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2010

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75

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"Wonderfully articulate speakers"

Sonus Faber Liuto Monitor – BBC Music (September 2009)

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

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

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

Sonus Faber Toy – BBC Music, Best Loudspeaker of 2008

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

And yet, thanks to Sonus Faber's latest creations, such luxury costs less than you might think. The new Liuto loudspeaker collection reflects the smooth contours and classic joinery of the lute, delivering a sprightly musicality, as sensitive, rich and graceful to listen to as it is to look at. The lute shape is not just visually pleasing; its curves serve to stiffen the cabinet and dampen unwanted resonance, whilst the leather cladding stretched across the front baffle enhances dispersion. The result is a soaring, soulful sound.

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

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



The Liuto collection



The Toy collection

absolute sounds ltd

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It's our 75 issue and it's our Awards issue. Any excuse for a party! The audio world is very different from how it was in 1999 and we decided to track the changes of the first decade of the 21st Century, and a little bit of crystal ball gazing to guess what the next few years might bring for music lovers.

Looking back at the best of a decade ago and comparing it to the best of today is an interesting exercise; with products like the Devialet D-Premier, the Squeezebox Touch and the Linn DS-I, it shows just how far forward we have come. On the other hand, in some respects the best of 1999 is still worthy of respect. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

In some respects, that makes for the best of both worlds. No-one would suggest using a PC or Mac from a decade or more ago, but the Densen Beat amplifier – reviewed in the very first issue of *Hi-Fi+* is still considered one of the best integrated amplifiers you can buy 11 years later. But perhaps the biggest change over the last 11 years is just how inexpensive good quality sound has become. Just look at the excellent Peachtree iDecco in the latest issue, which can give high-end sound without the high-end prices. It's one of many products that at last exploits the benefits of the next generation of music replay.

In this, the start of the second decade of the 21st Century, we are seeing major change in the way people obtain and use music. In the last few years, we have begun to consider a time when people loan – rather than own – their music collection. This significant change in the way people listen to music is having an effect on the way people listen to music... and the equipment they use to play it on.

The great thing about audio is its adaptability. The products are out there to support an album from the early 1950s,

or early next week. Whether on a physical disc or downloaded data, modern audio has a pathway for listeners to still enjoy their music. And that looks set to continue for another 75 issues at least!

Errata: Last issue, we incorrectly listed the price of the Monster Turbine Pro Copper earphones. The SRP is £279.95 with ControlTalk (£249.95 as tested) and the street price is currently around £200. Our apologies for any confusion caused.

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com



Crystal Cable

Live on stage;



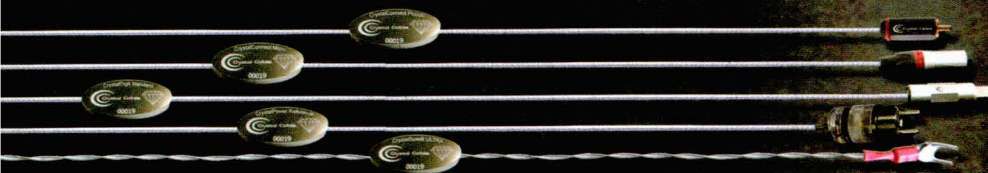
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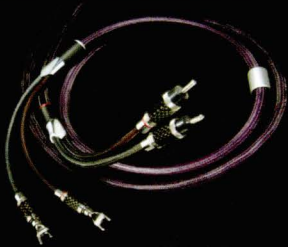
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— Chris Thomas HiFi+March 2010

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— Chris Thomas HiFi+March 2010



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Back to Basics VI – power products

music matters

by Alan Sircom

OF ALL THE COMPONENTS YOU CAN ADD TO AN AUDIO SYSTEM, few come with as much baggage as those products you place between the power and the electronics. Power cords, conditioners, RFI-busters, magnetic field stabilisers... they all court controversy. Beyond anything else tested in this *Back to Basics* project, power products are often dismissed out of hand, usually by people who feel they have no need to test them first. Worse still, those who dare admit on an audio forum that such products make a difference in their system are laying themselves open to ridicule and opprobrium. On the other hand, those who take power products seriously often consider them the foundation stone in turning a good system into a great one.

There are three basic things a power product can do: improve the power; reduce the influence of potential pollutants from the local environment and reduce the influence of a power cable being there in the first place. The first – mains conditioners and regenerators – are not the subject of this evaluation, because their effects can be considered dependent on the power coming into the system, rather than their influence on the system itself.

Radio frequency interference, noisy power supplies, mobile phone chargers and data being sent across mains lines increasingly define our local mains environment. Modern products are designed to be free from such interference, but the sheer number of potential pollutants in the average modern house represents something of an onslaught. The best way to limit the ingress of such pollutants is to switch them all off... but that's not a practical solution for many listeners, and even if you do disengage all local pollutants, there's always the mobile phone mast.

As described in a previous *Back to Basics* column, the difficulty with some of these issues is they don't necessarily resolve in a short AB or ABX test. Instead, we'd recommend trying long-term listening to determine whether there are any changes and – if there are – how those changes manifest over time, how much you listen to music with such devices in place and how such changes shape or alter your musical tastes over the course of a few weeks.

In some respects however, how much of a problem such poor power poses to a system really seems to depend on how lazy you are. I am remarkably bad at switching off wireless access points and phone chargers. When I do turn everything off, things sound less grainy, especially in the upper mids and lower treble. Adding a cable designed to minimise the effects of such interference, they sound less grainy. This

effectively describes the perfect test for such products. Put every potentially EM/RF producing product you have in the house into the equation, listen to the system for a couple of hours. Pull them out and listen again; if you hear a difference, then either you or your system are likely to be sensitive to such changes and filters around the system or more shielded cables in place of the standard ones.

The next potential problem is mechanical interactions between cable, plugs and sockets and even within the plugs and sockets themselves. The latter is difficult to test unless you can compare a power cord with and without specially designed connectors (such as those from Naim's Powerline) but you can get some of the way there by adding yet more Jenga blocks (or even Lego bricks) under every mains cable. Spend some time with these blocks in place then remove them and listen to the sound. If the bass seems a more indistinct and not so clean sounding without the blocks in place, then welcome to the world of mains cable microphony.

If your system has passed muster and none of these tests made any significant change to the sound, there's one more thing to try before we leave the world of power products. Get some cable ties – or the sort of paper-wrapped wire ties used to seal off freezer bags – and tie interconnect, speaker cable and power cord together in one, for a couple of feet. Spend a couple of weeks playing the system this way, then undo the ties, separating power, signal and speaker cables out as much as possible. Try to make sure that no two kinds of cable run parallel to one another and listen again.

Hopefully, even the most cable-sceptic person will discover that they should always 'dress' those cables, in order to make their system sound better. If nothing else, your system will look slightly better, because a rat's nest of wire looks horrible! +

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

incoming

STRAIGHT TO THE POINT.

The new look *Hi-Fi+* is much better and is the first issue I have bought since Issue 66. I did receive issue 70 free at the Heathrow Hi-Fi show earlier this year & I confess I flicked through a few in between at newsagents and the simple reason I did not buy them is I thought the magazine had lost the plot and got boring. (Sorry just being honest!) Prior to that I bought all of them from issue 15 to 65.

I am sure many readers will give you different opinions but the things that bore me in Hi-Fi mags the most is people going on about future formats (Blu spec/ Super bit/Gold knob five star dts/ Can't buy in the shops anyway audio yawn), technologies within audio equipment (who care's if my tweeter is metal/paper/ ribbon/diamond etc. Does it sound any good is all that matters.) an obsession with specifications (Specifications for me are only important for making sure your existing equipment is compatible and you don't blow yourself or the equipment up when connecting!) and Computer Audio.

Sure Computer Audio, accessing from the net, deleted rare music, sound quality potential etc is a good thing but it almost feels the collective Hi-Fi media is saying to the average customer..."Erm you know those 300 CD's you have bought over the last 25 years. Well you wasted your money Sunshine! Vinyl sounds better anyway nah ne nah nah". I am sure there are many people like me who have invested a lot of time in the CD format and like Vinyl in 1983 (When CD arrived) there is far more potential in this format.

From a reader/customer's point of view what I require from a magazine is "Oh I am on the lookout for a new Turntable/Arm/Cartridge/Phono Stage/CD Player/ Tuner/Amps/Speaker/Cable/Table/Mains. Do I like the look of it. Looks are important. It's not on to be spending £500 plus on a bit of equipment and it looks like a transformer of a 1970's calculator! Can I afford it? Where can I audition or hear it?

I would like you to feature any reader systems (I know your rival mag *Hi-Fi News* does this but I noticed they seemed concerned with people that change their equipment too many times, mega expensive & must have A/V setup from within) Reason being is I wholeheartedly respect any ordinary person (not trade/ reviewer/hi-fi shop) who has paid full price for their

purchases. It's also nice to see how many readers have compiled their systems to reach their hi-fi goal. I am of the belief that people buy hi-fi in the first place is because they wanted to hear their music sound better and discover new music along the way. Only a total mug spends 30k on a system and finds extreme shortcomings with their old music and now has to listen to esoteric audiophile guff in order for their system to sparkle!! Yes, it's true the Rolling Stones' 'Get of My Cloud' has abysmal sound quality, but it does not stop it from being a great record! Anyway thanks for taking the time to read this letter and always look forward to hearing equipment you rave about at the next nearest Hi-Fi show.

Nass Khan, via email

It does sometimes look like we are obsessed with the next new thing, but we try not to do this at the expense of what it purports to replace. Computer audio is a prime example of this. I don't think anyone believes computer audio should replace your existing CD collection, but that you end up storing your CD collection in one easy to access place.

We've been exploring the concept of running readers systems, but it's very difficult to get the balance right, it must be said. Our surveys have thus far demonstrated very little interest in readers systems unless they are systems of great interest – such as the uber high-end types you find so vexatious. But as ever, we're open to suggestions – Ed.

BURN THE HERETIC!

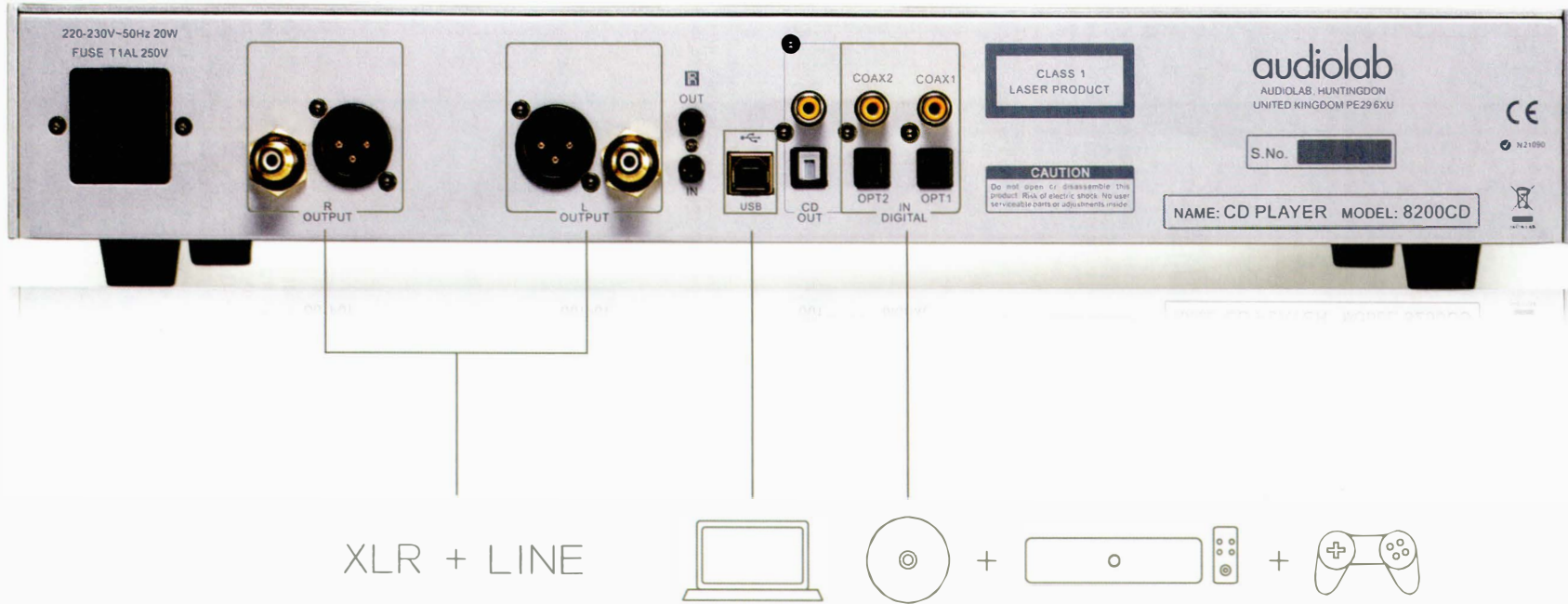
I read with interest your comments in issue 72 regarding the motives behind the actions of the 'serial box swapper'. ▶

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- Optical cables
- S video
- Component cables



On demonstration

Raidho Acoustics



C2

The Raidho Loudspeakers employ the very finest components, including Ceramic drivers which are hand built in house. The Raidho ribbon tweeter is unique and was the very starting point of the company. The new Raidho speakers utilize the very finest filters and crossover components in a topology unique to Raidho.



How many evolutionary steps does it take to make a revolution? The Raidho magnet system consists of 2 rows on neodymium magnets placed in a push pull configuration. Loudspeaker technology has moved very little in the past 50 years, with small improvement in real terms, taking a long time to realize. But now a systematic reappraisal of fundamental principals has changed the rules. Designer Michael Boerresen has created a new standard when it comes to delivering the life and drama captured in a recording.

Evolutionary ? Yes
Revolutionary ? Absolutely

The C2 is an agile conjuror of a speaker, able to keep all the balls in the air at the same time. It is often an education to live with and I can do nothing but thoroughly recommend it.. Chris Thomas Hi-fi Plus issue 73



C1



Product of the year 2008

Please visit the High End Cable website for call for more information. C1.0 was Hi-fi plus Product of the year 2008. **We offer fabulous trade in deals, up to 40% when we take in your old speakers in part exchange. So your old speakers could be worth more than you think. Call Dave today on 01775**

audience



Overall, very impressive. Robert Townsend -- Stereophile Jan 08

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If your budget can not stretch to the Au24e then the Maestro might fit the bill at £259.00 for the interconnects and £670.00 for a 3m pair of speaker cables.

Please visit the website for the full range of Audience Hi-fi products including their excellent power conditioners and power cords.



- ▶ While I appreciate some of your comments in context, I generally disagree and, as a self-confessed 'box swapper', felt compelled to put the argument from the other point of view.

Firstly, hi-fi is my hobby, I enjoy it, I enjoy music too, but my passion extends to the huge plethora of different equipment and philosophies that keep our industry so varied and diverse – this also drives the need for 'self education'. Reading reviews is wonderful, listening to dealers and friends systems also enlightening, but how does the hi-fi enthusiast come to understand the concepts of imaging, bass texture, presence, impact, dynamics, detail, warmth or any of the other hundreds of terms used to describe kit? This cannot be done during a demo, even an extended one – it needs to be learned over time. As reviewers, you are exposed to a huge variety of kit, and of course it is your job to be able to define and describe the differences between them for the benefit of the potential purchaser – but how does the purchaser know what they want? Without having had extensive experience, it becomes an element of pot-luck picking something, or even creating a demo shortlist for that matter, of equipment that 'sounds' like it might suit ones tastes.

My second point is perhaps more prudent to the wider audience, assuming your 'self education' is complete and you know what sound you are after, how do you choose the right kit? As with most, I have had many, many hours over the years in dealer's demo rooms, and up to a point this has been successful. However, moving on from entry level systems one can very rapidly reach the point of diminishing returns, and certainly by the time we are approaching high end systems, so many factors come into play that traditional demonstrations cease to be a valid or appropriate way of choosing audio equipment, one has to live with equipment for an extended period in ones' own environment. We try so many 'tweaks' just to make that nth difference, 'initial impressions' in a demo just won't cut it as by and large everything is good. Yes, there are dealers out there that will provide home demos (some at a cost of course), but the stock list is usually short and the process would be both prohibitively expensive and time consuming to get right.

To address both of the above points I have spent the last 18 months owning used speakers, understanding what they do well, how they work in my room and narrowing down exactly what it is I am after. I have owned Tannoy Definitions, Tannoy Glenairs, Proac Studios, Ushers, Anthony Gallo References, Impulse horns, Acoustic Zens and have finally settled on some Zingali 15" Home Monitor horns.

I have lost a few quid, but these were all used, so as you say very little compared to the alternatives. I feel my journey is over and I now know what I want out of future upgrades – this will make buying 'new' a much quicker and more educated process.

Kind regards, on behalf of the box swapper.

Stephen Rutherford-Bate, via email

Yours was not the only email about the Heretic's box swapping comments. Not many were happy with him, so he's currently taking a break and being waterboarded by our team of expert torturers. He may return in the future, but he'll probably be a broken man – Ed.

NO MORE COMPUTER AUDIO!

The fact that CD sales are falling and LP sales are rising prove to me that analogue rules. So stop talking up lo-fi MP3 sounds and have the guts to make the magazine vinyl only!

Scott Blake, via email

There's a common misconception that all computer audio is MP3 audio. The reality is computer audio can be anything from MP3 to high-resolution 24/96 tracks that can sound like the studio itself. But computer audio just means more to play with, alongside LP, CD and SACD spinners – Ed.

RIGHT TO REPLY?

Quis custodes custodiet? Who will supervise the guards? This is about all I learned from High School Latin so I became a dealer. These days it isn't very profitable being a Hi-Fi Dealer, but what fun it is to be allowed to review the reviewers!! At the risk of seeming polite or sycophantic, neither quality I have been endowed with by nature, I can only thank Alan Sircom for what I know has been an extended audition of these (JPS) cables. Now we get a distilled and insightful piece of writing. It's humorous too! I for one can't be bothered reading six pages of navel-gazing analysis. Thankfully, here we get the conclusion in a nutshell which underscores two of the axioms of musical reproduction: neutrality isn't boring; and success in system building takes patience. Thanks for the "right to reply."

**Jack Lawson
The Music Room**

We are considering creating a section that allows manufacturers and dealers the right to reply to our reviews in future. We have tried this before and have been met with people withdrawing their products if they review runs, but hopefully sanity will prevail. Should we run the manufacturer replies, or will it just end in sycophancy? The choice – as ever – is yours – Ed. +



the world according to plus

by Alan Sircom

Hi-Fi+ is 75 issues old. That's about 11 in human years. It's time to take stock. Not only of the highlights of the last 75 issues, but also how the audio world has changed and changed significantly.

the world according to plus

The first issue of *Hi-Fi+* hit the streets in April 1999. The dot-com bubble was still a year away from bursting. 'Cool Britannia' still hadn't thawed out. The Euro was just starting and the Checker Cab was just ending. Everyone was wondering if the sky was going to fall in when the Millennium bug struck, and Bill Gates earned his first \$100billion. In music, this was the year of Britney Spears, Shania Twain and Ricky Martin, but was also the year of Sigur Rós and Bonny 'Prince' Billy. It was the year Marilyn Manson, Rammstein and KMFDM were caught up in a moral panic following the Columbine High School massacre. Perhaps more importantly for today's music market, 1999 was the year *Californication* by the Red Hot Chili Peppers was released, igniting debate about a Loudness War of 'hot' masters and digital clipping.

From a music technology standing, two elements coincided that went almost unnoticed in the high-end audio world. The Diamond Rio PMP-300 portable MP3 player was not the first of its kind and was actually launched in late 1998. However, the Recording Industry Association of America attempted to prevent sales of the player claiming it violated the Audio Home Recording Act. This restraining order failed, and the Rio proved the surprise hit product of the Christmas 1998/99 season – selling more than 200,000 players – and set a trend for small solid-state portable players that got their music from a computer source.

Meanwhile, in mid-1999, a 19-year old undergraduate called Shawn Fanning released a peer-to-peer music filesharing program called Napster. Napster too fell victim to law suits from the music business, this time at first from litigation on behalf of Metallica and Dr Dre and eventually (once again) the RIAA. By mid-2001, the original Napster was shut down.

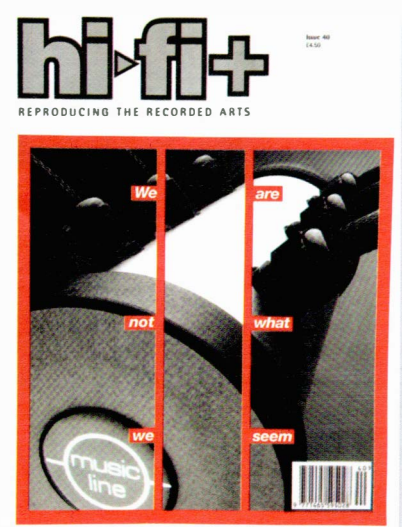
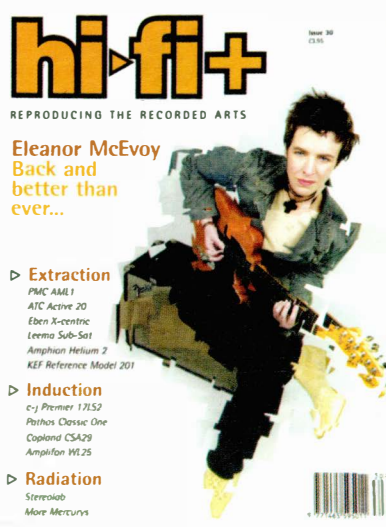
Why were these two events proved so significant? Both demonstrated that a subset of young music lovers were

content to use their computer – rather than a CD player – as their music source, and that a key player in this transition away from disc-based music entertainment was the portable player. Of course, at the time, such changes went almost wholly unnoticed by the music biz and audio enthusiasts alike, because 2000 was one of the best ever years for CD music sales.

With such change going on at the computer end of the market – at that time, still a long way from becoming a viable audiophile source – you could be forgiven for assuming the hi-fi industry was something of a sleepy backwater. However, 1999 was also the year that Sony launched its first SCD-1 flagship SACD player. In addition, products like the original TacT Millennium digital amplifier and the 47 Labs Gaincard were challenging the established thinking of how to make an amplifier. Manufacturers were already exploring switch-mode power supplies and the development of the IcePower Class D amp circuit was in full swing.

In our second issue, we began to chart another side to the changes to the amplifier scene, with products like DNM, Final and Pass Labs presenting a high-quality, low-power alternative to the muscle amps that dominated the high-end scene for the previous 15 years. From the outset, *Hi-Fi+* was created with the goal of not being afraid of challenging the status quo – no other magazine would consider putting purple interconnect cables on the front cover of its very first issue. OK, in hindsight, restaurant reviews were possibly a step too far for a magazine about audio electronics, but it set the tone for exploring what is potentially the best of everything that has been the *leitmotif* for *Hi-Fi+* ever since.

The end of the 1990s and the start of the 21st Century saw rapid change in the portable market. Both MiniDisc and Compact Cassette were in steep decline; pre-recorded MiniDisc – at best a rare find in record shops – disappeared ▶



the world according to plus

▶ altogether at the end of the 1990s and the hardware all but followed soon after (the recorders and discs still have a small following among field recording enthusiasts). Meanwhile, having failed to find a replacement in Digital Compact Cassette (which was discontinued in 1996), analogue cassettes faced competition from jog-proof CDs, MP3 portables and CD autochanges in cars. Compact cassette still exists to this day, but sales are very low.

Undoubtedly the biggest change to audio arrived on October 23, 2001. The Apple iPod initially sold in 'small' numbers; roughly a million of the initial 5GB product that could put "1,000 tracks in your pocket" were sold. It took almost more than years before the iPod really took off, when sales began to rise from a couple of million iPods a year to more than 20 million players per year, and beyond. Pundits and reviewers alike all commented on the significance of the iPod at the outset, but its first few years meant that many audio (and – in fairness – music) companies failed to see the significance of the product until it was too late. At about the same time, *Hi-Fi+* went through a significant redesign and retained its format that survived until the middle of last year.

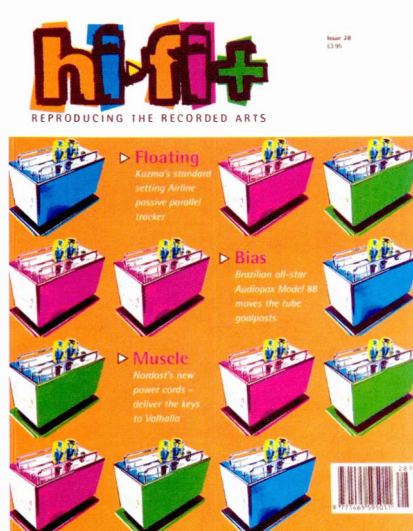
One of the great missed opportunities in audio – not simply high-end audio – was the failure to thrive of multichannel audio. DVD-Audio and SACD failed to set the audiophile world alight – although classical SACD has proved to be more successful than many anticipated – and multichannel audio became intrinsically linked with home cinema. It's perhaps no surprise that although there is technically a specification set aside for Blu-ray audio, thus far dedicated Profile 3.0 Blu-ray discs are virtually unheard of. Part of the reason for multichannel audio's failure came down to inertia from audiophiles wishing to stay with stereo and the rise of the iPod pushing music into earbuds through much of the middle of the last decade.

