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DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER!

IS THE 802 DIAMOND THE JEWEL IN BOWERS & WILKINS CROWN?

ASR EMITTER II EXCLUSIVE

CABASSE RIGA AND SANTORIN 30

LEEMA TUCANA II

SONIC SOLUTIONS AMARRA



HIGH-END 2011 EXCLUSIVE!

A LEGEND IS REBORN



There comes a moment in every product sphere when a truly iconic product is created. In the case of high-performance speakers, that product was the original Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy.

Now David A. Wilson has reengineered the speakers that defined audio excellence for a generation. The Sasha W/P boasts the same uncompromising approach to design as its illustrious predecessor but with newly devised innovations such as the resonance minimising material that has been specially created for the cabinets, a revised motor/magnet assembly to bring new dimensions to the bass and a redesigned crossover that dramatically increases midrange clarity.

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editorial

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We are seeing significant change in audio. Not just in terms of the move toward streaming products and away from disc replay, not even in the recognition that small is beautiful once more, but something deeper; a distinct change in the very fabric of what constitutes high-end audio.

Whether it's due to economic forces or simply changes in the way people view their free time and spend their money, there's a move toward a more pragmatic approach to audio that must be applauded and supported. While there's still a great deal of interest in traditional high-end equipment – especially in the fast-growing 'BRIC' economies (Brazil, Russia, India and China) – rank and file audio enthusiasts the world over are discovering a new paradigm of smaller, smarter products that still deliver excellent performance. Far from the 'sky is falling' prophecies of audio doom-mongers, today's open-minded audiophile has a plethora of new, exciting and pioneering products at their disposal, many of which don't choose to play by the traditionalist's rule book.

A difficult question keeps being asked today; are we buying big and expensive because it's good, or because it's big and expensive? In many cases good performance is embedded in precision engineering, which inevitably stacks on the pounds, both sterling and avoirdupois. But there are products that can deliver high-end performance without backbreaking, wallet-tearing strain.

The high-end remains committed to the replay of recorded music in a manner that strives to limit the shortcomings of the recording process. It should not just be about price, size, weight or

rarity value and what delivers high-end performance – at all levels – must be explored. In other words, we should aim for high-end values, not just high-end prices. At least, that's my take on things. Do you agree?

Any change takes time in a magazine, because we plan several issues in advance. But rather than simply change direction for the sake of it, this gives a perfect opportunity for you to help shape this change. We welcome your input on the shape of Plus to come, and rather than rely on a questionnaire, we've left things open for your views. Of course there has to be some moderation, but why should we let our past completely define our future?

Alan Sircom
editor@hifiplus.com



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incoming!

In Vino Veritas

I love the idea of 'Classic Album Sundays', as reported in your magazine (issue 80). It made me realise that I've become my own 'shuffle' mode and I rarely play a piece of music from beginning to end any more. Modern life and the family from 'Outnumbered' means the time I get to spend playing music is very limited. What I forgot in the process is that it's also very precious.

Inspired by Ms. Murphy however, I put away the Kindle (I got into the habit of reading while I listened), poured myself a large glass of a very nice Syrah, closed the door and gave myself some 'me' time. I played Illinois by Sufjan Stevans from start to finish – instead of just playing 'Jacksonville' and 'Chicago' – and found the whole process profoundly moving and fascinating. I'm now up to my fourth such session, even to the point of inviting friends round.

However, I've found you need pick your album carefully, it's better to play a few warm-up tracks than just launch into the album cold, you really do need to remove those distractions (especially talking, walking and mobile phones) and the wine plays an important part in the process. Curiously, you may find yourself listening to less music per week (especially as background), but getting more from those sessions.

Next Sunday, it's A Day at the Races, by Queen, which was the first album I ever bought. I hope it's still a good 'un, and I think it will go down nicely with a good Barolo.

Andy Trenton, via email

Great wine and great music go together well. Perhaps it's time to create a tasting menu. To that end, I think Barolo goes better with a rich and fruity Led Zep, while a good Pomerol and Queen are made for one another – Ed.

