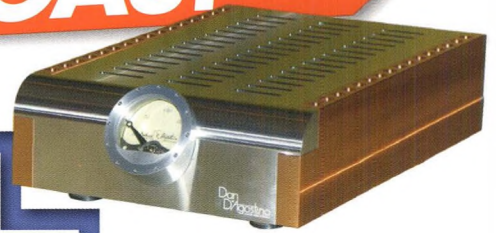


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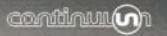


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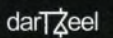
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This decade is freshly minted, but already it's proving to be... strange. As our CES round-up shows, there's plenty of new equipment at a wide range of prices, but especially for those seeking out up-market solutions. But there's a sense of unknowing that permeates the audio industry. Some of this comes from uncertainty over the future – are turntable sales going to remain buoyant? Should we replace our aging CD player, or wait until they become fashionable again? Is it to be a networked solution or 'PC-and-DAC' that's the way forward? Is Class D audiophile-ready yet?

Some are already coming out of the fugue. They are the ones that sussed out answers to some or all of these questions, and have released products that fit the bill. Their only concern is 'when are the customers coming back?', because both English and American audiophiles in general are taking a buying break at this time. Still, many see double-digit growth in their brands as the break new and emerging markets, and can experience genuine surges in sales, when they discover one good shop in Brazil can sell more equipment than two dozen stores in the UK. Curiously, this buying break doesn't seem to affect the highest of high-end too dramatically, especially if you have the right product at the right – if high – price.

Not everyone is faring so well. Other companies – it must be said – have just woken up to discover it's the twenty-first century. Some still have their watches set to 1980s time. You have to wonder occasionally how such companies keep going, but they turn up at the same shows, year in, year out.

This is show season. The annual Consumer Electronics Show (and the accompanying The Home Entertainment show) in Las Vegas is much more than

just 3D TV and iPad clones; there's a whole hotel dedicated to high-end audio. *Hi-Fi+* and *The Absolute Sound* went mob-handed round the audio rooms (and not the porn show next door, honest) to bring you a comprehensive round up of what's hot in high-end.

By the time you read this, Bristol Sound and Vision will have just happened, with its more feet-on-the-ground approach to audio, and then there's the Pie Show. This event – run by members of the Hi-Fi Wigwam forum – is at the Salford Hall Hotel, just outside Melton Mowbray, on Sunday 6th March 2011. Think of it as one big bake-off! Finally, there's the exciting new Audio World '11 show, which runs the weekend of the 26-27 March 2011, at the Park Inn hotel in Heathrow, London. Perhaps we'll see you there!

Alan Sircom
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Apple controls the music... again

The irresistible rise of the iPad

by Alan Sircom

OVER THE NEXT FEW PAGES, you'll find an embarrassment of audio riches from the Consumer Electronics Show. Curiously though, if you went looking for high-end audio in the mainstream press or the geekier end of the publishing, audio was virtually a no-show. Instead, the plane-loads of journos squeezed into an overcrowded Las Vegas Convention Center to find column inches about the latest gadget. And many of those gadgets were tablet computers (a.k.a. the how-do-we-get-a-piece-of-the-iPad-action tablet). It's hard to determine precisely how many iPad clones were in circulation at the CES, but the standard estimation was close to 80 different models competing for that market. And it's some market; Apple sold more than 14 million iPads last year*. Many of those went to audio companies, judging by the CES.

My specific 'patch' at the show was high-end solid-state amplifiers costing \$15,000 and above, at the Venetian Tower. This was where the bulk of the audio industry resides for the CES, although there are 'off piste' events in other hotels and a completely separate expo called The Home Entertainment Show in the Flamingo Hotel. Nevertheless, despite the narrow 'brief', you do end up speaking to about half the industry, to pin down reviews for this year, chew the cud, and so on.

If I were to find a particular trend for this year, it would have been ending the demonstration with the words "... controlled from the iPad." The first time I heard this, I figured it was understandable because the company that uttered the statement had a new DAC and was playing it through a Mac and a USB cable. Then I heard the same thing again, and again, and again. The most elegantly OTT – and wholly understandable – use of this particular gadget was by Kevin Wolff of Vienna Acoustics. Vienna was running at least three separate and very competent demonstrations in its suite – one of the Kiss, one of the Beethoven Baby Grand and one of its in-wall speakers. All were using MacBook Pros as front ends, and each one was driven by the same Apple iPad, using the simple – and free – Remote app. Others had written their own apps, were in the process of writing their own apps, were using PlugPlayer or RealVNC to control a PC. The thing is, it was *everywhere*.

Move across to THE Show, where you have a more traditional hi-fi setting, and the iPad count dropped



significantly. Whether this reflected the nature of the products there (you don't need an iPad to operate a turntable or a CD player, and both were still in full effect at THE Show), a refusal to change or simply correctly reading a different audience in the mile-walk between the two expos, but the frequency of iPads in both was very different. I hate to say this, but in some respects, the iPads have it!

"Fourteen million people bought this thing for a reason, and they keep on buying them."

Perhaps the most immediate example of the change was in Naim Audio's room. Here, they had a lone guy sitting in a chair, playing through a music collection, completely and utterly immersed in the experience, and yet having almost no idea what equipment he was listening to. All he knew was that he was in the Naim room, he was playing tracks he knew, using an iPad with a big Naim-chummy interface. After about 10 minutes, they guy turned to the staff, with a Cheshire-cat like grin and asked where he could get this stuff, what was it and how much will it cost him. No questions, no concerns, no quibbles... just "I like" and "I want".

Naturally, we are going to hook ourselves to this iPad revolution. Some of you – probably more and more each day – will be reading this on your Apple iPads, using our own standalone iPad app. But it's not just shameless self-promotion on our part, there's something more at play here. Fourteen million people bought this thing for a reason and they keep on buying them, even if they are buying nothing else. And they make a brilliant remote! +

*I saw this uptake when flying abroad last year. In May, travelling to the Munich High End show, I saw one guy with an iPad. This January, it was as if they were handed out like headphones.

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Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming!

No more man cave

A recent change in circumstance forced me to completely reevaluate my system. The move to a smaller house meant saying goodbye to the 'man cave', and an unexpected change in my mobility – following a stroke – meant the days of wandering round the room to pick out a bunch of discs and the room full of tube amps and huge loudspeakers are now just a distant memory. I'm still active, but far less ambulatory than before.

So, instead of throwing money at the problem, I've approached audio with economy and what I believe to be new-found intelligence. Pre/power systems, valve amps, room treatments and expensive cables are out, due to lack of space and because the listening room is now a living room. The system doubles up as loudspeaker system for the TV these days, and my son-in-law helped me to select a source that I can operate and select all my music without needing to lumber out of my seat.

The system I've settled on comprises a Sonos ZoneBridge, which plays all my music stored on the computer hard disk in the bedroom. This connects wirelessly to the Sonos ZonePlayer 90 in the living room. This is connected by coaxial digital link to a Lyngdorf TDAI2200 and then to a pair of Harbeth P3ESR on shelves either side of a chimneybreast, where the TV is now mounted. A Sony Blu-ray player and a Sky+ box also connect to the Lyngdorf amp.

The Lyngdorf works perfectly, and its DSP room control helps to eliminate any problems from placing the Harbeths too close to the wall and chimney. But the Sonos is a revelation. I recently joined the ranks of Apple iPad owners on my son-in-law's recommendation, simply because of the Sonos 'App' that allows you to access the music with the sort of simplicity I wouldn't have imagined before. The iPad has made me something of a silver surfer, too. This is an excellent system and one I really would hope that *Hi-Fi+* covers in its own right soon. Not just to make me feel a part of the hi-fi fraternity once more, but because it's so damn good, it leaves me wondering why I spent all those years struggling with valves and the rest.

In fact, my only grumbles are that classical music is not so easily categorised and labelled on the Sonos (apparently, it's a problem with all classical music on computers) and that I wish there was a way to put of all those other controls onto the iPad. Who'd have thought a Luddite like me would be so swift to embrace all this new technology though? Even if I was back to full mobility tomorrow, I doubt I'd go back now. Best of all though, I'm content with the sound; no more fiddling around, no more upgrading or tweaking. I'm done.

Frank Wotherspoon, via email

There are ways to run the infra-red commands (used by your other remote handsets) through your iPad, Frank. Either by using little IR repeaters glued to your components and a product called iTach, or through a 'dongle' that fits in the headphone socket of your iPad and a device called RedEye. At the moment though, I'd suggest staying with the collection of handsets.

As to classical 'tags' (the metadata used to help categorise and sort your music), yours is an all-too-common complaint. The ID4 tagging protocol designed for music was designed without too much consideration of classical's demands, and classical music providers are not good at working within the standard. Fortunately, these tags are easy to edit; it just requires a spot of planning and a clear head on the part of the person making the changes. A feature beckons...

The iPad has quickly become a near ubiquitous feature in many new audio systems, even those of noted Apple-haters. And yes, it seems few would ever go back. This is why we were keen to have our own standalone iPad app for the magazine. Your positive and pragmatic approach to music today sounds like you have personally triumphed over recent adversity and I hope your recovery continues at pace - Ed

The kids are alright?

A couple of years ago, the mainstream media was full of stories about the record revival and how a new generation of young people were getting into LP instead of CD or downloads. Is this true, and is it still happening? I would love to see LPs keep going for another 20 years, but I reckon the only way that will happen is if the kids get involved. Now that the Technics DJ deck has been discontinued, I'm not sure if this was just a flash in the pan.

Manfred Guttenplan, via email



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The trend for young people to latch onto LP was something of a fad, but it's a fad that still has a following. While it didn't start a substantial new wave of LP buying, there's no denying vinyl sales are still on the rise. Total LP sales in the UK continue to top the million mark, largely capped by the limits of the surviving pressing plants. But, with no plans to build new pressing plants and the machinery of the closed plants long since scrapped, further marked rises in LP sales seem unlikely. Sales of new turntables – especially in the high-end – have slowed slightly, but tonearm and cartridge sales are still relatively buoyant. All of which suggests the market for LP is still a long way from being played out just yet - Ed

Remaster disaster

There are some great bargains to be had on CD right now. Several companies are bundling two, three, sometimes as much as five discs together in one package for the cost of a full-price CD. I recently got five Byrds albums (*Mr Tamborine Man, Turn! Turn! Turn!, Fifth Dimension, Younger Than Yesterday* and *The Notorious Byrds Brothers*) for just £19 in my local HMV... and this was one of the more expensive bundles.

The trouble is, the sound quality is variable. These Byrds albums are actually pretty good, but some are remastered, and it seems that means they are extremely bright, undynamic and aggressive sounding, totally unlike the original LP. Is there anything I can do to make them less bright?

Roy Gardiner, via email

Yes – you can try not to buy modern remasters! This sounds flippant, but one of the biggest problems in music today is the 'Loudness War' clipped and compressed sound that passes for remasters of old classics. Not every modern remaster is so tainted, but it seems with each successive week, yet another old master is ruined by heavy-handed remastering work.

The justification for this is that if everyone else makes 'hot' masters, those that are recorded at levels that allow real-world dynamic range don't sound as iPod or radio friendly. It seems that there is something of a revolt in the music biz, as more and more producers demand music pulls back from the loud, yet undynamic precipice. Unfortunately, this argument falls flat with A&R people who are scared to pull back from the brink, in case a recording 'tanks' and they get the blame. And with the success of über-compressed tracks like 'I Gotta Feeling' by the Black Eyed Peas making it ever harder to argue for natural dynamic range and backed-off volume levels in pop and rock recordings, I Gotta Feeling (groan!) this is going to be a long-haul struggle.

There is some mileage in careful use of tone shaping to get rid of the more upsetting aspects of the remasters. Tone controls took a significant step forward when they moved into the digital domain, and the subtle hand of Amarra can work wonders in improving digital sound quality. - Ed

There's life in the digital dog yet

Every audio company seems to want to package CD off to the old format's home. Well, maybe I'm the lone dissenter, but I still like CD. I still buy CDs (mostly from Amazon and Play.com these days, because my local specialist shop closed down a couple of years ago and HMV has hardly any stock and costs too much these days), I still play CDs and have no intention of either downloading tracks or 'ripping' (ugly word) those CDs to a computer. Please don't lecture me on the arguments as to why I'm out of touch with today and how much better my CDs would sound played through a computer; I know and I really don't care. Computers are for work, CDs are for leisure and why should I confuse the two?

I hope that in the rush to join hands with the iPod (don't own one, won't own one, no interest for me there), hi-fi's big wigs don't lose sight of who put them there and how they play their music. CD's still the biggest selling format, please don't lose sight of that.

Terry Young, via email

While the number of new CD players has shrunk in recent years, I suspect very few companies will follow Linn Products lead and cease CD player production just yet. A new-found pragmatism seems to permeate most audio brands; whether you are sticking to CD, haven't played a disc in a decade or are somewhere between these two extremes, companies have a solution for you.

I still maintain in most cases, computer audio simply represents another shelf or two on the equipment stand. There's no reason why the PC automatically spells the end of the CD and the two formats can sit comfortably together, although as Mr Wotherspoon found through adversity, the migration process isn't as uncomfortable as we first believe.

We'd anticipate that CD will have almost as long and as happy a life expectancy as the format it was touted to replace – LP. Now, some 30 years after CD, new LPs are still pressed and new turntables, arms and cartridges spring up. There is no reason to suspect the future of CD is any less secure - Ed

And the walls came tumbling down!

Well the deed is done – three months hard graft and the walls submitted to my will.

The carpet fitters had hardly left the premises when I could be seen dragging my PMC EB1s on heavy duty dust sheets like dead bodies into their new resting place. They were positioned using the Cardas formula (using the distance between parallel side walls and not the rear wall), which located the tweeters 1.87 metres from the front wall and 1.15 metres from the side walls resulting in a distance of 1.88 metres between the tweeters. My listening position is at the apex of an equilateral triangle and 2.1 metres from the rear wall. The speakers are toed in so that I can just see the inside face and their axis cross 0.5 metres behind my head. I had not built myself up to expect great improvements, but it was evident on hearing the first track of Keb Mo's 'Peace' that something miraculous had happened. There was a much greater depth of image, open sound and instruments were clearly defined. The speakers sonically disappear. Even when hanging curtains at the other end of the room one could sense a new depth to the sound stage. I played CD after CD – violin concertos, orchestral symphonies, Mercedes Sosa. I didn't want to go to bed. For the first time since I purchased the speakers I had a desire to sit down and listen to music and I can say I am really pleased with the results. And what of the title track of Joan Armatrading's *This Charming Life*, which triggered off the demolition job? Well I had to check I had put on the right CD. While the bass is still heavy there is no overhang or serious booming and no desire to reach for the Paracetamol. I am sure the speakers are thanking me for the greater breathing space.

Ideally the ceiling should be a metre higher to echo the length and width on the room and fit one of the recommended ratios of 1:1.4:1.9, but that would take a lottery win. Clearly I don't have a wide sound stage and had considered using the ratio (1.62) between the two figures established by the Cardas formula to place the speakers 3.10 metres apart. This would have located them 0.50 metres from the side walls and 0.81 metres from the front wall, but I am so happy with the results I decided not to experiment further.

I have no immediate plans to introduce professional acoustic treatment, but recommendations from Acoustica Applicata are in two stages. Stage one, which involves installing traps against the front wall and to the side of the speakers being necessary to solve the most important sound problem (I informed them of boomy bass). Stage two, which involves traps placed on the rear wall and at the first reflection point on the left wall while not essential, would, they claim, improve the results. A test I did with a mirror indicated that the first reflection points on the side walls are narrow due to the speakers being placed well away from the walls. Clearly Italian designed acoustic treatment would look better than the charcoal grey foam slabs I used in my old room, but I am not sure if I want to be surrounded by Greek style columns. However, I can say with hand on heart, the room has been sorted to the best of my ability.

David Bond, via email

There is a strong and increasingly well-organised lobby within the high-end audio community that maintains the interaction between loudspeaker and room makes more significant a change to the sound of an audio system than any other single upgrade. Naturally, purveyors of electronics, cables and equipment supports would tend to disagree, but your simple expedient of a dirty great sledge hammer hitting brick makes a pretty good argument.

I am constantly and exceptionally impressed at the lengths people will go to in the pursuit of good sound. But even in a world of extremes, your provisions push the envelope in all the best ways of audicphie dedication to duty. If we gave out medals for hi-fi heroics, yours would have to be cast out of an old bronze turntable bearing and have the inscription 'For Valour'.

It's something of a worry when making recommendations that involve building works, but this has obviously worked exceptionally well for you. Which is a good thing, because I am terrible at plastering and I'd hate to fix the damage I caused. As to the room acoustic treatment, the Acoustica Applicata equipment isn't designed for every decor, but there are equally excellent room treatments from Advanced Acoustics, GIK Acoustics and more that aren't quite as ostentatious - Ed

HMV – not for me!

The news reports look bleak for the HMV shop. Well, I can't say I'll be crying too hard if the company goes belly-up!

Where I live used to bristle with record shops run by exceptionally knowledgeable malcontents and misanthropes. Life may not have dealt these strange folk a good hand in the social skills stakes, but their understanding of all things musical gave me a grounding in krautrock, electronic music and avant-garde jazz that I still treasure to this day. It seems, however, that such skills are no longer required by the average HMV staff member, who only seems to know about the latest X-Box 360 games and considers music to be something of a minor annoyance, stocking shelves with no interest and even less understanding.

If HMV is to survive, it must return to its roots, which really means returning to the roots of the companies it pushed out of the high-street; those specialist record shops and their weird but informative store staff.

Cliff Scott, via email

I hope that HMV's troubles can be resolved quickly, Cliff. Whatever you think about the company's staff, stocking policy, pricing or even its decor, it's still the last, best hope for buying a CD on most high streets... and must be preserved for that alone - Ed +



The 2011 Consumer Electronics Show

Each January, the massed consumer electronics industry descends on Las Vegas to show off its latest and greatest goodies. Aside from the iPad clones, the 3D HDTVs and the cars that can park themselves, a whole section of this huge annual show is dedicated to the best in high-end audio. With record numbers of trade and press visitors this year, the CES is crowded, but the perfect place to discover what will be the next big thing in hi-fi. Report by Robert Harley, Neil Gader, Chris Martens, Kirk Midtskog, Dick Olsher, Paul Seydor, Alan Sircom, Steven Stone, Alan Taffel, and Jonathan Valin

CHRIS MARTENS: AFFORDABLE LOUDSPEAKERS

CES 2011 offered an embarrassment of loudspeaker riches for those of us who aren't particularly rich. Take the new LSA's .5 monitors (\$699/pr) for example. These are the firm's newest, smallest, and least costly offerings, yet they sound astonishingly rich, vibrant, and full-bodied, capturing much of the performance of LSA's larger designs. While the .5's bass extends only to about 50 Hz, it seems to go lower than that, giving the speaker an unexpected touch of bottom-end weight.

PSB's Paul Barton is an unassuming design genius, and for evidence of this we need look no further than to his latest pint-sized giant-killers: the PSB Image Mini monitors (\$700/pr). At CES, they wove an expansive, punchy, and richly textured sound wildly disproportionate to their size, with no trace of edginess or strain.

Monitor Audio has been on a roll of late, successfully updating first its Silver, then its Bronze, and now its Gold Series speaker families. I sampled several new Gold GX-models at CES, but was enchanted by the smallest of the group: the Gold GX 50 monitors (\$1,800/pr). Monitor's new Gold GX models leverage technologies drawn from the firm's top-tier Platinum speakers, and accordingly the GX 50 sported a ribbon-type tweeter along with a ribbed-for-rigidity C-CAM (ceramic-coated aluminum magnesium) mid/bass driver.

Many Gallo Acoustics speakers use futuristic, sphere-shaped metal enclosures, but for CES the firm revealed a family of more traditional-looking, wood-finished speakers called the Classico series. The Classico Series III floorstanders (c. \$1,700-\$2,000/pr) combine Gallo's signature wide-dispersion CDT tweeter with 5 1/2-inch carbon-fibre mid/bass drivers loaded in transmission-line enclosures.

Audiophiles may fondly recall MartinLogan's late, lamented Aerius hybrid electrostat, but now history is repeating itself with the launch of MartinLogan's ElectroMotion ESL hybrid electrostat (\$2,000/pr). In a nutshell, the ElectroMotion ESL's gives listeners a big taste of electrostatic goodness at an unexpectedly low price and in an attractive and easy-to-drive package. You get lightning-fast transient response, razor-sharp detailing, and precisely focused imaging, all leavened with a good measure of fast,

Left:
Evolution Acoustics
MM Micro One

Right: Paul Barton
with the PSB
Imagine Mini



well-defined and surprisingly well-integrated bass from the ESL's piston-type woofer. There's huge value here, making the ESL by far the least costly way to sample the time-proven joys of electrostats.

Wharfedale's new Diamond 10.7 floorstanders (\$1,299/pr) were singing in rare form at CES. Like all Wharfedale speakers today, these speakers are made in China. The plant produces every single part of the speaker, right down to the wood pulp from which the MDF speaker enclosure cores are made. Those seeking balanced performance from a speaker that offers both sonic refinement and near full-range frequency response will discover the 10.7's are a tough deal to beat.

Nola designer Carl Marchisotto is best known for his superb and expensive Grand Series loudspeakers, but at CES he focused on the opposite end of the price spectrum, giving us his extraordinary three-driver, 3-way Nola Contender floorstander. (\$3,400/pr) The tower-type Contender is loosely based on the design of Nola's Boxer bookshelf monitor and features a rear-ported upper chamber housing a silk-dome tweeter and a 6 1/2-inch mid/bass driver, while a downward-ported lower chamber houses a second mid/bass driver that shoulders the low-frequency workload. The Boxer sadly never made it to these shores because of stiff home-grown competition, but the Contender looks set to fight its way to the top.

NEIL GADER: AFFORDABLE SOLID STATE ELECTRONICS

I'm no economic pundit but sense of recovery and relief was in the air and on the faces of exhibitors. My assignment for the show was solid-state electronics under \$15k. As you will read I had my hands full.

April Music of Korea is best known for its Stello and Aura components, but its flagship Eximus line is something really special. The P5 preamp is a beauty, dual-mono and fully balanced all the way, including the input and output modules. It's 100% discrete with no op-amps or even a remote control—nothing to degrade sonic purity. Price: \$9,000

Over at Audio Research sat the DS450 stereo amplifier driving Magnepan 3.7s. The ►

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- ▶ proprietary switched-mode design is from ARC's Dennis Petrich and was first seen in the DSi200. It features discrete-transistor components and no potted modules. It outputs a robust 450Wpc into 8 ohms and is configurable for both balanced and unbalanced inputs. Look for a monoblock version, the DS450M, to be introduced in short order. Price: DS450, \$7,995; DS450M, \$9,990/pair

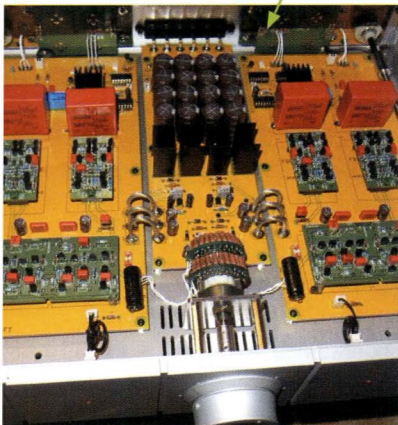
Bel Canto's CSi integrated exemplifies the new guard with built-in USB/DAC and a rear panel chock full of digital inputs, at the expense of 'vestigial' analogue inputs. Power output is expected to be around 75Wpc, but the amp is said to be comfortable with lower-impedance speakers. Expect it to be in the sub-\$2k range. An FM tuner with the same form factor should hit the market later this year.

Splitting its catalog between tube and solid-state, Cary Audio Design introduced a pair of brawny new transistor power amplifiers. The SA-200.2 and SA-500.1 are all-new designs that take a modular approach. The SA-200.2 is a 200W stereo amplifier into 8 ohms (350W into 4 ohms), while the SA-500.1 is a 500W monoblock amplifier into 8 ohms (1000W into 4 ohms). The amplifiers exhibit very high current capability, and are stable into low-impedance loads. Price: \$3,995 and \$4,995, respectively

Mark Levinson is back with the aggressively priced 500 Series. Each delivers 300Wpc from its power modules, and ML brass reported that these amps can "still handle crazy loads." There are four amps to choose from, including the 531 monoblock (\$6,500), and 532 stereo (\$8,000). Later this year ML will add a pair of integrated amps and a CD player. By adding an Ethernet input and accessing a Web page, users can relay equipment status and error info directly to techies at ML for diagnosis.

Off-site at the Mirage Hotel, MBL of Germany debuted its entry-level Corona Series electronics. A ground-up design, the integrated amp and power amps feature MBL's own take on Class D—150Wpc hybrid designs with all-analog power supplies. In order to increase isolation critical circuitry floats on an internal steel subchassis. Later this year the line will add a tuner and monoblocks. Price: C11 preamplifier, \$7,600; C21 amp, \$8,000; C51 integrated, \$9,700; C31 CD player, \$8,000.

McIntosh was abuzz with news this year. The C50 preamp and its kid brother, the C48, feature an inverted-double-chassis design. Essentially identical in sonic performance, both are equipped with a USB/DAC, but the C50 adds a wider eight-band tone control, more inputs, two phono-section inputs for mc and mm, and, of course, McIntosh's famous output-level meters. Also introduced were a pair of stereo amps designed to complement the preamps—the 450Wpc MC452 (\$7,500) and the 300Wpc MC320 (\$4,500). Price: C50, \$6,500; C48, \$4,500.