Essentially, in a little more than six years since the iPod began to dominate the musical map, sales of CDs have seen annual double-digit percentage falls and the music industry saw sale more than halve across the decade. Revenue for both music and audio companies took a major hit and it took several years for some audio companies to find a way to reach the 'lost generation' of audiophiles. Some companies have yet to find that way to reach audiophiles.

There is hope for the 'lost generation' though. A counter-culture has emerged in the young. Fed up with modern music techniques and rejecting the lack of physical ownership of their albums, an increasing number of teenagers are buying turntables and discovering the joys of vinyl. Teenagers usually don't buy high-end audio, but they grow up into high-end audio buyers and they are discovering the joys of turntables and even tubes once again.

The last decade has seen a significant resurgence in interest in turntables for those past their teenage years, too. Far from fading out gracefully, it now seems that vinyl is going to outlive its CD replacement. Sales of new LPs are increasing, but with just a million albums sold in the UK per year, this still represents a tiny subset of the music business. Similarly, sales of new turntables are rising (this year saw sales of turntables outstrip CD players for the first time in more than 20 years), but once more the number of new products is still very low. Vinyl has a significant second-hand following, and there is a counter-culture market of companies making products, plinths and parts for classic Goldring and Lenco products.

New turntable sales are still important in audio circles and *Hi-Fi+* has continued to cover the latest and greatest vinyl products right from the very first issue. We've, ahem, tracked the resurgence of the 12" tonearm and – more recently – the rebirth of the parallel tracker, watched the phono section ▶



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the world according to plus

▶ disappear and reappear from modern preamps and even seen the rise of phono stages with long-past alternatives to the RIAA equalization curve. And now we are beginning to see yet another resurgence, in the shape of the direct drive turntable. Air bearings, platters floating on magnets and more are all expected to help shape vinyl replay in the second decade of the 21st Century.

The 21st Century also bought significant increases in pollution from local wireless sources. It seems hard to believe just a decade on, but at the turn of the millennium Wi-Fi was practically non-existent in the home. Now, we have myriad prospective sources of electromagnetic interference in our environments. This has in part created a demand for power products that help counter this prospective pollutant.

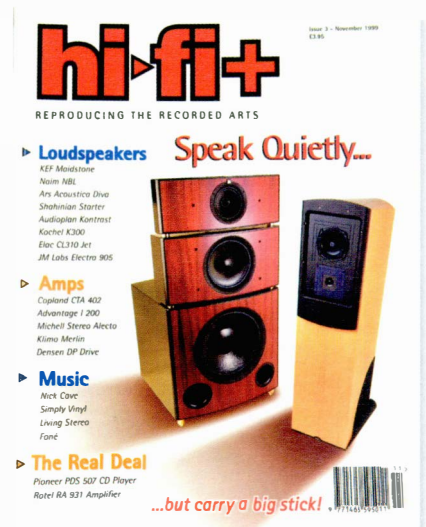
However, the 21st Century cable world does highlight a profound change in the audio landscape that has become more significant over the last decade. The rise of the internet as the primary source of information has called into question many of the aspects of audio most audiophiles hold as self-evident. There is a strong 'no-nothing' culture on many audio websites that holds cables (among other things) cannot make a difference, irrespective of whether you can hear a difference or not.

Another unexpected change in the audio world in the last four years or so has been the rebirth of the DAC. This is more understandable as people started putting computers in their systems, and an increasing number of these nu-DACs feature USB computer inputs alongside S/PDIF and AES/EBU connections. This has had an interesting upside – the intricacy and level of work needed to get the best out of computer audio is on a par with getting the best out of vinyl, and many people who felt the CD was too 'fit and forget' for their tweaking needs have found themselves returning to

computer audio and ploughing through books on networking, discovering the best codec and more. We are fast coming to the conclusion that making good computer audio is easy, but making it great is extremely difficult.

As we enter the second decade of the 21st Century, audio faces turmoil. The economic downturn and the rise of the internet trader combined make it difficult to imagine a return to a time where new specialist audio retailers will flourish. Indeed, with the possibility of a new big player in the UK audio market – Best Buy – the bricks and mortar hi-fi store looks set to live through 'interesting times' for the next few years. Meanwhile, the problem many dealers face is what to stock. With the current downturn in CD player sales, a range of different computer audio solutions and the continued success of vinyl, no cookie-cutter solution has yet emerged. With the speed of turnaround in computer-side products, this potentially means the audio retailer can easily back the wrong horse and end up with products that simply cannot be sold anymore. It's probable that the retailer needs to supply a couple of computer audio DAC and a couple of networked solutions as a bare minimum to keep up with the technology. Unfortunately, it seems that many are failing to grasp the change in technology on any level. A few of these companies will survive by providing niche products for a specialist arm of an already specialist audience. Others... won't.

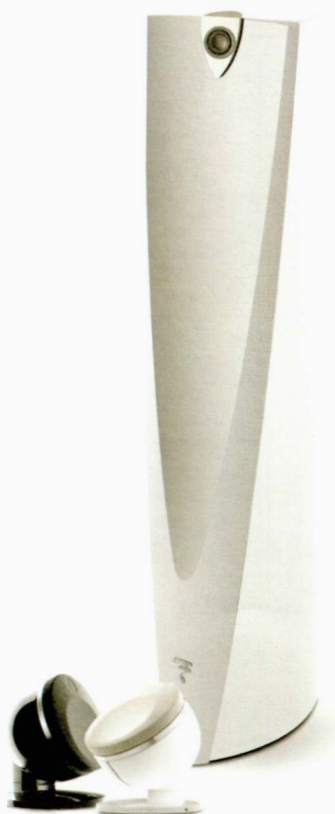
This is not as grim as it sounds. Audio is a technology that has been through profound change since Thomas Edison first shouted 'Mary Had A Little Lamb' into a horn. Some of the most significant change has happened since *Hi-Fi+* first hit the streets 75 issues ago. And it will keep on happening. Things may change, but however they choose to play it, people will always love music. That single thought will hopefully sustain a hi-fi industry for many years to come. +



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Welcome to the 2010 Hi-Fi+ AWARDS!





We review hundreds of products every year, but once a year we round up the best of that year's products. This year, a baker's dozen of the key categories in audio have come under scrutiny. Over the next 22 pages, we bring you the best products we have seen over the last 12 months. And, with our reputation for covering the highest of high-end audio, those 13 best categories really represent the take-no-prisoners best of the current state of the audio art.

This year, our biggest problem was an embarrassment of riches. Starting about May this year, a spate of extremely fine products in all categories began to appear in the offices of *Hi-Fi+*. Many of which we have had to struggle to fit into the pages of the magazine. We could have doubled or even tripled the number of first-rate products that made it to market this year. Which, given the mighty down-turn in the world economy, must represent a remarkable achievement for all concerned.

High-end audio is still currently dominated by American names, but the tide is turning. European and Asian products are beginning to provide a serious challenge to the existing big names in audio. It still might be some time before people begin to speak of Pure Sound in the same hushed tones as they do of Audio Research, but the exciting thing is that everything is rated evenly these days. If a product is good, it is good on its own merits, rather than because of who made it.

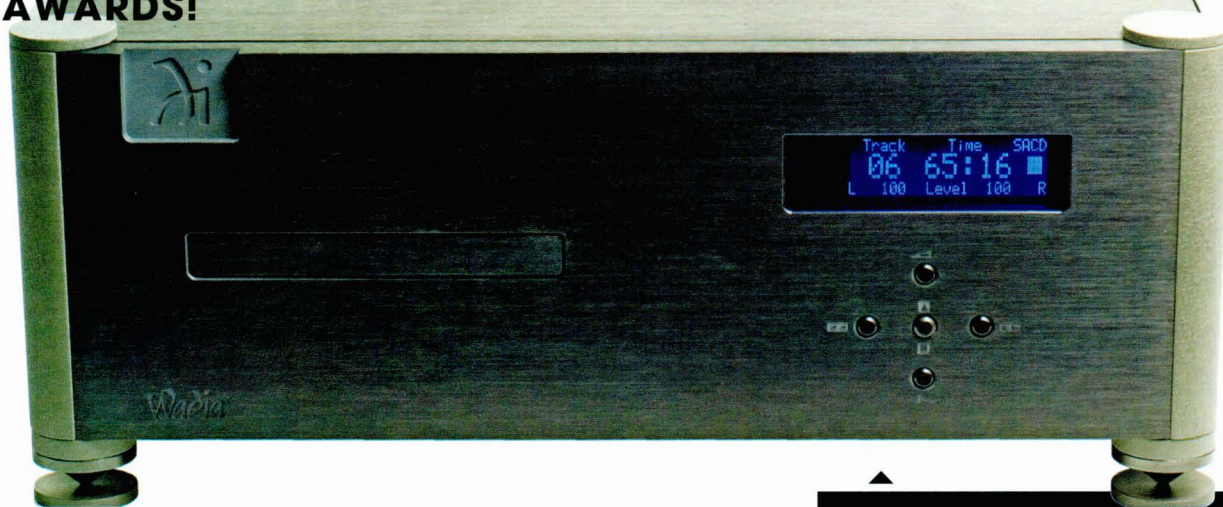
Despite the changes to the music business and the downturn in CD sales, we are still standing by the CD player. There are still many people who are reluctant to place their music onto a computer and for them CD still rules. That, coupled with our inherent audiophile conservatism, means CD remains a popular choice for audiophiles. We shall continue to support the shiny silver disc in all its forms for as long as there's demand for shiny silver discs. Who knows? Perhaps tomorrow there will be a CD-playing counter-culture emerging, just like has happened to vinyl!

Fortunately, there are still lots of CD players to choose from, and just as we cannot afford to ignore computer audio, we cannot afford to ignore CD players or record players. The simple fact is, for now at least, computer audio merely adds an extra shelf in the equipment table.

It's almost impossible – and extremely expensive – to construct a system made entirely of Award winners, but neither should you try to make a system based solely on those Award-winners. Sometimes products work well together, but sometimes they don't. Often the best system is a combination of Award, Highly Commended and reviewed products. At the high-end, synergy is rarely an issue, especially as few people will buy a £65,000 loudspeaker or even a £5,000 power amplifier sight unseen. There are still good and great sounds possible from top-class audio equipment, but synergy seems to make more of an impression as you drop into the more affordable and budget levels. In other words, choose your products carefully.

Regardless, these are the best of the best – enjoy!

▶ the 2010 Hi-Fi+
AWARDS!



CD PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Wadia 781i

Reviewed in issue 69

Wadia has long been one of the most significant players in the high-end digital game, but its recent models have raised the stakes to new levels. The 781i is a perfect example of this; effectively a one-box CD transport, DAC, digital pre-amp and control centre (with the option of a separate A-D converter for those wanting to digitize their music collections), the player is as much hub as it is mere disc spinner.

The combination CD and SACD player features Wadia's unique Digimaster decoding software coupled to a dual-processor driven gate array. This means where some players proudly proclaim 96kHz sampling rates, the 781i can deliver an extreme 1.4112GHz sampling rate, at 24-bit precision. It also sports three different algorithms for CD and Wadia's own decoding algorithm for SACD. These algorithms allow the user to fine tune the player to their own tastes and system demands.

In our test, we felt that its "ability to deliver both detail and the sort of instrumental identity and warmth... moves the 781i so close to the digital ideal," coupled with the way it "cuts straight to the heart of both that performance and what hi-fi should be all about – the music rather than the means by which it arrives" makes the Wadia 781i an almost mandatory Award winner.

Price: £14,999

Manufacturer: Wadia

URL: www.wadia.com

UK Distributor: Musical Design Company

URL: www.mdc-hifi.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1992 573030

HIGHLY COMMENDED

dCS Puccini and U-Clock

Reviewed in issue 73

Adding a highly accurate external clock (and asynchronous USB input) transforms an already stunning one-box Puccini player into one of the world's best and most future-proofed disc players.

Price: £13,799

Manufacturer: Data Conversion Systems Ltd

URL: www.dcsLtd.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1954 233950

Gryphon Mikado Signature

Reviewed in issue 74

Stunning top-loader CD player sounds even better than it looks, with striking authority and resolution. Best used in balanced mode.

Price: £11,995

Manufacturer: Gryphon Audio

URL: www.gryphon-audio.dk

Distributor: The Music Room

URL: www.music-room.com

Tel: +44(0) 141 333 9700

Rega Osiris

Reviewed in issue 72

Rega's first attempt at a high-end CD player may not win any awards for its looks, but it receives the highest praise for the order it brings to music it plays.

Price: £6,000

Manufacturer: Rega Research Ltd

URL: www.rega.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1702 333071

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▶ the 2010 Hi-Fi+
AWARDS!



DAC OF THE YEAR

Ayre QB-9

Reviewed in issue 72

The Ayre QB-9 takes the newly regenerated world of DACs and shakes it by the scruff of the neck. With only a USB input – meaning it is limited to being used with a computer in the listening room – rivals have criticised this DAC as something of a one-trick pony. Yeah... but what a trick!

It was one of the first DACs to feature the revolutionary Asynchronous USB input – which hands over digital data timing tasks to the DAC itself. This takes the USB feed from a PC or Mac without the need for driver software and presents it in good order to the QB-9's Burr Brown 24/192 Delta-Sigma DAC chip, a custom minimum-phase filter and to Ayre's either balanced or single-ended analog outputs.

The sound quality is revolutionary, as it helps remove that last layer of resistance felt by those who still cling to a 1980s model of how digital data should be handled. The QB-9 takes an age to run in and sounds much better balanced, but when it does, it "retains the typical Ayre sound; remarkably clean, very detailed, extremely musical and a tiny bit dry, especially at the top end." It also sounded "tidy, well-ordered, the sort of product you might tap your foot too."

We recognise that computer audio is not for everyone yet, but we felt that "even those who dismiss the QB-9 can't help respecting the sound it makes." As an excellent-sounding ambassador for the biggest change in music replay since CD, the Ayre QB-9 deserves the highest praise.

Price: £1,995

Manufacturer: Ayre Inc

URL: www.ayre.com

UK Distributor: Symmetry

URL: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1727 865488

HIGHLY COMMENDED

[HRT Streamer II+](#)

Reviewed in issue 72

A USB-powered DAC might seem inexpensive in such vaulted competition, but this Asynchronous USB converter is high-end audio all the way. Fantastic value for money is guaranteed.

Price: £329

Manufacturer:

High Resolution Technologies

URL: www.highretech.com

Distributor: Audiofreaks Ltd

Tel: +44(0)20 8948 4153

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

[Naim DAC](#)

Reviewed in issue 71

Very high-resolution upgradable converter that will charm Naim and non-Naim followers alike with its ordered and dynamic sound quality.

Price: £1,950

Manufactured by: Naim Audio

URL: www.naim-audio.com

Tel: +44(0) 1722 426600

[Weiss DAC2](#)

Tested in issue 72

A pro, FireWire-supporting DAC that is as neutral – both in sound and to source – as the Switzerland it comes from. Bomb-proof build, too.

Price: £1,950

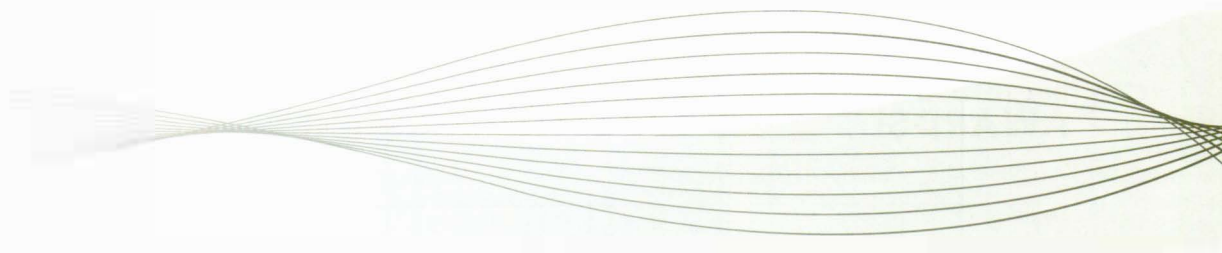
Manufacturer: Weiss Digital Audio

URL: www.weiss.ch

Distributor: Purite Audio

URL: www.puriteaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)208 815 5878






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TURNTABLE OF THE YEAR

Bergmann Sindre

Reviewed in issue 74

It's not hard to see why this turntable can win the hearts and minds of today's LP spinning audiophiles. Not only is it that rare combination of air bearing turntable with air bearing parallel tracking tonearm, but for once, the whole combination looks elegant and refined.

A three box design (turntable, power supply and surprisingly silent air pump) the package is all about understated Nordic elegance, resplendent in its matt black and brushed alloy finish. The simple looks almost extend to the process of building the turntable in the home; there's no need to call upon the services of a PhD in mechanical engineering to build the record player, even if you seem to need at least three hands at times. Remarkably for air-bearing designs, this is a low-maintenance project, and the arm's compliance and effective mass makes it suitable for a wide range of modern cartridges.

We found it made a remarkable sound, by making less of an intrinsic sound than normally expected from turntables; "these don't necessarily manifest as obvious graunching distortion, but are more akin to a not totally balanced transformer on low-voltage lighting. It's the sort of thing you don't notice until it's taken away." Ultimately, we considered that "It just sounds more right." A turntable that makes sound that good without the fuss or bother is a hard act to follow.

Price: £11,995

Manufacturer: Bergmann

URL: www.bergmanaudio.com

UK Distributor: Midland Audio Exchange

URL: www.midlandaudioexchange.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1562 731100

HIGHLY COMMENDED

[Acoustic Solid Solid One/Cartridge Man Conductor/MusicMaker Classic LE](#)

Reviewed in issue 71

A high-mass deck, parallel tracker arm and customized moving iron cartridge combine to make one of the most solid and accurate turntable sounds around.

Price: £7,900 (as tested)

Manufacturer: Acoustic Solid

URL: www.acoustic-solid.de

Manufacturer: The Cartridge Man

URL: www.thecartridgeman.com

Distributor: Hi Audio

Tel: +44(0)8450 525259

URL: www.hiaudio.co.uk

[Origin Live Resolution/Illustrious](#)

Reviewed in issue 73

DC-motor driven turntable and remarkably free-sounding arm combine to make a very neutral turntable source in the Pink Triangle Anniversary style.

Price: £4,070

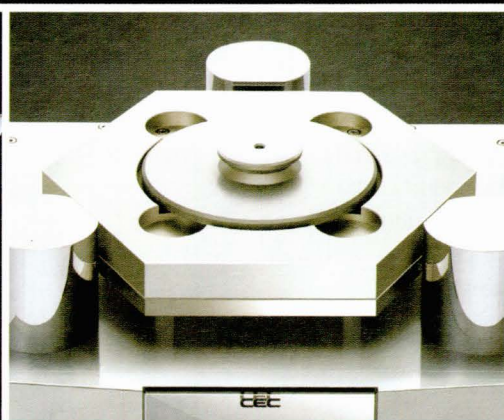
Manufacturer: Origin Live

URL: www.originlive.com

Tel: +44(0) 2380 578877



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TURNTABLE COMPONENT OF THE YEAR

Audio Research Reference Phono 2



Reviewed in issue 72

To hit the stratosphere of vinyl replay – especially in a phono stage – you need something more than just the run-of-the-mill. In fact, you need something more than just good sound, because many rival products already reach that goal. The Reference Phono 2 is one such product.

Not content with making a phono preamp with the sort of build quality and circuit design of the company's Reference range, Audio Research really went to town on the Phono 2, allowing a range of cartridge loadings – and more significantly, equalization settings – adjustable on the fly from the remote control. The EQ settings is a vital component in getting the best possible sound from turntable, because so many albums were recorded using EQ curves that were only notionally like the RIAA standard.

The vast build and massively over-spec power supply give the Phono 2 the sort of power reserves to handle any sound LP can throw at it, and the Columbia and Decca curves really do bring out the best in some of the finest albums in your collection. Little wonder then that we concluded the Phono 2 “delivers a performance level for others to aim at.”

Price: £10,726

Manufacturer: Audio Research Corporation

URL: www.audioresearch.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)20 8971 3909

HIGHLY COMMENDED

conrad-johnson TEA-2

Reviewed in issue 70

Zero-feedback, minimalist triode phono stage with all the expansiveness of American electronics with much of the pace of UK designs.

Price: £2,459

Manufacturer: conrad-johnson

URL: www.conradjohnson.com

Distributor: Audiofreaks Ltd

Tel: +44(0)20 8948 4153

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Music First Audio Moving Coil Step-Up

Reviewed in issue 70

With high-quality transformers from the parent company, little wonder the MFA is one of the best ways to bring moving coil cartridges to life.

Price: £1,675

Manufacturer: Music First Audio

URL: www.mfaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0) 1424 858260

Rogue Audio Stealth

Reviewed in issue 74

Ultra-minimalist – but surprisingly adjustable – solid-state phono stage with an exceptionally low noise floor and excellent mids and treble.

Price: £850

Manufacturer: Rogue Audio

URL: www.rogueaudio.com

Distributor: Audiofreaks Ltd

Tel: +44(0)20 8948 4153

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER OF THE YEAR

Devialet D-Premier

Reviewed in issue 75

Is it the best integrated amp in the world, or maybe the best amplifier? Or the best DAC? One thing's for sure; the high-end world is reeling after the launch of the slimline D-Premier amp+DAC from exciting French start-up Devialet.

Designed by two Nortel engineers, the D-Premier starts from a clean sheet, placing an ultra high-quality DAC at the heart of the amplifier in place of potentially distortion-making gain stages. For its output, it uses a new Class ADH, that uses a sweet sounding small Class A amplifier for its excellent sound and a Class D powerhouse for the purposes of moving loudspeaker air.

You can read what we thought of the amplifier up close on Page 68, but basically if you use digital sources and aren't a passionate valve enthusiast, this might just be all the amplifier you will ever need. It has a dynamic range, transparency, detail and energy unlike almost any amplifier you will ever hear. While it's good on 'legacy' analog products and even has a good phono stage, it's in its happy place playing digital like it was meant to be played. Quite simply, the biggest change in amplification in decades is in a small shiny Parisian box of tricks.

Price: £10,000

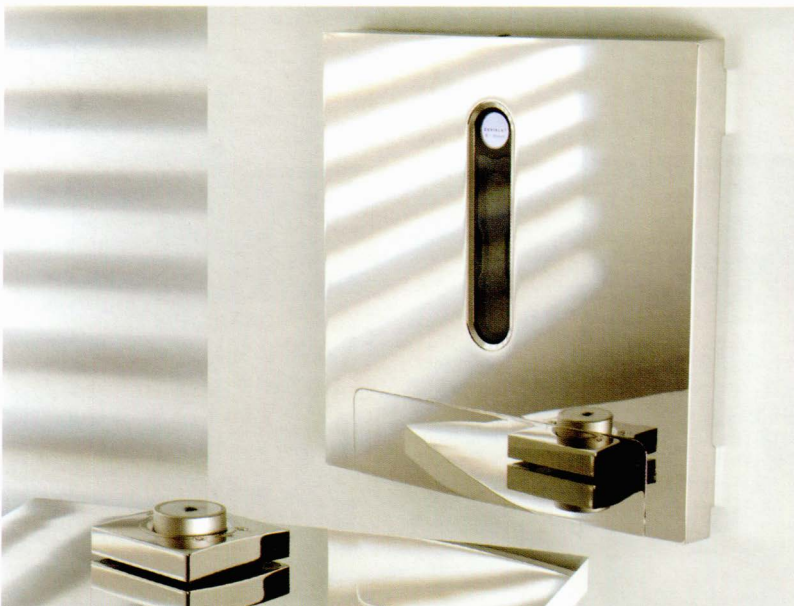
Manufacturer: Devialet

URL: www.devalet.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)20 8971 3909



HIGHLY COMMENDED

Musical Fidelity M6i

Reviewed in issue 71

A return to form from Musical Fidelity, with this effortless, fuss-free 200 watt integrated powerhouse. It does what MF does best, deliver a lot of power with refinement, grace and oomph!

Price: £2,500

Manufacturer: Musical Fidelity Ltd

URL: www.musicalfidelity.com

Tel: +44(0)20 8900 2866

Fonel Emotion

Reviewed in issue 73

Unusually elegant wood-finished integrated amplifier with one of the sweetest midbands you can get from a solid-state design.

Price: £5,525

Manufacturer: Fonel Audio

URL: www.fonel-audio.com

Distributor: Ikon Audio Consultants

Tel: +44(0)1473 217853

URL: www.ikonaudioconsultants.com

Quad II Classic

Reviewed in issue 73

Quad's first-ever integrated harks back to the good old days of Quad II mono power amps from the 1950s, the 25 watter sounding half way between a refined push-pull amp and a delicate SET. Beautiful sounds start here.