The vinyl frontier

Your feature on playing Syd Barrett's Madcap Laughs LP to a trendy audience (Issue 80) made me think that such things are only possible on record. CD's ability to skip tracks and iPods and their shuffle commands make it all too easy to move around an album. The limitations of mechanically having to lift up the tonearm and move it, or turn over the album makes us LP users more likely to listen to a whole side of an album in a single sitting. Yes, this move to listen to the whole album as a complete entity is new and exciting to generations moving further and further from the album, but for us old guys, no big deal.

This got me thinking further. Do we love LP despite its limitations, or because of them? I know that under the microscope, CD is a far superior format in terms of dynamic range, distortion and absence of surface noise, but I still prefer my LPs. I even prefer LPs made from CD compared to the CD. I really don't know why I do, but I do. Perhaps, as I suggested, it's because we actually prefer the shortcomings of the format. In which case, is 'high fidelity' really the goal?

Michael Sainsbury, via email

CD's death is greatly exaggerated

What is the agenda behind the killing off of CD? I have already stopped reading US-based hi-fi magazines because they act like CD and SACD are long gone, but now I am seeing the same disturbing trend in UK magazines. As I live in the US, I spend a lot of money on your magazine but if this trend continues, I will stop. Where are the CD player reviews?

The obsession your magazine and others have with computers is not something shared by your readers, who don't want to go through all the rigmarole of transferring their music onto a computer that will be out of date by the time we finish the process, all to end up with poorer quality sound, a noisy computer in the room and a 'more convenient' screen that is nothing of the sort. So, please stop reviewing all these music streamers and start looking at CD again.

Art White, via email

There is no agenda, we are taking no glee from the recent turns in CDs fortune and are reviewing any SACD or CD player we can get our hands on. The fact remains, however, that there is a marked downturn in interest in CD players and discs alike, at all levels. This means there are fewer players being made today and less new players in the design stage. Meanwhile, all those companies with digital skills built up over years making CD players are now shifting their attention to DACs, streamer and server devices.

We'll keep supporting CD for as long as there are CDs to support. Just as we'll keep supporting LP, and now streaming. It's my hope that CD's fate will be similar to that of LP and have a renaissance, but this hope is not predicated on any firm evidence as yet. While we recognise that not everyone will be an enthusiastic jumper on the computer-audio bandwagon, but if we denied the reality of CDs current situation, we would be doing our readers a disservice in my opinion – Ed.

news

Neat Ultimatum XLi

Neat Acoustics has developed a new compact floorstander that builds upon the strengths of the company's Ultimatum XLS. By using a floorstanding chambered cabinet, the speaker can be mass-loaded and isolates the crossover at the same time. The XLi project emerged after feedback from customers and distributors who wanted a loudspeaker with the benefits of the XLS but without being a standmount.

Neat relies on a custom 168mm mid/bass drivers doubled up internally in an isobarically mounted chamber. A modified SEAS XL Sonomex domed tweeter is then joined by a pair of upward firing EMIT supertweeters in their own enclosure. The 33kg loudspeaker features a cabinet made from slow-growing birch ply. The front baffle is from precision routed controlled-density fibreboard coupled to the front of the cabinet by means of a polyethylene membrane. This makes an extremely inert platform for the mid/bass and high frequency drivers. The lower cabinet areas are also extensively braced to ensure that they are acoustically quiet. The XLi stands just a metre tall and is expected to cost £6,000 per pair.

www.neatacoustics.com



Bowers & Wilkins PM1

Slotting between the CM range and the 800 Diamond series, the £1,995 standmount two-way features a wholly new carbon-braced tweeter. This is an aluminium-dome tweeter that uses a ring of carbon-fibre to add stiffness, pushing the break-up point of the driver to above 40kHz. This sits in a Nautilus tapering tube and is coupled with a 130mm mid-bass driver. Although this might look identical to previous B&W yellow woven Kevlar designs, what could at first be mistaken for a phase plug is in fact a rigid anti-resonance plug in the centre of the drive unit is designed to fit inside the voice coil former and help damp the drive unit.

