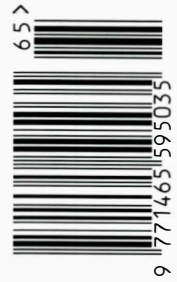


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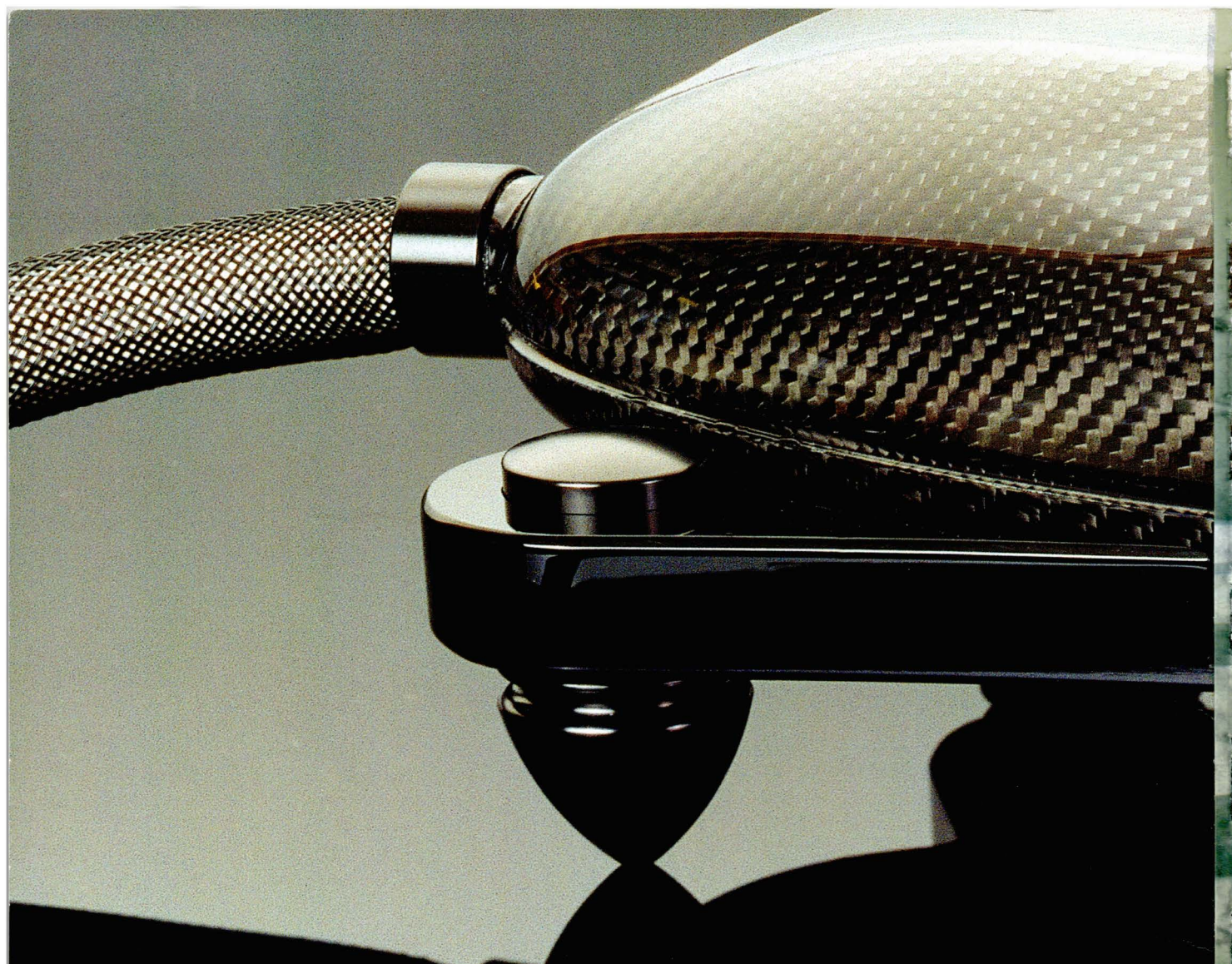
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Last issue, I joked that former editor Roy Gregory was "spending more time with his speaker cables". Little did I know at the time how prophetic those words would end up being. Roy has now taken up the post of Vice-President of Marketing for the Nordost Corporation. This does not automatically spell the end of Roy Gregory's words in the magazine, though. Naturally, products that are from the Nordost stable are strictly out-of-bounds to him from this issue onwards; as, of course, are products from rival companies. So, we'll never get to see the words 'coherent cable loom' fall from his keyboard ever again in the pages of *Hi-Fi Plus*, but Roy's years of experience as a reviewer of high-end sources, amps and speakers would be very hard to replace.

Roy has been given special dispensation to discuss cable in this issue however, but only in the context of the design of his new listening room. Even before he took on his new role, his dedicated listening room was so full of Norse-named Nordost that a list of products reads like a lost *Lord of the Rings* manuscript. To not mention the cabling used would be to ignore a key aspect of the room's sonic development. But, as a last act of cable contrition, he gets to grips with Philosophy and Audiost, as part of the Splash Audio system. These cables were a key aspect of Splash's presentations at this year's Bristol and Heathrow hi-fi shows.

I am currently looking at the ways *Hi-Fi Plus* can go forward, both in terms of its style and editorial content. In this issue, the fruits of this investigation include long-form reviews – the six-page special on Pass Labs' pre/power combination – and short-form supplementary reviews, such as the one-page review of the Lehmann Black Cube Linear USB headphone amplifier, to accompany the Sennheiser HD800. We are also looking at follow-ups of important products, like the Vitus amplifier and cables. But while the magazine has got the decorators in, now's the perfect time to let me know what you think – good and bad. Otherwise, I'll just paint the whole magazine in purple and green stripes with yellow spots. Mmmmm... tasteful.



editor@hifiplus.com

Readers Survey

To help us know more about what you want from *Hi-Fi Plus*, we've included a short questionnaire in this issue. Simply fill it in and send the form back to us by July 20, 2009, and you can win one of two superb pairs of Audio-Technica AD-700 Open back hi-fi headphones, retailing at £140. Check them out at www.theadphones.com



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CONTENTS

Comment+

- 5 Alan Sircom – Music Matters
- 10 The Hi-Fi Heretic – The View From The Other Side
- 12 The Mystery Scribe – Anger Management
- 102 Readers letters – Incoming!

Equipment+

- 16 Sennheiser HD800 Headphones
- 24 Lehmann Black Cube Linear USB Headphone amplifier/DAC
- 26 dCS Puccini Integrated CD/SACD player
- 32 Naim HDX Hard Disk Player
- 38 Pass Labs XP-10 Preamplifier and XA160.5 Monobloc Power Amps
- 48 Krell S300i Integrated Amplifier
- 52 Esoteric P-03 CD/SACD player and D-03 Digital Converter
- 58 PMC PB1i Loudspeaker
- 62 MSB Technology CD III CD Transport and Platinum DAC III Signature Digital Converter
- 66 B&W 684 Loudspeaker
- 72 NAD Masters Series M4 Tuner

- 80 Clearaudio CMB Bearing Upgrade and Outer Limits Record Clamp
- 84 Vitus Audio SS-010 V2 Amplifier and Andromeda Cable system
- 90 Splash Audio's 'show' system, as seen in Bristol and Heathrow

Feature+

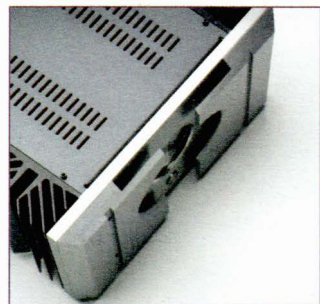
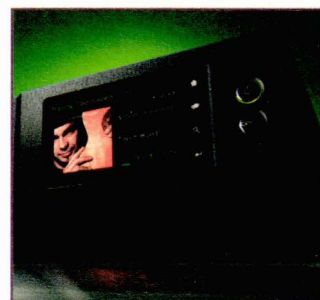
- 98 The New Room – Roy Gregory's impressive new listening facility

Music+

- 104 Interview – Fink
- 107 Popular and Contemporary Music
- 112 Top 10 – 21st Century Demonstration Discs
- 117 Audiophile and Classical Recordings
- 120 Every Home Should Have One *Flight of the Conchords*

Plus+

- 85 Subscriptions
- 93 Binders
- 103 Competition – win AudioSmile loudspeakers worth £1,400!
- 114 Advertisers Index





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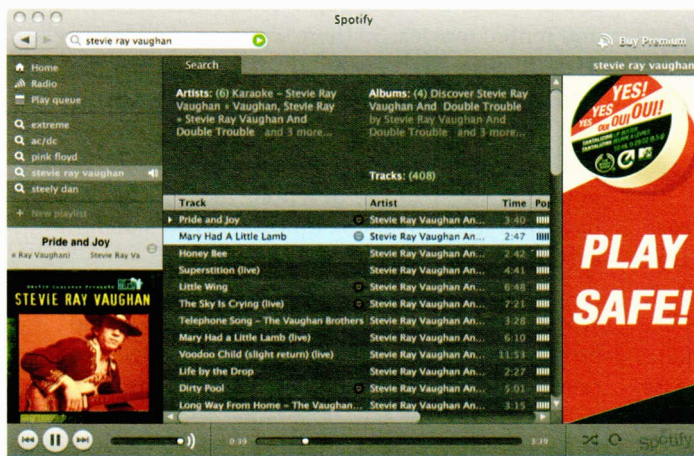
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MUSIC MATTERS

by Alan Sircom

It's amazing how quickly some things take off these days. Last issue, most people would have thought Spotify was an un-acne cream, or maybe a Photoshop plug-in. Now, the name has become synonymous with the future of music. Spotify is a legal peer-to-peer music streaming program, started in Sweden and has an office in the UK. It's free if you are prepared to put up with adverts, a tenner a month if you want the Premium package without ads. In fact, the service has been going for three years, but like all good overnight sensations, that bit got overlooked in the media. Two months ago... whatify? Now, the name Spotify is all over the music business like a rash. It's gone pan-European and already has a million users. And it's growing at an exponential rate.



Above: Spotify delivers free music in seconds

It's simple to drive. Subscribe. Download the software. Play music. That's it. For the geekically minded, it streams music under the Vorbis codec at q5. That's a little hard to put into English, because Vorbis is a variable bit-rate codec, but it's around 160kbps, which is at least as good as a similar bit-rated MP3 file in listening tests. Okay, so we aren't talking exactly CD sound quality, but it's surprisingly good, and Spotify has an ace or two up its sleeve that have nothing to do with music quality.

Ace one is there's almost no buffering delay. Click on a track and it plays. Instantly. It'll take you longer to type the name into the search box than it will for

the search results to arrive and your selected track to play (unless it's advert time). This is a significant and potentially wonderful thing – it's like having the most huge music server on tap.

Ace two is the vast array of music on tap. It's not complete – The Beatles catalogue, for example, is notably absent (although cover versions exist and 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' performed in the style of Gregorian chant has its moments) – but it's also surprisingly thorough in places. It's 'Classic FM' in its approach; a surf through Wagner's output shows no piece of music longer than 21 minutes and you sometimes need to piece disparate parts of music together. In addition, the choice of conductor and orchestra is relatively limited... But if you dig deep,

you can find some gems. This has a further advantage, it becomes effectively radio-on-demand that you can control, especially when you start building your own playlists.

Spotify isn't the only game in town, but it is the newest. Last.FM is the obvious alternative. Like Spotify, it offers listeners a near endless supply of free music, but not direct access to specific tracks and playlisting is not as elegant. Last.FM is in more countries than Spotify however (Spotify is not available in the US or Canada... Yet) and has more potential for user-interaction thanks to scripting subroutines written by users. It's also available on mobile devices like iPhones and the Google Android.

Personally, I like both Last.FM and Spotify, but still maintain that Spotify is potentially the better musical tool. It's brilliant for discovering new musical genre without having to empty your wallet into the nearest HMV, Amazon or iTunes. If you ever wanted to know how percussionist Mongo Santamaria's version of Iron Butterfly's 'In A Gadda Da Vida' sounds, or whether you should buy the White Stripes of the Black Keys, it's there. Or, if you want to dip your musical toes into the waters of Baroque music, this is a basically free way of doing so. Using it as a form of musical education or reference library is amazing, even though from an audiophile perspective, it

▶ should be used as a pre-purchase tool, because of an incomplete catalogue and the sound quality does not compare to CDs or high-res downloads.

If you speak to people in the music biz, they are cautiously optimistic about Spotify and what it means for their future. If you speak to them in person, you can watch the blood draining from their faces as they say it, too. They also hope Spotify becomes a reference library for music; people listen to a diverse series of musical pieces on the site, then buy what they liked somewhere else. It certainly has more potential for money-making for the industry than, say, YouTube or MySpace, it's still not clear how the revenue streams will work out. Yes, there's the money made from £10 per month subscriptions and there's Spotify's links to the music download site 7 Digital (which sadly goes for 50p tracks in so-so MP3 quality – and not available for Macs – with no price being set for 320kbps MP3s as yet). However, if you are prepared to stream direct from Spotify's browser and can put up with the advertisement breaks between tracks... It's pretty much free music on tap.

"If you speak to them in person, you can watch the blood drain from their faces..."

This is a definite rear-guard action against illegal peer-to-peer and file-sharing services, where you can download bootlegged albums and tracks for free. Spotify wins out because it's easy to use (many P2P programs are designed with the geek in mind), and there's no wondering when the summons happens for copyright theft.

Those used to illegitimate file-sharing may be tempted to go legit, because they get to pick and choose what they buy. If you ever speak to one of the serious illegal downloaders, their biggest concern is not whether they get caught, it's that they can end up loading half a terabyte of music in a single session. It gets hard to sift through a music catalogue when you've just downloaded the entire musical output of the 1960s over a weekend. The music business has been trying to make illegal downloading go away since the days of the original Napster, and Spotify could be the tool to do just that.

Nevertheless, there's something burbling along under all this, a feeling that I just can't shake off. I keep thinking we are watching some kind of slowly-unfolding car crash, even if right now we don't know

who's crashing. On the one hand, if Spotify's earnings from advertising and subscriptions aren't enough to keep afloat, I can't help thinking it will disappear just as quickly as it came on the scene. Bear in mind that right now it has the tacit approval of the record industries; if Spotify had to pay the sort of royalties a radio station has to play, the business model would quickly become difficult to maintain. That kind of about face is relatively unlikely, but if Spotify proves to be an amazing success, but does not generate the sort of music sales the industry hopes for, it could be 'game over' for the music business, or it could mean big royalty demands landing on Spotify's owners. I really hope this remains nothing but idle speculation and that Spotify ends up bringing more people into the music stores (virtual or otherwise), however. I want it to succeed because it gets more music to more people, which is always a good thing.

Spotify's very existence suggests we might be approaching something of a new paradigm in the way people get their music. Back when it launched iTunes Movie Rental, Apple's Steve Jobs suggested that from experience people generally bought music and rented movies. So there was no need for iTunes to do to sales of DVD what it is already doing to CD. The likes of Spotify – if ultimately successful – suggest that model may already be coming to the end of its working life. It may mean we are moving from a time of buying music to one of renting music. If so, it will have profound effects on how tomorrow's audio systems are configured.

I'm not sure how to take this potential future. With thousands of albums on LP and CD, I would consider myself something of a music collector (although I'm always humbled by those whose collections stretch into the hundreds of thousands). I find it hard enough to consider a future where discs become redundant, even if many now download or use – as I am now increasingly doing – their CDs as one-time data carriers. But to move onto someone else's music servers, and merely dip into a collective collection... I'm not sure if I could make that jump.

Perhaps the next few years will prove more interesting than we first thought. It's commonly held that music servers (or similar) might supplant CD by the time we all clamber out of recession. But now, the very idea of owning music could come under scrutiny too. Like many things, a lot depends on how this idea plays in the US, and – at the time of writing – Spotify is distinctly European in outlook.

I guess only time will tell for Spotify... And the future of music. ▶+

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For many of us, the concept of Quantum Mechanics seems like something out of a Sci-Fi movie script. But don't be fooled. It's very real, very practical and its products are all around you: how about the transistor, the laser, the electron microscope and MRI scanner? These and many more everyday technologies and devices depended on the application of Quantum theories for their development. Which might leave you wondering why we mere mortals find the whole idea so alien? The answer is – it's down to our schooling...

QUANTUM THEORY

High school physics depends on certain assumptions in order to keep things manageable. Gravity is supposed to be a constant, there's no such thing as air resistance and atoms are made up of protons, neutrons and electrons. Oh, and we all study the gospel according to Sir Isaac...

The problem is that in reality it isn't, there is and they aren't. In fact, our acceptance of Classical Newtonian principles and a few convenient truths locks our understanding of the way things work pretty securely in the 19th Century, ignoring most major advances that happened after 1900. Which means that, whilst we have heard of Albert Einstein and Schroedinger, Max Planck and Dirac, we're kind of confused when it comes to what they actually said and did, why it's important and its ultimate implications. We don't know about you, but the idea that an electron is both a particle and a wave, simultaneously, stretches our conceptual capabilities quite far enough – and that's just the first step... Which I guess kind of explains why Quantum Mechanics isn't part of the high school syllabus.

But if you are doing serious physics research then the chances are that you are working with Quantum Mechanics, at a sub-atomic level and with methodologies that employ Quantum Field Theory, the basis on which Quantum Mechanics is built. Whether you are using the LHC at Cerne, or trying to perfect the Quantum computer (the next huge step forward in processing power) you live in a Quantum world. Indeed, we all live in a Quantum world – it's just that most of us don't realize it.



But it gets better than that. QRT can be added to just about any existing hi-fi or AV system (boy, does it work on picture quality) and its unique approach means that unlike most conventional mains filters or regenerators, it doesn't reduce the source impedance or affect the peak current capabilities of your AC supply, instead delivering pure power the purist way. With a Quantum unit in your power line you'll hear a more natural and much more credible performance, with lower noise levels, increased dynamic range and a greater sense of musical expression and flow. Add more Quantum units and things get even better, with each extra unit adding to the effect, getting more and more music out of the system you already own.

So, isn't it time you based your approach to hi-fi on 21st Century thinking? Listen to Quantum's Qx2 or Qx4 and you'll be doing just that – which is at least one logical explanation for the silly grin you'll have plastered all over your face!

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Still sound like science fiction? Look at the Quantum Website (www.quantumqrt.com) and you'll see measured evidence of the effects of QRT on the noise floor and dynamic range of hi-fi systems. So, you don't have to trust your ears or your high school physics: these measurements were carried out by an independent, high technology defence contractor with access to instrumentation and techniques that most of us have never heard of. They understand what QRT does, so that you don't need to.



 **Quantum**
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THE VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE

by the Hi-Fi Heretic

Way back in 1976, the French hi-fi designer Jean Hiraga wrote a landmark article in *La Nouvelle Revue du Son*. A year later, while punk was gobbing its way around record decks up and down the country, a translation of this article – ‘Can we hear audio connecting wires?’ – hit the pages of *Hi-Fi News & Record Review*. We’re still feeling the aftershocks of that article more than 30 years later.

If you ask any physicist or electronics engineer about the potential for an audio signal to be influenced by short lengths of loudspeaker or signal wire (I dislike the word ‘cable’... You use cables to anchor a boat or run Victorian telegraph signals from London to New York) and you will be met with hoots of derision. At best, you’ll get the worst words and audiophile wire fan will ever hear... “Is there any real evidence for this?”

Presenting a series of reviews doesn’t count; to a scientist, that’s just ‘mere opinion’. Testing them yourself to yourself is no good either, because bias clouds our judgement. Bias is a remarkably tough thing to eliminate. We listen with our eyes and wallets as much as we do with our ears.

A length of wire can be accurately defined by measurement of its resistance, capacitance and inductance. A signal wire (a.k.a. interconnect cable) should aim for low capacitance (ideally under 100pF per metre), but if used in a standard one-metre length, you could double or even triple that figure and not detect a difference under controlled conditions.

On speaker wire, the key figure is low resistance. It’s only when the speaker wire extends beyond 15m do losses due to capacitance and inductance begin to kick in, and they occur irrespective of wire design, construction or materials used. Experiments have determined that a wire’s resistance should account about five per cent of the loudspeaker’s nominal impedance. Too high a resistance and the loudspeaker gets to sound more like its impedance curve, too low and you have bars of solid copper between your amp and speakers. How low a resistance largely depends on the minimum impedance of your speakers and how long a set of wires you intend to run. But let’s put this into perspective: 14-gauge (or 79-strand) wire would be

perfectly comfortable running a two-ohm impedance speaker cable at lengths up to about six metres – for an eight-ohm load, the same cable would be good for more than 14m.

So far, despite elegant ‘scienciness’ claims made by wire companies, no-one’s come up with any other parameters that change the performance of wire.

When normal length wires make a difference to the performance of a system (and this can happen), it’s because they introduce too much capacitance to a signal wire or too much resistance to one used for speakers. At this point, a wire ceases to be a neutral carrier of signal from point A to point B and starts to become a filter. In most cases, that’s not what you want from your wires.

“Bias is a remarkably tough thing to eliminate. We listen with our eyes and wallets as much as we do with our ears.”

All the above is clearly documented, evidenced material, but if you ask someone selling cables about the impedance of their signal wire, many will have to look up the information. Yet, when asked about the purity of the copper, the composition of the dielectric and the nature of the interface between wire and connector, they can all wax lyrical from the top of their heads. Why? Because wire is hi-fi jewellery!

By all means buy good wire, even if it’s just for bragging rights. I use comparatively expensive stuff myself (Canare signal and Linn K20 speaker wire) because less rugged wires don’t ‘feel’ right to me. That works out to about one per cent of the total cost of my hi-fi system. However, I don’t make any claim that these wires sound better or worse than anyone else’s. Because I don’t see how it’s possible. ▶+

The Hi-Fi Heretic’s views do not necessarily represent those of the magazine, its editor or publishers. If you have been affected by the Hi-Fi Heretic please contact our hotline at editor@hifiplus.com.

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The humble remote control has slipped into people's lives neatly and unobtrusively over the last few decades. Some handsets have even become minor points of design in their own right – the leather-backed monolith that accompanies an Esoteric, the wooden whimsy of Unison Research, the almost Bauhaus-like metal block that Bryston supply. How could something so ubiquitous and useful possibly become a source of rage?

The remote codes that correspond to the handset's commands are not unlimited. The codes themselves – with precious few exceptions – are constructed around the RC5 system. It's not uncommon for a 'system driving' handset (able to control source and amplification) to drive both

"If you are not paying attention at this point, your next piece of music is going to be a loud and very possibly destructive experience"

the manufacturers unit and an amp or source from another company altogether. This is a pleasing bonus, as the less functional remote can be placed in a drawer and forgotten about. This happens to be the case with two components of mine. The amp remote (which, in contrast to the icons of design mentioned earlier, looks like it was borrowed from a 14" television) is made redundant by the fact that the volume commands on the CD handset will control it perfectly well. The CD remote is an altogether nicer unit to hold and use and so assumes the role of system remote. All would be well were it not for the sting in the tail.

Beyond the 'normal' codes on a remote, it is not unusual for there to be some less commonly used ones for the control of features specific to that product. In my case, this is to allow you to select between digital inputs fitted to the CD player. I have no idea what this specific code is but unfortunately, not only does the CD player respond as planned but

the amp seizes on this command with considerable enthusiasm as well. Upon receiving the command, the amp will increase the volume to maximum in one elegant five second sweep and sit with the volume motor still whirring away on its end stop. If you are not paying attention at this point, your next piece of music is going to be a loud and very possibly destructive experience. Why the amp responds in this way is unclear, but it does and so I have stopped using this remote function completely.

To add insult to injury, the third remote handset in the system is not without its own side effects. Supplied with a CD/Hard Drive recorder, it and my CD player operate in a more straightforward dislike of one another. Pressing any button on this remote will instantly cease all playback on the CD player and, because the Law of Sod is always present on these occasions, it appears to have a sending arc of about two miles, so it will get the signal to the CD player every single time. As such, something as simple as listening to a CD while editing a recording on the hard drive (which is far more simply done on the remote) is essentially impossible – and if I elected to the change the digital input of the CD by remote – potentially very loud.

As such, despite owning three fully remote controlled units, I find myself frequently operating them from the fascias to actually allow myself to hear music without intermission and at a volume that will avoid my drivers being embedded in the opposite wall while my neighbours form a lynching party. My 'convenient' remote handsets sit gathering dust due to their near total inability to get on with one another. Is this yet another item to add to the pre-purchase demonstration checklist? Or do I simply have three of the most ill tempered units going? In the absence of answers, I'm going to listen to my (remote-free) turntable. Progress be damned. ▶+

The author's opinions do not necessarily represent the opinions of the magazine, its editor or its publishers. But if you feel strongly about hi-fi, why not pen your own Anger Management column? Please send your 700 word rant to editor@hifiplus.com. Your identity will remain a closely guarded secret.

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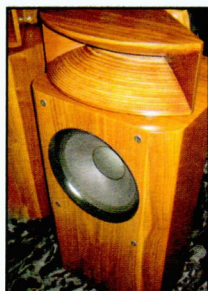
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Munich High End preview

What to see at Europe's most important audiophile event



Alium Audio (ATR Booth)

Opera-Consonance of Beijing is celebrating its 15th anniversary this year and has released several new products to coincide with this event.

New products include the Cyber series stereo chassis power amplifiers (these use

either 2A3 triodes for 30W, or 6550 tetrodes to deliver 100W in parallel push-pull designs), and a new non-oversampling 'Linear' version of the Mini Droplet CD player, now featuring a digital input.

The new M12 tractrix horn loudspeakers that were such a hit at the recent London Hi-Fi show are also garnering much critical acclaim, all products are available from www.aliumaudio.com.

Audio Physic (D118, 1st floor Atr. 3)

Audio Physic will showcase the CARDEAS, the company's latest four-way high-end loudspeaker design. You will be able to experience first-hand this



exciting new floorstander at the show, where you will also

get a chance to talk to the Audio Physic team about the rest of their loudspeaker range, including the recently-launched SITARA.

Audio Physic has undergone a tremendous change in recent years with head of development Manfred Diestertich streamlining, updating and revamping the product line, with all the models using the same new technologies.

The result is an evolution of the trademark 'Audio Physic sound', that is known and loved all around the world, right through the whole range of their exquisitely crafted loudspeakers.

For more information about Audio Physic products visit www.audiophysic.de or for a list of UK dealers: www.c-techaudio.co.uk



Cabasse

Hailing back to an instrument maker who crafted the first violin signed Cabasse in 1740, five generations of craftsmen followed him, supplying violins, violas and cellos, most of which are still being played in orchestras today. Today, the Cabasse range presents one of the most complete portfolios of loudspeaker

products for the hi-fi, home cinema and custom installation markets, from discrete in-ceiling speakers through to the range topping and class leading La Sphere audiophile speakers with its four way co-axial drive unit.



The Chord Company

Britain's leading specialist cable company is bringing its award-winning range of audio interconnects, speaker cables and home cinema connections to Germany. Precision manufacturing and innovative high-frequency shielding systems mean interference-free signal transfer, unaffected by mechanical noise or vibration induced resonance.

Contact www.chord.co.uk for more details.



Scheu Analogtechnik (H 03, Hall 4)

Scheu Analogtechnik, manufacturers of the Cello, Premier (described by *The Absolute Sound* as "among the handful of the best turntables

ever made, regardless of price"), and reference Laufwerk ranges of turntables, will be launching the Mk II version of their Tacco tonearm. It features a ruby unipivot with a tapered amboina wood shaft, wired with one strand from headshell to Neutrik Profi RCAs. The 9-inch version is available now; a 12-inch is to be available soon. Scheu is available in the UK from Cool Gales, 0800 043 6710, www.coolgales.com



High End 2009: 21-24 May M.O.C. Munich



Crystal Cable (E112, Atr. 4)

After the world premiere at CES in January, an official introduction in Taiwan, Canada and our home country, The Netherlands, our glass loudspeakers, the Arabesque by Crystal Cable continue their world tour by going to

the Munich High End Show from May 21-24. You are very welcome to visit us and enjoy the Arabesque with its unique combination of music, art and technical innovation. And this time, the Arabesque are accompanied by a new and exciting product by Crystal Cable; a hi-fi rack made of glass! So, we hope to see you in Munich.

dCS (E112, Atr. 4)

Munich sees the active demonstration of the patent pending (GB0817141.5) Puccini U-Clock and Puccini CD/SACD Player.



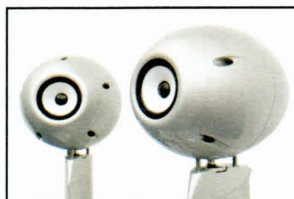
Puccini combines all of dCS upsampling, DAC, clocking and CD/SACD player technology in a single unit which delivers unbeatable performance. Adding

upsampling on the Puccini digital inputs turn Puccini U-Clock and Player into a complete high end system for CD and computer audiophiles alike.

Eclipse

The new TD712zMK2 from Eclipse, as high-end-statement loudspeaker and a substantial upgrade to the acclaimed TD712z introduced in 2004.

In designing the MK2, Eclipse undertook a fundamental review of all elements and functions. As a result, the MK2 has a wider frequency response, improved power handling and even better impulse

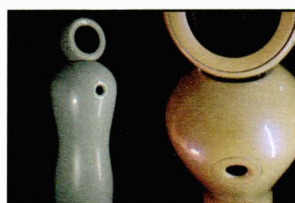


response than the original TD712z.

The result is one of the world's finest loudspeakers. In many areas of performance, particularly transient impulse response and imaging, this is

possibly the best there is anywhere.

Eclipse loudspeakers are used by many of the world's great musicians and in many recording studios. You can see the testimonials on the Eclipse website www.eclipse-td.net

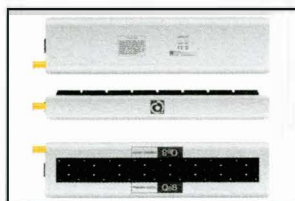


My Audio Design

MAD launches its flagship Royal Salute, one of the most beautiful, curvaceous, and heavenly sounding loudspeakers on the planet.

The speaker is hand-crafted in England with six kinds of special materials, in order to reproduce the original sound as closely as possible.

Recently the Royal Salute has been selected as an 'Objects of Desire' by *Smart Life* magazine, and received praise from thousands of people who saw and listened to them at the *London Hi Fidelity Show* and the *Gadget Show 2009*. www.madengland.com



Nordost (E113, Atr. 4)

Munich marks the world launch of important new additions to the Nordost and Quantum product lines. Dedicated tonearm and both 75 and 110 ohm digital leads

complete the Odin line-up, bringing the all-important source components into the coherent cable loom. Meanwhile, the QBASE distribution unit establishes the foundation of the Quantum QRT modular mains set up, with units available to take four or eight power cords (six for the UK). These new products will be on active demonstration – with surprising and occasionally shocking results!

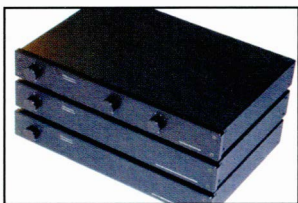
High End 2009



Quadraspire

The Sunoko-Vent rack is based on Quadraspire's long established and successful Q4 design that combines functionality and style with acoustic performance. In keeping with all Quadraspire's support solutions, the Sunoko-Vent rack is modular and

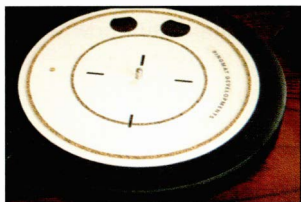
upgradeable, designed to accommodate changing needs as audio systems develop. Using the product builder on the website, customers can easily configure any Q4-based support and storage solution to their requirements. The Sunoko-Vent is available in six wood finishes – Cherry; Maple; Oak; Dark Oak; Rosenut and Black. All Quadraspire furniture is made at its factory in Bath, United Kingdom.



Renaissance

German distributor, Input Audio is demonstrating a Renaissance Amplification system at Munich for the second

year running. The Unity 100 makes its debut at the show. This is a 100W per channel power amplifier in stereo configuration. Capable of delivering enormous power into low impedances, the Unity 100 power amplifier also pulls off the challenging task of delivering convincing performances at low levels. To achieve the required balance of speed, power and timbral accuracy, an unusual topology is employed. A fast and accurate voltage gain stage with regulated supplies is followed by a powerful, multi-transistor 'pure unity-gain buffer'.



Ringmat Developments

Ringmat Developments produce support systems for turntables, CD players and other products. The company

has also advanced the ideas and technology in anti-resonance effects as they relate to audio equipment, as well as manufacturing a range of interconnect, tonearm, loudspeaker and mains cables.

The company's latest project – Vivacity – is a

ground-breaking anti-resonance equipment platform system, designed to work in harmony with the company's already well-respected Ringmat platters, feet, domes and spike stoppers that help isolate audio equipment.

More details can be found at www.ringmat.com or by calling ++44 (0)1277 200210



Vitus Audio (E08, Hall 3)

In every product, Vitus Audio creates something that is far greater than the sum of its parts. Each part on its own is the best of its type, but bring them all together and you have at the very heart – a finely tuned 'emotion engine'.

Take more than one of our products together you have a heart that beats as one. For example,

partner the NEW SL-010 Linestage Amplifier with the SM-010 Monaural Power Amplifier and you will hear micro details/dynamics never heard before without compromising the coherence of the recording.



WBT

WBT's Nextgen™ connection was awarded the coveted Innovation and Reader's Choice Awards by Germany's *Stereoplay* magazine. WBT has also won three awards at Plus X, Europe's largest contest for technology products. The WBT nextgen™ connector series has won the Plus X Award for Innovation and the Award

for High Quality. The nextgen™ Banana plug WBT-0610 won the Plus X Award for Design.

For more information, visit www.wbt.de or for a list of UK dealers go to www.c-techaudio.co.uk



Wilson Benesch

Fifteen years ago, Wilson Benesch's A.C.T. design marked a departure from convention. The world's first curved floorstanding loudspeaker took carbon-fibre know-how from the Wilson Benesch turntable to achieve unheard of signal to noise ratios.

This year, we celebrate two decades of innovation with two new advanced versions of the of the A.C.T. A commemorative Limited Edition version and a Production version – of the remarkable A.C.T. C.60. "The Future is (still) Carbon"

SME

*Model 20/12
Precision turntable*



Uncoloured sound— The art of blackness

A larger and more massive version of our well known Model 20/2. It will accept nine, ten and twelve-inch arms but is especially directed at the exciting Model 312S. This offers a performance some 27% better than a nine-inch arm in respect of angular error distortion. The wand and headshell are pressure die-cast in magnesium and are 27g lighter than they would be in aluminium. Probably the stiffest and lightest twelve-inch arm ever made these dual problems are at last addressed and on listening, the benefits of minimal tracking error and harmonic distortion are clearly revealed.

'This arm/turntable combo is the most graceful-sounding analogue front-end I've heard'.

Ken Kessler Review - Hi-Fi News, Volume 51 No. 5.

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Loudspeakers for the ears...

The Sennheiser HD800 headphones

by Alan Sircom



Sennheiser is one of the biggest names in headphones. And yet the company's last big move into high-grade headphone design was the Orpheus, and that's at least 10 years old. This has left the top-end of the headphone market open to rivals, at a time when – thanks to the iPod – headphone listening became cool once again.

That's all set to change with the launch of the HD800, the new top of the Sennheiser line. Unlike the Orpheus of the 1990s, this is no electrostatic design and as such does not require the large valve-based, fan-shaped energiser that the previous top of the tree demanded. That also means that the HD800 can shave something like £9,000 off the price tag of its decade-old predecessor.