Price: £4,500

Manufacturer: IAG

URL: www.quad-hifi.co.uk

Tel: +44(0) 1480 447700

PREAMPLIFIER OF THE YEAR

conrad-johnson ET3

Reviewed in issue 75

Last year, conrad-johnson's excellent GAT took the laurels as one of the preamps to beat. But, at almost £20,000, there were only going to be a handful of serious contenders. But c-j's back again this year, this time taking the top slot with the 'baby GAT'; the brand new ET3.

The company's new 'entry-level' (The Classic preamplifier's lack of remote control gave it an all too short lifespan in 21st Century audio), the ET3 owes a lot to the design of its flagship stablemate. It also marks a true return to form for the company, having reintroduced the lush, refined and musically glorious sound that marked out conrad-johnson preamps years ago. And yet, it does this without making the sound seem too lush or so sweet as to make the sound saccharine. It's natural rather than neutral and that seems a deliberate effort to make the pre more likeable and listenable than most. Especially when faced with current musical efforts; the ET3 manages to make the best out of some of the worst recordings around.

In hi-fi terms, it's got one of the best soundstages around for the money, with a wonderful sense of dynamic range and an uncanny ability to draw you into the music. But you can read all that on page 58.

Unless you consider the lack of a balance control a deal-breaker, this gives you more than a glimpse of what the GAT can do for a fraction of the price. What a return to top form!

Price: £2,450 line-only, optional £795 phono

Manufacturer: conrad-johnson

URL: www.conradjohnson.com

Distributor: Audiofreaks Ltd

Tel: +44(0)20 8948 4153

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

HIGHLY COMMENDED

[Electrocompaniet EC4.8](#)

Reviewed in issue 69

Whether used within or outside of an Electrocompaniet system, this elegant preamp can really spring to life when used in balanced mode. And it shows EC is not just a power amp brand

Price: £2,590

Manufacturer: Electrocompaniet

URL: www.electrocompaniet.no/uk

Distributor: EC Distribution Ltd

Tel: +44(0)20 8893 5835

[Pure Sound L300](#)

Reviewed in issue 73

Transformer-coupled line tube preamp with a musically impassioned presentation that belies its price tag.

Price: £4,795

Manufacturer: Pure Sound

URL: www.puresound.info

Tel: +44(0) 1822 612449



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POWER AMPLIFIER OF THE YEAR **Almarro A340A**

Reviewed in issue 70

This might come as something of a surprise. A push-pull mono amplifier from a relatively unknown Japanese amp manufacturer... what's that about. The Almarro A340A isn't one of those Japanese valve products wishing it was 1958 all over again; instead it's a vision of what the power amplifier world might look like if transistors just hadn't happened. The amp – featuring two of the distinctive and well-respected 6C33C-B power triodes per side – is fan cooled and features adjustable feedback and damping factor controls, with 36 different permutations.

In other words, the 40 watter can be matched to almost any loudspeaker (unless they demand hundreds of watts to get going), or you can use these dials to adjust the presentation from taut to flabby. But however you play with the amp it remains airy, entertaining and neutral sounding, detailed and yet hugely musically entertaining. It also has extended and attractive bass.

The net result of all of this is a sound that holds your attention and keeps it held for album after album. "Whether audiophile noodling or lo-fi graunch", we wrote, "the Almarro did it all and did it all well." And that's what makes this hot-running Japanese tube amp a must-hear for 2010.

Price: £5,895 per pair

Manufactured by Almarro

URL: www.almarro.com

Distributed by Angelsound Audio

Tel: +44(0)1923 352470

URL: www.angelsoundaudio.co.uk



HIGHLY COMMENDED

Consonance Cyber 880

Reviewed in issue 69

100W pentode powerhouse. Weighs a lot. Hugely powerful. Sounds great, looks great and doesn't cost as much as you'd expect. What's not to like?

Price: £2,895

Manufactured by Opera Audio

URL: www.opera-consonance.com

Distributed by Alium Audio

URL: www.aliumaudio.com

Tel: +44(0)1273 325901

Unison Research Unico DM

Reviewed in issue 72

Well-crafted 150W MOSFET amplifier design that both looks good and sounds great. Very natural performance. Best used with Unico Pre.

Price: £2,880

Manufactured by Unison Research

URL: www.unisonresearch.com

Distributed by UKD Ltd

URL: www.ukd.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1753 652669

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER OF THE YEAR

Cabasse Bora



Reviewed in issue 72

The Cabasse Bora loudspeaker looks like a two-way speaker but it's actually a three-way. The white surround around the tweeter is actually a Rohacell coaxial treble and midrange driver. This not only gives the Bora elegant lines, but also makes its treble and midrange effectively a point-source, which helps give it such stunning stereo. The combination of 90dB sensitivity and an ability to cope with 840W peaks also spells a very loud loudspeaker if you want.

That's the thing about the Bora. You can place it without any care and attention and it will make an excellent sound. Or, you can set it up with millimeter precision and make an excellent sound exceptional. Whatever you decide upon, you get a sound with great imagery and an ability to play almost any kind of music you care to throw at it.

We concluded that the Bora "puts a smile on your face when you play music, whatever the music; and that makes it well worth the money." And that alone makes this a mandatory Award winner.

Price: £2,200 per pair
Manufacturer: Cabasse
URL: www.cabasse.com

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Eclipse TD712z Mk 2

Reviewed in issue 74

Unusual single-driver loudspeaker that is winning over a lot of musicians... for good reason. You'll either love it or hate it.

£4,995 per pair

Manufacturer: Eclipse TD (UK) Ltd

URL: www.eclipse-td.net

Tel: +44(0)20 7328 4499

KEF Reference 201/2

Reviewed in issue 74

We came to these late, but these three-way standmounts are as good a speaker as the sources you feed them. Need a lot of power, but prodigious bass for the size.

Price: £3,500 per pair

Manufacturer: KEF Audio (UK) Ltd

URL: www.kef.com

Tel: +44(0)1622 672261

Von Schweikert Unifield One

Reviewed in issue 75

Using a dual concentric drive unit sitting in one of the best cabinets around makes for a truly wonderful sound for any small to medium room.

Price: £4,995 per pair

Manufacturer: Von Schweikert Audio

URL: www.vonschweikert.com

Distributed by

URL: www.audioplay.co.uk

Tel: +44(0) 207 359 6962

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER OF THE YEAR

Magico Q5

Reviewed in issue 74

The Magico Q5 is the sort of loudspeaker that loudspeaker designers would dream of making if they weren't constrained by practical considerations like budget and the engineering limitations of the country of origin. A cabinet made out of thick sheets of aluminium and brass, drive units flown twice round the world to get the best people to perform key treatments, crossover components that cost more than many complete loudspeakers... all the stuff of myth, now the stuff of Magico.

Those things make a difference, a huge difference to the performance of the loudspeaker, too. It's a loudspeaker that makes big demands on the user (it needs a lot of power, a lot of room space and – at 176kg per speaker – a reinforced floor) but you are met with an accuracy and freedom from distortion that wasn't possible a year ago. "If you are looking for the most accurate frequency response, the lowest distortion and the widest dynamics, this is your speaker," we concluded. And that's not going to change for some time.

Price: £65,000 per pair

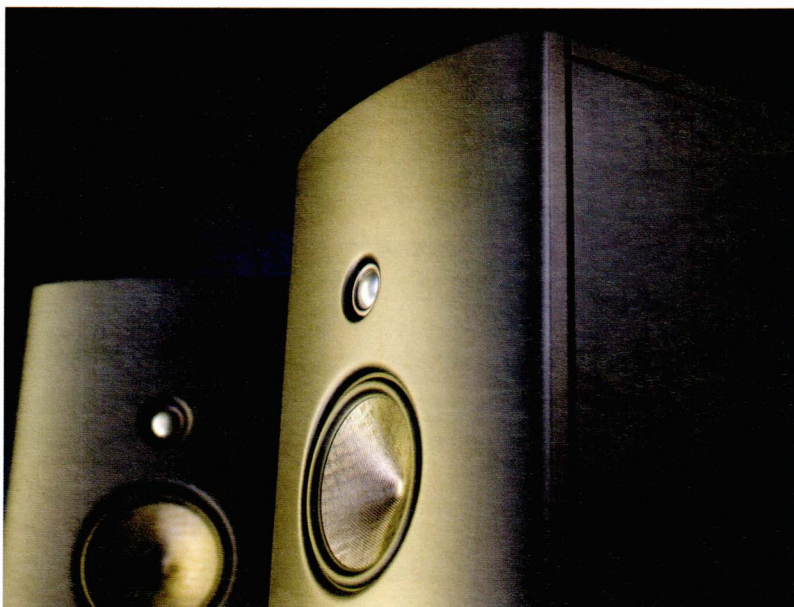
Manufacturer: Magico LLC

URL: www.magico.net

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)20 8971 3909



HIGHLY COMMENDED

Avalon Time

Reviewed in issue 71

The most musically beguiling and exciting loudspeakers currently in the high-end firmament

£47,995 per pair

Manufacturer: Avalon Acoustics

URL: www.avalonacoustics.com

Distributed by: Audiofreaks Ltd

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)20 8948 4153

Focal 1028Be

Reviewed in issue 71

Beryllium tweeter and fine design make this one of the most musically communicative and involving loudspeakers at the price

Price: £4,700 per pair

Manufactured by: Focal

URL: www.focal-fr.com

Distributed by: Focal UK

URL: www.focal-uk.com

Tel: 0845 660 2680 (UK only)

PMC Fact 8

Reviewed in issue 73

That rare combination of slim and elegant design coupled with the sort of sound that can charm any audiophile always deserves high praise

Price: £4,600 per pair

Manufactured by: PMC Ltd

URL: www.pmc-speakers.com

Tel: 0870 444 1044 (UK only)

POWER OF THE YEAR

Audience adeptResponse aR8

HIGHLY COMMENDED

ISOL-8 Substation Vogue

Reviewed in issue 71

Heavy-duty passive conditioner with high and low power sections. Makes your system sound extremely consistent, like every hour is after midnight.

£2,295

Manufacturer: ISOL-8 Teknologies

URL: www.isol-8.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)20 8856 8856

IsoTek Aquarius

Reviewed in issue 68

The highly popular Gil MiniSub gets a significant makeover, with increased dynamics and quieter backgrounds. Time to trade in that MiniSub.

Price £795

Manufacturer: IsoTek Systems Ltd

URL: www.isoteksystems.com

Tel: +44(0)1276 501392

Quantum Qbase QB6

Reviewed in issue 73

The most important foundation stone to a good system in the Quantum/Nordost school of thought

Price: £850

Manufacturer: Quantum

URL: www.quantumqrt.com

Distributor: Atacama Audio

URL: www.nordost-cables.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1455 283251

Reviewed in issue 69

Power products remain a hugely contentious issue in audio. Which is strange because the Audience adeptResponse aR8 isn't a contentious product at all. One listen to the sound of your system with it in place will convince you of how important this power product really is. The aR8 is basically a large passive conditioner, with a plethora of Audience's Auricap capacitors inside the eight-socket box (a Teflon capped version exists in the US market). Aside from a magnetic power switch and a voltage LED read-out, that's basically it.

Where the adeptResponse works is under musical conditions where it comes to life. It takes a long time for those caps to come to life and they should be left on because they do seem to lose the refinement if left alone for a while. But left plugged into the system, the passive conditioner seems to do the least harm and the most benefit for systems. It's one of the few conditioners that the normally curmudgeonly Naim community considers a worthwhile addition to the system.

We love it because it sounds like you have just upgraded every component in the signal chain, making voices more articulate and natural. As we said back in issue 69, "the Audience adeptResponse aR8 makes a big, important difference to the sound, every bit in line with three grand upgrades to electronics further up the food chain." In other words, we like it!

Price: £2,999

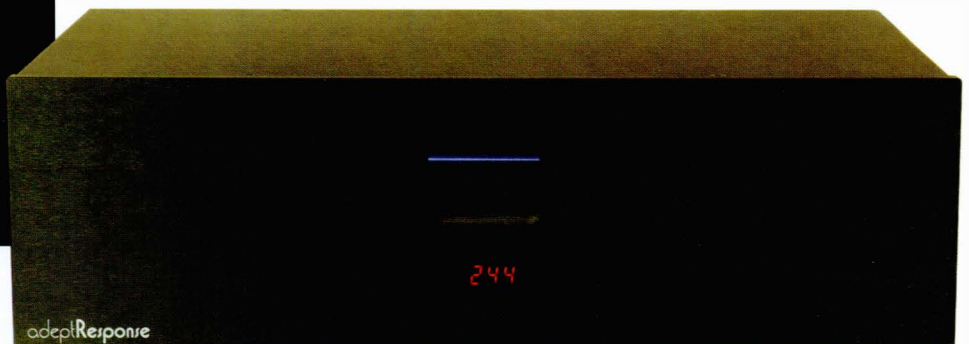
Manufacturer: Audience

URL: www.audience-av.com

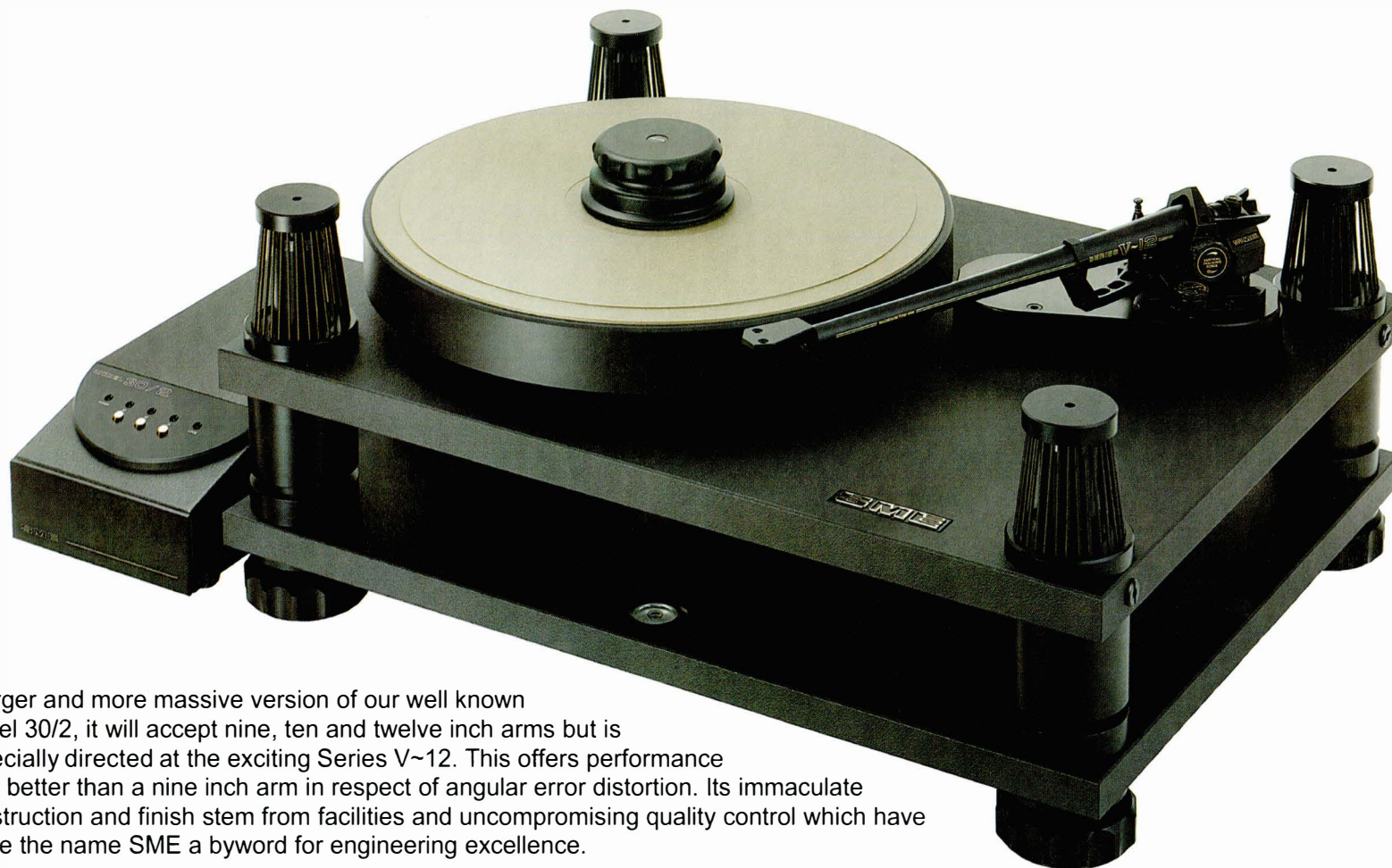
UK Distributor: High End Cable

URL: www.highendcable.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1775 761880



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With its dedicated arm, the Model 30/12A possesses a majesty I hadn't heard before. Bereft of absurd, self-aggrandising over complexity exhibiting nothing but sane engineering and producing sound that's impossible to fault.

Ken Kessler Review – Hi-Fi News, March 2009

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CABLE OF THE YEAR

Tellurium Q cables

Reviewed in issue 69

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Price: £2,999

Manufacturer: Audience

URL: www.audience-av.com

UK Distributor: High End Cable

URL: www.highendcable.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1775 761880



HIGHLY COMMENDED

ISOL-8 Substation Vogue

Tested in issue 71

Heavy-duty passive conditioner with high and low power sections. Makes your system sound extremely consistent, like every hour is after midnight.

Price: £2,295

Manufacturer: ISOL-8 Teknologies

URL: www.isol-8.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)20 8856 8856

IsoTek Aquarius

Tested in issue 68

The highly popular GII MiniSub gets a significant makeover, with increased dynamics and quieter backgrounds. Time to trade in that MiniSub.

Price: £795

Manufacturer: IsoTek Systems Ltd

URL: www.isoteksystems.com

Tel: +44(0)1276 501392

Quantum Qbase QB6

Tested in issue 73

The most important foundation stone to a good system in the Quantum/Nordost school of thought.

Price: £850

Manufacturer: Quantum

URL: www.quantumqrt.com

UK Distributor: Atacama Audio

URL: www.nordost-cables.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1455 283251

imagine...

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



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* terms & conditions apply

- > Please ask about our unbeatable part-exchange programme.

ACCESSORY OF THE YEAR

Quadraspire Q4EVO & Sunoko-Vent SVT racks

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Furutech PC-2

Reviewed in issue 71

Spray this on your CDs or DVDs, wipe it away with the supplied antistatic microfibre cloth. One of the best.

Price: £35

Manufacturer: Furutech

URL: www.furutech.com

UK Distributor: Sound Foundations

URL: www.soundfoundations.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1276 501392

Nordost Sort Kones

Reviewed in issue 73

The new king of the cones redefines the silences possible from supports.

Price: From £49.99 each

Manufacturer: Nordost

UK Distributor: Atacama Audio

URL: www.nordost-cables.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1455 283251

VPI HW-27 Typhoon

Reviewed in issue 69

One of the most important products any LP-lover can own, the HW-27 is the perfect record cleaning machine.

Price: £1,650

Manufacturer: VPI Industries Inc.

URL: www.vpiindustries.com

UK Distributor: Analogue Seduction

URL: www.analogueseduction.net

Tel: +44 (0)1733 344768

Reviewed in issue 70

Quadraspire is a company that makes completely practical audio and video stand solutions, media walls and other very down-to-earth products. And it has a wild and crazy side that makes some of the most high-tech tuned modular equipment supports you can buy at this time. The tuning comes in the shape of half depth (in Q4EVO) and full-depth slots (in Sunoko-Vent). The loops and whirls on the underside of EVO are not just there for show; they help break up resonances within the MDF of the shelf itself, which helps improve the clarity of sound from equipment placed on the table. Moving over to Sunoko-Vent, the brass SVT inserts make the table sound even less congested while the slotted – yet heavy – platforms give equipment greater solidity, poise and control. They also afford greater opportunity for upgrading the sound quality thanks to being better able to bring out the best of Stillpoints devices and similar.

The existing Quadraspire systems work well, but we felt "these changes are entirely to the good, with no downsides whatsoever, and that itself is pretty unusual." A step-change then, but a seriously good one at that.

Quadraspire Q4EVO

Price £95 per shelf

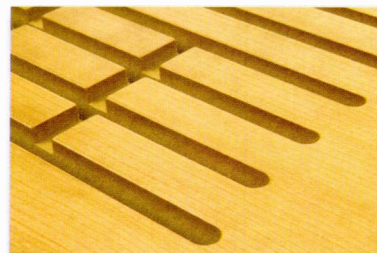
Quadraspire Sunoko-Vent SVT

Price £200 per shelf

Manufactured by Quadraspire Ltd

URL: www.quadraspire.com

Tel: +44(0)1179 863228



SYSTEM OF THE YEAR

Peachtree iDecco and Amphion Argon³

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Linn Majik DS-I

Reviewed in issue 75

The end-point of a sophisticated home music serving system, this makes the whole computer audio thing seem less daunting... when fully set-up.

Price: £2,500

Manufacturer: Linn Products

URL: www.linn.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)141 307 7777

MeridianSooloos

Reviewed in issue 74

An infinitely flexible way of making your music come alive, thanks to some seriously innovative musical linking software to let you swim through your music collection.

Price: from £2,735

Manufacturer: Meridian Audio

URL: www.meridian-audio.com

Tel: : +44 (0)1480 445678

Reviewed in issue 75

This wasn't set out as a system, the two products just happened to arrive at a similar time and happened to work together well. Scratch that... they happened to work together *brilliantly*.

The Peachtree iDecco is an integrated amp with a digital-accessing iPod dock, a first rate DAC, excellent pre and good power amp stage in one elegant rounded design. It even has a triode in the preamp to make things sound a little more rich. The Amphions are rear-ported two-way standmounts with a distinctive large tweeter horn and aluminium bass driver. Hook the two together and put the speakers on a good pair of stands and you have the ultimate in iPod sound. Or any other digital audio sound for that matter. The warm, almost loose bottom end of the Peachtree is the perfect partner with the quick-fire, direct sound of the Argon³.

We concluded that "this particular set put a smile on my face for longer than many systems... ..this just sounded 'right'. No other term will do." If you want to know what your iPod can really do, look no further.

Peachtree iDecco

Price: £800

Manufacturer: Signalpath Inc

URL: www.signalpathint.com

UK Distributor: Computers Unlimited

URL: www.unlimited.com

Amphion Argon³

Price: from £1,800/pair

Manufacturer: Amphion

URL: www.amphion.fi

Tel: +358 17 2882 100





Magic Bus?

Computer Audio Just Got Serious

Like all new formats and sources, it takes time: time to learn how to do it properly, time to learn what matters and what makes a difference.

Along with file formats and transmission standards, the cables used in computer audio applications can have a dramatic effect on sound quality. These are digital leads, and just like the digital leads in any other high-end audio application, they have standards to adhere to. It's just that the standard for USB (Universal Serial Bus) 2.0 cables is rather more complex than the 75 and 110 Ohm digital leads we are more used to. Their hybrid construction combines data and power conductors with multiple screens in a precision symmetrical array. Any geometrical or impedance deviation will materially effect data-integrity, making it a challenge that tests the ability of cable manufacturers to produce and consistently terminate cables that meet the standard sufficiently accurately for high-fidelity audio reproduction.

The new Blue Heaven USB 2.0 data cable is precision wound from dimensionally optimized, solid-core conductors that employ Nordost's proven micro mono-filament technology to

ensure ultra high transmission speeds with superb geometrical accuracy. Metal-jacketed plugs ensure shielding continuity and to further guarantee quality control and consistency, the cables are entirely manufactured and hand-terminated in the USA. This cable sets new standards of audio performance – not by inventing some new, “magic” technique, but by applying the same tried and tested technology and absolute attention to detail that has made Nordost audio cables market leaders across the analogue and digital domains.

Nordost's Blue Heaven USB 2.0 – a rigorous exercise in affordable excellence.

NORDOST
 MAKING THE CONNECTION



amphion

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Peachtree Audio iDecco and Amphion Argon³

by Alan Sircom

It began in a hotel room. I was recuperating after having a nine-foot chunk of ceiling fall on my head and taking in a couple of lungfuls of hundred-year old lime plaster. And I was bored, so I smuggled a little system in there – a Peachtree Audio iDecco, a pair of Amphion Argon³ bookshelves, and ran it off my iPhone.

I wasn't expecting much, but I had time to kill and anything better was sitting under half an inch of the same dust that had put me in hospital. But in fact, it was good. Good enough in fact to make you wonder why we bother with the whole audiophile thing.