The cabinet itself is internally braced using B&W's interlocking Matrix system and the side walls of the cabinet themselves are high mass and the curved front baffle made from resin-filled thermoset plastic to limit flexing, so internal resonance is kept low. Even the crossover is kept simple, but made to a very high standard with Mundorf M-Cap Supreme caps and air cored inductors, even down to oxygen-free copper speaker terminals on the back panel.

At the moment, B&W has no plans to have the PM1 become the first in a range of products. Its designed from the outset as an audiophile two channel standmount, so the concept of a PM-series centre channel looks highly unlikely. Hurrah!

www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk



NAD C 446

The new £695 C 446 is NAD's first Digital Media Player. The new-category device combines conventional AM/FM/DAB/DAB+ tuner circuitry with the facility to stream internet radio and networked audio from a variety of computer sources. NAD has designed the C 446 to accept streaming from USB memory sticks, Android, Apple iOS and network hard drive devices as well as direct from computers, and supports MP3, FLAC, WAV and AAC file formats, playing them at up to 24bit, 192kHz precision thanks to its built in DAC. It includes WiFi, support for cloud music services and a RS232 port for custom install use. There's even an IPD2 Dock that allows you to control or charge an iPhone or iPod.

The C 446's abilities as media renderer are further enhanced by its support of Universal Plug and Play (UPnP) and Digital Living Network Alliance (DLNA) standards. Additionally, its support of UPnP's Digital Audio Renderer (DAR) protocols allows the user to control the music, create playlists and more from networked devices such as computers and tablets like the ubiquitous Apple iPad.

www.nadelectronics.com, www.armorhome.co.uk

Krell Cipher

Krell's latest source component is the £12,000 Cipher SACD/CD player. And it's best written that way round – it's designed from the outset to replay SACD to the best of its abilities. Krell has taken the handbuilt nature of its devices to the extreme – not only does the company's own custom firmware act to enhance the accuracy and operational parameters of the drive train, the laser heads are hand-calibrated for precise output level adjustment. This passes data to a custom made anti-jitter module and to a pair of balanced 24-bit, 192kHz DACs in balanced mode. The Cipher uses these DACs one per channel and feeds the native balanced current output directly to its proprietary CAST current mode circuitry, to avoid the any current-to-voltage conversion degradation. This is all fed by a massive linear power supply with independent feeds to digital and analogue stages as developed in Krell's Evolution e-Series amps.

www.krellonline.com, www.absolutesounds.com



Audio Research PH8

Audio Research has developed a new hybrid phono stage. The £6,298 PH8 couples the two 6H30 double triodes and low-noise FET output stage as seen in the PH6, with additional valve regulation thanks to a 6550 and a further 6H30 as used in the Reference series preamp and phono stage.

The capacitors used in the PH8 are all the same types as those used in the Reference Phono 2, including the same coupling caps, and Teflon caps used in both the RIAA stage and as bypass caps. Even the high-grade PCB material used in the Reference model is used here. The PH8 also sports a new R-core transformer.

With its four button control, adjustable vac-fluro display and it's ability to select from 47K, 1K, 500, 200, and 100 ohms cartridge loads from the front panel, it is also easy to load. In other words, this is the Reference Phono 2 for people who don't need balanced operation or a range of EQ curves. For two-thirds the price.

www.audioresearch.com,
www.absolutesounds.com



Cambridge Audio Sonata NP30

Cambridge Audio has launched its first network music player, the £400 Sonata NP30. The wireless streaming device allows you to stream data from a PC, Mac or Network Attached Storage box and supports WAV, FLAC, AIFF, a full range of MP3 and AAC formats and Ogg Vorbis. The player features a Wolfson 24/96 DAC and supports Universal Plug and Play (UPnP). It also includes a front-mounted USB port for USB memory play.