The Micromega AS-400 is the integrated amplifier/wireless DAC version of the original stand-alone AirStream. Essentially an IA-400 integrated amp with its own DACs and regulation, it leverages iTunes integration in concert with the AirTunes wireless transmission protocol. Power is 400Wpc via Class D. The AS-400 employs Airplay for remote access from an iPod/iPad, and when available will allow streaming of 24-bit files. Includes four analog inputs and a phono input. Price: \$4,995

On tap for review by yours truly was the new Audiant integrated amplifier from New Zealand's Perreaux. Equipped with a 24-bit/96kHz USB/DAC, it outputs 80Wpc into 8 ohms courtesy of MOSFET driven by Class A preamplifier stages. At CES it was driving the redoubtable Harbeth HL5 loudspeaker, and its sound was engaging, honest, and dynamic. Reflecting the current trend toward digital inputs, its rear-panel I/Os include coax and a pair of optical and USB. On the drawing board are a CD player and a digital streamer, but don't expect either of them to ship prior to Q4. Price: \$2995

Primare's \$2,695 I32 integrated has upgrade and ecology on its mind.

Using UFPD power modules, this Class D amp outputs 120Wpc, uses a bright OLED display, and eats a paltry 0.2W in eco-friendly standby mode. Later this year an optional media I/O module will be introduced to accommodate a range of devices from CD players to smart phones and satellite boxes.

Left:
The superb dual-mono layout of the Eximus P5 preamp.

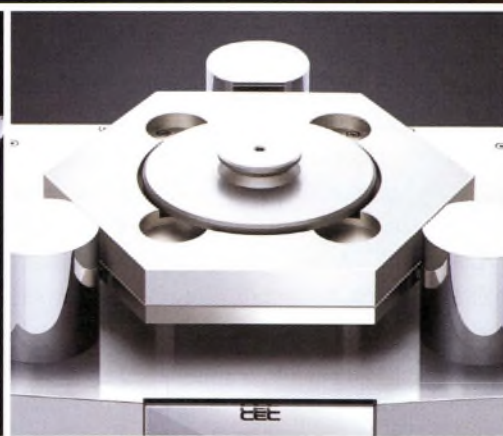
Right: Bent Holter, technical director and Anders Ertzeid, export manager of Hegel.

STEVEN STONE: DIGITAL GEAR

Armed with three memory sticks and one CD, I worked my way through the halls of the CES and The Home Entertainment Show, searching for the top new digital products. Perhaps surprisingly, I found that more rooms could accommodate memory sticks than CDs! Such is the change of pace in digital today.

In the past the best products of their type were produced right before the formats ▶

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► became defunct—cassette decks with Dolby S and Laser Disc players with quiet digital power supplies are just two examples. This year saw several CD players vying for best-performing units ever made.

Parasound's new Halo CD 1 leads the CD player parade. Although the price is still to be determined (expect around \$4k), the unit features three separate power supplies and six-layer PCB boards for the ultimate in low-noise digital playback. This was closely followed by Germany's Lindemann Audiotechnik. Its model 825 plays CDs, CD-Rs and SACDs, but also comes with USB capabilities up to 192/24 via its own proprietary software driver. With no op-amps in the analog circuitry the \$12,500 825 is designed to be a sonic tour-de-force.

Stello's \$9k Eximus Legacy player represents its assault on the upper echelons of audio. Heralded as "the only CD player you'll ever need," it has multiple inputs for coaxial, TosLink, and USB, in addition to a full set of digital outputs, making it a complete digital switching center, as well as a CD transport and player.

Other CD players on display and worthy of note were from EAR (EAR Acute III, \$5,895 in black) and Einstein (The Source, \$18,400). Unfortunately both rooms were playing analog discs during the multiple times I walked by, so I didn't have an opportunity to hear either of these players in action.

Moving over to the reborn DAC market, Jeff Rowland Design Group has finally released its first DAC. The Aeris will be priced just under \$10k and features a dual-stage analog volume control, USB 96/24 capabilities, and both balanced and single-ended analog outputs. On the other end of the affordability spectrum Peachtree Audio rolled out its new \$999 iDac. Featuring a digital-connection iPod dock as well as inputs for 96/24 USB, 192/24 S/PDIF, and 96/24 TosLink, the iDac employs the ESS 9016 32-bit Sabre DAC and even has video outs. Attach it to any analog preamp and you'll be all ready for the 21st century.

To round out its cost-effective mini-chassis line of products Wadia debuted its 121 decoding computer. Sporting a complete set of digital inputs, with balanced and single-ended analog outputs, this unit will offer



Left:
Daniel Weiss
elbows the MAN202
net player into place.

Right: Parasound's
Halo CD 1 was one
of the new disc
spinners.

192/24 USB connectivity, asynchronous clocking, and even the option to use its internal word clock to sync other digital devices. While the price still to be determined, it will most likely be under \$1,500.

Bouncing back up the price scale, Burmester demonstrated its \$10,995 Classic Line 099 DAC-preamp. It's equipped with six digital inputs including 96/24-capable USB. It supports both fixed- and variable-level analog outputs and includes a reference-quality headphone output. Considering the price of many Burmester components the 099 represents quite a value.

Speaking of value, Accuphase premiered a new DAC-30 board that fits into the back of its E-308, C-245, or CX-260 components to increase their flexibility and value. The board includes both S/PDIF and USB inputs and keeps Accuphase owners at the crest of the current wave of digital technology. Price to be announced.

For audiophiles on a budget, Music Hall has updated their DAC 25.2 to a DAC 25.3. The latest version includes a completely new USB input that supports 96/24 and uses the latest Texas Instruments PCM1796 24-bit 192kHz A-to-D converter while still keeping the price under \$600.

Esoteric had so many new digital products that it held a press conference to highlight them all. First up was their \$22,500 flagship K-01 digital source device. It uses Esoteric's VRDS-NEO SACD/CD transport mechanism, and eight parallel/differential DAC circuits per channel. For those who want Esoteric's technology at a lower price, there's the new \$13,000 K-03 digital source device. It still has Esoteric's fine transport mechanism, but uses only four parallel differential circuits per channel. Finally Esoteric will be distributing M2Tech's Young 384/32-bit DAC. It features a proprietary high-speed asynchronous USB connection as well as S/PDIF, AES/EBU, and TosLink inputs and a neat front panel that displays the current bit-rate via large LEDs. It's slated to be around \$1800.

While I expected to see more music servers, the ones that were displayed were standouts. Auraliti demoed its \$799 PK100 file player, as well as a prototype of its next-generation server. This wired or wireless music server featured both great sound and clever intuitive ergonomics. Still a work-in-progress, Auraliti expects to have the new unit available by late spring.

A new German company, called Purist displayed its HDR 6D. Priced at \$25k, it supports every musical format known and serves as a player, ripper, and server, with complete library features including full metadata search functions.

Meridian has been busy incorporating Sooloos advanced server technology into several new products. The Media Core 200 and Media Core 600 perform both playback and storage functions and can be controlled by an iPhone/iPod

app. They can operate as stand-alone systems or with existing Meridian installations. The final price is still to be announced, but the 200 is expected to be around \$4,000.

Weiss also has thrown its hat into the server market with their MAN 202 archive network player. It is a CD-ripper, media manager, and storage system that accepts USB, FireWire, and NAS storage devices, with inputs and outputs for S/PDIF and AES/EBU and both balanced and single-ended analog outputs with a variable output option. The MAN 202's software management allows for complete metadata searches and cover art acquisition. It also supports wireless as well as Ethernet connectivity, and does this all in a classic Weiss half-width box. Price TBA.

Cables matter, if for no other reason than without them you'd be listening to dead air. In AudioQuest's suite I heard an A/B/C demo of three of its USB cables. Even through a modest system, the differences between the three were readily apparent. Surprise, surprise, I preferred the \$495 Diamond to the \$79 Cinnamon.

Wireworld had a passive display showing its newly patented USB cable geometry. It's the first, and with its new patent, only cable manufacturer with a layout that physically isolates the power conductors from the data conductors. Also the new geometry makes for a more robust cable that will retain its internal configuration regardless of how it is bent, pinched, or otherwise physically abused.

Software isn't something you usually need to travel across the country to see, but in the case of Sonic's new \$695 Vinyl software package, the live demo was a revelation. Designed to port any analog source into the digital domain, it includes some very effective and musically benign impulse filters for pops, clicks, and surface noise. Although designed for analog, it can also do wonders for digital files with static clicks, which is a common problem with board mixes.

KIRK MIDTSKOG: MID-HIGH-END LOUDSPEAKERS (\$5,000 TO \$10,000)

While my coverage price range was relatively narrow, I found a seemingly wide offering among the speakers on my beat. The trend appeared to be toward manufacturers providing more performance for the price, even though the range is not exactly 'starter-priced,' as such.

As a case in point, the new Element Series from Totem Acoustic offers three stereo speakers ranging from \$6,000 to \$13,000. The Element Series includes a stand-mount (Fire) two floorstanders (Earth and Metal), a center channel (Wood), and a subwoofer (Water) to round out the five elements in the Chinese elemental system.

Another gem was the small, stand-mounted Duke speaker (\$8,500) made by the Swedish speaker maker Marten. Mostly known for its larger and much more expensive models, I was struck by how involving and full the smallest Marten sounded. Powered by the latest version of the EAR V12 integrated amp, mated with an EAR Acute III CD player and cabled up with all Jorma



Left: Vincent Bruzzese with Totem's new Element Series.



Right: Fabulous new Aerial 7T.

wire (which is apparently also used as internal wire in some of the Marten models), the Duke sounded detailed, smooth, and revealing of deep textural and timbral nuances.

I chose to highlight a few rather than scatter a little over many, but I would be remiss if I did not also mention the following speakers: Magnepan 3.7 (\$5,500), Focal 1028 BE (\$8,500), Sonus Faber Liuto (\$6,000), Dynaudio Confidence C1 (\$7,500) and Paradigm S8 (\$6,000) —all more than just solid contenders. My apologies to those I left out. Show demo conditions are nearly always significantly compromised, often characterized by a prominent glare or a midbass bloat (sometimes both). On the whole, though, the presence of many good choices was encouraging. A speaker budget of \$5k to \$10k should allow you to put together a very satisfying music system.

ROBERT HARLEY: SHOW HIGHLIGHTS Instead

of taking a category assignment at this CES, I was free to cover the entire show and report on the highlights. Here are some products that particularly caught my attention.

At last year's CES Nagra, the legendary Swiss firm that is celebrating its 60th year in 2011, showed a prototype of a 300B-based amplifier to gauge interest. Apparently interest was high because Nagra showed up at this CES with two versions of the amplifier, the 300i integrated and the 300p power amp. Both units use two 300Bs per side to deliver ►



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► 20Wpc. The design approach was to surround the venerable 300B tube with the most modern technology and circuits including gold-plated circuit boards built to military specs, an innovative internal grounding scheme, and custom-wound transformers of Nagra's own design. In choosing to make a modern 300B-based amplifier, Nagra cites the 300B's virtues, such as greater linearity than any transistor and a benign distortion spectrum. The execution is classic Nagra; compact chassis, jewel-like look and operation, and no unnecessary frills. Prices: \$21,500 for the 300i and \$16,900 for the 300p. Both units are now shipping.



Above:
Constellation
Audio electronics
raise the bar high.



Below: Nagra's 300B
integrated amplifier
looks even better
in reality.

Krell put on quite a demonstration in a large penthouse suite at T.H.E. Show of its latest versions of the Evolution amplifiers. These new amps benefit from a redesigned power supply that, in addition to reportedly delivering better sound, reduces the standby power consumption from 240W to 2W.

Classé Audio's innovative new preamplifier, the CP-800, is a forward-looking unit that redefines the feature set in the preamplifier category. First, the CP-800 offers a built-in DAC with an asynchronous USB input along with full compatibility with the iPod, iPhone, and iPad. Secondly, the unit has a subwoofer output jack, bass management, and parametric equalization for those systems employing a subwoofer (or subwoofers). Two configurable AUX channels can drive a second-room, be used for bi-amping, or feed additional subwoofers. The preamplifier is controlled by a touchscreen and graphic user interface. The CP-800 was designed by Alan Clark, who has a long resume of creating great products, including the Linn CD12. Price: \$6,000. Classé also showed the

CA-2300 a 300W stereo power amp for \$7,000 that features the company's 'ICTunnel' (Intelligent Cooling Tunnel) active-cooling system that brings the output transistors to optimum temperature within 15 minutes and then holds that temperature regardless of the load on the amplifier. The CA-2300 also consumes half a watt in standby mode.

Meridian Audio, who pioneered active DSP loudspeakers in 1991, introduced its smallest and most affordable DSP speaker yet, the DSP3200. This tiny stand-mount incorporates a DSP crossover, D/A converters, and two power amplifiers. The two-way is unusual in that what appears to be the tweeter is actually a nearly-full-range driver that reproduces frequencies from 250Hz to 20kHz. The larger driver operates below 250Hz. This arrangement shifts the crossover away from the midrange. Price: \$6,000 per pair. The companion piece to the DSP3200 is the Audio Core 200, a complete control center that incorporates some Meridian technologies such as an apodising filter, upsampling, and a stereo-width control. With the addition of a source component, the Audio Core 200 and DSP3200 form a complete system. A Meridian SpeakerLink input allows the Audio Core 200 to connect to a Sooloos music server or Meridian i80 iPod dock. A USB input is provided for computer connection.

Monitor Audio introduced an entirely new range of loudspeakers to migrate the company's more advanced technologies into popularly priced models. Of particular interest was the GoldGX 300, a \$5,500-per-pair floorstander using dual 165mm woofers, a 100mm midrange, and a ribbon tweeter. The GoldGX300 is easy to drive, with a sensitivity of 90dB and an impedance of 8 ohms. The woofers and midrange drivers are made from an alloy of aluminum and magnesium, and the tweeter is a new design that extends the response to 60kHz.

ALAN TAFFEL: LOUDSPEAKERS FROM (\$10,000 TO \$25,000) Didn't

one-way speakers die with the Bose 901? Perhaps, but at CES 2011 I witnessed their resurrection. The best-sounding one-ways I heard came from Audience. In my category, the company introduced the \$12,300 4+4, so dubbed because of its four 75mm high-excursion aluminum-magnesium drivers front and back. Bass rolled off fast below 60Hz, but otherwise these speakers exhibited incredible soundstaging along with excellent mids and dynamics.

Another surprise—and a most welcome one—was this year's bumper crop of ribbon-tweetered models. The most successful example I heard was the new \$24,000 ProAc K6. Its ribbon tweeter and 50mm dome midrange are identical to those on ProAc's flagship models. But whereas the top dogs feature carbon-fibre woofers, the K6, in a good example of the multiple small woofer movement, uses dual 165mm resin-injected Kevlar drivers. Aside from the K6's beautiful finish, a nice aesthetic touch is the invisible port, which fires downward into the plinth of the base.

Another ribbon—oops, planar-magnetic—speaker was the Raicho S2 (\$11,000, available in May). The 10-year old Danish firm, which builds its own drivers, says it chose a planar-magnetic tweeter over the close-kin pure ribbon because it felt the former yielded a superior blend with a dynamic driver. ►

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As for the rise of horn-loading, a good example was the DeVore Fidelity 076 (\$12,000), a member of the Orangutan Series. Here is a speaker that eschews the common gospel of narrow baffles. At 96dB sensitivity, the 076 is intended for use with SET tube electronics. The two-way design includes a 250mm mid/woof and a 25mm silk-dome, horn-loaded tweeter.

A few speakers seemed to go out of their way to buck these trends.

My final example, incorporating absolutely no aluminum, ribbons, or horn-loading whatsoever, was the \$27,000 SS-AR1 from Sony. Though eschewing aluminum, the front panel is nonetheless thick and dense, having been constructed from layers of solid maple. The designers are so fastidious they grow their own trees from which they source this wood. The enclosure is then shaped by hand and finished to a depth and brilliance normally found only in the finest lacquerware.

Driven by Pass and EMM Labs electronics in Ray Kimber's IsoMike room, the AR-1 sounded both ravishing and dynamic.



Left: The SS-AR1 relies on Sony-grown trees for their density.

Right: Look Ma, no tweeter! The Earo Eight with its single driver.

Well-known in the UK, Croft has established a fine reputation for minimalist and cost-effective designs. There's the RIAA Phono (\$995), the Micro 25 preamp (\$1,395), and the Series 7 power amp (\$1,395).

Versions of the preamp and amp with a regulated power supply are also available at \$2,595.

The search for musical truth often comes in conflict with engineering logic. I'm pleased to

announce that VTL has made

the right decisions when it came to its revision of the MB-185 Signature monoblock amplifier. The new Series III (\$14,500/pair) duplicates the MB-450's balanced circuitry but deploys EL34 power pentodes. A total of eight EL34s per amp in parallel push-pull produce 200 watts in pentode mode and 140 watts in triode mode. There's a variable damping-factor control that allows the user to adjust the amp's output source impedance

by setting the amount of negative

feedback to one of four levels. The

rest of the system consisted of

the Avalon Indra, the VTL TL5.5

Series II Signature preamp

with phonostage (\$8000), dCS

digital front end, Spiral Groove

turntable, Centroid arm and Lyra

Kleos cartridge.

Conrad-johnson announced an update to its popular LP66S tube amp (\$4500). The Series 2 version will incorporate a new voltage amplifier stage modeled after the one in its flagship ART amp. New for 2011 is the ET5 enhanced triode preamp (\$9,500), which is said to bear a close relationship to the GAT

DICK OLSHER: VALVE ELECTRONICS

A notable trend this year, was the increased spotlight on sub-\$6k price points. My guesstimate is that about 80% of high-end component sales fit in this category. Thus, the expansion of tube audio's foundation via an increase in affordable gear is good news for most of us. Of course, the ultra-high-end is still alive and well, perhaps a reflection of the rich-get-richer adage.

PrimaLuna's Prologue Premium line sits between its Prologue and Dialogue lines, and it demonstrated a system that included the Premium monoblocks (\$4399/pair), Premium preamp (\$2199), and the Premium CD player (price is yet to be finalized). Matching speakers were the Sonus faber Elipsa, while power, interconnect, and speaker cables were by DH Labs. The monoblocks feature an ultra-linear output stage and ship with EL34s, though KT88 power tubes may also be used. Additional features include an auto-bias circuit, power and output transformer protection circuits, and a B+ relay that replaces the plate fuse for protection against tube failure.

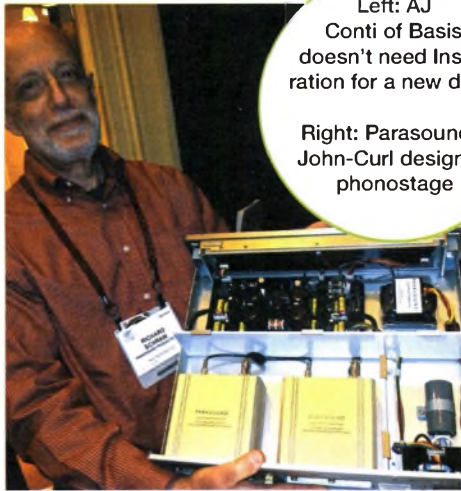
Left: Luke Manley of VTL with 200w of EL34 mono power.

Right: EAR supremo Tim de Paravicini puts pedal to V12 metal.





Left: AJ Conti of Basis doesn't need Inspiration for a new deck.



Right: Parasound's John-Curl designed phonostage

preamp. While the GAT features a dual-mono layout in a single chassis, the ET5 is a stereo design. A total of 14 2µF CJD Teflon capacitors are used throughout the audio circuit and for the plate voltage power supply filter and storage caps.

EAR Yoshino's Tim de Paravicini obviously likes the medium-power EL84 pentode, but doesn't think that Leak got it completely right with its classic stereo TL20 design. The V12 (\$9,595), a 50Wpc stereo integrated amp, is his latest magnum opus and showcases the EL84 in a parallel push-pull design. There are six EL84s per channel, used in Tim's balanced bridge mode, along with a wide-bandwidth output transformer and no overall feedback. The amp is said to be compatible with loads in the range of 4 to 16 ohms.

LAMM Industries introduced the ML2.2 single-ended monoblock power amp (\$37,190/pair), which replaces the ML2.1. There's a new output transformer and beefed up power supply. The 6C33C-B power triode is used in both the output stage and as a voltage regulator in the power supply. Power output is rated at 18 watts into 4, 8, and 16 ohms. The loudspeaker load was the mighty Verity Audio Lohengrin II (\$95,995/pair).

Engström & Engström new LARS Type 2 (\$60,000/pair), is rated at either 20 or 36 watts, depending on whether one opts for a standard 300B or a 300B XLS type. Its strength are clearly in the realm of tonal color fidelity and textural smoothness.

PAUL SEYDOR: ANALOG

Analog was alive and thriving this year at the Venetian in Las Vegas, suggesting the so-called vinyl renaissance shows no signs of slackening. While it would be misleading to say that it dominated digital, there was easily peaceable coexistence between the two.

Judging from the prices, analog is a niche market for the wealthy. To be sure, there were the usual exceptions, but even they introduced more up-market products. So Pro-Ject's Heinz Lichtenegger, celebrating his company's twentieth anniversary, did so with an \$8,000 deck rumored to be called the HL Signature. It'll be interesting to see if audiophiles 'allows' companies known for high-value and low-to-reasonable pricing to make that leap.

One manufacturer that has managed to maintain credibility more successfully than most over a wide price-range is Clearaudio. This year was no exception, introducing several "turntable packages" (meaning arm included) priced from \$1,400 to \$9,450, including the Performance DC turntable package with Verify Carbon Fiber arm at \$4,200.

But these prices pale beside much of what I saw, both as regards cost and size. Thus, A.J. Conti of Basis was proudly displaying the new stand (priced not yet determined) for his Inspiration turntable with Vector IV arm (\$47k). Always a fount of knowledge, Conti explained how he grinds his belts to thickness variations of less than +/-1/100,000 of inch (2.54 microns), which he claims is

key to his 'tables' speed constancy.

SME is another manufacturer noted for ultra-precision engineering; on display was the new SME 20/3 turntable with SME IV arm (\$18k for the ensemble), an upgrade from the original 20/2 and making very nice sounds with the latest Celebration pickup through The Sonus faber flagship.

Johnnie Bergmann had on display his turntable statement, the Sleiper (\$54k), with vacuum hold-down, and also the Magne, which looks as if it has inherited a good deal of the technology as well as the performance of the Sindre for an equally good deal less money (\$12k rather than \$21k).

There were several new phonostages this year. One that stood out is Clearaudio's Statement, a phono/line preamp, breathtakingly priced at \$35k, even allowing for its outboard power supply. Discophiles who are also fans of John Curl's electronics (and who shouldn't be?) will be delighted to know that he has designed a new phonostage for Parasound. Priced at \$2,300, it is claimed to have exceptionally low noise and distortion, and will accept a fully balanced input. And speaking of electronics, my favorite new product was McIntosh's full-function C50 preamplifier, which includes a very sophisticated on-board phonostage for moving magnets and moving coils, with front-panel switching of loading options. McIntosh is not the first manufacturer recently to feature a phonostage in a full-function preamplifier, but it is unquestionably the one with the highest profile. What better indication that vinyl is indisputably here to stay than the reintroduction of phonostages into preamplifiers by major manufacturers?

ALAN SIRCOM: UPPER-END ELECTRONICS

The high-end solid-state stereo amplifier world is an indicator of the entire two-channel audio market. Sources go in and out of fashion. Loudspeakers can end up in home-theatre systems as well as stereo setups, but the affairs of two-channel amps define the health of stereo sound. And the inverse is also true. ▶

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Left: Dan D'Agostino's Momentum amp. Cap'n Nemolicious!



Right: Simaudio Moon 880M mono power amps. 800W of class.

Arguably the most significant two-channel amp launch at the show was the new Momentum from Dan D'Agostino, in fine finished form. Priced at \$42,000 per pair, the elegant and distinctive mono power amplifier delivers 300W, yet weighs just 40kg. The amplifier uses solid copper heatsinks at either side of a Jules Verne-esque case complete with large power meters.

Boulder's new monster 3000 power amps came about as a request from the company's Asian distributors. "Make us something bigger," they cried. And Boulder stepped up to the plate; a 180kg per side, 1.5kW (doubling all the way down) \$180,000 plate. The asymmetric chassis means four different heatsink designs for each pair of amps, the rear panels are "handed" and inside each amp are more toroidal transformers than you'd find in most complete systems.

Pass Labs is also known for its big amps, but next to the Boulder and Constellation, the two new UA-class prototypes demonstrated at the show were almost dwarfed by comparison. It's still early days in the development of these two new four box, single-ended Class A designs, and the name is still a work in progress. The two-chassis mono amp—which uniquely spreads half the amplifier circuit across the two chassis, rather than a discrete amp/power supply layout—will be available in either 200W or 300W mono designs and are expected to cost \$45,000 and \$70,000 per pair, respectively, when they are released mid-year.

Simaudio was showing off its new flagship mono amplifier, the \$38,000 per pair Moon 880M, together with the matching two-box \$25,000 850P line preamplifier. These were being fed by a 750D DAC with built-in CD transport, and both new amplifier products were showcasing the down-to-earth innovation that has become synonymous with the Canadian company. The 880M mono amps deliver a healthy 800W, the first 10 of which are in Class A, and uses Moon's own output devices, while the 850P features Moon's new M-Octave damping system that is said to make the preamp one of the quietest ever made.

Jeff Rowland's new \$12,800 Corus

preamplifier and \$13,500 625 power amplifier looked great and will be the subject of a review soon. The 300W 625 stereo power amp, on the other hand, marks a return to traditional, discrete transistor, zero-feedback, Class AB power amplifier design, after the brand spent many years in the Class D realm. The amplifier case is hewn from a solid billet of aluminum.

It wasn't all North American amplifiers, though. The new \$15,000 Accuphase E-460 replaces (surprise, surprise) the E-450. The 180Wpc MOSFET Class AB amplifier features a new version of the precise, variable-resistor-free AAVA integrated amplifier/volume control stage. The amplifier was launched mid-year, but this was the first time the amp was seen at a show.

Finally, perhaps the most unexpected amplifier of the show was the new offering from Swedish loudspeaker manufacturer Marten. The new \$45,000 M-Amp mono is an inverting, globally self-oscillating, Class D design delivering 550 watts into eight ohms. It features the company's unique Adaptive Modulation Servo drive. Marten also announced its new M-Furniture range (which was supporting an EMM Labs disc-spinner and an EAR324 preamp) and playing through the new \$93,000 Marten Coltrane 2 loudspeakers. The system looked and sounded wonderful, and both amps and speakers are worth checking out.