The iDecco iPod doc meets DAC meets integrated amp (dacpodlifier? dacilypodilydoc? ipodydaclifier? pterodactyl?) is the cheaper of the two Peachtree Audio devices. It's also the more recent of the two and features a universal iPod/iPhone dock on its curvy black gloss top. It's not a scaled down version of the company's top Nova – it's a completely new (and, so the gossip goes, better) design. Like the Wadia and Onkyo docks before it, the iDecco gains access to the digital data inside the iPod or iPhone – and treats it as a digital audio signal for the processor. The processor also deals with a USB, coaxial and Toslink input, and has a fixed Class A output stage should you decide to use the iDecco as a standalone DAC (not as crazy as it sounds). This preamp also drives one of the best sounding headphone amp sockets around.

The DAC itself ticks four important boxes – 'ESS Sabre', 'reclocking', 'upsampling' and 'John Westlake'. The ESS Sabre DAC is the current fave converter for the digital cognoscenti. Reclocking the data mitigates any potential jitter effects and upsampling (to 24/96) gives a hi-res feel to CD and computer audio sound quality and John Westlake (Pink Triangle Da Capo, the original Cambridge Audio DacMagic and the forthcoming Audiolab 8200CD) is one of the brightest digital engineers on the planet. This is not someone slavishly following a set of application notes – this is a convertor designed by the guy who convertor chip manufacturers call up in a crisis. Perhaps this is why it has a shallow/steep digital filter and a two-step jitter function, because some computer sources need more jitter busting than others.

The preamp stage adds a single line input and has a defeatable single 12AX7 tube buffer. You should almost consider this an 'ensweetener'; it warms up quickly and helps smooth out some of the high-frequency anomalies of low-rate files when played through loudspeakers. And it glows, with a blue backlighting. The 40W amplifier stage, on the other

hand, is more humble; a MOSFET module design that's fine with easy eight-ohm loads, but can get low impedances and long runs of capacitive speaker cable can trip its protection circuit.

None of which is a problem when used with the Amphion Argon³. This two-way rear-ported standmount is an easy eight-ohm load and at 86dB sensitivity will work wonders in a small room with the iDecco. Had I used it in a barn of a hotel room, I might have needed something nearer its 200w maximum power recommendation. Using the distinctive horn waveguide for its SEAS 25mm titanium dome Integrator tweeter and a 165mm aluminium mid-bass driver (also from SEAS) could potentially spell ringing and brightness, but those clever Finns at Amphion are a lot smarter than that. By crossing over from treble to bass at just 1.2kHz – instead of the 3kHz – 4kHz normally found in two ways – the ringing of the aluminium midbass driver is effectively out-of-band. In addition, the depth of that tweeter waveguide effectively makes the acoustic centres of both treble and bass units on the same vertical plane. The waveguide also forms a key part of what Amphion calls its Uniformly Directive Diffusion technology, which has the laudable goal of making the off-axis performance as good as the on-axis.

The speaker's rear has just the one set of gold WBT plugs and a port, with bungs to use for close-to-wall placement. Given the speaker specs, a 40W amplifier (into six ohms, it's nearer 35W at eight) is not going to raise the roof, but in a typical UK hotel room (fast becoming larger than a typical UK living room), it's fit for purpose.

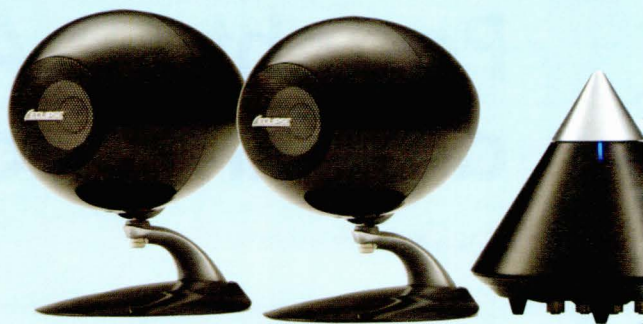
It is anything but stand-fussy in use. Smuggling a big pair of speaker stands wasn't going to be a good plan, but fortunately I have a pair of Quadraspire's 'plastic fantastic's' lying round – flat packed, the acrylic QX600L fit into a large rolling suitcase and are an excellent match for the speakers. As was the shelf the TV sat on. Yes the QX600L's were a better – a lot better in fact – but the sound wasn't as undermined as you'd expect from being in the worst possible setting. Just use the speaker bungs and 'job done'. ▶

What do you listen to?

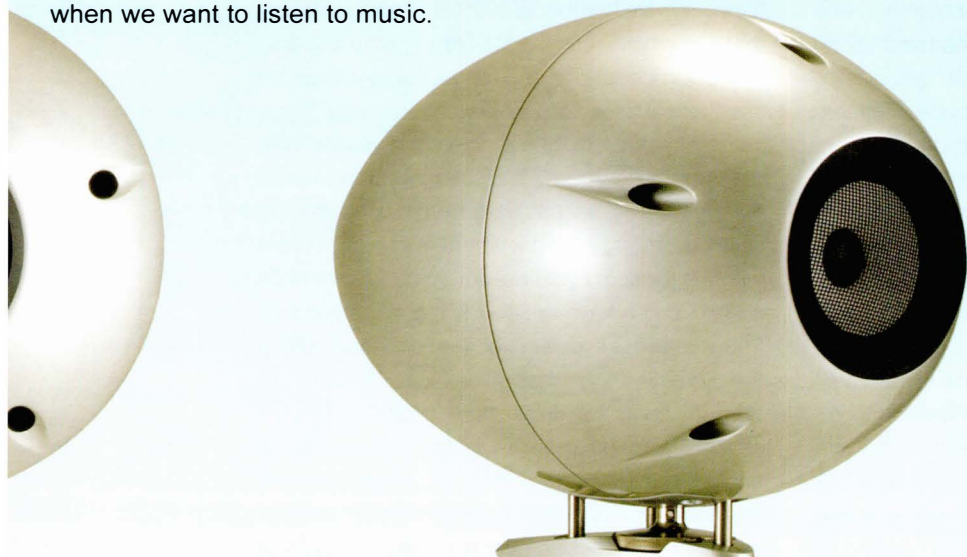
≈ COOL GALES

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

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



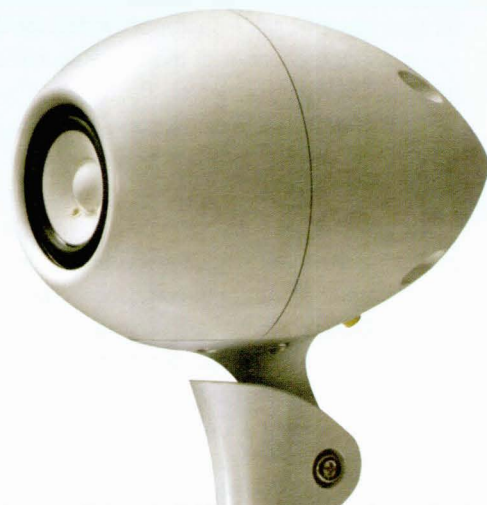
At the other end of the range is the baby TD307II PA system, a steal at £440 for a pair of speakers plus a little conical integrated amp and cabling, perfect for desktop or small bedroom systems. For more mainstream listening, the range continues with the TD508IIs and the TD510s. All have the same sonic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



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

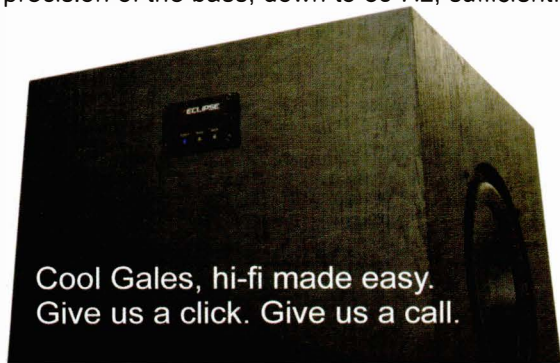
Reviews have reflected the revolutionary nature of their sound: "more life-like and cohesive than just about anything you can buy" (*What Hi-Fi?*), "unusually life-like" (*Hi-Fi Choice*), and "an almost shockingly pure sound" (*The Financial Times*).

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



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▶ The two balance one another out well. The Peachtree's tonal balance, with its emphasis on the lower end of the spectrum, is a fine foil for the clean and extended Amphion. With lossless files on the end of an iPod this is almost a true iPod music server in a neat package.

Breaking the magic mix at a later date showed both products are good, but the Amphions are exceptional. Entering – as they do – a land where we kind of lay claim to 'owning' the small two-way standmount, they have a nasty habit of leaving a big 'er...' on the notepad. Not 'er...' as in 'why did you do this?' or 'are you sure?' No, this is 'er...' as in 'can you do something bad so I can have something critical to say'. The bass is surprisingly meaty, yet not overblown or exaggerated, for a standmount. The midrange is almost electrostatic-like in its clarity while the treble is natural enough as to leave me struggling to find things to say about it. Longer exposure and comparison to a pair of similarly-priced ProAc Response D Two showed just how good the titanium dome tweeter is, because it didn't 'zing' compared to the soft dome ProAc. The bass unit was equally honest, although the Amphion wasn't as ultimately dynamically free as the other design. However, in most other respects, it made a pair of speakers I have been happily using for a year or more sound more like Prozac than ProAc. I think this is the new bookshelf to beat at the price.

The Peachtree is not the poor relation. The balance is hard to beat and it has an ace up its sleeve in that staggeringly good DAC. It's possible for someone to buy the iDecco, go through some frantic upgrading and still end up using the iDecco's DAC stage on its own. It really is that good.

But, it's the two together that really shocked me. It made me ask the question that ends with you being drummed out of the Audiophile Corps – do you need more? I can see people using this with a notebook PC or a MacMini and a USB cable, wiring it to this system and simply getting on with life without the twitchy/changy audio nervosa taking hold. I don't know what kind of magic synergy is taking place here, but this particular set put a smile on my face for longer than many systems; sure, high-end audio gives you more sonic lushness, some classic Brit-fi audio will enforce the beat with more authority, but this just sounded 'right'. No other term will do.

A month or so on, and my excitement for this system remains undimmed. Look, let's not get crazy about this. A lot of bigger, better products are bigger and better than the Peachtree/Amphion combo I assembled here. You'll get more headroom, more dynamic range, more bass depth, possibly more detail and all the hi-fi attributes. But you'll pay exponentially for the privilege. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Peachtree iDecco Specifications

Amplifier stage: 40 watts per channel
<1% distortion into 6 ohms

Stereo MOSFET amp modules

Class A Preamp output stage

Hybrid tube design using single
6N1P triode

Inputs: 1 Aux input 4 Digital inputs (all
transformer coupled) iPod, USB, Toslink
(optical), Coax

Class A headphone amp

Converter stage: ESS 9006 Sabre

DAC w/patented jitter reduction

circuit 24/96 upsampling

Galvanically isolated USB stage.

Signal/Noise Ratio: >118db

Jitter: <1 picosecond measured at the
Master Clock (Super Clock)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 37.5x12.7x35.6cm
(including volume knob and speaker
terminals)

Weight 10.4kg

Gloss black finish

Price £800

Manufactured by

Signalpath Inc

URL: www.signalpathint.com

Distributed by

Computers Unlimited

URL: www.unlimited.com

Amphion Argon³

Two way rear ported loudspeaker

Tweeter: 25mm titanium integrator dome

Woofer: 165mm aluminium cone

Crossover point: 1.2kHz

Impedance: 8 ohms

Sensitivity: 86dB

Frequency Response: 40Hz-40kHz

Dimensions (WxHxD) 19.1x38x30.5cm

Weight 11kg

Finishes: black, white, birch, cherry

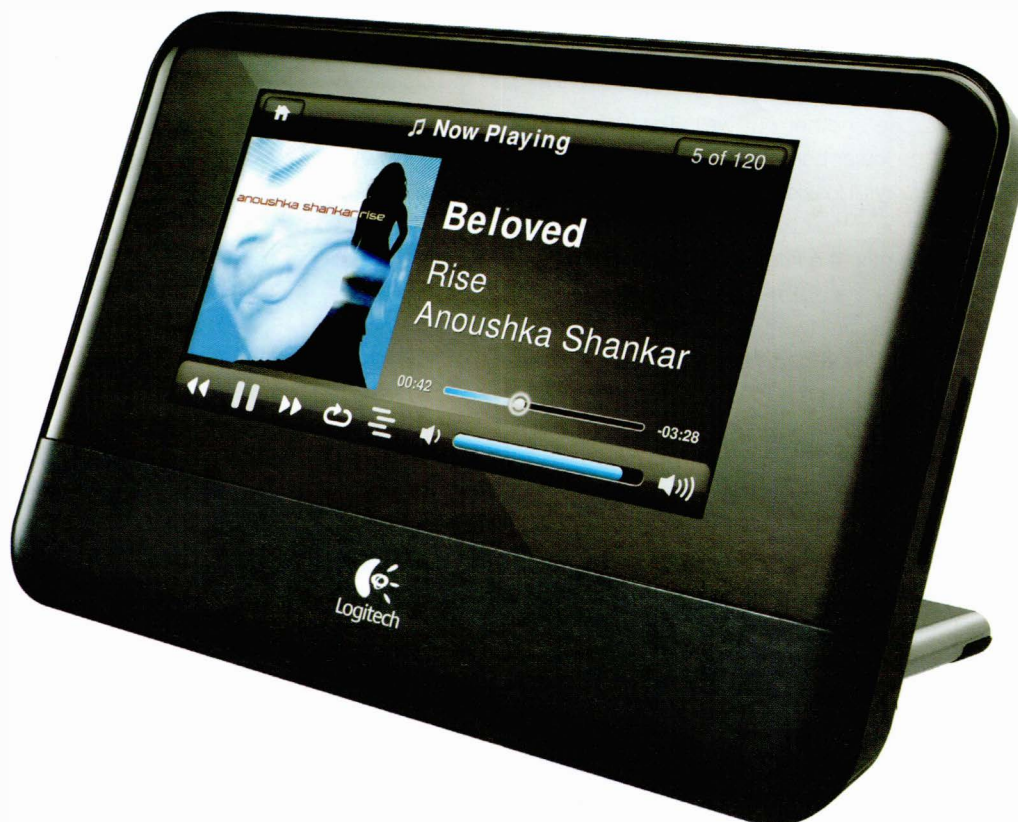
Price from £1,800/pair

Manufactured by

Amphion

URL: www.amphion.fi

Tel: +358 17 2882 100



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Logitech Squeezebox Touch

by Steven Stone

The debate over whether wireless audio or computer-based audio are 'good enough' to be part of a high-end system is still raging among some audiophiles. For others the debate is already over. As Alan Sircom discovered when he reviewed the Meridian Sooloos music server in the last issue, if you can afford a server that costs thousands, you can have great sound from a hard-drive-based system. But what about those of us who can only pony up three figures? Can you achieve CD-competitive (or better) sound from an "entry-level" product such as the new £260 Logitech Squeezebox Touch? I sure hope so. I see strong signs that the price/performance differential between expensive and budget-priced front-ends is shrinking. In the rapidly approaching new music-library-based audio world, consumer electronics, computer manufacturers, and pro-audio firms will all have devices suitable for use in high-end audio systems. Logitech is a prime example of a company that's involved in this new audio revolution. Its latest wireless audio device, the Squeezebox Touch, builds on two

prior generations of Squeezebox wireless devices. Offering 96/24 capabilities, a responsive touchscreen display, and a more robust and open-ended interface, the Touch looks like the ideal 'first step' for audiophiles who have yet to make the jump to a high-performance wireless music device.

The Basics

The Logitech Touch's main function is to play music files. The files can come from many sources, including your iTunes library or the primary music library on your computer or music libraries on USB and NAS drives, as well as Internet radio, Pandora, Last FM, and other on-line music services. It is called Touch because of its 4.3" (actually 2 1/4" by 3 3/4" display area) touchscreen. All functions can be controlled and accessed from this

touchscreen. The Touch also comes with a remote control to operate it from your listening chair, if your listening chair is close enough to the Touch to read its screen (for me the decipherability limit is five feet.) If not, you can use the Touch with the Squeezebox Duet remote, which has a full colour screen. You can also control the Touch via your iPod or iPad via a free app available through Apple's App Store.

The Squeezebox Touch supports most formats including WAV, AIFF, Apple Lossless, FLAC, WMA, WMA lossless, AAC, and MP3. It can also transcode formats through its Squeezebox Server software (more on this later). The Touch does not require a computer running Squeezebox Server to play Internet radio or on-line music services. A server is required as one of the ways to play tracks from your primary home music library — the other way is to play from a USB memory stick or SD card inserted into the Squeezebox Touch. This USB drive connection gives you access to any local music library on a USB drive without forcing you to turn your computer on. Some users have even set up the Touch so it runs exclusively off a USB drive with no local or Internet connectivity whatsoever (except for initial setup, which will require Internet access).

“You can use the Touch with the Squeezebox Duet remote, which has a full colour screen.”

I used the Touch with a variety of different manufacturers' USB sticks to conclude that this method is both reliable and easy. But I never managed to get the Touch to recognize my Newer Technology V3 drive due to its OS X file system. The Touch only supports USB drives with FAT 16, FAT 32, NTFS, and ext2/ext3 file systems. Also it's vitally important to use a drive that has its own external power supply that does not depend on the USB connection for its power. The Touch's power supply can't fully support the power requirements of a USB drive through its USB connection. If you are planning to use the Touch primarily with a USB drive, consult a list of supported devices here on Slim Devices' Web site.

The Touch's most exciting new feature is its ability to play 96/24 high-def music files. It's the first under-£300 wireless server that supports these higher-resolution files. During the review period I played 96/24 files from my USB sub-libraries and main library via both Wi-Fi and

hard-wired Ethernet sources successfully. Only once, during months of play, did the Touch stop in the middle of a song. Merely pushing the pause and play buttons instantly solved that problem.

Initial setup for the Touch was simpler for me than for a new user since I've been using a Squeezebox Duet and have already set up a Squeezebox Server and Squeezebox system. The Squeezebox Server software and my Duet remote immediately recognized the new Touch and I was listening to music from my main music library via Wi-Fi in under fifteen minutes. If you do have set-up problems Squeezebox user forums on Slim Devices' Web site (forums.slimdevices.com) will be immeasurably helpful. Several Squeezebox experts, such as John Swenson, frequent the forums regularly.

Two Ways to Get Hooked Up

The Touch has both WiFi and Ethernet connectability, but if I were a betting man I'd wager that over 80% of Touches will be connected via WiFi. I tried it both ways, and like the general public most of my listening was done via WiFi connected to 170GBs of music in my iTunes music library. Some users on the Squeezebox forums claim that Ethernet offers better fidelity than WiFi, but I didn't hear any repeatable, recognizable fidelity differences between these two connection methods. Obviously if you experience dropouts via WiFi then switching to a hard-wired Ethernet connection will reduce incidents of dropouts due to the connection. Will it sound better this way? That depends on your WiFi connection. ▶



the 44.1/24-bit FLAC files onto another USB stick, load the stick into the Touch's USB slot, and a minute later I was listening to the entire Beatles library in 24-bit splendor! That was good day sunshine indeed.

Day-to-Day Operation

During the past two months that I've had the Touch up and running in my system I've found it to be substantially more stable and glitch-free than the Logitech Duet. Dropouts caused by connection errors have been virtually non-existent with the Touch, while in the past the Duet has occasionally given me problems. I should mention that Logitech's latest version of the Squeezebox Server Software might also be part of the reason that the Touch has been so stable and responsive. Other users on the Squeezebox Forums also have reported improved performance with the Duets and version 7.5.1.

When I reviewed the Sonos system and compared it to the Duet using the previous version of Squeezebox Server software, the Sonos proved to be ergonomically more elegant. But the Touch with SC 7.5.1 and SBL brings the Squeezebox system much closer to the ease of operation of the Sonos. Now, regardless of whether my computer is on or not, I can access and enjoy my music files through the Touch. That alone is a massive improvement over previous Squeezebox systems.

Mid-Fi, Hi-Fi, or Ultra-Fi?

Once the Touch was set up in my room system, the fun really began. Since both the TosLink and coaxial digital outputs are active, it was easy to try different digital connection schemes and compare the results. At first I set up the Touch so it ran through my Meridian 518 digital-processing device before the signal went into my Meridian 568.2 controller. With this hook-up method, the sonic differences between the Squeezebox Touch and Duet were nil. Going back and forth using ▶

▶ In both my systems I used the Touch primarily with its digital outputs. I understand that some readers intend to use the Touch's internal DAC instead of its digital outputs, so I spent some time listening to its analog output through my Stax Nova headphones. Compared to the Weiss DAC 202 via its RCA coaxial connections, the Weiss exhibited a more extended top end with a greater sense of air. I also found the Weiss to be more dimensional. But the Touch's own internal DAC isn't bad. It's musical and smooth, and has excellent dynamic contrasts. Its sins were primarily of omission, with a slightly darker and more forgiving nature than the Weiss.

“Now, regardless of whether my computer is on or not, I can access and enjoy my music files through the Touch.”

Multiple Libraries

I mentioned earlier that many people are using the Touch as a stand-alone unit with a music library connected via the USB inputs. While this is an excellent solution for those who don't or won't install a wired or wireless network to access digital music files, it does limit your options to only one music library. Part of the beauty of the Squeezebox system is its ability to handle and access multiple libraries. Each household member can have his or her own library, which the Touch can access via only a few selections from its screen.

My preferred method for using the Touch's USB connection is with what I call 'micro libraries,' which are USB memory sticks between 2 and 8GB with specific types or genres of music. The Touch's Squeezebox Lite software has memory limitations that make it happier with smaller libraries as opposed to fully populated big ol' 1TB USB drives. Large drives cause the SBL software operations to slow down upon installation, when the Squeezebox software is initially indexing the drive. These slow-downs can affect response time to commands, especially those involving skip and search functions. Once fully indexed, larger drives will respond with the same speed as smaller USB cards, but any time you switch USB drives the indexing process will affect the Touch's response time until SBL finishes its indexing duties. With small USB cards instead of larger mechanical hard drives, the Touch's SBL software can quickly index the music and be fully responsive moments after the drive is connected.

At the 2010 CES a friend of mine loaned me a USB memory stick with the complete *Beatles In Stereo* boxset on it. This was one of a limited run of 30,000 copies. When I got home I could hardly wait to hear the 24-bit FLAC file versions of my fave Beatles songs on the USB stick, but when I tried to play them on my Mac I couldn't. Even the latest Apple OS 10.6.4 operating system wouldn't natively decode FLAC files. Sure, I could load them individually into Audacity for playback, but if I wanted to play the entire stick's contents from the 44.1/24-bit files I was out of luck. Using the Squeezebox Touch all I had to do was copy

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▶ the same 44.1/16 digital file source I couldn't reliably tell one from the other. But once I hooked both units directly into the Meridian 568.2 via their RCA coaxial outputs, the differences between the units were more pronounced. I noticed the Touch had a more three-dimensional soundstage with a better sense of depth. Also dimensional cues and subtle low-level details were more apparent through the Touch. When I tried streaming Internet radio sources, I couldn't discern any sonic differences between the Touch and the Duet. MP3 files through the two units were also essentially identical. My conclusion was that to hear the Touch's sonic improvements over the Duet you have to use at least a lossless 44.1/16 file for your listening tests.

Next I compared the Touch to a Meridian 598 DP DVD/CD transport with the original CD in the Meridian and its matching digital file on the Touch. Overall, I'd call this comparison a sonic dead heat. The 598 was a bit more harmonically lush, but this lushness came at the expense of dynamic contrast and inner detail. The Touch was more matter-of-fact with greater dynamic ease. Both displayed riveting levels of inner detail and musical texture, but the Meridian emphasized the source's musicality while the Touch brought the music's dynamism to the forefront.

The best sonic results from the Touch came when it was playing higher-resolution files. I listened to a slew of my own 96/24 recordings through the Touch and it never failed to produce outstanding results. I was especially impressed by the Touch's ability to reproduce spatial information. I have a recording I made of a live concert from the bluegrass band Long Way Home. The recording was done in a small one-room wooden schoolhouse west of Boulder, CO. The band was recorded with one stereo pair of Schoeps Collette microphones connected to a Grace Lunatec V-3 microphone preamp in M/S mode. Through the Touch it was easy to place each instrument in the soundstage and hear the wall and floor reflections. Even very subtle dimensional cues were obvious, such as the way the acoustic bass's notes bloomed and expanded as they interacted with the room.

Goin' For The Touch

Economically speaking, a £260 device is not high end. But high-end audio isn't only about economics. Performance matters. Judged strictly by that yardstick the Logitech Squeezebox Touch qualifies as a legitimate high-end component. Alone, the Touch produces musical and detailed sonics and can deliver 96/24 music files to your eager ears. Coupled with a top-echelon DAC the Touch can take you well past the first scrum in high-end sonics into the centre of the playing field.