The HD800 is a circum-aural design (meaning the headphones sit over your ears instead of gently crushing your pinnae) that look substantial, but extensive use of ABS materials instead of wood and metal mean they aren't as heavy as you might expect. Some have criticised this, even before the launch of the product; ABS being not as chic as metal – ABS being not as easy to dent or damage and doesn't vibrate in the audio band, either, of course. The use of ABS extends to the headband, although this is topped off with

a metal plate with the serial number etched in and a soft fabric headband. The oversized D-shaped surround for the drive unit and rear-mounted attachment to the headband looks austere on paper but doesn't look too intrusive on the head. And it's damn comfortable too; you can sit and listen to these headphones for hours on end with no physical fatigue whatsoever.

Perhaps surprisingly, the ear-cups themselves are uncovered, and the housing that keeps the transducer away from prying fingers is made from stainless steel. Aside from the fact that it keeps your ears less sweaty after long periods listening, this also works for acoustic reasons (less coverings, less things to resonate) and aesthetic ones (sci-fi style). The ear pads that surround these cups are made from a classy microfibre fabric, although not the one originally specified (see below).

The single biggest change that separates the HD800 from all that went before is the unique ring transducer. Most headphones have something not too dissimilar from a tweeter acting as transducer. A single drive unit is problematic though – too small and you get frequency extension problems; too large and the surface of the transducer sets up its own inertial vibration mechanism. At the extremes, this makes the pistonic action of a drive unit turn chaotic. The way to resolve this in loudspeakers is to introduce a second drive unit (or more) to cope with the other frequencies. Unfortunately, that doesn't work when the drive units are about an inch from your ear,

because you hear the two acoustic centres of the drivers as two distinct entities.

Sennheiser spent many years thinking about this, and ended up with a toroidal – or ring – transducer. This manages to deliver the large wavefront sound desired by listeners (bigger, clearer sound that is more extended into treble and



bass) but without the aftershocks of transducer chaos. This in itself was only possible thanks to several years of materials science developments, to make a transducer material that was strong and rigid enough to cope with the job, but didn't sound like a crunched-up packet of Kettle Chips in the process.

With a wide-bandwidth, high performance driver in tow, the way the headphone interacts with ears suddenly became possible to explore. Smaller transducers effectively point at your ear canals, but the HD800 drivers are angled, to give the appearance of sound hitting the ears as it would when listening to a pair of loudspeakers set in optimal position. This gives you a series of psychoacoustic clues to make

it seem like there really are loudspeakers (more realistically, musicians) out in front of you, because sounds arrive at nerve endings in the middle ear slightly earlier than others.

The HD800 comes with three metres of cloth-wrapped, Kevlar-strengthened OFC balanced cable, featuring four individually Teflon-coated insulated wires, for connection to a headphone amplifier. It includes the standard ¼" jack, but no mini-jack – this ain't no iPod headphone. The cable is supposedly anti-twist, anti-knotty stuff – yeah, right. It twists a bit less than most plastic headphone cables (which seem intent on turning into a Gordian Knot three seconds after you rip open the box) and untangles easier than most, but there is no magic deknottifying technology here.

Of course, the HD800 is a truly hand-built affair. It will take time to get a pair, they are back ordered and each one takes several man-hours to build. No wonder the

▶ company put the serial number on the top of your head.

There was a two-fold aspect to this test. The first was an invite out to the Sennheiser factory, just outside of Hanover in Germany. The next was the test itself. The two were supposed to follow on relatively quickly, but a last-minute change in the ear surround material (the previous ultra-rare Japanese material was more prone to tearing than initially anticipated) and this meant a brief hiatus. This sent headphone fans on internet forums into complete apoplexy and started the conspiracy theories rolling. The boring truth is that no one died. No companies collapsed. No alien biowar interrupted the manufacturer. And no, the headbands do not cause giant pandas to suffer a loss of libido.

The HD800 is a serious piece of headphone gear. It demands use with a good headphone amplifier. Actually, make that a very good headphone amplifier... simply 'good' is not 'good enough' for this design. And no, that does not mean it's headphone amp fussy, just that when you hear how good the HD800 is, you get fussy instead. You will start demanding the best possible headphone amplifier, the best sources and everything else, because it's clearly and audibly rewarded.

Hi-fi writing is often filled with hyperbole, but sometimes that hyperbole reads like understatement to the reviewer, because the product is so damn good. That's how good the HD800 is – I could wax lyrical to life-threatening levels, with sickening prose about how wonderful this

product is, and not even scratch the surface. These products don't come along that often; the Focal Grande Utopia EM loudspeaker, the Berning Quadrature Z power amps and now add the Sennheiser HD800 headphones to the list.

Why? Because it tells you stuff about your discs that you never knew before. Even discs that might have been used time and again to ascertain the performance of products start to divulge secret bits of information lost in the back of the mix. One of the tests conducted at Sennheiser



was to compare the sound from headphones, near-field and full-tilt studio monitors, with a recording made a few minutes earlier and taken off the mixing desk. In particular, the engineer demonstrated the difference between two Lexicon reverb units – the PCM91 and latest PCM96. In listening through both speaker systems, the sound of the two reverbs were identical, but moving to the HD800, you could hear a slight 'pull' to the PCM91. It was as if the older reverb moved the singer fractionally to the side as the notes decayed. Of course, the only people who are likely to notice such subtlety are fellow HD800 users. The rest of the world

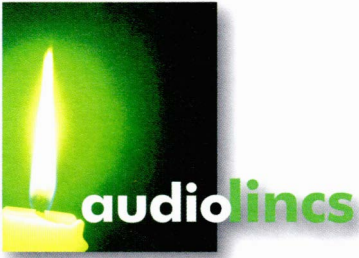
will be in blissful ignorance of the make and model of Lexicon used to mix vocals.

Whether it's stereo separation, detail, coherence, dynamic range or flat as a pancake frequency response, the HD800 has it in spades. In fact, it does these things so well, you'll struggle to find a pair of loudspeakers that does as good a job. Forget the money aspect – you will struggle to find any pair of loudspeakers that can do all of the things the HD800 can do. Granted a pair of headphones will not give you that

gut-punching bass that a pair of really big, really good loudspeakers can produce (on the other hand, with the £30,000+ you might save by not buying a pair of big loudspeakers, you can pay someone to come round and punch you in the stomach if you like that kind of thing). But for everything else there's the HD800.

Of course, things like soundstaging and imagery are harder to get right in a headphone, because it always sounds like the sounds are inside your head. Except for the HD800 that is. Thanks to those big, offset transducers, this headphone gives a passable sense of there being a group of instruments standing in space in front of your head, just like a good loudspeaker can. It's not as seamless as a pair of electrostatics or as pin-point precise and powerful as a pair of Wilsons or Magicos, but it comes surprisingly close.

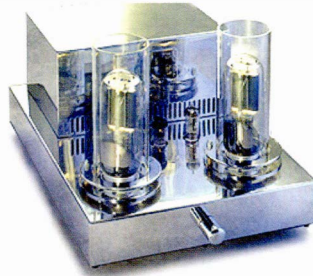
But perhaps the big thing about these headphones is the sense of effortlessness they have. You can put almost any piece of music through them and nothing



...because the flame is worth the candle



HORNING SATI Amplifiers



ART AUDIO Full Range Available



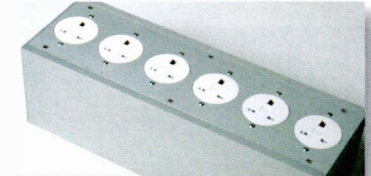
MUSIC FIRST Full Range Available



LUXMAN SQ38u Valve Amplifier



REFERENCE 3a Full Range Available



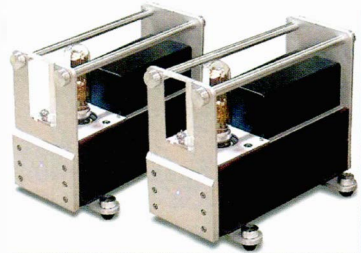
VERTEX AQ Full Range Available



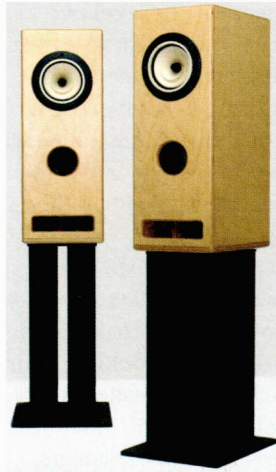
AIRTIGHT Full Range Available



BENZ MICRO Full Range Available



CONSONANCE Full Range Available



FEASTREX Full Range Available

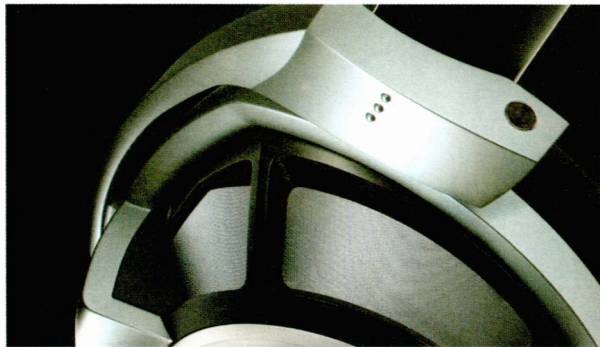


HORNING Eufrodite, Aristoteles & Agathon



BEL CANTO Full Range Available

▷ will cause them distress. Granted, some recordings prove to be not as good as you first thought – Gillian Welsh’s *Time (The Revelator)* turns out to have a hardness and closed in presentation that you’d really struggle to hear elsewhere – but even this is due to the fact that the headphones always sound like they are cruising rather than panicking. Rodrigo Y Gabriela’s percussive *palmas* opening to ‘Tamacun’ is a case in point – it’s expressed so dynamically on the disc and through the HD800 it’ll take your ears off if played at a fair lick, and yet the HD800 deals with the onslaught like it was nothing. Excellent stuff.



There’s a significant limitation to the HD800. Two in fact... One either side of your head. The headroom of the Sennheiser HD800 is so wide that you will break your ears before you break the headphones. This is no small consideration, because a transducer so clean and so free from break up at high levels will make you push the envelope. It’s almost irresistible, the “let’s see what this baby can do” mind-set that gets Porsche owners their first speeding ticket within a mile of the showroom. In this case, you keep turning up the volume control until something starts to clip. That something is usually

the headphone amplifier. By which time you are in the world of potentially serious hearing damage at the very next transient. Fortunately, in most cases good sense prevails, but at the aforementioned German trip to the Sennheiser factory, there were a number of otherwise sober, dour and professional international audio journalists blissfully wiggling out to Pink Floyd at some quite ear-threatening levels.

There’s only one last comparison to be made. We were fortunate enough to have a sample of the Sennheiser Orpheus on hand when comparing samples at the initial listening test in

Germany. The HD800 gets surprisingly close, but lacks the smoothness and even-handedness of the electrostatic design. That said, I’d happily trade the Orpheus’

smoothness for the level of information the HD800 gives you. As the HD800 is destined to be the start of a new high-end line for Sennheiser, perhaps there will be an even more up-scale version of this headphone with all the trimmings. Cor!

As it stands though, the Sennheiser HD800 leaves us with a very bold claim to make. This £1,000 headphone could be your next £25,000 loudspeaker. By that, I mean it has the sonic qualities of the very best loudspeakers, but without the footprint and the need to barricade yourself away from angry mobs if you plan on some late-night AC/DC at full blast.

In reality, most people who own a pair of £25,000+ loudspeakers would never contemplate going without them and moving to headphones, but where the HD800 score is that they do the other thing; they give you high-end loudspeaker sound for times when you can’t play loudspeakers. And for that reason, the HD800 (and a good headphone amp) should be your next loudspeaker purchase. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Sennheiser HD800

Type: Open, Dynamic headphones
Ear coupling: circum-aural
Transducer type: ring radiator
Frequency response:
 14Hz–44.1kHz (–3 dB)
Nominal impedance: 300 Ohms
Sound pressure level at 1 kHz:
 102dB (1kHz, 1 Vrms)
Max. nominal long-term input power: 500 mW
 (in acc. with EN 60-268-7)
Harmonic distortion: < 0.02%
 (1 kHz, 1 Vrms)
Contact pressure: c 3.4 N ± 0.3 N
Jack plug: 1/4" (6.3 mm) stereo
Connecting cable: 3m silver-plated,
 oxygen free (OFC) copper cable,
 symmetrical design
Operating temperature:
 –10 °C to + 55 °C
Approx. dimensions (WxHxD):
 273 x 348 x 149mm
Weight (without cable): 330 g
Price: £1,000

Manufacturer:

Sennheiser
 Net: www.sennheiser.com

Distributed by:

Sennheiser UK Ltd
 Net: www.sennheiser.co.uk
 Tel: +44 (0) 1494 551 551

Sonus faber®

CREMONA SERIES. LOOK TO THE PAST TO HEAR THE FUTURE.

“FAST, TRANSPARENT, DYNAMIC, OPEN, CLEAR, VIVID.”

HI FI CLUBE / JOSÉ VICTOR HENRIQUES / CREMONA ELIPSA

Sonus Faber's introductions in the early "Noughties" of the floor-standing Cremona and the smaller Cremona Auditor were hailed as milestones in the Industry's long standing quest to achieve the highly-desired marriage of both aesthetics and sound quality. Such a marriage would please both ends of the consumer spectrum, the audiophile as well as the cineaste

Indeed, it seemed incredible that the legendary, exquisite craftsmanship of the original Cremona and the Cremona Auditor could have been surpassed

However, the recent launch of two new models with 'M' designations, along with a flagship speaker, the Cremona Elipsa, were inspired by that most astounding of transducers, the Stradivari. Thus, they are testaments to the fact that Sonus Faber's designers are in a constant process of perfecting the art of music reproduction, and of pushing the boundaries in the creation and engineering of awe-inspiring handcrafted works of art. These speakers are all the more precious because of their rarity, in a world characterised by so much automation and mechanisation

The Auditor M, the smallest of the new Cremonas and the successor of the original Auditor, is a versatile two-way system ideally suited for smaller environments craving a large-scale musical picture. Its natural maple enclosure follows the Sonus Faber signature form of a lute in cross-section, while its components and final sound have been ear-tuned by the Sonus Faber team

For larger rooms, the original floor-standing Cremona has evolved into the new superior Cremona M, which displays a more elegant, stylish finish and benefits from the introduction of new components

Like their Homage siblings, both the Auditor M and Cremona M reflect the findings of Sonus Faber team's longstanding research, with attention paid to every detail, from small components, to wiring, to the drive units themselves. Equally, the aesthetics and external details have been refined to indicate a new stage in the speakers' evolution

At the top of the new Cremona range lies the brand-new Cremona Elipsa, designed for the connoisseur with both the means and the environment to exploit a larger system. The Cremona Elipsa provides near-Stradivari performance in a more compact, economical package. Its sound is room-filling, open and natural, while its form is as beautiful as the speaker that inspired it. The Elipsa is, without question, another Sonus Faber masterpiece



Sonus Faber CREMONA M



Sonus Faber CREMONA ELIPSA

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www.absolutesounds.com
info@absolutesounds.com

Sonus faber.

How to get ahead...

The Lehmann Linear USB headphone amp

by Alan Sircom



The Sennheiser HD800 is a wonderful and demanding beast. When we tested it in Germany, the headphone amp used was the Lehmann Black Cube Linear. With a total output power of 200mW into a 300 ohm load, a claimed THD of less than 0.001% at 6mW/300ohms, a signal to noise ratio of more than 95dB at 0dB gain plus a very flat frequency response from 10Hz up to 35kHz, the Lehmann Linear is a perfect match for the new flagship headphones. If it's good enough for Sennheiser...

We got the Linear USB version in for testing. As the name suggests, this adds USB connection and a Burr-Brown DAC. It auto-detects signals (defaulting to the analogue input) but it cannot power a USB device.

On the underside of both the Linear and Linear USB are three DIP switches that allow you to select the output gain for more or less efficient headphones (the options are 0dB, 10dB and 20dB). The impedance remains constant at 47kOhms, with a five ohm output impedance for headphones, and a 60 ohm for line out. We left the DIP switches 'as is', although the relatively sensitive HD800 meant the 27mm ALPS volume pot behind the milled aluminium knob was most commonly at the first third of its travel. The rest of the

deceptively-heavy Linear USB box – it weighs a little over 1.5kg - is taken up with a beefy (given the slim and small size) transformer and a very well engineered Class A output stage, that dissipates just five watts. The built-in power supply means there's no need for an external PSU box and the headphone amp is fed by a standard IEC three-pin mains lead.

There's the obligatory blue LED, of course, next to the two 6.35mm headphone sockets and a volume control. The rear panel is tiny, with just two sets of gold-plated phono sockets, a USB connection and a power supply block. So tiny in fact, the connection instructions for the Linear USB are printed on the baseplate. That's it; no remote, no balanced connections (although XLR features in the pro version).

In terms of sound quality, it's the perfect partner for the Sennheiser HD800. It's rugged, can drive to very high levels without distortion or complaint, it's tonally neutral, dynamic, fast and very, very detailed. Take away the HD800 and replace them with more humble cans (Sony MDR-7506, Grado SR-60 mk II) and the same detailed and accurate presentation follows across. As does the ability to go really loud without complaint – in short, the Lehmann s the perfect headphone partner.

There are better headphone systems, but they cost a lot more. We're talking Grace Design's m902 Reference D/A headphone

amplifier. The Grace has even more openness, expansiveness and clarity. However, it also has relatively low gain and you need to get close to the end of the dial to hear at anything approaching real-world listening levels. And that means we're happy to proclaim the Lehmann Linear USB as the perfect HD800 partner, for those who don't want to spend almost twice as much on the headphone amp as they did on the headphones. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Lehmann Black Cube Linear USB
Type Headphone Amplifier/USB DAC
Maximum gain . . . 0dB, 10dB, 20dB
(switchable underneath the unit)
Input impedance 47 KOhms
Output power . . .200mW/300 Ohms
400mW/60 Ohms
Output impedanceline out 60
. Ohms
. phones out 5 Ohms
Channel separation . . .>70dB/10kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD)
110x44x280mm
Weight app. 1.5 kg
Front panel colours . silver or black
anodized aluminium
Price (Linear) £650
Linear USB £900

Manufacturer

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Floats like Madam Butterfly

The dCS Puccini CD/SACD Player

— by Steve Dickinson —



Some years ago I was driving late at night, listening to *Late Junction* on Radio 3. A piece came on which intrigued me, I bought the CD a few days later. The album is *Frame* (Black Box Music BBM1055), the title track composed by Graham Fitkin, performed by Simon Haram and the Duke Quartet. I duly got it home and played it. Oh dear. Forced, nervous, aggressive and shrill. I'd obviously picked up on something when I heard it on the radio, but the edginess was probably drowned out by background noise in the car.

There's another Graham Fitkin piece on the album, 'Hard Fairy' and, once again, I could tell there was something remarkable in the music, but the recording, or the system, was just making a nasty noise. As my system has improved over time, the album has occasionally been pulled out, retried, and quickly put back again. No longer. Shortly after the dCS Puccini arrived, I conducted what has become known as the '*Frame*' test. Then I played 'Hard Fairy'. Then, grinning like a Labrador with a stolen Sunday roast, I played it again. And again. I've probably played those tracks more in the couple of months since the Puccini arrived than I ever did in the preceding six years.

The thing is, the music still has the aggression, is still hard and, yes, still a bit harsh, the Puccini has most definitely not

produced an airbrushed, elegant and beguiling sound thereby making a dodgy recording bearable. That is not what it does. What it has revealed is that behind, or perhaps within that edginess there is indeed some amazing music, played by some equally astonishing musicians. The album has gone from unlistenable to unforgettable. And how has it done that timing that's how. I'm sorry, I'll say that again. And how has it done that? Timing. That's how.

dCS players do sometimes polarise opinions. There are those who get wildly enthusiastic about their capabilities and those who, in a nutshell, don't. I quite admire equipment like that. Whether I like it or not, I respect the fact that people will argue about it. That means it probably has something worth arguing about, even if it doesn't necessarily float your boat. The thing is, dCS equipment doesn't sound quite like anything else out there – at least, not in my experience.

I believe the fundamental reason for this is dCS' digital processing expertise, evidenced by their proprietary DSD data format and Ring DAC. This patented technology, produces an analogue signal possessed of more detail than I've ever heard from CD. Upsampling of the data to DSD format in the digital domain allows the Ring DAC to reconstruct the analogue signal using rather more data points than should exist at first glance. This is not interpolation, nor conventional oversampling, nor are they 'inventing' data which is not already encoded on the disc, it is rather like one of those

mathematical conundrums which defies common sense logic until you see it from another point of view. Suffice to say, there is apparently more musical information on your average CD than conventional DAC technology is equipped to convey. This translates not only into revelatory levels of low level detail and ambience, but also into simply exquisite timing. The dCS has the ability to unravel the music like no other player I've yet heard.

It is, however, entirely possible for much of this to pass unnoticed. Shortly after the arrival of the Puccini, the MusicWorks ReVo equipment stand arrived. I delayed installing it until I'd got the measure of the Puccini and part of that process had involved some experimentation with support. Using my own, MusicWorks modified, Quadraspire acrylic reference table I find I can get decent results with a wide variety of equipment through a little fiddling and faffing around. For example, my regular Cairn Fog3 CD player responds well if you take the weight off its feet and rest it instead on a set of Nordost Titanium Pulsar Points. Some other players, notably the dCS Puccini, don't. The Puccini was definitely happier on its own feet when sat on the Quadraspire top shelf. So naturally, when I

reinstalled the Puccini on the new ReVo stand, I set it on its own feet.

Putting on YoYo Ma, playing the Prelude from the Bach Cello Suite No.1 was hugely unexpected: vague, slow and dull. Other pieces, for example Ariel Ramirez' *Missa Criolla* had a soundstage which had imploded. I was beginning to think I'd broken the player during the messing about. Then I remembered something the MusicWorks guys had mentioned: that they sometimes got better results if they bypassed the equipment's own feet and rested the kit directly on its own baseplate, easy to do with the ReVo support.

Revelation! Richer harmonics, massively expanded soundstage, air and space, ambience and sense of acoustic all returned. With knobs on. Notes had a longer and deeper decay, all the better to appreciate their shape and how they were formed. Now the Puccini was starting to sound like a proper, ten grand player. The *Missa Criolla* had a sense of acoustic space with depth and tactility, the percussion sits at the very back of the recording and now that distance was palpable but, if anything, the percussion was clearer, tighter





▶ and more solid than before. This is clearly a player capable of deep and subtle discrimination. Some might accuse it of being overly analytical, 'Moon over Bourbon Street' from Sting's live album *All This Time* (Polydor B00005RT0M) was crystalline and beautifully presented, bass being particularly tight and strong, but perhaps a tiny bit compartmentalised, similarly 'Brand New Day' from the same album leaves one with the sense that something has been deconstructed and reassembled (which, of course, it has) which may partly be down to the dCS player's extraordinary precision: bass is tighter and better defined, leading edges of notes, indeed general levels of articulation, are overall significantly better than any non-dCS player I've encountered; instrumental separation, placement and solidity are quite extraordinary. Then along comes 'Shape of My Heart' and blows my theory apart with a deeply affecting version of a song I'd previously thought was good, but not one of his best. So, it does do emotion, rather well as it happens. Take it from me.

It occurs to me that if I'd started with the Puccini on its own feet on the ReVo stand, without hearing it first on the Quadraspire table, I wouldn't have had my

nose quite so forcefully rubbed in the fact that all was not as it should have been. I might have tinkered, aware that the player was underperforming, but without any real sense of what I was missing. Clearly the dCS player can, in some circumstances, spectacularly fail to impress. Get it right, though, and the Puccini becomes a vital, vibrant thing. Rhythmically impeccable, it never gets tripped up by complex polyrhythms or rubato; combining classical and jazz in Shostakovich's Waltz from the Jazz Suite No. 2 the player's sure-footedness allowed a real sense of fun to infuse the piece, this felt less like a concert or recording session, more like a sunny afternoon on a seaside fairground.

Technically, the Puccini contains little that is new, mostly just the latest implementation of the dCS Ring DAC technology with upsampling of the digital signal to DSD format before delivery to the DAC. There is the facility to leave the data as PCM (i.e., not upsampled to DSD) in the various menu options but, if you do opt for this version, much of the magic leaves too; the sense of acoustic space, naturalness of instruments and the feeling of being in the presence of a musical event is evidently an important

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

dCS Puccini

Type . . . Upsampling CD/SACD player
DAC . . . dCS Ring DAC, upsampling to DSD before oversampling.
Inputs Two digital (S/PDIF) RCA Phono connectors, accepting up to 24 bit PCM at 32, 44.1, 48, 88.2 and 96 kHz. One word clock input on 75 Ohm BNC connector
Outputs . Two digital coaxial output
 . . . One unbalanced analogue output
 One balanced analogue output
 . . One word clock output on 75 Ohm BNC connector
Output Level . . 2.0V rms or 6.0V rms
 Variable output level as digital preamp

Dimensions (WxHxD, in mm)

. 460x101x410

Weight 12.1Kg

Available finishes . . . Silver or black

Remote control Yes
 optional programmable remote

Price £10,799

Manufacturer

Data Conversion Systems Ltd

Tel: +44 (0)1799 531999

Net: www.dcsLtd.co.uk

part of the DSD upsampling option. The DSD upsampler also provides a choice of output filters which progressively reduce the bandwidth, trading detail, air and space for a reduction in perceived harshness. If your system is limited in frequency extension this may be an option worth exploring, but if you can justify around £10k on a CD player you probably have ▶

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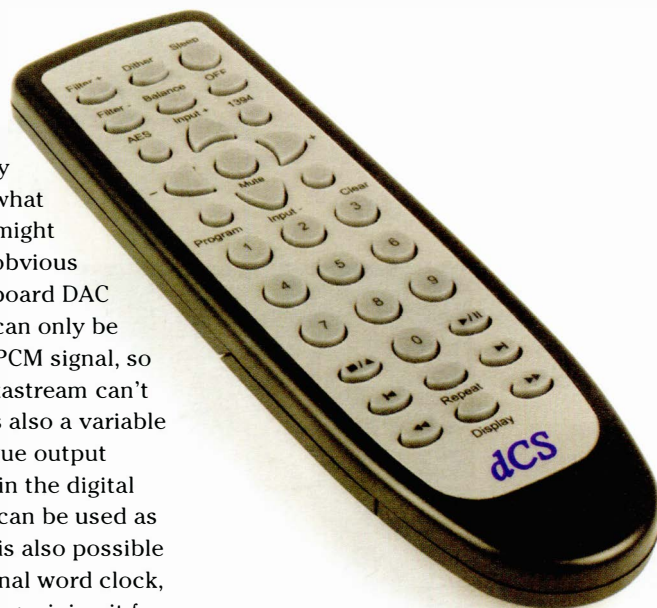
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▶ an amplifier and loudspeakers which can cope and will probably do as I did, check them out, then leave the factory recommended filter option set. The player uses a high quality TEAC UMK5 dual-laser CD/SACD transport, modified with a custom-made aluminium CD-tray replacing the standard plastic part. This mechanism operates with a silky precision well worth the elevated asking price, indeed the casework, switchery and display are all made to a satisfyingly high standard, to my eyes this is the best-looking dCS product yet.

The use of the TEAC UMK5 transport means, as expected, that the Puccini also plays SACDs. Given the already impressive performance of DSD upsampled CD I was expecting great things from the SACDs in my collection. I wasn't disappointed. We glibly use expressions like 'shape' and 'solidity' to express ideas in reviews but high-definition formats such as SACD show just how much can be achieved by this process. Kick-drums now have a real sense of body, firing their beats at you like hard-edged nuggets of sound; delicate, breathy female voices, for example Eleanor McEvoy's fragile vocals on *Yola*, are easy to discern, even over loud, complex or bass-heavy mixes because they float free of the background, claiming their own space. The SACD layer of the *Dies Irae* from the Nicholas Harnoncourt/Vienna Philharmonic Verdi *Requiem* (Sony BMG 82876 61244 2) gains not only weight and body, but a sense of presence and urgency, which is lost in the general melee that is (by comparison) the CD layer.

The dCS Puccini is also versatile. It has two digital inputs, so the advantages of the Ring DAC technology can be extended to another transport, or perhaps

DAB radio, it has a digital output (though I am slightly struggling to think what real-world use you might put it to, given the obvious strengths of the onboard DAC and the fact that it can only be used to access the PCM signal, so an SACD or DSD datastream can't be output). There is also a variable output level, analogue output volume is adjusted in the digital domain so the unit can be used as a digital preamp. It is also possible to connect an external word clock, such as dCS' own Paganini unit for yet greater precision, something I have yet to experience but am keen to try.

"Rhythmically impeccable, (the dCS Puccini) never gets tripped up by complex polyrhythms or rubato"

Other players sound unfocused, in comparison with the dCS. *Possessed* by the Balanescu Quartet (MUTE 9 61421-2) has a sinewy, urgent quality through the Puccini. It is still compelling through other players, but one is not left quite so breathless or bereft when the music stops. If timing is at the heart of the dCS approach, as I think it is, then the Puccini has it, in spades.

Mostly very, very positive, I have nevertheless been left with curiously mixed feelings about this player: on the one hand, it has strengths which leave me feeling overwhelmingly enthusiastic, the

sound of DSD-upsampled CD and SACD is beyond what I've heard elsewhere, it is infectious and addictive; on the other hand there is something niggling away at me which I haven't isolated. I did the 'Frame' test on an Accuphase DP500, a superb CD player at around half the price of the dCS and it gave a very good account of itself, as it should. Although ultimately not even close to the mightily impressive dCS, it did however have a wonderfully natural sense of ease and liquid phrasing which the dCS would struggle to better. I've also heard dCS at shows sound distinctly off the pace. It occurs to me that perhaps dCS have concentrated on their peerless digital expertise and the analogue output hasn't had quite the attention of more organic-sounding players from Accuphase, Audio Research or Zanden, for example. I'd like to stick my neck out and wonder aloud just how good the dCS Puccini would be, with a genuinely top notch analogue output stage. It is already one of the great one-box players, dCS may have to ask very, very nicely indeed if they want it back. ▶



Ⓟ A.C.T. C.60

Wide Bandwidth Sound

Tomorrow's World?

The Naim HDX hard disk player

by Alan Sircom



The Naim HDX has arguably courted more controversy than any hi-fi device since the CD player. So, what's caused all the fuss? The HDX is a hard disk player, in Naim's inimitable style. It combines regular computer technology with Naim's expertise in analogue and digital music circuitry and power supply design, and also takes advantage

of some of the lessons learned in developing the company's NaimNet custom install devices.

The computer-side parts are effectively an off-the-shelf PC (specifically a Mini-ITX design sporting a 1.5GHz Via C7 CPU), a pair of 400GB hard disk drives, a CD-ROM drive and quiet computer power supply. That's met by Naim's own custom-

made PCI board; this combines PCI bridge, audio controller and high-precision clock, each with its own power supply regulation. This necessitated Naim writing its own driver software for the device, to make sure the transfer of data from the hard disk to the custom PCI board is performed as smoothly (and with as little processor action) as possible.

Once we leave the computer side, the HDX begins to look more Naim-y under the skin. There's a four-layer custom audio-board, which drives both analogue (DIN and phono) and digital (toslink and coaxial S/PDIF) outputs and features a Burr Brown PCM1791A digital to analogue converter chip. Once again, high-quality clocks and plenty of power supply isolation are a common factor, and the analogue board uses a microcontroller that lies in slumber when music is playing on only wakes when accessing new tracks. This is the one upgradable aspect of the player; again in the Naim style, this can be beefed up by something like a Naim 555PS power supply, or a separate DAC. Granted, adding a 555PS to a HDX makes for a very expensive server indeed, but Naim's power supply upgrades are key to the company's ethos. It's not a power supply upgrade to the computer side, but confers the same benefits to the audio side as upgrading the power supply to a preamp.

The NaimNET connection means you can run six audio streams simultaneously from the HDX. It also includes the thoroughly clever system of giving the front panel a different IP address to the computer side. This means the computer part can access online music stores or databases, while the control architecture can be driven from other locations. It also means the HDX can be controlled from a webtablet like the Nokia N8.

There's one big – and thoroughly deliberate – omission; no CD burning facility. This is entirely understandable when coming from a company with its own record label and therefore a good understanding of intellectual property rights. Similarly, the HDX

does not automatically rip CDs to its hard drive(s). Instead, it gives the option of playing the CD as a CD, meaning those bringing CDs to a party do not end up making an illegal copy on the HDX. You still get all the advantages of the HDX's metadata control and database lookup facilities when playing that CD, but it's just that the moment the disc is removed, the menu system removes all record ('depopulating the menus' in Naim-speak) of that disc. Yes, we'd all rather have the facility to burn discs and rip our friends music, but it's crossing a copyright line that Naim is keen to prevent.

Naim says the player should be powered up permanently (except during thunderstorms, of course), and suggests a good five-day warm-up to bring the player to its best. In fairness, I spent my first five days with the Naim HDX stuffing it full of CDs to see just how crash-proof and how good the player was at finding obscure records on databases, but the sound did seem to improve over those days – as is commonplace with Naim products.

Although the HDX will support FLAC and MP3 files, and high-res PCM audio from downloads, it does not offer anything other than full uncompressed WAV rips from CD. This means the internal 400GB disc will only store up to about 600 CDs (the second HDD is for back-up), but you can add network attached storage ('NAS') boxes for larger collections.

Naim's ripping technology uses secure mode ripping (this means an average CD will take several minutes) and preserves track lead-ins and outs as standard; this makes your ripped discs sound more like you remember them, not simply tracks stored on a computer.

The HDX will rip more accurately than discs ripped in burst mode, but so will any other ripping software using secure ripping. Bit-perfect is bit-perfect, whichever way it arrives. I ripped the same file using the HDX, Exact Audio Copy and iTunes (all in WAV) and compared the results – they were identical.

A more disputed claim is whether there's a need to store in WAV, as many servers now use lossless compression and there's no notional difference in sound quality between the original and lossless form (if there was a difference, it wouldn't be 'lossless', goes the logic). Many – including Naim, it seems – reject that concept as a matter of course. If you receive FLAC or MP3, AAC or even WMA files, the HDX will cope with them, but there's no pathway to rip discs in anything other than their original form.

Connection is easy, although a little different from most hi-fi systems. The usual phono connection to a preamp (DIN if you are a Naim user), the big Burndy link for a power supply or maybe a S/PDIF link for digital. But then, there's the connection for a screen and an Ethernet connection for linking to a router. There's no wi-fi connection and Naim recommends linking the HDX to the outside world using a wired connection. Generally, the IP connection is straightforward, and up and running in seconds.

We tried to floor the HDX by feeding it a very broad range of discs. Some of them were designed to check the speed and performance of the rip – discs that look like they've been read by a cold chisel instead of a laser – and others that challenge the abilities of the database software. In both cases, the HDX acquitted

▶ itself well. The scratched discs took longer to rip than clean ones, but the result was the same. The player has a limited lookup table built-in, but when going to AMG (and, failing that, FreeDB) it can load up details and album covers with about a 98% certainty (of the first 100 discs I loaded up, only Popa Chubby and Schoenberg tripped it up, and even then it served up album and track data).

Using and abusing the player as much as possible rarely threw out problems and the player required a

There's a distinctive 'Naiminess' to the sound of the HDX. It has that beat-driven musicality that makes the player prove so seductive at playing rock music. And, with a few hundred CDs loaded up, that 'seductive' turns into track after track of air guitar around the living room. There's also a directness and precision to the sound that's the antithesis of vinyl, and even challenges CD on the timing and solidity stakes.

Van Halen tracks off the HDD. And the joys of being able to reach for *Back in Black*, *Stockholm Syndrome* or *Ain't Talkin' 'bout Love* in a matter of seconds any time of the day or night is something to relish... and something your neighbours will seriously come to hate you for.

Like a lot of Naim equipment, the HDX tends to lead you toward the rock end of your musical spectrum. But that may be



hard reset twice in two weeks of stern punishment – at the same time a feeding discs into a PC caused it to crash out, making a tweeter ripping chirp every few hours. A hard reset takes a long time to power down or boot up, though and if you are used to pressing play a few seconds after powering up a CD player, the HDX will leave you disappointed... there's a several minute long gap between turning the thing on and getting the menus up and running.