JONATHAN VALIN: LOUDSPEAKERS \$25K AND ABOVE

Save for Saturday afternoon, I thought the high-end exhibits at CES were poorly attended this year, which was a shame because the sound was for the most part very good and often excellent.

One of the key rooms in recent shows has been Magico. This year is no exception; the aluminum-bodied, three-and-a-half-way, \$34k Q3, was being debuted, driven by Soudation electronics. Though there is definitely a family resemblance between the Q3's sound and that of the (IMO) incomparable Q5, this is an altogether warmer, more forgiving speaker, whose romantic character may appeal to many audiophiles more than the austere (and higher-fidelity) presentation of the Q5 does. Magico also had on passive display its new two-way stand-mount Q1, but price and availability have yet to be announced.

One of YG Acoustics' new speakers, the aluminum-coned \$74k Anat Compact Reference III, was being shown in the Synergistic Research room with Technical Brain electronics. The Anats were fast on transients and quite detailed, and the entire system was neutral and natural, sounding very lifelike.

Hansen Audio showed its new \$98k King E three-ways with Tenor electronics. As always with Hansen speakers, this was a most cheerful cozy sound. Indeed, with Tenor amplification, these speakers were the veritable Kings of cozy. The Hansens' bass was, as always, very very good, but definition was very good, too (extension, power, and definition do not always come together this well in one package).

Danish speaker-maker Peak Consult showed its \$89k three-way, four-driver El Diablo V, replete with Audiotechnology mids and woofs and a ►

New – an 'invisible' loudspeaker and a DAC from Vertex AQ

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SHOW

We're so impressed with this new loudspeaker that we're importing it ourselves. The **Vivace** has some of the best drive units in the world, a crossover screened with material from the Stealth aircraft programme and a cabinet of synthetic wood so dense that it is used as a neutron shield in nuclear research.

We will debut the Vivace at the Heathrow show at the end of March together with the new Aletheia DAC from Vertex AQ and new versions of VTL valve amplifiers.

A key design feature of this 'disappearing' loudspeaker is that it produces a hall-filling scale in a living room, with lifelike instruments and voices with correct tonal colours, yet from a slim-fronted cabinet without 'beaming' the sound field at the listener.

Rainer Weber of Kaiser Acoustics in Bavaria achieves this feat by blending output with the room's ambient sound and supplementing the front mid-woofer and ribbon tweeter with a second bass unit and a passive radiator on the back.

The superb performance stems from the best ScanSpeak drive units, the Illuminators, the Mundorf Air Motion Transformer tweeter that can be swivelled for best imaging

and the Tankwood cabinet material, formed when beechwood is compressed under high temperature and pressure to create new chemical bonds. The material has excellent damping properties but also is perfect for musicality, natural tonal richness and authentic timbre.

EMI and RFI techniques and acoustic energy absorption from Vertex AQ are applied to the crossover to open the sound still further.

Prices range from £23,000 up to around £30,000 per pair with a wide choice of wood veneers or paint colours.

Another product of original thinking, the Aletheia dac-1 from **Vertex AQ** is highly unusual in employing no oversampling, noise-shaping or filtering. Their measurements, using defence techniques in one of the MoD's research agencies, show that signal processing can cause filter ringing and phase shifts, breaking down the structure of the music.

A survival trait of human hearing is that the timing of sound in music is crucial for our enjoyment. Both signal processing and the acoustic energy (or vibration) present in all systems can seriously damage timing. Result? The replay process no longer 'tracks' the music, especially in complex, dense passages.

Vertex have distilled their Radio Frequency Interference, Electromagnetic Interference and acoustic energy absorption expertise into the dac1, right down to treating individual components on the circuit boards.

With the dac-1 intermodulation drops, complex music is untangled, the midband sound of voices and instruments is enriched and the soundstage stays clear of the speakers.

Our September demonstration with **VTL's** reliable valve amplifiers earned many 'best at the show' comments and the sound with these components should be awesome again. The MB-185 monoblocks have been significantly upgraded to Series III, now fully-balanced with circuits based on the more powerful MB-450 monoblocks and using the sweet-sounding EL34 valves. We shall also be using the MB-450 amplifiers and the top-end TL-7.5 preamplifier.

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Loudspeakers: Audio Physic, Ethos, Focal, Gamut, Kaiser, NEAT, Totem. Cables: Chord Co., DNM, Kubala Sosna, Nordost, Siltech, Tellurium, Vertex AQ.
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THE 2011 CONSUMER ELECTRONICS SHOW



Above:
Scaena's 3.4
ribbon/cone line ar-
ray loudspeaker. Cor!

Below: The Sonus
Faber loudspeaker.
It's not home, but
it's much!



Scanspeak tweeter housed in a multifaceted solid-wood and HDF box that combines a transmission-line on its upper woofer with a port on its lower one.

Avantgarde's Duo Omega three-ways with spherical horn midrange and tweeter coupled with a dynamic woofer sounded very coherent but a bit thin in the bass. However,

there was a definite horn coloration. Not my cup of, uh, hands.

The long-awaited, long-delayed, digitally-crossed-over-and-corrected \$28.5k Electrocompaniet Nordic Tone Model One was again shown with Electrocompaniet electronics. Revised with Scanspeak sliced-paper drivers (replacing the original SEAS drivers) and a brand-new crossover, it is still dark in balance, but capable of reproducing details in very complex, very dynamic cuts that very few other speakers can resolve. This remains a potentially remarkable transducer.

The \$90k Marten Coltrane II three-way floorstanders with ceramic mid and woofer and diamond tweeter were in several rooms, most notably with Marten's own amplification, which produced a very lively sound with less chalkiness than I'm used to from ceramic-driver speakers. They did an excellent job on big dynamic swings, without any of the compression that some ceramic-driver speakers tend to show at loud levels.

Ayon was showing its electronics with the \$35k, three-way, five-driver Lumenwhite Artisan—equipped with a ring-radiator tweet, ceramic mid, and three 180mm ceramic woofers. The speakers were outstanding, though I thought I detected a touch of hollowness in the sound. This may have been caused by the speakers' proximity to an even larger pair of speakers sitting beside them, although it was impossible to tell what was doing what to what because there was so much noise in the room from people talking. Crr!

Burmester was showing its \$55k B80 three-way with MTM mids and tweet and side-firing woofers. A bit to my surprise given past performances, this entirely Burmester system produced an outstandingly neutral, natural, low-distortion sound.

They used to say that McIntosh was the "doctor's amplifier," because of its upscale looks and appeal. Well, if McIntosh is the doctor's amp, then its \$37k XRT1K line-array floorstander fitted out with scores of identical little drivers is the "doctor's office loudspeaker." This is a great speaker for casual or background listening. It does absolutely nothing wrong and nothing outstandingly right. It's just fun to hear. Pleasant, musical, and relaxing.

T+A showed its \$45k Solitaire, which combines an electrostatic tweeter with six cone midranges in a line array and two side-mounted 250mm woofers in a sealed enclosure. Believe it or not, the Solitaire produced the deepest bass I heard at the show. Unfortunately, that sensational bass did not mate up seamlessly with the Solitaire's mids and treble. (It's hard to mate 'stats with anything other than more 'stats.) This slight bass discontinuity might have been exacerbated by room or placement; whatever the reason it did darken the soundfield. This is an interesting and ambitious speaker, which, though not


wholly successful, did some things better than any other at the show.

We come now to my CES 2011 Best of Show winner—the \$66k Scaena 3.4 ribbon/cone line-array loudspeaker with outboard woofers (newly redesigned, BTW). I've had a love/hate relationship with Scaena speakers since they were introduced several years ago. I heard them sound nearly magical a year ago, but I've also heard them sound awful—phasey, incoherent, with bass that didn't come close to mating up with the midrange and treble. On top of this, I've had reservations (and still do) about the Scaena idea of line arrays mated to tar-barrel-sized subwoofers.

At this year's show, I sat in drop-jawed wonder listening to Captain Luke singing "Rainy Night in Georgia" and Guitar Gabriel singing "Key to the Highway." I've heard these cuts sound real before—that they are capable of sounding unusually realistic is why I bring them to trade shows. But I don't think I've ever heard these two old men sound more realistic than this. The speakers just weren't there. Neither, for that matter, were the electronics. All that was being transmitted were the voices and the instruments, as if they were materializing from the very air of the room. There was no sense of enclosure, no sense of drivers and crossovers, no sense of electronic mediation, no sense of window or aperture. We all know "real" when we hear it; we don't even have to think about it. This was that real. Only, because it was coming from a dCS CD player, a Conrad-Johnson amplifier and preamplifier, and four woofers about fifteen feet away from two line-array columns of ribbons and cones that were about six feet away from me—all of which were obviously "there," too—I had to think about it. The music didn't seem to be "coming from" anything. And that was—and remains—marvelous and baffling.

CONCLUSION

Elsewhere in CES (dubbed 'the zoo'), you couldn't move for iPad clones. In the Venetian Tower (where the audio community congregates), you couldn't move for iPads. Virtually every demonstration ultimately ended with "...controlled from an iPad". But this round-up is only scratching the surface of the CES; many, many brands were plying their wares, including many well-known British names, but it's always fun to focus on the exotic! +



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Brian Eno

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A tall, slender floor-standing speaker with a dark wood-grain finish. The front baffle features three drivers: a small tweeter at the top, a midrange driver in the middle, and a larger woofer at the bottom. The speaker is illuminated from the side, creating a strong contrast against the dark background. A small blue square is visible in the top left corner.

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Avalon Transcendent

by Alan Sircom

The Transcendent sits in a relatively new price point for the Colorado based company. At £15,000, it's more than the Ascendant or the Aspect but not as much as the Indra. It has the same back-swept and faceted look common to most Avalon designs, but owes a lot to the recent Time loudspeaker in terms of performance. In other words, it sounds remarkable.

Loudspeaker builders are the laziest product designers on the planet. What other branch of consumer electronics would you find a range of oblong veneered boxes that followed in the footsteps of other oblong veneered boxes dating back half a century or more? Set against this going nowhere industrial design, the back-swept, angular Avalon design is radical. Okay, it was radical a few years ago, but it still looks fresh and is designed for a specific reason... to make the loudspeaker work better. Those faceted sides are designed to minimise internal standing waves while the loudspeaker is swept backwards to accommodate time loudspeaker time alignment. It also makes the loudspeaker surprisingly easy to install, as the centre of gravity allows those armour-piercing spike-cones to be installed without tears.

Avalon has a reputation to observe about its fit and finish. It has book-matched veneers and a grade of finish that is the envy of many cabinet-makers and the Transcendent is no exception. The sad fact is that despite a pair of loudspeakers often being one of the largest pieces of wood in many listening rooms, most loudspeakers fail to set themselves out as furniture makers, preferring instead to choose a relatively cheap veneer and a mediocre finish, sourced in a distant factory. With the options of curly maple, quilted cherry and figured walnut, all produced under Avalon's wing, the level of finish is every bit as anally retentive as the loudspeaker design, which means it's finished to the sort of levels furniture makers would be happy with. This is understandable when you think of that faceted cabinet; a lesser finish would quickly become a loudspeaker

of peeling edges; here, just so long as you don't use the speaker as a column for a vase or light, or your kids or your animals don't include the Transcendent in their kung fu shenanigans, these speakers have timeless appeal and the cabinet work will last the distance.

This is a two-way, three-driver design, with a one-inch ceramic inverted dome tweeter and a pair of seven-inch Nomex/Kevlar bass units, the two bass drivers working together, not as a bass unit and an ABR. All three are made to Avalon's tight specification, and like all Avalons, the speaker is vented into the floor. That's deliberately 'vent' not 'port'; while the vent allows the lower bass cabinet to 'breathe' when dealing with high-excursion bass notes, it is not tuned to a specific frequency, is not filling in the gaps in the bass response of the cabinet or drive units and – as a consequence – doesn't create a 'chuff' at any given frequency.

If there's a simple tag-line for the Transcendent, it would be "the Avalon loudspeaker for the rest of us". Avalons require precise set-up and a long run-in (although some of this is rooted in audio mythology), but it seems the Transcendent is the exception; it still benefits from some careful installation and run-in, but will happily work in smaller rooms with a foot or less between it and the rear wall and sounds good as soon as it leaves the packing crate.

"If there's a simple tag-line for the Transcendent, it would be "the Avalon loudspeaker for the rest of us".

It's also more partner tolerant than traditional Avalons. The 88dB efficiency and benign impedance notwithstanding, this is a loudspeaker that doesn't make heavyweight demands on the equipment it is partnered with. Like all good loudspeakers, the better the parts further up the chain, the better the overall sound, but you could potentially use the Transcendent with five grand's worth of electronics for the ultimate 'mullet' system without tears. Yes, you would quickly want to upgrade to something better in the process, but the Transcendent's un-prissy nature means you don't need to make the speaker the cheapest part of the system to get top-notch performance.

To this end, it's the Avalon that even the most tubular will admit that it sings with solid-state equipment. Which is perhaps why it has been cropping up in shows on the end of fine-sounding solid-state electronics. Such as Karan Acoustics in the UK and Edge in the US. And in demonstration, it's been partnered with the likes of Ayre and Jeff Rowland. What all these amplifiers have in common is very clean and open midranges, and this is no coincidence; the Avalon Transcendent is marked out by its open midrange.

I wouldn't take the action at shows as too much of an indicator of ultimate performance, because the results can vary both from room to room and the last room you visited alters your perception of the sound of the next room. And it's here where I lay perhaps my biggest criticism of the Transcendent, right at the feet of the company that makes it. In the US, Avalon is also the distributor of Acoustica Applicata's DaaD room acoustic treatments and Prolfemo and Phemo Helmholtz resonators. Nothing whatsoever wrong with this, but in this

► year's CES, the Avalon room was so dominated by acoustic treatment that people walked out of the room unsure whether the sound was down to the room, the treatment or the speakers. Acoustic treatments are vital, but this profusion of DaaD treatments clouded the issue.

If my biggest criticism is how they are demonstrated in America, my second biggest criticism is actually a positive element. They react precisely and accurately to the sound of the system further up the chain. So much so, the Transcendent could be used to challenge the 'all competent amps sound the same' argument. They do not need exotic or necessarily expensive equipment (above a certain point), but if you use a system that is bright or hard, the speakers will sound bright and hard, if you use a system that is gently laid-back, it will sound gently laid-back. It doesn't fail to impose its own character on the system, but it's far more likely to show up characterful electronics elsewhere in the chain. This means careful and intelligent system building is mandatory; not simply throwing money at the solution, but finding a sound you like and honing it.

That incredibly lucid midband comes across throughout, though. It makes The XX sound a lot deeper than they have any right to be. The female lead singer's voice normally sounds 'foreign' (as if she's doing a bad Nico impression), but here you can hear it's actually a combination of accent and adenoids. This has a by-product of being able to hear every word they utter, even making sense of the relatively weak diction on offer. So 'wawnaah thninn aah feazyah' (as you hear on most speakers) turns into 'We watch things on VCRs', and most importantly, there's a plural on the end of the acronym that you don't get to hear on anything apart from very occasionally and on the sort of loudspeakers that makes the Transcendent appear small and cheap. I moved over to 'The Fall of Troy' by Tom Waits and once again, the speaker is like a decoder ring for 'difficult' voices. Everything makes sense here, even words I've struggled to make sense of despite owning and playing the album regularly for the last decade and a half.



“Careful and intelligent system building is mandatory; not simply throwing money at the solution.”

Move over to someone with good diction – Neil Diamond's *12 Songs* – and you don't need the Avalon's Rosetta Stone impression. So, instead, you get some significant and profound insights into the recording and mix. You know from even a mediocre loudspeaker system that there are two acoustic guitars accompanying Neil Diamond's voice on 'Oh Mary', and you can usually tell that one's a steel string and one's nylon, but the fact that

one sounds softer and warmer than the other, but what you can tell even clearer through the Transcendent is that he's playing the steel string and it's a big 'whispering giant' Gibson jumbo, while the nylon sounds more like a traditional Spanish than something like a Chet Atkins. The Avalon's precise enough here to determine that both have the same 'fist', in that I'd wager

it's Diamond playing both pieces, instead of being accompanied by Tom Petty or Mike Campbell (of the Heartbreakers fame).

If this sounds like studio-like analysis, you are both right and wrong. This is an open window into the control room, yes, but more importantly it's endlessly satisfying with it. It's like a musician's musician's speaker; capable of deep levels of insight into what's going on in a recording (if the second violin is a couple of cents of a semitone out of tune, not only will you spot it, but you'll know where in the ►

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► mix the offender is situated) but also musically entertaining enough to make you love your discs all the more. This is yet another one of those loudspeakers that if I could distribute through much of what's left of the big studio system, planting a pair of these in the office of every head of A&R, every top producer and CEO of a big label, the days of bad recordings would come to an abrupt end. Because they don't blur or soften the midrange, extend well into the treble and give good, deep bass, they are merciless on modern clipped and compressed recordings and the Loudness War would be over by Christmas.

There's a last part to this of course; the oft-touted and thoroughly incorrect statement that Avalon doesn't make 'rock' loudspeakers. While these loudspeakers do sensationally well with orchestral music (their dynamic range serves up those tympani with shock and awe on Pickard's 'Flight of Icarus'), they also start and stop with the sort of speed that's needed to play bangin' dance music. And they can go loud enough to receive a visit from a guy in a uniform brandishing a sound pressure meter while doing so. I managed to make Leftfield sound taut, deep, tuneful and impressive, something beyond a non-rock loudspeaker. What surprised me with this album was just how good it sounded when the sound was turned down to a whisper; the full gut-mangling bass and the beat stayed intact and the tonal balance didn't change. In other words, it did it all well.

Of course a two-way floorstander has its limits, especially when compared to the bigger speakers. Here, the limitations are down to frequency extremes and when you decide on a bit of headbanging. The speaker goes deep and low, but compared to speakers that might weigh twice as much, stand a foot taller and include an additional brace of bass units, the Transcendent gives up those last few organ pedal notes and won't double up as a FA system. In addition, those who think high-end loudspeakers are all about glitz and huge sound might want to look elsewhere; no Attack of the 50' Woman Singer, no mile wide pianos or 3,000-piece orchestras here, just good, honest right-sized audio. And all the better for not falling into the big sound trap.

It's an obvious comparison to draw and end up calling the Transcendent something like the 'tiny Time' in the process. It does so much of what the Time loudspeakers do in terms of naturalness, precision and dynamic range, the comparison cries out to be made. But it's a faux comparison, because you almost invariably end up damning one or other speaker with faint praise. The two



exist side by side and demand different things from listener, system and room. The Time requires you to be more rigid in installation, needs a larger room and has a tighter set of demands upon the system, but in return gives you the kind of directness of sound that makes those who can give it all reach for the credit card. The Transcendent swims in the same seas as the Time, but doesn't swim as far or as fast and consequently there's no need to be afraid of the undertow. Your room isn't the right size or shape for the Time, go for the Transcendent; the amplifier isn't powerful enough for the Time... ditto. Can't be bothered with precise adjustments to the installation, you know what to do. Ultimately, it

comes down to you... if you haven't got the time (or the energy, or the room), go for the Transcendent. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Driver Complement: (1) 25.4mm Concave Ceramic Neodymium Tweeter

178mm Nomex/Kevlar Composite Cone Woofers

Sensitivity: 88 dB @ rated impedance

Impedance: 4 ohms nominal

Frequency Response: 26Hz to 25KHz

Recommended Power: 50 to 500 Watts

Wiring Method: 2 Position Binding Post

Dimensions (WxDxH): 25x37x105cm

Weight: 44 Kg per loudspeaker

Standard wood finishes: curly maple, quilted cherry and figured walnut.

Price: £15,000 per pair

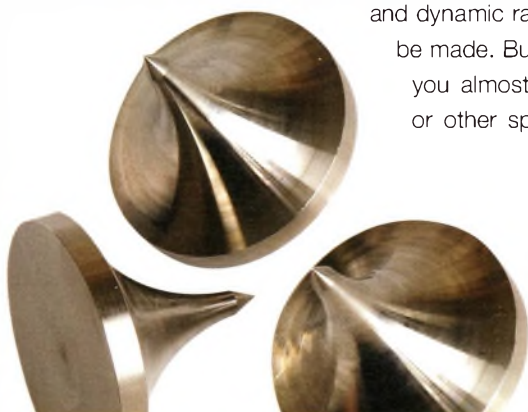
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

dCS Debussy DAC

by Alan Taffel

In 2003, Bentley Motors shocked the automotive world by introducing the Continental GT. Until then, acquiring one of Bentley's bespoke motorcars would set the purchaser back several hundred thousand dollars. But the Continental GT cut in half the price of entry into those rarified ranks. Initial skepticism was short-lived; one look at the car's sumptuous interior and prospective buyers knew they were in the presence of a true Bentley. The GT became an instant success, neatly illustrating that value has appeal even at extravagant price points.

Now comes the Debussy DAC from dCS, the digital specialist whose products are every bit as top-shelf—and pricey—as those of its stable-mates. Prior to the Debussy's arrival, owning an 'entry-level' dCS DAC was an £10,000 to £13,500 proposition. The new model, which carries an £7,500 price tag, aims to be dCS' Continental GT.

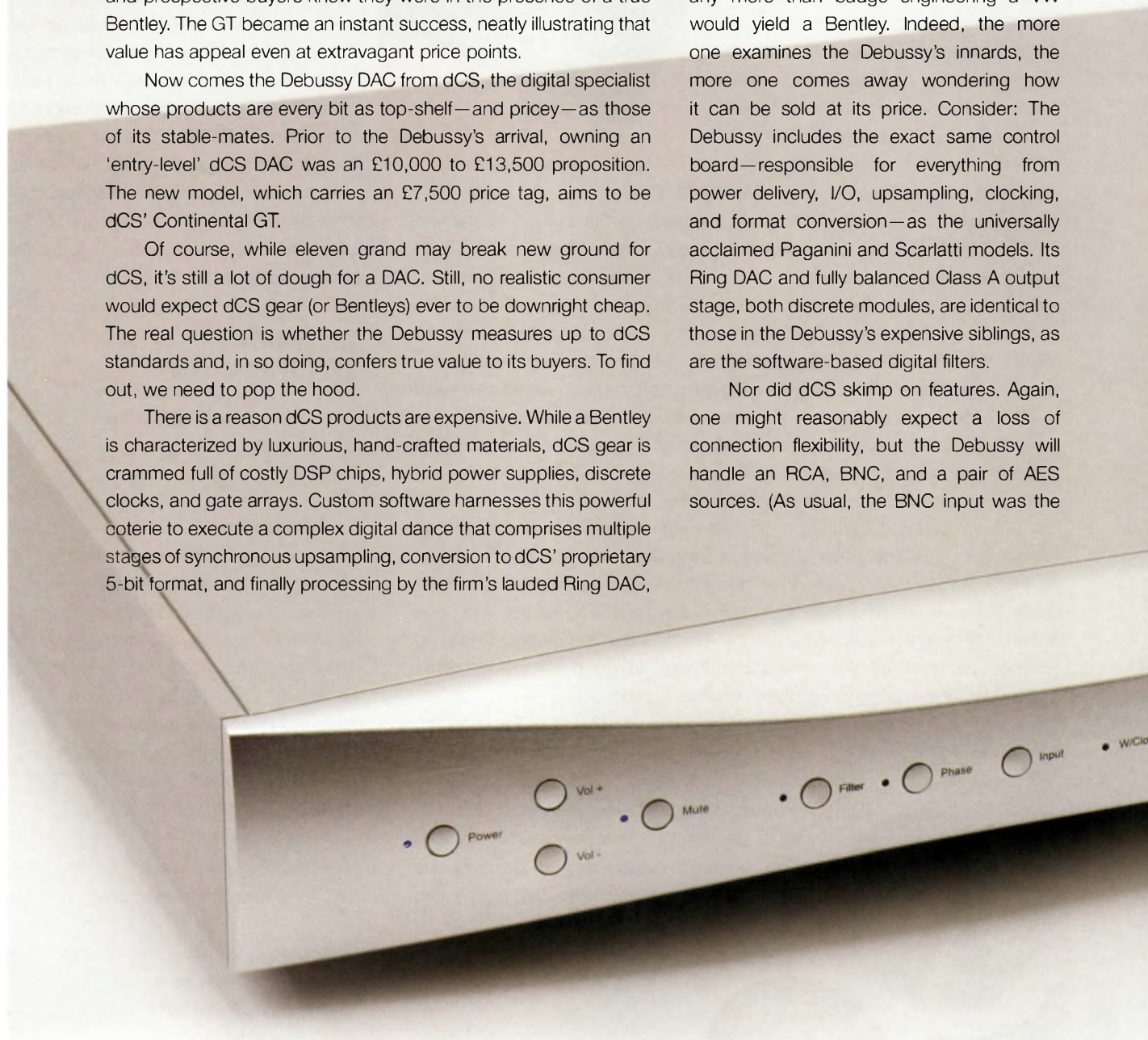
Of course, while eleven grand may break new ground for dCS, it's still a lot of dough for a DAC. Still, no realistic consumer would expect dCS gear (or Bentleys) ever to be downright cheap. The real question is whether the Debussy measures up to dCS standards and, in so doing, confers true value to its buyers. To find out, we need to pop the hood.

There is a reason dCS products are expensive. While a Bentley is characterized by luxurious, hand-crafted materials, dCS gear is crammed full of costly DSP chips, hybrid power supplies, discrete clocks, and gate arrays. Custom software harnesses this powerful coterie to execute a complex digital dance that comprises multiple stages of synchronous upsampling, conversion to dCS' proprietary 5-bit format, and finally processing by the firm's lauded Ring DAC,

with a choice of in-house programmed filters on the side.