If you haven't dipped your toes into the ocean of wireless and computer audio, the Logitech Squeezebox Touch would be an excellent craft for your maiden voyage. For less than the cost of a pair of top-quality one-meter interconnects, you can enjoy your digital music files, even 96/24 files, anywhere in your home. Let's face it: Early adopters aren't usually thought of as thrifty types, but considering its price and capabilities, purchasing a Squeezebox Touch may be the most parsimonious audiophile purchase you'll ever make. Recommended? Oh, yes! +

Review originally published in The Absolute Sound, issue 206

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

System requirements: For access to music on your computer use Squeezebox software with the minimum system requirements: 256MB RAM and 100MB of available hard disk space. With any of the following operating systems—Macintosh: Mac OS X 10.3 or later; Windows: 733MHz Pentium running Windows 2000, Windows XP, Windows 7, or Windows Vista; Linux/BSD/Solaris/Other; Perl 5.8.3 or later. Broadband Internet connection required for Internet radio and music services.

Audio formats: MP3, FLAC, WAV, AIFF, WMA, Ogg Vorbis, HE-AACv2, HD-AAC, Apple Lossless, WMA Lossless, APE, MPC and WavPack supported through transcoding

Internet radio: Support for MP3, Ogg Vorbis, HE-AACv2 and WMA formatted Internet Radio streams

Wireless interface: True 802.11g wireless networking; support for 802.11b and 802.11g routers and access points; throughput up to 54Mbps, high speed PCI interface to radio module

Ethernet interface: Shielded CAT5 RJ-45 connector, connects to any 100Mbps or 10Mbps network (with Auto MDX)

General: USB host connector for accessing music and photos via USB drive or USB key; SD card slot for music and photos; supports sampling rates up to 24 bit / 96 kHz; stereo analog (RCA), digital optical, and digital coax output; 4.3" (11cm) 24-bit colour LCD with capacitive touchscreen

Price: £260

Manufactured by: Logitech UK Ltd

Tel: +44(0)175-387 09 00

URL: www.logitech.com

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Von Schweikert UniField One loudspeaker

By Alan Sircom

The Von Schweikert UniField One loudspeaker is the perfect example of the dichotomy between the sort of small room speaker UK listeners require and the kind of speaker that works in the larger rooms of our US counterparts. The UniField One is almost a forgotten loudspeaker in American territories and yet is probably the 'Most Valuable Player' on the team here in Blighty.

That 'UniField' part of the name comes from the term 'unified sound field' design, a concept that theoretically makes the speaker independent of the room itself. This works by combining a drive unit arrangement with excellent on and off-axis performance with a very inert cabinet. The loudspeaker effectively has no output to the rear and sides of the cabinet, so any boundary interaction (or lack thereof) is immaterial to the sound. Which means the loudspeaker will work in a cabinet, on a wall or in free space with little change in tonality, even if the wall does reinforce the bass response.

How this works is using a triple-wall cabinet structure, combining a medium Q resin-impregnated MDF outer shell with a high Q artificial stone damping blocks and then a low Q inner coating of hard felt, all bonded together with a rubberised adhesive, which itself acts as a constrained layer and thereby

helps damp vibration transmitted from layer to layer. The whole point of this is to combine the benefits of all three types of material in a manner usually only possible with very high-mass, thick walled cabinets. Nevertheless, the composite cabinet still is almost 6.5cm thick, but it does take a piano gloss well. The internal void is filled with little fluffy clouds of Dacron wadding, although with a twist – the closer you get to the cabinet walls, the denser the Dacron, in a manner suggested to provide absorption without reflection back into the cone. Inside the cabinet, the UniField One is divided up into three chambers, in what von Schweikert calls a 'hybrid transmission line'.

The cabinet itself looks like a well-made but relatively commonplace chamfered cabinet, with a rear panel wide enough to take a beefy single set of rhodium-plated 4mm posts (that can also take a set of spade

lugs). This also has a relatively wide front baffle with a front mounted flared port. This does give the UniField One some tuning potential; if the bass is too overpowering in a very small room, stuff more Dacron up the front port and it should tame the bass beast.

The main driver is a coaxial design, sitting in a 172mm cast frame. It combines a silk-dome tweeter using a neodymium magnet with a transparent TPX mid-bass cone coupled with what the company defines as a 'low distortion motor'. This UniField driver is said to be based on a BBC design and von Schweikert licenses this from what used to be the corporation's engineering research department. The drive unit itself looks very similar to a SEAS Prestige model, but even if it was an unmodified version of that unit, the raw materials are good... that's an extremely expensive coaxial drive unit in its own, unmodified, right.

“As the rest of the speaker package is deader than Elvis riding Shergar through a graveyard, this shouldn't matter”.

The company recommends the speakers sit on tall stands when used off wall, but the UK distributor goes one further and supplies a pair of Partington Super Dreadnought speaker stands, pre-filled with the appropriate mass for the loudspeaker. The stand is not overfilled, and this does give mean the stand has a dull 'ring' instead of a duller 'thunk' when given the knuckle test, but as the rest of the speaker package is deader than Elvis riding Shergar through a graveyard, this shouldn't matter. The distributor also supplied a two-metre set of VSA Signature shotgunned (jacketed bi-wire cables, with eight different cables per jacket, recombined to single wire) speaker cables. These cost as much as the loudspeaker itself and they did offer a level of mid-band transparency more than commensurate with the loudspeaker itself. Certainly, in listening sessions through the UniField One, they proved themselves on a par with competitive cables from Atlas, Audience, Cardas and JPS.

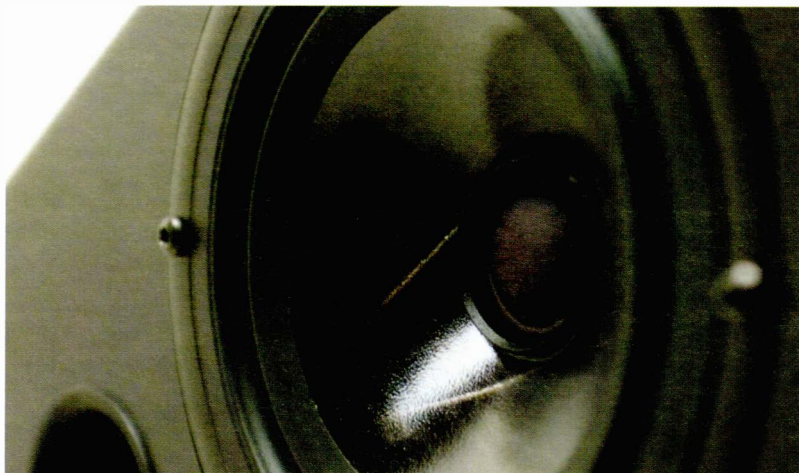
With a claimed sensitivity of 87dB, a nominal impedance of eight ohms (with a six ohm minimum) and a power rating from anywhere between 20W-125W, the speakers should be an easy match with any amplifier. The key word there is 'should'. For, although the UniField One is not a tough load (in measurement terms), it's a demanding one in terms of quality of electronics. While notionally possible to be driven as some

kind of 'mullet' system (where the cost of the loudspeakers far outweighs that of the source and amplifier), a more intelligent partnering should be considered, because the speakers are very transparent. I found a perfect set of partners in the Deltec pre and power amplifier combination tested back in issue 73, and in a small room these drove the speakers with ease.

There are two parts to the auditioning, here. Aside from the usual 'how does it sound' section, there's the bold claim that the loudspeakers are 'universals' to contend with too. This latter is easy... the UniField One lives up to the claim. Sort of. These speakers are best used firing straight down the room (as in, with minimal toe-in) and very slightly closer together than usual. In that setting, the speakers shine in a similar way to KEF coaxial designs, although these tend to prefer a wider than usual placement.

You could apply that simple formula to big room and small and get a very similar result. ▶





► So why 'sort of', then? The speakers are somewhat influenced by their position in the listening room relative to the rear and side walls. Although there's no 'too far' position, too close to the boundary and the bass begins to grow a boom. Filling in the port can mitigate this, but the speaker sounds at its most free with some air around it. A true universal design would have no placement issues, although I think such a speaker only exists in the virtual world. Certainly, this is one of the least room dependent conventional speakers on the market and achieves its claim (once again with KEF being in the same league).

So, what does it sound like otherwise? Surprisingly and accurately deep. No, it doesn't 'beef up' the bass and it will need some reinforcement in really large rooms, but as a small room speaker it delivers pretty much all you need from the bottom end, in as clean a manner as you could ask for. This is why it's heavy on the quality; any sense of mid-forward 'detail' or brightness in the electronics is laid bare here. Because it's so honest, it demands the same from its partners, and such partners are rare.

It's detailed and insightful without drawing attention to itself. Opera sounds like something more than a collection of vowels set to music. Rock has drive and energy and can be played at a fair lick. Jazz sounds close-knit and focused. Orchestral music has the energy and passion or it has the focus and precision needed to parse Beethoven at one end and Haydn at the other. It's as happy as your room and your system will let it with anything from a solo voice to a massed choir. Which is remarkably hard to do properly.

There's an obvious rival in the KEF Reference 201/2, also in this issue. Both sport a coincident drive unit (the famed Uni-Q, in the case of the KEF), both are standmounters and while the 201/2 is actually a three-way design, they have similar frequency response characteristics. A soundbyte comparison would place the KEF as the winner for those ruled by their heads, where the UniField One is the one from the heart, but as with any pithy comment, it fails to get the details across. The KEF is brighter and more 'modern' in its balance, and far more comfortable in a wider range of rooms, but the UniField One wins out in sheer musical naturalness. I'd struggle to choose one over the other because in fairness, comparing the two is almost an exercise in futility because their commonalities are more apparent than their differences, especially in terms of detail and soundstaging. This shows both companies are on the right track and even set against the home team's best opposition, the UniField One has a lot of music to offer.

This is a very clever loudspeaker. It's voiced to sound remarkably good, no matter what you throw at it. That's not smoke and mirrors, just very attentive listening from an engineer who knows how to make a good sound. Using the right materials and the right components makes that easier to execute, but I dare say Albert Von Schweikert could make a good sound out of a loudspeaker made out of matchsticks and tissue paper given the UniField One. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Two-way standmount loudspeaker
Front firing reflex port

Main driver: coincident coaxial drive unit

Silk dome tweeter at acoustic centre
176mm TPX mid-bass driver

Sensitivity: 87dB

Nominal impedance: eight ohms (six ohms minimum)

Frequency response: 40Hz-22kHz

Power handling: 20W-125W (250W peak)

Dimensions (HxWxD): 36x23x33cm

Weight: 12.7kg

Price: £4,995 per pair

Manufactured by

Von Schweikert Audio

URL: www.audioplay.co.uk

Tel: +44(0) 207 359 6962

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Linn Majik DS-I integrated system

by Alan Sircom

Strange that Linn products – the company so anti-digital, it used to have people remove digital watches when auditioning its equipment – has ended up at the forefront of the next gen audiophile movement. Or perhaps it's not so strange; Linn's position has long been one that considered CD something of a 'fad', and the move from disc-based to streaming-based digital audio is a reflection of that.

The Majik DS-I is key to that digital future. It essentially combines two of Linn's entry-point products – the Majik DS digital streamer/renderer and the Majik I integrated amp – in one box.

In simple terms, the Majik DS-I is a 2x90W (into four ohms) integrated amplifier – with all the usual trimmings such as analogue and digital inputs and outputs, multi-room zoning, a headphone socket and even a MM phono board. Linn loves naming things, so the monolithic amplifier 'boosted' by bipolar transistors circuit becomes the Chakra amp and the switching power supply is Brilliant. The renderer part is an custom made upsampling DAC working to 24-bit, 192kHz precision. It's an elegant solution without endless devices in

the listening room, the perfect antithesis to a wall of boxes.

Streaming audio is a networked digital audio solution, as opposed to the more straightforward computer-to-DAC option commonly put about. At its most basic, a streaming solution demands an UPnP (Universal Plug 'n' Play) Network Attached Storage device (to hold all your recordings), the renderer and ideally a control device (a laptop, computer, PDA or smartphone) all working off a network. This means more futzing around with network cables and typing static IP addresses into routers than simply plugging a USB cable between a computer and your audio system, but it does make for a very robust system. It also means a lot of equipment in your system can be made to disappear to another room, or even a store cupboard.

A number of audio companies – from

Squeezeboxes to music servers – are going down the networked route because of this robustness (the packetized data of networked audio also effectively side-steps the whole audio jitter problem). To its great credit, Linn's Linndocs website does list a thoroughly tested step-by-step methodology to create a dedicated music subnetwork that runs alongside your regular home computer or computer network. It's a belt-and-braces approach that can end up with a user having a lot of network products in their system – and the recommended use of homeplugs sending network data packets along the home power lines will send shivers down the cables of those seeking the purest possible AC – but it works. The list of NAS boxes recommended by Linn is short and specialised, but this is down to the use of Twonky as server thinning out the pack.

Linn has gone 'open source' with its DS line. This means although it has its own set of Kinsky programs to control, you are not forced to use these programs and – if you are an able enough programmer – you could customise or improve Linn's own program suite. Or write your own. You could even use Linn's KinskyDesktop as your music control point for a different computer audio solution, although I suspect that's not going to be a popular choice, because – although improved over early iterations – it's still something of a weak link, next to J River or MediaMonkey.

Linn's going 'open' also means it isn't locked into a proprietary backwater. It uses standard Ethernet, line-level analogue or coaxial/optical digital audio connections, and runs on UPnP and Linn recommends ripping to FLAC (free lossless audio coder). The only real limit is the problem of DRM-tagged recordings, but this is not a problem unique to Linn. Digital Rights Managed tracks are 'difficult' (a polite version of 'impossible') to use in a client-server distributed system, because they are effectively 'locked' to a single device.

The DS option is principally – but not exclusively – PC based. The DS system will recognise Apple Lossless files and much of the architecture will run alongside and under Mac systems (using the Safari browser and the Bonjour 'handshaking' program), but configuration and updates still require a PC running Linn's Konfig (there is a Mac version, but it's buggy).

In short, there's not much that the Linn DS system can't do with software or hardware, thanks to a kanny bunch of Linthusiasts, who will come up with a workaround at an alarming pace. However, working in the way Linn intended works best for the purposes of a review of the Majik DS-I. So, I used it with a RipNas acting as both CD ripper and network storage, with both products – and a D-Link DWL-3200AP wireless access point – connected to a Netgear FS108 ethernet switch, which was itself hooked to a Netgear RP614 router.

This acted as a complete subnetwork that then latched on to my internet router, leaving my existing wired-and-wi-fi home computer network both unaffected by and unable to access the music server. The RipNas rips CDs using dbpoweramp, a very able and fully automated program that allows Accurate Rip checking of each CD stored on the system. The Majik DS-I could control what music was played from its front panel, but the scrolling display would make working through a large music collection difficult in the extreme. Controlling the server through either a PC laptop (running KinskyDesktop) or my iPhone (through the PlugPlayer app) was the better way of navigating things.

Linn also provided a pair of Majik 109 standmount speakers, stands and a short set of Linn K20 speaker cable to show what an all-Majik system might sound like. I also used the system with a range of loudspeakers, and the Spendor S9 floorstanders and the Majik DS-I in particular lived together in a very happy place.

Here's the thing. If the world of NAS boxes and Ethernet Switches leaves you confused and in a cold sweat, read the Linndocs site. If it still leaves you panicked, call for help. The wrong thing to do would be to dismiss this out of hand, because the end result is an extremely capable music replay system. Moreover, once all the network boxes are hidden away in a cupboard, the end result is paradoxically less boxes in the living room.





TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Linn Majik DS-I

Integrated amp/digital streamer

Supported file types: FLAC, ALAC, WAV, AIFF, AAC, MP3

Audio sample rates: 7.35-192kHz

Word depths: 16-24 bits

Control protocol Compatible with UPnP™ media servers,

UPnP™ AV 1.0 control points

Connectors

Line inputs: (1 to 4) RCA phono (Input 4 MM/Line)

Aux input (front) 3.5 mm stereo jack

Tape/Zone output RCA phono (pre-volume control)

Line out (L+R) RCA phono (post-volume control)

Headphone (front) 3.5 mm stereo jack (post-volume control)

SPDIF In RCA phono

Optical In TOSLINK

SPDIF Out RCA phono

Optical Out TOSLINK

Ethernet 100Base-T RJ45

RS232 (1 & 3) RJ11

IR Flasher 3.5 mm jack (x2)

Speaker outputs: 4 mm banana/ binding post/spade

Power output: 90 W RMS per channel into 4 Ω

THD+N: < 0.015% (1 kHz, 1 W RMS into 4 Ω)

Dynamic range: > 120 dB

Signal to noise ratio: > 115 dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 8x38.1x35.5cm (without feet)

Weight: 4.9 kg

Price: £2,500

Manufacturer: Linn Products

Tel: +44 (0) 141 307 7777

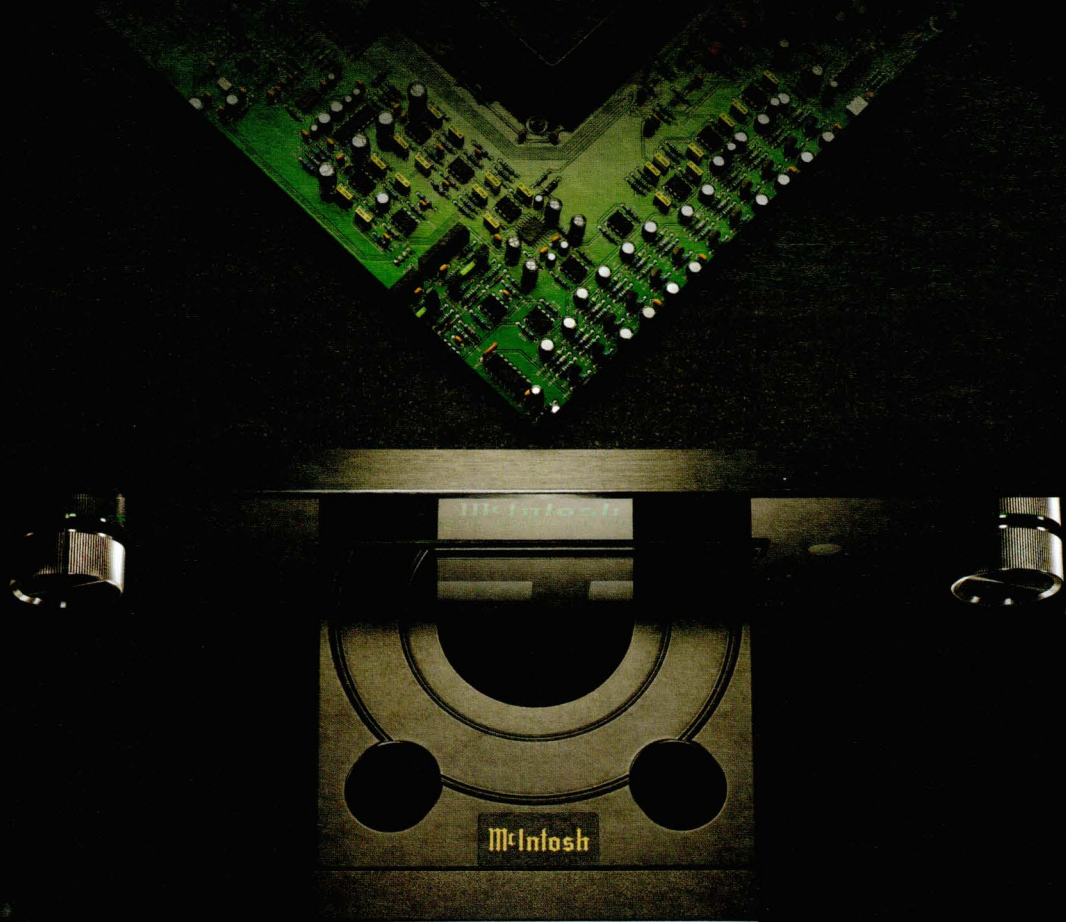
URL: www.linn.co.uk

► There are two main ways of accessing music through the DS system; music stored on your NAS box (whether that's from existing ripped CDs or downloaded tracks from internet music sites) or streamed content direct from the internet, such as digital radio stations. Linn does both well, and they all show up exactly what the Linn system is capable of. Linn's internet radio stations are essentially there to show off Linn Records catalog and do the job exceptionally well.

The internet radio player is extremely competent, although I was suffering an exceptionally fragile broadband connection for some of the listening period (thanks, BT) and this ended in periodic drop-outs, especially at peak net-surfing time on the same contended broadband line. While horribly frustrating, it demonstrated that the quality of the signal didn't degrade, it was just like someone playing with the pause button. This is actually a good thing; the fade in and fade out is a lot less aggressive than sudden moments of punctuation potentially damaging drive units. The Linn Majik DS-I was about as good with internet radio as I've heard to date; virtually CD quality with the best channels, increasingly degraded as you get into the cheap seats. There are some remarkable gems out there though; Linn's own high-quality stations among them, naturally.

Then there's the quality of the sound from the NAS. I am not a major supporter of the 'CDs sound better when ripped and stored' school of thought, but the Linn Majik DS-I does make a strong argument for that. Certainly as a two-and-a-half grand package, I'd struggle to find a CD and amp that significantly better the overall performance. It's a 'dry' sound, with neither the lush mids of valve amps or the forward mids and tops of solid state to get in the way of the performance. All of which is a polite way of saying "sayonara Squeezebox". And I suspect that for a significant number of newcomers to our little audiophile clique, this and a pair of Majik 109 speakers will be all they need to discover the joys of music in the home.

It's hard not to sound a bit nerdy when discussing the whole DS concept. And, in all fairness, that nerdy part could read 'unstintingly daunting' to someone used to a more 20th Century interpretation of technology. This can sometimes mask the benefits of a DS system – name a conventional hi-fi system that can let you access every piece of music you own in a second, has potential access to the whole musical canon from online sources and even wake you up in the morning without a fuss? Ultimately, UPnP streaming is likely to be the way you will be playing your music tomorrow. Linn just lets you get with the programme today. +



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

conrad-johnson ET3 preamp

by Alan Sircom

I'll be honest, here. The conrad-johnson ET3 preamplifier is a remarkable preamp, but I had trepidation about the way it's being promoted. It's down to the 'baby GAT' thing – the ET3 is being touted as an affordable version of the company's GAT flagship pre. That, I feared, is setting the ET3 up for a fall; the GAT is so damn good, it's like calling someone the 'mini Mozart'. Trouble is, the ET3 is a baby GAT.

The ET3 uses a single Russian-made Electro Harmonix 6922 double triode voltage gain with MOSFET follower circuit acting as a buffer – designed to give the preamp a strikingly low output impedance – and a similar solid-state DC voltage regulator. This is very much in line with the GAT's circuit. Once again like the GAT, the low impedance means you can use the preamp with long cables between it and the power amplifier.

Functionally, the two are similar. There are six line inputs, a tape and a home cinema loop – all single-ended – all of which are selected through relay switching. The relays are all placed on a stand-alone board to limit their switching clicks from reaching the tubes. The volume control is a discrete, relay-driven design once again similar to the GAT, although lacking balance adjustment (even though the LED read-out has separate left/right levels). This can't be altered even on the remote handset, even though there are buttons marked out for the task. The remote this time is a slim black plastic unit instead of the thick metal one supplied with the GAT.

Like the GAT, it's a physically big preamp, right up to the 19" rack limits. The standard, gold front with black crackle cover has been unchanged for decades and the big central

display/IR receiver has become a standard feature for some time. The overall fit and finish is very good, and the whole device sits on four thick hard-rubber feet. While not the cutting edge of footer technology, this more than suffices.

The GAT and ET3 preamps do differ – given one costs more than eight times the other, so they should – they share more than you might expect. Things like the separate power supply for the filaments of the valve, a microphony-reducing suspension system and a parts list that reads like a Who's Who of the best in audio components are all missing from the ET3. That being said, the audio-chain caps are all polypropylene and all the resistors are high-quality metal-film types, but the special Teflon by-pass caps and the field full of Vishay resistors seen in the GAT are what help keep the ET3 price in check. Like all c-j preamps, you need to phase invert the signal at the speaker terminals if you want to keep the sound in absolute phase.

The review sample came fully loaded. Along with the IR remote handset, it also included the built-in and retrofittable high gain phono stage, based on the reference TEA-1, which has enough gain and low enough noise to be good for moving coil cartridges of 1mV and below. The resistance loading of the phono module is adjustable thanks to two small covered DIP switch arrays. Factory

set of 47kOhms, the ET3 board can cope with 9.6k Ohm, 1.9k Ohm, 200 and 500 Ohm loads. The addition of this section adds to the component count on the circuit board, and adds three more tubes – Mullard 12AX7’s – to the roll call. It’s worth pointing out that modern Mullard is also made in Russia, but – like the 6922EH – tube rolling isn’t mandatory, because these standard tubes are pretty damn good in their own rights.

My initial dread about the ET3 was entirely unfounded. I did receive a sample with more than 50 hours on the clock, so I have to take the early break-in sound as hearsay, but that hearsay suggests there’s a magic point at around the 40 hour mark when the ET3 goes from lightweight to wonder-pre. I just got the wonder-pre point.