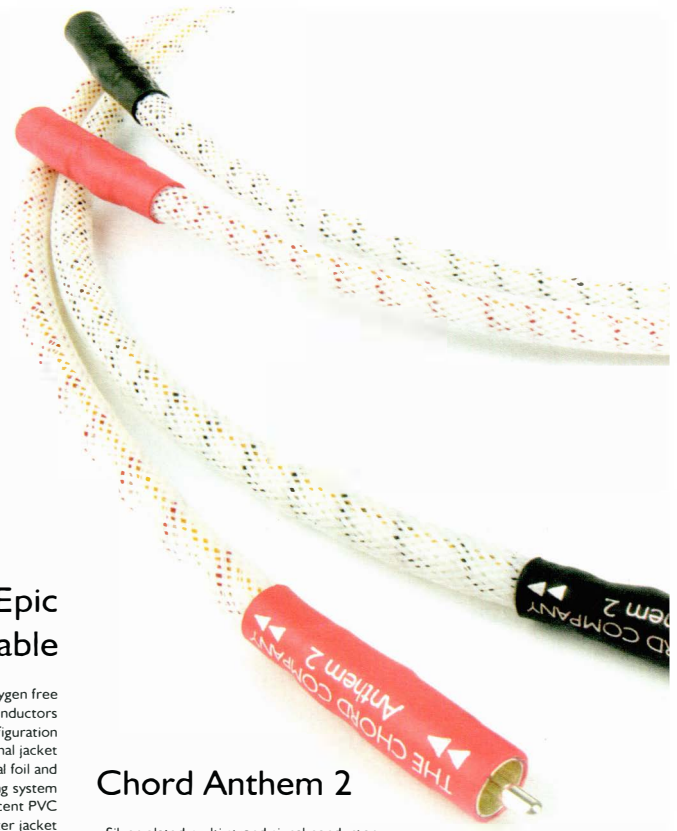
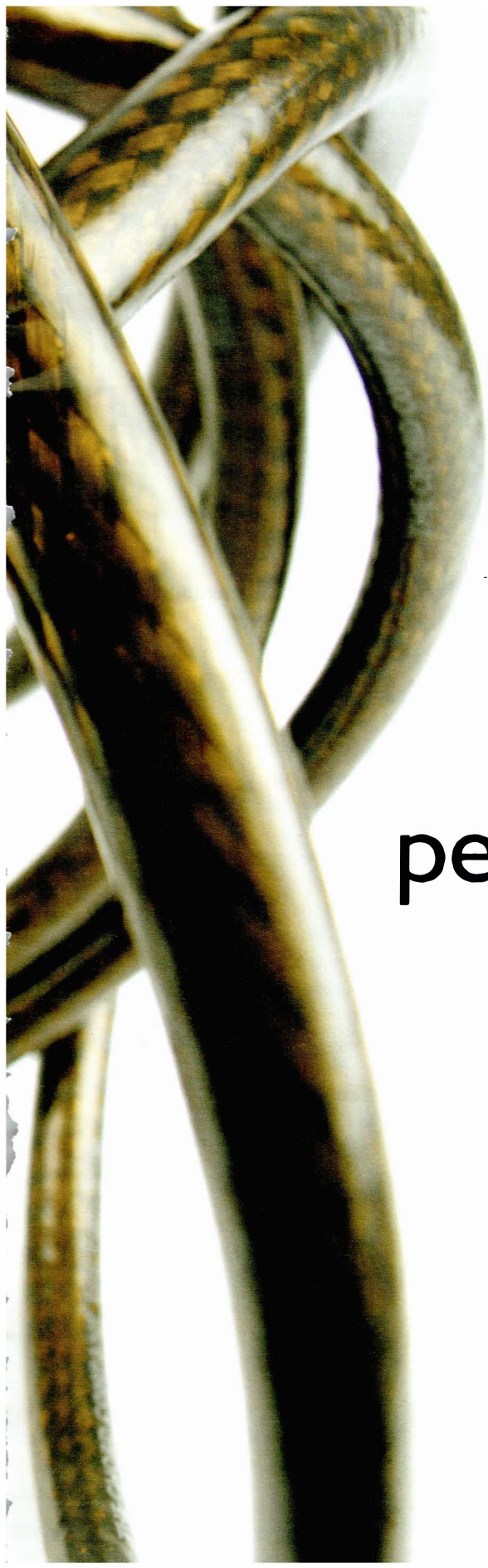
We played the HDX through a thoroughly non-Naim system (a Sugden A21SE amp and ProAc Studio 140 loudspeakers) and compared it with a Cyrus CD8se CD player with PSX-R power supply and to a PC with a DAC.

What the Naim HDX does – and does brilliantly – is cope with the architecture of the music, at once making music seem more integrated and delineating the spaces around the notes with as much finesse as the notes themselves. In that respect, it plays music with the economy of a BB King, which is a rare treat.

It also makes music a great deal of fun. We all have our guilty secret recordings that we feel the need to wig out to; forget the surface intellectualising of listening to genteel Mendelssohn, this is the bad-boy stuff you never quite got over as a teenager. You can guarantee the Naim HDX will make you reach for that CD and rip it. Which is why the next recipient of my review sample will had to clean out all the AC/DC, Muse and

because those who have reviewed it tend to play music at the rock end of the spectrum. I had no problems listening to a fair selection of older jazz, folk and even pumped the thing full of unhealthy amounts of Richard Strauss. Whatever you play, though, it seems to free up your inner rocker; I found myself air conducting Strauss, playing air trumpet to Louis Armstrong and playing air fiddle to the folksy stuff. I still got a lot of the cerebral aspects of the music, but this made you think entertainment first and foremost.

In some respects though, the performance is secondary. It's a good player, but that's not the point. What Naim has done with the HDX is make computer audio painless. Although you couldn't get exactly the same performance ▶



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▶ as you can get from the HDX, you might be able to get close using a PC and a good DAC. However, the steps you have to go through to simply rip a disc, store it and access it make such a thing difficult without turning your hi-fi into a workstation. You can run the HDX just using the display panel if you want.

This sounds trivial, but is the key to the HDX's success. It's also some explanation as to why the HDX has received such flak in cyberspace. Those who are into their hi-fi and computers enough to post to forums are not necessarily the kind of people who will 'get' the HDX. Instead, think of the Naim player as a CD player with a very good memory and an interest in musicology for someone who is loathe to use a PC in the living room.

Eventually, we compared the Naim HDX to a CD and a PC solution, with no considerations made toward price. All three produce a comparable performance; the Cyrus duo has the accent on 'clean', the PC leads the field when it comes to stark detail and the Naim wins in the sheer enjoy-the-experience stakes (in fairness, an iTunes solution would

make the PC more user-friendly, but you still think of it as a computer, where the Naim HDX is every bit the music player). When playing directly off the CD, the Cyrus was the winner by a hair, but both this and the Naim were somewhat more musical sounding than the no-name transport mech inside the PC.

The Naim HDX's software isn't perfect; it could do with some Apple-esque user-chumminess and the powerful sorting process of the Sooloos, but it's certainly not human-hostile. In fact, it's virtually as easy to use as a Naim CD player, as you might expect. Because it's the migration product for those who think a computer is for workin' and surfin' and a hi-fi is for listenin'.

I suspect the HDX will always divide people. There will be those who think it's 'just a computer' and others who think it's Naim's best product since the CD 555. Personally, I think it's a clever product that starts hi-fi traditionalists (many of whom love Naim products) on the road to 21st Century music delivery systems without too many tears. And for that reason, it's a lot smarter move on the company's account than many people credit. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Naim HDX

Type: Hard Disk player

Features: . . . Rips CDs to WAV only
2x 400GB hard disk drives internally
NAS external support for increased capacity and back-up

Line outputs: DIN and RCA

Frequency response:
10Hz-18kHz ± 0.1dB

Output levels: . . . 2.1V rms at 1kHz

Output impedance: . 22 Ohms max

Phase response:
Linear, absolute phase correct

Distortion and noise:
<0.1% 10Hz-18kHz at full level

Disc compatibility: Red book compatible CD, CDR & CDRW

Audio Files supported: .WAV, MP3, AAC, FLAC, WMA

Mains supply:
100-120V, 220-240V, 50/60Hz

Dimensions (H x W x D):
87 x 432 x 314mm

Weight: 10.8kg

Price: £4,500

Manufacturer:

Naim Audio

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Tel: + 44 (0) 1722 426600

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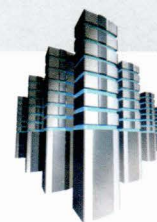
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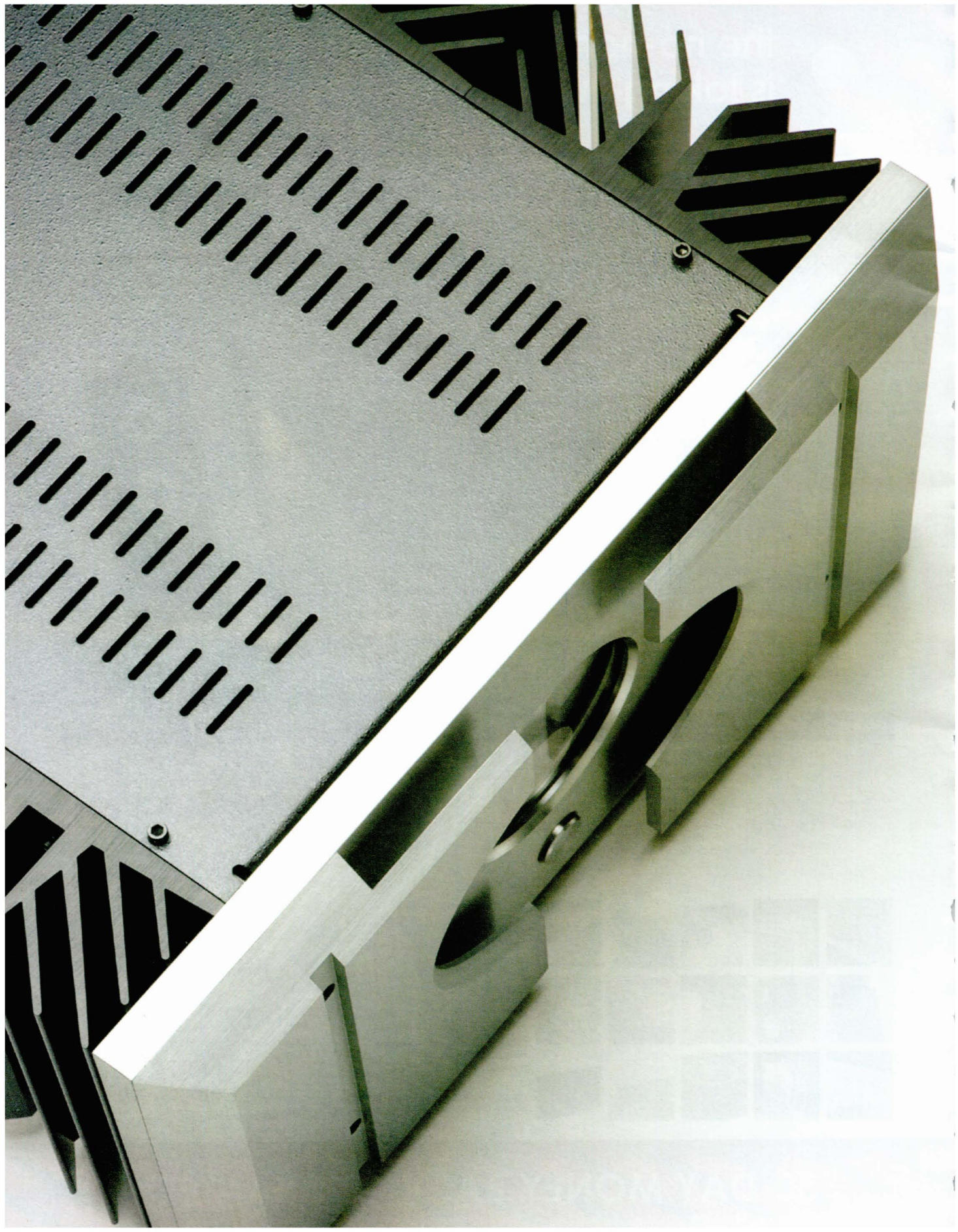
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The Sound of Progress...

The Pass Labs XP-10 Preamp and XA160.5 Monobloc Power Amplifier

by Anthony H. Cordesman

I confess to something of a love affair with Pass Labs electronics, but not one where I have ever been particularly faithful. I have repeatedly fallen equally in love with top of the line preamps and amplifiers from a wide range of other manufacturers.

The fact remains, however, that I have used Pass equipment in my reference system for years. The reasons have been exceptional transparency, signal to noise ratios, lack of coloration, and dynamics. They work well with virtually any mix of other components I have reviewed, and produce the same sound over a period of months and years. Pass is scarcely unique in having these merits, but Pass equipment has yet to disappoint me either as an audiophile or reviewer.

This experience has also given me a great deal of insight into how the sound of Pass equipment has evolved over time, and Pass has made a significant advance in the sound quality of both its preamps and a Class-A amplifiers. The Pass XP-10 preamp may not be Pass Labs new top of the line – that will be the XP-20 – but it is cleaner, more dynamic, and lifelike than

its top of the line predecessor: the X0.2. The same is true of the Pass XA160.5 power amp, although the differences between it and its predecessor are more subtle. With the possible exception of the Krell Evolution line, the new Pass XA160.5 is the best example of solid state, Class-A design I have currently experienced.

Having said that, let me make three important qualifications about both these judgments that shape the rest of this review. First, these are not night and day improvements, or reasons to rush out to replace the previous generation of Pass Labs equipment. As is the case

with other top manufacturers, preamp and amplifier design has long advanced to point where each new generation of improvements is a matter of nuance. Second, the value and impact of such improvements is a matter of personal taste. It is far too easy to buy on the basis of a good review, but an audiophile who does not really listen make personal judgments is not really an audiophile, simply a puppet with money. Third, at least some of the nuances you hear will be system dependent. This is particularly true of the interactions between a power amp like the XA160.5 and a given speaker and speaker



▶ cable, but it applies to the interactions between front ends and interconnects as well.

That said, the Pass Labs XP-10 not only makes advances in sound quality, it has better ergonomics for most real-world audiophiles. The XP-10 is notably smaller than previous designs; it gets better sound out of one chassis than the previous top model got out of three. It also has a more practical and easy to use remote control.

I don't like to fight my equipment when placing it, changing connections, or even operating it. The previous Pass designs were only moderately easy to use in any of these respects, and while their sheer size may have been more impressive than that of the XP-10, there are few things that are more meaningless in solid-state design than the size of the box.

Pass has clearly been thinking 'inside the box.' The XP-10 has a new and advanced Plitron power transformer with higher current and lower noise. Although the XP-10 has an internal power supply, XP-10's supply has lower noise than earlier models with an external supply. The XP-10 also has new, high speed, low noise rectifiers, and new switching suppression circuits. This reduces the amount of high frequency EMI generated by the power supply. There is a separate power supply for digital circuits, isolated by inductors and diodes, and an isolated digital ground to further reduce noise.

The XP-10 uses the same Corcom RF input filtering as the earlier Pass X0.2, but the earlier unit used IC supply regulators. The XP-10 has high-current low noise discrete regulators with passive Diode/Resistor/Capacitor decoupling after each regulator. The resulting noise is much

lower, and because the noise is symmetric it is better rejected by balanced circuits.

The Pass XP-10 has a new UGS6 gain stage that offers an extremely high input impedance (the UGS5 is a virtual ground input). The new gain circuit provides lower distortion and noise than its predecessor, and improved common mode characteristics – Including input noise rejection, supply rejection and temperature drift. Performance is also better at high output voltages. Earlier

"There are few things that are more meaningless in solid-state design than the size of the box."

Pass designs could swing +/- 50 volts, but the XP-10 does it with significantly lower distortion. The volume control has higher resolution – with 1 dB steps – with better matching between channels, and we have reduced the amount of 'zipper noise' when the level is being altered.

The single-ended RCA outputs of the XP-10 are now isolated from the balanced outputs to eliminate interaction when driving loads with both simultaneously. This prevents degradation of the balanced signal when one side of the balance output is additionally loaded. There also is RF filtering on all analog inputs.

Do all of these technical advances produce advances in sound quality that lead me to have emotional epiphanies and

wild mood swings, or reduce me to tears when cranking up my collection of 8-track Barry Manilow tapes? Of course not! However, if you put the XP-10 into a high resolution system with components of matching quality, you will hear more detail, more musical life, more low-level dynamics, and more of the subtle nuances in your recordings.

Much of this improvement is most striking in with acoustic music, or at least the kind of music where low level detail and dynamic subtleties really count. The value of 'sound of silence' does depend on how much you care about nuance versus how much you care about loud. The same is true about a subtle improvement in timbre. I have no idea why, but the timbre of acoustic instruments link piano, guitar, and violin does seem more real, somehow.

The new XP-10 also does an even better job of removing the last traces of hardness in solid-state designs while doing so with less residual noise than any tube preamp I have heard to date. This improvement seems to affect at high listening levels as well as low one, although Pass designs have never constrained high level dynamics. These improvements also have the kind of synergy that produces an expanded sense of space – to the extent a given recording actually has a sound stage. XP-10 has more realistic imaging, and – *if the recording permits* – more depth

The improvements in the volume control and balance control improve on the practical listening experience regardless of the music you choose. You get more control in getting musical levels just right. It is also possible to use the improvements in the balance control to adjust balance

consonance

...**Opera-Consonance** was the first turntable manufacturer in China and has demonstrated with analog at every show since the company's founding. Even with more than 100 products in the line (including technical and cosmetic variations of products), **Mr. Liu still creates all the designs himself.** The product range includes both solid-state and tubed integrated amplifiers, preamps, power amps, CD players, and turntables. **Opera-Consonance** even makes its own tone arms...

Everything about **Opera-Consonance** was impressive, from the fundamental design ethic to the build-quality to the sound.

Robert Harley, The Absolute Sound June/July 2008 US



Opera-Consonance Mini-Droplet Linear CD player

Featuring non-oversampling, filterless design, superclock, triode output and a digital input connection.



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Utilising a Compression driver combined with a Tractrix wooden horn. Available in 12" and 15" versions. 97dB sensitivity, 8 Ohm.



Opera-Consonance Cyber Series Power Amplifiers

Choice of 30WPC 2A3 Triode, or 100WPC 6550 Pentode.



1. 120 Linear CD Player

2. Cyber Series Monoblocks

3. Forbidden City Series

4. Cyber Series Integrated

5. Reference Linear CD Player

6. Forbidden City Turntable

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▶ exactly to fit a given recording, or track on a recording, to get more precise imaging and a more realistic mix of width and depth, and do so more easily. (Exact balance adjustment is a key aspect of practical listening and I would never buy a preamp that did not have a balance control, or trust anyone who recommended a preamp without one.)

As for features, there are a couple of points you need to

consider if you have an unusually complex system. The XP-10 does not have a tape or processor loop. It does not – as previous Pass designs permitted – allow each input to be used as either an unbalanced (RCA) or balanced (XLR) input, and there is only one pair of XLR and RCA outputs. It is a line stage preamp, and it does not have a phono stage. It does, however, allow you to choose between two levels of gain, and

it does have the ability to be integrated into a home theatre system. It produces reference quality sound, and has all of the features most audiophiles actually need for music listening, but it does not have all of the bells and whistles of the most complex preamp designs.

The XA160.5 makes similar advances in sound quality, although I should stress that the XP-10 and XA160.5 complement

other associated components be coloured to match. I have never been a fan of either approach, and the XP-10 and XA160.5 are free of such problems. Both are designed to be as neutral as possible, and work well with components from other manufacturers – tube or solid state.

Like its predecessor – the XA160 – the XA160.5 is a full Class-A amplifier that produces Class-A sound at its full frequency range and up to its full rated output of 160 watts. It also has the kind of power supply and power output devices that allow it to produce peaks of Class-A power of up to 328 watts. Let me note that choice between the sweeter and more harmonic detail and low to mid level dynamics of the best Class-A designs comes at the expense of an apparent smoothness or coherence and a major trade-off in less power for high level dynamics. The choice between the best Class-A and Class A-AB designs is not an easy one, and also very much depends on the nature of the speaker and speaker cable being used and the quality of the recording and electronics that drive the amplifier. I find myself moving back and forth between the two circuit topologies and many top manufacturers – like Pass – use both.

The Pass XA160.5 did, however, prove to be an exceptional member of the Class-A breed, and one that again showed that it is what is inside the box, not to size of the box or the styling of the front panel that counts. It continues to use a hybrid Class-A circuit topology that Pass first developed for the Aleph .0 power amplifier in 1991. This circuit parallels a push-pull Class-A output stage with a current source that biases it into single-ended

Class-A. The use of a single-ended Class-A circuit delivers what Pass feels is the lowest order of harmonic distortion, 2nd harmonic, instead of the 3rd harmonic of push-pull. The use of high bias levels also reduces that distortion to extremely low levels, although it also means more heat, something like twice the size and twice the weight of lower bias designs and high AC power consumption.

The way in which the new circuits in the XA160.5 circuit are executed, however, is very different from that in both the Aleph and the XA160. There is a new bias circuit with bias generator that sharply reduces variation in the bias current in the output stage, and provides allows 20% greater power output for a given supply voltage. The output stage also not only uses a heavy bias current for push-pull Class A operation to a large portion of the rated power, but also has a single-ended bias source for single-ended Class A at low wattage.

The XA160.5 has a cascode JFET Symmetric front end that replaces the previous differential MOSFETs to produce less noise, a higher input impedance, and greater linearity. Put simply, the devices operate self-biased in a symmetric quad topology, and each device is cascoded and level shifted to form the full voltage gain stage of the amplifier. There also are more output devices, and matched complementary power Mosfets are operated as followers to provide more current and power handling and improved linearity. The overall circuitry also provides a very high damping factor (a nominal 200) and stability into demanding loads. More generally, there is no high frequency compensation in any of the gain circuits; no frequency

each other rather than have some special form of synergy. There are times a manufacturer seems to tune a preamp and amp so they have at least slightly opposing colorations and only produce a neutral sound if used with each other. There are other times where all of a manufacturer's products have a similar warm or bright coloration to the sound, and seem to be designed in ways that almost require that the speaker and

roll off or lag capacitors, no output coils, and no Zobel networks to try to neutralize the effects of the driver's voice coil inductance.

The power supplies have been given greater storage capacitance, larger and quieter power transformers, twice as many fast recovery rectifiers, and improved harmonic filtering in both the primary and secondary supply circuits. This may account for the fact that the XA160.5 is considerably less sensitive to AC line quality and power cords than some competing amplifiers.

This combination of a better power supply and more output devices gives the XA160.5 the ability to deliver more than five times the current of the XA160, and more than 25 times the power into very low impedance loads – allowing it to drive virtually any speaker available (and even including some older Apogee designs, which may have set the record for demanding low impedance loads). The XA160.5 is also stated to have about ten per cent of the noise of the XA160 from the audio to radio frequency spectrum.

What really counts, however, is the sonic impact of these improvements in the XA160.5, and while they are changes in nuance, the end result is still impressive. In brief, the XA160.5 is a cleaner, sweeter, and more detailed amplifier with distinctly better high-level dynamics into real world speaker loads. Like the XP-10, these improvements are most audible with the kind of music where low level detail and dynamic subtleties really count.

At the same time, this is not because of some striking improvement in one area, or

sudden change in the sound of one recording or one group of instruments or type of voice. It is rather the result of series of subtle improvements in virtually every area. You get a cleaner bass line and both better control and more dynamic life. The cello sounds more realistic. Good flute, clarinet, piano, and violin become more natural, particularly with today's most demanding midrange range drivers and tweeters like those on the new Thiel CS3.7.

detail, and reproducing low level musical 'life.' The XA160.5s also did very well getting soundstage life out of recordings with a natural ambience and depth. There was none of the two-dimensional construction associated with some solid-state designs.

As for features, the XA160.5 is a large and heavy monobloc. Each measures 483x279x 711mm and weighs in at a healthy 68kg. Healthy, that is unless you try to dead-lift one. They give off considerable heat (rated at 53°C),



They are remarkably realistic amplifiers.

I would not say that the XA160.5s sound more tube-like than their predecessor, but largely because I think this "tube versus solid state" thing is outdated and has become a canard. Today's top tube designs are not warm and romantic. I would say that the XA160.5s remove even more of the last traces of whatever residual problems in solid state if these mean a slight hardness, problems in reproducing natural harmonic

and they require intelligence placement and breathing room. Styling is very good for a power amplifier, with a large bias meter (more decorative than functional) and a single off on switch on the front panel. There are two excellent sets of speaker connectors on the rear for easy bi-wiring. The XA160.5 has both single-ended and balanced inputs. There is a standby power switch on the rear and warm up to full

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'This arm/turntable combo is the most graceful-sounding analogue front-end I've heard'.

Ken Kessler Review - Hi-Fi News, Volume 51 No. 5.

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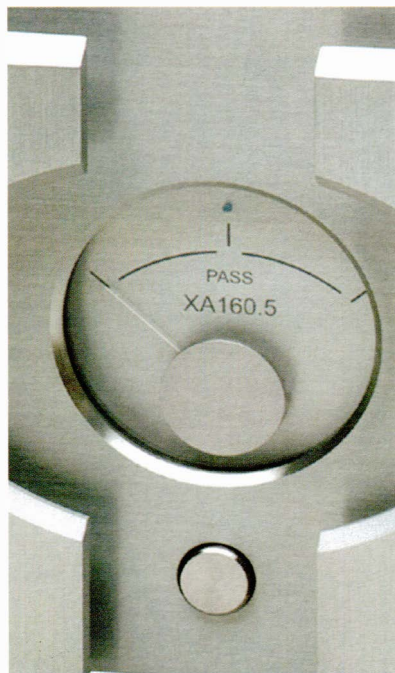
▶ sound quality is quick, if the switch is left in the 'on' position.

It is easy for me to praise the sound of Pass XP-10 and XA160.5, but it is a lot harder for me to put them in context. I was reviewing an excellent preamp and Class AB amp from Boulder at the same time I was reviewing the Pass units. If you asked me if there was a definitive difference in sound quality between them, I'd have to say you missed the point. It is like comparing two great wines. You celebrate the differences, and you consider the food and company just as much as a real audiophile considers the impact of different mixes of interconnects, speaker cables, speakers, and the impact of room interactions. There are always new and exciting 'greats', but there is never one 'best.'

I can tell you that I not only highly recommend the XP-10 and XA160 units, but that I now use them as references. At the same time, I strongly recommend you listen for yourself. The high end is a hobby where difference between

a very good system and a great one is making personal choices based on which system you feel best reproduces the illusion of live music that matters most to a you. You can't go wrong with equipment of this caliber, but it takes time, effort, and taste to go really right with it. ▶+

Editor's note: As this review went to press, we learned that Pass Labs is currently 'between distributors' in the UK. A new distributor is expected to be appointed within the next few weeks.



Reviewer Reference

Stereo System

Dynavector 20X, Sumiko Celebration, and Koetsu Onyx Cartridges
 VPI TNT HRX turntable and JMW 12.7 tone arm
 Tact 2.2X digital preamp-room correction- equalizer-D/A converter
 EMM Labs SACD/CD player
 Pass Xono phono preamp
 Pass XP-10 stereo preamp
 Pass XA160.5, X600.5, Prima Luna Pro Logue Seven power amplifiers
 Vandersteen 5A speaker
 Audioquest Niagara and K2, Kimber Select, and Stealth interconnects, speaker and digital cables.
 PS Audio Premier AC power conditioner.

Tape loop no
 External Amp turn-on no
 Remote control yes
 Power Supply Internal
 Power Consumption 15 Watts
 No. of Chassis 1
 Dimensions (WxHxD).....
 432x102x305mm
 Shipping Weight 12.7kg

XA160.5 monobloc power amp

Gain (dB) 26 / 30
 Sensitivity @ 26 dB gain... 1.79V
 Sensitivity @ 30 dB gain... 1.13V
 Low Frequency Response ... 1.5 Hz
 High Frequency Response 100kHz
 Power Output /ch (8 ohm) . 160W
 Power Output /ch (4 ohm) . 320W
 Distortion, (1 kHz, full power) 1%
 Maximum Output 52V
 Maximum Output 36A
 Input Impedance.... 30 / 20kOhms
 Damping Factor..... 200
 Slew Rate 50V/μS
 Output Noise 200μV
 Input CMRR -60dB
 DC Offset..... 0.05V
 Leaves Class A at pk 320W
 Power Consumption..... 600W
 Temperature..... 53°C
 Dimensions (WxHxD).....
 483x279x711mm per unit
 Shipping weight 68kg per unit

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

XP-10 preamplifier

Gain 1 / 10 dB
 No. Volume control steps 64
 Freq. Response -3 dB @ 2Hz
 -3 dB @ 60kHz
 Distortion approx 0.001%
 Maximum Output Voltage..... 7V
 single-ended, 15V Balanced
 Output Impedance 200 ohms
 single-ended, 1K / leg Balanced
 Input Impedance 48K single-ended,
 48K per leg balanced
 Number of gain paths..... 4
 Input voltage before overload: 11V
 CMRR approx. -60 dB @ 1 kHz
 Output Noise Floor less than 0.5 μV
 Crosstalk -85 dB
 Inputs .. 2 balanced, 3 single-ended

Prices:

XP-10 preamp: \$5,250
 XA160.5 monobloc: \$22,000/pr

Manufacturer: Pass Labs

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Heaven or Krell?

The Krell S300i integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom



A new amp by Krell always piques the interest of audiophiles. But this one is perhaps the most significant Krell in a very long time. You see, the S300i integrated amplifier is the first Krell product to be made in China.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with building in the Far East, but the high-end community has been a notable hold-out on Chinese manufacture. However, a few that are doing what Krell is intent on doing; making the entry level products in the Far East and the more up-market equipment in its original factory.

This is a bold move on Krell's part. The audio types fear change. Chinese Krell cannot be as good as Connecticut Krell... Can it? In fact, the odds look good. The words on the back of the S300i mention ISO 9001 – a very clear message to the nay-sayers. ISO 9001 is a formal statement of quality control that is common to all good engineering practice. It means constant

monitoring, measurement, analysis and a heck of a lot of paperwork accompanying each product. ISO 9001 is one of the mislaid and hard to achieve standards that everyone was struggling to achieve in the 1990s and swiftly forgotten when it came down to building cheap abroad. It means the place of manufacture is completely immaterial, because the standards set by ISO 9001 remain a benchmark wherever that product is built. It means Krell is Krell, no matter where it comes from.

If the S300i could be made anywhere under ISO 9001 conditions, why move production of any product to China. Why not keep it made in America? Put simply, it would be hard to produce a product of the S300i's calibre in the US without either compromising on performance or raising its price to thoroughly unrealistic levels. The S300i is a bit of a technological *tour de force* under the skin and Krell would

either have to sacrifice some of its advanced features, or bring the sound quality down a few notches. Or, it would sell for about £5,000. None of these concepts sit comfortably, so the company decided that for this level of component, Chinese manufacturer was the only possible option. This is not the thin end of the wedge though; Krell is keen to limit the number of products made in China, as the economies of scale that apply to the S300i (or some AV equipment) don't apply to Evo-type products and these are best hand-built by American expertise.

So, what do you get for your £2,640? Basically it's a pre/power in a single box; there's a stripped-down version of an Evolution preamp, and a Current Mode technology power amplifier stage that's like a Evo 302 writ small. Not that small, as the thing packs a whopping great 750VA transformer and 38,000µF's worth of reservoir capacitance into that

20kg chassis. There's a single balanced (XLR) input – highly recommended – three single-ended line inputs and a power amp direct input. This can also be routed to act as a front channel power amp for a home cinema system. Next to these are a set of CI-chummy connectors (for AMX and Crestron remote handsets and multiroom triggers) and in between is a thin little connector designed to accommodate an Apple iPod.

The amp delivers a claimed 150 watts per channel into eight ohms and doubles that into four. This is the sign of a very 'stiff' power supply, so a relatively low impedance loudspeaker will prove no trouble at all. Such a power supply is common in Krell designs, but comparatively rare at the cheaper end of the market (Harman/Kardon being the notable exception). In musical terms, this means sustained deep bass is not a problem, even on 'difficult' loudspeaker loads. In fairness, if you were to engage in some cruel and unusual loudspeaker punishment – like partnering this amp with something like an old Apogee Scintilla from 20-plus years ago – the S300i might struggle. But, with any of the loudspeakers you would normally expect to partner with a sub-£3,000 amp, the Krell will breeze through the test.

One of the more smart features (part of that 'technological *tour de force*' mentioned above) is its ability to delve into menu systems and adjust a series of parameters to best suit the system context it ends up living in. Not only can you name individual inputs (let's face it S-1, S-2 and S-3 are not exactly roll-off-the-tongue describers of inputs), but you can adjust the input trim (making sure the different sources are close to

level match), balance adjustment (independent of main balance – good for those rare sources that might be slightly 'out' in one channel) and muting level. Such adjustment is becoming commonplace at the lower-middle end of the market – and at the very top – but is surprisingly rare among the up-scale integrations this amp goes up against.

The front panel has a big blue LCD readout that tows that fine line between the tiny-wee letters of some amps and the unnecessarily huge graphics of Audio Research and Classé products. And then

"This Krell neither foreshortens the soundstage nor exaggerates that wispyess at the edges; it makes the sound seem more rock solid"

comes what I think is the one weak spot; the big knob in the middle. I know this is machined out of aluminium, and sits in front of a digital rotary control instead of a potentiometer or a stepped resistor ladder for good reason (it's more accurate). However, it just feels light to the touch, with no weight or resistance to it.

No such comment could be made about the remote, though. If the Army decided it would be a good idea to equip the Parachute Regiment with remote handsets, they would look and feel like this one. In the hands of one who's trained in such things, this could kill a man with a single blow. It's a solid chunk of remote, all black and capable of controlling other

Krell products and even a passing iPod hooked to the S300i. You need a Torx driver to gain access to the batteries, but this is a lot better than a sliver of plastic falling apart in a year or two. However, the beefy remote means Apple's remarkable user-interface gets replaced with Krell's own interpretation. This takes some getting used to and is nowhere near as intuitive as the iPod it handshakes with. Nevertheless, it does offer control of your iPod from an armchair, which is a not inconsiderable bonus.

Turn the S300i on and the first thing you get is ordered control. Seconds later, you reach for your killer bass track, because you can bet it sounds great. It will live up to expectations, too; my Spacemoneyz remix of the first Gorillaz album has enough bottom end to give a trawlerman seasickness, but this often comes across as (*double entendre fans please look away now*) 'all flap and no muscle'. The Krell reverses this beautifully – all muscle and no flap.

There's also a sense of grip and authority to the sound that becomes immediately apparent when listening to something with an expansive soundstage. Often, large stereo presentations become 'blowsy' and incorporeal at the extremes, as if the phase effects used to widen that soundstage began to encroach on the music itself. This Krell neither foreshortens the soundstage nor exaggerates that wispyess at the edges; it makes the sound seem more rock solid. This makes the crowd noise at the start of 'Numbers' from Kraftwerk's *Minimum-Maximum* album appear less like slightly phasey white noise and more like an audience of middle-aged blokes wanting to recapture their youth.

► ‘Numbers’ also demonstrates just how taut the overall performance of the Krell really is. The precise, insistent sequenced rhythms and complex layering of sounds and altered voices within that rhythmic structure are a perfect test of an amplifier’s control over an instrument’s ‘envelope’; how individual sounds attack, decay, sustain and release. These are the sort of tone shaping descriptors used in synth programming, too.

