian cleverly recognised this a few years back, and acquired the Sooloos music server system. The first iteration was very Sooloos, but with the latest version 2.1, Meridian and Sooloos are beginning to look like a happy marriage. Given the changes in the market over the last year or two, the wedding happened at just the right time.

The difficulty with music servers are two fold. First, there's the task of explaining to existing audiophiles why storing your music on a hard drive is a good thing. Then, there's the Argument from Economy – why should I pay money for a music server when any PC or Mac can do the same for free? Both are hard questions to answer for any company, but the Meridian Sooloos comes with a surprisingly simple and identical answer for both – try it!

It breaks down into a range of component parts, as configurable and flexible as it's possible to be. The easy solution is to start with a Control 15. This is the most visible version of the Meridian Sooloos system.

This comprises a touchscreen that rests on a combination CD drive, hard disk drive and electronics to get you up and running. This would allow you to rip and store 1,000 discs losslessly and can either connect to your inevitably-expanding Meridian Sooloos system (and the interweb) through Ethernet, S/PDIF and Meridian active speakers through an Ethernet-like connection.

From there, expansion is key. You want more storage or backup? The Meridian Sooloos TwinStore with its two drive bays (one store, one mirrored backup) is the key. To add Sooloos to a system without digital audio inputs, the SourceOne will cover the bases, while an Ensemble will add up to four separate room 'zones'. Those after the best sound quality will plump for an ID40 card to fit into Meridian's 808.3 CD player. 'Finally' (no such thing – the system keeps evolving) comes the Media Source 600, which give the system greater flexibility, such as control from an iPhone, iPad or a custom install remote.

We're not finished. The Ensemble allows the user to specify two different storage standards at the same time. In other words, ▶



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.

Blue Horizon's unique products are engineered to the highest possible standard and designed by a highly qualified, award-winning team with over 70 years combined experience in specialist audio.

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

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

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

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

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

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



Blue Horizon Proburn Cable Burn in machine

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

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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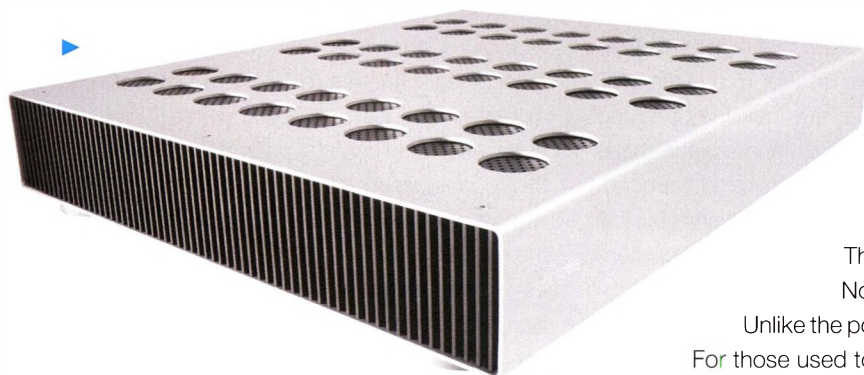
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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Meridian Sooloos 2.1 Music Server Control 15

Touchscreen panel size: 17" diagonal, 1280x1024 pixels

Network connections: One Ethernet (RJ-45)

Audio connections: One SPDIF coaxial output on RCA jack, one Meridian SpeakerLink

Control connections: Meridian Comms, RS232

Disc drive: CD drive for importing CDs

Dimensions (WHD): 45.7x34.5x18.5cm

Weight: 10.75kg

Source: One one-zone system/net hub TwinStore system storage

Ensemble zone player with storage

Network connections: Ethernet (RJ-45): x1 for TwinStore and Ensemble, x4 for Source:One

Audio connections: RCA analogue audio inputs (1x Ensemble, 4x Source:One) One SPDIF coaxial output on RCA jack (Ensemble and Source:One)

Disc drive: 2x 1TB mirrored as standard (TwinStore and Ensemble only)

Dimensions (WHD): 43x7x36.4cm

Weight: 5.8kg

Prices: £4,750 (Control 15)

£2,995 (Ensemble, 1TB)

£2,300 (TwinStore, 1TB)

£2,735 (Source:One)

£1,750 (Media Source 600)

Manufacturer: Meridian Audio.

URL: www.meridian-audio.com

Tel: +44(0)1480 445678

lossless for good audio standards and MP3 for your iPod or similar. The standard configuration for Ensemble or TwinStore is a 1TB music storage space, but that can be scaled up to larger drives. Or you can add more TwinStores.

You can even stream to or from a PC or Mac.

The possibilities are open-ended.

Not everything in the Sooloos garden is rosy, though.

Unlike the possibilities, the storage options are not without limits.

For those used to configuring their own systems, the inability for the Meridian Sooloos package to work from a NAS box seems a fatal flaw. It limits options to Meridian Sooloos-shaped ones. In the real world, though, this is not so much of a problem – those who invest in a Sooloos are looking for a plug-and-play solution installed by an expert, rather than a pick ‘n’ mix system designed by geeks for geeks.

Music server systems stand or fall on their interface. I know this is a hard thing for a magazine devoted to sound quality to say, but the reality is that the best sounding system with the worst interface will quickly end up an ex-product. This where the Meridian Sooloos shines out. Part of the reason why comes down to the way it populates its metadata. Normally, music servers run off to a music database like CDDB to find out about a disc. If this first pass is unsuccessful, it goes looking at Allmusic, and so on, until it finds details, or gives up. The Meridian Sooloos goes metadata hunting in a different manner. Data from each music database is used to populate a far more thorough set of categories. Better still, these are then uploaded to a special Meridian extranet of rich CD metadata. You can access this and correct details like a Wiki page, and the more users load up a wide range of discs, so the database expands organically. This doesn’t just make Meridian’s users have access to a special place, but it absolutely enhances the musical experience. No, really!

Meridian Sooloos calls it ‘swimming’. Say you play a piece of music, and the drumming sounds particularly good. So good in fact that you call up the database information on that drummer, get shown a list of albums you own that he plays on, pick a track, follow the recording engineer to the next album, the lyricist of which leads you to the next, and so on. You can make this into a playlist, place music into a stack to be played now or next or in a few tracks time. You can – at any time – abandon your swimming lesson and go back to the main list of albums, a filtered list according to a world of different parameters, a list dominated by your previous swim, then switch back and forward. Bear in mind that at all times, this process is largely intuitive and a one-finger control interface. Short of poaching Apple’s distinctive and excellent Cover Flow system, it’s hard to think of a more easy to drive system. That it translates so easily to the small display of the iPhone without losing large swathes of functionality in the process shows just how good the interface is. In fact, this is the sort of functionality that doesn’t translate to the written word, because it would take you longer to read this sentence than it would to begin to intuitively ‘get’ the Meridian Sooloos screen.