The NP30 also uses the UuVol digital platform. This allows PC-less access to 20,000 internet radio stations and streamed content from your home network or online sources, all controlled from a special free app for your iPhone, iPod Touch or iPad.

www.cambridgeaudio.com

NEWS IN BRIEF

TEAC has introduced a new Reference series of devices now supporting Apple's AirPlay wireless music system. The micro-sized £550 CR-H700 is a 2x40W CD receiver that supports DNLA and AirPlay music streaming. In addition, the company also announced its £300 UD-H01 USB DAC, which features 192kHz upsampling, XLR outputs and a high-quality headphone jack and volume control.

www.teac.co.uk

Better known for its high-end equipment stands, the German Finite Elemente company is about to launch its innovative Mirror 62. Available in three sizes, the Mirror 62 looks like a conventional mirror, but conceals a 4x 25W amplifier system, loudspeakers similar in design to the company's Hohorizontal 51 iPod dock bar and connectivity to the outside world using the magic of Bluetooth. The design starts from 1,448€ and is intended to be available from high-end furniture shops, not traditional hi-fi stores.

www.finite-elemente.de

Having developed its latest Fact standmount, and announced a new 20 year guarantee on its products, PMC has quietly uprated its OB1i floorstanders, adding a Signature version to the range. The £4,840 per pair floorstander has a reworked crossover, is finished in a unique Rose Palissandre veneer and comes with a special aluminium plate and certificate of authenticity, both bearing founder Pete Thomas' moniker.

www.pmc-speakers.com

NEWS

Cool Gales Analogue Fest 2011



Neither wind, nor rain, nor sleet, nor snow could keep a good listener from their next turntable. Unfortunately, vandals did. By deciding their need for copper wire was greater than the railway network on the first Saturday in June, Brunel's masterful London to Bristol railway line ground to a halt, thereby limiting the number of people willing or able to make it to the Bath and Country Club in Bath to take in Cool Gales' second Analogue Fest.

Ivan Kursar still managed to get more than 100 people through his doors that fateful Saturday. Those lucky centurions got to see some of the best audio around, including several exclusive first UK showings.

There were five rooms dedicated to all things audio, but with a distinct slant toward the analogue end of things. Ivan is the importer of several key products too and although this year his range of Scheu turntables were not being played, in their place was the excellent Artemis Labs SA-1 turntable with matching, Frank Schröder-designed TA-1 tonearm, playing on a Lyra Kleos into Leema's stunning Agena phono stage, Tucana II integrated amp (see page 28 for review) and Xone or Xeta speakers. Leema was also showing off its new Elements range of half-sized, high-quality electronics.

The largest demonstration comprised Clearaudio Innovation Wood turntable, Graham Phantom Supreme arm, Transfiguration Orpheus L cartridge, Aesthetix Romulus CD player, Aesthetix Io Eclipse reference phono stage, Aesthetix Atlas monoblocs, Acapella High Violon speakers, all connected by Kubala-Sosna cabling. Racks were by Tabula Rasa and Shun Mook. This was also the venue for a fascinating insight into audiophile-grade recording, by ex-BBC engineer Mike Valentine.

Another room, another system. This one put together by combining the best of Symmetry equipment with Eclipse TD's

superb TD712z Mk2 flagship speaker/TD725sw subwoofer combination. The direct drive Brinkmann Bardo turntable with a 10.5 arm and EMT-ti cartridge was excellent, but the Esoteric 03 series amplification and K-01 SACD player, all wired with Chord Sarum and resting on Quadraspire.

The bar was also given over to audio, featuring a system comprising Analogue Alchemy turntable, with SME IV and Lyra Delos, into a set of custom Thomas Meyer amps into a pair of wonderful sounding Asparra HL1 SE horn speakers. As the name suggests, this is very much an analogue show, and the rest of the bar was made up of a wall of Diverse Vinyl plying its wares (the show seems to cost me more than £100 in discs each time I go) and anyone who visited with their own records had a chance of getting them cleaned by Jonathan Monks, of Keith Monks Record Cleaning Machine fame.

This year saw the Bath and Country Club's library put to use. The only room not featuring a turntable highlighted the increasing interest in headphone technology, with a fine collection of Stax and Hifiman headphones and headphone amps. Driven off Ayre equipment, or just a cheapo DVD player, the sounds from these on-ear wonders were astounding. No wonder Stax is having a bumper year.