The S300i controls the envelope in a manner that would make Postman Pat hang his plastic little head in shame. Much of ‘Numbers’ is all about attack and release; half the sounds in the mix are transients of some kind or another. It handles this with ease. Other sounds are more legato – like the vocoder-coated voice intoning Russian numbers or the deliberately slowed German voice. This too it handles with ease. Then, there are the two side by side in the same mix; the regular rhythmic transients and the legato elements, arriving simultaneously; with such hard transients and blunted beats in the same mix, something usually gives. Again... ‘handle’, ‘ease’ come to mind.

So far, so potentially clinical; if all the S300i had in its arsenal was authority and a lot of control, it could easily be bested by any number of equally good integrated amps. Yes, so it can start and stop impressively despite having plenty of power behind it, but that’s not putting it in the exceptional stakes. What sets it apart from the most integrated amplifiers is that it seems to pull in all the properties of all good integrated amplifiers, and then do a Spinal Tap, by going up to 11. No, the analogy doesn’t extend to going louder than its rivals (although it can go very

loud, very clean). Instead, it has a lot of the ‘bounce’ of a good UK design, a lot of the detail and large-scale soundstaging of its American counterparts, some of the warmth of a valve amp at the bottom end but with the cool neutrality of a well-engineered solid-state design at the top.

The amp is hugely powerful, but graceful and composed at quiet levels. There’s a paradox about amps that have huge power reserves, in that they often show their best side at incredibly low levels. Sometimes, at low, late night listening SPLs, the interaction between tweeter and woofer can appear less coherent. It’s as if the crossover stopped behaving itself and let the two drivers play their own games. Here, the Krell S300i’s power reserves keep woofer and tweeter on track, even when the volume level is at ‘001’. That kind of control doesn’t come cheap, and is normally the reason why people buy Krell pre/powers.

At this point though, the mild ‘shhhh’ of the background noise begins to be apparent. This is very mild (think ‘well designed valve amp’, rather than ‘someone making a cappuccino in the corner of the room’) and is quickly forgotten about when raising the volume even slightly, because this background noise is quieter than most CDs spinning up. So in many settings, you might not even hear it. It’s there, though and some will never be able to settle down with a solid-state amplifier that isn’t free from background noise. More fool them, the lose out on a remarkable sounding amplifier because of something they will struggle to hear under normal conditions. While we are on the subject of stray noises, the amp does make a whisper-quiet ‘phut-phut’ sound as

the volume control goes through its steps. Consider it the computer-age version of relays switching in and out. Pay it no heed, though.

The S300i is a really good amplifier. It’s almost good enough to soak up sales of the Evolution 222 preamp and 302 power amplifier, unless you happen to try to partner it with really daft, punishing loads. With its combination of ‘next gen’ inputs (like that iPod connector) and the sort of build quality that could make ‘Black Box’ flight recorders look shoddy. Whether this is My First Krell, or the Krell you never thought you could afford, the S300i must rank as one of the best integrated amps in the business. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Krell S300i

Type Stereo integrated amplifier
 Balanced Class A input stage
 Current Mode power stage
 750 VA toroidal transformer
 38,000µF reservoir capacitance
Inputs single ended line (X3)
 XLR balanced line (x1)
 Direct iPod connection (x1)
 Home theatre preamp input (x1)
 RS-232, RC-5, 12 VDC Triggers
Outputs
 WBT loudspeaker binding posts
Power output
 150W into eight ohms
 300W into four ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD)
 43.82x10.16x44.45cm
Weight 20kg
Price £2,640

Manufacturer Krell Industries
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Acoustic Solid - Solid Machine
with Parallel Tracking arm and MM
Classic Cartridge (we have this exact
combination on demonstration)

Geoff Husband, TNT Magazine 2007

"Had the Classic Wood made it to our house a month earlier, it would have been part of my Favorite Discoveries of 2007. Since the 2008 wrap is still 11 months away, my suggestion is that you don't wait that long and give it a listen now. I turned 35 just a few days ago, rediscovered vinyl with a passion and a wonderful birthday present now sits on the top shelf of the equipment rack. I just have to write a cheque for it."

Classic Wood
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Frederick Beudot, 6 Moons 2007

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Clock watching...

The Esoteric P-03 SACD Player/D-03 DAC

by Chris Thomas



The hot discussion within the audio world at the moment is what comes after CD. Yes, the death knell is about to be sounded for the silver disc and quite eccentric claims are predictably being made regarding the new order. Despite the fact that we have been using our computers to store and replay music for years now, some hard disk storage designs are being hailed as tremendous breakthroughs and the dawning of a new age of home entertainment. This rather hysterical over-reaction should not mask the reality of what is going on and this is really just an increase in the availability and convenience of alternative ways to access, store and replay digital information.

So, what does the new era offer? Will we all have massive dedicated hard disks crammed full of high definition music and high-resolution movies, lifted from specialist internet sites? Are you going to take the time to rip all your CDs onto these hard drives, keeping the originals as back-ups? Will we stream music from our computers into DACs via USB connections or even wirelessly? Should we instead utilise the claimed benefits of jitter-free solid-state storage? Or shall we just decide that for now it's all too much hassle and continue to buy the CDs we want and play them back on dedicated

players? Just because we can do these things it doesn't mean we have to and techno-geeks seldom have any appreciation of user interface. My general feeling, having gently dipped my toe in the waters of the alternatives, is that it's a bit too early to make any expensive decisions. But things are changing fast and it is proving difficult to keep up with the latest developments. What is certainly true is that anyone considering investing in a CD player at the moment would do well to future-proof it by making sure that it can accept external digital signals into its DAC and that the connections to do that are as comprehensive as possible because, with the gradual demise of CD, the DAC could well become the more relevant part of this particular combination. Also, and rather more pertinent to this review, is this really the end of the line for high-end machines like the glorious Esoteric P-03/D-03?

Having previously reviewed a couple of versions of Esoteric's X-01 single-box SACD machine I was already a huge fan of their CD players. TEAC's high-end wing certainly knows how to put a component together with a build quality that is just over the top enough to give you the satisfaction that it is likely to be bomb-proof. Very few companies can even afford to build and finish to such a standard and the P-03/D-03 is just about as good as I have seen. In Japan in particular the Esoteric range are regarded primarily as SACD machines though, unfortunately, that particular ship has all but sailed in the UK.

Certainly nobody is going to have too much cause for complaint with the D-03 when

used as a separate converter. It has a full set of the standard digital inputs and by the time you read this these will have been expanded to include both wireless and USB alternatives, enhancing its capabilities even further. There is also the option, when using it with a separate SACD transport like the P-03, to connect it via a pair of AES/EBU cables (available separately) which supply left and right feeds individually and this allows PCM data to be upsampled up to 176.4 kHz. The transport can output data as either PCM at various sampling frequencies or straight DSD. But if you also want DVD-A or straight DVD-Video, you will need to look at Esoteric's own Universal transport.

The P-03 features



TEAC's superb VRDS NEO transport, very similar to that found in the flagship P-01. This disc-clamping mechanism is as impressive physically as it is in use. Fabricated from duralumin aircraft-grade alloy and incorporating a 20mm thick steel vibration damper this massive unit contains no plastic parts and conforms fully to Esoteric's formidable sense of hyper engineering and mechanical solidity. It also has the neat powered flap over the CD drawer that I first saw on the X-01 D2. In fact the technical description of both of these units could consume the copy length for this review

quite easily so I would urge you to investigate Esoteric's website to get a fuller picture of the incredible lengths they have gone to with these machines.

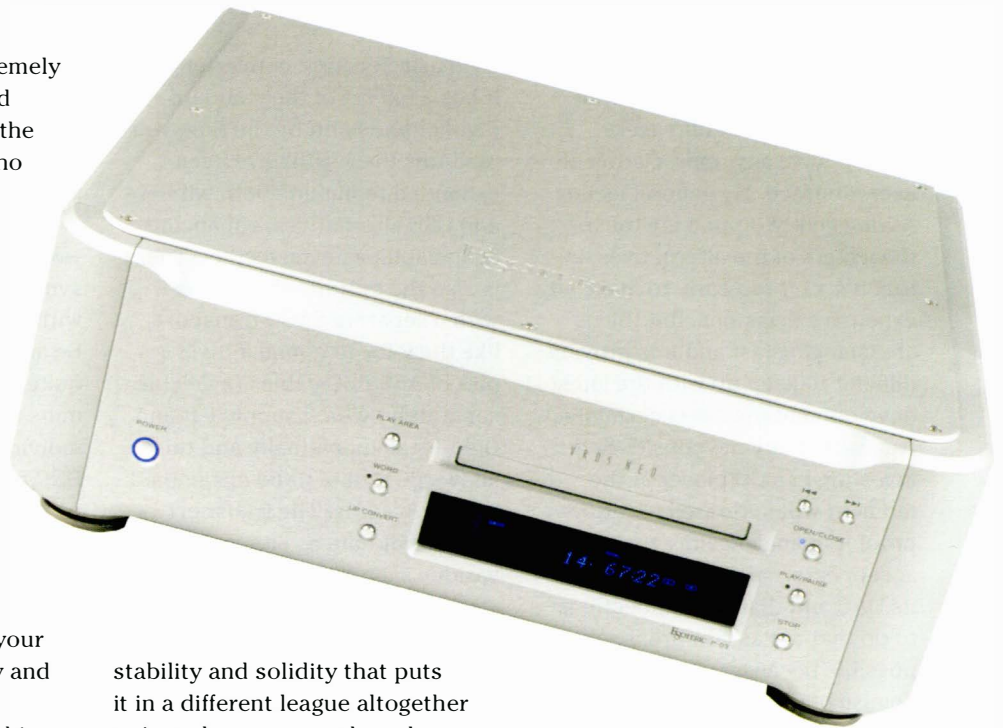
The D-03 houses the word clock and this must be synchronised with the transport with a simple menu operation. Be aware though that it is quite easy to connect the two units together with both the individual digital leads and the BNC terminated word-sync cable (not supplied) and not have the clocks synchronised. I ran like this for a couple of days of warming up before I began to get into the manual and delve deeper into the menus. Needless to say, this is a critical setting and if a further improvement is desired and ones pocket is deep enough, the DAC

can also accept the ultra-precise output from Esoteric's separate Rubidium master clock generator. The D-03 can handle 44.1, 88.2, 176.4, 48, 96, 192 and 100kHz clock input and output rates. In fact there are so many features available on both machines that, for quite a while, you will find yourself exploring the attributes of the various sampling frequencies, whether to convert to DSD or PCM and getting to grips with the switch-able digital filter on the fascia of the D-03 that provides an 8x oversampling option before conversion.

Then there is the choice of balanced or single-ended outputs. I used both, with the same cabling into Ayre's fully balanced KX-R/MXR pre/power amp combination and equalised the differing output levels with the adjustable input sensitivity menu, so switching between them for comparison became a matter of pushing a

▶ single button. Both are extremely good and while the balanced option would seem to have the most support from those who have used the Esoteric, I think that the one you prefer will certainly depend on the system and your individual taste. Quality-wise I say there is nothing in it, which is an opinion I know will not be widely shared. But certainly, with such operational flexibility on offer, I would recommend that you take your time and run through the choices and I guarantee you that you will soon find your preferences. It's fun actually and quite informative.

I have been living with this Esoteric combination for several months now and have heard it sourcing quite a few different systems. There is no question that it is certainly the best CD player I have ever used at home. Tonal balance is just about perfect and its extraordinary resolution is supplemented with a massive multi-dimensional soundstage and a quite formidable bandwidth. But I was initially surprised at its tonal balance as I had expected to be able to hear some family resemblance to the single-box X-01 D2, but, sonically, the only thing they share is the ability to extract minute levels of musical detail. Where the X-01 still has traces of brightness and the faintest whiff of leading edge emphasis, the P-03/D-03 is far more neutral and never sounds less than balanced, no matter what type of music you ask it to play. Sit it at the front of a well-sorted, high-resolution system and regardless of the quality you are used to you will be intrigued with its performance. There is a sense of



stability and solidity that puts it in a different league altogether to just about every other player out there and this includes the X-01 D2. The scale and power of the music is supplemented by a completely relaxed feeling of rhythm and movement that is unforced and full of personality. By this I mean the nature and character of instruments and voice is as colourful and explicit as I have heard from a digital source, outside the recording studio and in many ways and with the right disc, this Esoteric sounds rather more like listening from a digital master-tape than a conventional CD player. Part of the reason for this is its bass performance where its sheer power and pure extension are among its sonic hallmarks.

This machine brings you into close contact with low frequencies that you simply don't hear with other machines. It reaches down and accesses that infra-bass region with solid conviction and even if you don't use large floor standing speakers you can still feel its weight and presence and this gives music a whole new scale and perspective.

So many hugely expensive high-end CD playing systems are impressive information retrievers but somewhat soulless and un-engaging to listen to. Not so the Esoteric. Given the Japanese perhaps undeserved reputation for frigid technical excellence, I was surprised at just how comfortable and musically sympathetic this machine is. Great audio equipment manages the large things as well as the small and this player is an object lesson in that. It is delicate and endlessly subtle right through its bandwidth but notably at high frequencies where it achieves levels of texture and micro resolution that, if you have the system to realise it, is addictive and extremely rare. Yes, it is powerful and imposing because it is tremendously fast and effortlessly dynamic but there is a feeling of relaxed precision about it too which means that it asks intense questions of the rest of the system and most equipment will fail to answer

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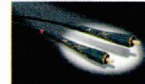
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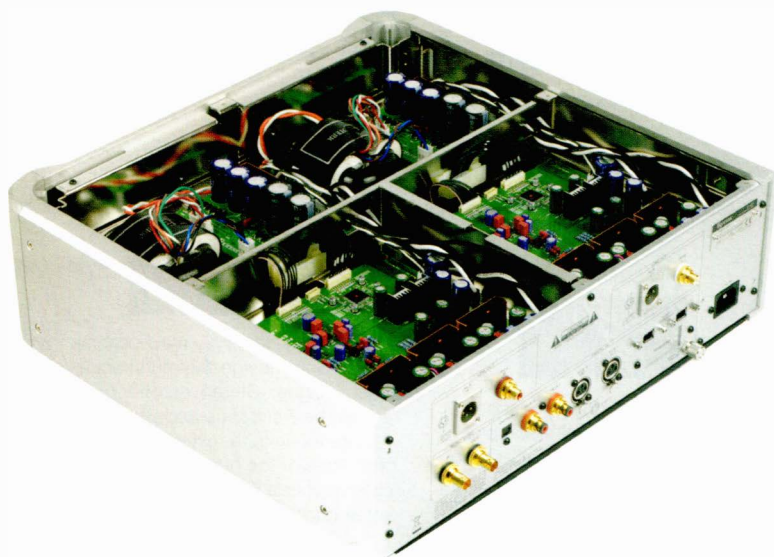
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▶ these fully as their bandwidth and resolving limitations will be only too obvious. It will expose the shortcomings in your system like few other players but it will do so with a smile on its face as it is so comfortably capable with everything you ask of it. It is one of those rare audio components that are so good that you accept them immediately as being right and then rarely give the matter another thought. Now, there's a thing. Spend this much money and rarely think about the performance. But, I have found that it is so often the case with the best equipment. Their gift and brilliance is that they allow you to loose yourself in the music and not get confounded within the electronics.

I tried the D-03 with some live vintage acoustic guitar recordings I had made on my solid-state Sony PCM D-50 field recorder. Unfortunately, due to the recorder's digital output limitations, the only way I could get the connection made was with an optical cable that would not have been my first choice. But the results were really superb and astonishingly lifelike. I also fed

it with some music I had ripped (using EAC) through a PC and loaded onto the Sony at different sampling rates with the same impressive results. The D-03 is unlikely to have any problems with any digital source you feed it with in the future, particularly when the USB and wireless options become available. But at this moment in time it is really at its absolute best with SACD. I don't say that all SACDs are good and I know that the overall music choice available lacks depth, but listen to the SACD layer of Esoteric's own superb remastered version of Mozart's piano concertos and tell me that we have explored SACD's potential and need to move on.

This is a great combination that totally exemplifies Esoteric's approach to high-end audio. Yes, it is very expensive, but a close look and listen will tell you why. Anyone with a large CD collection and both the system and financial resources to indulge themselves will not be disappointed, and the DAC will prove its worth as things begin to change. Is the Esoteric P-03/D-03 no more than a magnificent anachronism? I hope not. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

P-03 TRANSPORT

Type SACD/CD transport
 Formats supported
 SACD, CD, CD-R, CD-RW
 Digital Audio Output
 i.Link output x 2, XLR x2,
 RCA coaxial x 1
 Word Clock BNC x1
 Freq. accepted
 .. 44.1kHz, 88.2kHz, 100kHz, 176.4kHz
 (rectangular wave)
 Dimensions (HxWxD)
 158x445x420mm
 Weight 30 kg
 Price £10495

D-03 D/A CONVERTER

Type D/A Converter
 Digital Inputs i.Link terminal
 6-pin x2, XLRx2 (Dual AES output),
 RCA x2, Optical x1,
 USB and Wireless-coming soon
 Analogue outputs XLR, RCA
 Word Clock input/output ... BNC
 Word Clock Frequency . 44.1, 88.2,
 176.4, 48, 96, 192, 100 (kHz)
 Dimensions (HxWxD)
 108x445x420mm
 Weight 27kg
 Price £9,995
 Interconnects Not supplied
 Both digital XLR and BNC
 word sync cables must be
 purchased separately.

Manufacturer TEAC Esoteric
 Net www.teac.co.jp

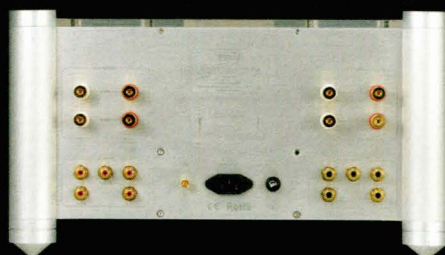
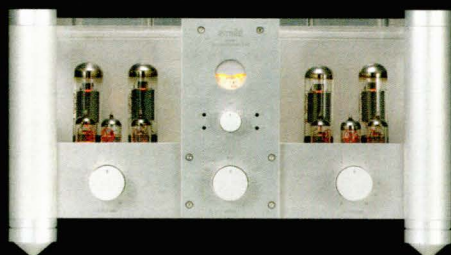
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Timeless Design

The PMC PB1i floorstanding loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy



Design in East Germany during the GDR was as marooned as the lizards on the Galapagos islands, the packaging of products like scouring powder remained the same for over forty years. Likewise the Trabant car was never changed because there was no need to encourage demand when you had a twelve-year waiting list and there was no affordable or viable alternative. As a result what they did produce has a certain old world charm, the best examples have a simplicity that despite the crude execution gives them an aesthetic that is still appealing if unlikely to make much impact on your local supermarket shelves.

Although there's few similarities between a loudspeaker factory and a former Eastern European country, PMC in its own way shares a consistency of design to its loudspeakers that stops them being attached to a particular era. Or at least that's the way it seems, but look closer and you will see that the range has been refined in both aesthetic and sonic ways that has kept it looking contemporary without jarring with earlier models. The badge on the PB1i for instance is a lovely enamelled design that was introduced on the EB1i last year and gives the speakers a quality feel that is backed up by the real wood veneers the company uses.

The PB1i, so called because it is next in line to the OB1i, is a decent size floorstander with a pair of bass drivers, a dome midrange and the 'i' series tweeter. It is not a speaker that has been re-engineered to work with this drive unit but a completely new model that fills the gap between OB and FB. It is closer in style to the former by virtue of a similar baffle width, it's only 4mm wider,

and supports bass drive units of the same 170mm diameter. In fact it appears to be an OB1i with an extra bass driver. But it's cabinet is 76mm deeper front to back and 59mm higher which accounts for the longer ATL or advanced transmission line. It also accounts for the extra quoted bass extension, which only amounts to four more Hertz but more is more, especially at this end of the scale.

The fact that the bass drivers are the same size is misleading because in most respects they are completely different, the power handling for instance is far greater than the OB1i LF unit as the voice coil is 38mm in diameter rather than 25mm. The magnet is three times the size. The cone, surround and spider are upgraded and stiffer and are capable of far greater excursion. PMC's MD and designer Pete Thomas did a lot of work on the suspension and surround so that they provide linear braking for the cone. As a result, they have greater headroom and will take greater level before reaching maximum excursion.

This speaker has a newly developed ATL or advanced transmission line, which means that the size and length of the line has been tailored to the design as well as the way the line works. The line's damping has to accommodate the twin driver arrangement, because the bass is produced over a greater length of the line than is the case with a single driver. This means the arrangement and density of the foams in this line are specific to the array. The damping is far more dense and fills a greater length of the line than that of the OB1i.

The PB1i also has heavy duty components on the 24dB per octave (fourth-order) crossover



board. There are two massive air core inductors and these were selected to allow far greater current, something that the new bass drivers are designed to take. As the inductors are unlikely to become saturated this allows for greater headroom.

The PB1i is a rather special loudspeaker and I don't mean that in the sense of it needing to take the special bus. What I mean is that it's damn revealing and extremely capable. It doesn't have quite the bone-mashing potential of the EB1i but it goes a lot further than most toward the

combination of great resolution, power handling and domestic acceptability. I set the speakers up with glides rather than spikes because they don't screw up the carpet and nor do they nail the speaker to the floorboards, which limits the potential for getting the floor to join in. Spikes are what PMC supplies however so that route is an option, even if it's wrong! Ancillaries for the most part were Classé CP-700 preamp, CA-2200 power amp and either the MSB III series transport and DAC or my reference Resolution Audio Opus 21. And, while the speakers

▶ sounded cracking with the more affordable Resolution player, they revelled in the detail that the MSB pairing brings to the party.

The one thing that PMC was quick to demonstrate with the PB1i is its ability to play at high levels, those two bass drivers provide an ease and consistency at any volume but which comes into its own then the wick is up. That said these speakers remain much the same at moderate levels, revealing the depth, width and scale of everything you play. They therefore excel at stereo imaging which can be extraordinarily physical with the right recording. I played the Avishai Cohen Trio quite a bit and there was no getting away from the solidity of the band leader's double bass, its big wooden body standing between and in front of the speakers in visceral fashion. On another track, the drums are placed well behind the rest of the band in an unusually tangible fashion. I thought that this might be down to the MSB source, but got the same result from a Moon CD3.3 player, too.

If this speaker has a character, it is a relatively relaxed bottom end. Because the bass really breathes you don't get the same solidity or tightness that you get with a well built ported box. But put on the right track, one with a solid kick drum and that tight, powerful drum sound comes through. All of which makes me suspect that the ATL approach could well be the less distorted. The fact that there is so much range of bass character available from the PB1i suggests that it is not making much of that character up itself, rather it is revealing it in a truthful fashion. With the Moon player, however, the overall result was a little soft and I got much

better results with the other two sources at hand, so you still need to match front and back ends to get the right final balance.

My B&W 802Ds produce tighter bass, great definition of leading edges and more character seems to come through the midband. However, its presentation is completely different and while power handling is slightly greater and overall resolution higher the amount of extra detail that one can confidently say is coming from the recording and not the speaker is not so great given the three grand price differential.

The PB1is do like a bit of power behind them. I tried using a Leema Tucana integrated, which is a pretty powerful unit. While it produced an engaging and revealing result, it was not terribly comfortable at higher levels in what is admittedly quite a large room. One interesting point was that the speaker didn't need that much space behind it to give an even response, I kept them a metre clear of sidewalls, but only needed half that behind them. Obviously different rooms will work in different ways, but with a speaker that goes down as low as this and with as much power, this was closer to the wall than experience suggests would work.

One's attention is drawn to the bass because it reveals so much instrumental timbre, shape and depth in everything that goes down there, but the mid and top are easily on a par. It wouldn't reveal as much about the qualities of recordings without a stunning midband and it wouldn't reveal the shape of recording venues without good treble extension. Of course, all three elements are bonded together seamlessly by the fourth-order crossover.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

PMC PB1i

Type: ... Three-way, four drive unit
floorstanding loudspeaker

Sensitivity: 87dB/1w/1m

Impedance: 6 ohms

Frequency response: . 24Hz-25kHz

Drive units:

27mm Sonolex soft dome treble

75mm soft dome midrange

2x170mm doped cone bass

Crossover freq.: ... 380Hz, 3.8kHz

Input connectors:

4mm sockets (3pr)

Dimensions (WxHxD):

204x1084x401mm

Weight: 26kg

Finishes: ... oak, walnut, black ash,
cherry

Options: magnet shielding

Price: £5,500/pair

Manufacturer: PMC Ltd

Tel: +44 (0) 870 4441044

Net: www.pmc-speakers.com

Speakers with this type of crossover can have great detail resolution, but a poor sense of timing. While there are snappier sounding speakers out there, the PB1i is right on the money when it comes to this critical factor. Not only does the bass breathe but it is also fast, that's why you can hear so much detail and why it can stop on the proverbial dime.

This is a hugely entertaining and revealing speaker and one that I was genuinely saddened to see leave the listening room. In tandem with a decent source and a powerful amplifier, it can create the illusion of musicians in the room with remarkable ease. And even with a compressed slab of Frank Zappa, it transports you to that other world where all that matters is the sound. ➤

DEFINITIVE AUDIO



1.



2.



3.



4.



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6.



7.



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- 2. Living Voice OBX-RW Loudspeaker in Ebony
- 3. KSL Kondo DAC
- 4. KSL Kondo Neiro Integrated Amplifier

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



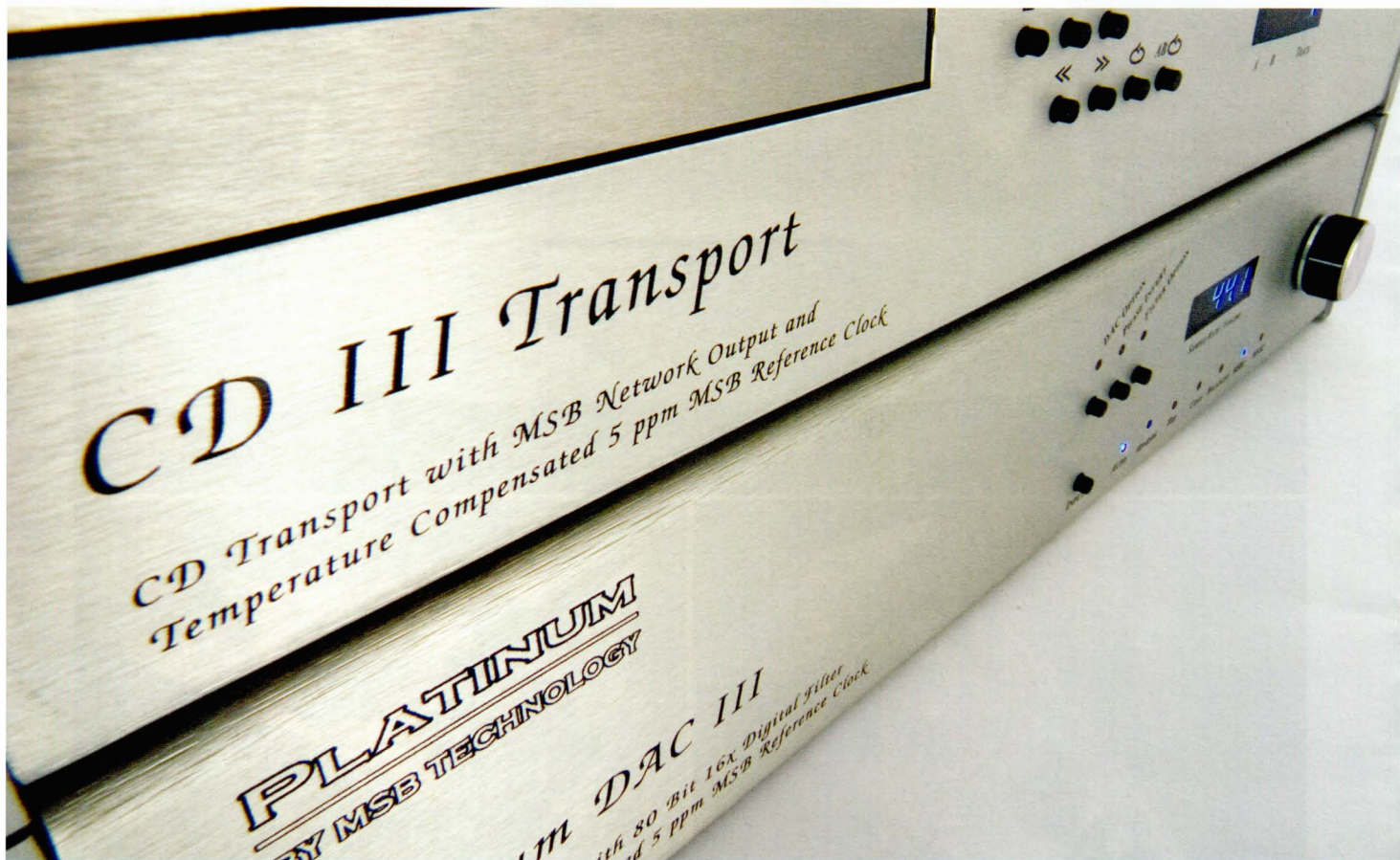
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The Platinum Standard

MSB Technology CD III & Platinum DAC III Signature

words and pictures by Jason Kennedy



I'm no industrial designer (as you might imagine), but I know what sort of result they generally produce and you won't find it in the MSB range. This includes this high-end transport and DAC, built to deliver the sonic goods. Its appearance, however, is politely summed up as 'form following function'. Judging by the front panel graphics, it must

have been bargain assortment day at the Letraset shop. At least this is the way that the MSB CD III and Platinum DAC III have looked while they have been in my system. The distributor, Paul Bengé of ABC Audio, also noticed these otherwise striking products are sorely lacking in the aesthetic department and is in negotiation with MSB to improve matters soon.

So, consider the 'interesting' look of these products at best a work in progress. Sadly, a new look didn't arrive in time for the photo-shoot.

Clearly not style-savvy, the guys at MSB Technology are about engineering. PR, marketing and design are not their thing and, to be honest, that's likely to be a good thing from a value for money perspective. The world's largest

loudspeaker company is reputed to spend over 30 per cent of its revenue on marketing and as a result its products cost about the same percentage more than its competitors. But its success suggests that the approach makes good business sense. If you want the best sound for your pound, however, it pays to go for brands that put all their resources into R&D, and I get the impression that MSB is just such an organisation. In fact, if you read enough of MSB's website, you will come across the claim that sales and advertising costs are under one per cent of sales. But don't tell the *Hi-Fi Plus* ad department!

Started in 1986, MSB has an impressive list of 'firsts' to its name, including the first 'mass marketed' 24/96 DAC, the first AC-3 (Dolby Digital) demodulator and the first outboard DTS processor. Today, the company concentrates on CD transports, DACs, an iPod dock with a difference and a mono power amplifier. It was the iLink iPod dock that first drew me to this company; by modifying iPods, MSB manages to extract an S/PDIF digital output from them. This makes these clever little devices eminently suitable for use as a server in high resolution systems. The iLink has recently been upgraded to offer 176.4 upsampling, which seems pretty incredible for something with such a popular front-end.

What is most significant about MSB is that it designs and makes its own converters and these are handmade, discrete devices not chips, this explains the very high cost of its components and also the many upgrade options that it makes available. The Platinum III DAC that I was loaned came with the standard DACs onboard, but the Signature version was also

supplied and easily, if slightly nervously, swapped in – the DAC upgrade alone costs an arm and a leg, so you'll understand my financial concern.

The CD III Transport with its highly restrained display, it remains black if its not playing, in fact there is no indication of life on the unit at all, nor an on/off switch. But press the open button and a Philips loader issues forth in the less than slick fashion of these ubiquitous mechanisms. Press play and a single digit appears in the display, there is no time elapse display or anything else. MSB is similarly mute about the internals of the transport.

On the back panel there are digital outputs in a good variety of forms, including AES/EBU and MSB's own proprietary Network system. This uses an RJ45 plug and CAT5 cable, the stuff that's popular with custom installers and multiroom systems. It's popular because it's very good for transmitting signals over long distances; MSB considers it the best system available for transmitting digital. I compared it to Chord Co's new Indigo Plus Digital coax cable (\$695) and have to say that the MSB took the honours. The Chord has a bit more edge definition, but is not as refined and clean overall. That said, it does have the more crude interface in RCA phono. A comparison of the CAT5 with AES/EBU XLR terminated cable proved inconclusive; both sound similar.

The DAC III, MSB's top dog converter, has the company's second generation R2R ladder DAC and accepts signals up to 32-bit/384kHz. It looks slightly more alive than the transport when not in use, with LEDs indicating which of the six inputs is in use, you can switch between these or

press 'auto' and let the DAC play whichever is getting signal. With multiple simultaneous inputs the one with the highest sample rate takes precedence. The display shows the incoming sample rate, so if you're using the CD III it's stays on 44.1, but hook up a Lynx AES16 soundcard and the number will match whatever you set the output to.

The knob on the front panel functions as an input selector or a volume control if you add passive resistive network boards and turn the unit into a DAC/preamp. Unusually there is no output stage in the usual fashion of DACs, rather the four balanced DAC modules drive the output directly. Producing a high 3.6volt output (via RCA phono) that is designed to both offer the highest signal to noise and work well with passive attenuators such as the one that MSB offers.

It's an impressive piece of engineering and one that produces extraordinarily natural and undigital results. At first, the pairing can seem a little unprepossessing; there is little or no character evident in the sound and the result is dependent on the rest of the system, the room and the music. But little by little, it becomes clear that these components are uncommonly resolute, they have a way of eeking out fine detail that produces immensely natural and fluid music.

I became completely engrossed in the Avishai Cohen Trio's complexity of interplay, I have never heard this much of the mix before and the effect is mighty persuasive. You hear the low level colour of the cymbals as well as the solidity of the double bass, in fact the stereo image from the latter is uncanny when the rest of the band takes a break. ▶

▶ Andras Schiff's piano likewise has an extraordinary physical presence within the room. Next to more affordable disc spinners it's a full colour high-def experience that makes the alternative sound rather basic and flat. The way it can deliver so much more of each note is what makes instruments and voices seem that much more substantial and convincing. It has the same effect on dynamics, which can be quite startling with a good recording. There seems to be no noise or distortion so the tendency is to turn the wick up, which can catch you out when the recording has range to match.

Playing some older material it became clear that this pairing has an extraordinary ability to reveal the details that other players barely hint at. On tracks like Missy Misdemeanor's 'Busa Rhyme' you



can hear all the separate elements that producer Timbaland has brought together to make up the final mix. There are a lot of effects – like a dog growl – that I'd never heard before, because they are so short-lived and usually buried underneath other higher level sounds. You can almost understand precisely what Da Brat is saying in her contribution to the track 'Stickin' Them Chickens'; to be honest, you can hear it well enough to wonder if you'd understand it even in the flesh.

This system is also extremely good at dynamics, something that my Resolution Audio reference excels at, but which this combo improves upon. I wondered how the MSB would compare with dCS kit, but hearing just how good it is at dynamics makes me think that the comparison would not serve the British components well.

It's not unusual to find very detailed results with high-end CD players, but you might be surprised at how many fail to deliver the relative level of different sounds within a mix effectively. This is not such a player, the discs you spin on the MSB come through with their life and vigour in full effect. And it's an addictive quality to have in something that seems to be so devoid of negative digital characteristics.

If MSB considered marketing and aesthetics to be as important as sound quality you would already be well aware of the brand and its capabilities. As it is, it's taken over twenty years to come to my attention and I thought I had my ear to the ground.