One might think a 'budget' dCS would employ fewer custom parts and more off-the-shelf hardware and software. But that approach would not result in a true dCS, any more than badge engineering a VW would yield a Bentley. Indeed, the more one examines the Debussy's innards, the more one comes away wondering how it can be sold at its price. Consider: The Debussy includes the exact same control board—responsible for everything from power delivery, I/O, upsampling, clocking, and format conversion—as the universally acclaimed Paganini and Scarlatti models. Its Ring DAC and fully balanced Class A output stage, both discrete modules, are identical to those in the Debussy's expensive siblings, as are the software-based digital filters.

Nor did dCS skimp on features. Again, one might reasonably expect a loss of connection flexibility, but the Debussy will handle an RCA, BNC, and a pair of AES sources. (As usual, the BNC input was the



best sounding.) Further, there are both single-ended and balanced outputs. Other welcome ingredients include a front-panel sample-rate display, the ability to accommodate an external word clock, and the world's heaviest remote control.

All this would be sufficient to justify excitement about the Debussy's debut, but dCS ups the value equation considerably with the inclusion of a USB port. An easy, inexpensive add-on, you say? Not in this case. Elsewhere in the dCS line, adding a USB interface requires an entirely separate (and dearly priced) box (the U-Clock). The Debussy is the company's first and only product to incorporate both the Ring DAC and USB in one box. Furthermore, this is no ordinary USB interface. It's good up to 96/24, and is of the asynchronous variety, which allows the DAC rather than the PC to control timing, resulting in far less jitter. This port is the icing on the Debussy cake.

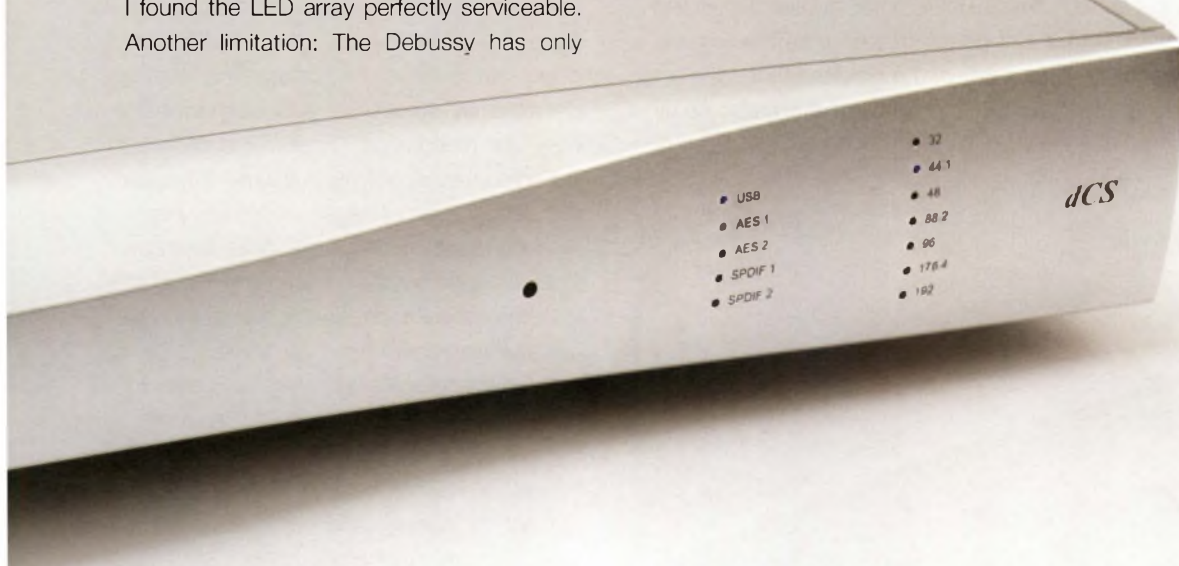
So where, exactly, does the dCS newcomer cut corners? Mostly in areas that do not affect the sound. Much was saved, I am told, through the exclusion of an alphanumeric front-panel display. In its place are a series of LEDs that indicate input and filter selection, sampling rate, and volume when the Debussy is used as a linestage (more on this later). Personally, I found the LED array perfectly serviceable. Another limitation: The Debussy has only

two filter options, whereas higher models offer more. This is another non-issue as far as I'm concerned; I was perfectly content with the recently released apodising filter, which I found significantly more natural than the standard version. In any case, future filters that dCS deems superior will be downloadable. One final omission was upsampling to DSD—a feature that impressed me mightily at the 2010 CES. This particular exclusion did disappoint me, and I'm still lobbying dCS to find a way to include it in the Debussy. Call me greedy.

Ultimately, of course, a car is judged by a test drive and an audio component is judged by listening (unless you're Julian Hirsch). So, does the Debussy's advanced and costly componentry deliver the sonic goods? I won't mince words: The Debussy is flat out fabulous. Let me count the ways.

This is not the first DAC I have reviewed that employs an elaborate processing scheme. For the most part, I have been unhappy with such units. The behind-the-scenes frenzy of digital calculating seems to find its way into the listening experience. That is, such DACs sound like they're working hard, which prevents the listener from relaxing into the music. DCS knows of and is careful to avoid this phenomenon. The company uses more processors (oops, there goes the cost curve) so that each is taxed less. This explains, for example, why upsampling is performed in stages rather than all at once. Perhaps it also accounts for the fact that, despite all the binary manipulations taking place, the Debussy sounds unflinchingly natural. Music winds out of this DAC like thread from a spool.

In virtually every way, the Debussy sounds terrific. Dynamics, depth, and detail are present in copious quantities. If the music so beckons, this DAC's tone is as ravishing as long, lustrous hair. Indeed, early in my time with the Debussy I identified a certain pervasive smoothness that was fine for some source material, but inconsistent with the more ragged elements of my CD collection (e.g. the MFSL remaster of the Pixies' wonderfully raw *Doolittle*). However, inserting some good cones underneath the



“the Debussy sounds unflinchingly natural. Music winds out of this DAC like thread from a spool.”

Getting the Debussy's USB Right

No matter what anyone—or any manual—tells you, USB is not plug-and-play. Not if you want to get the best sound from this interface. Overcoming your PC operating system's inherent limitations is the first challenge. If you are running Windows XP and follow the Debussy manual's instructions, for instance, you will likely end up (knowingly or not) invoking Windows' Direct Sound, which means bits will pass through the dreaded kernel mixer. Following the manual to the letter, I achieved what I have come to view as typical USB sound: smeared rhythms, closed extension, and screechy strings. In short, yuck.

Regardless of your Windows OS, what you want to do is bypass all its junk by using the far superior, professional standard ASIO driver set. (Another option is the recent WASAPI, but I did not have time to experiment with it.) Most music-playing software packages, like Media Monkey, support ASIO. The problem is that the Debussy doesn't. However, a nifty, freely downloadable package called ASIO4ALL solves the problem. Not only are these drivers bit perfect, they dynamically adapt to the source material's sample rate. This is an important provision, because standard PC (and Mac) drivers asynchronously upsample data to the highest supported sample rate—a sonically injurious process. ASIO4ALL will work with virtually any playback software except iTunes. Once you've heard the way ASIO restores USB's air and dynamics, you will never go back.

After sorting out software, there is still the matter of cables. As I have stressed before, USB cables make a demonstrable difference. For my tests with the Debussy, I experimented with five of them, ranging from the Brand X variety that comes with printers to audiophile affairs from Synergistics and Kimber. The winner this round — just as in the last time I conducted a USB cable survey — was the unpretentious Belkin Gold Series. The difference this cable makes is not remotely subtle. Depending on what you are comparing it to, it can be the difference between music and wallpaper. Here, blessedly, in one area of the high end that does not require spending a fortune; you can pick up a 1.8m set at Amazon.co.uk for just £7.99.



▶ chassis completely extinguished this minor coloration. So I settled down to some serious listening.

'On the Beach at Night Alone,' from Ralph Vaughn Williams' choral Sea Symphony (Telarc) is an enthralling piece that whisks the listener on a journey from the solitude of one man's thoughts to the "vast similitude" of the cosmos. I listened to this piece through the Debussy feeling that it could hardly be more engrossing. The DAC's sheer quantity of spatial, dynamic, and musical information added up to an all-encompassing, emotionally shattering experience.

"Dynamics were still excellent, yet the Bryston could not achieve the cataclysmic climax delivered by the dCS."

By comparison, my Bryston BDA-1 reference DAC (a TAS Golden Ear recipient) seemed restrained. The chorus lacked high-end extension, sounding almost muted. Dynamics were still excellent, yet the Bryston could not achieve the cataclysmic climax delivered by the dCS. Bass was nowhere near as thunderous. Finally, the Bryston buried some instruments in the mix, whereas the Debussy would never subject any player to such ignominy. In this respect, having a Debussy is like buying a new analog front end; in both cases you get to discover previously buried treasure within familiar tracks.

On smaller scale works, like the Stravinsky Suite from l'Histoire du Soldat (Pentatone), the gap between the dCS and the Bryston narrowed. Neither held an advantage with respect to pacing, and orchestral timbres were virtually indistinguishable. Still, the Debussy delivers more detail — you can hear the hall reverb far more clearly right from the first note—and a deeper stage.

In addition, the Debussy not only unearths every musical line, it makes following all those lines concurrently an effortless task. ▶

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Every great performance deserves an audience.

- ▶ Were it not for Linn Product's own well-charted delve into the waters of the next generation, I guess Ivor Tiefenbrun would be well pleased with this DAC.

I should reiterate here that the Bryston to which I compared the Debussy is an excellent DAC, and considerably cheaper too. The above contrasts are not intended to denigrate the BDA-1, but to convey just how good the Debussy is compared to “run of the mill” reference gear. This point hit home even harder when I played the SACD layer of the same Stravinsky disc through the estimable Marantz UD9004 universal player. In the past, even the best CD rigs have paled beside the Marantz's way with an SACD. Not this time. Here, it was the SACD, higher resolution notwithstanding, that sounded literally pale by comparison to the Debussy's Red Book presentation. That's how good the Debussy sounds— it can upend the normal CD/SACD pecking order.

One area where I find the Debussy ever so slightly wanting is rhythm. It's not that the DAC lacks a sense of pace—far from it. However, I have heard other digital pieces, such as the Burmester 089 CD player (tested by Chris Thomas on page 46) whose rhythms are more concrete. I doubt this deficit would even be noticeable without a direct comparison to the rare product that is superior in this category. As such, rhythm is not so much a Debussy weakness; rather, it simply is not among its lengthy list of strengths. I suspect the addition of the external Puccini clock—a nice down-the-road upgrade for Debussy owners—might improve things in this area.

That leaves me with one last strength and one real weakness to report. Let's get the bad news out of the way first. Although the Debussy is fully equipped to directly drive an amplifier, I found it quite unimpressive in this capacity. As a linestage, the dCS sounds rather boring, with compressed dynamics and undifferentiated timbres. Only its vocal purity, quiet background, and solid imaging elevate it above mid-fi. I tried the Debussy in this mode with two different amps, with the same results. So, although being able to use the Debussy as a linestage would up the value quotient even further, I must instead recommend using this DAC as a DAC, sending its analog outputs through a good dedicated linestage. In my experience, that is the only way to hear what the Debussy can really do.

And the last thing to report that this DAC does is deliver the best USB sound I have ever heard. Setup must be done with care (see sidebar), but the results can be extraordinary. This is the first USB I have listened to—and longtime readers know that I've heard and dismissed quite a few—that is truly in the same sonic territory as (if not quite the equal of) the best S/PDIF. Playing my trusty Dvorak Serenades (Praga), the Debussy's BNC input was just slightly less grainy and more dynamic than USB. Mary Guathier's “Falling Out of Love” from Mercy Now was again awfully close. In USB mode, Mary's voice moved forward and exhibited some sibilance plus, once more, a hint of grain.

With higher-resolution source material, the gap widened—in S/PDIF's favour. The Classic Records 96/24 recording of Ravel's Pavanne pour une infant defunte was clearly less timbrally pure when played via USB. Too, the Debussy's USB does not sidestep the lax rhythms I have noted in every other

USB DAC. On the other hand, strings, which are usually USB's *bête noir*, here had nary a trace of the shrillness that would normally afflict them. Overall, the Debussy's BNC input is its most convincing; however, the USB port is very nearly its musical and sonic equal—and that's saying a lot.

I have no idea if the dCS Debussy will meet with the same success Bentley's Continental GT has enjoyed. What I do know is that it delivers everything its builders intended in terms of performance, usability, and yes, value. Is it a ‘true’ dCS? You don't even need to look under the hood to find out. Just listen. +

First published in TAS issue 209.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: Digital USB, RCA, AES/EBU (2), BNC

Outputs: Analog balanced XLR and single-ended RCA

Maximum Resolution: 192/24 (S/PDIF), 96/24 (USB)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 44.7x6.6x39.4cm

Weight: 0.64kg

Price: £7,500

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Goldmund Mimesis 36 digital transport
Bryston BDA-1 DAC

HP Latitude (Windows 7) PC

Marantz UCD-9004 Blu-ray Player

Goldmund Mimesis 22 Preamplifier

Goldmund Mimesis 8 Power Amplifier

Metaphor Acoustics 2 Speakers

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MANUFACTURED BY

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Siltech C1 preamplifier

by Alan Sircom

Reviewers can wax lyrical and philosophical. Sometimes, as a method of padding out a review. Sometimes though the navel gazing is a vital part of defining the nature of the product. That's the thing about the Siltech C1 preamp.

Hang on a second... Siltech making a preamplifier? Isn't that like Nordost making a CD player, or Transparent making a record deck? Knowing the guy behind Siltech goes some way to explaining the appearance of a preamplifier among the well-respected cables. Edwin van der Kley could be an engineer straight out of central casting; when you speak to him, you expect him to pull out a slide rule, even if to calculate the correct angle of French fry placement. Like any good engineer, he's going to have an engineering solution on absolutely everything, and the place where engineers in audio feel there's a gap in the market is in the production of a really good preamp. In fact, the C1 is merely the first in the SAGA line of audio electronics from the brand.

Edwin's take on the really good preamp is to build essentially a very traditional minimal hard-wired valve line preamp inside a very advanced logic controlled and battery powered chassis. It uses new old stock of a little-known valve that was only manufactured for a few years at the end of the golden age of tubes, point-to-point wired with monocrystal cables, and there is the absolute minimum of components in the signal path.

“Hang on a second... Siltech making a preamplifier? Isn't that like Nordost making a CD player, or Transparent making a record deck?”

The four valves are all ECC86 double triodes. The story behind these tubes is fascinating in its own right. The ECC86 was only manufactured between 1959 and 1962 and designed for a very specific purpose. Back in the mid 1950s, car manufacturers were keen on fitting in-car radios to the latest chrome fantasy machines. The car industry wanted to fit the then-new transistors to these in-car systems, but those early solid-state devices weren't necessarily as reliable or as good sounding as their hollow-state equivalents (most commercially available transistors in the 1950s used pure germanium instead of silicon, alloys or compounds as their semiconductor material; in pro audio circles, one of the most visible uses for germanium transistors was in the manufacture of fuzz boxes for guitars... so perhaps they had a point). So, the car industry commissioned a new valve specifically for purpose, needing to be low distortion, low powered with attendant long lifespan and very low microphony. The ECC86 was born, but was sadly short-lived, because solid-state devices quickly caught up and by the time The Beatles hit the charts, car radios were all transistorised. ▶



▶ Nevertheless, the ECC86 is perhaps the ideal preamp valve. It's got a 10,000 hour life expectancy, there's that low distortion and very low microphony, and the fact it was designed to work within the confines of a 6V or 12V car system means it doesn't come with crazy rail voltages. But somehow, it never got picked up; no-one makes them now, and every other preamp uses devices like the ECC82 or ECC83 instead. This has built legends around the valves – such as which brand of valve sounds best (as they were all built to the same spec off the same production line, variations are practically non-existent, but when did reality get in the way of a good story?). But the fact remains Siltech has spent the last few years buying up remaining stocks of the Telefunken ECC86, so the 50 C1 users will have spares for a long, long time. Let's face it, the chances of a new batch of ECC86 appearing are slim.

The preamp within a preamp part is that the power and logic control circuitry are all entirely separated from the ultra-minimalist audio signal path. Given the audio circuit is the sort of thing that could be understood by an amp engineer of half a century or more ago, the control and power chains are state of the art. Things like a counter on under the rightmost vent, that shows you elapsed valve life, and things like battery power. The C1 has two big blue power switches, the left one is the conventional power button, the right one is marked 'forced charge' and switches the preamp between running off mains while charging the 25v batteries and running on batteries alone. The good thing is these are off-the-shelf batteries, with a five-year plus lifespan; finding replacements should not be difficult, even if for some reason you chose not to send the preamp back to Siltech. Battery power in tube preamps is not unheard of, but the 6.3v heater voltage of the ECC86 makes battery life easier to contemplate.

“The preamp doesn't sound like a valve preamp, it sounds more like the best of solid-state. Now's the time for that philosophical aside. Does it matter?”

The logic circuit drives the five single-ended and one balanced line inputs (all using Siltech connectors and using monocrystal wire throughout, naturally) and single-ended and balanced outputs. It also drives the rotary volume controller. The preamp's medium-to-high input impedance and medium-to-low output impedance makes it good for highlighting differences between cables, but not so divorced from convention that the preamp threw up problems for other connected products. I would put a practical limit of about 5m from preamp to power amp (presuming single-ended connection and high input impedance on the part of the preamp... guaranteed in most cases). Naturally Siltech's own monocrystal cables seem an obvious match for the C1, although I couldn't help thinking I prefer Crystal Cable's Piccolo Diamond cables, despite being considerably cheaper. Still, given the connection (Crystal Cable is run by Edwin's wife, Gabi) we really aren't falling far from the tree. A Logitech remote is provided.

The preamp doesn't sound like a valve preamp, it sounds more like the best of solid-state. Now's the time for that philosophical aside. Does it matter? Will people buy a valve preamp that doesn't sound 'valvey'? And will someone wanting the best in solid-state preamps buy a valve preamp? I would hope that in reality that the physical devices used in a preamp are immaterial and that the sound is all, but I suspect that some people in the market for a top-end preamp have a pre-conceived set of notions of either tube or solid-state preamp sound, and the C1 challenges them to the very quick.

That's the thing about the C1. It's not valve-like. It's remarkably quiet in use (you could whack the gain up and put your ear to the speakers and hear almost no noise at all) and really, really accurate. Don't expect an easy ride for less than perfect sources or low-fi recordings, don't go hoping the C1 ▶

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“A true window on the recording; play two different recordings and you’ll immediately hear the different mixes.”

► acts as a Band-Aid to help improve a system that shuts in imagery or lacks depth or coherence. The C1 gives or expects no quarter.

This makes it a very difficult preamp to judge, because it is a chimera. You find yourself drawing attention to aspects of the sound that you then find attribute to other parts of the chain; the thinness of a source, the topky power amp, even the puffy sound of a capacitive cable. But when the system works properly, the C1 simply vanishes. It’s like a passive preamplifier with gain.

And when the system works like that, it’s uncanny. You hear into the mix, the compression (musical, signal and data) and the layering and panning of the musical components in the mix are on display. A true window on the recording; play two different recordings and you’ll immediately hear the different mixes, even to the point of playing a round of Spot the Producer. So, it’s not just getting you closer to the music, it’s placing you closer to the mastering and mixdown. And only absolute honesty can do that. It also exposes the idea that many attributes attributed to good systems (most notably timing) should be a function of the recording and not the electronics; when a recording has good timing, it comes through well here, and when it doesn’t, it doesn’t. No imposed beat or compromised timing. It just does what it’s supposed to, nothing more, nothing less. What’s surprising is how rare this seems by comparison.

I guess all of this could sound like it leaves the music cold and exposed. Stripped of any attractive artifice, the music played could be left on the slab. That doesn’t happen here, although I would imagine those who run the valve preamp gamut from Conrad to Johnson might find this more intellectually stimulating than musically impassioned. But I suspect more will praise it for its integrity than dismiss it for lack of artificial tonal colour. Oddly, if you need a bit more tonal colour, use the C1 with the batteries on charge, rather than battery powered, which can sound a trifle undynamic in the wrong setting.

Perhaps of all audio electronics, the preamp is the easiest part to make and the easiest part to make wrong. There are a lot of mediocre preamps, which either add to or subtract from the sound of the source. This is different; it’s almost the traditional goal of ‘straight wire with gain’, even though it uses valves at its heart. Just 50 of these pieces will be made and those 50 users will be getting the unvarnished truth. Can you handle the truth? +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Line inputs: 5x RCA phono, 1x XLR

Outputs: 1x phono, 1x XLR

Valve complement: 4x Telefunken ECC86 (new old stock)

25v battery power, with forced operation

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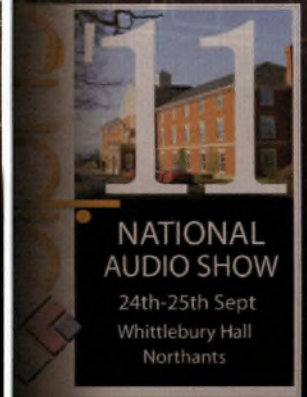
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Naim Audio UnitiServe

by Malcolm Steward

The UnitiServe occupies an interesting position in Naim's digital component hierarchy. It is a hard disk player like the HDX but, unlike the latter, it has no display and no analogue output capability. It is also half the size. It does, however, include a DLNA-compatible UPnP server so it can stream music to the NaimUniti or UnitiQute or any UPnP renderer. It does local playback through its S/PDIF output (BNC or Toslink) so it effectively wears two hats: it can be the relatively inexpensive – around half the price of the HDX – main source in an unpackaged media-based primary system while simultaneously performing as a ripper and multi-output server for a NaimNet or, more probably, a Naim UnitiSystem distributed audio set-up.

I used the review sample in a similar situation: connected through its BNC output to my Naim DAC with XPS power supply, feeding my primary system locally in exactly the same way that my resident HDX SSD does, and providing a UPnP stream over Ethernet to the UnitiQute in my office. I ripped and stored music both on its internal hard disk and on a pair of NAS drives; one in the music room and the other in my office. The review sample came fitted with an internal 1TB hard disk but can also be had with a low capacity (16GB) Solid State Disk, which stores no music and just contains the operating software. On this model, all music would be stored on a NAS. As is my wont, I connected everything with ethernet through a Gigabit network switch and a router before it connected to the main network switch, router and internet feed in my office system. The Uniti system components are all wi-fi enabled with the exception of the 'Serve, which Naim considers deserves a wired connection only to maintain reliable performance, especially with high-bit-rate material, and I tend to agree. In my system, wireless is used only for control signals: music always travels through cables.

The UnitiServe's digital, ripping, and library management technologies are based on those in the HDX so it catalogues rips in the same fashion as its bigger brother. It only rips to WAV but it will serve a multiplicity of files formats including the expected WAV and FLAC, along with AIFF, ALAC, Ogg Vorbis, AAC, WMA, and MP3. The latter, I suspect, was included for its ubiquity and because, although the 'Serve is a 'proper' Naim product, it seems it is being marketed more on the strength of its convenience and ease of installation and use, rather than exclusively on its performance. In that respect, it is worth noting that one cannot upgrade the 'Serve with XPS or 555PS power supplies, as one can the HDX and DAC. The 'Serve comes with a laptop-style 12V DC power supply. ▶



I began my listening tests by using the 'Serve to deliver Sir Tom Jones' album *Praise and Blame* from its hard disk to my modest office system – a UnitiQute driving Creek CLS10 bookshelf two-ways through Cable Talk flat speaker cables. The system conveyed Sir Thomas's reworking of John Lee Hooker's 'Burning Hell' as fluidly as anyone could expect well driven, inexpensive, aging two-ways to manage. The music flowed beautifully and rocked convincingly, and Sir Tom sounded as wondrous and compelling as ever, his voice demonstrating a credibly wide dynamic compass that created a genuine impression of him being in the room with the listener. It was particularly well drawn in its quietest reaches.

I really needed to listen to the 'Serve in my primary tri-amped DBL system alongside my HDX. I wanted to see how it stacked up against my recently updated to SSD specification HDX with each playing through my DAC with XPS combination. The music immediately assumed far greater weight and authority through the big system, but the HDX-SSD heightened the sense of attack and grip, especially on the guitar, and allowed listeners to hear exactly how His Royal Jonesness was breathing before each phrase. In terms of the way his voice was presented, I reckon the HDX was more persuasive and authoritative: he sounded more credible and weighty. The 'Serve sounded a smidgen less substantial but it still gave a thoroughly convincing and musically rewarding presentation.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Digital Outputs: S/PDIF, 75ohm BNC, Toslink

Audio Formats supported: WAV, AIFF, FLAC, ALAC, OGG Vorbis, AAC, WMF, MP3

Sample rates: WAV, AIFF, FLAC, ALAC, OGG Vorbis, AAC

Dimensions (HxWxD): 8.7x20.7x31.4cm

Weight: 5.6kg

Price: £2,045 (1TB), £2,300 (SSD)

Manufacturer: Naim Audio

URL: www.naimaudio.com

Tel: +44 (0)1722 426600

- ▶ Naim is making a fair bit of noise about operating the UnitiSystem with 'apps' for iPods and iPhones and the Apple Authenticated nature of the equipment. While I am sure that this makes good commercial sense, I still feel very comfortable operating the UnitiQute with its remote control and driving my HDX and the 'Serve through the DTC (Desktop Client software) on my laptop. However, now that I have grudgingly become an iPhone owner I have to admit that its convenience and facility for controlling both sides of the steaming system grow more attractive by the day.