I am very reluctant to write what journalists call a 'puff piece', accenting the positive aspects of a dealer's show where the reality is that three guys and a cat sat round a decrepit turntable. But that's not the case here. Instead, we have a dealer you is trying to put the service back into a service industry and making a special event that really does stand out from the crowd. It's also perhaps a mark of the future of audio; our American counterparts are already seeing a marked increase in local shows as almost a replacement to ailing bricks and mortar stores. Here, we get the best of both worlds, good shows and good stores. Long may it continue! +

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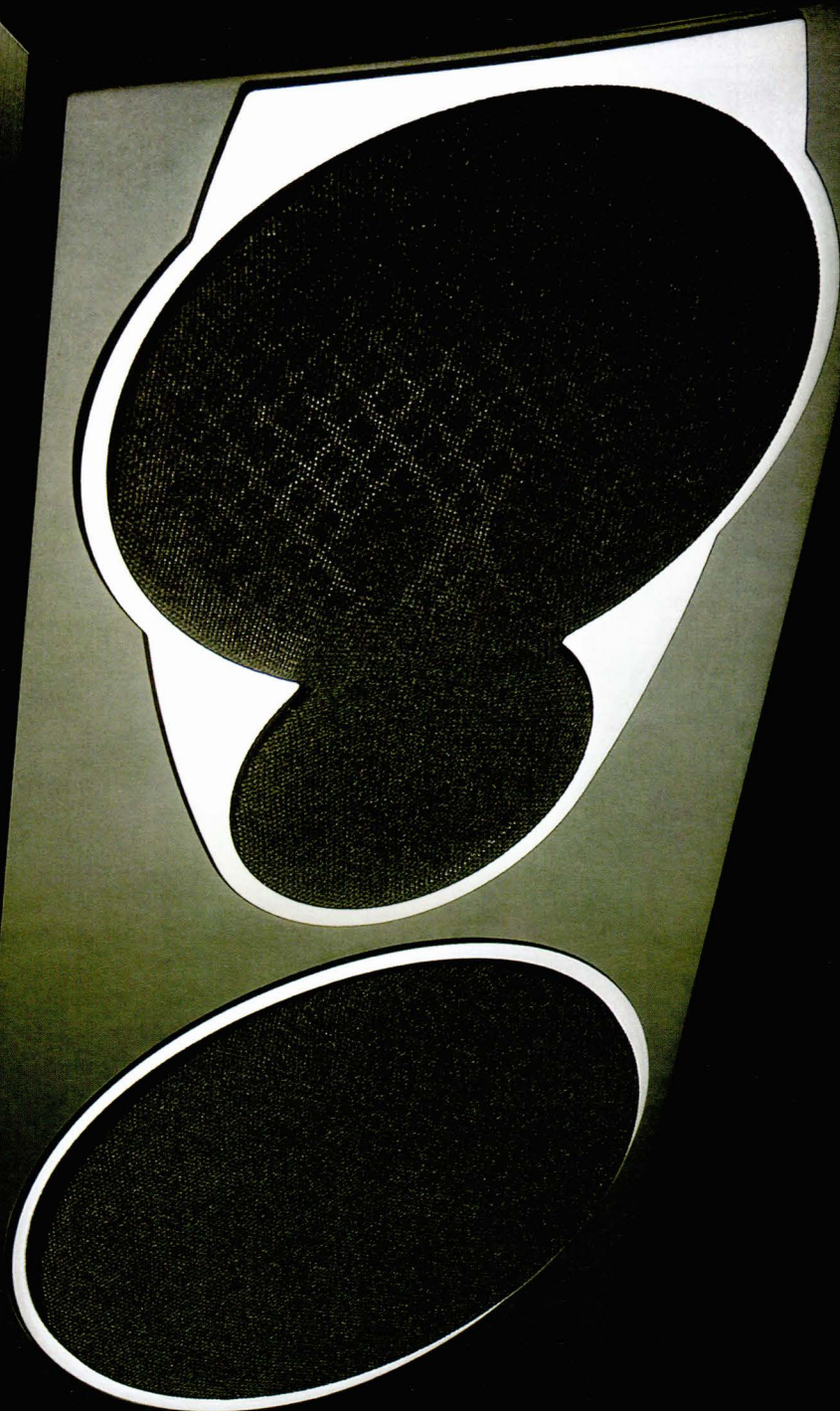