Of course, the Meridian Sooloos system slots into a lot of other Meridian Audio equipment. A very fine, heavily ‘tomorrow’ system uses the Sooloos front end with Meridian Active DSP5200 loudspeakers, which is a useful way to assess the performance as a complete package. This is likely to be the way many new systems will attract new clientele, the other being using the digital or analogue audio outputs of different Sooloos components through other people’s audio systems. The Meridian Active does show off how much you can do with digital today, and it’s an impressive package.

▶ This has to represent one of the most coherent ways that high-end audio will reach new customers. The 17" touchscreen of the Control 15 and the DSP speakers can be the only components in the room. They look the part, and sound as impressive as they look. There's a lot of oomph and drive in those floorstanders and – while the Meridian Active sound isn't the airiest around, which may not appeal to more traditional audiophiles – it's a very physical approach to music, far more so than the size and price of the speaker system would suggest.

Both in and out of the context of that system, the sound is exceptionally good from the Meridian Sooloos system. This, it must be said, was one of the biggest criticisms laid at the door of the early iterations of the system – great interface, shame about the sound. This has been addressed by the digital engineers at Meridian, because it sounds, er, Meridian-y. It has that accurate, precise and detailed, if 'dark' sound. Like its CD players, this falls somewhere in between the exuberance, excitement and entertainment of a good Naim CD and the detailed, analytical sound of dCS. If that sounds like a compromise position, it's not meant to; instead the Meridian Sooloos treads a fine line between stark accuracy and sacrificing that accuracy for artificial entertainment.

Expensive source components often fall short into one of three broad camps: those that 'pimp up' the sound to make it seem slightly more exciting than it really is; those that deliver all the information you could ever need, but somewhere down the line forget that it's music; and those that try to skate between these two opposites, but end up making something bland in the process. Fortunately, not all products fall short; some come up sounding fantastic. The Meridian 808.3 player is one such example, it manages to make the sound detailed and entertaining at once.

The reason why I'm rolling out all these comparisons with CD players is two fold. Most of us are more familiar with players than music servers, so mentioning CD sound is a handy frame of reference. More importantly, as the Meridian Sooloos has the game-raising option of driving an 808.3, it's fair sport. It's also good to set the Meridian Sooloos sound in context; the Meridian Sooloos, played through its digital out or through a Meridian Active system is better than most CD players, barring the likes of the 808.3. When hooked to an 808.3, the CD transport mechanism is still the ultimately best way of making digital music, but the gap between CD and computer sound is much smaller than you might imagine.

Part of the reason why the lesser CD players fail to shine compared to the Sooloos system comes down to the ripping system. Using Exact Audio Copy, the Meridian Sooloos can take its time to extract the information that might otherwise get skipped over when played live. The Reed-Solomon error correction on the fly in a CD is very good, but it doesn't compare to EAC's ability to chew through a disc at a snail's pace to get the best sound.

This also serves to reinforce the concept that FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec – the lossless file format used by the Meridian Sooloos system) really is without loss for the music lover (if you are importing music from online sources, go for FLAC or ALAC if possible). There are still those who prefer to use AIFF or .WAV uncompressed audio files for their music, but if it takes the pinnacle of Meridian CD replay to find a player that can show up the Sooloos, you have to wonder if this is an argument on sonic grounds, or ideology.

The limits are few and far between. American users can hook up with Rhapsody, vastly extending their music collection with no loss of metadata or swimming capabilities. Unfortunately, the same option is not open to us damn foreigners, unless we know a way of getting a Rhapsody account. But we

wouldn't recommend such a thing, because some media lawyers in LA would be quite miffed at the idea. So, you mustn't try that at home. In addition, the instinctual nature of the touchscreen makes you go all *Minority Report* and assume you can spin through the discs like Apple's Cover Flow allows as well as dragging and dropping albums into different playlists and play stacks. You can't, and until you end up unlearning these actions, their non-appearance is somewhat frustrating. This shouldn't be overstated though – I'd like the elevators at the Empire State Building to go right to the observation deck from the lobby, and not have to change on the 80th floor, but that doesn't mean the view from that 86th floor deck isn't worth it. The same's true here – the benefits of the Meridian Sooloos system far outweigh the early knee of the learning curve.

Canny audio companies are coming up with complete audiophile replacements for the giveaway programs that dominate the modern music scene. In some cases, this action is questionable – too many companies seem to forget that when you pay for something, it has to do better than the thing you get for free. Sooloos sussed this long before it hooked up with Meridian, and now it gets the digital audio expertise to help make it sound as good as it works.

The big question that keeps getting asked in this time of transition, "is it for me?" In the case of the Meridian Sooloos, that depends on what you bring to the musical experience. If you have a small collection of discs that you play in a linear, logical manner, then a lot of what the Sooloos offers is of little more than academic interest. If your way of selecting what you listen to stays on the straight and narrow, and you never once have one of those "that reminds me..." moments where you start browsing your collection in search of that bass line or other works from the lead violinist, the Meridian Sooloos is overkill. But not all of us think that way. For some, the joy of music is as much exploring where it takes you; not just in terms of what that particular piece does for your emotions, but how you get from Mozart to Metallica and back again in an evening. The Meridian Sooloos not only facilitates such exploration, it positively revels in it. The fact it turns in a very good sound too is almost icing on the cake. +



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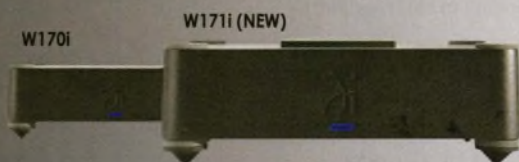
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**The New Angle on LP Reproduction, Level 2:
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Although many MC cartridges have good performance, their sound is held back by how they are designed. The problem is, the signal coils should have the same angle as the magnetic circuit during playback, but MC cartridges are typically designed so that the opposite happens - applying normal tracking force pushes the coils out of alignment. This impairs coil sensitivity and linearity, and reduces sound quality.