"I wanted to see how it stacked up against my recently updated to SSD specification HDX"

Installing the UnitiServe follows the practices I learned when I first installed my HDX-SSD: plug it into the network, power it up, then walk away from it for a day or two. While left to its own devices it will scour the network looking for folders serving as music stores and/or shares, which it will then enumerate so that they will surface on the controlling user interface. (There is more than a semantic difference between stores and shares: stores are shares to which the device rips using a defined architecture, and are 'locked' by the player so preventing users clambering into them through an Explorer interface and disturbing the arrangement of files the player expects to find there.) With the HDX I found it was best not to listen to it while it was doing all this house-keeping because it consumes processor power that is better devoted to playing music. When I installed the 'Serve it was only a day after I had made significant changes in my network: I had just re-installed my HDX after it had been back to its makers for a modification or two, and had installed a new ZyXEL GigaBit switch. I had further re-organized all the storage structure on both my NASes. I left the 'Serve alone for the best part of a week while all these networked devices organized their databases and the NASes defragged their hard disks, which, recording engineer, Tony Faulkner is convinced affects the musical performance of any NAS.

The UnitiServe certainly has the delicacy and finesse I have come to expect from Naim's equipment. That it does not prove the equal of a machine that costs double is hardly a criticism, especially when one takes into consideration the pernickety nature of the comparisons being made: for example, listening to the sound of damped cymbals decaying right in the back of the mix on Teo Macero's album *Bumps in the Road*, or comparing the attack of gently plucked notes on an acoustic bass on *Softly in a Breeze* from the same album. The HDX sounded crisper and more incisive but not so much so that it would put me off buying a 'Serve, especially for use in system with less resolving power than my active DBLs.

masked a degree of detail. I could imagine some people preferring what they might interpret as a less clinical, friendlier presentation.

As already noted, however, both the HDX and UnitiServe can deliver UPnP streams to suitable renderers so I put together a more modern system in my office using a Uniti and SuperNAIT amplifier, and Neat Petite SX speakers on Partington Dreadnought stands to test their performance. Each was tested streaming music from the identical NAS running Asset server software on an XP OS: I would have tested them from their internal drives but my HDX-SSD does not have one so I selected a recently defragged NAS.

The UnitiServe acquitted itself thoroughly well, delivering the detail, dynamics, tunefulness and expression of all the instrumentation on a multitude of compositions from Teo Macero's exquisite album *Bumps in the Road*. The HDX forged in front, though, playing tracks from XTC's *Nonsuch*, once more with its improved leading edge definition and better defined spaces between notes. These differences are probably attributable to the more sophisticated power supply arrangement in the HDX, which gave the impression of the musicians having a shade more vitality and enthusiasm.

Both devices also rip CDs so a test of their relative performance in that respect seemed appropriate, especially considering that, to all intents and purposes, they use the same ripping engine. However, in order to avoid any compromise in this comparison because UnitiServe has integral storage on its hard disk and the HDX-SSD does not but uses NAS, I created an 'Internal' store on the same hard disk on the same NAS that stores the HDX rips, and then, effectively relegated the 'Serve's integral HDD to the substitutes' bench. Anything ripped on either machine now finished up stored on the same disk in the same NAS.

In terms of ripping times the HDX seemed to take about 1 minute longer than the UnitiServe to rip a 12-track, well-known CD, chosen to minimize the time taken for

the internet information database to do its stuff and return accurate metadata. In all then, no momentous differences here and the process is still much faster than downloading a high-res album off the internet. And, on that subject, do not try to copy any downloaded albums into the same folder structure your Naim equipment uses as a music store: create another discrete, shared folder that your Naim gear can still access. There is all sorts of file-locking voodoo going inside these boxes' Windows-based infrastructure to maintain the integrity of the ripping database.

The overall performance differences between the 'Serve and the HDX, with both playing through a Naim DAC/XPS combination were hardly what anyone would call earth-shattering. However, as the resolving power of the system increases, so does the superiority of the HDX. Certainly, the HDX has greater authority, finesse and, I feel, crisper timing. It also sounds more natural and convincing over an extended listening session using a high-resolution system. However, that is not damning the eminently capable and enjoyable UnitiServe. Comparing the two is very much a horses for courses consideration, not least because the HDX comes in at twice the price of the 'Serve. +



“The UnitiServe acquitted itself thoroughly well, delivering the detail, dynamics, tunefulness and expression of all the instrumentation”

Similar differences were evident playing tracks like 'No Killing' from the Violent Femmes album *The Blind Leading the Naked*. The HDX timed better in the sense that it made the silences between notes more distinct and it sounded faster on bass guitar leading edges, with the result that the band sounded more animated. Listening simultaneously to the same 24-bit file, Charlie Winston's *Passport* album, and switching between the HDX and UnitiServe by changing the same BNC-terminated cable from one output to the other to eliminate all possible external influences. The HDX was, as expected, more precise and 'accurate' but the 'Serve had a warmth and slightly softened edges that made for a cosmetically appealing presentation even if it

EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Burmester CD 089 CD Player

by Chris Thomas

In some quarters Burmester has gained an unfair reputation in the UK for being expensive German audio bling, due partly to its highly polished chrome fascias no doubt. The company designs and manufactures, largely in-house, an extensive range of equipment spanning several performance levels from CD players, pre, power and integrated amplifiers, speakers, cables, mains conditioners and support racks and each bears the unmistakable visual identity of the company. Burmester is also heavily involved with high-end in-car installations in joint partnerships with Bugatti and Porsche. One could almost think of it as Germany's equivalent to our own Naim Audio. Representation in the UK has been problematic over recent years, as distributors have inevitably found it difficult to promote the entire Burmester range in a price-driven market and have understandably wanted to cherry-pick those components that they consider the most competitive. I confess to a lack of experience of their full systems, but a decent knowledge of three of their CD players. If you expect the Burmester CD sound to be one of cliché – an uber-cool tonal balance coupled with forensic Teutonic clarity – then you would be very wrong. The 10 year-old belt-driven CD 001 remains a classy performer. It is certainly smooth, has good resolution and is, for me, characterised with a rhythmic flow and sense of musical movement that, even today, a decade after its introduction, few other players can match. For several months this year I have been living with the CD 089, another belt-driven player, virtually indistinguishable in appearance from the 001 but internally the two are very, very different.

The CD 089 has benefited from the kind of trickle-down technology that we've come to expect from companies with tiered ranges. In this case, Burmester's Reference Line sits at the top of the pile and quite obviously gets the benefits of their most advanced design thinking. The 089 is a Top Line product, just below the Reference series, but has benefited enormously in this way. This is no 001 with a dash of contemporary electronics grafted on. In fact they share virtually no components at all despite looking virtually identical. At its heart it has Dieter Burmester's belt-driven adaptation of a Phillips transport, also found in the Reference Line 069 two-box player and the 001, but here it is mounted in a separate, high-mass, low-resonance 'room' for superior isolation. The design aim is that decoupling the laser from the drive motor reduces jitter. I have often wondered just how much the belt-drive technology contributes to the Burmester CD sound and it's outstanding realisation of tempo and timing and I have a feeling that its influence is more than considerable.

The 089 features selectable sample rates of 96kHz/24bit or 192kHz/24 bit and these can also be applied to the external digital sources that can be connected through the rear panel. The only connection ▶

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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▶ that is missing is a USB input, but as Burmester currently support this with its preamplifiers, which can be ordered with USB and internal DAC, I have little doubt that future CD players will incorporate such a connection. This player can also be configured as a preamplifier as it has a switchable 60-increment analog volume control. I have tried the 001, 089 and other manufacturers players in this mode by connecting them straight to power amplifiers. The results have never convinced or tempted to me shelve my preamp but I think that, to make a more informed judgement, I would need to hear it through a Burmester power amplifier or perhaps a pair of active loudspeakers.

Considering the price, perhaps the one notable omission is the lack of processing for SACDs. This doesn't bother me, but if you have an extensive SACD collection it just might dissuade you from considering the Burmester. It shouldn't, but it might. Rear panel output connections are both single-ended and balanced, and internally the 089 is designed with balanced circuit technology. It's an old debate as to which is the best method of connection and needs to take into account the rest of the system and some comparative listening. If this was a full-blown Burmester system I might have ended up with balanced connections but I chose to use the RCA connections with my home system although Burmester themselves, like many high-end companies are firmly in the balanced camp. I have always generally preferred the single-ended option. The player even has a pair of XLR analog inputs to connect a non-digital source component. The analog output stages are equipped with more technology from the 069 in the shape of the X-amp2 output modules and it is these that Burmester are especially proud of, citing them as a major reason for the sound quality the 089 achieves.

“Considering the price, perhaps the one notable omission is the lack of processing for SACDs”

The player is certainly a joy to use with an excellent display, adjustable through four brightness levels plus an off function and a very large but clear remote control that has been thankfully lightened from the potentially lethal device that came with the 001. Drop that thing on your foot at the wrong angle and you'd spend an afternoon in casualty. Obviously the first thing to come to decide is whether to upsample to 192kHz and the answer is a resounding 'yes'. After a bit of experimentation I left the machine at this setting and never turned it off again. The rest is classic Burmester with a beautifully weighted sliding door and their disc clamp system. The sound too was immediately recognisable to me but with a huge leap in quality over the 001. It became apparent after only a few minutes listening, even with an ice-cold machine that this was going to be a hugely enjoyable experience and over the next few months I realised that musically the 089 bordered on the extraordinary.

As high-end CD players have improved over the years there have been hugely important strides made in their ability to convey a musical performance. There never seemed that much problem in extracting high levels of information, but I have heard a number of players that, while impressive number crunchers, were never comfortable to listen to for any period of time. The description of a sound being 'digital' became an insult, but I understood the roots of it.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Single-box CD player

Transport: Phillips with belt drive

Sampling rates: 96kHz/24 bit – 192kHz/24 bit

Connections

Digital Inputs: 1 x optical (TOSLINK)

1 x RCA

Digital Outputs: 1 x optical (TOSLINK)

1 x RCA

Analog Inputs: 1 x XLR

Analog Outputs: 1 x XLR (balanced)

1 x RCA (Unbalanced)

1 x RCA (TAPE) (Unbalanced) with preset volume.

Dimensions (WxHxD): 48.3x11.4x33.5cm

Weight: 13 kg

Price: Approx £13,500, depending on currency exchange rates

Manufacturer: Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH

URL: www.burmester.de

The 089 is as far from that as it is possible to get from a digital source and the roots of its musical performance lie squarely with its abilities to portray musical movement. Call it tempo, call it timing, the way that a hi fi system portrays the development of music through time is nothing short of critical and even extracting the maximum amount of miniscule detail is completely irrelevant if it is rhythmically stunted. When we sit and listen we all have that timing element **beating inside** us. It is not metronomic, it lives as pure feeling and you don't need to sit there counting out loud to judge whether a system either does or doesn't have it. I agree that some people are more 'tuned into' this aspect of performance and that matters more to them than others but for me, if it doesn't have that feeling of rhythmic liquidity then I won't enjoy it. Listening to the 089 is quite unlike any CD player I have heard and that includes several that are much more expensive and some which are lauded as being the best available. The 089 is like a flowing river of music whether it is showing you the pure pace and speed of impact of a rock band or

- ▶ playing a deliciously considered piece that hardly moves at all. It is sinuous and completely elastic where time is concerned and this provides an eloquent and reassuring base for everything else that it does so well.

It has superb bandwidth, a great sense of space with wide and deep views of the musical soundstage and simply stunning resolution. Not the chilly needlepoint variety of tiny background sounds that is often cited as musical detail but a more organic version that is unerring in solidity and stability. And if you are a fan of tonal colour and find the digital view of instruments and vocals is inevitably too monochromatic then the 089 will change your mind about that. Tonal nuance and contrast is beautifully realised and this helps no end if you are excited by the pure performance of the musicians. Because when you factor in the Burmester's wonderfully natural realisation of dynamics you will hear the relationship between the musician and his instrument in a way that very few CD players manage to capture. Let me try and illustrate this with a couple of examples. Luciana Souza's twin offerings *The New Bossa Nova* and *Tide* are certainly my two albums of the year and seldom does a listening session pass without one or even both of them getting a listen. What I love about them, apart from her sublime phrasing and vocal control is the impeccable quality of the playing. Everything is seriously understated on these albums, withdrawn to leave only that which is necessary for the song. For me it is the art of great musicianship and production. But the music still remains dense and incredibly textural. On 'Bossa' she sings other peoples songs, adapted to a bossa nova rhythm that is often suggested rather than stated. Played through the 089 this becomes stunningly obvious. On the Randy Newman song 'Living Without You' she gives it a quite obviously romantic slant. After the introduction of a conversation between piano and guitar the shimmering rivet cymbals and brushed snare provide a waterfall-like backwash against which the guitar pushes a simmering hint of a South American time signature and the piano plays what initially seems like a simple series of tonal droplets. The beauty and balance that the 089 brings is that it is so good at showing such small dynamic shifts and movements. The tonal expression of the piano lights the way through the piece with a sense of shape and colour that brings accents in time and space. I have never heard a CD player hold all these delicacies together quite like the Burmester before. But, on other systems, I have heard the close washing cymbals swamping the piano and guitar and I've felt the song drift by without that captivating feeling of intensity that it should have. Likewise with the Becker/Fagen song 'Were You Blind That Day'. I love the way this player really gets the message of the song across as she sings just behind the beat,

"It is a real shame that Burmester don't have a current UK outlet where you could hear the CD 089 but that will hopefully change very soon."

almost as if to make the lyrical point that much more succinct. It is easier to get this level of coherence wrong and I must point out that the CD089 positively demands that the amplifier, speakers and indeed the whole of the system be up to the job. It will ask a great deal of the installation if the music is to stay perched on the point of intensity.

Low-level and ambient detail is striking and is usually the domain of more expensive two box players. But few of those that I have heard achieve that delicate balance this well. If I had to describe the actual overall tonal balance of the CD 089 I would say that it leans very, very slightly towards warmth but don't think that it is in any way slow or remotely retiring. Listen to Jeff Beck ripping it up at Ronnie Scott's and you'll be in no doubt that this is a machine that responds with boundless energy regardless of what the music demands of it. It is as happy punching out Kai Wilkenfeld and Vinnie Colaiuta's low-end bass and drum work out as it is in caressing the delicate sweetness of *The Lark Ascending*.

It is a real shame that Burmester don't have a current UK outlet where you could hear the CD 089 but that will hopefully change very soon. I would happily buy one direct from Germany myself and for a purchase this important might even be tempted to nip over for the day for an audition. This is one of the very best and most complete CD players I have heard to date and certainly the best single-box design. It is, unfortunately, also one of UK audio's best-kept secrets. +



What do you listen to?

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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.



For digital formats, of course, we use Esoteric, so established as the de-facto standard in digital replay that other manufacturers use Esoteric transport mechanisms in their own CD/SACD players. The X-05 is the entry-level model of Esoteric's high-end one-box series, a perfect choice for any audiophile wishing to select a "final" CD/SACD player without spending a fortune. *The Absolute Sound* declared, "There aren't enough superlatives to describe this machine."

But did you know that Esoteric manufactures equally fabulous amplification components? The new E-03 phono stage, with two configurable inputs, a de-mag function, and "magnificent instrumental textures and vocal accuracy, fluidity and rhythm, expansive dynamics on large orchestral surges and tremendous litheness on instrumental flutters, with deep and resolved bass, extended and nuanced treble and imaging and staging to die for" (6moons.com), is certainly one of the finest phono stages on the market.



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The C-03 lineage, "as good as I've heard," according to SoundStage.com, and the A-03 dual-mono power amplifier, "sonically superior to all other amplifiers I've had in my system" (SoundStage.com again), both beautifully crafted in sculpted aluminium, would form the bedrock of the highest of high-end systems.

There's even a massive four KT88 valve power amplifier, the A-100, that can also function as an integrated. "Only a handful of amplifiers on this planet are as revealing," raved *The Absolute Sound*.



And for smaller systems, the one-box RZ-1, a 100 W integrated amplifier with CD/SACD player, USB input for computer audio, and even an excellent moving-magnet phono stage, is a compact corker!

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Esoteric E-03 phono stage

by Jason Kennedy

You have to hand it to the Japanese, no one builds electronics like they do. The attention to detail, the finish the fit and the feel of high-end kit from that island nation is second to none. The Germans get pretty close, yet somehow don't quite manage to make such perfectly executed products. This was apparent with the likes of Luxman back in the day and continues with brands like Esoteric today, although there aren't many brands like TEAC Esoteric. A company that builds only high-end components and up until recently only those designed to replay five-inch polycarbonate discs. But a few years back, it started to introduce amplifiers to its range and now has an integrated, preamp and three power amps on its website. It also has a phono stage and in true Esoteric style, it's a fully formed and fully featured example of the breed with two inputs and variable settings for each. It appears to be based on the company's C-03 linestage preamplifier and there's a clue in the name as to why that might be, although it's not clear what 'E' might stand for.

The E-03 is part of Esoteric's Master Sound Works concept, components designed to reproduce the 'audio impression' of the master tape. The case is a masterwork in itself; a steel subchassis splits up the interior in order to shield the amplifier circuits from flux leakage from the mains transformers that sit behind the front panel, that is two mains transformers for two identical amplifiers, because this is a dual mono design all the way through. The exterior of the case is in solid aluminium, which has a two finishes. It's bead blasted in certain sections and brushed in what's described

as 'short scratch' style in others to provide some contrast. The front panel is actually deeper than it looks, for fixing purposes, while the top lid reveals no means of fixing at all. The three feet give a disconcerting rattle when you pick the unit up but that's because they are two part, stainless steel examples that have a hardened tip sitting in a cup, very much in the style of certain aftermarket supports.

"In true Esoteric style it's a fully formed and fully featured example of the breed."

Around back, RCA phono inputs for the two phono stages within the E-03 are spread out laterally with the output RCAs alongside them. There are no XLRs because this is a single-ended design and while certain markets appear to like them there is little point in putting an unbalanced ▶

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▶ signal through an XLR just for the sake of it, in fact there is a good argument for avoiding this approach. The final rear panel fitting is the earth clamp, just one which seems a little mean given that there are two inputs here, I wouldn't like to try fitting the earth leads from two SME arm-leads, with their double earth tags, onto this one post.

The luxuriously sculpted front panel has controls for impedance on both inputs and capacitance on the right hand one, this because one input is dedicated to moving coil cartridges whereas the other can accommodate moving magnets as well. Input one for MCs has seven impedance settings all the way from 10 Ohms to 10k Ohms, input two offers four impedance settings over the same range plus three capacitive loadings. Both inputs have a demagnetizing function for cartridges and step-up transformers.

This is a well-equipped phono stage no doubt about it, all too many of the ilk either don't have any means to adjust what the cartridge output sees or require you to open the box to fiddle with little DIP switches or move jumpers around. Esoteric's approach means that you can experiment with impedances rather more easily so you are more likely to get this aspect of cartridge set-up right, I wish more stages were this simple.

“One thing that it told me was that the Esoteric's rich, three dimensional presentation is not quite as fleet of foot as the very best phono stages can be.”

It also wish that more stages were this revealing but that isn't going to happen any time soon, if experience is anything to go by you can't make phenomenally transparent electronics without the attention to detail that Esoteric has brought to bare here. My first impressions were of an immensely relaxed and easy sound but this was largely because the first slab of vinyl I spun through it sounds that way. The E-03 is totally free of grain or edginess which is still quite rare in solid state amplification and initially makes a product seem soft edged. However it soon becomes apparent that you can hear an awful lot more of the fine detail, the harmonics and reverberations that accompany every note, every sound. Thus an old copy of Mallard's eponymous debut is extraordinarily laid back but replete with nuances. And yet the playing is bang on time albeit in a totally effortless and fluent fashion, with none of the leading edge sibilance that passes for speed in so much equipment. Put on a recent release of Deep Purple's seminal Machine Head and there is no mistaking the drive of the track Highway Star which will have you leaping about in the armchair even at low level, well it did for me a least.

This stage's greatest quality is its ability to show you the often huge differences between recordings and pressings, an ability that can be negative if the pressing of Steely Dan's *Katy Lied* happens to be more worn than you thought. I found another one – you need several to get you by – which initially seemed better but deteriorated as the stylus approached the label. Of all the albums to warrant audiophile re-issue this is one of the most obvious yet



inexplicably overlooked. We have enough great pressings of *Gaucha* and *Aja*, it's the mid period diamonds that need re-pressing. Rant over.

Assuming the vinyl hasn't been mangled what you hear is the studio and its hardware plus the style of the producer and mastering engineer along with your favourite music. This isn't to say that these qualities are presented separately but that their nature is considerably more obvious. Importantly it also brings you more of the performance and the quality of playing, this isn't a tool for analysis but for enjoying great music. Something you can't help but do if the rest of the system is up to the job, I used a Townshend Rock 7 turntable with Funk Firm's FXR tonearm and a van den Hul Condor XCM cartridge in front of the E-03. On the other side preamp duties were taken by my trusty Border Patrol Control Unit and then Max Townshend's remarkable Glastonbury Pre, a contender for most transparent linestage in the world ever. Power amplification and transduction was delivered by the mighty ATC SCM 150ASL, an active speaker that tells you how it is come what may.

One thing that it told me was that the Esoteric's rich, three dimensional presentation is not quite as fleet of foot as the very best phono stages can be. It's unusual for a product to be able to do both timing and rich detail at the highest level and while this stage times quite nicely it's not quite up to the standards of the best in this regard. It's a ▶

▶ situation where even at this price you still have to make a choice really and that will of course come down to musical and sonic taste, I enjoy both qualities but err on the pace side of the equation when the option is available. But as my comments hopefully reveal I found the realism on offer with the Esoteric to be totally beguiling – it brings the music closer to you and puts it into the room so effectively that the result is totally convincing.

The E-03 is the sort of product that you could never have too revealing a system for, it is always going to be more refined than a power amplifier and more even handed than a loudspeaker. It may not have the sheer midrange transparency of the best triodes but its noise levels are always going to be lower and its bandwidth wider. I found quite a few albums that had more bass energy on them than expected, the ATCs are big speakers for the room they are in but this isn't often an issue but this is presumably because my Trichord Delphini phono stage is relatively lean in this area. The Esoteric isn't fat or exaggerated but it doesn't play down the bottom end, this is a quality that brings body to the rest of the range not least the treble. Arvo Pärt's *Tabula Rasa* often tests a system in this regard, his use of violins in a sparse acoustic can be grating in the wrong system but here the music's power to spiritually uplift is fully evident, its conduit to a higher plane waiting for you to close your eyes.

ECM recordings like *Tabula Rasa* can sound a little bit clinically clean but in the quieter passages its apparent that the church where the recording was made is actually pretty creaky, I bet Arvo gave someone a hard stare when that showed up on the monitors.

Less ethereal music such as Miles' *Bitches Brew* reveal the Esoteric's ability to cope under fire. This is not like *Kind of Blue*, it's a rather less accessible album and can easily be hard work for the listener. But if you eliminate distortion and time smear from the RIAA and phono amplification process it becomes a whole lot more approachable, not easy listening of course but engaging and pretty damn remarkable. It's probably at its most impressive with dense material; the Mahavishnu Orchestra, John McLaughlin and Jan Hammer's leviathan among jazz-rock combos, were inclined to throw everything at you all of the time and while the solid beat means its never hard work you don't



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level: 18V

Rated output level: 500mV

Gain: 40dB (MM) 66dB (MC)

Maximum input level: 180mV (MM) 9mV (MC)

Input impedance: 47 k ohms (MM) Selectable (MC)

Input 1: 10/50/100/300/500/1k/10k ohms

Input 2: MC 100/500/1k/10k ohms, MM 0/100/330 picoFarads

External dimensions (W×H×D):

44.2×10.4×36.4cm

Weight: 10.5 kg

Price: £4,795

Manufactured by: TEAC Esoteric

URL: www.esoteric.jp

Distributed by: Symmetry

URL: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

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often get this degree of insight into exactly what all five members are up to.

One thing that I found a little surprising is that the Esoteric CD players that I've had the pleasure of using in the past did not sound like the E-03, their character being akin to ECM recordings: revealing, clean and slightly lean. This phono stage is ultra revealing in the context of a warmer balance, this undoubtedly reflects the nature of vinyl itself and the extremely low distortion nature of the phono stage, there is no grain, no overload it simply tells it like it is in a calm and transparent fashion. Perhaps it's naïve to assume that the same engineers work on the analogue electronics in both product types or it could be that the analogue front end they work with has a much leaner balance. A situation that might result in both product types sounding more similar.

What I do know is that this is a fabulously well built and revealing phono stage that is capable of revealing almost everything that a great turntable can give it, if you appreciate refined components it has few peers. +

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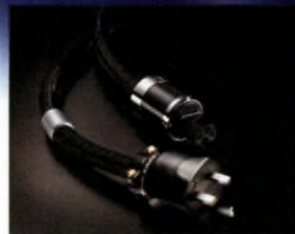
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Chord Chordette Prime, Peach, Scamp

by Alan Sircom

“Where the Chordette system wins out is because it perfectly accommodates a lifestyle that does not demand worship at the altar of audio.”

despise those self-reverential “as I write this” statements beloved by some journalists. They are usually at best irrelevant, often mendacious and occasionally penned to take the edge off ribald statements that would have seemed a bit extreme at a Nuremberg Rally. Despite that, it’s the Joker in the journo’s pack... and for once, I’m playing my Joker.

You see, as I write this, the same laptop I’m working on holds a goodly selection of my music on iTunes and is beaming it to a series of alloy boxes across the room – all sitting in something that looks like a tiffin dabba – through a wireless system commonly associated with telephones. In fact, if I had wanted to, I could have driven this from my mobile phone. All of this drives my loudspeakers with surprising ease. ▶

► Technically, nothing here is particularly new. We've had small audio systems for years. We've had wireless audio for a while now, and controlling a system remotely might have impressed the hell out of us 40 years ago, but it's commonplace today. So what makes the Chord Chordette system so damn special?

Put simply, it fits in with modern lifestyles better than conventional audio. We can be Luddites about this, but if you look at how most people – at least most people who aren't hi-fi buffs – play their music at home, they often do so from a laptop or iPad gently broiling their technical area while simultaneously posting on a friend's Facebook wall, uploading pictures to Flickr, playing *Angry Birds* and watching *NCIS* on telly with the sound turned low. Where the Chordette system wins out is because it perfectly accommodates a lifestyle that does not demand worship at the altar of audio, something fast becoming a near-impossible task in our time-poor, always connected modern world.