There are two schools of thought in good preamp design. Both follow the path of ‘first, do no harm’, like some electronic version of the Hippocratic Oath. Where they differ is whether they strive to do no harm to the recording, or the music. The two should be alike, but there seems to be a difference. The ET3, like the GAT before it, manages to make the music come to life whatever the recording. Others are faithful to the recording but the entertainment suffers in the process. This is the big bonus of the GAT, of course, in that it manages

“The preamp presents the listener with an enveloping sense of dimensionality that draws you deeper into the music.”

to make everything sound right without being sweet, where the ET3 makes everything sound right without being *too* sweet.

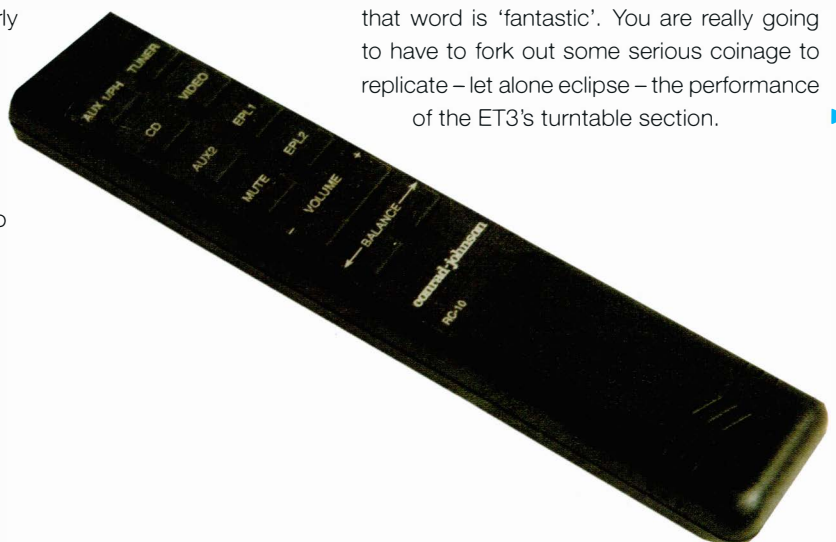
Where the ET3 scores highly is in its soundstaging. The preamp – like the GAT before it – presents the listener with an enveloping sense of dimensionality that draws you deeper into the music. This will invariably bring up that hoary old “yes, but is it accurate?” canard from those who will never hear or want to hear the ET3. Those who have and do just don’t care... they love the sound of the preamp, and would do so regardless.

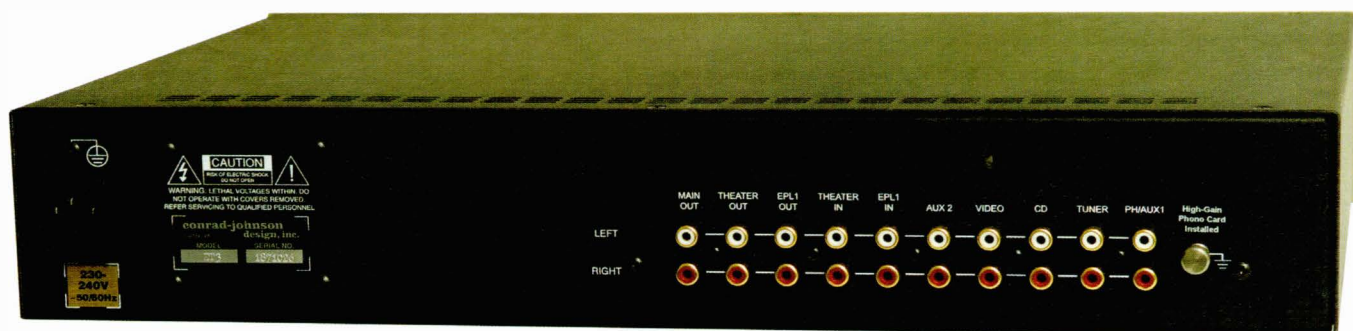
In some respects, this is a return to conrad-johnson’s heyday, like a PV12, rather than a more recent PV15. There was a time when a c-j preamp drew you into the music in a way that no other preamp could. That was c-j’s strength, but somewhere down the line, that got pushed to one-side to make products more in line with the clean, detailed – and some would say bloodless – sound of the early 21st Century. It must be said, the top line of c-j preamps never quite lost the way, but somewhere the romance went out of the relationship at the lower and middle end. A move back began with the ET2 and the Classic preamps, but it’s here that the return to romance really kicks off again.



If there’s one word that sums up the ET3 it’s ‘sumptuous’. Sound is full-bodied and natural sounding, enveloping the listener in the musical event in the way the c-j preamps always used to. You’d naturally expect this to shine playing smooth jazz combos and string quartets – the sort of music that benefits most from a touch of sonic ‘beautification’. And yet, strangely the album that became the standard bearer for what the ET3 does best was the least likely of all – *Californication* by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. This is considered the worst casualty of the Loudness War, with horribly clipped and compressed ‘peaks’ (it’s actually all peaks). The ET3 doesn’t reconstruct or repair the album and it doesn’t soften those clipped drum beats and power chords. But it does make them more listenable than most systems.

A word about the phono stage too, and that word is ‘fantastic’. You are really going to have to fork out some serious coinage to replicate – let alone eclipse – the performance of the ET3’s turntable section. ▶





- ▶ The nearest thing to a fly in the ointment is the need to be careful in choosing a good power amp to go with the ET3. Mix this in with a very warm and soft sounding tube power amp and the result could be too much of a good thing. The old classic combination of valve preamp and solid-state power amp works wonders here, and an Edge power amplifier (to be reviewed in an upcoming issue) made an absolutely perfect partnership.

“The ET3 gets a good way toward achieving the same performance (as the GAT), but at a fraction of the price.”

Looking back over my notes for the GAT, there was one album that surprised me because of how good it sounds – *Lateralus* by Tool. The GAT managed to deliver the drive and energy of the band (and it is an excellent recording, just not for everyone) with an uncanny dynamic freedom. The ET3 approaches that dynamism, but just falls short of nailing it. Hardly surprising really, given the price differential. I suspect most would not struggle with the compromise, and instead enjoy one of the most harmonically rich and sweet sounding preamps you can buy for the money.

This is no small achievement. The GAT was one of the very best preamplifiers I've heard, ranking up there with the best of the best. Expensive, yes, but justifiably so in performance terms. And the ET3 gets a good way toward achieving the same performance, but at a fraction of the price. No, it's not so good at being a 'baby GAT' that it will undermine GAT sales, but it does bring rediscovered elegance, sophistication and refinement back to preamplifiers at this price. Balance control aside, the ET3's 'baby GAT' description is far closer to the truth than the price differential suggests. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Line preamplifier with optional phono stage
Five RCA line inputs (four with phono stage)

Processor and Theatre RCA inputs and outputs

Line Stage

Gain: 25dB

Maximum Output: 20Vrms

Bandpass: 2Hz-100kHz

Hum and Noise: 98dB below 2.5v output

Distortion at 1.0V output: less than 0.15% THD or IMD

Output Impedance: 100ohms

Optional high-gain phono stage

Gain: 54dB

Hum and noise: 80dB below 10mV input

RIAA equalization: within ± 0.25 dB of RIAA specification

Dimensions: (HxWxD): 8.5x48x33.3cm

Weight: 5.9kg

Price: £2,450 line-only, optional phono stage £795

Manufactured by: conrad-johnson Design Inc

URL: www.conradjohnson.com

Distributed by Audiofreaks Ltd:

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)208 948 4153

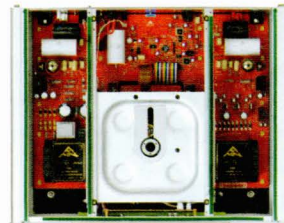


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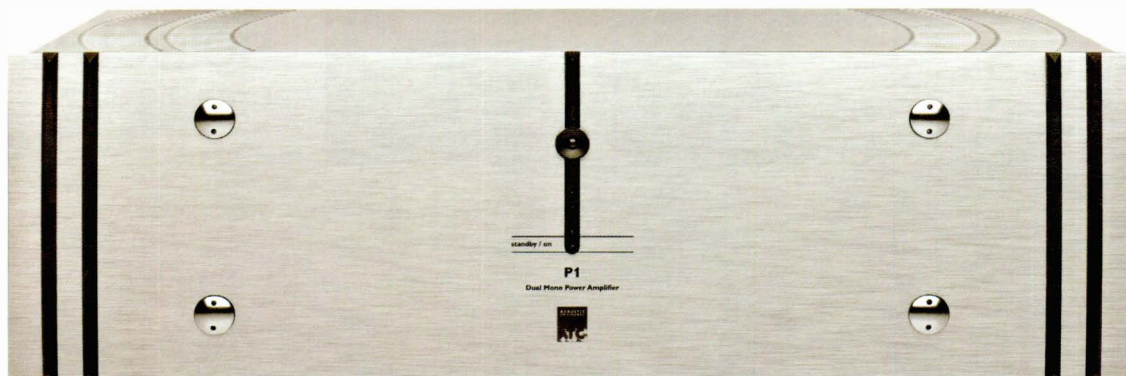


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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

ATC CA2/P1 pre/power amplifier

by Jason Kennedy

ATC has an enviable reputation in the pro audio world for its active monitors. These are often substantial speakers that combine classic but refined technologies to produce highly revealing and neutral results. The sort of results that professionals are happy to rely on. What is less obvious is the remarkable value the company appears to offer given its size. It may be Stroud's finest manufacturer of audio equipment but it's a small business in the general scheme of things. Yet it manages to produce a 150 watt pre/power combo for just over two and a half grand, what – you might ask – gives?

Having probed this point for some time it would seem that it's a case of keeping margins down across the board. ATC doesn't make a lot from each sale and nor do its dealers, which is why you don't see its kit as often as you should. But fortunately there are still some retailers who are into it for more than the money, people who are willing to forego a bit of profit in order to provide great value to their customers. An approach that hopefully nets them loyalty, which is something that ATC seems to have in the pro world. We are told that the company is so busy with custom jobs for studios and concert halls that it isn't too concerned about how well or otherwise its equipment does in the hi-fi world. However, this doesn't tally with products like the pre/power combo here. After all, ATC already makes a preamp and power amp called SCA2/SPA2-150, there's even an integrated (SIA2-150) so why bother making a more affordable one, a much more affordable one at that? The CA2/P1 cost about the same as an SIA2-150 and has the same power; in fact, all the ATC amplifiers are 150 watt designs built to the same design, but with greater refinement through higher quality parts etc in the top model. That probably helps keep the price down as well.

The CA2 is a very nicely executed preamplifier, with a solid 12.7mm thick brushed aluminium fascia. This is inlaid with black bars either side and held on with four discreet fixings that look like buttons. In fact, only the two inner domes are buttons, for power and tape monitor, the rotary knobs, also domed, control volume and input selection. The latter takes a bit of getting used to as it moves the LED across the various inputs named in the centre rather than pointing to inputs around its perimeter, but even I was able to master this peccadillo.

What foxed me however is the way that the phono input is named on the back panel. As it's an either/or input that can be configured for line or phono sources the script by the sockets and on the front panel reads 'Aux 2'. You'd probably be told whether it had a phono stage onboard if you bought it or you might even read the manual. But as I didn't have the latter, somewhat inevitably I chose this input to connect a CD player to and this may be why the phono stage failed to work as desired when I finally got around to trying it with a turntable...

You can change it from an MM to an MC stage internally, but figuring out how to do so proved a little tricky as the labelling on the board is pretty obtuse and the instructions not significantly clearer. However, a little trial and error produced a result that worked with my van den Hul Condor moving coil. You can adjust sensitivity for cartridges with between 0.7mV and 10mV output with five increments in between and choose either 100 ohms or 47k ohms impedance. This is the degree of flexibility you get with a good phono stage, but it's pretty rare in a preamplifier.

Input socketry is all single ended RCA phono, but there is an XLR output alongside the phonos as well as outputs for a subwoofer and tape. It has a headphone output on the back should you need to do a bit of discreet listening. Inside the box is a low noise circuit with fully regulated power supplies for each channel, ATC avoids ICs in the signal path because it feels they can distort phase and uses discrete gain blocks to provide amplification. Bandwidth is quoted as DC to greater than 200kHz and THD as bettering 110dB, the SCA2 at about four times the price gives you another 300k bandwidth and four extra decibels of 'quiet' between signal and noise. It is however fully balanced which is useful. Control can be achieved with a rather unglamorous but totally practical remote handset which also provides basic controls for a CD player using the popular Philips RC5 protocol.

“In detail terms, the P1 is as refined as you’d expect at the price. It’s not unduly revealing, but neither does it veil details.”

The P1 power amplifier has matching metalwork to the CA2, but I wouldn't suggest you stack the pre on top of the power for obvious thermal reasons. It weighs in at a respectable 23kg (50lbs) thanks to a 300 VA transformer for each channel. This is a true dual mono, class A/B power amp, which lives up to its output rating if independent tests are to be believed. Power is delivered by two pairs of MOSFETs per channel through a single pair of small but strong speaker terminals that will accept spade or banana connectors, or even bare wire if you feel the urge. Input socketry is in both flavours and there are link connections for each channel that can pass the signal onto another power amp. Unusually for a power amp, it can be powered up/down with the remote but the option exists to defeat this mode.

I started out by substituting the P1 for a Gamut D200 MkIII in a system with Bowers & Wilkins 802D speakers doing the transducing, and this revealed a matter of fact, no pussy footing character that is definite about what's going on. It is also very solid and grounded so there is plenty of control and weight in the bottom end which provides a firm anchor with which to tether the soundstage in the room. You can hear the not insubstantial drop in price between the Gamut and the ATC, but the latter does little that gets in the way of the music. In fact, the quality of timing is so good that the musical flow is totally unhampered, free to go where it wants to with a strong sense of purpose.

In detail terms, the P1 is as refined as you'd expect at the price. It's not unduly revealing, but neither does it veil details that are important when it comes to understanding how recordings have been put together. Despite having a slightly lower power rating than the Gamut, it has stronger bass. This underpins records like Antonio Forcione's *Tears of Joy* to great effect, revealing more about the space he's playing in than other amps if not elaborating on the more romantic aspects of his playing. The mid for instance is a little short on sparkle, but the overall result is very strong on musical engagement and that should be a fundamental goal for any audio component. ▶



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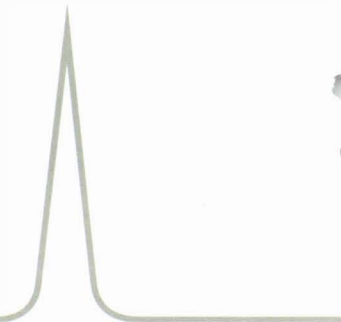
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▶ Using the CA2 preamp with a pair of ATC SCM150ASL Pro active speakers in place of an Audiozone Pre-1 TVC the result is once again strong on power. Kick drums have real energy and become more lifelike and visceral. Likewise, all electric instruments are far more real. It's a bit of an apples and pears comparison though, the passive controller is cleaner but lacks dynamics which makes the powered nature of the CA2 more apparent. It in turn sounds distinctly electric by comparison, but does a rather better job at delivering the power of the music. In short, you either like Marmite or you don't! I prefer listening to music. More useful perhaps is comparing the CA2 with another active preamp namely the Classé CP-700, once again the result was a notable increase in bass weight alongside a tighter, snappier presentation that gives the music far more get up and go. The flipside of this is that it's less relaxed and there is a shortfall in fine detail of the sort that reveals the tonal shading of each note and the decay that goes with it. But remember that the Classé

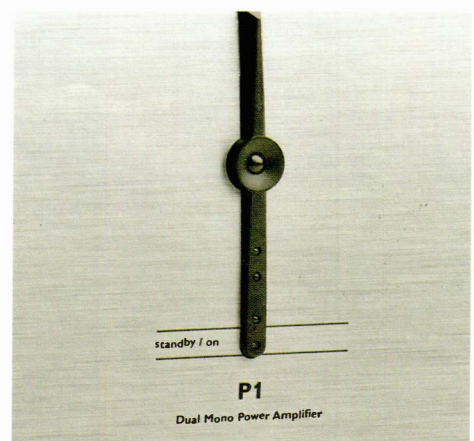
“Kick drums have real energy and become more lifelike and visceral. Likewise, all electric instruments are far more real.”

is also a rather more expensive beast and I would happily trade some of its finesse for a bit more zip.

Using both CA2 and P1 together through the 802Ds provided a full scale, full power experience that brings dynamic recordings to life. Muddy Waters' *Folk Singer* is a high energy recording with some occasionally savage mic abuse, the ATCs let it deliver all of its energy thanks to the ability that these amps have to unleash controlled power just when it's needed. Keith Jarrett's Carnegie Hall performance is not short of meat on the bone either, the tempo is strong and the piano bodacious. This pairing concentrates on the fundamentals and gets them spot on, so the timing is locked down and the

headroom allows the instrument's dynamics to ebb and flow in realistic fashion.

There are lower powered amplifiers that can deliver more of the harmonics and tonal richness from a recording but they don't usually back it up with the dynamics on offer here. At this price point there are always compromises to be made and ATC has focused on making an amplifier that delivers the core elements of the music in realistic and timely fashion. Leema's Tucana II (£3,425) Integrated for instance has a more open midband in the context of a relaxed and revealing presentation, albeit one that can't compete with the P1's sheer grunt. Arcam's A38 (£1,450) on the other hand is a bit more frenetic than the ATC pairing, which produced a more fleshed out sound that is ▶



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

CA2 Specifications

Input sensitivity 300mV
 Input impedance 12 kohms
 Dimensions (HxWxD) 90x445x330mm
 Weight 7kg
 6 year warranty
 Price £1,058

P1 Specifications

Rated power 150 watts per channel into 8 ohms
 Input sensitivity 2V
 Input impedance 10 kohms/leg
 Dimensions (HxWxD) 135 x 435 x 350mm
 Weight 23kg
 6 year warranty
 Price £1,566

Manufacturer

ATC Loudspeaker Technology Ltd,
 Gypsy Lane, Aston Down, Stroud, Glos
 GL6 8HR
 URL www.atc.gb.net
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- ▶ itself relatively relaxed. I didn't have anything more closely matched price wise but you can see that the ATCs fit into the scheme of things in terms of detail but rise above their station when it comes to power and timing.

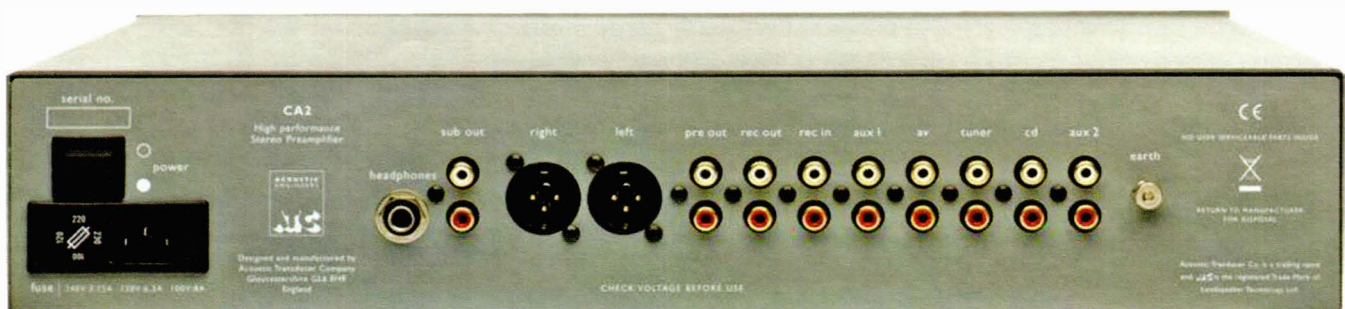
ATC kindly supplied a second CA2 with a fully intact phono stage which gave me the opportunity to put this particular input through its paces. With an MM cartridge it did the same trick as the rest of the amplifier by beefing up the bottom end and this gives the sound a greater sense of solidity overall. More significant however is the way it can pull realistic sound out of a modest turntable, I had a Rega RP1 in for review and this sounded pretty crisp and

“What it gives you is solid engineering and build quality for the money. The sound is reminiscent of pro audio.”

timely with a Trichord Dino phono stage but going directly into the phono stage resulted in the nature of percussion instruments being made more clear at the cost of a reduction in zing from the acoustic steel string. The outboard stage was inevitably combined with an interconnect which is an extra barrier but this was nonetheless a good result for the preamp. Impressively it even worked well with a low output MC (van den Hul Colibri), in my experience few onboard MC stages to cope with such things very well.

This pairing doesn't have some of the features that the competition is beginning to add such as digital and USB inputs, instead what it gives you is solid engineering and build quality for the money. The sound is reminiscent of pro audio, it delivers the fundamentals in a remarkably coherent and down to earth way. If you are looking for cavernous soundstages or inky black backgrounds you will have to pay rather more for it, but if you want to hear the important musical detail presented in a coherent, clear-cut fashion this pairing

has remarkably little competition in the two box arena. There are a few integrations around which give them a run for their money in one respect or another but nothing comes to mind which seems like a better overall package. +




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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Blue Horizon Proburn Cable Burn in machine

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

Hi>Fi+

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

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

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Devialet D-Premier integrated amp/DAC

by Alan Sircom

The first person I met who had heard about the Devialet D-Premier was French. He spoke animatedly of the category-busting Class ADH integrated amplifier/DAC, his speech full of superlatives, his hands bursting with extravagant gestures and his eyes wild with passion and drama. I put it down to a Frenchman being French about something French.

Then I started seeing the same symptoms from others who had experienced the D-Premier. Not just French people; people of all nationalities and fans of all musical genre, died in the wool measurement-led types or fairy-foo folk who believe electricity is made in the caves of the Dwarf-Lords of Moria. They all started discussing the product with a high degree of animation. Even the normally down-to-earth Paul Miller, editor of rival UK audio magazine *Hi-Fi News & Record Review*, was seen to be shouting about just how important this product really is, and you should read his measurements to see why.

So, either the Devialet D-Premier is something really special, or it's the audio equivalent of those man-sized seed-pods in *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*; people walk into a room with the D-Premier, and come out a few minutes later... changed. I decided to investigate.

A part of the reason why the measurement types are so excited about the Devialet D-Premier is it's something genuinely new and original. While each new product has legitimate reasons to highlight its novel aspects of design and implementation, deep down the changes are variations on one of several themes, no matter how good those themes, how innovative those variations or how remarkable the final result. A Class AB amplifier may differ in many ways from another Class AB amplifier, but the basic design of the amplifier circuit remains fundamentally the same.

The Devialet designers didn't approach the concept in the same way. They looked at what an amplifier has to do for a living in the first decade of the 21st Century and designed a product *tabula rasa* (blank slate) to accommodate those demands. People today, it seems, don't want a plethora of large, hot-running boxes that take a month before they sound good. They will increasingly rely on digital-only systems, despite recent improvements in the fortune of vinyl replay. They need enough power to drive today's more punishing loudspeaker loads, but enough finesse to make that process sound good regardless. Last, but not least, it needs to be easy to use and look very cool.

The designers – Pierre-Emanuel Calmel and Matthias Moronvalle, both from the R&D department of telecoms giant Nortel – set about designing an amplifier circuit that is both incredibly linear and highly efficient, utilising the advantages of both Class A and Class D amplifier designs. What they came up with was 'Class ADH' – a hybrid of analogue Class A amplifiers and a digital Class D design.

How this works is to have a small Class A amplifier directly coupled to the loudspeaker, to provide the voltage, while the Class D amplifier provides almost all the current needed to drive the loudspeaker. If you disabled the Class D circuit, you'd have something that would be capable of driving horn loudspeakers and headphones in its own right, but the hired muscle of the Class D amp bestows the same linearity to more demanding loudspeaker loads. Eagle-eyed readers with long memories might note that this concept is not far removed from the Quad 'current dumping' 405 amplifier of the 1970s. It's brought bang up to date, but the concept is similar.

It's important to stress that the 'D' in Class D does not stand for 'digital'. In fact, Class D is a highly efficient high-frequency switching amplifier. However, in the case of the Devialet, the Class D stage is fed by digital processors instead of an amp stage, so that it receives a digital 300kHz PWM (pulse width modulation) signal. So, it really is a Digital Class D design.

That in and of itself would be enough to impress people, but the rest of the story is just as impressive. The power output (nominally 165W per channel into eight ohms) can be remapped (akin to 'chipping' a sports car's engine management system) to deliver anything from 160-240W, special loads on the phono input and more will be addressable though downloading onto an SD card (supplied). The amplifier treats all

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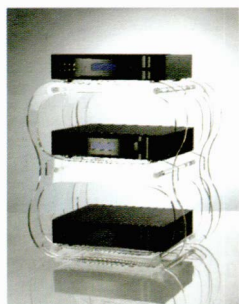
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► sources identically, immediately digitising analogue sources through a high-quality 48kHz ADC, with the Class D amp remaining in PWM mode up to the output devices and the Class A stage only receiving the output of two Burr Brown chips at the last possible moment. Yet again, this isn't handled in the normal manner, Devialet using what is called a 'current reflector' layout.