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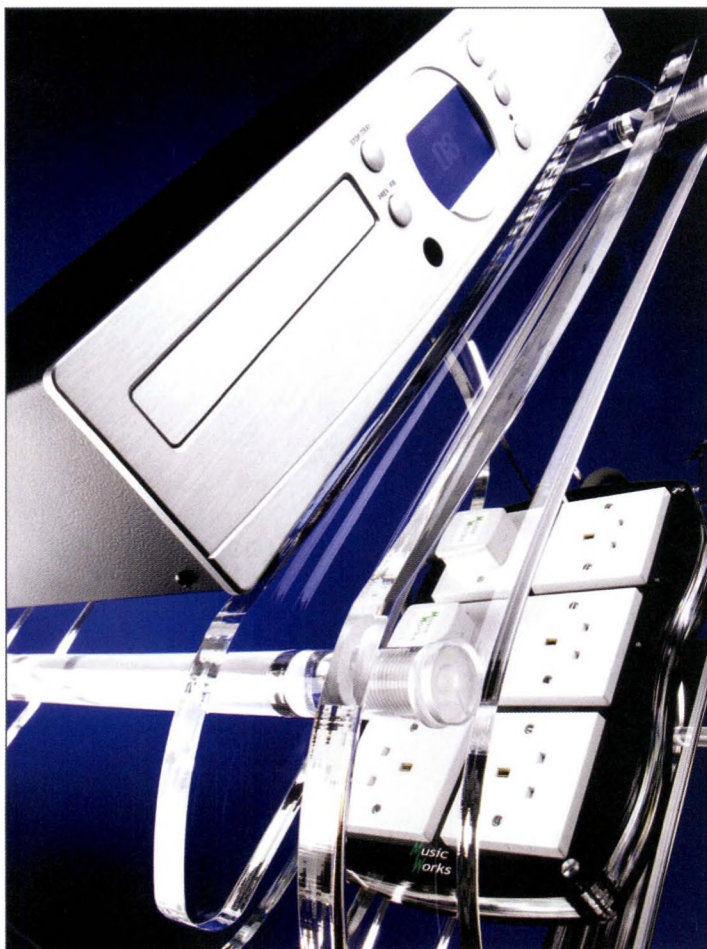
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

My Audio Design Royal Salute power cable

by Jimmy Hughes

A mains cable (power cord) retailing for £1,499? Yes – I know - £1,499 for a mains cable. Even if it's silver, it's time to call the men in white coats... To make things even more 'interesting', I used this item to power the PS Audio Premier Power Plant conditioner that my system runs off. Now this is supposed to clean up the mains and take out all the noise.

That being the case, you'd assume it wouldn't be sensitive to 'mains cable differences' – even accepting such things existed. Yet (and I was surprised too) with the Royal Salute power cord connecting the PS Audio Premier to the mains, there was a noticeable and unexpected difference to the sound – bigger, clearer, sharper, more transparent.

Indeed, after installing the Royal Salute mains cable, I was actually able to reduce volume levels on my amplifier a tad, and still experience (what seemed for all the world like) the same subjective loudness. Explain it? I can't! Something else I noticed were increased degrees of 'difference' between nominally similar tracks. Why? No idea!

For example, while sampling the six CD edition of Schumann's complete male songs on DG with Dietrich Fischer Dieskau, I found myself hearing all sort of subtle changes of timbre and balance between piano and voice. The set contains several hundred songs, recorded over a four year period – between 1974 and 1977.

Before, the sound seemed to have a fairly consistent quality – good, but perhaps a little generalised. Now, all of a sudden, I could hear things like subtle changes in microphone placement and room acoustics. I'm not sure exactly WHY a silver mains cable should make a difference, but – all I can say is – it does!

With all comparisons – but perhaps especially with cables – much depends on what you've already got, and what you're used to. My general impression was that the sound grew purer and more effortlessly transparent as more MAD silver cable was used. The more you have, the greater the effect.

Naturally, the expensive ultra-purity MAD cables gave a heightened sense of the qualities mentioned – extra refinement, purity, naturalness, effortless ease. But you could sense the same qualities in the cheaper cables – it was definitely there, albeit less pronounced.

But, if the sound gets more and more natural and refined with these cables, is this a wholly good thing? Speaking as a listener to classical music who prizes clarity and naturalness very highly, I'd say unequivocally – yes. The more MAD silver

cable I used, the less 'hi-fi' my system sounded.

Playing Barenboim's Mozart concerto recordings, cemented an earlier good impression that had slowly been forming over a week or so – specifically, that things were now sounding truer and more effortless; more natural and real; clearer and more detailed, yet at the same time smoother and more refined.

While I also liked the effect on rock and pop, might (perhaps) MAD's silver cables rob the sound of its aggression slightly? Well, yes and no. A rough fuzzy-sounding guitar still sounds rough and fuzzy with MAD silver cables, only now you can differentiate fuzz from the guitar from the fuzz added by the system reproducing it.

These cables can sound a little bright and 'sharp' when first installed, but once burnt-in the sound is very smooth and open, while remaining tactile and detailed. With MAD's 30 day trial offer, it's possible to sample these cables at home before making up your mind – thereby giving you time to discover the difference at your own pace. +

PRODUCT INFORMATION

MAD Royal Salute mains cable

Construction: 99.997% purity 'Diamond Die' silver conductors in braided form

Price: £1,499/m

Manufacturer: My Audio Design

URL: www.madengland.com

Tel: +44(0)208 123 9789



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Monster Turbine Pro Copper Edition earphones

by Jason Kennedy

Like the entire population of the world eight times over, I have an iPod, an iPod Touch to be exact. This came with a pair of the ubiquitous white ear-buds, and they seem quite tolerable so long as external noise levels are low. Still with a .wav or lossless file the result is not too shabby, but I'm not sure that I'd want to listen for long on them however. The Monster Turbine Pro Copper ear-speakers are an obvious upgrade – albeit one that's less sensitive than the Apple in-ears.

The Turbine Pro Copper is a compact metal bodied ear-bud that's little more than 10mm in diameter and whose sonic output is delivered via a 4mm port to which you can attach one of a selection of SuperTip foam and gel covers. Given the size of our ears can differ, this feature is clearly an important factor for the long-term comfort of the Turbine range.

They come with a number of gizmos, including a mini-jack to quarter-inch jack adaptor, two cases for the phones and a cleaning cloth. The mini-jack itself is a very nice, with its custom made right angle bend and copper sleeve to match the name. Copper is of course what the cables are made of as well, and Monster offers a limited lifetime guarantee, which appears to mean that they will replace them after the first time you break them.