My Chordette system was a four-boxer, comprising Prime preamplifier, Peach DAC and a pair of Scamp power amps in bridged mono mode. The Scamps in this case provide the power for the rest of the system; you could theoretically run the whole system from one Scamp, or have separate external power supplies for each product, but this provided good clean power and more than enough oomph to drive most loudspeakers, unless you are the proud owner of some amp-killing Apogeos from the late 1980s. Meanwhile, the Peach DAC uses a chipset that eliminates the need for an output stage, because it has its own line driver. Which is perhaps why all three products are practically identical in size and weight.

Installation is slightly fiddly, and you need to work in a logical manner. The rear panels are free from legends (the engraving work to describe the action of each input/output or dial is too fine unless it's hand engraved, apparently) and that means you might be best installing with manual in hand. Ultra-short phono plugs are the way forward for this rack system, but you can't escape a sort of 1920s telephone exchange/1970s Moog Modular synthesizer Gordian Knot of wire round the back of the Chordette tiffin box.

Both the Peach and the Scamps come with rear-mounted volume controls. At first this might seem strange, but the idea is to balance things out properly; giving the Peach just enough output to match other sources and to give the Scamps just enough output to make it worth owning a preamp. Too low a level and you are having to work to the end-stops of the preamp and you will have hiss to contend with; too high and you have a volume control that runs the full scale of levels from one to two before it goes too loud. This evens the score. Of course, setting even volume levels with a tiny pot does become problematic with a dual-mono design; if you don't use a test tone and a multimeter, you are in guesstimate territory. And I suspect the Chordette's target audience isn't in the 'test tone and multimeter' club.

There are two ways of making your PC talk Bluetooth to the Chordette package. Either you use the built-in Bluetooth transceiver within the computer itself or use a separate dongle – Sennheiser's A2DP-based USB dongle being the connection of choice at Chord. The only difficulty with this is Chord's version of Bluetooth appears to have a habit of going into 'sleep' mode and can take a second or so to come back to life. That doesn't necessarily mean a problem, but *in extremis* can lose the first note of a recording – if you think this trivial, imagine Beethoven's Fifth without the first 'Dum'.

Chord Electronics has a distinct house sound, that's pretty much the same across the board. If you like a particular Chord amp, a bigger one just brings more power to the table. This is remarkably consistent; a tidy and ordered

“Chord Electronics has a distinct house sound, that's pretty much the same across the board. If you like a particular Chord amp, a bigger one just brings more power to the table.”

and clean, slightly bright sound that curiously stays across the room; other equipment envelops the listener in the soundstage, this presents the soundstage perfectly between the loudspeakers almost as a wall of sound. Don't think this criticism or faint praise, merely an observation; while it projects an image into the room, Chord is not the brand for those who like to feel adrift and immersed in sound. Especially here.

This works exceptionally well in context, because it doesn't call on the subtle imaging cues that a lot of traditional hi-fi systems rely upon. These imaging cues demand good recordings and sometimes modern recordings that might end up being played through the Chordette simply won't have that lush soundstage to enrich the experience.

Much as it pains me to say this, we have to get real about the state of the music business in 2011. Recordings are clipped and compressed (both signal and data compression) and can come from an alarming variety of sources. While there will always be those who treat the signal chain from microphone to loudspeaker with the greatest of respect, good audio performance ►





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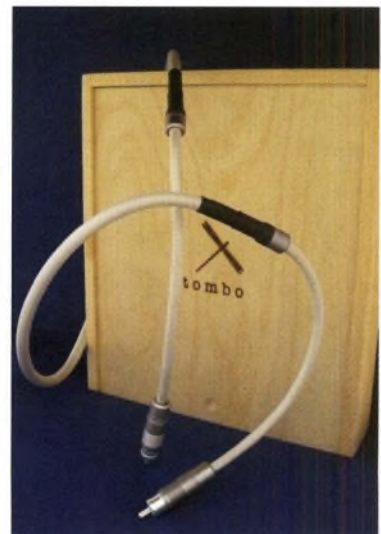
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► is increasingly becoming a minority interest in the recording studio. The Chordette system treats such music with a more understanding approach than most conventional hi-fi; if the recording is good, it sounds good, but if it's mediocre, it doesn't sound terrible. Okay, the audiophile trades some of the filigree imaging and dynamic range for more approachable modern recordings, but that means a new audience could start discovering good audio.

I beamed most of my recordings from my laptop, both with the Sennheiser dongle and direct from the computer's own Bluetooth system (Macs support A2DP now), but I also used my iPhone, which has many of same tracks squidged down to manageable file sizes for use when commuting (there's no point listening to lossless files on the London Underground, because the ambient noise is too high to give any benefit). There's not much point here either because A2DP compresses the signal for transmission.

My big concern was the mild brightness when playing MP3 or AAC files. Would it highlight any compression artefacts? Would it make bright mixes from today sound harsh and unlistenable? The acid test here was beaming the sound of a couple of YouTube videos; one of Lily Allen's 'The Fear' and one of The Black Eyed Peas 'I Gotta Feeling'. I needn't have worried; both tracks were handled well and sounded 'clean', the compression (both signal and data) was accurately portrayed, but not laid bare to undermine the performance.

Then I dropped the system (with a pair of speakers) round to a friend who has a couple of teenage kids. I expected to go through a lengthy explanation about the operation, but when I hooked it together, told them it ran under Bluetooth, both immediately reached for their phones, simply said 'password?' and were playing music seconds later. About a minute after that, they were taking it in turn to play cellphone DJ. About a minute after that, I realised I was the outsider here; I've spent decades playing about with audio kit, but the playing space the Chordette creates I merely have a surface knowledge of; those teenagers live in that space, they understood the Chordette in a manner I probably never will.

A lot of people will never go for the Chordette system, especially when running off the A2DP system of the Peach DAC. Some won't like what it does to the music (the wireless system is 'effectively' transparent, rather than 'actually' transparent and there's some noticeable grain compared to wired inputs), while others will just object to it being simply too damn small. Of course, a predilection for audio quality and big things has described a significant proportion of the audiophile market. So, it's directed at the non-audiophile, gadget geek world. The strange thing is such non-audiophiles just say "that's cool" or "how do you do that?" The other strange thing is just how little the price of the system matters to those people. It does something cool that works with their mobile or laptop that they want, irrespective of price.

Ultimately, this is just the start. A truly 2011-chummy product would do all the things these four boxes do in just one, small alloy case. And it needs to cost less than four figures. And guess what Chord is working on? +



“The playing space the Chordette creates I merely have a surface knowledge of; those teenagers live in that space, they understood the Chordette in a manner I probably never will.”

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Chordette Prime preamplifier

4x RCA inputs, 1x USB input, 1x RCA output, Chordette control, S/PDIF output

Price: £1,495

Chordette Peach Bluetooth DAC

1 x USB (44/48Khz, USB 2.0 Compliant), 1 x Bluetooth supporting A2DP and APT-X Stereo Audio, 1 x Toslink Optical, 1 x Coax S/PDIF

2x RCA output

Rear control for DAC source selection

Price: £799

Chordette Scamp power amp (x2)

40w bridgeable stereo amplifier

1x RCA input, USB input

Rear-mounted Variable output volume control knob

Price: £799 per amplifier

Standard Chordette rack £1,215. 'Tiffin box' price on application

All Chordette devices tested:

External 12V PSU, daisy chainable

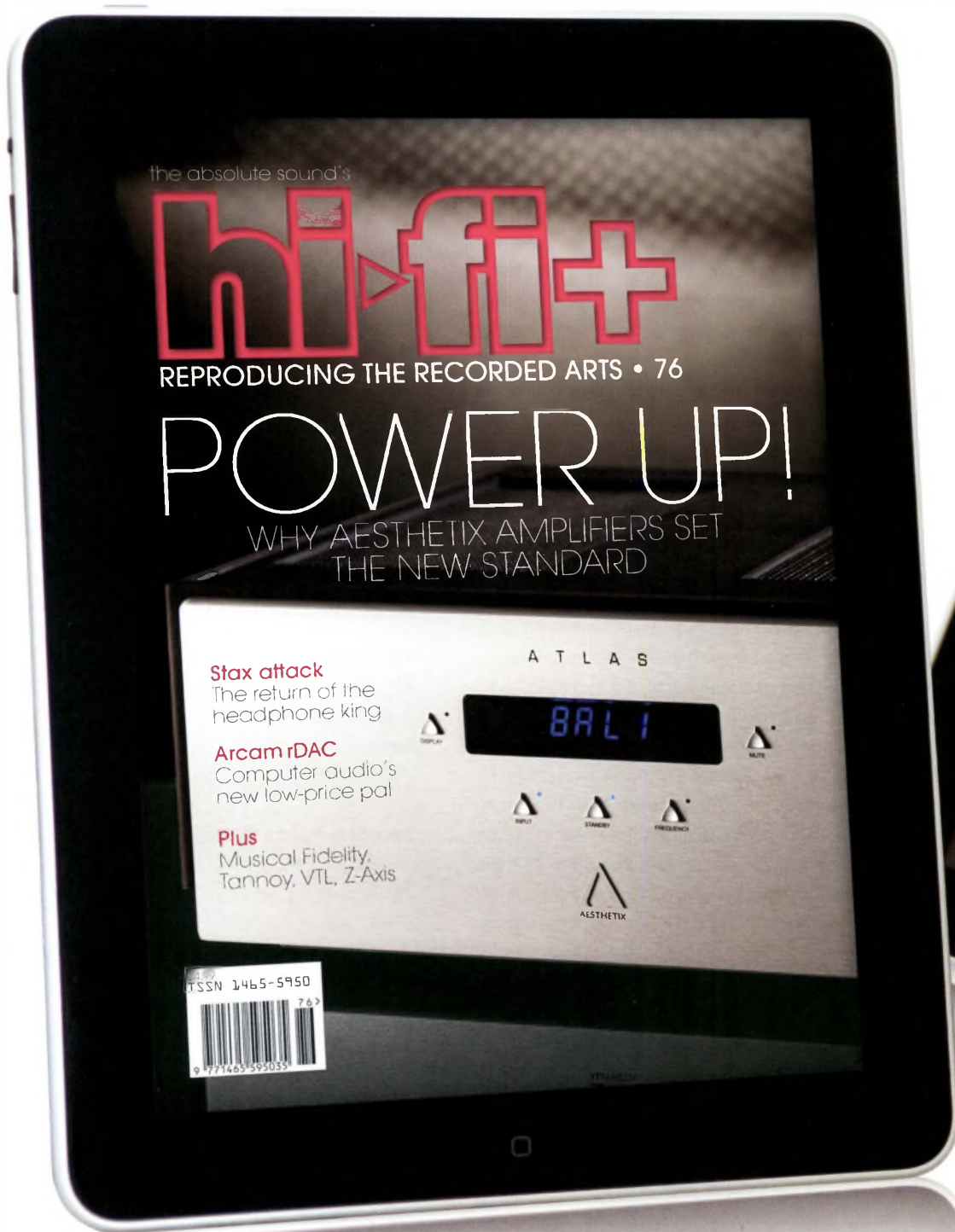
Dimensions (WxHxD): 16x7x4cm

Weight: 0.4Kg

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Clearaudio Concept turntable

by Alan Sircom

Vinyl's oft-touted comeback is a three-fold thing. There are people who never lost sight of what the 12" disc had to offer them, those who are returning to the fold and there are those who are reaching out to the senior format for the first time. To this latter group, the selection and installation of deck, arm and cartridge can be daunting and fiddly, especially now that the number of dealers who offer such a turntable assembly service gets smaller each year. At the entry-level, things are fine, because Rega and Pro-Ject both have a 'turn-key solution' – a deck where everything is done for you. But what happens at the higher end?

That's where the Clearaudio Concept comes in. The job *has* been done for you. The arm and MM cartridge have been fitted and aligned, even the counterweight and anti-skate have been adjusted. All you have to do is undo a couple of bits of tape and a stylus guard, put it somewhere light, level and rigid, use the supplied spirit level and level the feet until the bubble is in the right place. Fit the belt and the platter. No fuss, no bother, and you can be off playing music inside 10 minutes.

Of course the problem with all-in-one solutions is they can be cynical products made up of three kinds of dreck thrown together to

appeal to a lowest common denominator client at one remove from the company's usual clientele. Fortunately, Clearaudio doesn't do 'cynical', and each part of the Concept package represents a very good device in its own right. More a highest common factor, in fact.

“The problem with all-in-one solutions is they can be cynical products made up of three kinds of dreck.”



▶ The chassis is black MDF material, with a contrasting aluminium band around the outside. This isn't just for show, as it helps damp the MDF chassis' resonant properties; the dull 'thunk' of MDF seems kept at bay. A decoupled DC motor and a flat belt drive the sub platter; hardly a big or impressive motor, but more than enough to keep the platter assembly in motion. The motor itself is offset, in the same position Linn uses for its LP12 motor. The main platter is made from polyoxymethylene (also known as Delrin), which isn't commonly used for platters, but is a fine option because it's extremely inert and has a good weight to it. It doesn't come with a mat. Speed control is from a knob on the front left of the platter and includes 33, 45 and even 78 (although I don't think I'd want to play 78s with the cartridge supplied). The DC motor is controlled from an external plug-top 'wall-wart' power supply.

I was somewhat concerned by the use of a DC motor power supply in that they can 'hunt' for the right speed, but in use, the speed was perfectly stable and the DC motor meant no cogging effects. My only grumble here is the shift from 33 to 45 and back again takes a little longer than speed-box controlled AC motors, but only by a second or so.

The arm is a real honey, and indicative of the economies of scale Clearaudio must be hitting if it can build something this good for this little; you could happily spend a grand on this arm on its own from some smaller companies. The arm is a magnetic bearing (almost) unipivot design. It works by opposing magnets on the arm and the yoke, with the arm tube wired to prevent it launching or graunching. Clearaudio is fast becoming the magnetic expert in turntable replay, with an increasing number of Clearaudio decks sporting mag bearings. Used in this arm, it means a high degree of freedom of movement (although not the potentially disturbing freedom that comes from

a unipivot) coupled with no friction hang-ups. Although factory set, the arm does have the options to control anti-skate, VTA and of course downforce. Of these, anti-skate is the only setting that is more fiddly than usual, as it requires some under-the-deck adjustment.

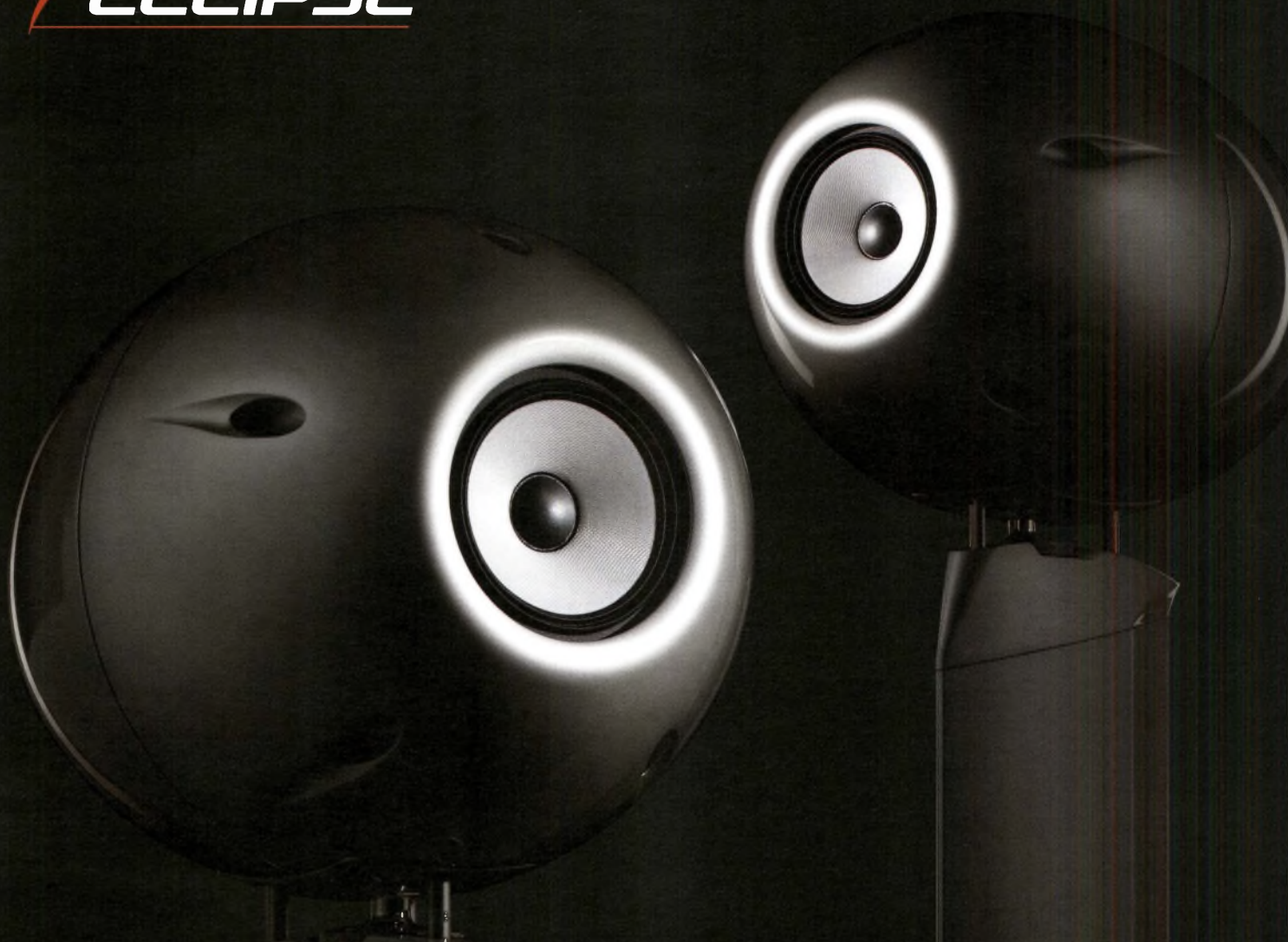
The cartridge is good value too. It's a moving magnet design with a nude stylus, that comes factory set with a downforce of 2.4g and I see no reason to change this. The VTA is similarly preset for about a 120-150g LP, but the whole package isn't particularly VTA fussy and lots of people who aren't Roy Gregory seldom feel the need to adjust VTA to suit particular discs. VTA adjustment is via an Allen key at the front of the arm base, so it's not suitable for on-the-fly changes. Best left as is.

My one concern with the cartridge is there doesn't seem to be any provision for replacement styli. As that stylus is denuded and exposed – and especially as the deck lacks a dust cover – it's the kind of thing that will end up getting swiped by kitty's paw or caught on a sleeve. As this really not designed for user adjustment (the manual suggests anything like adjusting VTA or anti-skate is the job for an expert and there's no alignment protractor or tools in the box to help you swap carts), you might need to be friends with your local dealer or learn how to change carts. An interchangeable stylus (or better yet, headshell) might help. ▶

“The arm is a real honey, and indicative of the economies of scale Clearaudio must be hitting if it can build something this good for this little.”



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January 2011



Issue 75

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Construction details: Resonance-optimised chassis turntable. Friction free tonearm with magnetic bearing technology

Speed ranges: 33 1/3, 45 and 78rpm

Drive unit (motor): Decoupled DC motor with low noise bearings

Bearing: Polished and tempered steel shaft in a sintered bronze bushing, runs on a mirror of Teflon

Platter: Black coloured POM, 30 mm thickness

Speed variation: ±0.04 %

Dimensions (WxDxH): 42x35x14cm

Weight: 7.5kg

Price (including arm and cartridge):

£1,100

Manufactured by Clearaudio
www.clearaudio.de

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“We live in a plug ‘n’ play world today. Although for many, installing an arm and cartridge is their idea of a perfect afternoon’s distraction, many of us want things to just work.”

► The Concept package aced all the basic tests well. The cartridge tracks extremely well on the HFN torture tracks and copes with semi collapsed tracks on a worn flat copy of the old Decca SXL version of the *1812* (this is not used for listening, but to see if the cartridge can salvage anything musical from the destroyed grooves... it can). The unipivot-esque arm helps here, and it can handle some relatively warped discs without topping or bottoming out. Clearaudio has an optional record clamp specific for the Concept, Innovation Compact and Innovation; if you have a lot of warped discs, consider this a must-have accessory, because the Delrin platter isn't that good at stopping warped discs from slipping and wowing in play. In most cases though, with LPs that don't double up as fruitbowls, there's no slip or wow whatsoever.

The cartridge doesn't just track well, it's exceptionally quiet too. This means it helps to quell the Rice Crispies effects on the run-in groove of an overplayed Dylan album.

Dylan's *Desire* also highlighted the one flaw of the sound; the top end can tend toward stridency. His Bobness' harmonica took on a shrillness that isn't usually in such full effect on vinyl. But *Desire* also pin-pointed the deck's greatest asset; that lithe, listenable and articulate midband. Dylan's voice rose out of the dense mix and you could easily separate the instruments even when 'Hurricane' goes all protesty. Move over to some baroque and Music For Drumlanrig (CRD) and the ambience of the East Lothian church hall is given free rein, while the Scottish Baroque Ensemble's playing retains its deft touch. This also shows just how light and bouncy the bass notes get; this LP was one of Linn's unofficial demo discs in the 1980s, and was every bit a part of the 'Tune Dem' schema, because it's remarkably 'boppy' for music composed nearly half a millennia ago. That boppiness is retained here in full effect, albeit this time not quite so forced as the sound of a mid-80s LP12. Which seems to suggest the Concept manages to combine accuracy and fun factor in equal measures. And that applies equally to music of all stripe and genre.

Set next to an SME 10 with a Benz Gullwing SLR, the limitations of the package began to show. Considering that the Clearaudio package costs about 1/6th that of the SME/Benz combo, things would be amiss if it didn't, but what's surprising is how close the Clearaudio gets. With the right phono stage, the SME/Benz combo has the edge in clarity and focus. There was a lot more refinement and force to the bass, and some extra depth in the deepest notes. They weren't missing through the Clearaudio, but they were less obvious and less integrated into the musical whole. But, on any level playing field, you'd have to admit the Clearaudio was delivering about 90-95% of what the SME/Benz could do, for about 17% of the price of admission.

We live in a plug 'n' play world today. Although for many, installing an arm and cartridge is their idea of a perfect afternoon's distraction, many of us want things to just work. The Concept does that beautifully, and makes a great sound in the process. Just site it somewhere light, rigid and level and away you go. +



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



MSB Technology Platinum DATA CD IV & Signature DAC IV

by Jason Kennedy

When I reviewed MSB's last Platinum transport and DAC, the mkIII iteration of these components, I spent a paragraph bemoaning the gulf between their appearance and their sonic capability. It used to be acceptable to make butt ugly kit that sounded great but those days are behind us, a fact that MSB Technology seems to have woken up to with its latest Platinum IV range. In most respects the build is commensurate with the price and sound quality, although when you get up to the top level Diamond DAC IV – which is fifty per cent more expensive than the Signature – you might want a more fancy box.

But as Peter Bartlett of Cyrus pointed out when I complained that his latest five grand a pair monoblocks didn't look any better than his five

hundred pound offering, what do you want to pay for; a case or an amplifier? His argument is that by spreading the cost of tooling for the Cyrus magnesium chassis over so many products you minimise the cost per unit. MSB is not a big numbers operation, but it's easy to see that if it started to use casework like that found on dCS products its prices would be in the same league, possibly higher. dCS is arguably the British equivalent of MSB, both are technology driven and produce a small range of very high end components, ►



▶ the difference being that MSB makes a broader range of products at a lower price. A situation achieved to some extent by its clear disdain for marketing; you only have to look up some of MSB's clips on YouTube to realise that this company is into technology before all else. The people talking to camera are clearly engineers who understand digital onions better than most, but they are not very glamorous and while clearly enthusiastic about their work largely avoid hyperbole.

“But what you might ask does all this technology do for the humble CD, the one format that we can get pretty much anything we want to hear on.”

MSB's DAC technology of choice is the ladder DAC, a multi-bit discrete design that uses multiple resistors to achieve its aim. The company built the first 24-bit ladder DAC in 2000 and the converters in its current range are a refinement of that design. The quality of the resistors is fundamental to the sound of the DAC and this is one of key differences between the three DAC modules available for the Platinum DAC. But these modules have not changed for Mk IV, what has changed is the casework and the electronic architecture. One issue was that the expansion capability of DAC III had been outgrown, so DAC IV has two 'massive' DSPs and a pair of expansion ports for future upgrades. The clock has been moved so that it is physically closer to the converters, which has reduced both noise and jitter, and it has two new digital inputs one or both of which can be USB2 connections if desired. My sample didn't have this option, but it's worth noting that the standard DAC IV accepts signals up to 192kHz and the Signature DAC's USB accepts signals up to 384kHz. Given that all the others I've come across can't cope with more than 96kHz this is pretty astounding, but MSB seems to like big numbers. The company provides information on how to set up PCs and Macs to give maximum resolution and even supplies test signals so that you can establish precisely what's coming into the DAC. Its LCD display usefully tells you the sample rate and bit depth of incoming signals.

Both transport and DAC require an external power supply, an inline supply comes as standard but for full effect a Power Base in the same casework as the DAC is available. These come in different levels to match the DAC modules so we had the Signature supply which runs both transport and DAC, but you can upgrade to a Diamond PSU for £800.

One option that I got to use is the optional volume control, a passive one which now operates in 1dB steps for fine level control, this combined with five digital and a one analogue input means that you don't necessarily need a separate preamp. Should you have one already there is an analogue bypass feature so that it can run through the DAC to the power amp(s). Having one volume control for analogue and another for digital will likely confuse secondary users however. Specs wise the DAC IV upsamples multiples of 44.1kHz to 352.8kHz and multiples of 48kHz to 384kHz, both at 32-bit resolution.