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

MSB Technology CD III & Platinum DAC III Signature

Type: CD transport and DAC
Inputs: coaxial, Toslink, balanced AES/EBU, 2xMSB Network (192k) and 1 balanced analog input (<600 ohms)
RCA outputs: . . . 3.6V RMS (10V pp)
Balanced outputs: 7.5V RMS (20V pp)
Output impedance: 50 ohms at 0 dB
Sampling frequency: 1.5 MHz up to 3 MHz
Digital Filter: 16x digital filter
Slew rate: . . . >1,000 V/Microsecond
Settling time: . . . <90 Nanoseconds
Dynamic Range: 136 dB A Measured
Noise Floor: <-145 dB
THD+N: 0.002%
Signal to noise ratio: 140 dB
Channel separation: >130 dB
Control Features: remote display dim, mode phase invert, upsampling (4x) volume control input and filter selection
Upgrade options: Volume 32x Digital Filter 384kHz Upsampler Signature DACs, USB Input

Price:
 CD III Transport £3,097
 Platinum DAC III £4,338
 Signature DAC upgrade £4,338

Manufacturer:
 MSB Technology
Net: www.msbtech.com

Distributor:
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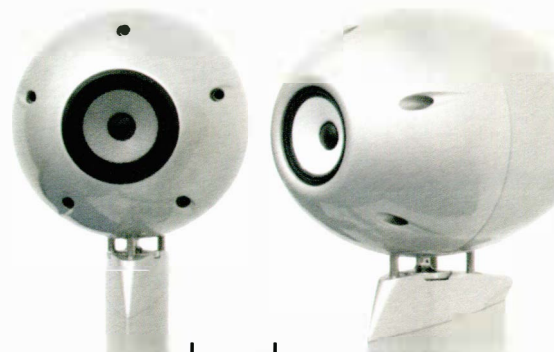


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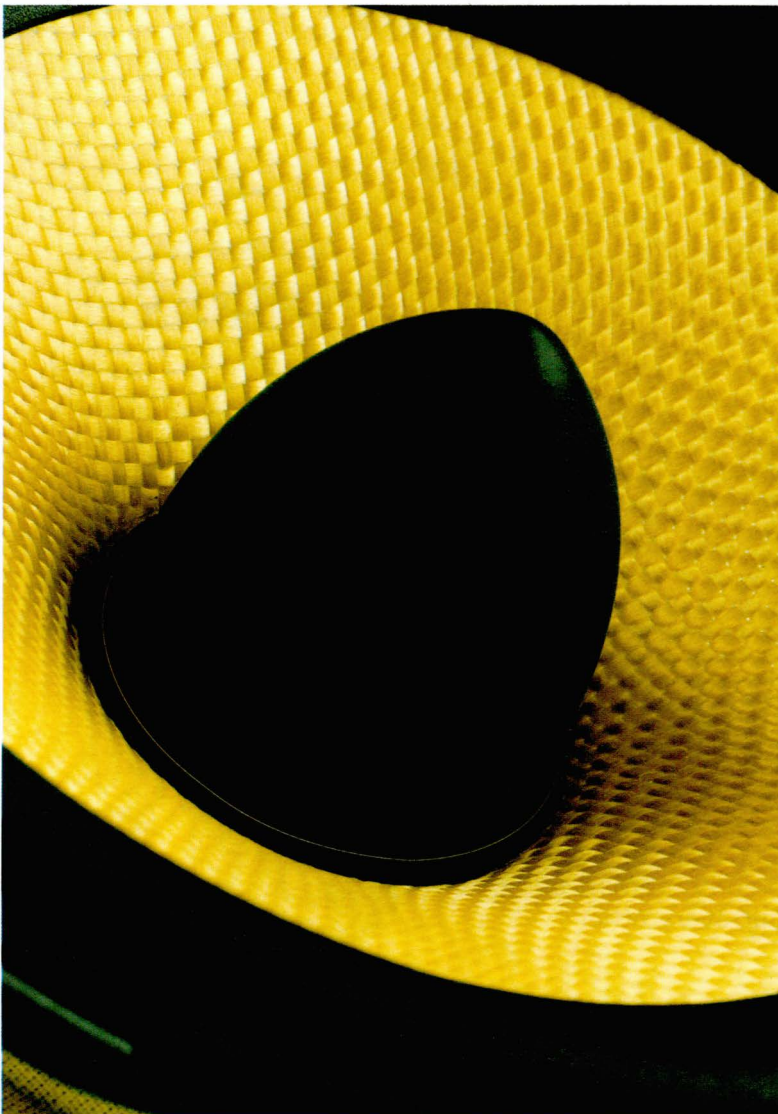
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Six of the best...

the Bowers and Wilkins 684 loudspeaker

By Alan Sircom



The 600 Series has been a constant stream of musical pleasure for entry-level and cash-strapped audio enthusiasts for the longest time. The latest iteration builds on this, but with a twist to two. Like the Krell S300i on pages 48-50 in this issue, the new 600 range – two standmounts, two floorstanders and a subwoofer – features local design and global production. The 684 floorstander tested here is typical; it is designed in the Steyning plant in West Sussex and built in China.

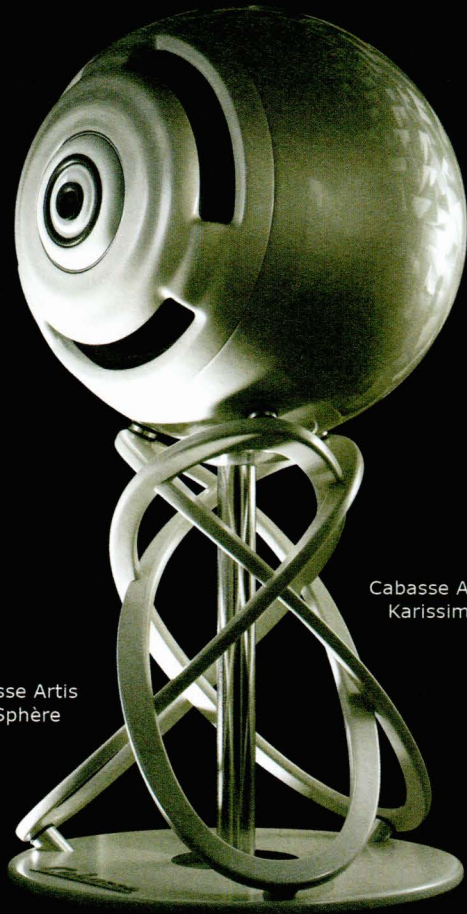
Curiously, the nomenclature is back to front. Normally, the higher the number, the better the speaker, but the top model in the 600 range is the 685, and below this model are the 685 standmount and the entry-level 686. It's nothing to get concerned about of course, but might cause confusion when trawling through the price comparison sites.

The 684 is a ported, two-and-a-half-way design. It's sporting the now standard B&W issue Flowport golfball-pitted port both fore and aft, a 25mm aluminium dome tweeter and a pair of 165mm Kevlar mid-bass units with hard 'bullet' phase plugs in the acoustic centre of each driver.

Each speaker comes supplied with a pair of 'flexibungs' (I've got all her movies); these allow the speaker to be extremely fine tuned to its environment, as you can have the front bung in, the rear bung out, in, out, in/out and the middle of the bung out. In total, this gives you nine different acoustic modifications to the same loudspeaker and that gives you a lot of freedom in positioning and room size. That being said, the best placement is in a medium sized room (5x4m or larger), firing down the longest axis and approximately half a metre from

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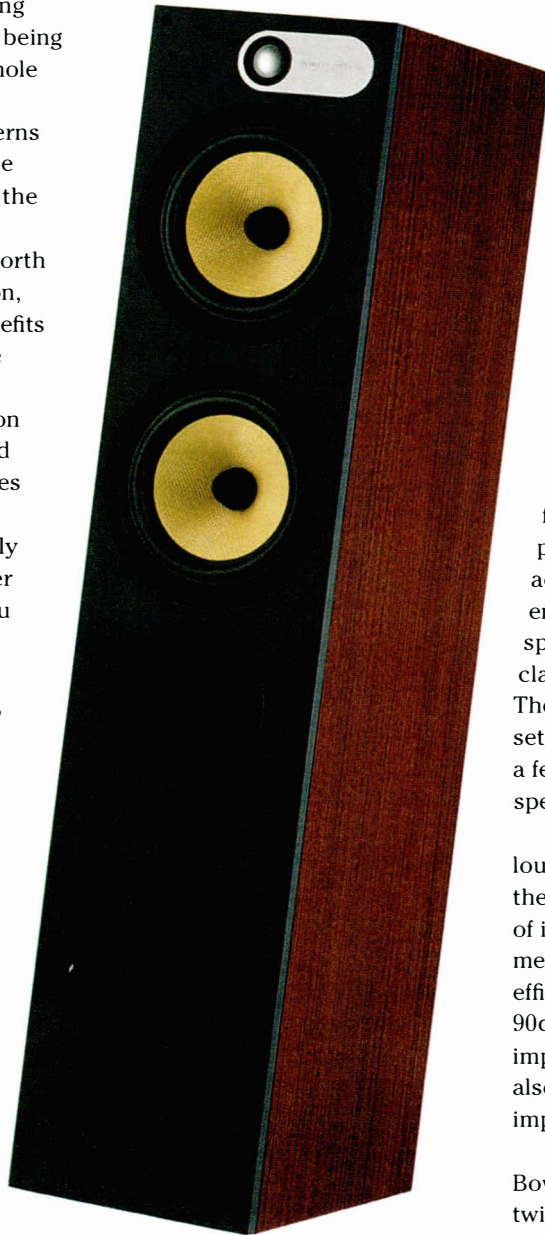
Bel Canto e.One Dac3

▶ the rear and side walls. I found that after a lot of experimentation, the best sound came from using the outer portion of the bungs in both speakers, but the dynamics of my room meant it worked well (arguably better) with left bung being complete and the right being just the doughnut, not the whole bung, with a mild toe-in.

My only gripe here concerns the manual, which makes little useful mention of how to use the flexibungs and many will just give up because of this. It's worth the effort and experimentation, because the loudspeaker benefits greatly from trying out all the different options. So, here's what the manual should say on this – The two ports are tuned to slightly different frequencies with and without ports; the rear port can be used to subtly tailor the way the loudspeaker interacts with the room. If you have to place the speakers closer to the rear wall than the recommended half metre, try inserting the bungs into the rear ports (first the round outer section of the bung, then the bung entirely). Don't make snap decisions. The front port tailors the bass output for the room; once you have positioned the speaker properly, experiment with the front bungs in order to accurately match the bass to the rest of the performance. Once again, don't jump to any snap decisions.

Initially, Bowers and Wilkins supplied the 684 with just the spikes, and initial findings surrounding the speaker ('best played loud') reflected possible issues with centre of gravity. Pretty soon after, the 684 shipped with a

black plinth with a set of spacers to raise the speaker a centimetre or so off the baseplate, house spikes and widen the footprint. That, plus the slight increase in



mass at the base of the speaker, does help give the 684 a sturdy footing. The company includes both spikes and little white rubber feet for those mounting on

bare floors. Purists might think anything other than spikes is an abomination, but this is a practical solution that – in practice – works better on a hard wood floor than spikes in this context.

The finish is very slick, although irrespective of whether you use the grilles or not, you are faced with a big slab of flat black to the front and the plinth. The rear and sides are finished in several vinyl woodprint wraps, including light oak, cherry, wengé and black ash. Personally, I think the speakers look better with grilles off, highlighting that distinctive off-centre Bowers & Wilkins tweeter surround logo.

I also think the speakers benefit from grille removal where possible; although supposedly acoustically transparent, I'm not entirely convinced and felt the speaker lost a bit of mid and top clarity with the grilles in place. The bi-wire rear panel is usefully set low, so speaker cables rise only a few inches up the back of the speaker itself.

These are deceptively heavy loudspeakers (thanks in part to the B&W trait of a healthy amount of internal bracing) and the plinths mean they top 18kg. And they are efficient and easy to drive too; 90dB sensitivity, with an eight ohm impedance (although the company also claims a three-ohm minimum impedance).

The 684 makes a typical Bowers and Wilkins sound, with a twist or two; very clean, extremely neutral and very, very competent. Exciting too, the combination of taut, surprisingly deep bass and bright treble makes for a speaker with a zing to them. Twist number one: perhaps a little too much zing for some. It's not a rising treble, ▶

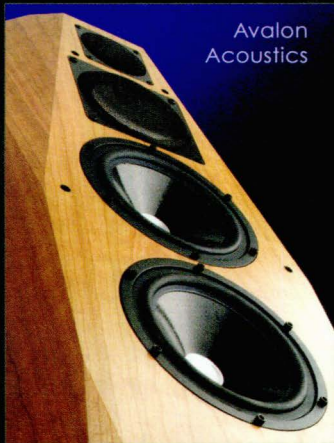
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▶ nor is it a treble with a definite peak or sting, but the 684 seems to make the top end of a piano sound more like a piano than a real piano.

For most, though, this will just make the speakers sound exciting and alive. Playing Lambchop's *Is A Woman* album through the 684 showed just how minor this treble lift is; the sound is very open and Kurt Wagner's speak-sing vocals come across brilliantly, thanks to a very open and clean midrange. The top remains untouched, except for a very slight increase in the guitar vibrato effect. This is a subtle effect on a relatively obscure background part of the mix.

Bass is exceptionally good, and not just 'for the money'. Once the experiment process with bungs and placement is over, bass is both deep and taut, and that easy drive means it will be like that irrespective of the amplifier used. And this is one of the most important plus points for the 684 – it's remarkably unfussy as to its business partners. It will deliver a remarkably similar performance whether it's the most expensive part of the signal chain, or the cheapest. Differences are still apparent, but not as marked as many designs. And yet, this doesn't come at the expense of the musical presentation. It's a remarkable leveller of equipment,

I suspect that might disenfranchise those who want the sound of their expensive CD and amps to be immediately apparent, but

for many others this is a handy bonus. Arcam, Cambridge Audio, Marantz, NAD and (obviously, given the company connections) Rotel would be logical choices for electronics happiness. The 600 Series speakers have often had exciting treble and deeper than

you might expect bass for any given cabinet size. The problem in the past has been a sound that had 'all top, all bottom... nothing in between'. Worse, as you went up the 600 Series, so the gap between bass and treble widened.

Fortunately, based on the evidence of the 684 at least, those days are gone and one of the best parts of this loudspeaker is its clean, open midrange. There are so many recordings that demand a good midrange, but *All Is Yes* by The Blessing really takes advantage of this. The percussive piano and drum kit, coupled with a Milesesque muted trumpet can all so easily degrade into a midrange-free zone, but the 684 brings out the less accented bit in the middle.

Stereo is fine, although those looking for a pair of speakers

that throw out a huge soundstage or a lot of image depth will be disappointed. Increasing toe-in improves stereo imaging considerably, but does so by trading precision in the bass. It's a question of balance.

In fact, balance is the key to the Bowers & Wilkins 684. There are speakers that might do one or two things better (superior imaging, for example), but at the expense of other aspects (overall balance, detail, compatibility, fun). These will prove perhaps more attractive to people seeking the same. However, the 684 should be considered the default choice for £700 loudspeakers. It's the benchmark at the price. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Bowers and Wilkins 684

Type: ... Two-and-a-half way reflex loaded floorstanding loudspeaker
 Driver Complement:
 1x 25mm aluminium dome tweeter
 1x 165mm woven Kevlar® cone bass /midrange
 1x 165mm woven Kevlar® cone bass
 Bandwidth:
 44Hz–22kHz \pm 3dB on reference axis
 –6dB at 34Hz and 50kHz
 Sensitivity: 90dB (2.83V, 1m)
 Impedance:
 8 ohms nominal (minimum 3 ohms)
 Dimensions (WxHxD, not including plinth or feet):.. 198 x 910 x 300mm
 Weight:18.2kg
 Finishes: Black Ash Vinyl
 Light Oak Vinyl
 Red Cherry Vinyl
 Wengé Vinyl
 Price: £700

Manufacturer: BW Group Ltd

Tel: +44 (0) 1903 221 500

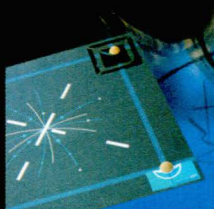
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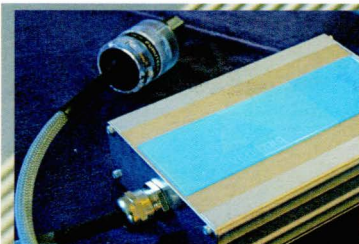
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You can tune a piano...

NAD Masters Series M4

by Alan Sircom



High-end tuners are thin on the ground. I suspect it's the influence of DAB, because it didn't used to be like this. Not so very long ago, Accuphase, Linn, Naim, Day Sequerra and Magnum Dynalab all had seriously no-compromise tuners on sale. Until recently, that list dropped to just Accuphase and Magnum Dynalab, but surprisingly NAD has changed all that.

The company's new £1,438 M4 arguably completes the brand's Masters Series – its top end, built like a tank range of audio and home cinema electronics. The M4 is a combination DAB and AM/FM affair, designed to fit snugly into a system comprising M3 dual mono

integrated amp and M5 stereo CD/SACD player. As a consequence, with its grey on silver livery and steel case, the tuner is one of the biggest, most hard-looking tuners around – only the aforementioned Magnum Dynalab from Canada does 'butch' better.

The controls are exactly as you might expect from a NAD Masters. Simple, to the point, with a multi-way controller (think the controller on the back of a Canon camera) an array of seven buttons beneath the blue scrolling dot-matrix display, and one solitary power buttons on the opposite panel. The rear panel shows just how flexible this tuner is; no combi

aerial connector here – there's a separate connection for AM (two spring clips), FM and DAB (75-ohm coax connectors). There's also digital coaxial and optical outputs for those who want to hook the M4 to a DAC, a pair of gold phono connectors and an array of trigger and RS232 hook-ups for custom installers. And yes, you can beef up the mains lead if you want, because it has a two-pin IEC connector. Okay, no balanced outputs (both the M3 and M5 sport XLR links), but this represents about as good as it gets in the crazy, wacky world of audiophile tuners today, from a connectivity standing at least. ▶

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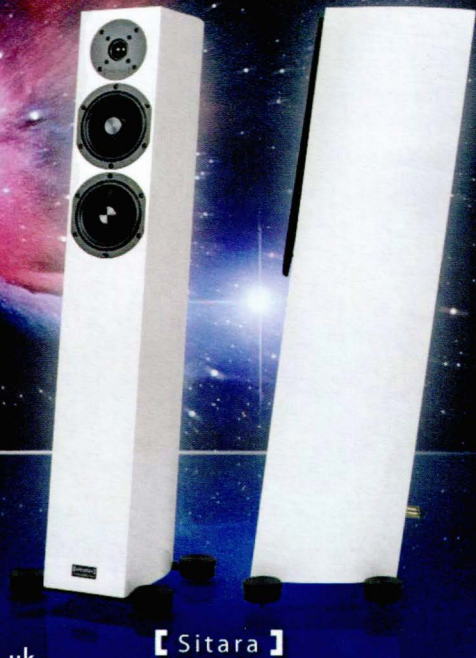
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This is matched by a M4 remote, which neatly clones the features and functionality of the front panel, with the added bonus of glowy buttons for late night listening. And, like the rest of the tuner behaves, it itself extremely well. No hiccoughs in moving from band to band, storing presets is easy and quick and the display can easily turn its hand to the usual variety of informational activities (except some of the more traffic-oriented subroutines of RDS). This sounds like a natural function of any good tuner, but experience shows that as you go up the price band so occasionally the tuner gets quirky. None of that here; no three finger power chord to switch from FM to DAB, no defaulting to Latvian in the set-up routine, no turning the power on and off just to get into 'preset' mode. It is even undemanding of FM signal feed – so many posh FM tuners demand the best possible signal, but here the FM sound hits stereo

and is quiet with even the humble copper Model T supplied with the majority of tuners. In other words, this is as easy to operate as any good budget tuner, and is all the better for that.

NAD has been canny with this tuner. In many respects, it's similar to more budget models in the range (like the C445) sharing as it does tuner front ends, which takes advantage of the common functionality and operational control. This is because there's no need to reinvent the wheel... You just make a better class of wheel. So, higher spec chips and a IF stage with three ceramic filters have been specified in the FM tuner stage, while the DAB section has a higher grade of shielding and a very acceptable Burr Brown DAC (coupled with op-amps from the same chip fabber) that wouldn't look out of place in a CD player in the signal path. Speaking of clever, the same chassis is used in the US as well, this time replacing the DB-1 DAB module with an XM satellite radio head. Common once again to all the NAD Masters

range, the tuner has a seriously beefy power supply in the box; overkill in a tuner, but falls under the 'if a job's worth doing...' remit deployed throughout high-end audio.

In the interest of completeness, AM radio through the M4 is, well, pretty dreadful, just like AM radio routinely sounds when mistakenly amplified through a stereo system. The M4 tries to make the best of a (very) bad job, by seeming to eliminate some of the worst hiss, but as the only surviving reason for AM replay is cricket coverage and that's largely solved by DAB, it would have been no great omission. Still, at least it's good to have it there in times of national emergency.

FM is a much better served. It offers both a useful 'blend' mode to knock out some hiss from fringe stations by making a station not-quite-mono at the high frequencies, and it has tighter tuning steps (12.5kHz) than most from its shielded MOSFET RF stage. This is a godsend in a metropolis, as a nasty sideband from a pirate house music station used to butt in over BBC Radio 3

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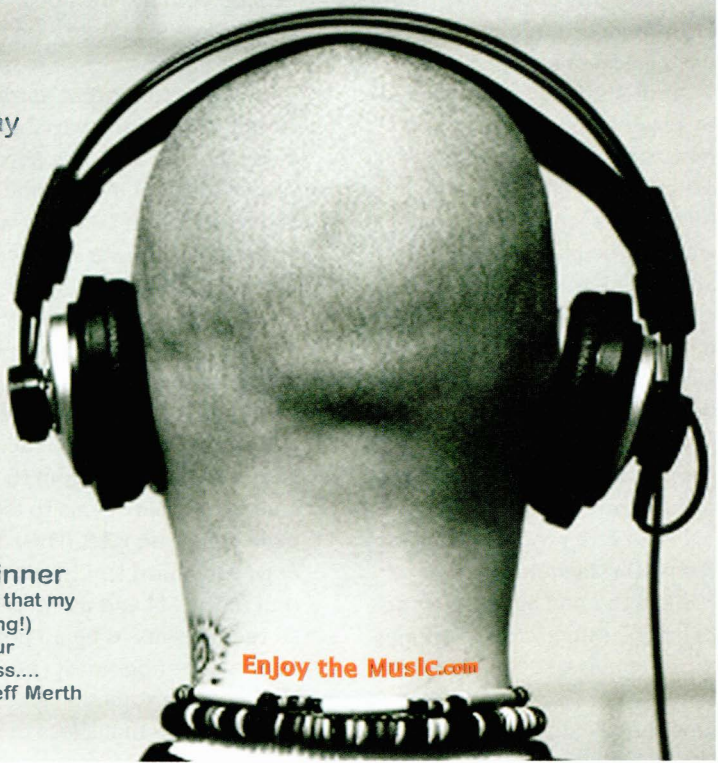
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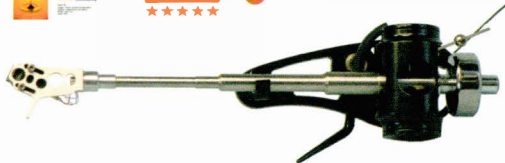
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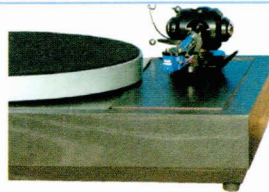
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▶ at regular intervals, and *The Today Programme* is not improved by having a Soca backbeat.

For stations untrammelled by pirates, the FM sound is remarkably noise free and extremely well-balanced in frequency response, entirely without the plague of multipath adding enharmonic distortion to the treble. Multipath distortion must still be there – no-one’s knocked down all those buildings between my house and the nearest mast – but is effectively suppressed better than many on this tuner.

The rare product that bests the NAD (Magnum Dynalab springs to mind again) does so by taking the next step in tuner thoroughness, rolling its own tuner head. This is a considerably more costly implementation than simply buying an off-the-shelf tuner head as NAD has done. The improvement can be likened to the difference between an Armani Black Label suit and something made for you by a Savile Row tailor; the custom-made route is a better ‘fit’ for the rest of the tuner circuit and makes a big difference to those who notice these things. Specifically, it’s this ‘roll your own’ approach that moves you out of the listening room and into the studio with the Eddie Mair, or knee deep in silage with Eddie Grundy. You don’t get that level of detail on the NAD, but this detail is at the sharp end of the 95% rule, though and unless you gain an awful lot of pleasure listening to radio on a very regular basis with an extremely good aerial, the custom tuner head may not prove the draw it might first seem. Certainly, if the choice came down to either a NAD M4 as it stands, a rudimentary version with a more expensive tuner head or a £5,000

version with the best possible FM stage, most would go with NAD’s current offering.

DAB is somewhat harder to suss out, given the variable quality of bit rate on offer. It is perceptibly louder than FM in this model, and that built-in DAC upgrade did appear to bestow a significant benefit on the M4’s digital radio output. The sound had considerably better separation and a more open midrange on anything at 128kbps and beyond and even 96kbps mono talk radio was mercifully free from the chestiness that seems to trouble male voices on DAB. The sound of the on-board DAC was as good that of the M4 and a separate DAC, so there seems to be no point in aftermarket upgrades; cheaper DAB devices sometimes need a good DAC, so that’s less of a saving in comparison.

It pains me to say this, but I suspect DAB imposes its own price ceiling in audio quality terms, and this was something that doesn’t happen with analogue FM radio. And that price ceiling happened several hundred pounds below the price of the M4. So those expecting a huge jump in DAB sound quality between this and the entry-level DAB tuners will be disappointed. In DAB sound quality alone, the M4 is better than cheaper models, but not as significantly as the price might imply.

This is not NAD’s fault, though and the M4 raises the bar for FM replay on a DAB tuner, which is going to be a major source of quality audio for at least the next decade. And that’s a major feather in the M4’s cap – it represents the perfect transition product, from excellent FM to great DAB. And it’s well-built enough to live out the last years of FM... However long that ends up being. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

NAD M4 tuner

Type: AM/FM/DAB tuner

FM Tuner Section

Capture ratio (FM): 3dB

Image Rejection: 85dB

Signal/Noise (mono): 72dB

Signal/Noise (stereo): 66dB

IF Rejection: 78 dB

Channel separation @ 1kHz: 42 dB

Frequency response: ±1.5dB
(20Hz-15kHz) ±1.0dB

AM Tuner Section

Usable sensitivity: 30dBμ

Selectivity: 17dB

Image Rejection: 28dB

IF Rejection: 36dB

Signal/Noise Ratio: 38dB

Harmonic Distortion:3%

DAB Tuner Section

Tuning Range (Band III):
174MHz-240MHz

Tuning Range (L Band):
1452-1492MHz

Sensitivity Range Band III:
-100dBm typical

Sensitivity Range L Band:
-97dBm typical

Signal/Noise: 100dB

Frequency Response: ±0.3dB

Dimensions (WxHxD):
435x100x300mm

Net Weight: 8.97kg

Price: £1,438

Manufacturer: ... NAD Electronics

Net: ... www.nadelectronics.com

Distributor: Armour HE

Tel: +44 (0) 1279 501111

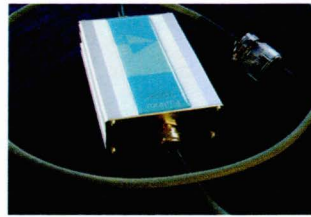
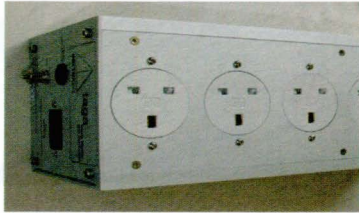
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Taga (below left), Roraima lead & Kinabalu platform (right)



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RG in HiFi+60 wrote: ... the most radical product in the Vacuum State range has to be the dpa300B mono-bloc, a fully differential 300B based circuit delivering 18 of the sturdiest Watts this side of the Lamm ML2.1. These amps belie their modest power rating with an ability to drive and control speakers with an astonishing combination of authority and subtlety that places them firmly in the front rank... "But what sort of speaker can you drive with 18 Watts?" I hear you scoff. You might be surprised – you might be very surprised...

(one such speaker was the new ML CLX!) *Full review by Roy Gegory in the next issue of HiFi+*

www.vacuumstate.com

Float, float on...

The Clearaudio CMB magnetic bearing

by Roy Gregory



It can be argued that a turntable is best considered a drive system, a main bearing and whatever joins them together. In fact, dress it up how you like, complicate things or use exotic materials, but that essential truth remains the same. Which makes the main bearing a central player in the performance of any record player. Not only is it responsible for supporting and is directly connected to the platter, but that same platter supports the record being 'measured' by the stylus. What's more, the record itself tends to be close coupled

to the bearing too, both via the spindle and also by any clamping system being employed. Any vibration or influence emanating from that bearing, will be read by the cartridge as noise, overlaid on the signal – hence all the fuss that's made about bearing design.

Various zero or reduced contact bearing designs have been developed, the best being the bi-axial air bearing employed by Versa Dynamics and Rockport. Developed for astronomical purposes (to spin mercury mirrors if you must know) it is

also astronomically expensive. More common, more practical and eminently more affordable are single axis designs that seek to reduce solely the vertical load on the bearing, using a conventional shaft to control lateral loads. These vary from the floating bearing developed for the original Cranfield Rock to single axis air bearings and the opposed magnetic type that I first came across in the Platine Verdier and later in the Blue Pearl. Now Clearaudio has come up with its own take on the magnetic bearing

MAD
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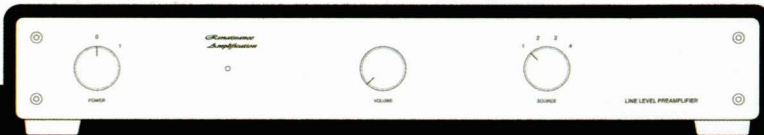
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▶ recipe, the CMB or Ceramic Magnetic Bearing.

One of the resident fixtures in my home system has been the original Clearaudio Master Reference 'table with Master TQ1 tonearm. Essentially modular in design, it has evolved considerably over the years, with wood and aluminium chassis elements replacing the solid Perspex ones on my unit, as well as a host of other refinements. Time then to look at giving the old girl a makeover, although in this case that was less about cosmetic surgeons and hairdressers and much more to do with a large box of kit that duly arrived from Germany. Inside were a host of goodies, including new, triple-groove drive pulleys and matching belts and an Outer Limit peripheral record clamp along with the annular Perspex adaptor to carry it. But the most exciting item was a small box containing a CMB bearing designed to carry the combined load of the immensely thick Master Reference platter and Outer Limit. Of course, compared to the likes of the Blue Pearl's

monster platter, the acrylic item used by the Master Reference is a relative lightweight, even with the added peripheral mass. The good news is that this makes the magnetic forces required to support it rather more manageable.

The CMB bearing is a straight replacement for the original inverted design, possessing exactly the same dimension, layout and two-part construction. The bottom half simply bolts into the turntable chassis in place of the original, offering up its vertical shaft to accept the female housing and platter. It's this shaft that gives the Clearaudio design its distinctive feature and justifies the Ceramic moniker. But first, you are in for a surprise. The shaft is a ceramic tube, with an open end. That's because the floating bearing design requires no vertical thrust-pad. Instead, simply coat the shaft with the special synthetic oil provided and slip the sleeve over it. Then, gently place the platter in position and let it settle for a second or two. Now give it a spin and see just how long it keeps turning... And turning...

And turning... That's down to the total lack of vertical friction and the incredibly smooth ceramic surfaces of the shaft reducing the

Prices And Availability

Master Reference CMB
(exchange price) - £705
Outer Limit - £740

UK Distributor:

Audio Reference
Tel. (44)(0)1252 702705

Manufacturer:

Clearaudio GmbH
Tel. (49)(0)1805 059595
Net. www.clearaudio.de

horizontal drag. It's okay, you can stop it now and put the new drive belts in place.

Of course, to assess the CMB's benefits, I'd already fitted and listened to the (very worthwhile) upgrades delivered by the new pulleys and peripheral clamp along with the original bearing. But the extra weight, drive and sense of purpose paled into insignificance when compared to the impact of the new bearing. Previous experience with zero contact bearings had prepared me for the reduction in grain and increase in musical fluidity, but I wasn't prepared for its extent when combined with the uncluttered clarity of the Master Reference.

So, let's put these upgrades into perspective. The Outer Limit is a precision clamp that performs the dual purpose of both flattening even the most warped records and adding ▶





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Stuck In The Middle - Stealer's Wheel
Little Green Bag - George Baker Selection
Alright Now - Free
Pretty Woman - Roy Orbison
Should I Stay Or Should I Go - The Clash
You Really Got Me - The Kinks
Back In The U.S.S.R. - The Beatles
Teenage Kicks - The Undertones
Roll over Beethoven - Chuck Berry
Message In A Bottle - The Police
Honky Tonk Women - Rolling Stones
I Saw Her Standing There - The Beatles
Jailhouse Rock - Elvis Presley
Baby Please Don't Go - Van Morrison
Mustang Sally - Wilson Pickett
Pulling Mussels From A Shell - Squeeze
Wonderful Tonight - Eric Clapton

More modern songs from the setlist:

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Mr Brightside - The Killers
I Predict A Riot - Kaiser Chiefs
Chelsea Dagger - The Fratellis
Angels - Robbie Williams
Don't Look Back In Anger - Oasis
She Moves In Her Own Way - The Kooks
Dakota - Stereophonics
I Bet You Look Good - Arctic Monkeys
Always Where I Need To Be - The Kooks
All The Small Things - Blink 182
Last Nite - The Strokes
Bohemian Like You - Dandy Warhols
Molly's Chambers - The Kings of Leon
New Shoes - Paolo Nutini
Dreaming Of You - The Coral
Basket Case - Green Day
Oh Yeah - The Subways
Parklife - Blur
Ruby - Kaiser Chiefs
Alright - Supergrass
Weather With You - Crowded House

www.myspace.com/thehounddogsband



ripening of instrumental tones and greater texture and harmonic complexity. What that means musically is a huge step forward in the palpable presence and expressive range of performers. Lyrics will

rotational mass to the outside edge of the platter, where it's most effective. Those of you who can't see themselves lifting and replacing the clamp for each record can simply run it under the discs, getting the benefits that come from the extra mass. At £740 it's not cheap, reflecting the precision required in its manufacturing, but sonically it certainly delivers, giving music a deeper, more stable and more powerful foundation, the effects of which are heard right through the range. Voices are more stable and solid, while acoustic instruments take on a greater sense of body. But it's the overall presence that the clamp brings to proceedings that really pays its way. You can fit the Outer Limit to any of the Clearaudio 'tables, from the Solution upwards. But before you do, think about the magnetic bearing option first.

There are CMB upgrades available for every turntable that Clearaudio makes, including the baby Emotion. Priced on an exchange basis, they start at £205 for the Emotion, rising to £310 for a basic Solution and all the way up to £705 for the Master Reference. Let's be absolutely clear about this: they're worth every penny. If you are buying a

new Clearaudio deck spring for the upgrade at point of purchase. If you can't afford it right then or you already own one of their decks, factor in the upgrade as soon as you can. Replacing the conventional, inverted bearing on the Master Reference removed a subtle texture and grain that had pervaded both the notes and the soundstage.

"Sonically it certainly delivers, giving music a deeper, more stable and more powerful foundation right through the range."

It's a common intrusion into the sound of almost all turntables that use such bearings – so much so that we hear past it until it's gone. But installing the CMB banished it almost as completely as the bi-axial air bearings on the Rockport 'tables. The result? Sonically speaking, you'll hear greater transparency, focus, crisper dynamics, more localized and dimensional images, deeper soundstages and better-defined boundaries. There's also a subtle

be clearer and more effective, musical phrasing more pointed and telling. It's a transformation that goes beyond the 'what' of the music and well into the 'why'. So the convoluted and extended lines that meander through Coltrane's 'Lush Life' take on a new sense of shape, purpose and direction; there's a new curl to Patti Smith's lip; a resurgent verve and panache to Ricci's bow work on the 'Carmen Fantasie'. The sense of bite and grip of bow on string, the skittering spray of rosin as the maestro negotiates the twists and turns of the score, also brings home the sheer fluidity and unimpeded progress in the music. In contrast, the conventional bearing sounds halting and almost mechanical, the music advancing in steps, subtle hesitations undermining its momentum and pace. There's no going back!