No in-depth information is supplied about the technology employed in this phone save for the fact that it has a "low mass, ultra-wide bandwidth driver", which it would have to in order to achieve the results claimed. A caption on the box says "Bass so deep, it sounds like a subwoofer in your ears" which doesn't sound all that appealing. However, pressing them into your ears produces a remarkable improvement in bass, which suggests that the metal under the tip produces the LF. This provides some of the physical resonance that you hear with a loudspeaker; it doesn't get your whole body moving, but clearly works on the bones in your ears – assuming you can get a tight enough fit that's not uncomfortable. They don't compete with similarly priced full-sized phones in this important respect, but are a lot less bulky and impractical than increasingly fashionable full size cans for iPod users.

The mid and treble are pretty revealing and you can tell what bass instruments are doing from their upper harmonics. More importantly, the sound is tonally quite rich while maintaining good definition. Best, it avoids a tendency to fatigue the ear that has always put me off head- and earphones in the past. This is clearly a very low distortion earphone.

They are surprisingly effective and produce an evenly balanced and dynamic sound, one that reveals a lot about the composition and production of the music. I particularly enjoyed an

uncompressed file of Gentle Giant's *Octopus*, a superb chunk of British prog, it features some top quality playing and a production that brings out the chromatic breadth of the instruments used. You don't come across many speaker/room combinations that can give you the evenness of balance on offer from these mini Monsters, and that makes them an in-head recommendation. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Total cable length: 116cm

Capsule diameter: 10mm

Capsule weight: 5g each

Metal housing with copper finish

Limited lifetime warranty

Gold plated mini-jack

SuperTip variety pack

Price: £319

Manufactured by: Monster Cable

URL: www.monstercable.com

Distributors

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The Absolute Sound (Aug '09)

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noel lee

the headphone Monster

by Jason Kennedy

Noel Lee calls himself the head Monster but I stuck to his given name when we met in Knightsbridge a few month's ago. Noel, who founded Monster Cable in 1979, has had no little success with his Dr Dre approved Beat range of on-ear headphones but he also has the audiophile in his sights. Lee has developed a range of 'in-ear speakers', a product which he says has had him go through his record collection over again in order to enjoy new found detail. As well as mentioning that the iPad is the best sounding iPod yet he had time to share his philosophy on headphone technology.

JK: What got you into headphones?

Noel Lee: I was a two-channel stereo guy when I started, I did what a typical audiophile guy does, then I went to video and hard integration of video with audio. Because of MP3s and iPods people are listening to music in different places, because video has taken over the living room there is no audio sanctuary, you can't have both. It would be great if you had an audio only room and a living room for home theatre and the TV, but the days of just listening to pure audio are pretty limited. It doesn't mean that people are listening to music any less in fact they're listening more, you can get it for free you can carry it with you. In a 160GB iPod you can have 3,000 lossless tunes, there's no limit to what you can do but the big issue is that 95% of people listen on white ear-buds. The white ear-bud is the equivalent of a black and white TV, you have high-def content and you're watching it on a black and white TV, you can't hear all the things that you need to hear. Even with the concept that MP3s are bad, it's a downgraded CD and CDs are a downgraded 192/24 file. That's good but how do you hear it on a white ear-bud? How do you know that MP3s are no good?

My perspective is that MP3 sounds fantastic, it's like 720P and when you have high def TV versus a black and white you've got colour you've got resolution, all these different things and it can sound really incredible, once you've got a headphone that's capable of doing the same thing that big speakers used to do.

Whether it's a B&W speaker or a Quad electrostatic you've got different flavours but there were really no headphones in my opinion that were the equivalent of a high end speaker, that's why I got into headphones.

JK: What about high-end headphones?

NL: They're flawed. You listen to them, the really high end Sennheiser and you wouldn't be able to listen to them as a loudspeaker, it's got a high end peak. All headphones sound like headphones, there's a flaw in them, it's not the audiophile equivalent of the living room. If I'm listening to Wilsons or MartinLogans, something really high end, that's what the audiophile strives for. He has no equivalent in the headphone space. Top of the line Sennheisers have a peak in the high end that sounds steely. Headphone listeners perceive that as detail but the audiophiles really haven't gravitated to headphones. The recording engineers haven't

gravitated toward headphones, myself I would never listen to headphones because they sounded bad. The Etymotic was the closest one I found to speakers, it's reasonably flat – has no bass OK – but doesn't do anything wrong, but it gets you a step up from the average headphone. I wanted to create a headphone experience that was as good as my home experience with speakers, if you can do that then you change the game in headphones. Because serious music lovers now have a way to enjoy their MP3s or their lossless files with the same resolution that they would expect from a loudspeaker at home.

So what are the limitations? One of the main limitations is bass, it's hard to get a little tiny driver to produce subsonic frequencies like you get out of a subwoofer, the second limitation is clarity and speed. Headphones, in my opinion, don't have the transparency of an electrostatic speaker, with the exception of a Stax but it still doesn't have bass. I wanted to have something that had that sort of transparency and clarity as well as a linear sound, but the advantage of headphones that you can't get in a speaker is the dynamics. You'd have to have a really big speaker for it to be as dynamic as a headphone could possibly get because in the headphone space you've got controlled acoustics. You take the room out of it, and even an iPod has the ability to generate enough SPL to match a really big speaker.

**JK: How did you rise to this?**

NL: I'm a real bass kinda guy I want to hear the low frequencies so if I did anything I probably hyped the bass, but I wanted to prove to myself that I could get a fundamental 20Hz signal out of headphones. As well as the transparency and speed, those two things don't go together. Because we're in a small space, I can do this with a small capsule.

For the second generation I went for a little more accuracy in the balance, it cost a lot more to do that but we came out with the Turbine Pro Gold and the place we debuted it was at the AES in New York. The pros there had never listened to an in-ear so they were sceptical but they loved them. This headphone is like a B&W 801 in terms of the accuracy, the balance, the euphonics, it's a very musical headphone. But I'm more of an electrostatic guy, I use big MartinLogans at home so that's where the Turbine Pro Copper comes in. +

Turn to page 76 to see our review of the Monster earphones!

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Cardas Clear Beyond loudspeaker cables

by Alan Sircom

Cardas Clear is an excellent loudspeaker cable. But if you want to bi-wire your loudspeakers – forget it! The ‘Perfect Mirror Quadaxial’ litz construction of the standard Clear speaker cable cannot be configured that way. Which is where Clear Beyond comes in.