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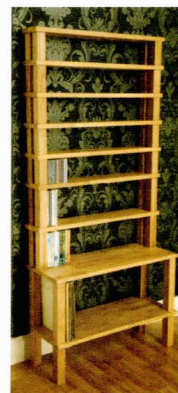
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MUNICH SHOW REPORT



High End 2011

By Alan Sircom

I never have much luck at the Munich High End show. It has nothing to do with the show itself, or even Munich. It is just that fate conspires against me. One year it was being held up at customs while I explained that a microphone wasn't an explosive device, and spent 12 hours trying to edit a three minute interview. The next it was a volcano. This year I just about escaped another volcano, had only the briefest hold-up in customs ('what is an Audioquest and why does your USB cable have a battery attached to it?'), but heard my trusty-but-rusty MacBook making sounds like a distressed Boeing whenever it was turned on. With all my photos loaded.

The moral of the story: never trust technology. Or volcanos.

Still, some time to reflect on the event is a good thing in many respects. This year's Munich High End Show was perhaps more subdued than usual, but these things are relative; it was still nigh on 20,000m² of exhibition space and had more than 14,000 visitors attending, but some of the German

distributors were upset that while the number of foreign trade visitors were up, the number of real Germans who might buy things had dropped to under 10,000 this year. And, at first when you saw that half the world's audio press turned up to view the new 20 year guarantee for PMC loudspeakers, you might be mistaken for thinking this wasn't going to be a show of thousands of new launches. In fact, there were many key players showing exciting new products.

Perhaps the most anticipated product launch was the KEF Blade. First shown two years previously in the same show, the Concept Blade – as it was known at that time – was considered one of the best sounding products that would never, ever be commercially available. The cost of a carbon-fibre over balsawood enclosure or the array of hand-made drive units, pushed the Concept's price way over the edge for KEF, the \$200,000 Muon notwithstanding. However, in the intervening two years, KEF refined the ideas, made the product production-possible and ran nearly a whole Pixar's worth of computer modelling to realise the Blade out of the Concept. Built to order, the 24,000€ floorstander



Right: KEF Blade loudspeaker



Double Bubble...

QRT's revolutionary and multi award-winning Qx2 and Qx4 didn't just introduce a unique new approach to the problem of delivering clean, clear AC power to audio systems, they forced us to reassess our whole understanding of both the cause and affects of AC quality on musical performance. Their proprietary technology and non-intrusive approach delivered astonishing results exactly where they matter – in the music, vividly bringing performers and their performances to life.

Now, by applying QRT technology directly to the AC line driving your audio or AV system, the new Qv2 provides a compact, versatile and affordable addition to QRT's modular solution to AC treatment. Equally effective used as a first step to upgrading your system's performance, or as an addition to an existing Q_B/Q_x installation, the benefits of the Qv2 are both complementary to the Q_x units, and just like them, cumulative in nature. You see, with QRT's modular approach, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, which means that, after the first Qv2, you will get an even better result by adding a second – and that even if that

Qv2 is your first step on the QRT path, it will never become redundant, simply slotting in alongside a Q_{BASE}, a Q_x (or two) or additional Qv2s.



Just plug the Qv2 into a spare socket on your distribution unit (or the same AC line as your system) and you'll hear an immediate increase in depth, dimensionality and presence, musically and on your AV screen. Colours will be richer and more vibrant, but more natural too. It's easy to do – even easier to see and hear. In

fact, the small size and simplicity of installation mean that you can readily experiment with multiple Qv2s, either on the AC line that powers your system, or by adding them to other lines that feed "noisy" electronics elsewhere in your house.