It's this combination of detail, presence and easy flow that lifts and unlocks the performance. The Outer Limit adds weight and depth to the bass; the CMB takes it deeper still, adding solidity, shape and texture. In that sense, it's the bearing that's the key, the clamp that's the cherry on the top, adding intent and extra flesh on the bones. In combination they transform the performance of the Master Reference. A significant upgrade? For less than £1,500 this is a whole new turntable. ➤+

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Two years on...

Vitus Audio SS-010 V2 amplifier & Andromeda cable set

by Chris Thomas

It has been more than two years since the Vitus amp first stunned me with its musical abilities. Since then it has undergone several internal modifications. Now, with the introduction of the new mains lead, the company's own Andromeda cable concept is complete, too. When I reviewed the amp, I asked Hans Ole Vitus, the designer and manufacturer, whether he regarded it as a power amplifier with a volume control and two inputs or as an integrated amplifier. He liked the former description, but I have mainly used it as the latter and have yet to hear a single-box solution that I have

enjoyed as much.

At the time of the first review, I did have the Andromeda speaker cables and the RCA terminated interconnect leads but, as these were completely new and the amplifier was a well-used example, I chose not to include them at the time for fear of muddying the waters. Who knew then how long the cables would have taken to run-in? So I employed Nordost Valhalla throughout, including mains cables, as these were the best I had to hand. The results were superb so, when I heard from Vitus that he had decided to make some internal changes

to the SS-010, I was intrigued. The only real criticism I had was that there was not enough gain available when the amplifier was used with a separate preamplifier so he decided to address that and several other issues to produce a Version 2 model.

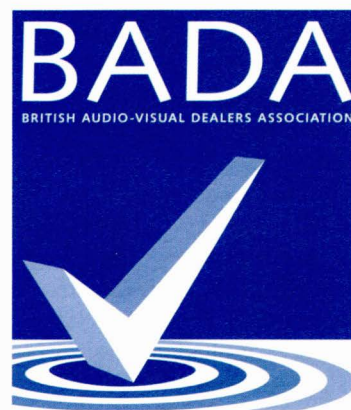
Where the original employed a 24-step volume control, the new model has 48 steps, which has enabled it to achieve full gain at the input stage and therefore full sensitivity. It also makes setting the volume level notably more accurate. There was a rearrangement of circuit design, which saw the power supply capacitors moved across to the amplifier PCB and that, Vitus claims, gives the SS-010 V2 better impulse handling. Apart from these, the amplifier remains as before. Extremely sturdily built around a massive 1,400KVA UI transformer (UI being the shape) that physically dominates the internals, the amplifier still weighs in at a mighty 35kg and for its size and weight produces what seems like a fairly conservative power output of 25 watts in either Class A or A/B. It still provides only two inputs, one single-ended and



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▶ one balanced. All adjustments are made via a neat menu system that controls input and class switching, volume adjustment, display illumination and of course the procedure that removes the preamp section from line and configures the unit to be employed as a power amplifier. There is now also an untested Vitus remote, which will take the place of the originally supplied Phillips Pronto.

The Andromeda cabling is manufactured by Vitus and is the result of the sort of painstaking research that is so much a part of Hans Ole's singular approach to audio. He started by working with different suppliers of raw copper. Each type was provided in equal purity before being made into cables and subjected to extensive listening tests. Then, with the materials selected, the cabling was manufactured with typical Vitus attention to detail.

Each consists of 20 different gauge, individually isolated conductors, spun in a unique way. No less than four isolation zones are incorporated into a new Dielectric structure they call DSE (short for 'Dielectric Skin Eliminator', which sounds like disturbingly like some sort of instrument of torture). Quite obviously this is a complex procedure but essentially

comprises of two, highly insulated inner zones, totally anti-static and employed to create the right atmosphere around each conductor. A third procedure installs an isolation zone while the fourth is then added to provide a minimum surface contact between the different poles in the final wire. All Andromeda cabling is essentially of this construction and the result is a thick black wire that – while not the most aesthetically elegant – is soft and extremely compliant.

This makes dressing the speaker cabling around corners surprisingly easy. The speaker cables themselves comprise of three individual wires per pole, gently plaited together, giving six for each speaker.

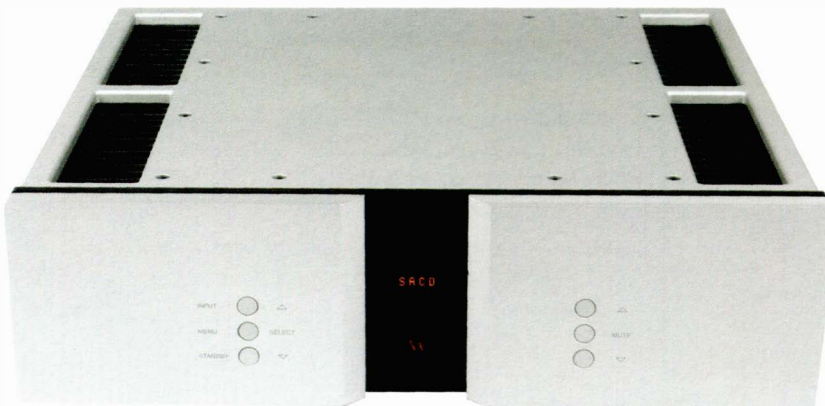
The whole essence of what this amplifier is about is expressed when listening in Class A. When idle it can be flipped into A/B (where it still sounds very good) and this halves the power consumption, or it can be put into stand-by. But for serious and intense listening sessions nothing comes close to its delicious tonality and flow that emerges



about an hour after the Class A setting has been selected and the amplifier is fully warmed. From then it just gets better and better, the more work you ask it to do.

When the V2 first arrived it had a literally months of running in ahead of it and I have lived with it for a year now. Even after a few hundred hours of initial use I was disappointed with the bass. It just wasn't right. I was still using a Nordost mains lead as the Andromeda was a late summer arrival and the low-end performance seemed to lack extension. It was also compressed and I was certainly missing that freedom and elastic feeling of movement that I had so enjoyed with the V1.

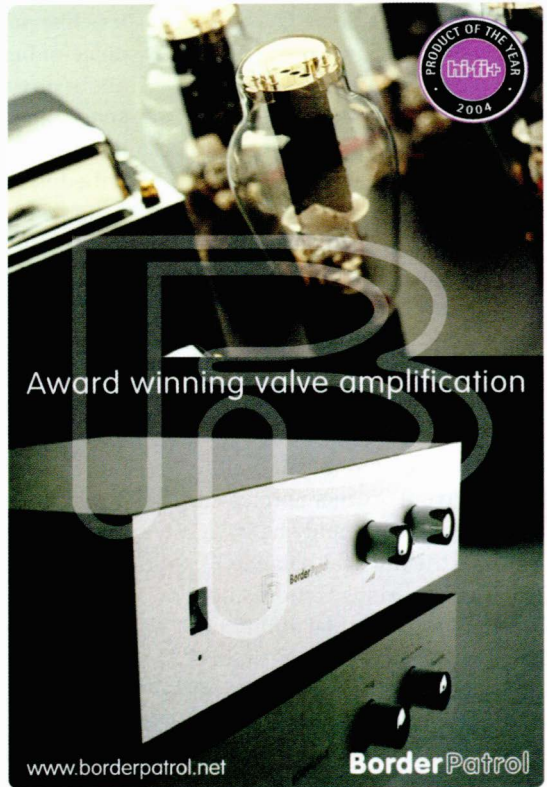
However, soon after the Vitus mains lead arrived and was installed, the amplifier changed character completely and as this spent more and more time in use I really started to hear what



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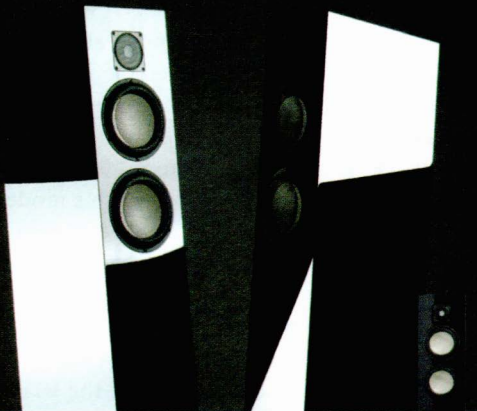
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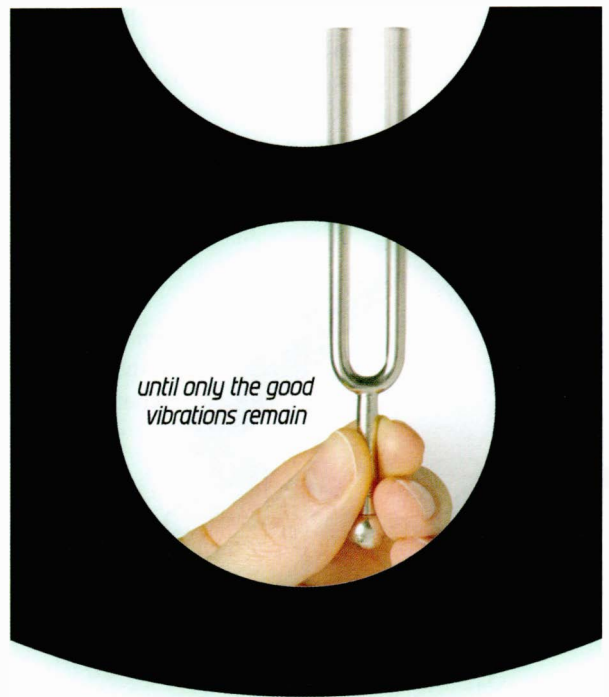
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▶ the V2 was capable of. Over the intervening period I have had a chance to use it with a variety of equipment in a number of different situations and I have to say that, with the complete cable system in place the new SS-010 has shown a quite different side to its character. Sonically the Andromeda is a darker cable than the Nordost. With the Vitus amp, it is perhaps a little less agile with a touch less high frequency delicacy, but is more intense and deeply shaded. Tonally it shifts the spectrum down a notch and adds more weight and sheer width to the musical balance. The focus it brings is more about the amplifier's special ability to show you the colour and timbral character of instruments without ever shredding the musical picture or interfering with its natural sense of dynamic precision.

The advantage that the best integrated amplifiers, with shared power supplies, have over many separate pre/power combinations lie in the word. They can seem simply more musically integrated and the SS-010 V2 is a classic case in point. It actually sounds

less like most people's idea of a piece of high-end audio than just about any other amp. There is no sense of extended top to bottom bandwidth. The instruments are imbedded within the pictures it paints and its control over them and the rhythmic conditions is entirely natural and unforced. I can guarantee that it will sound unusual at first to many people as there is nothing immediately attention-grabbing about its performance. But there is a deep body of muscular strength that lies at the heart of the amplifiers performance that no doubt stems from that huge transformer and this brings a sense of unflustered calm to everything you ask it to do. Control is superb but with no feeling that the electronics are exerting superfluous grip and as a result instrumental articulation, although not the very best I have heard, it still extremely impressive.

One of my favourite systems for the SS-010 V2 is the Burmester CD 001 CD player and the Focal JM Labs Diablo speakers with Andromeda cabling throughout, including the mains lead for the CD player. This is one of the most musically satisfying systems, built around an integrated amplifier, I have heard.

The Diablo is certainly a demanding speaker but even though it is only 25 watts per channel, this set-up is musically powerful, with layers and layers of instrumental texture and subtlety that just flow (that word again) from the speakers with a stability and concise resolution of the great and small that I really enjoy. But, are those 25 watts enough I hear

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Vitus Audio SS-010 v2

Type: Power amplifier
with volume control

Power Output: 25 W Class A
25W Class AB

Inputs: 1 x RCA, 1x XLR

Input Impedance: RCA-10 K ohms,
XLR -600ohms

Frequency Response: DC to 800KHz

THD: Better than 0.01%

Dimensions (HxWxD):
130x435x430 mm

Weight: 35 Kg

Price: £13,500

Vitus Audio Andromeda cable

Prices:

1m interconnect £2,160

1.5m power cord £1,650

2x2.5m speaker cable £5,130

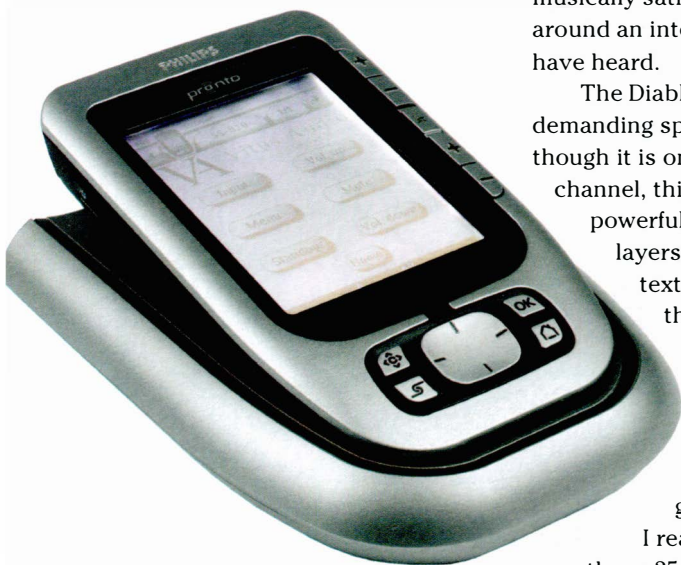
Manufacturer: Vitus Audio A/S
Denmark

Net: www.vitusaudio.com

Distributor: Metropolis Music

Net: www.metropolis-music.co.uk

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you ask? This Vitus majors on quality rather than paper power and those Class A watts will be enough for most, although those with very inefficient speakers and/or very large rooms may find it marginal but then there is always the SM-010 which is a mono version of this model. The big problem at the moment is that, like most equipment built abroad, the Vitus is an unwitting victim of the crippling current exchange rates and its price has rocketed since I first heard the V1. That's a judgement call for any prospective buyers, but all I can say is that this remains a remarkable amplifier and I can only give it and the cabling a huge thumbs-up. ➤

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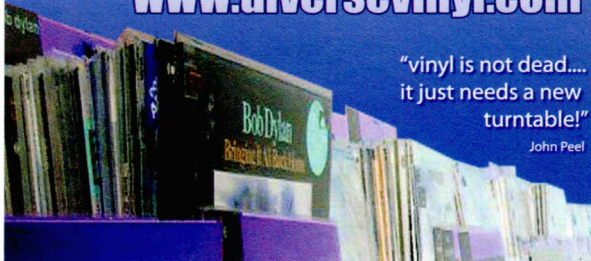
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Making a Splash...

The Splash Audio 'Show' system

— by Roy Gregory —

Take a quick look at this system and you'll see some familiar pieces; familiar from the pages of *Hi-Fi Plus*, familiar from any number of hi-fi shows. Indeed, you could easily have seen and heard this exact set-up at the recent Bristol or Heathrow High-End shows – which is one of the reasons that you are reading about it here.

In essence, a system – any system – should be greater than the sum of its parts. It's a rule that applies to hi-fi with a vengeance, it being all too easy to assemble a set of products that, while individually excellent, simply don't gel when it comes to the exacting practice of making music. Which brings us back to the set of 'parts' assembled here. The amps, speakers and rack have all received reviews, in these pages and each in their own right. But what sets them apart, aside from the fact that they're huddled for protection from the current economic storm beneath the sheltering umbrella of distributor Splash Audio, is the fact that, time and again they've been responsible for some of the most impressive, most musical and most downright

enjoyable sounds to be heard at any number of hi-fi shows. To achieve such consistent excellence in an environment that more often than not constitutes a musical desert, one in which the sonic cacophony is (often mercifully) drowned out only by the

starting, naturally enough, at the back end with what is a distinctly different speaker. Most speaker designers would be happy to come up with one truly novel idea, but Paul Burton (him behind the Rountree Acoustics OmniMon OM1 loudspeaker) can list the original Sumo Aria, the ground breaking, shallow cabinet Podium Sound 0.5 and a heavy involvement with NXT on his resume. And that's before we even get to the OmniMon. Perhaps even more remarkably, none of these speaker concepts share any sort of common technological root. From which you can assume with confidence that the OmniMon is the product of one of the industry's more fertile intellects.

Standing a shade over a meter tall, the OmniMon OM1 is characterised by its separate crossover, complex top-mounted tweeter assembly and lack of other visible, forward facing drivers. In fact, the housing for the ribbon tweeter effectively hides a downward firing 170mm Scanspeak mid/bass driver. This radiates omnidirectionally through the mid-band, while the (extremely) lightweight cabinet acts as a low frequency transmission line, open around the speaker's base. The whole assembly (drivers and cabinet) are perched on a cast



flood of excuses that accompany it, suggests that there's something going on here, something beyond the norm.

So, for those of you who have missed the shows or skipped the reviews, here is a précis,



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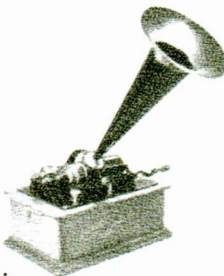


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▶ iron pole that provides a solid mechanical ground, and constitute a coincident, hybrid sound source, the omni mid and bass coupled to the monopolar output of the ribbon tweeter. It's an unusual configuration both physically and in terms of output, but then it's unusually musical too...

Amplifiers are the Renaissance Amplification RAP-03 preamp and RA-02 monoblocks recently last issue by Steve Dickinson. A model of simplicity, they employ quality components where it matters (so there's a nice stepped attenuator for level control) and dispense with anything that doesn't directly improve sound quality (so there's no remote control to screw things up). They're joined here by the RT-01 CD transport and RD-01 DAC – and there's also an RP-01 phono stage, all of which follow the same, no-nonsense philosophy. That

fed by a sophisticated independent power supply. There's just the one S/PDIF output (BNC) and this time round you do actually get a remote – which is just as well as the chassis boasts a total of five single function control buttons. Despite the slim dimensions, the RT-01 is surprisingly heavy, suggesting considerable attention has been paid to the mechanical termination of the transport. The DAC is similarly simple with just one BNC or RCA input and a pair of fixed level RCA/phono outputs. Inside there's an (unspecified) chipset feeding a wide bandwidth current/voltage stage and a beautifully executed analogue output stage. And that, as they say, is all she wrote...

The Audiophile Base rack is an established favourite with UK dealers and customers alike, providing an unusually

the system. The combination of the shelf options and the modular nature of the Starbase itself, with different height uprights available and silver/black finish options for both these and the support frames, make for a very versatile rack indeed.

Speaker and interconnecting cables are Philosophy throughout, whilst the AC supply is handled by an Audiooss distribution hub, no mean feat with five boxes to deal with. This latter product is particularly interesting, a simple and surprisingly compact box fitted with a 1.5m connection to the wall and four or more 13A IEC tails. But there's more here than meets the eye, the IECs' internals employing a sophisticated flexible mounting to decouple the cables, in a similar fashion to the Naim power cord. For people with multiple box set-ups the Audiooss approach offers an extremely versatile unit which can be specced to order as far as cable lengths go but remains astonishingly cost effective given the price of the competition. As we shall see, it also sounds very good indeed...

One of the things that fascinates me about this system is that it both abides by and breaks my cardinal rules. Yes, it pays considerable attention to supporting the equipment and delivering a decent cable package. But it also fails to offer any exit route for energy generated within the equipment itself, the interconnects cling to old style WBT connectors, rather than the better sounding NextGens (the alloy used in the Philosophy cables requires a crimped connection which isn't available on the newer plug design) and the mains leads come from a separate source all together. I guess the



complete approach to equipment isolation, both from the outside world and betwixt system components.

Available in a range of finishes, the Starbase rack can be combined with standard Base platforms or the higher performance Stratabase option. This system uses a mixture of the two, with Stratabases under the CD transport and pre-amp, standard bases under the rest of

means that on the CD transport you get a high-quality Philips CD Pro 2 top-loading mech combined with a manual drawer and magnetic puck (a combination that delivers superb results in the ARC Ref 8 CD player) with each section

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secret here is that all these issues (support, signal and mains cables) have been addressed, and with considerable care, allowing the electronics and speakers to work at their best. And work they definitely do.

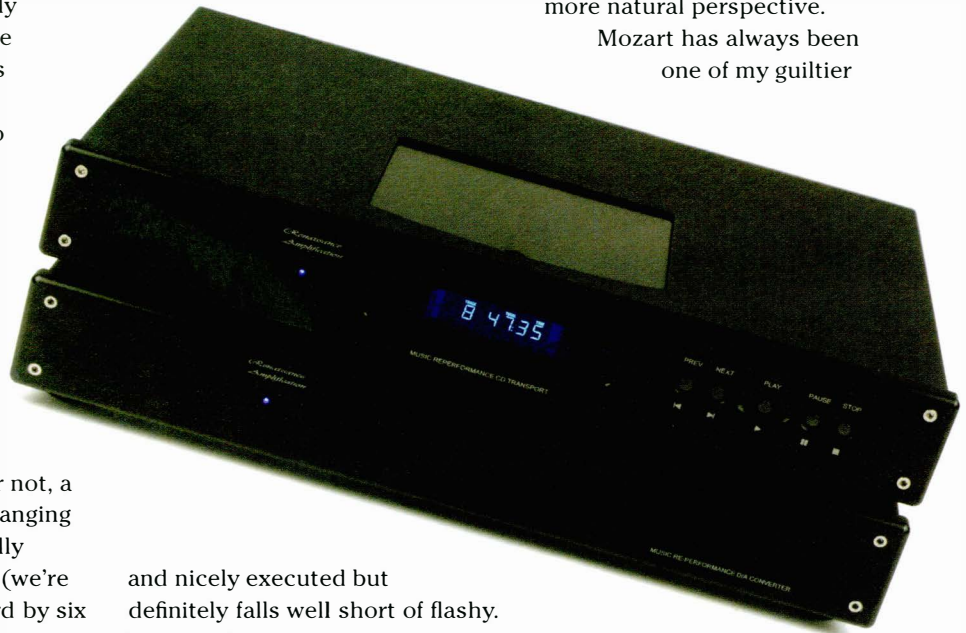
Setting the system up was perfectly straightforward until it came to positioning the speakers. Then, all of a sudden my listening room, which delivers totally predictable results with the highly directional speakers manufactured by so many hi-fi companies, decided to go all soft and sludgy on us. Clearly, the reflective rear wall that reinforces the sense of space around and behind the majority of speakers, were getting a bit carried away with the amount of mid-band energy thrown their way by the OmniMons. But fear not, a fix was at hand. Simply arranging the speakers asymmetrically slightly across one corner (we're talking one speaker forward by six inches, the other back by the same amount) and the sound regained its sense of life and urgency. More importantly, it also started to exhibit that lovely sense of musical flow that attracted me to the OmniMons in the first place.

Indeed, it's easy to fixate on the speakers, their uncanny combination of unforced delicacy and scale contributes so much to the sound of the system. But to do so overlooks the all-important contribution made by the rest of the set up – or rather, its lack of contribution. The really impressive thing going on here is the natural sense of musical coherence and uninhibited involvement – on the part of the players and also you, the audience – that escapes all

but the best hi-fi systems. Yet it's a result that is achieved through careful assessment of the problem rather than resorting to exotica and tweekery. It triumphs by identifying the really important things and then doing them right. Which explains why there's no remote control for the amplifiers and casework that's competent

merely makes that job easier, in turn, allowing the speakers to deliver their considerable best. Limited power and the drive units used mean this system won't go ear-bleedingly loud and it lacks the pinpoint positional sense and hyper reality of the more transparent miniatures – but it more than makes up for that with an expansive acoustic and much more natural perspective.

Mozart has always been one of my guiltier



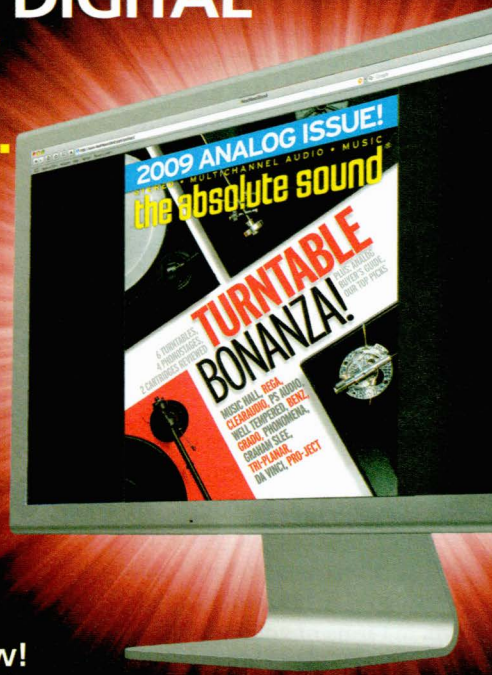
and nicely executed but definitely falls well short of flashy. It's why there's no ostentatious displays or banks of controls and programmable options. Likewise, there's no claims made for the uniqueness of the technology or engineering, other than that it's done right. Four line inputs on the pre and a single digital input on the DAC are definitely barebones, but adequate for most situations whilst meaning that the budget goes on performance rather than extraneous facilities that you'll rarely (if ever) use.

The end result is a set of electronics that are capable of standing aside from the signal and achieving that most difficult of hi-fi goals, being musically unobtrusive. The care that goes into their support and cabling

pleasures (not serious enough, don't you know?). The recently arrived Esoteric re-mastering of the Decca/Clifford Curzon K.466/K.595 was just too inviting to miss. With the Renaissance/Rountree combination, even the CD layer served up a feast of orchestral contrast and the dramatic flamboyance that typifies Mozart's later work, delicacy played against fiery bombast, light against dark. The sense of space and air around the orchestra was just right, the balance between it and the typically over-voiced piano, just so – not pushing the solo instrument forward of the acoustic, the way more direct speakers can. At the

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▶ same time, Curzon's deft melodic lines and mastery of shape unravel and reveal the perfectly poised development of theme and phrase that make Mozart's melodies so beguilingly beautiful.

But captivating as Curzon's performance is, the full scope of his artistic expression only really becomes apparent when you contrast his playing with the acute, angular brilliance and symmetry of Perahia's masterful Bach – which is about the same time you'll realize just how lucid and musically expressive this system is.

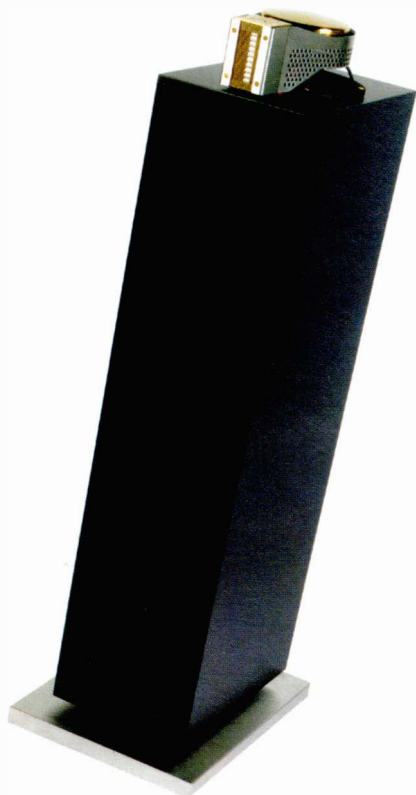
And don't go making the mistake of thinking that it only does 'nicey-nice' classical music. Just listen to the languid grace of Miles Davis' rendition of 'My Funny Valentine' followed by the unimpeded up-shift to the jaunty yet plaintive lines with which he leads 'Blues By Five'. And by way of contrast, how about Coltrane's

smoky tone and the darker shades of his solo vision, along with the tactile life and pace of Paul Chambers' short string, bass solo. Where so many systems fail with upright bass, here there's a shape to notes and a momentum and sense to Chambers' sure footed phrasing that just pulls you in and keeps you there. The natural tone of bass notes, the lack of clutter or slurring is one of the key aspects of the OmniMon's performance, allowing music to breathe with unforced clarity and an easy, natural pace.

The wilder excesses of *Led Zep II* were handled with aplomb and rock and pop hold few fears for this set-up. The only way to really get this system into trouble was to go way beyond its comfort level in terms of volume and sheer musical density. Crank up the *Gladiator* OST and it'll start to crack, but you'll be going some when it does. More to the point, you shouldn't really need to, as the scale delivered, even at much lower volumes, compensates remarkably well for any perceived lack of grunt. Indeed, it was the clean, deep bass that first attracted me to the speaker.

By now you might have noticed that this review has been all about the music, rather than the system making it. Which is just the way it should be. And not only does this system do a remarkable job of allowing that music and the musicians playing it to speak for themselves, it will do it equally well in almost any environment, as it's show appearances attest. It's also fuss and tweak free, no-nonsense and simplicity itself to use. The reviewer inside me occasionally bubbles up and makes my fingers itch; I know couplers under the kit would improve the sound still further, as

would a single brand cable loom. But then the musical enjoyment to be had just as it is banishes any such thoughts. If a system should be greater than the sum of its parts then this is certainly a system. More importantly, it's also music! ▶+



PRICES AND AVAILABILITY

Renaissance Amplification

RT-01 CD Transport£2,495
RD-01 DAC.£1,395
RAP-03 Preamplifier.£1,295
RA-03 Monoblock Power Amplifier. £2,495/pair

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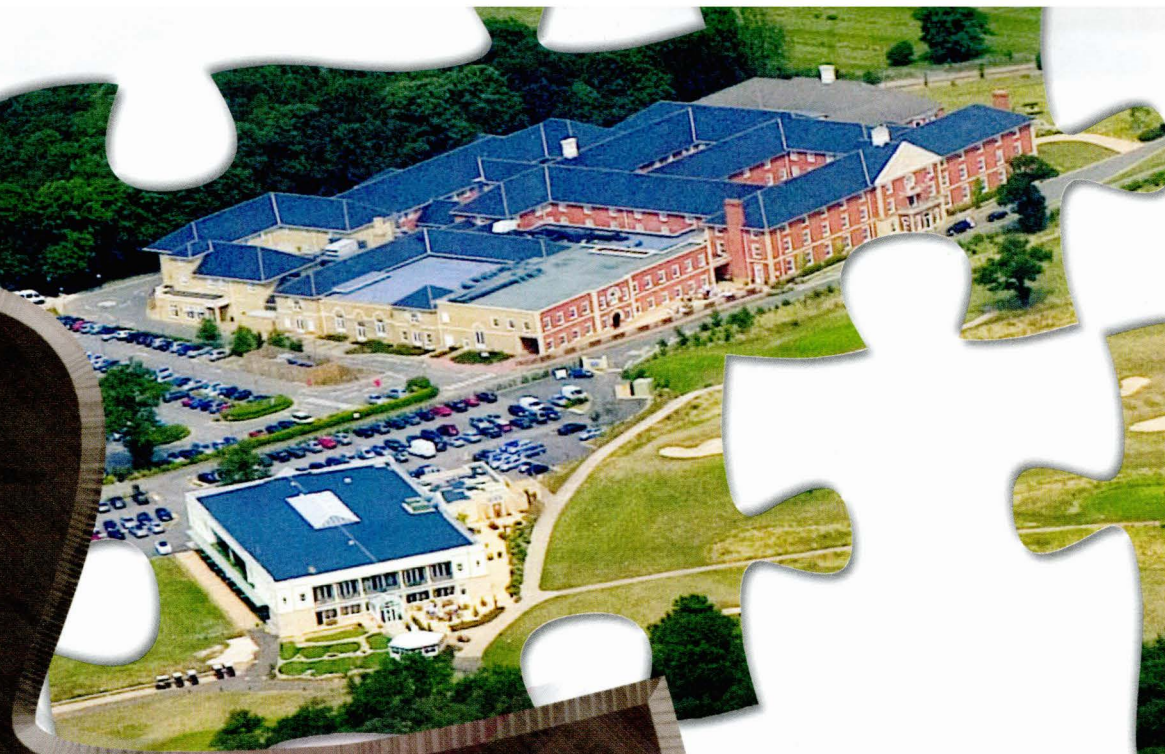
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Room to Breathe...

The new listening room

by Roy Gregory



For many of us, financial limitations aside, the biggest single compromise we face when it comes to system performance and listening pleasure, is the room in which the listening takes place. Not only is it all too often the wrong size, the wrong shape or the wrong construction, but the need to actually cohabit with a partner/wife and quite possibly the rest of a family means that everything from décor to positioning to access can all be seriously affected. Which helps explain why so many audiophiles and music lovers dream of a dedicated listening room, free of outside influence or intrusion, while the notion of a purpose built space is considered the Holy Grail.

As a reviewer, you can add a few other considerations besides. Such as the sheer volume of equipment that passes through the hands of an even moderately active audio writer, the large cartons

and all the extra equipment, cables and ancillaries (racks, platforms, mains filters etc.) that you need to make sure that each unit is working at its best. The end result is a veritable mountain of hi-fi 'stuff' that soon threatens to overwhelm every corner of your living space – to the considerable irritation of those who have to share that space without sharing your fascination/professional interest. The idea of a separate space which will swallow the problem in a single gulp; one where you don't need to worry about leaving three different sets of speaker cable running across the middle of the room; one where state of the art preamps don't get unplugged to make way for games consoles – it's almost too good to even dream about. But that's exactly the situation that I found myself facing, and it's remarkable how narrow are the lines between dream, fantasy and nightmare...

Mention to anybody with any interest in hi-fi that you are building a listening room and you immediately invite a torrent of unsolicited opinion and advice – none of which agrees with anyone else's. Your blank sheet of paper rapidly becomes a featureless expanse, threateningly devoid of common sense or accepted wisdom. What you need is advice, but where do you get it?

Let's start at the beginning...

Like many a house in the UK, ours had a detached, double garage. Wouldn't it be cool to convert it to a listening room, we thought – like many a couple before us. But a double garage is not a great donor building. In fact, once we actually looked at the reality of the situation, it was clear that to do the job properly would mean flattening the existing garage and building on its footprint as well as the space between it and the existing house. Turning the detached structure into an extension would deliver more, usable space as well as creating the option to incorporate storage and an office/workroom. Having said that, doing the job properly was also going to cost a lot more and involve that scary, blank sheet of paper planning experience.

Look at it this way: this is not only the most expensive piece of 'hi-fi' I've ever even considered buying, but you've got no chance to hear it before committing to the purchase and no real way of predicting what it will sound like when you do. And that's before you even get to the inevitable time lag and frustrations between purchasing decision and delivery. In this case, a three month long

building project has stretched out to nearly two years – and that only gets us as far as completion. Optimization is still to come...

Having made the decision to at least cost out the project, the next question was how to define the required structure? Having sought input from a (very) select group of people within the industry – mainly in the US – who have actually built listening rooms and have a wide experience working with them, I was also fortunate enough to discover that Chris Thomas is acquainted with one of London's



pre-eminent acoustic architects, a man responsible for any number of concert venues, rehearsal rooms and studios. He generously agreed to meet up with a view to advising me on the project.

Questions, questions...

What I needed to know from our initial meeting was the answer to a series of questions:

- Is there really a set of golden ratios or dimensions that I should work to?
- Should I consider tapering the walls or making the room asymmetrical?
- Should I curve or ripple the walls or ceiling?
- What materials should I build the room out of?
- What about windows, doors and

the like? How many and where to put them?

Meanwhile, Richard (the architect) had a few questions of his own:

- What ideas or notions had I already formed?
- What sort of space was I expecting as a result?

As I explained my level of acoustic ignorance and deeply held abhorrence of heavily damped and treated listening environments you could almost see the weight lifting from Richard's shoulders.

As I went on to explain that the finished room needed to be domestically representative and not too wildly removed from the sort of space that equipment will generally find itself used in, he almost broke into the Hallelujah Chorus. If ever I needed confirmation of just how misled, misunderstood or just plain wrong the hi-fi

industry and hi-fi aficionados in general are when it comes to acoustics, here it was, writ large in front of me.