In simple terms, Clear Beyond is two Clears up one sleeve. Unfortunately, the simple terms are basically... wrong. To make Beyond, George Cardas had to redesign the layout yet again, coming up with an Octoaxial version of the Perfect Mirror design. Beyond features eight conductors, placed in mirror image bundles of four. Each bundle comprises nine inner and two outer layers of high-purity copper wires, separated by a Teflon dielectric. As befits a litz design, each one of these strands is individually varnished, to limit oxidization and cut down on any naughty strand-to-strand action. With all that varnish to strip, making up Beyond is not easy.

As with Clear before it, the ompression die forged spades are beautifully finished and will last forever, but are slightly narrow. They work well with WBT connectors and most US terminals, though.

Clear Beyond doesn't just lie in bringing bi-wiring to the Clear range. Beyond ‘shotgunned’ (single-wired, with four conductors per side) is a very real option. This is how we decided to use it.

This is big boy stuff, designed for those lucky few to raise an already high-stakes game. If your system isn't at the bleeding edge of what audio can do, there's no point going Clear. But if your system has no works in progress and everything is as good as it gets, at that point, Beyond kicks in. It gives you the sublime, extended top end, completely neutral midrange and sonorous, natural hours-in-front-of-the-system magic of the Clears, but extends it further. A broader and deeper soundstage, smoother tops and more integrated bottom octaves.

Paradoxically, the differences between Clear and Clear Beyond are hard to detect until you have a system that is good enough to resolve them. At which point, they become patently obvious. In part, that is Beyond ‘getting out of the way’ even more than Clear. But there's also something else – Beyond, like Clear before it, bestows on a system a sense of sonic beauty that isn't fake, just really lovely sounding. It manages to make things sound ‘better’ without making them sound ‘fake’, and Beyond does that best of all.



Clear offers an almost impossible task for Beyond – how do you improve on something that good? And in most systems, the difference between Clear and Clear Beyond will be masked by the limits of the system. But for those lucky few who have systems that impose next to no constraints... phew! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

External diameter: 23.7mm

Dielectric Type: Teflon®, air

Inductance: 0.01µH/ft/loop

Capacitance: 446 pF/ft

Biwireable: Yes

Effective cable AWG: 5-gauge

Conductor Type: Perfect Mirror

Octoaxial

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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.

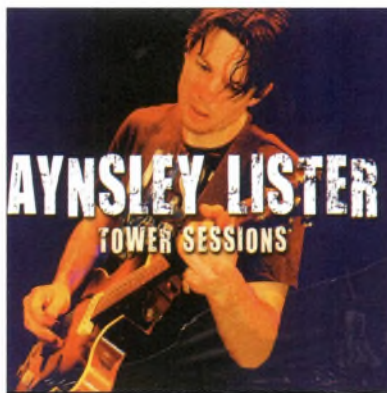
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information, the scale rates a standard,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

Key to Icons

	CD		120g LP
	Gold CD		150g LP
	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		200g LP
	Double Disc		10" LP
	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
	SACD		Vinyl Double Album
	Hybrid SACD		Multi-Channel



Aynsley Lister The Tower Sessions



Manhattan Records: HATMAN2025

Aynsley Lister has carved himself a niche in UK blues rock circles and is now reaping the rewards from years of slogging it out on the circuit. He's got a tasty back catalogue too, including a real balls-to-the-wall rocker called *All Or Nothing*, which tilts its cap to the mighty AC/DC.

He has a live album out already (great playing, poor recording) but this is one with a difference, for this live album was recorded at the Tower in Winchester *without* an audience! The band had just finished a very successful 2009 tour and decided to leave a lasting memento for their fans while the engines were still running hot. What they've achieved is clearly what they set out to do, for this is a different beast to that ill-fated first effort. Beautifully recorded with Aynsley's excellent vocals crystalline and up front, *The Tower Sessions* crackles with energy and vitality and has all the ingredients one would expect to find. Always an inventive and expressive guitarist and now fleshing out the sound with a keyboardist, Lister rips through a high octane set with style and panache. Included for the first time is the fans' favourite, a faithful rendition of Prince's *Purple Rain*. -

It's not quite the same as 'being there' but *The Tower Sessions* gets damn close. **DH**

RECORDING



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Guitar Shorty Bare Knuckle



Alligator Records: ALCD4934

Every picture tells a story. Just take a look at Shorty's face. There's pain and suffering in abundance in that eye. And look at that hand, skin like wasted leather firmly gripping the tools of his trade. Oh yes, every picture tells a story alright, and for a bluesman who used to play alongside Sam Cooke all those years ago, no doubt the lessons have been hard, well-earned and well-learned.

It's all in the sound, too; the fat, stinging guitar sound – like Albert Collins on a really pissed-off day. And in the voice; a voice with a thousand bad luck stories to tell but a voice rich in empathy.

There's something really galling about precious rock stars trying to speak for the man on the street, it tends to come across as contrived – Springsteen excluded. Shorty's earned the right though, and when he pleads to his president for 'stimulus and understanding' on the opening track it's clear he's coming from a place the ordinary man can relate to, unlike the Stings and the Bonos of this world.

You want attitude? It's on every one of these twelve tracks. You want bleeding fingers and scorched throats? Stick this in your CD player and turn it up to eleven. Then listen to his story. **DH**

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Workshop Notes 13: A Tale of Two Turntables. British Brio versus German control.....

It is an irony, 30 years after it was laid to rest, that vinyl sounds better than ever. Brilliant, if fanatical, designers like Conrad Mas and Helmut Brinkmann have pushed the performance envelope so far that vinyl still gives even the very best of digital not just a run for its money, but very often a good kicking. And that's before we factor in the thousands of LPs we vinylists still own and the very special magic of it all. **AVID** have perfected the suspended, belt-driven design and their new SP spec double belts and upgraded power supplies are way ahead of anything else on offer. Joining the fray is a particularly interesting turntable from Germany the **Brinkmann Bardo** – no belts, no suspension, direct drive, mass loaded & with electronic speed control. Unsurprisingly, they sound markedly different. Which is better? That is for you to decide. These two outstanding, fresh-off-the-drawing-board designs are at Audio Workshop Norwich raring to go and eager for your attention. Please don't disappoint them.....Call me, Julian Musgrave, and hear the best that vinyl can offer.