Those who read digital circuits in the way most of us wish we could read cooking instructions seem to make this low 'wwwowwww' noise. Digital engineers patently behave in a very 19th Century manner – since I received the D-Premier, I have had email from engineers wishing me to pass on their respect and admiration.

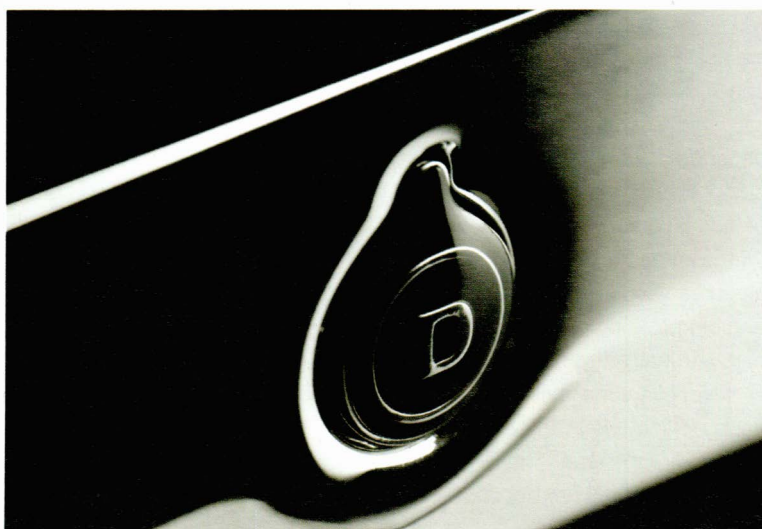
Once the engineering was done, it was time for the product designers to take their turn. This is a design award-winning exercise, from the computer screen and pen of Emmanuel Nardin (as in Ulysse Nardin watches, although the family is no longer connected to the brand, but style is in the blood) and Quentin Sannié.

The product itself is an exercise in shiny minimalism. Aside from a power switch (shaped in the style of the Devialet logo... nice touch) and the elegant circular display (which orients itself if you hang the D-Premier from the wall), everything is controlled from a remote comprising one big dial and four small buttons. This is RF control – so no pointing at a remote eye – and handshakes to the amp. If it loses that handshake or you manage to lose the big remote thing, you're in trouble because there is no manual volume or source switching on the amp. There's also no balance control, input volume trimming (that needs a computer and a quick byte of the SD card)... nada. At the back are three pairs of phono terminals that share tasks; one set are either the phono stage or the second line input, the next set are either a stereo analogue line input or two of the coaxial S/PDIF inputs and the third pair are either subwoofer and digital output or two digital inputs. These are selected by small, high-quality silent relays just after the phono terminals. The single AES/EBU input, the two Toslinks, SD card slot and HDMI input and outputs remain constant. These last are at first glimpse an odd addition – but they take the high-res stereo output from a Blu-ray and there's lots of good Blu-ray music out there. Strangely, network and USB connectors are missing, because Devialet is not convinced either is a good pathway for music. There is future provision for a high quality WiFi option, though – the black strip on the top plate is the antenna.

All of the inputs are hidden behind a thick removable panel. There's not much room under there, and fancy Wattgate IEC power plugs will foul the panel and spoil the lines of the elegant top-plate. Which is a shame because the amplifier/DAC is keen on good power delivery. In fact, the one operational hiccup through the whole time spent with the D-Premier was when plugging and unplugging products on the same power block; just the one time, it tripped the amp's power cycle, putting it into standby. That's it. Everything else, all manner of torture treatments (including – quite by accident – dropping a 103 year old ceiling on the thing) it brushed off without a care.

All of this impressive technology is as nothing if the performance doesn't live up to the hype. And that argument lasts until about 15-20 seconds after you power up the D-Premier. At which point, the hype begins to sound like mute understatement. About a minute in, you start the wild gesticulating, the "why didn't I know about this sooner?" pleas, and – in most cases – after about 20 minutes comes the realisation that all those amplifier boxes you currently own are about to go on Audiogon or eBay soon.

I hate the 'inky black silences' cliché, but I can't help noticing the absence of background keep coming back on my listening notes here. It's not enough that the amplifier delivers the sort of neutrality that makes you cry when you listen to *Carmen*. It's not enough that it has the sort of dynamic range and headroom that you would normally expect from an amplifier five times the power ►



► output and ten times the physical size. It's not even enough that the D-Premier has an ability to grab your speakers by the terminals and shake them until they disappear in the room. No. it's the lack of background that's the thing. It's like staring into Nietzsche's Abyss, only without the tertiary syphilis.

I am not a big fan of high-res audio, because in most cases it's like watching high-definition TV on a small screen – the improvements are just about observable, but not large enough to warrant the extra trouble and expense. CD is good enough. Except it's not, when you hear hi-res files through the D-Premier. Those HRx Reference Recordings – like the Rachmaninov Symphonic Dances (HR96) – leave you hungry for more. If it's a choice of CD or nothing, the CD is fine, but this makes even high-res sceptics like me recognise its benefits.

I don't want this review to be bound up in discussions of high-res recordings, because there's a mistaken idea that it means the product is only good for high-res. So, it's only right and proper that instead I listened to music far removed from the high-res revolution; Gang of Four, Television, Ornette Coleman, Stravinsky... music that still has the power to shock. And it shocks here. It shocks because of its newness, like it's the first time you listen to those recordings.

One of the big criticisms of Class D amplifiers is their reluctance to drive every loudspeaker equally well. Get a good partnership – typically a speaker with low efficiency and high nominal impedance – and the magic happens. Break rank and you break the spell. Some fare better than others. And yet, strangely, the D-Premier doesn't just make Class D more loudspeaker tolerant, it inverts the issue. Suddenly, set against the D-Premier, many conventional power amps seem 'speaker fussy' by contrast. It can drive practically anything, and will generally sound good doing so. The one reservation here is some speakers don't react well to having the window thrown open in the Devialet style. Some seem designed with a specific amplifier 'envelope' in mind and the neutrality of the D-Premier only serves to highlight this – it's like the amp comes with a built-in 'honesty' filter. On the other hand, I've heard whispers of loudspeaker designers saying they didn't know how good their speaker was until they heard them through the D-Premier, and rumours that the French company's order books are filled with requests for products from loudspeaker brands across the planet.

Analogue sources fare tolerably well, but they should be considered 'legacy' on this amp. The turntable input is no match for a good separate phono stage, but it's quiet and dynamic. The line stage performs similarly well – you can do better using a dedicated analogue preamplifier, but if you are using a digital source, the digital input of the D-Premier is going to be way better than most analogue preamps.

This last is an indicator of how you will react to the D-Premier. It largely depends on your stance toward audio in general – are you looking forwards or back? This isn't a test and there are no right answers, it's just a bald statement of fact. If your tastes lie with turntables and tubes, the D-Premier is something that commands respect and admiration rather than passion and wild hand gestures. Also, if you buy audio by the square yard, equating 'big' with 'good', one big pizza box – no matter how shiny – is never going to convince you to part with half a room full of heatsinks.

Not everyone feels this way. There are many who have found their musical happy place within the digital domain and the better than domain sounds, the happier they get. The D-Premier will leave them ecstatic. In fact, for those people, the search is – for now – over. This is as good as it gets... it really is the real deal. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Devialet D-Premier

Class ADH integrated amplifier and DAC

Inputs: 2x optical digital, HDMI, 4x coaxial digital, AES/EBU, two optional line, one optional phono, SD card, trigger mini-jack

Outputs: HDMI optional subwoofer, digital coaxial (shared with analogue inputs), trigger mini jack

Power output: 2x 240W

Efficiency: >85%

Loudspeaker load capacity: 2Ω-8Ω

Amplifier configuration: 1 Class A, 4 Class D per channel

Distortion (THD+N): 0.001%

Signal/Noise ratio: 130dB unweighted

Intermodulation (SMPTE): 0.001%

Output impedance: <0.001Ω

Dimensions (WxDxH): 40x40x4.5cm

Dimensions (Remote, WxDxH): 11.7x11.7x4.5cm

Price: £10,000

Manufactured by

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

It is an irony, 30 years after it was laid to rest, that vinyl sounds better than ever. Brilliant, if fanatical, designers like Conrad Mas and Helmut Brinkmann have pushed the performance envelope so far that vinyl still gives even the very best of digital not just a run for its money, but very often a good kicking. And that's before we factor in the thousands of LPs we vinylistas still own and the very special magic of it all.

AVID have perfected the suspended, belt-driven design and their new SP spec double belts and upgraded power supplies are way ahead of anything else on offer. Joining the fray is a particularly interesting turntable from Germany the **Brinkmann Bardo** – no belts, no suspension, direct drive, mass loaded & with electronic speed control. Unsurprisingly, they sound markedly different. Which is better? That is for you to decide. These two outstanding, fresh-off-the-drawing-board designs are at Audio Workshop Norwich raring to go and eager for your attention. Please don't disappoint them.....Call me, Julian Musgrave, and hear the best that vinyl can offer.

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Tellurium Q loudspeaker cables and interconnects

by Steve Dickinson

Tellurium Q is a recent entry to an already fairly well-populated field. They have a range of four loudspeaker cables, starting at an entirely sensible £16 per linear metre and extending to, if not the stratosphere, certainly the upper levels of the troposphere (where one has to breathe deeply and quickly or risk light-headedness, or worse). There is also an interconnect, priced at a level where hyperventilation is somewhat less necessary. The rationale behind the Tellurium Q range is a belief that the preservation of the phase relationship in a musical signal is the most important element. That differs from the majority of cable manufacturers out there, but chimes very well with my own experience. I've begun to think that phase coherence is not only important (and often neglected) but is in many ways fundamental to a properly musical performance. Phase coherence isn't simply a matter of making sure all the red plugs go to the red sockets and so-on, either, but if the high frequencies in a musical signal are phase-shifted relative to the lows, the resultant sound will be smeared and musicality will suffer.

Talking of red plugs and red sockets, the TQ interconnects don't have a 'red' and 'black' cable, each cable has a red end and a black one. Red is the 'upstream' end, black goes into the 'downstream' component. The interconnect is available in three variants, normal single-ended, high-impedance single-ended (for some valve designs) and balanced. DIN versions will be along presently, for those of that persuasion. There is only the one interconnect in the range, priced at £279.00 for a 1 metre single-ended pair. They are fairly chunky, but flexible, with good quality locking connectors at each end. On appearance alone, they look worth the money. Of course, nobody would buy an interconnect on looks alone, would they?

Just as well the TQ interconnect sounds so good, then. Putting it into my system, I was impressed by just how communicative this modestly priced cable was. Compared to my favourite of the similarly-priced cables I had to hand, the TQ offered a significant improvement in focus, timing and overall lucidity. 'Clandestino' by Roberto Fonseca, from the album Zamazu, is a busy, latin-jazz number with stabbing piano, fast and complex percussion and driving bass. Through the TQ cables, it was apparent just how percussive Fonseca's piano style is and the interconnect not only gave me the piano tone, but also reminded me how brilliant a pianist I was listening to. Piano is a tricky instrument to reproduce, often sounding smeared and blurred; the TQ created a solid, stable image with a very good sense of the weight and sonority of the instrument. Percussion was focussed and impactful, with speed and control and I didn't just hear the bass clearly, I could feel how it was being played. That's the thing, it's not really about the obvious things like tonal colour or graininess, what the TQ cables do so much better than their peers is portray the musicianship. In



the Fonseca piece, it was clear that not only were the musicians playing their parts, but they were listening and responding to each other, playing as an ensemble.

Time and again, I listened to familiar pieces and the Tellurium Q impressed not only with the hi-fi stuff like colour, timing and dynamics, but with a firm sense of the shape and substance of instruments, a clear portrayal of performance, how and why the players were doing what they did. Sometimes I like a piece of music because it is pretty, or maybe tuneful or dramatic. But these are short-lived enthusiasms. For a piece to become a long-time favourite, there must be something to hold my attention and keep me going back for more. That something is performance, it's an essence born of subtlety, skill and insight and it's one of the things I think you simply can't get to any meaningful degree without phase coherence. The Tellurium Q interconnects tap into the performance to an extent I've not previously encountered at this price level.

The speaker cables can be thought of as being grouped into two pairs, Blue and Black; Green and Ultra Black. Physically the pairings look similar, with the black-coloured cable taking pole position in each. Each upgrade improves on the qualities of the last without undermining the strengths of those





▶ below it; no sudden changes of direction as you move up the ranking, if you like the entry-level product, you'll love the top of the range. The emphasis, again, is on musical communication. All the TQ cables bar the Blue come made to length and pre-terminated with Z plugs, a simple design whose performance is good enough to be standard on my usual Nordost Tyr, a cable costing around 50 times the price of the entry-level Tellurium Q. Blue is bought straight off the reel from dealers, who will also fit Z plugs.

We'll start, then, with Tellurium Q Blue. A neat and flexible, flattish, cable jacketed in a fairly grown-up shade of blue, it gave a pretty good account of itself right from the start. While it's not bargain-bucket price, it's certainly a budget cable in terms of cost, a 3m stereo pair will set you back around £100. For that, you get a degree of coherence, timing and focus distinctly uncommon, in my experience, for this sort of money. These qualities give the cable a very engaging presentation with good pace and drive, accompanied by very decent levels of inner detail and musical insight. What it lacks is most noticeable at the frequency extremes: less weight to the bottom registers and some gentle rolling-off of upper treble makes this a fairly easy-going cable which will probably flatter budget systems, without exposing any obvious flaws too starkly. The midrange, in contrast, is engaging, lucid and perhaps ever so slightly forward; vocals, for example, are well-projected and simple, acoustic tracks come across with a very effective degree of intimacy and intent. 'Red Rain' by Peter Gabriel starts with some fairly light and fast percussion, mostly cymbal work, quite useful as a yardstick for upper treble performance. This was, as expected, perfectly acceptable at the price, but somewhat soft and mellowed in absolute terms. Then the bass and lead guitars came in, and Gabriel began to sing, and what had started as a quick 30 second check of the intro turned into a proper listen to the entire track. Carried along by a wave of energy and propulsiveness, this was music I simply couldn't ignore. Not a bad start, at all.

So, what about the Blue's pricier sibling, the Black? Similar in profile to the Blue, the only external difference is the colour of the jacket, a nice, sober black. Still discreetly sized, flattish and flexible, this is without question an easy cable to manage. Tonally, the bass is firmed-up and the treble is cleaner, crisper and more extended than the Blue, but the cable's midrange is still the first thing you tend to notice. Then, again, you realise there's lots of wonderful stuff going on with the performances. Listening to 'Roxanne' from Sting's live album All This

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Tellurium Q interconnects.

Single-ended

1 metre pair £279.00

1.5 metre pair £309.00

Balanced

1 metre pair £359.00

1.5 metre pair £399.00

Tellurium Q loudspeaker cable.

Blue £16 per linear (mono) metre, unterminated

Black £46 per linear (mono) metre, made to length, terminated with Z plugs

Green £145 per linear (mono) metre, made to length, terminated with Z plugs

Ultra Black £248 per linear (mono) metre, made to length, terminated with Z plugs

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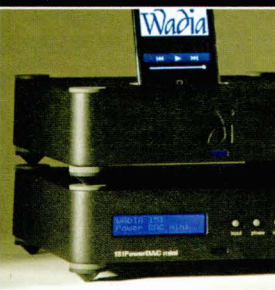
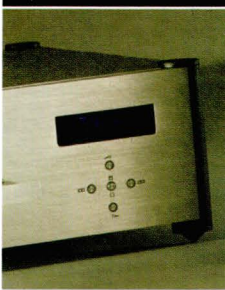
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TEMPO 25



VIRGO 25



► Time, the vocals project clearly and cleanly and it's all too obvious just what outstanding musicians Sting chooses for his gigs. The TQ Black may not be completely faithful to the tonal balance, compared to a full-range, high-end cable for example, but for sensible money, it gets you through to the essence of the music, partly by virtue of its good timing, inner clarity and that luminous midband, but mainly because it offers insight into the way the instruments are being played that is rare at this price. This is a very communicative, engaging and capable presentation, making it the most natural thing to just forget about listening to the system and simply enjoy the music. Back to Peter Gabriel, 'Biko' through the Black is assured and confidence-inspiring – the opening percussion and vocals are more solidly and convincingly portrayed, but most tellingly, the atmosphere and mood created, that feeling of world music exoticism, mixed with tension and foreboding, comes across much more convincingly via the Black.

What we do get with the Black, then, are some strong hints at the performance of the top cable, the Ultra Black. Timing and dynamics have taken a noticeable step up in performance; the general levels of coherence in this cable put it well ahead of any examples of its obvious competition which have crossed my path.

“Whatever you do, don't audition the Ultra Black. As I said before, once you do, there's no going back.”

This seems like a good point to talk about the top of the range loudspeaker cable, the Ultra Black. Physically much bulkier than the Blue and Black, most obviously due to a 3cm web which separates the two signal cables, each of which is also somewhat heavier gauge. It's both less flexible, and visually more obtrusive than either the Blue or the Black, but many, me included, will think this a price worth paying. That price, by the way, is slightly under £250 per linear metre, so this is a significant stretch from the cheaper variants.

I'm not really a Sinatra fan. I don't dislike him, but I never understood what all the fuss was about. Until recently. A friend gave me a copy of the remastered CD version of *Only the Lonely* and 'One for my baby' is, no way around it, quite simply a masterpiece. The way the man creates an atmosphere; subtle, intimate, regretful. His phrasing, the way he modulates his voice, his exquisite timing. This is not merely talent, it's genius. Through the Black, the piano and performer seem slightly semi-detached, almost as though the pianist is noodling along to himself and Sinatra is doing his own thing over the top of him. Through the Ultra Black, it's clear that this detachment is nothing of the sort, the pianist is giving Sinatra all the space he needs, but listening carefully and underpinning the whole thing. It's the most beautifully understated performance I've heard in ages and the Ultra Black is one of very few cables I've heard which does it any sort of justice.

What you're getting for your money is partly extra bandwidth, better articulation, timing and control, but much, much more significant is the way the Ultra Black lets the listener perceive the musicianship. It's not something you simply hear, you're just aware that this is better: the musicians are more skilful, and playing higher quality instruments. This makes for a pretty compelling

level of musical connection, we're now comfortably, firmly, irretrievably in the realms of being able to enjoy the performance, rather than merely hearing the music. There's no going back from here. The sheer physicality of Joanna Macgregor's playing on 'Libertango' from *Live in Buenos Aires* for example. That track also shows another strength of the Ultra Black, its inner focus, lucidity and general cohesiveness. This isn't simply about being able to hear low level detail, but tonally everything is tightened up, there is less noise, backgrounds are blacker, there's a sense that everything is being given every opportunity to work properly. Piano, for example, sounds very slightly blurred by comparison through the regular Black but Ultra Black gives the instrument not only clarity, but proper weight and scale.

The Green sits below the Ultra Black in the range and offers a fairly substantial cost saving. It shares the flagship cable's profile, but in comparison sounds a little held-back. Perhaps slightly less subtlety, timbral detail and definition to soundstage depth and solidity but the vital tunefulness, timing and leading edge detail is still clearly there. The impression, through the Green, is that the musicians are slightly less determined than they are when heard through the Ultra Black. Listening to the Kings Singers perform 'Villancico Catalan' the Ultra Black gives a more open, fluid and expressive performance than the Green, which lacks some of the sense of ethereality, born of the commitment and concentration of the performers. This is a serious lack, once you've heard the Ultra Black, the Green just won't do. Having said all that, I'm quite sure the Green is a significant step ahead of most cables at the price in terms of communicating those nebulous qualities we think of as musicality and performance, so if you can stretch to the Green but no further, I'd give it a hearty recommendation but, whatever you do, don't audition the Ultra Black. As I said before, once you do, there's no going back. +

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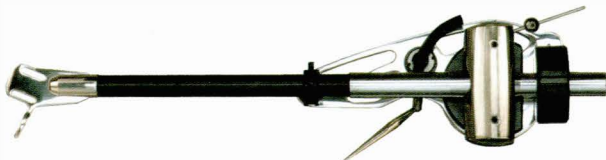
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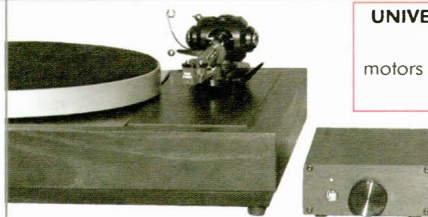
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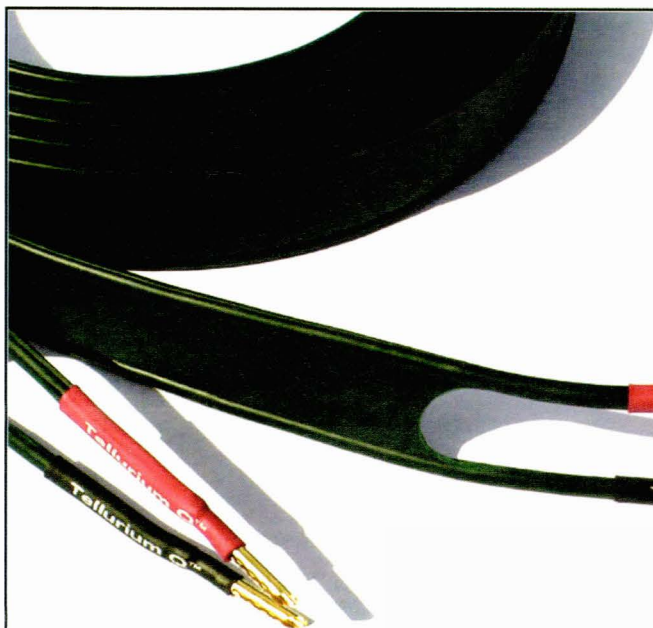
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

JPS Superconductor 3 interconnects and speaker cables

by Alan Sircom



I reviewed JPS Aluminata cable in Issue 68, saying reviews of the other cables in the series would follow 'soon'. In reviewer terms, 'soon' can mean anything from 'tomorrow' to 'around the time of the next ice age'. I left things hanging about Superconductor 3 interconnects, speaker leads and power cords. Now's the time to redress the balance.

The Superconductor 3 range comprises a wine red inflexible interconnect and thick loudspeaker cables in a black braid. Both come in wooden boxes; one the size of a dozen LPs, the other about the size of a BMX wheel. The speaker cable is surprisingly weighty. Both use JPS's distinctive copper/aluminium Alumiloy conductors (a whopping 16.8mm² conductor in the speaker cable), laid out in a quad formation with kapton dielectrics for the interconnect cables. These are shielded in a flexible topology than previous JPS designs, although 'flexible' isn't the first word that springs to mind here. Locking WBTs complete the package.

Like Aluminata before it, Superconductor 3 brings sophistication and refinement to the sound. It also seems to order the bass better than most, giving those bottom two octaves more clarity and definition in the well-used 'getting out the way of the music'. It also brings out the spaces round the notes better than many designs, a little like listening to BB King at his finest. In a world where everything is trying to shout everything else down, a little bit of musical economy comes as a welcome relief.

Unlike Aluminata however, this isn't a snap decision cable. It's the sort of thing that you live with for a while. Taking it out the system is the key thing, because that process seems to come with a profound sense of loss. In fairness, those who listen to Aluminata for some time, experience an even more profound sense of loss on its removal, too.

If you like what SC3 does – and I suspect the majority of people will – you'll love the Aluminata even more for the same things. But here's the strange thing; those who were not convinced by Aluminata first time round, after hearing Superconductor 3 quickly revised their position when they heard it a second time. Perhaps for the nay-sayers, Aluminata is too much of a good thing at first, and they need to be

eased into the JPS way of doing things.

There's no such thing as a cable panacea, but JPS gets closer than many, blending as it does the refinement of an Audio Note or a Cardas with the energy of a Crystal, Chord or Kimber. It's the cable for those who find some cables too 'zingy' and some too 'moody'. So, perhaps it isn't 'Marmite' after all... it's the 'Goldilocks' cable. And while the long-suffering Mrs S. isn't too happy with having the tail end of the listening room filled with python-like speaker cables (again), I'm loving what they do.

One final point – the power cords. Designed for specific tasks, the interesting thing is they work at those specific tasks (one – The Digital AC - for digital products like CD players and DACs, one – The Analog AC - for phono stages and pres and one – The Power AC – for integrations and power amps), and don't sound anywhere near as good when they swap roles. Now that really does warrant further investigation... 'soon'. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

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JPS Labs SuperConductor 3 loudspeaker Cable

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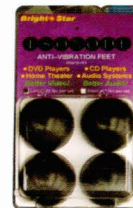
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christian scott:

The future of jazz trumpet?

by Jason Kennedy. Photography by Kiel Scott

Christian Scott is a young trumpet player from New Orleans whose fourth album *Yesterday You Said Tomorrow* came out earlier this year. What brought it to my attention was the inclusion of arguably the most famous engineer in the jazz recording pantheon, namely Rudy Van Gelder who worked for Impulse and Blue Note in the glory days of Davis, Coltrane, Monk, Rollins et al. Scott made the new album at Van Gelder's Englewood Cliffs studio and clearly sensed the resonance of the jazz giants that had preceded him even if he struggled to describe precisely how it feels.