So, once he'd regained his composure, what pearls of wisdom did Richard impart. I think they can best be summed up as follows:

First, build the room as large as the available space allows – it's easy to make a room smaller if you have to! What's more, as long as you avoid obviously coincident dimensions, then the notion of golden ratios is largely apocryphal.

Make it symmetrical. If you taper a room or make it asymmetrical, then the angles involved in order to be effective are so extreme that they undermine the point above. But just as importantly, you want the

▶ room to be a pleasant environment and non-symmetrical rooms tend to be unsettling (and unsaleable) as well as difficult to treat acoustically. Given a symmetrical environment almost any problem can be handled effectively and fairly simply. With odd-shaped rooms, the acoustics can be unpredictable, meaning that you tend to start chasing problems from one frequency to another.

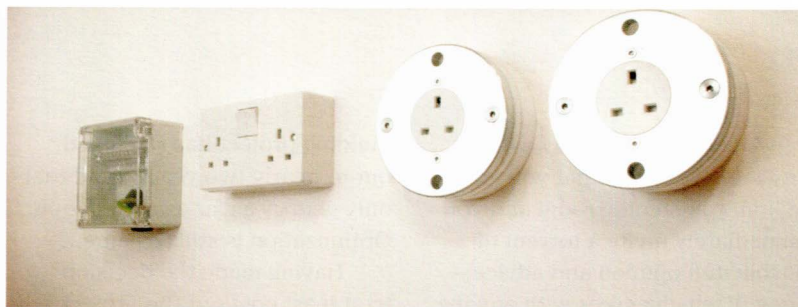
Build a real room – not a bunker. 'Recording Studio' type black holes are unpleasant to spend any time in and again, hard to sell when (if) you want to move. One of the governing factors when it comes to acoustics is energy dissipation and you need to allow low-frequencies to vent or escape.

Materials depend on location and circumstances, but with our garage standing close to a (fairly quiet) road, noise getting in was going to be more of a problem than noise getting out.

Laying down the basics...

Armed with such sanguine advice, what we were looking at was a building with internal dimensions of six by eight meters, filling the space bracketed by the road, house and boundary. The overlap with the house itself would provide access, while a dead space in the angle between the two would offer up storage possibilities. Build it tall enough and a workspace could be added in the eaves above the storeroom.

The existing house, a 1980 redbrick oblong with a shallow pitch roof, defined the roof angles on the extension, while the office/store settled the height and the open beam internal arrangement. The end result was a maximum floor to peak height of five meters, the open pitch ceiling falling to three and a half meter sidewalls.



The rear entrance... and exit for bass

It was time to pin Richard down as regards constructional details and materials. He placed emphasis on isolating the listening environment from the outside world, preventing intrusive noise from interfering with the music. To that end, the walls were specified with brick outers and high-density concrete block inners, rather than the more usual insulation blocks. One by-product of that was the need to increase the cavity from 75mm to 100mm and then stuff it with a much more effective insulation in order to meet the thermal requirements enshrined in UK building regulations. Likewise, the roof was double-skinned and the eaves sealed – overkill under normal circumstances.

Next area of concern was the floor. Many high-end speakers possessing a broad footprint and a weight approaching four figures in pounds, keeping them stable is no easy task. Fortunately, this fitted

"Build a real room – not a bunker. 'Recording Studio' type black holes are unpleasant to spend any time in."

in perfectly with a scheme that Richard had been quietly hatching.

What he proposed was that the room would be built with zero absorption, making every additional acoustic treatment entirely elective. I must admit that I hadn't realized just how rare this situation is, but actually, nearly every room comes with carpets, curtains, a fixed level of furniture or wall coverings that provide an associated, fixed level of acoustic absorption. As soon as Richard proposed his scheme, I could see the potential advantages, the only problem being, how to achieve that aim in practice. Which brings us straight back to the floor...

Normally, a laminate or wood block floor is laid on top of a flexible membrane that insulates footfall but also takes up any irregularities in the surface on which it's sitting. Our requirement for absolute stability ruled that out, as any flexibility under the wood itself would immediately allow a rocking motion to develop.

The contradictions didn't stop there. Radiators and their associated pipe-work being a root of considerable sonic evil, an under-floor system based on plastic piping was the way to go,

placing another limitation on the choice of flooring, many options simply being too thick. Plus shelling out for a huge area of top-notch flooring, given the weight and spikiness of hi-fi speakers means that its surface ain't going to stay pristine for too long.

What we needed was wood/laminated flooring that could be glued straight onto the screed – which would itself have to be incredibly flat and smooth. Eventually we found the right combination of screed, floor and the man to put them together, but for a long time it seemed like an impossible goal.

Light and shade...

Controlling light in a large space is complicated, too. We settled on a combination of a high set window

in the front wall (as much to break up its visual bulk as anything else) and three large Velux windows in the ceiling with their own electrically operated blinds, while shutters handle the other window. We initially planned for four narrow windows in the sidewall, but we dispensed with these in the name of symmetry – although they can be installed at a later date. We also added a large, double skin door and ramp to allow easy access with heavy equipment.

With the concrete walls and relatively limited window area, venting bass energy is a concern, but here we hope to draw on the experience of the existing room. This allows low frequencies to exit down a staircase into the labyrinth of rooms offered by the ground floor. The new room vents into the

same labyrinth from the opposite end, simply by opening the door. The big question of course, is whether it will behave in the same way or be as effective given the smaller area of the access 'port'. In one sense, this is the biggest gamble in the whole project – although it's backstopped by the relative simplicity of building dedicated bass traps if necessary.

The problem is, we won't know whether it has worked as intended until the room is completed and there's a system installed and playing.

Next time, I'll be looking at what happened when we did put a system in the room, which of our strategies worked and which didn't, how much treatment was required and how the finished room sounds. ➤✚

Power Trip...

The other big issue for any listening room is providing a really good, clean mains supply. That was a two part project: ensuring that all 'domestic' power for lighting, sockets etc. was physically and electrically separate from the system supply, and providing a system supply that was itself properly constructed and arranged.

The first part of that equation was quite straightforward, extending the household circuits to provide a supply into the new build. This was used to feed two lighting channels. The office and storage areas also take their power from the house supply, while a single low-level run provides sockets for general use. That leaves the other long wall free to carry the system supply, with no other wiring in close proximity.

For the system AC installation, I contacted Integral Electrical Services, NICEIC certificated electricians who specialize in this field. As well as taking my strange demands at face value, they also provide selected hardware to further improve sound quality. The precise wiring requirements were defined by the site survey and the topology mapped out by Raj, who carried the project through (Tel. 07973 145252).

The hi-fi system runs off a series of dedicated sockets, in turn fed by their own, separate fuse box, cleaned and treated with Deoxit before installation. This feeds four discrete spurs, each supporting a pair of sockets, one behind the system, one at the

speaker end of the room. Two of the spurs use a high-quality, shielded RS mains cable, used in some commercially available hi-fi power cords. These feed unswitched Crabtree 13A sockets. The other two spurs each comprise a single run of Chord Co. Power Chord or Nordost Valhalla power cable. All four spurs run in a conduit fastened to the outer, brick wall, mechanically isolating them from the listening room. Further, both the Chord and Nordost spurs are terminated with a hi-fi specific socket design called The Lens. Designed by Paul Soor, a chartered mechanical engineer with a serious hi-fi habit, (and available from Blade Audio at around \$400 each) this is a specially constructed Teflon and alloy housing that uses ceramic balls to isolate the faceplate and socket from the wall. By dressing the cables between the socket and the external conduit (rather like a Linn arm cable) you prevent any physical contact between the internal walls of the listening room and the electricity supply. All fixings are stainless steel and the fit and finish of these devices is exemplary.

The other thing that sits beside the two rows of dedicated hi-fi sockets are terminal blocks for the room's clean earths. Each of these contains a terminal strip allowing as many earths as required to be hooked up. One is generally enough...

It took four very long days to get everything installed and running (and complying with BS7671) with attention to detail that exceeded my wildest expectations. The resulting set up is an electrical work of art that demonstrates just how effective money spent on the mains supply (before it reaches the socket) really is.



INCOMING!

Please address your letters to the Editor at *Hi-Fi Plus*, Corneways House, School Lane, Ringwood, Hampshire BH24 1LG, or email: editor@hifiplus.com, or via the website at www.hifiplus.com

Don't go changin'...

I understand that a new editor will make changes, but please don't alter *Hi-Fi Plus* just for change's sake. The reason why I buy the magazine regularly is for its sage advice, its excellent record reviews and frankly beautiful photography. My wife calls it *Hi-Fi Porn* not *Hi-Fi Plus* for good reason.

I am also concerned that you say you are going to concentrate on products up to about £5,000. Part of the enjoyment of *Hi-Fi Plus* comes from ogling over products that I could never even dream of affording, and those are the products that cost a lot more than the price ceiling you intend to impose.

It's what sets you apart from the rest of the pack.

Howard Norris

Your letter encapsulates the thoughts (and emails) of many Hi-Fi Plus readers. We are looking at how the magazine's format can move forward, and this issue reflects that investigation process in part. And, it must be said, that also requires looking at the magazine in the light of the harsh economic realities that beset the world outside of audio.

My plans for the magazine do not include a price ceiling for reviews; if they did, I would have broken it in an impressive manner in this issue with products from dCS, Esoteric, Pass Labs and Vitus Audio. I still maintain that products like the Krell and PMC products (also in this issue) hold great interest for those who both want to ogle and want to buy, but this is not to say that the magazine will no longer look at the highest of high-end hi-fi. Ed.

Compression depression

I read recently that students prefer the sound of MP3 files to that of CD. This troubles me greatly, if it's true. If tomorrow's listeners are content with the bright, brash and compressed sound of MP3 files, they'll never discover the joys of listening to music played through good equipment.

In many respects, this leads to absurd conclusions about the listening tastes of these students. If they were listening to acoustic instruments in a live setting, would they still prefer their iPods?

Simon Steinberg

It's interesting, but we take such things with about a tenth of our recommended daily allowance of salt. It is possible that young listeners have become more accustomed to the artefacts of MP3, just as many of us have become so accustomed to the sound of vinyl that we are not troubled by its pops and crackles.

Whether their preference for MP3 sound makes the next generation unable to enjoy good audio remains to be seen. Many of us had dreadful hi-fi in our student years. Ed.

Tell me more...

I suspect you are regretting your request for suggestions, but here goes anyway. I would ask that the otherwise excellent reviews have a bit more practical information. For example, it sometimes isn't clear what ancillaries have been used, and that seems an essential bit of information. I would also welcome a bit of guidance on where a piece of kit might fit into a system. For example, with speakers, what amplifier seemed to match best, what room size works best, how far they need to be away from the walls, what cables, supports seem to bring the best out of them, and so on. This gives me the information I need to consider whether they could ever fit into my system.

Please don't reduce the music reviews. It might interest you to know, there is some evidence how much they are valued. When I enter one of your recommended recordings into Amazon's search engine, without fail, the names of other CD's in your reviews appear in the list. Like me, many people must be searching out the recommendations for purchase. In addition, please 'do' more shows – your coverage of RMAF has led me to book to attend this year as a retirement treat, after 30 years in the NHS saltmines.

I do feel a bit cheated about the annual Awards issue, because there are hardly any new reviews in it at all.

Finally, you put together systems for each other, or asked a dealer to set up a system and show an upgrade path with accessories. Why not do that for one of your readers every so often? Ask a dealer and perhaps one of your reviewers to spend a day with a reader who doesn't seem to be getting the best out of good components.

David Wise

Win a pair of AudioSmile Kensai loudspeakers worth £1,499!

"If you want something small, ultra-discreet, and potentially easily transportable, yet which is good enough to make your music (or radio, or whatever) totally engrossing and informative, I can think of no better." –Paul Messenger

In the last issue of Hi-Fi Plus, Paul Messenger wrote a stunning review of the tiny AudioSmile Kensai loudspeakers.

"The little Kensai can do amazing things even with bass-rich material." One reason why the Kensai can handle bass-heavy tracks is because of the unusual aperiodic slot porting. Unlike a normal port, this method offers air resistance below the frequency where the port stops working. This reduces the tendency for a small woofer to run out of steam when trying to make bass it simply isn't capable of delivering. The aperiodic port also works over a broader range and increases efficiency.

"Although the bass is thoroughly impressive, the best thing about this speaker is its total and seamless coherence." The Kensai has drivers physically close together, and offers an unusually low asymmetric phase-aligned crossover. This allows the sound from each driver to blend seamlessly together; not just at one point like most loudspeakers, but over a broad listening window. Essentially, the drivers act like one single sound source, making the crossover inaudible.

"Finish and presentation are top class." The

Kensai is available with solid Walnut or Beech sides in combination with black or white leatherette. The cabinets are cut, shaped and assembled in Kent. The cabinet is then meticulously sanded, sealed and waxed by hand.



Net: www.audiosmile.co.uk
Tel: +44 (0)7592 478 193

Please circle the appropriate answer, fill in your details below and post this page to:

Hi-Fi Plus Kensai Competition, Hi-Fi Plus magazine,
Absolute Multimedia (UK), Cornerways House,
School Lane, Ringwood, Hants BH24 1LG.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

If you would like your contact details passed on to AudioSmile, for product news, please tick the box:

Q1) What type of port does the Kensai use?

A – Transmission Line

B – Aperiodic

C – Passive Radiator

Q2) What type of crossover does the Kensai use?

A – FIR (Finite Impulse Response)

B – Neville Thiele

C – Asymmetric Phase Aligned

Q3) If you won a pair of Kensai speakers, what finish do you prefer?

A – Beech sides, black leatherette

B – Beech sides, white leatherette

C – Walnut sides, black leatherette

D – Walnut sides, white leatherette

Terms and Conditions

The closing date for this free prize draw will be 20th July, 2009. The lucky winner will be drawn at random from entries with the correct answer and we will notify the winner within 28 days of the end of the competition. The competition is only open to UK residents over 18 years of age at time of entry and the prize is not exchangeable for cash or any other prize. The competition is not open to employees of Absolute Multimedia (UK) Ltd, AudioSmile, their agents or immediate family members. No purchase necessary. Only one entry per person, but a photocopy of this page is admissible. The editor's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into.

Finian 'Fink' Greenhall

Ninjatune's first singer/songwriter

by Jason Kennedy

Finian Greenhall or Fink as he (and his band) are known started out as a trip-hop DJ, producing an album with Lee Jones under the name EVA in 1995. This garnered the attention of Coldcut's Ninjatune label for whom he made two EPs and his first album proper, *Fresh Produce*, released in 2000. This was an ambient, sampled album in the style of DJ Shadow et al, a far cry from the singer/songwriter style he adopted for next album *Biscuits for Breakfast* and those that have followed. He explains what prompted the transition in the interview that follows.

Since *Biscuits for Breakfast* Fink has made two more albums, *Distance and Time* in 2007 and this year he released the self-produced *Sort of Revolution*. *Distance and Time* has arguably been his best sounding album a result he attributes to the production skills of Andy Barlow of the band Lamb. But the albums that came before and after it sound pretty good too considering they were made in a home studio with more primitive monitoring than most of us have at home. Fink points out that it's not what you use it's how well you know it that counts and he demonstrates as much with his latest release.

I spoke to him shortly before the release of *Sort of Revolution*.

Jason Kennedy: The new *Sort of Revolution* album feels like an evolutionary step on from the



Distance and Time, is that what was intended?

Finian Greenhall: We don't want to move forward so much that it's like who are these guys. It's a tricky balance, we want people who liked the last one to like this one just as much but we also want loads more people to like it. We don't want people to think 'why buy a Fink album when we've already got two'.

We had more control over the album this time.

JK: Why did you decide to produce this album?

FG: It wasn't through choice. I used to try and be a producer myself and then I became a musician. Those aren't mutually

exclusive, but in broad strokes I became more of a musician. I produced the first album myself and it was hard work; for every five minutes of playing, you've got two hours of comping, compressing and queuing. Guy (the bass player) engineered the session; he used to work in a studio in London, and he's great when it comes to mics and leads and heavy lifting! And basically we produced it.

Apart from my Apple G5 specced up to the ball bags with stuff, I'm pretty much using the same kit I used when I made *Fresh Produce*, which was kind of trip hop. I'm really glad we used a producer on the last album (*Distance and Time*), and I think Andy Barlow who's got loads of experience did a great job. We were very rough, very raw and we wanted to keep it that way, we did the whole of *Distance and Time* in a three-week blitzkrieg. For Andy, who was used to producing Lamb, and taking eighteen months to make a record, we did it from setting up the drum kit to delivering the masters in literally three weeks. By the end of it he needed a holiday.

The great thing was, I could focus on being a musician. You go in do your music and the producer has to worry about mics, compression and essences and all that rubbish and then you go home and drink beer. One of the unfortunate things about producers is that they cost real

money. You definitely get what you pay for but you have to pay them, hire a studio and an engineer.

We thought – just in case we had learnt enough by producing an album ourselves and being produced by a professional – let's see in our demo if we can get up to that kind of level. I'm not saying we did but we got close enough to think, let's try and do it ourselves, if we deliver in to Ninjatune and they say that they're really good demos lets make some calls, then we're cool with that.

We approached Andy to do it again and he was busy and a little expensive and he realised that it was not going to be all fun! We approached a few others, like Brendan Lynch who did Paul Weller's records and *Young Disciples*, a record I truly love. We approached Nigel Godrich as well, but it wasn't falling into place. Even if they'd wanted to do it, Nigel wasn't available until the next millennium and is a serious investment, as in mortgaging the house. But what you get is a work of seminal genius every time; his work on Becks 'Golden Age' (from *Sea Change*) is one of the best records I've ever heard sonically, and his work with Radiohead it goes without saying is fantastic.

So I thought, I've got a mixing desk and a G5 – why not go for it? We needed kit, though. We did a gig in Berlin that was sponsored by Sennheiser – instead of taking a fee, we took mics! The biggest investment we had to make was mic stands, because I didn't really have any. It was a long and hardcore emotional experience for me, being the songwriter and the singer and the producer of the record. It's quite a lot of stress, but we got there in the end and now that I've recovered from the trauma it feels like a job well done.

JK: It sounds more intimate and is warmer than *Distance and Time*.

FG: Andy produced everything on fantastic kit, really expensive hard and software – every channel had its own compressor and its own valve; he's got all the Avalons you could shake a stick at. He's got kit coming out of his ears and it's all primo professional stuff and a Pro Tools rig that he doesn't need to look at to operate.

However, Fink fans we met on the road said that they loved the last album, but that they missed some of the intimacy from the songwriting of the first album. So what we wanted to do was use the intimacy of the first album and the songwriting on the second, which did improve, and also try and write it more as a unit of musicians rather than just me.

In the production we tried to avoid being a singer/songwriter project, whether we are or not depends on individual tracks. On 'If I Had a Million' where it's me and my guitar then that is the case but on *Sort of Revolution* its more like Fink are a band. We wanted to chuck a little more dub into the mix just to be kind of like... well, we don't want to be like Paulo Nuttini – he probably can't have a dub outro on his first single because he can't get it on the radio. On our original demo, that track was ten minutes long!

JK: What sort of revolution would you organise given the choice?

FG: The kind of revolution where you have to pack your kit and just do something that you wouldn't ordinarily do. Like when I was a DJ and retired from that and launched into this song based career.

JK: What brought that about?

FG: I went to a couple of gigs in quick succession that absolutely blew my mind. The thought crossed my mind that I'm never going to be able to rock that many people because this was a massive Radiohead gig, and DJs don't do that. The second one was this System of Down gig at the Astoria which was a breathtaking in its energy and you just don't get that kind of energy in a nightclub.

Around the turn of the millennium the people in clubland were thinking what are we trying to do here? Are we here for the music, for the chicks, the environment? We didn't know any more so we went to a few gigs and discovered that they were great, isn't going to a gig like cool as well. I thought I'd rather be a roadie on a Radiohead tour than be a trendy DJ on Ninjatune and having a great time all over the world. But after you do anything for three or four years you wonder if you want to do it forever. Apart from anything else the relentless round of buying records ground me down, my house is full of vinyl and I get rid of crates of the stuff every Christmas when I do a clean up and I've still got rooms full of the stuff from a decade of DJing on Ninja. Now I'm into finding Cure and Bauhaus and Joy Division, I'm going through an eighties industrial punk thing, I've got a whole other section of my record collection with the Sugarcubes in it. It never ends.

I do a radio show on Juice FM in Brighton called the Future Rock'n'roll show and we play really trendy indie stuff and a lot of that's influenced by the Cramps and the Cure and the Pixies. There's a new wave of what a couple of years ago would have been called skinny jean bands but now its getting very angular and proggy. Bands like These New Puritans are so

▼ crazy and angular and brilliant, they're like the new Joy Division. It's fantastic and its never ending there's always new records. If the show was four hours not two, I'd play all of them, the quality is just incredible out there. When the culture starts mining a good seam you get really great stuff. And right now that's happening and there's a lot of passion and reaction to the eighties.

JK: The 7 Dials Studio... Is that yours?

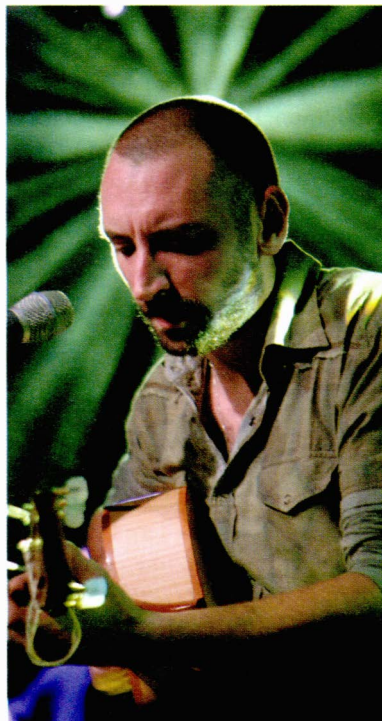
FG: Yeah, it's my loft. The great thing about a home studio is that you can move things around. If the vibe isn't right then move the couch, maybe that's all it is, maybe it's not the song it's that you're not sitting in the right place. We had to move the studio around a good three or four times before it felt right, so the bass guy sits there and I sit there and the drummer goes there. You gotta feel right, especially when you don't know what you're writing.

JK: You have even done a remix of a Nina Simone track. How did that work out?

FG: I did a new mix of 'Chilly Wind' for Verve that came out on compilation late last year. It was a real honour. As soon as I was sent the list I immediately jumped on the Nina track on the off chance that Fat Boy Slim didn't, and to my amazement no one else jumped on it because there wasn't any parts (no multitrack tapes exist), it was so old. It was just a case of "here's the track, try not to sound like Jive Bunny and do something interesting with it".

JK: Which other artists have been big influences on you?

FG: I think Radiohead has inspired a lot of artists, obviously you can never sound like them but the combination of a great band, a really interesting songwriter and a really awesome producer is great. I was inspired by José Gonzalez' first album *Veneer* when I got that. It made it OK to do folk. I wish I could attain just a pinch of the talent of Joni Mitchell and how



she just banged the records out, it wasn't a question of "I've got a style and I'm going to milk the cow", creativity was just bursting out of her. The production is sublime, too. Sometimes I'm not in the mood for Joni Mitchell or John Martyn but when I am there's nothing else like it.

JK: Which is your favourite Joni Mitchell album?

FG: For me *Hejira* is the definitive Joni album, but the Joni camp is split between that and *Court*

and *Spark*. Actually my favourite Joni album is the live one, *Miles of Aisles*. She does it live, that is amazing, it proves that it's real. Like when you hear Jimmy Hendrix live and it's well recorded, there is no one who has ever done it like that; if I saw that today on Jools Holland, I would wet my pants and rush out and buy it. I love virtually everything Hendrix has done, even the rubbish stuff. Even that soundtrack to *Rainbow Bridge* he penned in ten minutes, but still has a few moments on it. It was a tragedy that he died when he did but it did assure that he didn't do a Miles Davis, which was to go on so long that he made bland music but didn't even hear it was bland.

JK: Do you have a hi-fi at home?

FG: It's a bit of a mish mash, I've got a 32-channel hi-fi in my loft! I've got a pair of old JPW P1s as monitors in my studio. I've had them all my producing life, so I know them inside out. I've also got some lovely Celestion Ditton 25s which I got from a guy I used to work for. They have a warmth of sound, when you play Leroy Hutson or Bob Marley on these speakers its like eating ice cream in your ears, it's so delicious. Downstairs I've got an old pair of Sony speakers that I've been listening to since I was 12. My stereo is like a mish mash of old amps, old kit, I don't have a CD player any more. My amp in the studio is a Sony power amp that's a workhorse but you don't need a lot of power. When I go to mastering and hear my music on six foot, fifty grand speakers, it's really weird. I don't go anymore. ▶+

The album Sort Of Revolution is out now on Ninjatune. For tour dates visit www.finkworld.co.uk

Record Reviews

How To Read Them

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

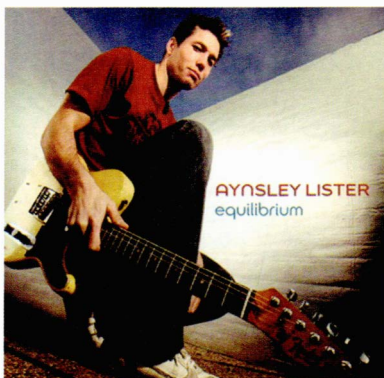
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information, the scale rates a standard,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

This issue's featured reviewers are:

DD – Dennis Davis
RSF – Richard S. Foster
DH – Drew Hobbs
RP – Reuben Parry
AS – Alan Sircom

Key to Icons

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



Aynsley Lister

Equilibrium

Manhatan Records: Hatman2024



Aynsley Lister in a live setting is a fearsome sight; with the amps cranked, the vocals pumped and the guitar smoking from the hip it's no wonder this young man is so revered.

His playing style is a generous helping of rock, wild twists of funk and a heavy shake of the blues come tumbling forth at speed from this man's ultra-talented fingers.

Aynsley's first for new label Manhatan *Equilibrium* is also the first time he's worked with a second guitarist in tow; the much-travelled Robbie McIntosh.

Equilibrium's first two tracks are pretty unremarkable but it soon starts to pick up speed with 'What's It All About', a mid-paced rocker housing not one, but two cracking guitar solos. Aynsley's version of Gnarl Barkley's *Crazy* is given the acoustic slide treatment and is a classic example of just how versatile he is. That shines through again on 'Superficial', a slow number with a hugely memorable chorus that's sure to bring out the lighters on the live circuit.

Other highlights include the Cream-inspired, psychedelically infused 'Running Out On Me' and the thumping foot-stomper 'Sugar Low'.

Equilibrium might take time to shine but when it does, the results are quite dazzling. **DH**



Bob Seger

Face The Promise

Capitol Records: 9463-73686-2



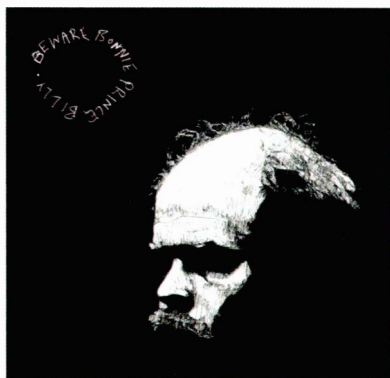
Rockers don't come more talented than Bob Seger. He's been making great albums for years and is still in possession of an amazingly flexible voice. He can turn on the heartbreak tap or bring on the roar.

After a lengthy absence, Seger's back with an absolute scorcher. All but two of the tracks were recorded in Nashville with a host of first class session players, along with two special guests. He rocks as hard as ever, particularly in the title track, which races along at a furious pace and could easily have been lifted from the celebrated *Smokin' O.P.'s* record. Seger and Kid Rock rip into Vince Gill's 'Real Mean Bottle' with serious intent, and it finds the young pretender doing a pretty good job of keeping up with the master, while Patti Loveless' timeless pipes blend beautifully with Seger's on the country tune 'The Answer's In The Question'.

Bob Seger's best known in this country for the touching ballad 'We've Got Tonight' and *Face The Promise* isn't without a few introspective numbers, but it's the rockers that dominate here.

The hair's turned silver and he's wandered the wrong side of 50, but Bob Seger still knows how to make a really good rock 'n' roll record. **DH**





Bonnie 'Prince' Billy

Beware

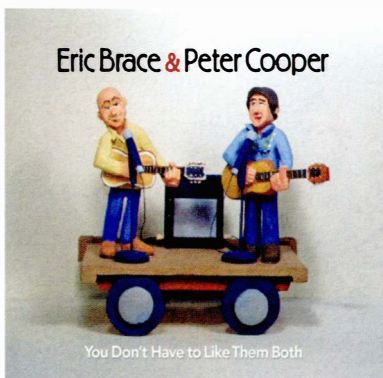
Domino/Drag City: WIGCD233



Will Oldham is almost Bowie-like in his persona changes. His latest – Bonnie 'Prince' Billy – has served him well though, because this is his seventh album under that alias. He's not one to play it for laughs or for commercial success; following up the almost cheery *Lie Down in the Light*, he's back to a more bleak folk style; tracks with titles like 'Beware Your Only Friend', 'Death Final' and 'Without Work, You Have Nothing' are a bit of a dead giveaway. With the accent on 'dead'.

Although a part of the 'lo-fi' movement (along with The White Stripes, plus US indie darlings like Guided By Voices and Pavement), this has a distinct country folk-rock feel. Dripping with phased guitar, bluegrass and country instruments, and lots of vocal harmonies, you could almost mistake this for a lost New Riders of the Purple Sage album (especially on the track 'You Don't Love Me'). Go deeper though and this is one of the more odd and uncompromising albums around today; the clue's in the use of a brass section and the clever, self-deprecating and wry lyrics.

Perhaps not the best recorded album ever, it's still got a close-knit feel that helps make the disc get under your skin. **AS**



Eric Brace and Peter Cooper

You Don't Have To Like Them Both

Corazong Records: CRZ255116

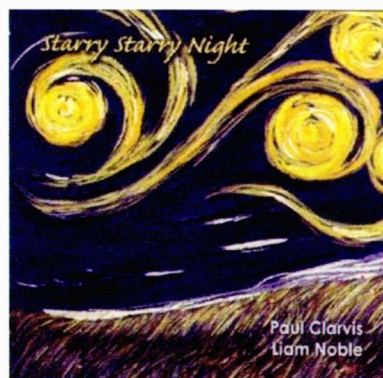


Eric Brace and Peter Cooper have both had fruitful careers as music journalists, and Brace has doubled up the day job as frontman for alt-country band Last Train Home. Meanwhile, Cooper's debut *Mission Door* had the likes of Kris Kristofferson and Tom T Hall drooling in admiration.

This is the first time the two have collaborated on a project. Both are excellent singers who produce harmonies as sweet as honey and use them to maximum effect across the 12 songs. Cooper, in particular, rings every last ounce of hurt from his voice, especially on 'Down To The Well'. Brace and Cooper handle the acoustic parts and are backed by a host of excellent musicians – Jen Gunderman's keyboard and accordion contributions deserving special mention.

Cooper's composition 'The Man Who Loves To Hate' is a wry observation on the hypocrisies attached to organised religion. Lines like these tell it like it is: "You can see him at the ballgame/Reigning curses on the kicker/Or see him driving through your neighbourhood/You can read his bumper sticker." That's sure to rattle a few cages!

These two should do this again, they work well together. **DH**



Paul Clarvis & Liam Noble

Starry Starry Night

Pure Pleasure Records: PPFAR 1001



In one sense its the technical minutiae (the antique ribbon microphones designed by stereo pioneer Alan Blumlein, no less) and the location (Studio 1 Abbey Road) that are more gripping than the material. These mainly jazz standards do include handsome versions of 'Maple Leaf Rag', 'Embraceable You' and 'Mood Indigo', but it's the versatility shown in their covers of a Gillian Welch 'Dear Someone' and the Don Maclean 'Vincent' where pianist Liam Noble and drummer Paul Clarvis excel.

Is it worthy of such a lavish recording? Probably not. I yearn for that meaningful British modern jazz album that gets an equally serious acoustic treatment. Something musically dangerous that tests the idiomatic boundaries rather than another album that safely treads well-worn boards. Is this harsh criticism? Yes – if you judge it on its own terms as a well conceived collaborative reworking of favourites old and new then it's a success. *Starry Starry Night* shines brightly in this sky, but it doesn't inspire me with a meteoric display. **RP**

Supplier: www.purepleasurerecords.com





Louis Armstrong and his All-Stars

Satch Plays Fats

Pure Pleasure Records: PPAN CL 708 180g

The strengths here as Columbia sought to build upon the success of their *Louis Armstrong plays W.C. Handy* tribute album are obvious. There is a wealth of undeniably great material in these nine Fats Waller songs (including 'Honeysuckle Rose', 'Squeeze Me' and 'Ain't Misbehavin'), played stellar musicians including Trummy Young (trombone) and Billy Kyle (piano). But most will still be drawn to this record because of Satchmo's distinctive style and swinging jazz. Yet there is a further and perhaps more captivating charm – that of an underrated vocalist, Velma Middleton, whose warmth, sincerity and understanding in those duets with Louis Armstrong simply stands out.

Rhythmic, reverent, sympathetic and ever so smooth, this journey through the Fats Waller canon – from cutesy numbers to important songs of real social significance like 'Black and Blue' – has been delivered with weight, wit and intelligence. Louis excels and the arrangements are impeccable. Technically too, the Steve Hoffman/Kevin Gray re-mastering of a mid-1950s recording reveals and then reinforces these qualities, creating a time-capsule like ambience. **RP**

Supplier: www.purepleasurerecords.com

Chris Duarte and Bluestone Co.

396

Provogue Records: PRD7271-2 CD

Japan is hardly noted for its blues bands, so it comes as a surprise to find one sharing the billing with mercurial Texan guitarist, Chris Duarte. Bluestone Co. are Japan's premier blues band, not difficult to understand why after listening to *396*. The band members are all excellent musicians with a firm grasp on blues and southern rock.

Duarte and Bluestone Co. simply snort their way through twelve original slices of prime guitar boogie and revved-up rocking blues. Duarte on his own is a force to be reckoned with and a premier league guitarist, but here you get the added bonus of Toshihiro Sumitomo's command of the electric slide. One minute Duarte's plucking notes from his overheated fretboard and the next, Sumitomo's chasing him hard with some of the best slide playing this side of Duane Allman. The other musicians deserve a mention too; Taizo Takafuji is a constantly inventive drummer, highly rhythmic and almost tribal, Taro Takagi is a master percussionist and Yoshihiro Ogasaitara remains rock solid in the engine room.

All the songs have enough about them to satisfy the most discerning blues and rock fan. Duarte and Bluestone Co. clearly speak the same language. **DH**



Easy Star All-Stars

Easy Star's Lonely Hearts Dub Band

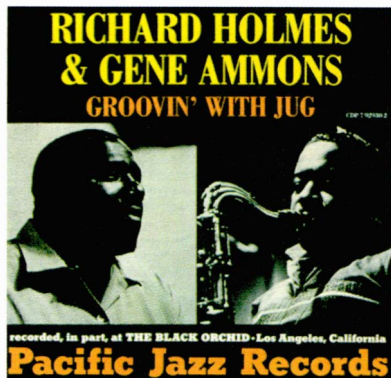
Easy Star Records: ES-1018 CD

Is nothing sacred? No, not in this case and nor was it for *OK Computer* and *Dark Side of the Moon* who've previously been the recipients of that indelible All-Star treatment. A reggae dub infusion for such an iconic Beatles album will of course polarise opinions but this deconstruction (or reconstruction, if you like) should not lead to the cry of 'kill the heretics'.

Blasphemy, it is not. This is instead a remarkable and truly affectionate return to the source material. *Lonely Hearts Dub* is an album that can reach out and catch-a-hold of your imagination.