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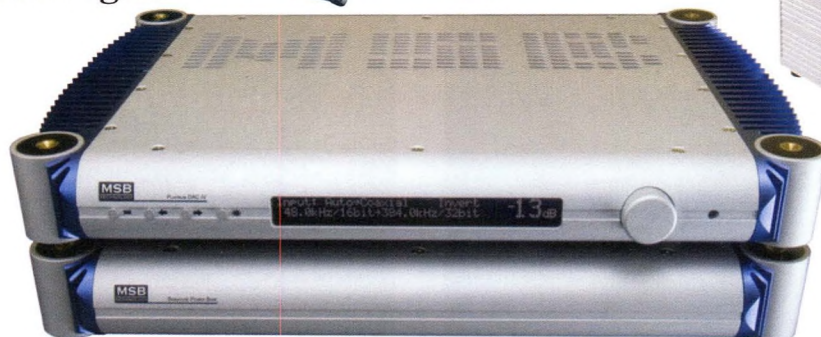
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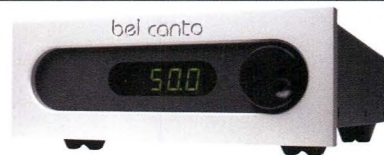


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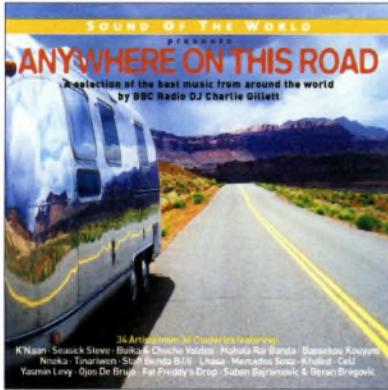
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Various Artists/Sound of the World



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Few compilations of world music hang together with a great deal of coherence. That is not the case here thanks to the faultless taste of late BBC London DJ Charlie Gillett. His was one of the few essential world music shows and his loss is greatly missed by all who value diversity in their musical diet. Here for his last compilation he gathered 34 tracks (across two discs) by artists from all four corners and beyond. The highlights are multifarious but the Bosnian and Serbian pairing of Saban Bajramovic and Goran Bregovic combine great brass arrangement with a jaunty song called 'Hop Hop Hop'. Tinariwen have made their mark outside of world music already but their blues tinged Malian vibe is impossible to dislike, especially if you appreciate the work of Ali Farka Toure. New to me is Orlando 'Cachaito' Lopez who makes a great impression with a piece dedicated to Charlie Mingus called 'Tumbao No 5'.

The thread that holds these diverse pieces together is that they sound very contemporary, even dare I say it westernised. But for the casual *Late Junction* listener and those with catholic tastes, this is a treasure trove of great music that happens to come from further afield. **JK**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble



Couldn't Stand the Weather (Legacy Edition)

Epic Legacy 88697559432 (2CD)

20 years ago, on the 27th August 1990, guitar legend Stevie Ray Vaughan died in a helicopter crash on his way to Chicago. His second studio album with his band Double Trouble – *Couldn't Stand the Weather* – was recorded and 19 days in 1984 and became an audiophile standard almost immediately, largely due to the slow blues 'Tin Pan Alley'. Studio notes from the time suggests this was a live soundcheck, the first take and the first track recorded on the album. The rest is far from filler too, I actually prefer 'Cold Shot' and 'Stangs Swang' and of course 'Voodoo Chile'.

This special Legacy Edition adds an extra 10 studio tracks to the original eight (the previous 1999 master added just five), plus a whole second live album recorded in Montreal.

The live album shows an epic talent at the top of his game, with a band that seems to have psychic powers. The sound has a rawness that only comes with a live recording, but SRV's ability to push his amps over the limit makes tracks like 'Texas Flood' almost over the edge, and the drum kit has too much emphasis. But that doesn't matter – crack open a cold one, turn up the volume and pretend it's 1984. **AS**

RECORDING
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The Marvelettes



Tamla/Speakers Corner TS-274

The Marvelettes were the first "girl group" as they were called then to hit it big with 'Please, Mr. Postman' in 1961. However, Motown's owner Berry Gordy became infatuated with Diana Ross and put all his backing behind the Supremes, leaving the Marvelettes to fend for themselves. The girls managed to continue churning out hits, and in 1967 their greatest album.

This great album, which includes 'Message To Michael' and 'The Hunter Gets Captured By the Game', includes a high percentage of great tunes guaranteed to bring those memories back with a blast from the past. Tamla/Motown albums span the range from sounding like an unsuccessful basement tape to some pretty fine sounding recordings. Too often, the albums have all the "hits" loaded on side one, with side two a wasteland. But this is the real thing—upper echelon Motown sound with a solid line-up of sounds throughout. Combine this album with the Marvelettes *Greatest Hits* package released a year earlier, and you have two great albums of one of my favorite girl groups. Of all the Motown released by Speakers Corner on immaculate Pallas vinyl, this is my favorite. Even if you're too young to remember this music, take a chance and discover it. **DD**

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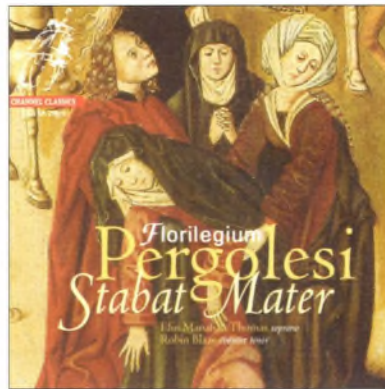
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Ludwig van Beethoven: **String Quartet in E flat major, Op. 74;** **Arne Nordheim:** **String Quartet, 1956;** **Bela Bartok:** **String Quartet No. 3, Sz. 85. Engegård Quartet.**
2L-071-SACD. Lindberg Lyd

This is a jewel, not only in the music, but also in a wonderfully recorded disc of string quartets. The artists are Arvid Engegård, Atle Sponberg, Juliet Jopling and Jan-Erik Gustafsson. Their playing is sublime and the sound quality is one of the finest I've heard. The original source was recorded in DXD [Digital eXtreme Definition] (352.8kHz/24bit). This has been authored to DSD for both the stereo and 5.1 multi-channel tracks. While you may have your favorite performances of the Beethoven, this recording will hold up to any previous interpretations that I am aware of. The Nordheim was new to me and is most enjoyable and easily worthy of repeat playing. The Bartok was composed in 1927. Bartok was an accomplished pianist and this, number three, is the first of his six quartets that really explores string sound and its possibilities. The music holds well with its rhythmic motifs and is one of Bartok's best. Recorded at Sofienberg Church, Norway in April of 2009, the performances and sound quality make this offering a real treat. Strongest recommendation. **RSF**
Supplied by: www.2l.no