The final option which needs mentioning is the latest incarnation of MSB's iLink iPod dock which is now part of the DAC itself rather than being a separate cradle. MSB was the first to offer direct digital output from an iPod but needed to modify each player, this latest iteration works with any current iPod in standard form because Apple has changed its design to allow an S/PDIF output.

The Data CD IV transport comes in a matching case with the dangerous heat sinking fins and feet that isolate and damp the chassis. It may not be obvious but each Iso-rack leg contains a material much like Sorbothane to damp resonance, these legs also allow you to stack transport, DAC and ▶



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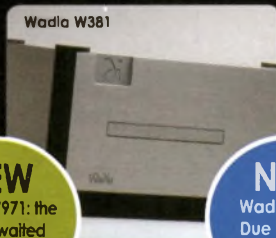


Qsonix User Interface



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▶ power supply. As the name suggests this is not merely a CD transport, it will play high resolution WAV files burnt onto a DVD as well as Reference Records' HRX discs (24/176.4). MSB shows you how to burn hi-res WAVs using iTunes, all you need is the hi-res material itself and this is now available to download from a number of audiophile labels.

The Data CD has all the usual digital outputs alongside MSB's proprietary transmission interface, MSB Network, which runs through RJ45 connectors in XLR sockets. This will transmit up to 32-bit/384kHz, and while this is pie in the sky resolution for most of us it provides pretty comprehensive future proofing. HD Tracks offers quite a few 88.2k and 96k albums including examples by artists including the Kinks, John Coltrane and Johnny Cash alongside a good selection of classical titles. These are FLACs which it might be better/easier to stream to the DAC IV via USB than converting to WAV but that's a comparison worth making.

But what you might ask does all this technology do for the humble CD, the one format that we can get pretty much anything we want to hear on. A staggering amount is the short answer, this is an uncannily revealing player that exposes the vast differences between recordings like no other digital source I've encountered. It is also a rather useful if minimal preamplifier with one of the least intuitive interfaces in the game. Fortunately its auto sensing feature means that you don't have to manually change between inputs but accessing things like single-ended or balanced output, changing filters and the like can be challenging if you don't have the manual to hand.

But there is really not much need to change things once its set-up, the only bit that needs changing is the disc and, so long as the rather flimsy plastic drawer doesn't grate, that's straight forward. Apparently a computer drive was chosen for its ability to read data discs and MSB listened to as many as it could in a quest to find the best sounding example. According to MSB's Jonathan Gullman "The other drives we evaluated with a nicer feeling drawer didn't have a close enough sound to the drive we selected to justify changing. Also, by using a stock drive it allows us to switch to a different drive if a better sounding one comes out in the future."

You can't help but enjoy the way this pairing unearths previously hidden details on pretty much everything you spin; on Kristin Schäfer's collection of Schubert lieder, 'Winterreise' always sounds good, but now it sounds really alive and dynamic. The singer is in the room as is the pianist and they bring the acoustic of the original venue with them, not only this but they bring the music with them. All too many high resolution digital sources fall at this crucial hurdle but the MSB system has a flow to it that is engrossing, the charm and titillation of the material being presented in full effect.

"This is an uncannily revealing player that exposes the vast differences between recordings like no other digital source I've encountered."

As ever the rest of the system has to be up to the job and the better it is the more you will hear, I had the pleasure of using these components with Valvet and Gamut amplification connected via Townshend DCT cable to PMC Fact 8 loudspeakers. A system that allowed the sound to expand out from the speakers and fill the room to tremendous effect. And a system that lets you hear that the MSB system presents more of the note envelope than most, a situation that makes for tremendously vivid music thanks to an abundance of detail that the system corals into a cohesive whole.

Using an iPod Shuffle in place of the Data drive does a pretty impressive job as well, one that comes surprisingly close considering the usual expectations of such devices. It's not as detailed nor dynamic as the transport proper but delivers a better result than you have any right to expect of an iPod. Another bonus is that the MSB handset controls the iPod. My own third gen iPod Touch proved less happy, emitting low level noises along with the music. I sent it back to Apple's Service Centre but they weren't able to replicate the issue, which suggests that ▶



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Platinum Signature DAC IV

Inputs: Coaxial (RCA and BNC), Toslink, Balanced AES/EBU, MSB Network (32 bit) and Balanced Analog input (<600 ohms) (All 384 kHz)

RCA Outputs: 3.6V RMS (10V pp)

Balanced Outputs: 7.5V RMS (20V pp)

Output Impedance: 50 ohms at 0 dB

Optional Volume Control: 1 dB Stepped Attenuator with 1/2 or 1/4dB steps selectable (+9 to -69 dB)

Sampling Frequency: 1.5 MHz up to 3 MHz

Digital Filter: 32x Digital Filter by MSB Technology

Platinum Data CD IV

Outputs: Coaxial, Toslink, Balanced AES/EBU and MSB Network (384kHz)

Sampling Frequency: up to 384 kHz

Control Features: Remote, Display Dim Mode

Upgrade Options: 384 kHz Upsampling

Price: Platinum Signature DAC IV & Signature PSU: £14,000

Volume control: £1,850

Platinum Data CD IV: £3,200

Manufacturer:

URL: www.msbtech.com

Distributor: ABC Audio

Tel: 020 8462 1379

URL: www.abc-audio.co.uk

▶ they don't have a digital dock of any form and thus have no idea of how good their products are. Someone sell Steve Jobs a Platinum DAC IV forthwith!

I thought I had better check that the Data IV transport itself wasn't making the iPod sound great by virtue of being not so great, the overall sound suggests it is but could that be the DAC alone. It would seem not, using another player as a transport revealed a soft focussed, small scale sound that was coarse by comparison, it wasn't disastrous but clearly a step down. Going back to the MSB drive brought back harmonics, image solidity and vibrancy of tone.

I very much enjoyed the way you can follow individual instruments within a mix, all decent sources allow this to some extent but here the extent was considerably greater than usual. The texture of the bass guitar on Steely Dan's 'Boston Rag' for instance is obvious as is the somewhat compressed nature of the latest remastering of the album (*Countdown to Ecstasy*), there always seems to be a little squeezing involved with a remaster, however restricted the original. What is also inspiring is the way that the tune still takes the lead, while it's easy to separate things out this doesn't get in the way of the musical message and you can forget about detail and just enjoy the experience. Better recordings are rather obvious, Antonio Forcione's efforts on the Naim label being a good example, here the lows were velvety in their sumptuousness and the tabla really pops out of the speakers.

"I very much enjoyed the way you can follow individual instruments within a mix."

I discovered when moving over to an alternative power amp that the way you set-up output on the DAC IV can make the difference between operation and none. The SE and balanced setting has to match the power amp – which may be single ended even though it has an XLR input. Both the Valvet and Gamut D200 amps have XLR inputs, but only the latter is actually balanced.

The DAC IV volume control works rather well with an analogue input as well, it lets an awful lot through, majoring on scale and transparency to the recording's subtleties and dynamics. While not quite in the league of a serious analogue preamp it's close enough and could easily usurp what you already have if multiple inputs are not required.

I have enjoyed the capabilities of quite a few very good disc spinners in recent times and some of them have been extremely engaging, the Rega Isis and EMM Labs's two-boxer being the best examples. However, neither of these manage to illuminate the dynamic, spatial and textural differences between recordings to the same degree as the MSB stack. Whether the MSBs have the same degree of engagement would take a comparison but that really depends on what you are looking for in a digital source. The MSB's timing is extremely good, but it's not the main emphasis as it is with the Rega for instance, and I suspect that in the long term the breadth of ability on offer here will bring you as much if not more musical pleasure. With the right disc it might even get you closer to audio nirvana, it's certainly the most resolute digital source I've heard. And it's not even the company's best DAC! +



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Bowers & Wilkins P5 Headphones

by Tom Martin

Bowers and Wilkins is a long-established English manufacturer of audio loudspeakers, that recently expanded successfully into iPod and iPhone-related products with its Zeppelin one-box iPod systems and desktop audio with its MM-1 computer speakers. But last year the company has introduced a full-size, on-ear headphone called the P5—the very first headphone it has ever produced.

The P5 is designed for musical accuracy in a mobile environment. As such, B&W has employed high-strength neodymium magnets and a carefully shaped Mylar diaphragm in the P5. These features, however, do little to differentiate the P5 from any number of other similarly configured headphones, though I would note that the devil is in the details here.

B&W has made real efforts to give the P5 some noise isolation, though this is not an active noise-cancelling headphone. Note particularly the use of sheep's leather from New Zealand and memory foam in the P5's supple ear pads, which serve to create a user-specific seal to the outer ear.

The P5 is a 26-Ohm headphone, with rated sensitivity of 115-dB/1V (or 100-dB/1mW). As such, it should be work well driven directly from a portable device.

It has several attractive attributes in actual use. First, it is a close-backed headphone, so fewer external noises get to your ears and less of your music leaks out to disturb those around you. Second, even though this is an on-ear rather than circumaural design, the compliance of the ear pads' leather and memory foam provides a bit of a seal and again reduces noise transfer. On my test flight on an MD-80, I immediately sensed a decrease in noise when putting the P5 on. This isn't as dramatic as one would hear with active noise cancellation,

but it helped a lot. In an office, this level of noise reduction would be nearly ideal.

The ear pads, combined with a low-pressure headband, mean that the P5 is quite comfortable for long periods. I would rate it as among the most comfortable in my experience, though heads differ, as may your experience. This test took place in December, so I couldn't test the heat/perspiration factor using our standard Texas blast furnace simulation technology, but indoors there was no issue.

Those ear pads pivot, so that the P5 lies flat in the included case. The P5 is therefore easy to store in a backpack or briefcase, but the ear pads don't fold inside the headband, so the footprint is relatively large.

The cord is short-ish at a bit over a meter. I think this is ideal, but your circumstances may make you wish for a somewhat longer cord. The cord is also very thin, which helps with packing and reducing the tug factor.

I also found the P5 fully capable of being driven by an iPhone 4. I used the P5 on a flight from Chicago to Austin and volume was more than adequate. A mic and remote cable are included for iPhone use, meaning that the P5 can also serve as a headset.

A significant part of most headphone reviews deals with the inevitable difficulty of reproducing upper midrange and high frequencies in a way that sounds natural. Basically, our recordings, ears and brains are designed for music that is reproduced by sound sources that are located some distance from us, and are not designed for music reproduced a fraction of an inch from the ear. Headphones therefore have to deal with the nasty issue of HRTFs (head-related transfer functions), which is basically how our heads and outer ears

equalize sounds coming from the outside world.

This is easier said than done. First of all, there isn't complete agreement about what the frequency domain effects of HRTFs are. The HRTF has to be observationally derived and with the inevitable variations between human research subjects it is easy to see why there might be divergent viewpoints on HRTF effects. Second, getting a low-distortion driver to render the inverse of the HRTF frequency response curve is difficult. Headphone makers have to create a carefully shaped peak in the upper midrange and lower treble which is a quite different goal than what they're trying to achieve with loudspeakers or microphones. Finally, HRTF isn't just a frequency response concept, but also a timing concept.

The reader may be wondering at this point why I've provided a mini-treatise on headphone design issues instead of covering the B&W P5 headphones. Well, it is because the P5 so simply and stunningly gets this HRTF compensation right. In the P5 we have a loudspeaker maker doing something objectively quite different from a loudspeaker and in the process showing up a bunch of headphone manufacturers who've been at it for decades. I was surprised, to say the least. The midrange and treble of the P5 sounds quite natural, and they make you realize (even if you've spilt many a word on the subject) how subtly but importantly most headphones deviate from the ideal.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Accessories: cloth carrying case, microphone/remote

Frequency response: 10 Hz – 20 kHz

Weight: 195 grams

Sensitivity: 115 dB (1 V input) or approximately 100 dB/1 mW

Impedance: 26 ohms

Warranty: Two years, parts and labour

Price: £249

Manufactured by Bowers and Wilkins Group Ltd

URL: www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1903 221500

To be specific, the upper range of the P5 does a few things better than most. First, the P5 treble sounds fine grained. Instruments and voices have a smoothness combined with a level of detail that is aligned with the way things sound in reality. It also does a fine job of producing low-level midrange and treble sounds. You need this to hear the space where the recording was made and to hear the upper harmonics that differentiate instruments. While you might not care about those things in an analytical sense, but you need them in order for music to sound natural. Finally, the midrange and treble of the P5 sounds dynamic without being harsh, edgy or hard.

One example of this treble purity comes on Jack Johnson's 'Wasting Time' (*On and On*, UMVD). The electric guitar/amp in the intro can have a painfully hard sound on many components—especially on those that have a small peak in the upper midrange or lower treble. The P5, however, passes this test brilliantly: the guitar is dynamic but it doesn't "shout" or distract.

“To be specific, the upper range of the P5 does a few things better than most.”

This natural clarity and balance extends across almost all of the frequency range from upper treble down to upper bass (roughly 100hz to 15khz). The P5 simply sounds well defined, relaxed and open. Overall bass/midrange/treble macro balance is quite natural.

Upper bass is within the P5's broad area of strength. On 'Happy House' from Old and New Dreams' *A Tribute to Blackwell* (Black Saint), the tom-tom drums are clear and tight. Similarly, Ginger Baker's drum kit on "Toad" from Cream's *Wheels of Fire* (Polydor) is amazingly well defined and dynamic. The long drum solo section makes heavy use of snare and tom-tom and the skin definition (in a 42 year old recording of one of the all time great drum solos) is impressive and the dynamics really engaging.

Once you get below 100 Hz, the P5 has some weaknesses, though they aren't severe. Bass rolls off slowly as the frequency goes down. That means that to some ears the P5 will sound slightly lightly balanced down low. It also means the P5 isn't ideal for power rock that depends on strong midbass for its dynamic flow. Before taking that too literally, however, note that my newfound appreciation for the '60s power trio Cream happened courtesy of the P5. But, if you are looking for punchy bass at high volumes, look elsewhere.

The Jack Johnson track mentioned above demonstrates the slight midbass limitations of the P5. When the string bass enters during the intro the level is good, but the definition is somewhat blurred. The somewhat lower pitched bass on the Jack Johnson track 'Dreams Be Dreams' fares a little better, again showing good—though certainly not over-rich—balance and a reasonable if slightly blurred sense of air.

But unless you consider yourself a bass junkie, don't let these quibbles throw you off. The P5 is a major achievement and must be heard by anyone interested in accurate headphones for a mobile environment. Ultimately, the P5's midrange and high frequency smoothness and detail are excellent, and if you would like to reach that goal with a headphone that imposes few tradeoffs elsewhere in the audio spectrum, the P5 is hard to beat. I'd also consider the P5 if comfort is critical to you (come to think of it, isn't comfort critical for everyone?), or if you prefer a headphone that really doesn't need an auxiliary headphone amp. In other words, the P5 is a headphone revelation! +



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Edge G6 power amplifier

by Alan Sircom

Edge electronics make what – to my mind, at least – must be the most ugly amplifier known to man; the NL Reference. These two hip-high bollard-pyramids of gently s-curved heatsinks might deliver 800 watts and sport laser-guided bipolar output devices. They may well sound amazing (and from the limited exposure I've had to these six-figure power amps at shows in the US, they certainly live up to the hype). But the looks... sorry, way too Luxor for my tastes.

Edge doesn't only make statement pieces. The G6 stereo chassis offers a sweet taste of what the best of the brand can do, at a price that doesn't need to come with an asthma inhaler. This standard sized two-channel power amp still manages to deliver a healthy 135 watts per channel into eight ohms. It features a conventional bias circuit (as opposed to Edge's signature laser bias, which fires a 630nm laser at the silicon of the output devices to act as a servo feedback system), a single 600VA transformer and a large 40,000µF of power supply filtration.

The amplifier itself is as simple as it comes; a pair of RCA sockets in an grooved panel, a good pair of speaker terminals, an IEC socket and a power switch at the back. And a blue LED at the front. The amp is finished in a choice of silver or silver and the rounded sandwich design stands out from the pack. The whole package is built with a reassuringly solid feel, like this isn't the sort of amp that anyone's going to call 'twitchy' or 'unreliable'.

Edge makes a claim – admittedly a claim more for the laser biased amps – that its amplifiers finally realise the potential of solid-state as the replacement to valves, as they deliver a speed of transient attack that only silicon can manage, with the harmonic richness of tubes, and this is a claim I can mostly agree with. The G6 also offers the promise of greater things as you move up the line.

There is a distinct and satisfying urgency to the sound of music on the G6. There's a speed to transient attack and leading edges that gives a sense of realism to percussive and rhythmic instruments (and that includes piano and guitar shredders). This is not an emphasis on leading edges, and the amp doesn't sound fake or aggressive because of this sense of balance, but it does serve to show just how slow a lot of designs can sound in comparison.

This speed of delivery is matched by a sound that is best summed up as both 'clean' and 'sweet', and it's here that I concur with Edge's own assessment of its performance. The 'clean' part channels the best of solid-state sound, while the 'sweet' conjures up images of very good valve power. Once again, these two elements are in dynamic balance; the 'clean' sound balanced by the 'sweet' and vice versa, so the overall performance doesn't pitch into that etched sound that can plague detailed solid-state equipment, but also doesn't over compensate and deliver something soft, warm and romantic, but completely free from drama.

These three elements – 'fast', 'clean' and 'sweet' – are the prevailing first impressions. You could easily stop here and be satisfied. Longer term listening though unveiled the aspects of the performance that are almost masked by these big three. Such as the G6's outstanding levels of detail and clarity, wide, ▶

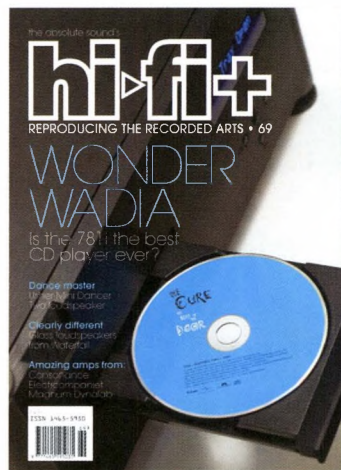
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► precise soundstage and effortless dynamic range. Because the fast, clean, sweet sound acts as a signature writ large, it's easy to overlook just how competent the amplifier is across the board. But go deeper and spend some time with the amp and you discover its suppressed strengths. Suppressed isn't the right word here, because the detail and dynamics are on show from the first track you play, but you are psychologically drawn to major strengths of the Edge. Most power amps are less forthcoming in the long term. There's an analogy with literature here; the Edge is a classic next to the pot boilers of commonplace amps, it deserves revisiting to unwrap its true depths.

There's a contemporary bonus too. This is the shallow end of a pool that goes all the way to DarTZeel as well as Edge's own NL series. That characteristic speed of attack and clean-sweet sound is common to both the Swiss and the American amp makers. Given the DarTZeel designs are some of the most well-received and 'now' sounding audio designs, that the little G6 gets you a long way down that DarTZeel path for a lot less than half the price of admission to the DarTZeel club, you can perhaps see why this is not just another power amp.

The one tempering force is this... choose your preamp wisely. It's easy to make 'fast', 'clean' and 'sweet' turn into 'forward', 'hard' and 'brash' with the wrong preamp in front of it. This is perhaps where Edge power amplifiers get a reputation for sounding very solid-state (or perhaps it's as simple as people reading the name 'Edge' and assuming they are 'edgy'). How you can tell whether you have the right preamp stuff is whether your music tastes are altered; the G6 is genre-agnostic with the good matches, but will pitch you toward certain styles if the preamp isn't a perfect partner. ARC and Conrad-Johnson preamps are perfect partnerships though; as is the Siltech C1 tested in this issue. Although not the sort of match people would make normally,

"The Edge is a classic next to the pot boilers of commonplace amps, it deserves revisiting to unwrap its true depths."

I can foresee not much in the way of good things coming from the marriage of, say, Naim and Edge or Exposure and Edge. Not that the preamps are wrong, not that the Edge is wrong, just that the two will likely go together like halibut cooked in cocoa powder and Marmite.

The Edge G6 leaves me wanting more. If the base model is this good, do they get better as they go up the range? Is laser biasing really a great leap forward? Are Edge's preamps and source components as good as this power amp? Is there something more to the big pyramids than a tall tower of heatsinks? One thing's clear, this isn't the last you'll hear of Edge. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Input: 1x pair RCA single-ended phono plugs

Output: five way binding posts

Power output: 135 watts per channel/ eight ohms

Constant current capability: 14 amps

Output impedance: 0.07 ohms

Output impedance: 33k ohms

Conventional bias

1x 600VA transformer

40,000µF power supply filtration per channel

Dimensions (WxHxD): 42.5x12x38cm

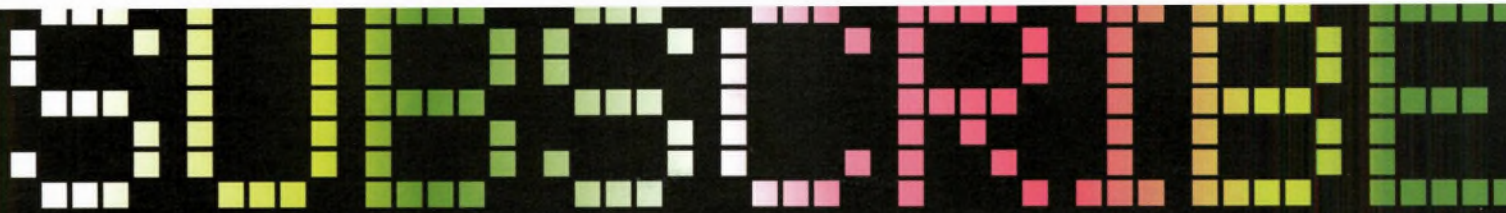
Weight: 22.7kg

Price: £4,900

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Chord Company Sarum Digital cable

by Malcolm Steward

The Chord Company Sarum is a truly magnificent digital interconnect cable that costs £1,500 for a one-metre example. That sounds a pretty stratospheric price for a short length of wire with a plug on either end... until you hear it perform, that is.

That digital interconnects can influence the portrayal of music is a contentious subject, with some folk believing that the simplistic concept of digital – the signal being just 1s and 0s – precludes anything but faultless transmission. This notion ignores the fact that in many situations digital really is nothing more than a concept: when being transmitted down a wire digital signals are no more than very high frequency square waves, and as such are just as susceptible to cable-related influence as any other analogue data.

My Naim HDX hard disk player used to connect to my Naim DAC through a Chord Company Indigo Plus coaxial digital cable (BNC-BNC). This was a relatively dear (£425) three conductor confection that offered the most coherent, and most analogue-sounding performance I had ever heard from a digital cable. When I compared it to a very respectable and highly respected cable from another manufacturer, I was absolutely floored by the unquestionable musical superiority of the Indigo Plus. It was, quite frankly, in a completely different league to other digital leads I had heard. Although impractical from a reviewer's point of view – its sheer bulk and inflexibility making dressing it consistently a pain when it was constantly being removed and refitted – it looked funky and appropriately expensive. Then I happened across the rather more conventional looking Sarum and it had me revisiting that same experience of downright incredulity.



The Sarum is not an especially flash looking cable. It appears, in truth, rather discreet and mundane. Underneath its white outer sheath, which is rather more reserved than the purple outer covering of the Indigo Plus, there lies a complex array of shielding. Chord describes its corporate pursuit of advanced shielding as an obsession, and says that the shielding of Sarum Digital is the most effective – and expensive to produce – that it has used to date. The whole purpose of the Sarum development process was for the company to take its existing sophisticated construction methodologies and materials – including shielding, Teflon, and silver-plated conductors – and see how far it could stretch each of them.



What this does to music's timing has to be experienced to be fully appreciated. Rhythms are better defined and more decisive: there is no suggestion of any ambiguity about the musicians' playing; they are firmly in – or out of – the pocket; playing with precision or plodding; grooving or grasping.

This enhancement, albeit outwardly marginal, brings an immediately recognisable added rightness to music and, to use a meaningless cliché, makes music make better sense: for example, you can readily understand why a guitar player chose a particular chord progression or riff because of the feeling it imparts to the performance. Their logic becomes instantly apparent, and it becomes far easier for the music to stir your emotions.

The improvements come regardless of the bit-rate to which you are listening although I feel that higher resolutions certainly tend to magnify them. The most marked performance leap came when I played Aurelio Martinez' 'Laru Beya' and 'Inweyu' from his 24-bit/44.1kHz album *Garifuna Afro-Combo*: his bass player and percussionist's instruments, especially, exhibited razor-sharp leading and trailing edge definition, which punched the music along relentlessly while Martinez' guitar was just as brilliantly and accurately defined and etched as it played above them.

“Their logic becomes instantly apparent, and it becomes far easier for the music to stir your emotions.”

Accordingly, Sarum Digital uses conductors that are polished before being silver-plated, and then insulated with gas-foamed Teflon. The conductors in the digital cable are subsequently wrapped in a spiral shield made from heavy gauge, silver-plated copper, unlike the analogue cables which use a high-density, braided shield and an extremely heavy gauge foil shield. This process, alone, adds considerably to the cost of making the digital cable but Chord decided that the enhanced performance fairly justified the price.

The Indigo Plus coped with silence far better than other cables: when a note ended you heard nothing; no smeary overhang or noise, just silence. Sarum demonstrates that this was not truly the case because its silences appear far more acutely defined.

SPECIFICATIONS

Price: £1,500 per metre

Manufactured by The Chord Company

URL: www.chord.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1980 625700

Another 24-bit/44.1kHz recording, 'Dead Against Smoking' from Admiral Fallow's album *Boots met my Face* demonstrated the ability of the cable to polish the cosmetic elements of a performance as well as render it with greater musical integrity. In fact, the acute instrumental and vocal detailing presented the music such that you felt truly drawn into the proceedings and compelled to examine, savour and enjoy every strand scrupulously. I am not suggesting here that the cable majors exclusively on the intellectual aspects of a performance because Sarum Digital most definitely both pleases the brain and satisfies the soul.

On both of these recordings the dynamic presentation was near perfectly measured. The contrast on such as a briskly whacked snare or a rim-shot seemed heightened by the silence from which the sound emerged: the Sarum certainly possesses a remarkable startle factor.