Stand out covers like 'Getting Better' from the Mighty Diamonds, together with Kirsty Rock's 'She's Leaving Home' and an appreciative and unctuous reworking of 'A Day In The Life' which features Michael Rose of Black Uhuru hits the grooves running. Menny More's delivery of the line "Four thousand holes in Blackburn, Lancashire" here, is simply priceless. You kind of wonder why this hasn't been done before when *Sgt Pepper*, so brimming over with quirky songs, lends itself so completely to the rise and fall of a reggae beat. **RP**

Supplier: jim@empathypromotions.co.uk



Richard 'Groove' Holmes & Gene Ammons

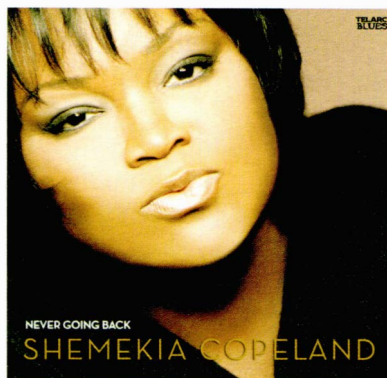
Groovin' With Jug

Pure Pleasure Records: PPAN ST32 

Recorded in L.A. on 15th August 1961, these sessions were split between the Pacific Jazz Studios where 'Morris The Minor', 'Hey You', 'What's That?' and the title track were all taped during the afternoon – with everyone relocating to the Black Orchid club for a free flowing evening gig that featured 'Good Vibrations', 'Willow Weep For Me' and 'Juggin' Around'. Giving us half a dozen gems where the jazz is ever so soulful and the bop is hard edged.

This is all carried by a combo (including guitarist Gene Edwards and Leroy Henderson on drums) who soak up that club atmosphere. The album smoulders and then sparks into a series of immense and articulate performances. The big tenor sax (Ammons) and the dynamic organ (Holmes) prove an effective and striking focal point. 'Juggin' Around' is fittingly given one of those fleeting yet fiery Ammons rips. While on the Ann Ronnell ballad 'Willow Weep For Me', he is more circumspect – subtly building this standard (both musically and emotionally) into a heartfelt and memorable climax with Holmes' exquisite and adroit assistance. **RP**

Supplier: www.purepleasurerecords.com



Shemekia Copeland

Never Going Back

Telarc Records: CD83692 

Shemekia Copeland's previous releases elevated her to the forefront of electric blues and soul. She has the most explosive delivery; the walls of the heart shake and the earth moves. She's won three W.C. Handy awards as well as being Grammy nominated. One doesn't achieve such critical acclaim without having the talent to back it up, and Shemekia's talent is huge.

There's a definite softening down in the vocal department here, with more emphasis being placed on her 'soul singer' side. That's enhanced by Oliver Wood's warm and earthy production. That's not to say she's abandoned the full-throated style she's noted for – one listen to 'The Truth Is The Light' is confirmation of that – but a jazzier Shemekia emerges too. 'Black Crow', with its double bass and sensuous Hammond B-3, courtesy of John Medeski, shows just how comfortable she is within a pared back framework. There's no holding a full-throated singer like Shemekia for long though; she shakes the rafters on the joyous 'Rise Up' and comes across as a subtler Tina Turner on the riotous 'Big Brand New Religion'.

This girl's one knockout singer and *Never Going Back* is sure to place more awards on an already creaking mantelpiece. **DH**



Lloyd Cole

Antidepressant

Sanctuary Records: SANPR429 

Crisis? What Crisis? Lloyd Cole delivers eleven songs that concentrate on an ageing male psyche, eventually banishing those middle aged demons with wit, charm and no shortage of sparkling tunes.

This is the antidote to sagging bellies, dipping sex drives and the attractions of right wing politics, especially for those of us who have grown up with Cole's music from the very teat. His telling observations – he possesses a photographer's eye and an artist's perception of light and colour – are at their very best when wryly examining the rituals surrounding desire. A loss of virility, that alarming inability to pull the pretty girls and a waning enthusiasm for the mating game as a whole are encapsulated in songs like 'Woman In A Bar'. The seriousness, that bittersweet counterpoint to these personal issues, can be heard in his evocation of life in the Big Apple. 'New York Sunshine' is wonderfully pictorial and of course heavily ironic song – it's a remarkable cityscape – a place where junkies and the homeless, millionaires and glamour models tread the same streets. And Cole maximises the impact of this contradictory society with another sweetly melodic and wistful arrangement. **RP**





Louisiana Red

Back To The Black Bayou

RUF Records: RUF1149

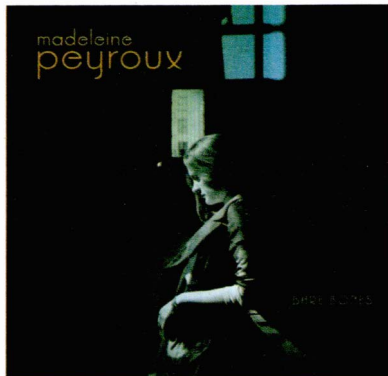


Louisiana Red (aka Iverson Minter) learned his trade under the watchful eye of some of the biggest names in blues. Being around the likes of Lightning Hopkins, John Lee Hooker and Muddy Waters has to have a lasting impact and Louisiana Red has clearly soaked up their influence in spades.

Back To The Black Bayou was recorded at a state-of-the-art (or ark?) analogue studio using all sorts of vintage equipment. Red's long time friend and guitarist Little Victor sat in the producer's chair, and with the help of a crack band they set about making the definitive Louisiana Red album.

Red's the meanest slide player and no slouch with a harmonica, and has a voice seasoned by years of hard toil in the juke joints and bars. Not surprisingly, considering Muddy Waters is Red's idol, this record has its roots firmly embedded in the classic Chicago sound of the 50's and 60's. Victor calls Red "one of the best slide players that ever walked under the sun" and it's difficult to argue when listening to his work here. That slide attack's to the fore on just about all of the tracks, although it's at its best on 'Sweet Leg Girl' and 'The Black Bayou'.

Victor and Red went for that timeless Chicago sound and hit the nail right on the head – this is 100 per cent the real deal. **DH**



Madeleine Peyroux

Bare Bones

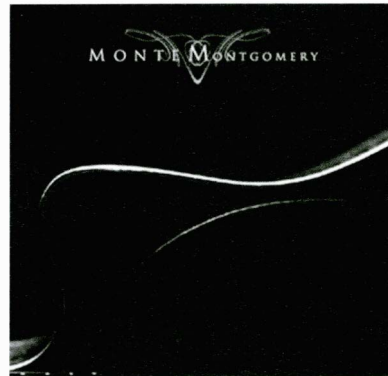
Rouner/Decca: 6132732



Although still accompanied by a laid-back six-piece jazz combo, singer Peyroux has moved away from her traditional eclectic mix of 'standards'. This time, she composed all eleven tracks on *Bare Bones* (with assistance from producer Larry Klein and a few friends). She writes like she sings, with a languorous, sultry air that seems straight out of 1954, only with 2009 production values.

Of course, those expecting the Great American Songbook will be upset, while those who don't might expect something more adventurous. The album could do with a few tempo changes – the unsurprisingly Dan-like 'You Can't Do Me' is about as fast as it gets... and that's about 'Haitian Divorce' speed. But, no-one would buy a Madeleine Peyroux speed metal album anyway.

By giving her own writing skills an airing, she breaks free from the risk of falling into dinner jazz hell; something that would have been so easy after mellow cuts like *Dreamland* and *Careless Love*. But with newcomers like Melody Gardot potentially muscling in on her jazz chanteuse patch, will *Bare Bones* be enough to keep the Peyroux flame burning? In sheer sound quality terms... Definitely, but maybe she needs more of an edge next time. **AS**



Monte Montgomery

Monte Montgomery

Provogue Records: PRD7251-2



He's been named by *Guitar Magazine* as 'one of the 50 all-time greatest guitar players' and he's received seven consecutive Austin Music awards. His name is Monte Montgomery and if you're in any way inspired by a master of the fretboard, you need to do yourself a mighty big favour and purchase this quite extraordinary CD.

Montgomery really is the complete package; excellent singer, damn fine songwriter and yes, one almighty talent on the guitar. To hear an acoustic guitar do the things this man makes it do is to listen to genius – there's no other way of putting it.

Working within a three man framework, Monte takes the listener on a magical music ride, stimulating the senses with shades of jazz, rock, blues and occasional Latin rhythms. Eleven of the twelve compositions come from his pen and any one can be singled out as a classic, but special praise has to be given to 'Midnight Matinee' – a beautiful way to end a spectacular record.

The only cover is the Jimi Hendrix piece 'Little Wing'. It's been done countless times by others but I promise you won't *ever* have heard it done like this before!

If I had to single out one artist to watch out for in 2009 it would be Monte Montgomery. He is, in a word, awesome. **DH**



The Top Ten ...

21st Century Demonstration discs

by Alan Sircom

Let's face it – *Famous Blue Raincoat*, *Rickie Lee Jones*, *Friday Night in San Francisco*, *Couldn't Stand the Weather*, *Brothers In Arms*, *Tracy Chapman*... All excellent demonstration discs, but they are all knocking on a bit. The youngest album in that arsenal of well-trodden test discs – Tracy Chapman's eponymous multi-platinum disc – is 21 years old. Little wonder that hi-fi is unapproachable to so many listeners under 35.

So, here's the update. Ten recordings all made since the year 2000 that are just as excellent at showing off your hi-fi or showing up its limitations. Some of these recordings have already passed into the hi-fi show demo catalogue – but some still get sidelined in favour of Yesterday's Heroes.

Please note that these are all from the rock end of the spectrum. This is not because we don't have interest in classical music anymore and certainly not because jazz is dead. However, it's simply because this is a reflection of what is played in many demos. It's also because jazz and classical experts already have their lists!

Modern recordings are often criticised for going for loudness over natural dynamics. While this is demonstrably the case in many current albums (no Muse albums in the list for that reason), there are also recordings so good, you'll just be hungry for more...

Rodrigo Y Gabriella ***Rodrigo Y Gabriella***

This Mexican pair originally played in a thrash metal band. They threw away their pointy electric guitars for nylon-string classical models (and, curiously, moved to Dublin in the process) years ago, but somehow retain the speed of metal with the rhythm, drama and elegance of flamenco. This, their second studio album, includes



cover remarkably successful versions of 'Stairway to Heaven' and Metallica's 'Orion'.

It's their own compositions that win out, though. The fiery opener 'Tamacun' and the energetic 'Diablo Rojo' will test the mettle of your system's dynamic range, while 'Ixtapa' is more jazzy, melodic and reflective (the duo are joined by violinist and fan Roby Lakatos on this one). But it's an instrumental masterpiece and a beautifully recorded one at that. Buy it!

Norah Jones ***Come Away With Me***

An almost instant addition to the hi-fi demonstration disc collection, it's not hard to see why Ravi Shankar's multi-talented daughter's first album was an instant hit with the 'contemporary jazz' audience. Light, poppy, catchy, elegantly crafted mellow acoustic music and beautifully recorded to boot... It couldn't miss. And didn't, as it sold more than 10 million copies in its first three years and picked up five Grammys in the process.

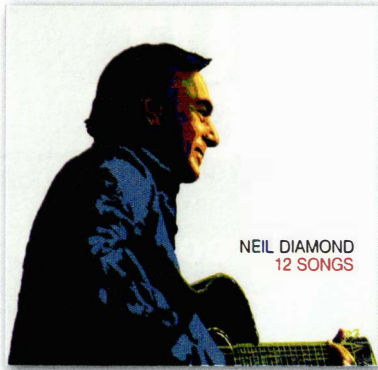
In fact, it's so well recorded that it's hard to find a track that stands out – the title track and 'Don't Know Why' are the best known, but the simple, jazzy feel to her cover of Hank Williams 'Cold Cold Heart' is sweet, staying just the right side of saccharine, and 'The Long Day is Over' feels remarkably like Rickie Lee Jones singing good country, complete with vibrato'd twangy guitars.

Neil Diamond ***12 Songs***

Neil Diamond is living proof that a comeback is never totally out of the question. As long ago as 1980, Diamond's recording career was in decline, even if he never lost the power to fill a tour schedule. Enter producer Rick Rubin with his trademark stripped down sound that worked so well for Johnny Cash in his later years. Rubin

allegedly pushed Neil Diamond to write, rewrite and hone a dozen taut and moody songs. Well, 13 or even 14 songs in the various special editions.

All tracks are outstanding,



but 'Oh Mary' – the opener – gives poignant a new resonance, while 'What's it Gonna Be' is stark and dark, with moody slide guitars and Fender Rhodes runs. However, it's not all gloom and doom - 'Delirious Love' is a typical Diamond barnstormer.

An important point to note for music server users: Sony snuck heavy 'rootkit' copy protection on early copies of the CD. This left Windows PCs open to hacking which has led to all manner of nastiness, but any post-2007 discs are free from either XCP or MediaMax protection.

Madeline Peyroux *Careless Love*

Madeline Peyroux sounds every bit the jazz/blues chanteuse, at once honey dripped and tinged with sorrow. Here, backed by a fine four-piece jazz combo, she mixes the traditional tunes her voice is made for ('No More' and 'I'll Look Around' were both Billie Holiday favourites, while 'Don't Cry Baby' and the title track were originally sung by Bessie Smith) with extremely successful reworkings

of 'Weary Blues' by Hank Williams, 'Dance With Me To The End Of Love' by Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan 'You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go'.

Like many of the albums listed here, *Careless Love* has been used extensively by advertising agencies, and for good reason. The sound is remarkable, with a close-miked simplicity that can only be found in the studio, but a live feel that reminds you of a smoky jazz club. Her new album – *Bare Bones* – is equally well-recorded but brings a more contemporary feel, and seems more like background music in the process.

John Mayer *Continuum*

John Mayer wins the love him/hate him award. It's not hard to



see why. He's popularised the blues for a new generation, but in the process turned it into a subset of soft rock pop and blue-eyed soul. He's also rich, successful, talented, good looking and got to play bouncy-bouncy games with Jennifer Aniston. This all combines to make him loved by American teenage girls and gossip magazines, and hated by guitarists.

Forget the back-story, though. *Continuum* is a fine cut and gives you a perfect understanding of the production values of a

modern album, without the grotesque compression used in some casualties of the 'Loudness wars'. Stand out tracks are the slow bluesy-soul ballad 'Gravity' (beloved by TV companies as fade-out music after something deep and melancholic happened), the Sting-like 'Belief', the Donald Fagan-esque 'Vultures', the soulful 'I'm Gonna Find Another You' (perhaps the only genuine blues on the album) and the bluesy-cutesy 'Slow Dancing in a Burning Room'. Soft and saccharine... Definitely, but could be the one album that puts *Couldn't Stand the Weather* back under the umbrella.

The Raconteurs *Consolers of the Lonely*

In many respects, the alternative music world effectively belonged to Jack White for the first half decade of the 21st Century. Trouble is, his best known work – from The White Stripes – is distinctly lo-fi. *Consolers of the Lonely* is the second album from Jack White's 'other project', The Raconteurs and gives hi-fi buffs something to shout about, too.

Consolers... is the four-piece's second album, and sets out its store as Rock Band Writ Loud. This is a time machine of a disc, cast right back to the early 1970s, dripping with Led Zep, Who and Badfinger references. The



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Company	Page No.				
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Absolute SoundsIFC & 23		Eclipse.....	IBC	Ikon Audio Consultants	91
Alium Audio	41	Cinenow	116	Infidelity	91
Analogue Seduction	89	Classic LPs	93	Emille	57
Angelsound Audio	87	Cloney Audio	81	Metropolis Music	37
Argento Audio	29	Coherent Systems.....	67	My Audio Design	79
Audio Emotion	51	Cool Gales Ltd	65	Nordost / Atacama 8 & 9	
Audio Images	91	Crystal Cable.....	2	Oranges and Lemons..	91
Audio Reference	73	Audio Physic	73	Origin Live	75
Audio Workshop Norwich		Definitive Audio.....	61	Oriton Ltd.....	87
.....	77	Diverse Vinyl	89	Pear Audio.....	83
Audiofreaks	4	Electrocompaniet ...	OBC	Press Blog	89
Audiolines	21	Enjoythemusic.com	75	Quadraspire Ltd	87
BADA	85	Focal JMI labs	47	Cabasse	7
Blade Audio	69	Heatherdale	83	Ringmat Developments	71
		High End Cables	55	SME Ltd.....	17 & 45
				Sonority Design	69
				Splash Audio Ltd.....	79
				Symmetry	25
				Synergy AV Ltd.....	89
				The Cartridge Man.....	83
				The Chord Company...35	
				The Foxes.....	114
				The Hound Dogs	81
				Vacuum State	77
				Vertex AQ Ltd	71
				Vitus Audio	11
				Wilson Benesch.....	31
				www.hifiportal.co.uk ...	91

▶ early 1970s feel extends to the recording, too, and the album at first received praise and criticism in equal measure for not adhering to the bright, compressed sound of today. The praise won out, though and the album received the Best-Engineered Album, Non-Classical Grammy at this year's awards.

Lambchop ***Is a Woman***

Given the band's Nashville base, the alt-country label is an obvious one for Lambchop. But life's not that simple. Take *Is a Woman* for example – the band's sixth album. With its lilting piano, sparse and atmospheric backing and Kurt Wagner's distinctive sing-speak vocals, this could be anything from easy listening to soul.



Chances are, you've already heard this album at a hi-fi show somewhere. 'The New Cobweb Summer' has already fallen into the audiophile show tune vocabulary (It's the one that begins with the line 'Last thought that you think today/Has already happened...'). It's especially popular in international and American audio demos, but the whole album is worth checking out, and for a lot more than simply audio quality. Ethereal and moving, *Is a Woman* is a sombre paean to loneliness and death. Perfect to cheer you through a hi-fi show.

James Horner ***Apocalypto OST***

Soundtracks have a long and illustrious history of use with hi-fi systems. For years, one of the most important albums you could own as an audiophile was the soundtrack to the original *Casino Royale*, and albums like *Paris, Texas* and *Dead Man Walking* have kept the OST alive in the hi-fi consciousness. *Apocalypto* brings this up to date.

James Horner's score for Mel Gibson's Mayan spectacular is as atmospheric as the movie. It features Qawwali singer Rahat Fateh Ali Khan's unsettling throat singing, drones, jungle drums, deep bass synthesisers and the sounds of the forest (possibly). This is perhaps the nearest you'll get to the *Sheffield Drum Record* for dynamic range in recent years, and a creepier test disc you will not find. Check out 'The Games and Escape' or 'Holcane Attack'... If your system will stand it.

Ray LaMontagne ***Till The Sun Turns Black***

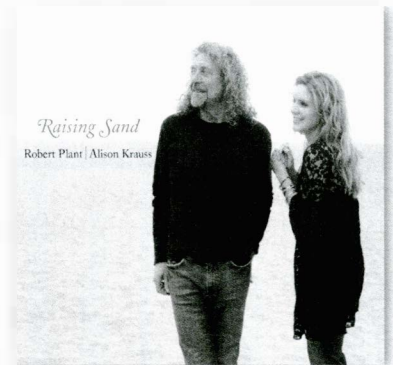
Simple, beautifully recorded music, and a voice tinged with melancholy, LaMontagne's alt-country *Trouble* was followed up by second album that made a break for the border. Ray LaMontagne's musical style refuses to settle down from album to album, but *Till The Sun Turns Black* twists and turns from track to track, covering ground from a brass-band influenced waltz ('Gone Away From Me') to R&B ('You Can Bring Me Flowers', 'Three More Days') and 'Be Here Now', which could be a lost Nick Drake track.

Anything produced by Ethan Johns is off to a good start (Ryan Adams, Rufus Wainright, the Kings of Leon and Emmylou Harris have all used Ethan's services), but this

eleven track album from 2006 looks set to be a grower... And a stayer.

Robert Plant & Alison Krauss ***Raising Sand***

Producer T-Bone Burnett makes albums with a distinctive style; it's the sound of late-model Elvis Costello, the final years of Roy Orbison and Gillian *Time* (*The*



Revelator) Welsh. The sound is big, soft and inviting... And dripping with tremolo'd guitars. Sometimes this can all get out of hand, sounding like *Elvis at Sun* by numbers. When it works well, though, it works wonders... And it works wonders with *Raising Sand*. Of course, with hugely accomplished performers like Plant and Krauss as lead lungs, it would be hard to fail.

The outstanding track here is 'Sister Rosetta Goes Before Us', a slow rumba that's almost like Kurt Weill meets Dr John, but it's hard to call any one track 'outstanding'... All thirteen are truly demonstration quality. ▶+

Disagree? Think we should have dumped John Mayer for Maroon 5? Should we swap Apocalypto for Team America World Police? Let us know your 21st Century test discs by sending your recommendations to editor@hifiplus.com. We'll show off the ten most popular picks in the next issue.

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Billie Holiday

Music For Torchin'g

Clef/Speakers Corner 

Music For Torchin'g was Holiday's first 12-inch Clef release, and it joins *Lady Sings The Blues* and *Recital By Billie Holiday* in the Speakers Corner quest to revive the Verve/Clef Holiday catalog. She is backed on this release by piano extraordinaire Jimmy Rowles, arranger alto sax player Benny Carter, Harry Edison, John Simmons and Larry Bunker, a welcome relief after the second rate sidemen she endured while recording for Decca.

Like most of her Norman Granz sessions, she sings standards – many tunes we have come to identify as songs she owns. Recorded during two sessions in August of 1955, the songs are among the best sounding records of the Norman Granz era. Billie's voice is worn and has lost its lightness from the early Columbia sessions, and the pace is very deliberate. But except for some of the latest recordings after she returned to Columbia, everything Billie Holiday recorded should be in your collection. These sessions are available in many packages on CD, but if you still play vinyl the best way to hear these songs is on black disc. Speakers Corner has done a good job of coming close to the sound of the original, and the tapes appear to be in good shape for their age. **DD**



Frank Sinatra

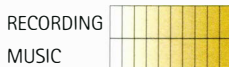
Only The Lonely

Capitol/Mobile Fidelity 

Many music lovers consider this their favorite Frank Sinatra album. These 1958 recordings feature arrangements by Nelson Riddle. Sinatra's Capitol recordings are the pinnacle of his recording magic, and *Only The Lonely* sits firmly on top of that heap, except for those days you hanker for something with a bit more cheer, and *Come Fly With Me* fills the bill.

The emotional mood of this record is evident from the song titles, which contain the words lonely, lonesome, weep, blues and tears. Beyond the melancholy mood is Frank at his supreme best not only in being as hip or cool as any celebrity has ever been with the exception of Miles Davis. Mono pressings of this masterpiece on the Capital label were always an essential part of any record collection. Mobile Fidelity has now released both a gold CD and an LP version of the mono tapes.

If you have the original Mobile Fidelity LP from the silver box of decades ago, don't fool yourself into thinking you have the same thing. This is a far superior mastering. And yes, the LP is better than the CD. Both this and the *Nice 'N Easy* Mobile Fidelity Sinatra issues are desert island fare—not to be missed on any account. **DD**



Sonny Clark

Leapin' And Lopin'

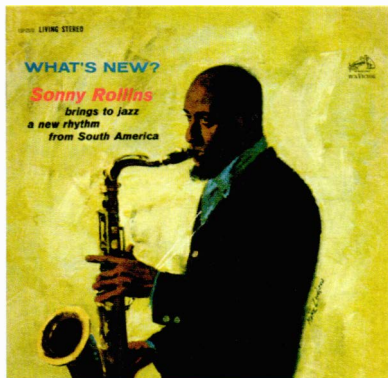
Blue Note/Music Matters 84091 

Pianist Sonny Clark only lived to the age of 31 and did not receive the acclaim he deserved during his lifetime. Today, however, he maintains almost a cult following.

Each of Clark's recordings is a case study of harmonic and rhythmic invention and this, his final recording, is no exception. His group consists of Tommy Turrentine, Charlie Rouse, Butch Warren and Billy Higgins, with Ike Quebec joining for the one ballad on the LP. Clark contributes three compositions. Music Matters' Ron Rambach and Joe Harley clearly love Clark's output and have scheduled three Clark titles among their 64 projected releases. His best-known title, *Cool Struttin'*, has recently been released and Sonny's Crib, a harder bop LP with John Coltrane, is in the second wave of Music Matters releases. *Leapin'* is an above average sounding Blue Note, if not in the first tier then not too far down in the rankings.

The consistently excellent mastering job by Hoffman and Gray shows once again that there is more on the Blue Note tapes than anyone suspected. So if you are a Sonny Clark fan, there really is no other way to listen to this music. If you are not, then you're missing out on one of the best kept secrets of recorded jazz history. **DD**





Sonny Rollins

What's New?

Pure Pleasure/RCA:LSP-2572 

While some jazz fans hold his Prestige and Blue Note titles in higher esteem, a case can be made that the six RCA recordings made between 1962 and 1964 compare favorably to anything recorded by Sonny Rollins. They cover a lot of ground – from the avant-garde brilliance of *Our Man In Jazz*, to the more retrospective pairing with Coleman Hawkins on *Sonny Meets Hawk!*


Here, Rollins presents his take on Bossa Nova, teaming with Jim Hall on guitar, Bob Cranshaw on bass Ben Riley on drums, Candido Camero on congas and a percussion team. This is not the bossa nova beat known to the American public from listening to Stan Getz records – Sonny's uncompromising approach of this period adds flame where others rely on embers. Super engineer Ray Hall recorded the session in the legendary RCA Studio B. Original pressings of the RCA Rollins LPs are among the best sounding jazz recordings of the last century. Pure Pleasure took the tapes to Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray of AcousTech Mastering and they have worked more than their usual magic on this master tape. It puts the original pressing to shame. This is on my short list of favorite reissues for 2009. **DD**



Franz Schubert

Forellen Quintet ('The Trout'), Variations on 'Trockne Blumen', 'Notturmo'.

Martin Helmchen (piano), Christian Tetzlaff (violin), Antoine Tamestit (viola), Marie-Elizabeth Hecker (cello), Alois Posch (double bass), Aldo Baerten, (flute)

PentaTone Classics PTC 5186 334 Stereo and Multi-channel Hybrid SACD. 

While I am familiar with Martin Helmchen and his previous two fine recordings for PentaTone (solo works by Mozart and Schubert) I find I am quite captivated by this quintet of players. There is very lively playing here and as is usual with PentaTone releases, the sound is just excellent. This makes for a very entertaining disc and one I can heartily recommend.

Composed when Schubert was only 22 years old (1819, but not published until 1829, a year after his death), the quintet is known as 'The Trout' because the fourth movement is a set of variations on his earlier Lied 'Die Forelle' (The Trout). I was very pleased at the playing between Helmchen and Baerten. Baerten plays a wooden flute by A. Braun, and it's very noticeable. Any hint of a metallic sound is omitted and this is very satisfying to say the least. I've enjoyed repeat playing of this disc over and over for many days and I heartily recommend these performances. **RSF**


Supplied by: www.pentatonemusic.com



Anton Dvorak

From the New World, Symphony No.9 in E minor, Op. 95

Vienna Philharmonic conducted by Istvan Kertesz

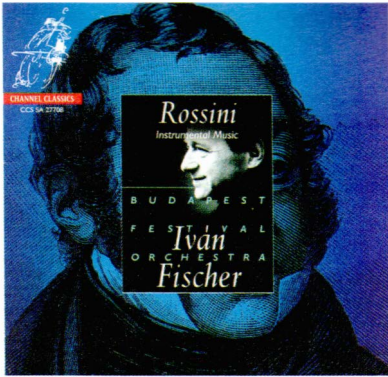
Esoteric: ESSD 90015 Stereo, Hybrid SACD 

Released in 1961 by Decca, this recording was engineered by James Brown, produced by Ray Minshull and recorded at the Sofiensaal, Vienna between March 22nd and 24th, 1961. This was also the debut recording on Decca for Kertesz.

Esoteric has gone to the master tapes to recreate a DSD layer that is simply stunning, although the CD layer – which I believe is an XRCD reissue – is excellent too. While there is strong competition from almost every major conductor today, this is definitely a performance you should visit. Kertesz has insight that allows this recording to stand with the likes of Szell, Reiner, Fricsay, Bernstein, Karajan and Ormany. He re-recorded this in his complete Dvorak cycle with the LSO (for Decca) seven years later and, while that performance has its attributes, I think this Decca Debut is the one to own. I have high marks to Esoteric for what they have done in giving new life to this masterpiece and I am delighted to have this demonstration quality sound recording in my collection. **RSF**

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Gioacchino Rossini
Instrumental Music
Budapest Festival Orchestra, conducted
by Ivan Fischer.

Channel Classics CCS SA27708 Stereo and Multi-Channel Hybrid SACD. 

This is an absolutely delightful release by Channel Classics. Rossini is an excellent composer whose music has not been as widely recorded throughout the catalogues as it should. His string sonatas have always been among my favourite works.


This disc opens with the 'Silken Ladder overture' and continues with a piccolo serenade moving next to the String Sonata in G. Next up is a delightful 'Grande fanfare por Rossini' which then moves into a 'Variations for Solo Clarinet, Solo String Quartet and Orchestra'. I'd not heard either of these compositions before and am very pleased to now have them in my collection.

This is followed by the 'Variations for wind Quartet', which is a lovely work with the disc closing with one of my favorite Rossini overtures, Semiramade, from the opera of the same name. Perhaps this overture is not as well known as say, William Tell, but it is a very charming and captivating overture none the less. This disc has been well played at *chez* Foster and I think you're really going to enjoy it. This disc contains demonstration quality sound. Most heartily recommended. **RSF**

Supplied by: www.channelclassics.com



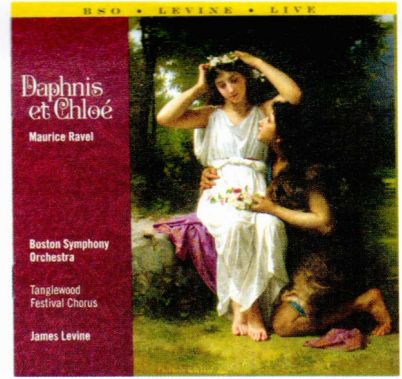
Richard Strauss
Don Juan, Op. 20; Eine Alpensinfonie,
Op. 64.
Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra
conducted by Mariss Jansons.

RCO LIVE, RCO-08006. Stereo and Multi-Channel Hybrid SACD. 


One of Strauss' earliest compositions, Don Juan is a staple for every large orchestra today. The work is based on the poem by Nikolaus Lenau, from which much of the musical work's passion is drawn. There are many performances in the catalogue today, but while I think the Jansons' recording is quite good, for me the star of the show on this disc is the Alpine Symphony. I'm only aware of a handful of recent recordings of this symphony and I must give the nod to Jansons and the RCO.

For those unfamiliar with this work, it is a symphonic poem depicting a full-day excursion in the Bavarian Alps. Taking the listener on an epic journey, beginning at night, through sunrise and finishing at sunset evokes the varying moods of the mountains, not the least of which are the terrifying dangers they represent. This is a grand work and Jansons does an excellent job with his Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. While I have minor reservations with Don Juan, they are swept away by an electrifying Alpine Symphony. Strongly recommended. **RSF**

Supplied by: www.concertgebouworkest.nl



Maurice Ravel
Daphnis et Chloé
Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted
by James Levine; Tanglewood Festival
Chorus conducted by John Oliver.

BSO Classics 0801, Stereo and Multi-channel Hybrid SACD. 

Ravel began work on the score in 1909 after a commission from Sergei Diaghilev. Daphnis et Chloé premiered at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris by his Ballets Russes on June 8, 1912 with the orchestra conducted by Pierre Monteux. It has received numerous very fine interpretations by many orchestras and conductors, the Boston Symphony being no exception. This performance by Levine offers outstanding insight, grace and majesty with demonstration quality sound. The control, authority, insight and sheer energy committed to this performance is matched by nothing I've heard in recent memory.

The music, some of the composer's most passionate, is widely regarded as some of Ravel's best, with extraordinarily lush harmonies typical of the impressionist movement in music at the time. I am exceptionally fond of the music of Maurice Ravel and this is quite simply perhaps his stunning achievement. The BSO has a long history playing the music of Ravel, and I believe they have outdone themselves with the live performance on this disc. **RSF**

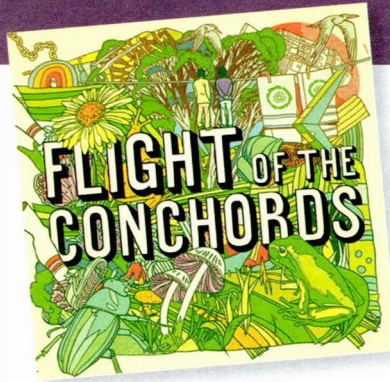
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EVERY HOME SHOULD HAVE ONE IN PRAISE OF THE UNDER-RATED, UNDER-APPRECIATED OR JUST PLAIN DISCARDED MUSICAL MASTERPIECE

by Alan Sircom



Most times, our walk through the by-ways of the music biz turns up old classics. Not this time. 2008's eponymous *Flight of the Conchords* is the album of the BBC radio show of the HBO TV series that follows two hapless Kiwi musicians trying to make it big in New York, 'aided' by their manager Murray (Rhys Darby).

The Conchords (Jermaine Clement and Bret McKenzie) proudly proclaim themselves as "Formerly New Zealand's fourth most popular guitar-based digi-bongo accapella-rap-funk-comedy folk duo". They formed in 1998 and the inevitable international overnight success and megastardom among hipster types was only nine short years away.

Comedy albums have a love/hate relationship with many, and comedy album spin-offs from TV shows especially have at best a mixed reputation. For every Derek & Clive there's a 'Weird Al' Yankovic. *Flight of the Conchords* is different. Clement and McKenzie are genuinely talented musicians who write good musical pastiches with wry, entertaining lyrics. 'Inner City Pressure' – their take on The Pet Shop Boys – is a perfect example of this; anyone who can pen lyrics like "Counting coins on the counter of the 7-11/From a quarter past six to a quarter to seven/ The manager, Bevan, starts to abuse me/Hey man, I just want some muesli" is clearly on to something good. Especially as they carry off a remarkably close deadpan Neil Tennant impression as well.

The duo take on rap ('Hiphopotamus Vs. Rhymenoceros', perhaps the only folk/gangsta rap crossover, and 'Mutha'uckers' a delicious take on radio-edits), Marvin Gaye ('Think About It'), cheesy soul ('Ladies Of The World'), psychedelia ('The Prince of Parties', in fairness not the best track on the album), electro-disco ('Robots', notable for having a binary solo, Jermaine's surprisingly accurate robotic voice and the line "come on sucker, lick my battery"),

ragga ('Boom') and of course 'Bowie', a beautifully-crafted three minute long jaunt through David Bowie's ever-changing musical style, from 'Space Oddity' to 'Let's Dance', complete with good impersonations of his distinctive singing style.

Because the tracks have a simplicity to them – often just the two and guitars – they have a dry and very clean dynamic. Not exactly demonstration quality, but hardly the sort of thing an audiophile would reject on sound quality grounds. Perhaps the best track from a recording standard is the Prince skit 'The Most Beautiful Girl (In The Room)', followed closely by the laugh-out-loud funny Isaac Hayes/Barry White-esque 'Business Time'.

There are some tracks missing from their TV show... perhaps most notably their take on kids TV; 'Albi the Racist Dragon' (a lot funnier than it might first sound) and with a second series having just aired on HBO in the States, there are a lot of tracks still to make it to disc. Perhaps next year... ➤

Flight of the Conchords

All songs written and performed by Jermaine Clement and Bret McKenzie
Released April 21, 2008
(Sub Pop records)
Produced by Mickey Petralia

Track Listing

Foux Du Fafa - 2:47
Inner City Pressure - 3:27
Hiphopotamus vs. The Rhymenoceros - 2:09

Think About It - 3:15
Ladies of the World - 3:57
Mutha'uckas - 2:27
Prince of Parties - 1:49
Leggy Blonde - 2:42
Robots - 3:43
Boom - 2:18
A Kiss Is Not a Contract - 1:55
The Most Beautiful Girl (In the Room) - 4:02
Business Time - 4:05
Bowie - 3:16
Au Revoir - 0:22

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