The Qv2 – one upgrade that's literally plug and play!

NORDOST
MAKING THE CONNECTION

► features what the company calls a Single Apparent Source, which places the four bass drivers and the Tangerine-waveguided Uni-Q mid-bass and treble speaker all equidistant and effectively acting as one. The two pairs of bass drivers use force-cancelling bars and the new body is GRP. The result is one of the most dynamic, fluid and right sound loudspeakers around.

Another long-awaited floorstander was not at the show, but off-piste. The new Ktêma Proscenium from Franco Serblin. Serblin, the man originally behind Sonus Faber has designed a loudspeaker that relies on ancient concepts the focal point of the theatre, creating a loudspeaker with a slim front baffle, expanding back to a wider rear, where the bass loudspeakers fire backwards and the sound emanates outwards through side ports. Naturally, the cabinet is made from solid wood and the finish was exemplary. The net result is a loudspeaker with a breadth that belies its size and all the warmth and passion you might expect from a classic S-F speaker in a slim, distinctive box. This isn't the only loudspeaker in the range; a standmount is planned too. I saw an early prototype – “no photographs, please!” – on static display and the words ‘achingly beautiful’ immediately sprang to mind. After 30 years in the business, Franco Serblin’s passion shows no sign of abating. Price on both sets of speakers are to be confirmed, but a price of roughly 24,000€ was mentioned for the Proscenium.

Meanwhile, back in the show, Sonus Faber itself announced a Guarneri Evolution c15,000€ standmount that has the same rich chrome and piano finish of the Amati Futura in the traditional Guarneri footprint. This left many an audiophile drooling.



Above: Audio Research Reference 150 power amp

The Amati Futura itself was part of the coolest system in the show, comprising EAT turntable, the new Audio Research PH8 hybrid phono stage and the excellent new Reference 150 stereo power amplifier. Building on the strengths of the Reference 110, but with more power, the balanced-only KT120-based tube power amp has excellent power reserves, a super-quiet fan cooling system. But that wasn't the only reason it was cool; super-smooth sound aside, it was the only room in the whole damn show to feature air conditioning!

Top end, two-way standmounts were all the rage in Munich. Crystal Cables showed its new Arabesque Mini, a delicious 12,000€ anodized-finished loudspeaker that builds on the success and design of the glass Arabesque flagship, but this time features a dome tweeter and a very refined Perspex-like three bar speaker stand. The company also showed a 36,000€ floorstander in a rich black anodized finish in the same Arabesque range, while sister brand Siltech launched its new Explorer series of interconnects and speaker cables. Why is this last so significant? For a company where the name bespeaks of its use of silver (or silver-gold) conductors in its designs, the new Explorer range is made from pure copper.

Meanwhile audio enfant terrible Magico added two more products to its Q series, the Q3 and Q1. Most people will wax lyrical over the Q3 – for good reason, it's pretty damn good – but the Q1 was for me the star of the show. As a replacement to the popular Mini, the new sealed-box two-way speaker is smaller, cheaper (that's a relative term, it's still 28,000€ per pair) and sounds like the biggest small speaker you've ever heard. This is the Manhattan Apartment loudspeaker par excellence. Yes, it needs a great set of electronics in front of it (it was powered, as is often the case at these events, by Soullution, which had its new 540 Media Player and matching – if huge – 530 integrated amplifier, the first from the brand). But also, yes, it lives up to the reputation Magico has created for itself in so short a time. It sounds like a grand audio cliché, but everyone sitting listening to these small speakers assumed they were the Q3, even when playing deep bass notes. Then they saw the speaker cables led to the Q1, and did a perfect double take at least twice. I stood outside the room to speak to one of the team, and learned how to swear in about 14 languages ►



▶ as other walked out, head shaking in disbelief at how they get that much sound out of that little speaker without fracturing the laws of physics. At less breathless heights of audiophile extremism, the improved Vienna Acoustics Mozart Grand loudspeakers are an elegant two-and-a-half-way floorstander at the very reasonable price of around 3,000€ per pair. The Mozart has been updated to take the new 6" X3P bass units and features a heavily revised crossover network. Sadly, Vienna wasn't running a demonstration room, but the speakers show great promise.