RECORDING
MUSIC



Giovanni Battista Pergolesi: Stabat Mater; **Flute Concerto in G major;** **Sinfonia in F major for cello and continuo;** **Salve Regina in F minor. Florilegium with Elin Manahan Thomas, soprano; Robin Blaze, counter-tenor; Ashley Solomon, Flute; Jennifer Morsches, cello.**

Channel Classics CCSA 29810

This disc has so much going for it in the way of quality performances it is easy to say that each work represented here is a reference. It must be made clear that I am a 100% a fan of Florilegium and their works performed on this label. The singing here is absolutely top class and a delightful pleasure for the ears. Ms. Thomas has a beautiful voice, crystal clear and oh so impressive. Counter-tenor Robin Blaze's voice is superlative as well. The Stabat Mater alone is worth the price of admission, but there is so much to explore and to enjoy with Florilegium I strongly suggest you go to the Channel Classics website and see what repertoire is offered. There is nothing you will not enjoy whether it is Bach, Telemann, Bolivian Baroque and/or Vivaldi. There is reference quality sound as always with this label. A must own disc that is simply, stupendous! **RSF**

Supplied by: www.channelclassics.com

RECORDING
MUSIC



Heitor Villa-Lobos: Floresta do Amazonas. Sao Paulo Symphony Orchestra & Choir conducted by John Neschling; Anna Korondi, soprano.

Bis SACD-1660

'Forest of the Amazons' is one of the last works composed by Villa-Lobos in 1958. The 23 movements were originally created for the film, *Green Mansions*. I first heard this music on a 1959 United Artist record with the composer conducting the Symphony of the Air Orchestra and the Brazilian soprano, Bidu Sayao.

The music is wonderfully presented on this Bis release and the flavor of Villa-Lobos' composition is as romantic and exotic as one would expect. Korondi has a beautiful voice and this can be heard clearly in 'The Bird of the Forest', the first song. She is again present in three more songs and then my favorite, the Love Song. There have been many performances of this work through the catalog and I am confident in saying this performance is among the best. The lyrical nature of this music sets a wonderful picture of the mystique of the Amazon and the sound quality offered on this disc is of reference quality. This is a wonderful outing that should be explored by everyone.

RSF
Supplied by: www.bis.se

RECORDING
MUSIC





Mi Alma Mexicana ("My Mexican Soul"). Alondra de la Parra (cond), The Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas.

Sony Music 88697755552.

These two discs are the end result of two years of extensive research by the 29 year old conductor, Alondra de la Parra. She was the founder of the POA in 2004 and serves as the orchestra's artistic director. Her musical credits are vast for one so young and she has conducted many, many orchestras around the World.

These discs are a testament to her mature knowledge of Mexican music and they offer an excellent cornucopia of various styles and affects. There are premiere recordings of works by Enrico Chapela and Eugenio Toussaint. Also included are works by Moncayo, Campa, Castro, Huizar, Ponce, Rosas, Revueltas and Chavez and offer some wonderful insight to those who may not be familiar with the wonderful music from these Mexican composers.

There are some outstanding soloists performing guitar, violin and piano in this set. Highly recommended for the performances and excellent sound quality. **RSF**

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Paul Dukas: The Sorcerer's Apprentice; Maurice Ravel: Mother Goose; Charles Koechlin: Les Bandar-log, Symphonic poem after Kipling's Jungle Book. Orchestre de Strasbourg conducted by Marc Albrecht.

PentaTone PTC 5186

Albrecht and the Strasbourg give us passionate playing and PentaTone has given us another of their outstanding recorded discs. The Sorcerer's Apprentice is a magical performance as the name of the composition implies. Up next on this disc is one of my all-time favorite works, Ravel's Mother Goose. I have enjoyed this music for many years. This is a wonderful performance that will satisfy the most distinguished listeners. I am most impressed. The final work on this excellent disc is from Koechlin's interpretation of Kipling's, The Jungle Book. This is the part where Mowgli has an adventure with a group of rascally monkeys. Albrecht exhibits excellent control of his orchestra and the music slowly builds and pauses and delivers one of the best bass responses I've heard on an orchestral disc. This is very easy to 'get close to' music and a disc that should be in everyone's collection. Top recommendation. **RSF**

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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Symphonies-14, 18, 20, 39 and 41. Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by James Levine.

BSO Classics 1001/02.

Celebrating his fifth season with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, James Levine performed 12 of Mozart Symphonies between February 12th and 21st, 2009. While the early symphonies are not as oft recorded as say, Number 41 in C, K. 551 (Jupiter) the interpretations are exceptionally well represented in this two disc set. These are extremely lyrical works and you can easily distinguish the different scoring (instrumentation) used for each symphony. The performance was exceptionally well recorded by Sound Mirror and is a testament to their craft. The performances place the listener in Symphony Hall and have that "you are there" feeling. Levine leads the orchestra with a light hand and one can clearly hear his control over the forces in Boston. Never heavy-handed, there is an ebb and flow to this music that is captivating. I have enjoyed these discs with repeat playing and can say that I hear something new each and every time I listen. Whether you are a collector of Mozart or just a novice looking to test the waters, I cannot recommend this disc more highly. **RSF**