This ability to reveal even the slightest dynamic or pitch variation worked to fine effect on aged 16-bit recordings as well as the more modern. The cable seems to reveal more about such recordings than its competition. Angus Young's guitar playing on AC/DC's 'Rock and Roll Ain't Noise Pollution', which is not exactly a densely layered mix and ought not obscure nuances, was particularly well revealed, with subtle, fraction of a tone, string bends during the intro being overtly highlighted. It was almost as though he had a pneumatic whammy bar fitted to his Gibson SG for that track, such was the precision and deftness of the modulation he was applying.

All in, the Chord Sarum strikes me as a truly special cable, one to use in a revealing system that you want to turn into a hyper-revealing system. In an appropriate setting it provides immense levels of clarity without a hint of clinical sterility. It is far too accomplished to waste in a mediocre system: only the best will suffice if you want to enjoy the myriad delights it has to offer. +



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Musical Fidelity V-Link

by Alan Sircom

The Musical Fidelity V-Link is an important device for the audiophile. It functions in an utilitarian, virtually foo-free manner, and performs a task that's difficult to achieve elsewhere, at least without spending more money, time and effort.

It's a 24/96 Asynchronous USB to S/PDIF connector box, for the princely sum of £100. Other devices do a similar task – most notably products in the Hi-Face range – but they are either more expensive or require special drivers loaded on the computer to run. Or both. But the V-Link lets you plug a USB cable into one side and either a coaxial or optical connector into the other, tell your PC that the V-Link is connected and is ready to go. There are two LEDs – one to tell you the USB is powering the V-Link, the other to tell you signals are happening – and nothing else.

So why is the V-Link so useful? The computer audio revolution isn't so much 'coming' as 'already here', and the easiest way of making your computer talk hi-fi is through a DAC. Trouble is, unless you bought one of the New Wave of DACs in the last five years or so, the preferred computer output – USB – is lost to you. The V-Link saves you buying a new DAC. For some with some really exotic DACs of the past, that alone justifies the purchase.

It's also asynchronous. This is fast becoming the *de facto* audiophile way of getting good quality sounds out of a computer, by letting the clock in the DAC take the lead, instead of relying on the clock chip inside the host device. In tests, the V-Link sounded considerably more upbeat and coherent when used with a matching V-DAC than through the V-DAC's own USB input.

Finally, one of the potential problems with using a computer in a hi-fi context is noise. Not just fans or spinning discs, electrical and RF noise being transferred along any electrical connection has been anecdotally linked with undermining the sound of the system... even when not playing the computer audio source, so long as the computer is powered up. The potential noise ingress

can be totally stopped at the digital input of the DAC by using an optical cable instead of an electrical one. Whether this problem is a problem seems to depend on so many near-random variables that it's worth a spot of experimentation. I wouldn't call this a key function of the V-Link, but when it's a benefit, it's a major benefit.

Of course there will be those who say 'just use the optical output from your computer'. Once again, a spot of experimentation is in order. When I tried this with both my Mac and Windows laptops, in both cases the sound from the V-Link was more focused through USB than through the optical input. Not by a deal-breaking amount, but enough to make a little more sense of the music. And more than enough to justify buying one.

Criticisms are few and far between. It doesn't cope with anything beyond 24/96, so those with 24/176 or 24/192 files will find the V-Link wanting. But given the small number of 24/192 files available, you have to ask yourself whether it's worth going the extra mile. Intellectually, that sits uncomfortably with audiophile sensibilities, but it's a pragmatic approach that echoes many people's music collections, both now and potentially even in the future.

So the Musical Fidelity V-Link still justifies itself. If you have a pre-USB (or even pre-Asynchronous USB) digital converter, this box keeps you future proof. +

PRODUCT DETAILS

Price: £100

Manufactured by Musical Fidelity

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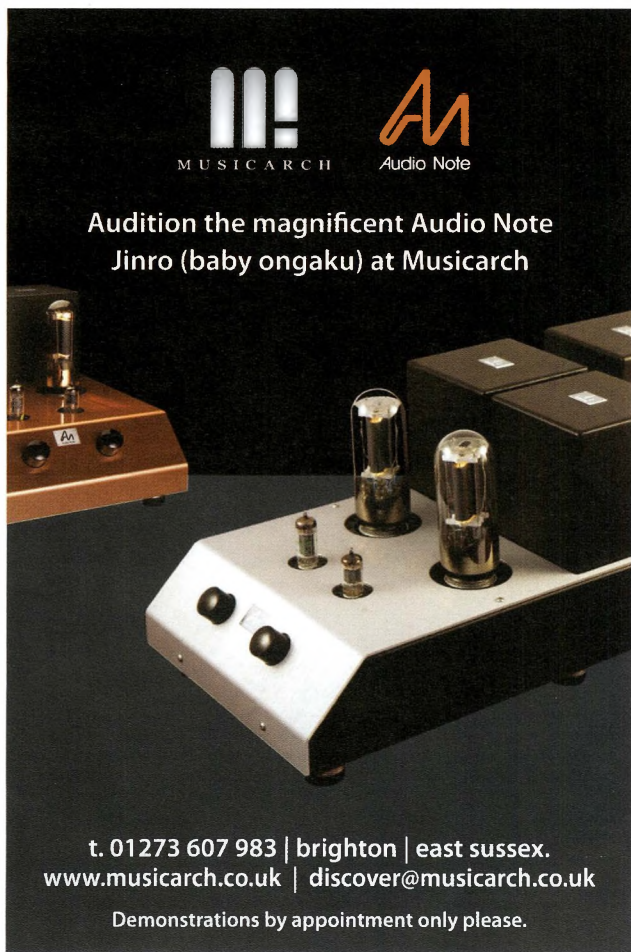
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record reviews

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:
 Contemporary – Alan Sircom
 Audiophile/Jazz – Dennis D. Davis
 Classical – Mark Lehman,
 Andrew Quint

Key to Icons

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Agnes Obel
Philharmonics
 PIAS Recordings



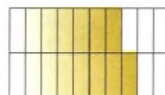
Agnes Obel is a Danish singer, songwriter and musician. She is perhaps best known for being co-founder of the Copenhagen-based band Sohio, but now she's gone solo, and *Philharmonics* is her first solo project. Really solo; she composes, sings, plays, is her own backing singer, records and produces herself.

Her music is stark, ethereal, acoustic and deceptively simple. There's some underlying melancholy, which can sound slightly fey, but there's none of that 'made for phone adverts' commercialism that undermines a lot of breathy girl albums.

OK, by about track four you start clamouring for something up beat, but you also can't help thinking this one's one to watch. There's a beauty in the sombre flow of sound. It's also very well recorded, although not for someone seeking a natural acoustic or lots of audiophile ambience. As it's all slightly samey, it's difficult to pick out a particular track, but if you like Joanna Newsom or even Rickie Lee Jones and want more than squeaks and harps, check out Agnes Obel.

If you find modern pop and rock music lacking in miserablism, this will prove a welcome change. Just one look at the album cover proves that – not cheery, then... and all the better for it!

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Danger Mouse & Sparklehorse
Dark Night of the Soul
 Capitol EMI



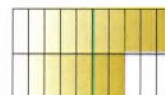
This is how to make an album in the second decade of the 21st Century. There was a 5,000 copy boxed set comprising two, gatefold LPs (of the album and an instrumental version), two CDs of the same content, cards, a poster, prints and a numbered limited edition book of a visual narrative of photographs by the director David Lynch. Once that went, there were still standard LP, double 180g LPs, CDs, MP3s and the rest to get through. A magnificent effort that deserves high praise in its own right.

Musically, it's also an indie must-have. Because of the sheer number of people collaborating on the project, it could so easily have descended into a mish-mash of styles, but instead each track is occupied by the artist, and each is contiguous with the rest of the album. It's not a concept album, but the tracks sound best in context.

The recording quality itself is a touch 'wall of sound', but subtle and not overproduced and – rare in today's release – not dynamically squashed. Especially on the LP mixes.

This is a bittersweet release; not long after the album finally hit the stores, Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse took his life, thereby ending the band's 15 year career.

RECORDING
 MUSIC





Tame Impala

Innerspeaker

Modular



Psychedelic jazz-blues indie rock from Australia, that frequently gets mentioned in the same hushed tones as Love and Cream, as well as new acts like Animal Collective and Dungen. Isn't this a big part of the fun of living in 2011?

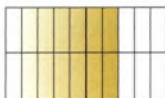
Innerspeaker has got all the elements of good ol' unreconstituted late-1960s trippy music; off-kilter harmonies, fuzz-box meets flanger guitar sounds, synths, lyrics that make no sense (but sound a little like John Lennon), but with more up-to-date back beats. All it needs is a Mellotron to cast you right back to 1967.

Flick through your music and if you've any Gong, Amon Düül or Hawkwind albums, have ever listened to *Piper at the Gates of Dawn* twice in a single sitting, or are old enough to have gone to the Middle Earth club in Covent Garden, this is for you.

Don't expect magical things from the recording, it's all phasey and rolled off and lo-fi, but that's not the point. Most of those psychedelic recordings from nearly four and a half decades ago weren't exactly high fidelity either.

Go on, shock your kids by buying something as trendy as you can get. Who knows, they might start playing your records!

RECORDING



MUSIC



The Black Crowes

Croweology

Silver Arrow



Growing old (dis)gracefully is a tough act for any band, but The Black Crowes' Rolling Stones obsession did give them a good role model. *Croweology* is a 20 track retrospective, given a unique spin. The Crowes went back into the studio to re-work those tracks, giving them a mostly acoustic, laid-back bar-room feel. Acoustic guitars, hand claps, mandolins and honky tonk pianos replace walls of Marshall amps and crunked up guitars, and the whole effect works well.

Except for 'Hard to Handle' the band's hits are there – 'Jealous Again', 'Remedy', 'Soul Singing' – as well as one cover of Chris Etheridge/Gram Parsons' 'She'. Some are slightly redundant in the Crowes Catalog – a slower acoustic version of 'She Talks to Angels' seems pointless, although the use of fiddle in place of guitars gives it 'Country Honk'-esque cred.

Some might question the 'acousticness' of the album, but the shift-down-a-gear, swampy and laid back sound gives the music a slick, live feel. Not close micing helps, too.

Rather than a cynical exercise in repackaging old wine in new bottles, think of this as a gift to Black Crowes fans; slick musicians breathing new life into their classics that have sustained their fans for two decades.

RECORDING



MUSIC



Violens

Amoral

Static Recital

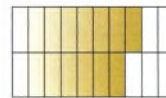


There's a whole new aesthetic in town. If you want to be anything in the indie world today, you got to go DIY. And debut album *Amoral* by Violens is DIY's first masterpiece since *The XX*. And like *The XX*, Violens relies heavily on synth pop sounds from the 1980s. All the while penning lyrics about pain, death and suffering.

It's a scattergun approach to style; tracks like 'Acid Reign' sound like U2 meets Echo and the Bunnymen, while 'Full Collision' sounds like The Las made a cover version of a Smiths record, sung by Lloyd Cole. But perhaps the band Violens most sounds like is ...*From Across The Kitchen Table*-era Pale Fountains, which is a very fine place to be for some of us still vaguely stuck in the 1980s. Strange then that this uniquely English sound comes from a New York-based band, best known for hanging out with MGMT.

Perhaps what's remarkable about Violens isn't the music, it's the recording process itself. This kind of polished almost over-produced sound would have once been the preserve of the sort of big studios. Now, it can be done by almost anyone; all it takes is a bedroom studio, some virtual instruments and lots of homebrew talent. If there's a bright future for music, Violens is leading the charge.

RECORDING



MUSIC

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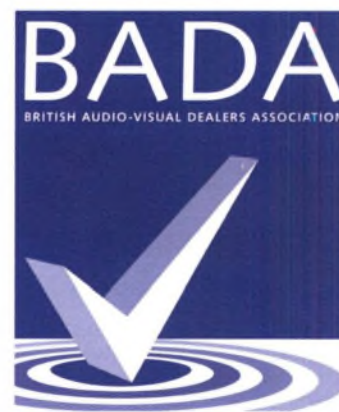
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By Alan Sirhan

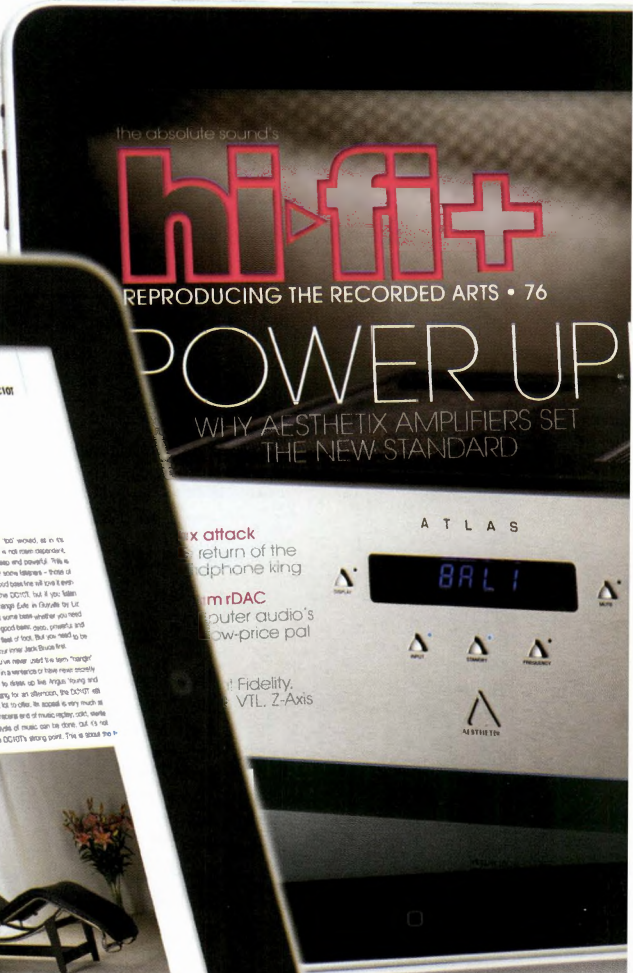
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Freddie Hubbard 
The Artistry of Freddie Hubbard
 Impulse!/Analogue Production AS-27

Listening to Freddie Hubbard at his prime reminds me of the scene in *Blade Runner*, where Tyrell says to the replicant Batty, “The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long”. Hubbard played brilliantly during his early years—his incredible technical ability and musicality shine through in his albums for Blue Note, Impulse and CTI and as a sideman on some of the greatest jazz albums of the 1960s.

Artistry is one of Hubbard’s two albums for Impulse! His sextet is filled out with a very sympathetic grouping of Curtis Fuller on trombone, John Gilmore on tenor, Tommy Flanagan on piano, Art Davis on bass and Louis Hayes on drums.

This is an album that’s like a merry-go-round. When you get off you’re a little dizzy but can’t wait to jump back on for another go at it. Even on the ballad ‘Summertime’ Hubbard’s intense blowing and the insistent rhythm section leave you holding your breath.

Recorded by Rudy Van Gelder, this is a respectable sounding album, if not as impeccable as the best of his Impulse! recordings. Kevin Gray has done a top-flight job of mastering this LP for 45-RPM play and the album jackets are first class packages, indeed better than the originals.



Grachan Moncur III 
Evolution
 Blue Note/Music Matters 84153

Trombone enthusiasts must have been a little shocked when young Grachan Moncur burst on the scene in the early 60’s with a steady stream of compositions and a new style of playing trombone foreign to those used to listening to Jay Jay Johnson.

He started out at Blue Note playing on (and composing for) two Jackie McLean albums, and then recorded two as leader. *Evolution* is composed of four Moncur songs, played by Lee Morgan, Jackie McLean, Bobby Hutcherson, Bob Cranshaw and Anthony Williams.

It’s a haunting and at the same time dramatic piece of music making. ‘Air Raid’ establishes the tone of the album. The title tune is an exquisite piece of writing that should be set to modern ballet.

The playful *The Coaster* brings more of a 60’s groove to the otherwise “out there” session. *Monk In Wonderland* brings to mind both Alice and Thelonious. Moncur could have had two-disc 45-RPM LPs in mind when he wrote this album, as each of the four extended pieces fits perfectly to a side of a 45 record. Done up in Music Matter’s always sumptuous packaging and perfect mastering, this excellent title may be new to some but should not remain that way. Very highly recommended.



Pee Wee Russell 
New Groove
 Columbia/Pure Pleasure CS3785

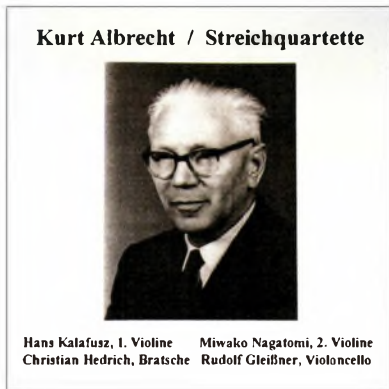
Pee Wee Russell started recording jazz clarinet in the 1920s and kept at it until 1967, a couple years shy of his death. Pee Wee’s playing was never old fashioned and his love of and expertise at modern jazz shown through on many of his recordings.

This 1962 cut is a mix of Coltrane and Monk compositions, with updated standards, and reflects the unique nature of Russell’s gifts. This quartet has a front line of clarinet and trombone (played by Marshall Brown). Their version of ‘Moten Swing’ remains my favourite small group rendition of that classic.

But the best is the back-to-back performance of Billy Strayhorn’s ‘Chelsea Bridge’ with Coltrane’s (or perhaps Dolphy’s) gyrating ‘Red Planet’, showing off the extremes of Russell’s genius on the clarinet. The interplay between clarinet and trombone leaves you breathless and then deposits you back to earth with ‘Pee Wee’s Blues’.

Columbia was still producing some of the best recordings ever at the time. Ray Staff of Air Mastering repaired some tape damage and the resulting reissue is an outstanding success. If you haven’t heard this audiophile grade recording of fascinating music before, you owe yourself a treat.





Albrecht: String Quartets Nos. 2 and 3. SA^(S)

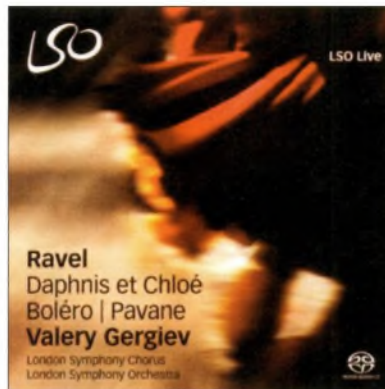
Kalafusz Quartet. Elrud.

The music of German composer Kurt Albrecht (1895-1971) is at once modern and very much in the noble German lineage. It balances compact, readily identifiable motifs with sinuous, long-lined melodies in complex polyphonic interplay. The opening movements in these two superbly crafted string quartets (from the 1950s) are imposing in their austerity and logic, but the following slow movements in both works are serenely beautiful, infused with elegiac inwardness and restrained grief.

The Second Quartet's adagio is haunting, built of arch-like chordal strophes that rise and then fall into poignant, gentle heartbeats that evoke the calm final moments of a human life. The finales affirm the resurgent life-force in driving rhythmic intricacies that superimpose asymmetrical metrical subdivisions in brilliant contrapuntal overlappings. Albrecht's quartets have the uncompromising integrity, contrapuntal mastery, architectural rigor, and deeply felt, humane emotion of the great German masters, and are brought to vivid life in these superb performances and detailed, truthful sonics (remastered from a 1970s LP) that will richly reward lovers of our era's best chamber music.

www.recordsinternational.com

Mark Lehman



Ravel: Daphnis et Chloe. Pavane. Boléro. SA^(S)

London Symphony, Gergiev. LSO Live.

Valery Gergiev, highly regarded for his passionate performances of Russian repertoire, Wagner, and Mahler, affirms his versatility with compelling interpretations of three Ravel staples. His Daphnis et Chloe is voluble and vividly coloured. While the conductor never overlooks the smallest wonder of Ravel's orchestration, Gergiev's reading is boldly assertive, and danceable. The sense of headlong rush with the final "Bacchanale" is exceptional, almost seeming to stumble ahead, thanks to the asymmetric 5/4 meter. LSO's generous SACD is filled out with an unsentimentalised Pavane for a Dead Princess and Boléro. The conductor views the latter work as a remarkable musical experiment for its time—proto-minimalism, composed before Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and Terry Riley were even born.

At these Barbican Centre concerts of late 2009, the LSO plays superbly for its principal conductor, both in the aggregate and individually. The engineering places the chorus behind the orchestra and the vocal/instrumental blend is very good. The recording is quite neutral, to the benefit of Ravel's exquisite sonorities.

Andrew Quint



American Music for Clarinet & Piano. SA^(S)

Jon Manasse, Jon Nakamatsu. Harmonia Mundi.

Everything on this superbly played recital of modern music for clarinet and piano by four American composers is flavoured, whether openly or more subliminally, by jazz. Gershwin's catchy Three Preludes (originally for solo piano) and razzle-dazzle 'I Got Rhythm,' from *Girl Crazy*, are unmistakable products of the Jazz Age. Leonard Bernstein's early Clarinet Sonata is less overtly jazz-influenced, but its rhythmic flair and optimism still shines through.

The other two works on the program were written for the performers. Pianist/composer John Novacek (born 1964) contributes Four Rags for Two Jons. These pieces channel the energy and syncopated lilt of Scott Joplin, tinted by Novacek's "slightly bent harmonies and cross-rhythms," as the liner notes put it. The Cape Cod Files, by Cuban-born clarinet and saxophone virtuoso Paquito D'Rivera, comprises four movements that effectively tap into the blues, boogie-woogie, and several strains of Latin music.

The recording of the clarinet is very close-up, exaggerating its size, and there's a slight excess of midrange warmth. But with performances as good as these, you won't object.

Andrew Quint



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Captain Beefheart – Safe As Milk every home should have one

by Alan Sircom

JUST BEFORE CHRISTMAS LAST YEAR, MUSICIAN AND ARTIST DON VAN VLIET PASSED AWAY DUE TO COMPLICATIONS ARISING FROM MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS, A DISEASE THAT IT'S DEBATED HE HAD BEEN SUFFERING FROM SINCE THE LATE 1970s. Vliet – who went by the stage name of Captain Beefheart – retired from the music business in 1982 to concentrate on his painting.

That absence has done nothing to weaken Vliet's reputation and no-one since has managed to combine a fine blues-rock sensibility with sheer avant-garde wig-out weirdness. And probably no-one will.

There's a strong Zappa connection running through Vliet's work. While not exactly friends in the strict sense, the two were collaboratively influential upon each other's work long before either achieved fame (they were schoolmates) and there are many common musical themes, such as 1950s doo-wop. Both also had a fine ability for discovering talent in the raw – *Safe As Milk* features a young Ry Cooder on guitar.

It almost didn't happen; after some early hits on A&M, the band was dropped by the label after hearing some early mixes of the album, presumably thinking the R&B influence was too controversial and unconventional. Fortunately, the band was picked up and signed to the then-new Buddah label. Band member changes were to follow (a Beefheart trademark, aside from Vliet changes were rife), and the album set the tone for what was to follow.

Safe as Milk is probably the best place to start your Beefheart collection; later albums – such as the seminal *Trout Mask Replica* – are remarkably avant-garde and take some work on the part of the listener to get through. The opener and one of the last tracks – 'Sure 'Nuff 'n' Yes I Do' and 'Grown So Ugly' are pure blues tracks, while 'I'm Glad' highlights that obsession with doo-wop. Even so, this album of poppy-blues-rock is often twisted out of shape and tracks like *Electricity* and *Abba Zaba* (named after a candy bar) are portents of future weirdness (not only Vliet's weirdness – the latter could be the soundtrack for BBC Three's mid-2000's surreal comedy hit *The Mighty Boosh*). Nevertheless, his first 'real' album remains the first place to go for Beefheart training sessions.

In a way, this album – while having nothing whatsoever to do with the psychedelic movement of the time, could only have happened then. At any other era, *Safe As Milk* would have been just too damn weird. Although many of the tracks point to a 1960s aesthetic (jangly guitars panning round the mix, theramins and tremolos, drums in the one channel, the band in the other, etc, etc), there's something timelessly strange-beautiful about it all.

The dozen tracks on the original album have been joined by a further seven bonus tracks on the 1999 CD reissue. My suggestion; play it six times in a month – if you want to play it a seventh, buy yourself *Trout Mask Replica*. Pretty soon, you'll have migrated to Zappa and the world starts to look very different forever. +



CAPTAIN BEEFHEART AND HIS MAGIC BAND – SAFE AS MILK

Recorded April 1967, RCA Studios Los Angeles

Released September 1967

Producer Richard Perry and Bob Krasnow

Label Buddah

Track Listing (1999 edition)

"Sure 'Nuff 'n' Yes I Do" (Don Van Vliet, Herb Bermann) – 2:15

"Zig Zag Wanderer" (Van Vliet, Bermann) – 2:40

"Call On Me" [10] – 2:37 (Van Vliet)

"Dropout Boogie" – 2:32 (Van Vliet, Bermann)

"I'm Glad" – 3:31 (Van Vliet)

"Electricity" – 3:07 (Van Vliet, Bermann)

"Yellow Brick Road" – 2:28 (Van Vliet, Bermann)

"Abba Zaba" – 2:44 (Van Vliet)

"Plastic Factory" (Van Vliet, Bermann, Jerry Handley) – 3:08

"Where There's a Woman" (Van Vliet, Bermann) – 2:09

"Grown So Ugly" (Robert Pete Williams) – 2:27

"Autumn's Child" (Van Vliet, Bermann) – 4:02

"Safe as Milk" (Take 5, Van Vliet) – 4:13

"On Tomorrow" (Van Vliet) – 6:56

"Big Black Baby Shoes" (Van Vliet) – 4:50

"Flower Pot" (Van Vliet) – 3:55

"Dirty Blue Gene" (Van Vliet) – 2:43

"Trust Us" (Take 9, Van Vliet) – 7:22

"Korn Ring Finger" (Van Vliet) – 7:26

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