I reviewed *Yesterday You Said Tomorrow* in issue 72 and have found more to enjoy in it since so jumped at the opportunity to interview the man himself. Despite his mere 26 years Scott is a mature, intelligent and hard working musician who only manages to spend a month or so at home every year because of the constant demands of touring and recording, but he managed to find time to speak to me from Tokyo in between a concert and a DJ set. Who says musicians don't earn their pay?

JK: *Yesterday You Said Tomorrow* is quite different to your earlier albums. What inspired this change?

CS: It's the way that the album was recorded. On most of the earlier albums we were in the studio with baffling between the musicians and the recording devices and the way that we recorded was different. On those two albums we had a Fender Rhodes but other than that the instrumentation is basically the same, it's just that on the new record Rudy [Van Gelder] recorded it live off the floor, so it has a different feel. It's more acoustic sounding but the instrumentation hasn't changed from the preceding albums.

JK: Is this the same band as you had on the earlier albums?

CS: No, the group that did *Yesterday You Said Tomorrow* has been together for about two and a half years. The first two records I did for Concord and Universal those were me pulling together some of my best friends that I made musically and happened to be really great musicians. This record is a band that has been together for a lot longer and working together which has cultivated a sound. When you play music with someone for almost three years every night you're working on the same general concepts and precepts you develop something more unique. The music develops its own environment, as opposed

to playing music on a high level as a means to communicate, it becomes more than that. I think the early albums were made by a bunch of young guys who could play very well but weren't really a band, this record is made by a band.

JK: Your drummer Jamire Williams is pretty phenomenal when he lets rip, he reminds me of Billy Cobham, has he made any other albums?

CS: I like that, that's cool. I think he's on the new Jacky Terrasson record and he's on the record that we did before this, *Live From Newport*.

JK: I read that at Newport in 1960 they had a riot, it was obviously a serious thing back in those days.

CS: It's serious now. We're working on getting people that motivated. On a fundamental level the ideals of the music are totally different from what they were then. I don't feel like people are connected to jazz because it doesn't make an effort to connect to them anymore.

JK: You're doing a lot to bridge that gap.

CS: It's a hard one to bridge but we're making efforts to move back in that direction, we'd like Watts riots at our own places, that's cool.

JK: What was it like working with Rudy van Gelder?

CS: Phenomenal and fantastic, he's the architect if you know what I mean.

JK: How did you get to work with him, he hasn't been working a lot lately has he?

CS: He's been working on things but not on any new records, he has been working on reissues of records that he had made earlier, Impulse stuff and Blue Note records, even some stuff that came out on Prestige I know Concord had him doing some of that. I heard that someone gave him a copy of my record *Live At Newport* and it's a DVD as well and I guess that he watched that and listened to the record and he had come to the conclusion that if there was any band that could bring jazz back to what he thought on a fundamental level it needed and had a potential to build on those things that he thought were important he felt it was this group. He had his people ▶



christian scott

► contact the record label and told them he wanted to record our next record.

It was strange because I'd written almost all of the music and I wanted to record the record as if it was done in the late fifties, early sixties, it was strange when I got that call because I was really stressing out trying to figure out who was going to record this thing. Then you turn around and it's the guy who created that sound!

I was having a conversation with McCoy Tyner about it and I was like man I don't know what to do and he was like don't worry everything will work itself out and then I got the call.

JK: If you build it they will come! Is his studio unusual?

CS: No but there's a feeling when you're inside it that's very different from most studios I've been in, the feeling when you're in the room. It's pregnant with... It's history but it's different to that. In every crevice and crack in this room it's lived in, you feel like whenever you touch anything in the room that there's been 50 people who have touched that over the decades.

JK: This is the same studio that he used in the fifties and sixties?

CS: Oh yeah, same everything, same piano. There's something about it, it's more like a portal than a studio.

JK: The track Angola, LA & The 13th Amendment is clearly protest song. Can you explain what it's about?

CS: The 13th amendment basically says that in the US and any of its territories if anyone is convicted of a crime it's perfectly legal to have that person be a slave or an indentured servant. If you take that idea and you think about the history of the prison industrial system in the US you start to go down a very dark path. You realise that lots of these penitentiaries, some of them have been privatised and basically they've been getting away with slave labour for over a century in America. It's one of those things where slavery wasn't fully abolished it was only changed, it's still allowed to exist, which for me is a problem. I don't know that everyone agrees with that but I definitely think that's it's not OK.

JK: Have you made any music about the way that the government dealt with the effects of Katrina?

CS: The *Anthem* album came out around the time of the first anniversary of the hurricane and a lot of people jumped on the bandwagon and concluded that the record was about the hurricane but it wasn't. The record was to solve macrocosmic problems not the microcosmic problems of New Orleansian's experience.

JK: Interesting to hear your cover of Thom Yorke's The Eraser, how did you get the distortion on this piece?

CS: It's just paper on the piano. I was trying to figure out a way to get the same sound that he has on his recording, I was doing all sorts of stuff, putting all kinds of things on different instruments and one day I put some paper on the piano and played the chords and I thought 'damn that sounds just like it!'

JK: Who are your influences and heroes?

CS: I always shy away from the word influences, but people that inspire me musically, right now. This week I'm into Georgia Anne Muldrow from the Bay area, she has a very unique compositional style and produces all of her own music. Of course I like Nina Simone, I listen to the Freedom Now stuff by Abbey Lincoln, she just passed away. I listen to a producer and hip hop artist Shafiq who just put out an album that's pretty good.

I'm not the type of person who when I hear something I say oh I don't like that or that's sad, whether or not it appeals to my taste for me music is my life so that type of stuff is irrelevant, I just like sound. I learn from anybody, I could be on an airplane going through the channels and I could hear a channel with polka music and I could get into that.

JK: What did you listen to when you were growing up?

CS: When I was developing I listened to a lot of stuff. But in context of what I do I listened to a lot of Clifford Brown. In the bebop tradition other than the architects – Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie – Clifford Brown was of paramount importance. The way that he went about playing the instrument, I haven't heard anybody do that again since. I listened to a lot of Freddie Hubbard when I was coming up, I listened to all types of trumpet players like Tommy Turrentine, Roy Eldridge, Louis Armstrong, Lee Morgan and I loved Booker Little.

JK: Not Miles?

CS: Of course Miles, that's a given. I didn't get into Miles until I could play, when I started trying to find a different way to approach the instrument. I must have been about 15 or 16, that's when I dug into Miles and I haven't let go of him.

Christian Scott will be in the UK in November for the London Jazz Festival and three other dates:

Monday 15th, Royal Festival Hall, London

Thursday 18th, Band on the Wall, Manchester

Friday 19th, Turner Sims, Southampton

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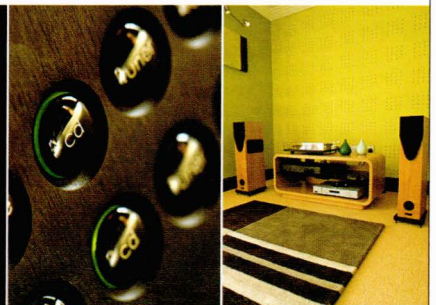


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Coco Montoya

I Want It All Back

Ruf Records: RUF1153

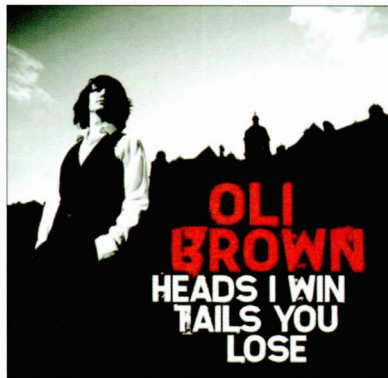
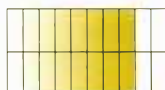


Coco Montoya was once a Bluesbreaker, gaining an enviable reputation as a ferocious left-handed guitarist who often went head to head with another Mayall protégé: Walter Trout. Coco's tutor was Albert Collins, not a bad teacher to have and no doubt responsible for his approach and the stinging pitch that attacks the central nervous system in all the right ways. His back catalogue, especially the Alligator releases, 'Suspicion' and 'Can't Look Back' testify to Montoya's intensity, fire and passion; when he's in full flow the guitar comes close to meltdown. This release, then, comes as a bit of a surprise, being much more laid back and restrained.

The sound is closer to Michael McDonald-era Doobie Brothers, albeit with more muscle and bite – white soul, black blues, blue heart, as it were. The clue to the shift probably lies in the sleeve dedication, to the loss of his sister, Connie. However, it's not morose and not all mellow; there are times when he cuts loose and the playing harks back to his previous work. The closest he gets to an out-and-out blues track is 'Fannie Mae', but who says artists have to follow only one course of action?

This is more late night than Saturday night, but it's still got a ton of soul, and it grows on you. **DH**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Oli Brown

Heads I Win, Tails You Lose

Ruf Records: RUF1160

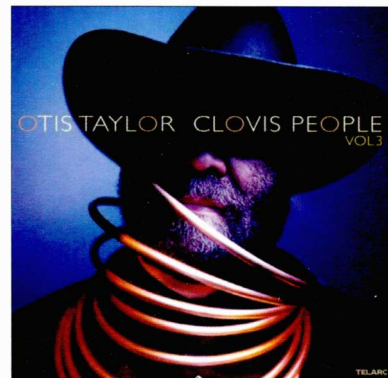


Glowing endorsements can come by way of the press, by word-of-mouth or by carrier pigeon for what it's worth, but when one comes from a guy who has seen and done it all in music, then it's best to listen. Mike Vernon was there at the start of the British blues invasion in the sixties and sat in the producer's chair for some of the biggest names and records, then and since. He retired 10 years ago and had no plans to return until he received a call from Thomas Ruf extolling the virtues of a young man named Oli Brown. What Vernon heard and saw convinced him to sit in the chair one more time.

This is Oli's second release and it fairly bristles with high level axemanship, age-defying vocals (he's only 20!) and buckets of charisma. Fine self-written tunes blend nicely with some well chosen covers, and all are delivered with a unique vision and complete understanding of the music's roots. At turns funky and bluesy but with a massive shot of soul, Oli never disappoints, and if the complete modern bluesman was ever going to surface, then it has with this young man.

He's touring on the back of this; go and see him while he's still playing smaller venues, because this guy's destined for bigger things. **DH**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Otis Taylor

Clovis People Vol. 3

Telarc Records: TEL3184902



11 albums in 13 years is going some; 11 albums with something valid to say and with a consistency few can match is nothing short of miraculous. But then Otis Taylor is no ordinary performer; he likes to go in to the heart of the human condition and pull out all manner of emotions, and he's not afraid to go where others fear to tread. Clearly well read and with a healthy appetite for history, Taylor pours it all out and pulls no punches. That's why he can get hold of a song like 'Babies Don't Lie' and really make it count for something. Like he says: "Babies don't lie. They don't." Surrounded by a crack band that includes his daughter Cassie on bass and Gary Moore on electric lead, Otis and friends cook up a mesmerising brew of wondrous sounds and textures, hypnotic in their build-up and totally infectious when they connect the brain to the feet.

As always, underpinning the sound are some of the sharpest lyrics in modern music, ranging from the historical and tragic to the charming and the delicate. 'She's Ice In The Desert' is a case in point, a story of one day love that's shiver-inducing and touching all at the same time.

Tune in, trance out and fall under Taylor's spell – he's a modern day alchemist. **DH**

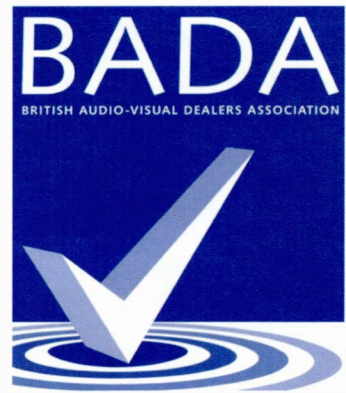
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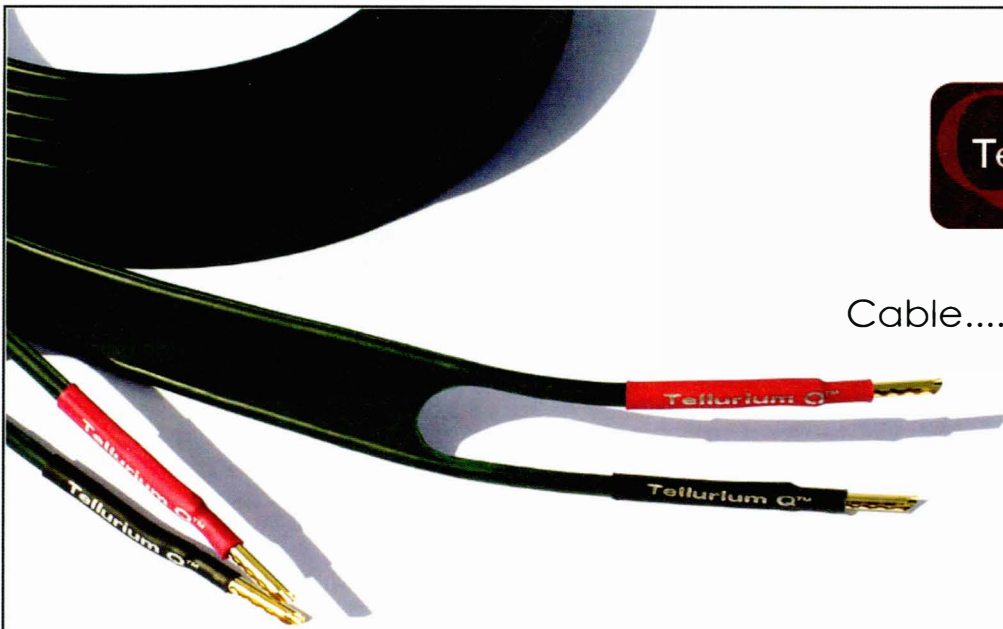
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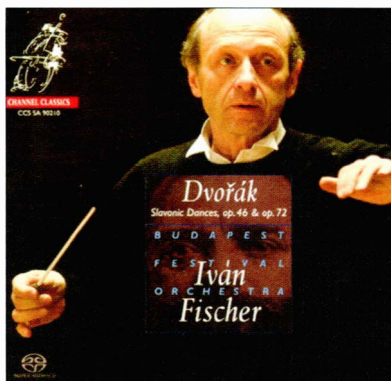
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Antonín Dvořák:
Slavonic Dances, Op. 46
& Op. 72. Budapest Festival
Orchestra conducted by
Ivan Fischer

SA^(5.1)

Channel Classics CCS SA 90210

This disc had previously been released on a now long out-of-print SACD from Philips. It has been re-mastered by Jared Sacks of Channel Classics.

The Slavonic Dances were inspired by Brahms' Hungarian Dances and are presented in the twoopuses each containing eight dances. Originally written for piano for four hands, Dvořák publisher asked that they be orchestrated and what we have here in this disc is a wonderful portrayal with all the Slavic tonality that this master composer has to offer. These sixteen dances are lively, poetic and wonderfully performed by the Budapest.

The sound quality is excellent and I have had this disc on repeat since I first obtained it. If you are not familiar with these works, let me say that you are missing out on much. These are very easily accessible compositions and they are certain to delight and enthrall everyone from the novice to the most knowledgeable collector. Highly recommended for sound and performance! **RSF**

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RECORDING
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Béla Bartók:
The 2 Violin Concertos
(1938), Violin Concerto
Op. Posth. (1907-08).
Arabella Steinbacher, violin.
Orchestre de la Suisse
Romande conducted by
Marek Janowski

SA^(5.1)

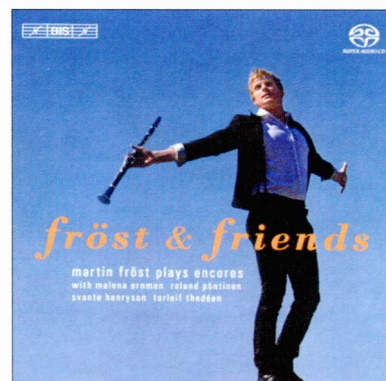
PentaTone PTC 5186 350

This is the second release by Arabella Steinbacher with this label. The two works are presented in the way they were released rather than by opus numbers. Janowski should not be overlooked as he's leading the Suisse Romande in a solid, tightly knit group that adds so much to these concertos. This is one of the first performances I've heard that doesn't give the stage only to the soloist.

Clearly from the outset, you can hear the influence of Eastern European flavors on Bartók. Steinbacher is an exceptionally gifted musician and has proven her reputation not only on her first release with this label (Dvořák and Szymanowski concertos) but in her other performances of 20th century music. One can look for Menuhin, Gitlis and Stern to compare to these performances and even the decade old release by Gil Shaham with Pierre Boulez, but I have found a new favorite. This is a most welcome addition to my violin collection. Highest recommendation! **RSF**

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RECORDING
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Fröst and Friends, Martin
Fröst plays encores: Martin
Fröst, Clarinet with Roland
Pöntinen, piano

SA^(5.1)

Bis-SACD -1823

Martin Fröst is recognized as one of the world's great clarinetists. He has recorded well over a dozen discs for Bis and this particular outing is quite wonderful. Every type of artist from mezzo-sopranos through violinists and cellists perform with Martin. There are not many discs I am aware of that offer this type of program for the clarinet-which is why I think this is so wonderful. The playing, as I have come to expect from Fröst, is nothing short of sensational. The disc covers Scriabin's Prelude in B major, Bach/Gounod's Ave Maria, a dance by Brahms, Rimsky-Korsakov's, Flight of the Bumble Bee. Fröst's playing is sublime. He is definitely the master of his domain and the variety of composers who have had their works transcribed would be amazed at how well they work. Fröst generally receives a new composition from 20th century composers annually. They too, are represented on this disc.

The sound quality is exceptional and if anyone is looking to listen to some different arrangements of music they may already know, I would strongly recommend that they give this disc a spin as they will be totally surprised as to what they hear. **RSF**

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Enjoy the Music.com Readers Say

I really enjoy your website and find it very informative (and read it every day).

— Richard Holbrook

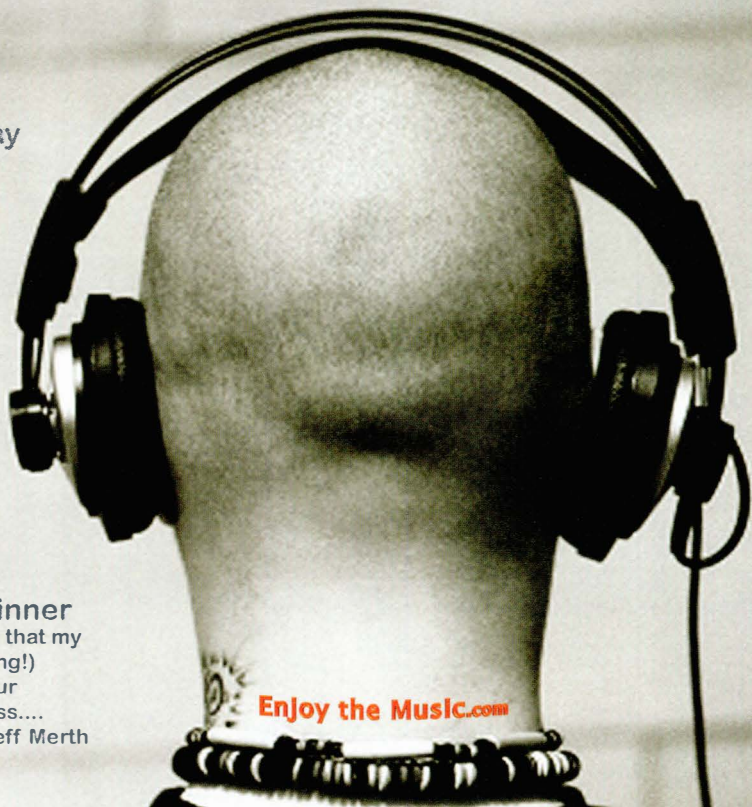
I have never replied to online audio reviews but wanted you to know that I have enjoyed several articles.

— Craig Mattice

What a great review! — Paul Kittinger

Enjoy the Music.com Contest Winner

In fact, the Axiom Audio EP500 works so well that my wife and I both stood mouths open (not kidding!) as it shook the rafters and window glass in our house. Amazing! Love that palpable, tight bass.... Thank you again for the awesome prize! — Jeff Merth



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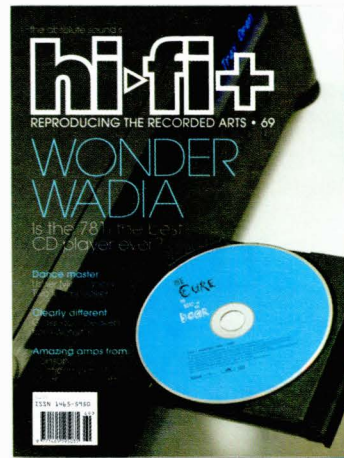
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Jimmy Smith – Back at the Chicken Shack every home should have one

by Alan Sircom

THE HAMMOND B-3 ORGAN WAS NOT ONE OF THOSE INSTRUMENTS THAT ANY SELF-RESPECTING MUSO WOULD HAVE CLASSED AS 'COOL' IN THE MID 1950S.

It was a 'church' thing, not a 'gig' thing, being big heavy and designed as a cheaper alternative to the pipe organ. It gained some small popularity in Big Band jazz circles thanks to its use by the Count Basie Orchestra, but it was still pretty far from being a part of the staple diet of modern music. And yet, used with a large Leslie cabinet with its rotating speaker to give the sound a rich phasiness, it became a staple of blues, rock and progressive rock music through much of the late 1960s and 1970s. So what happened to make the Hammond organ so cool, so quick?

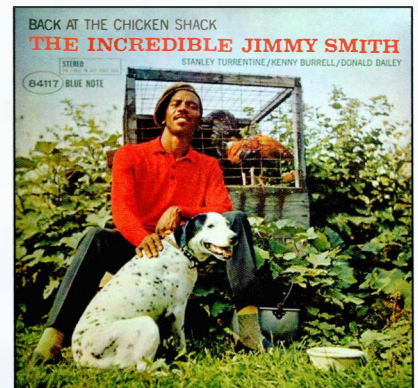
The late Jimmy Smith happened. A spate of fine Blue Note albums from 1958-1963 featuring Smith as band-leader helped inspire generations of keyboard players to take up the Hammond B-3, or even later electronic recreations of the classic tonewheel organ (the last electromechanical Hammond organ rolled off the production line in 1973). But it's *Back at the Chicken Shack* from 1960 that is the stand-out album. The line-up was small and simple; Smith on organ, Kenny Burrell on guitar, Donald Bailey on drums and the then almost unheard of Stanley Turrentine on tenor sax. The original album featured just four tracks, but each one is a honey; 'Minor Chant' by Turrentine practically defines that cool Blue Note sound of the time. That it was the first album to draw attention to the remarkable tenor sax playing of Turrentine is icing on the cake.

Smith's distinctive playing style (and even his drawbar setting on the organ) set the trend, and later soul-jazz recording all borrow heavily from *Back at the Chicken Shack*. Many even borrowed musicians, as Kenny Burrell and Stanley Turrentine were in great demand in the organ trios that were booming in the 1960s. Without this album soul-jazz might have been less impactful, which means no jazz-funk (maybe that wouldn't have been a bad thing), jazz-fusion (ditto) and no acid jazz. The success of Jimmy Smith didn't only lead to Hammond organ playing copycats; it directly led to the likes of Grant Green, Lee Morgan, even Herbie Hancock getting their own bands. Smith's influence even spread beyond the jazz, soul and funk realms, profoundly shaping the keyboard line up of Keith Emerson (of Emerson, Lake and Palmer fame).

Given the age of the recording, Rudy van Gelder used analogue two-track equipment to record *Back at the Chicken Shack* and the transfer to CD has stayed close to the original, save for the addition of 'On the Sunny Side of the Street'. Unlike many RvG recordings, the reverb is relatively controlled

and there's none of the thin sound he can sometimes create.

A remarkably cool recording from a remarkably cool line-up during a remarkably cool period in Blue Note's lifetime – how cool is that? +



JIMMY SMITH – BACK AT THE CHICKEN SHACK

Blue Note Records

Recorded on April 25, 1960

Recorded by Rudy van Gelder

Produced by Alfred Lyon

Performers

Jimmy Smith - organ

Kenny Burrell - guitar

Stanley Turrentine - tenor saxophone

Donald Bailey - drums

Track Listing

1. "Back at the Chicken Shack" (Smith) — 8:01
2. "When I Grow Too Old to Dream" (Hammerstein, Romberg) — 9:54
3. "Minor Chant" (Turrentine) — 7:30
4. "Messy Bessie" (Smith) — 12:25
5. "On the Sunny Side of the Street" (Fields, McHugh) — 5:45 (CD-only bonus track).

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