Supplied by: www.bso.org

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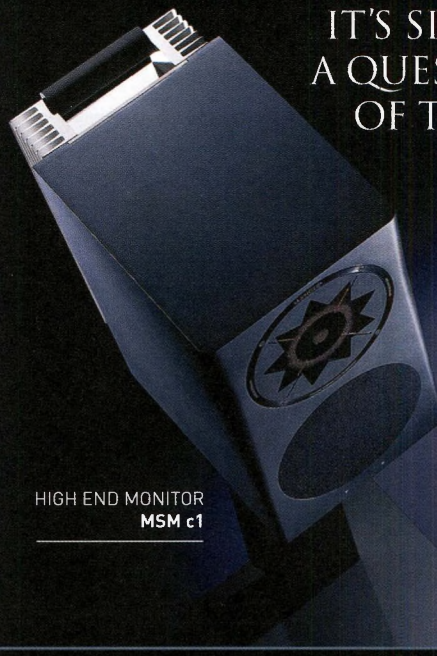
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Company.....Page	B&W..... 7	Emille.....36	Select Audio.....67
Absolute Analogue..... 85	BADA.....95	Focal JMLabs.....51	SME Ltd.....33
Absolute Sounds.....IFC	Cabasse.....77	Furutech Co. Ltd.....30	Sound Fowndations.....69
Ainm AV Ltd.....95	Chester Group.....58 & 59	Guru.....89	studioAV Ltd.....86
Analogue Seduction.....86	Classic LPs.....89	High End Cables.....28	Symmetry.....42
Argento Audio.....15	Cloney Audio.....73	Infidelity.....95	Synergy AV Ltd.....89
Audio Destination.....89	Coherent Systems.....57	Jordan Acoustics.....62	The Audio Works.....74
Audio Emotion.....64	Cool Gales Ltd.....54	Kef.....23	The Cartridge Man.....85
Audio Images.....95	Crystal Cable BV.....2	Leema.....8	The Chord Company.....41
Audio Reference.....83	Custom Electronic Design..	Lyra Co Ltd.....74	The Musical Design
Audio T.....9481	Manger Audio.....48 & 86	Company.....73
Audio Workshop Norwich..	dCS Ltd.....53	N Ireland Audio Show.....90	The Right Note.....77
.....83	Definitive Audio.....70	Nordost Corporation.....39	Triangle Industries.....47
Audiofreaks.....4	Diverse Vinyl.....93	Oranges and Lemons.....95	Vertex AQ Ltd.....27
Audiography Ltd.....86	Eclipse.....IBC	Origin Live.....81	Vienna Acoustics.....21
Audiolab.....35	Electrocompaniet.....OBC	Pear Audio.....85	VTL.....16

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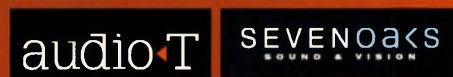
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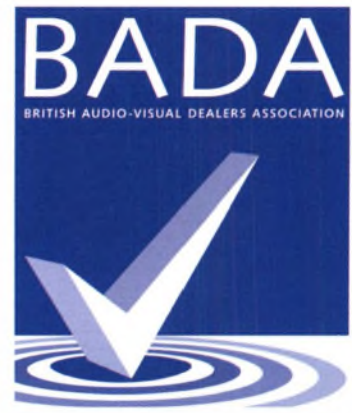


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Louis Prima – The Wildest!

every home should have one

by Alan Sircom

IF ANY ALBUM LIVES UP TO THE ‘EVERY HOME SHOULD HAVE ONE’ SOUBRIQUET, IT’S THIS FABULOUS SLICE OF ENTERTAINMENT. In a sea of fine 1950s recordings, this mono cut must rank as one of Capitol’s greats. And, produced in a time before Valium or Prozac, *The Wildest!* remains the perfect anti-depressant. You simply cannot listen to it without it putting a huge smile on your face.

Louis Prima was a Sicilian-American entertainer, trumpeter and singer from New Orleans. He had a string of minor hits in the 1930s and 1940s, but the early post-war years proved a struggle for all big bands. In the early 1950s Prima and his singer wife Keely Smith were playing small venues, finally ending up as one of the first lounge act in the then-new Sahara casino in Las Vegas. To say this was a success is an understatement... the show was the event to see on The Strip throughout the 1950s. Remember, Sinatra and the Rat Pack were still more than half a decade away.

In 1956, Capitol Records assembled the band at the casino lounge to try to recreate Prima’s spirited late night performance on record.

The album is almost a ‘best of’, showcasing an entertainer at his absolute peak. Combining swing, big band jazz, jive and early rock & roll, it’s a personality album, because Prima, Smith and the six-piece band have personality to spare. The ‘Just A Gigolo/I Ain’t Got Nobody’ medley (recreated by David Lee Roth more than 30 years later) as well as ‘Oh Marie’, ‘Jump, Jive An’ Wail’ and ‘Buona Sera’ are all signature pieces, with a glorious interplay between Prima’s larger than life vocals and Sam Butera’s even larger sax sound. The other tracks are far from fillers; even the wig-out Jimmy Blount trombone solo on ‘Body And Soul’, which goes all over the musical map, shows musical mastery. The energy of these tracks is infectious, fun and hugely entertaining; when The Gap set its 1998 Khaki Swing advert to ‘Jump, Jive An’ Wail’, it led to a revival of Swing dancing, Jive and Lindyhopping in the US, and a cover version by the Brian Seltzer Orchestra.

The Wildest! languished in the back catalog until the 21st Century. Like buses; you wait ages for a CD, and then two came along in quick succession, in part thanks to the Gap advert. The first – and arguably the best – was the 2000 Digital Compact Classics version remastered by Steve Hoffman. Unfortunately, this version is no longer available, but the current 2002 Capitol 24-bit Super Bit Mapping version (by Ron McMaster) is an excellent alternative. It’s clean, remarkably dynamic and adds four tracks to the original ten. Produced a couple of years before stereo records began to appear, the original was recorded

in mono and fortunately the desire to ‘stereoize’ the recording was thoroughly and successfully resisted.

Prima died in 1978 after a long illness. His time as King of Las Vegas and even the success of *The Wildest!* is all but forgotten. However, his immortality is guaranteed thanks to his vocal portrayal of King Louis in the 1967 animated Disney classic, *The Jungle Book*. For many people, ‘I Wanna Be Like You!’ is their first experience of Louis Prima, but at least it’s fairly typical of the born entertainer. *The Wildest!* is truly a must buy. +



LOUIS PRIMA – THE WILDEST!

Capitol Records 7 2435 38696 2 5
Produced by Voyle Gilmore/Capitol reissue
produced by Michael Cuscuna
Recorded on April 19-20, 1956
Featuring Louis Prima (vocal, trumpet)
Keely Smith (vocal)
Sam Butera (tenor sax)
James ‘Little Red’ Blount Jr (trombone)
Willie McCumber (piano)
Jack Marshall (guitar)
Amato Rodrigues (bass)
Bobby Morris (drums)

Track Listing

1. Medley: “Just a Gigolo/I Ain’t Got Nobody” – 4:42
2. “(Nothing’s Too Good) For My Baby” – 2:36
3. “The Lip” – 2:15
4. “Body and Soul” – 3:22
5. “Oh Marie” – 2:25
6. Medley: “Basin Street Blues/When It’s Sleepy Time Down South” – 4:12
7. “Jump, Jive, an’ Wail” – 3:28
8. “Buona Sera” – 2:58
9. “Night Train” – 2:46
10. “(I’ll Be Glad When You’re Dead) You Rascal You” – 3:13

Reissue bonus tracks

11. “Five Months, Two Weeks, Two Days” – 2:08
12. “Banana Split for My Baby” – 2:29
13. “Whistle Stop” – 2:15
14. “Be Mine (Little Baby)” – 2:35



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