Streaming and computer audio solutions were gaining ground, and there were countless new launches of computer-side products than new CD players in this show. Among the highlights, Plinius was showing its new 4950€ Toko streamer, complete with vestigial CD drive, Hegel was showing off its two newest DACs (one of which is USB only), Cambridge Audio finally launched the 598€ Sonata NP30 streamer originally shown a year ago, NAD announced the 800€ C446 does everything receiver and Burmester was showing its 111 Music Server from its Reference Line. The price of this player is still to be confirmed, but it won't be cheap! It includes an integrated CD slot for ripping, can connect to the world through WiFi and/or LAN. It has an excellent front panel display, that is easily readable across a room, and there is the obligatory iPad application to drive it.

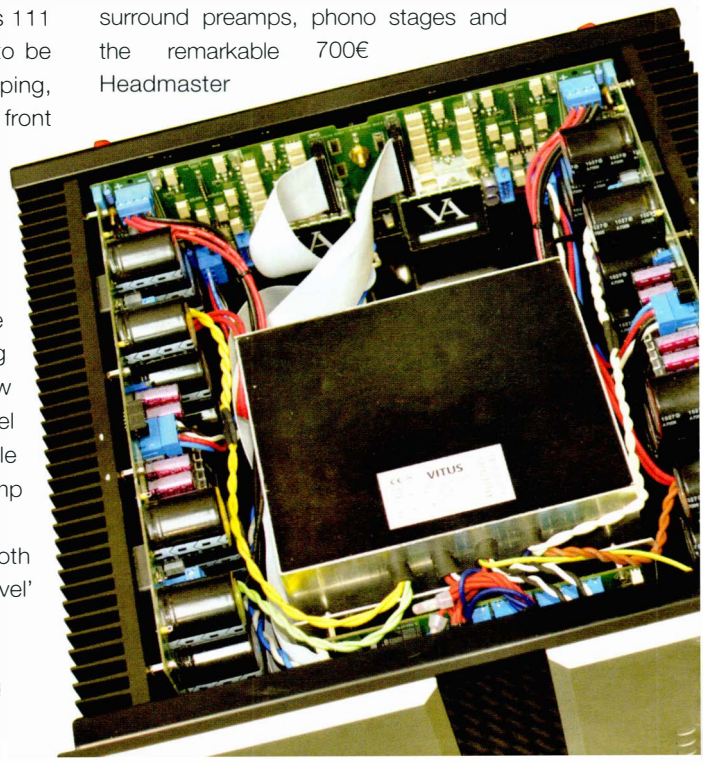
Meanwhile, burgeoning Chinese brand QAT demonstrated its MS5 host server (and was showing the forthcoming MS1 high-end server), but what was particularly impressive was the RP1 remote pad (with an Android app already to market and a very sassy looking iPad app in the wings). Expect much from this go-getting Beijing-based brand. Moving south to Shenzhen, IAG had a slew of new products, including new speakers from Mission and Quad and lots of two channel and multi-channel Audiolab equipment. Perhaps the most exciting of the lot for the audiophile was the upcoming Audiolab M-DAC, a half-sized DAC/headphone amp that is expected to take on the big boys.

The transition to file-based music is not quite complete, though. Both Vitus Audio and Burmester showed new CD players in new 'entry-level'

lines, while Gryphon Audio launched a whole new everything. Vitus Audio was showcasing its new '100' series, currently standing at a CD player, preamp and integrated amp, all of which are expected to retail below 10,000€ per unit. All built to typical Vitus standards. With widespread distribution by Focal, expect to see more from this Nordic brand.

NuForce is every bit the state-of-the-art brand, and it was showing products at both ends of the spectrum to great effect along with its new-found best friend in the audio industry, Amphion loudspeakers. The iDo will be an iProduct-chummy DAC that can output either a digital datastream or analogue/headphone output. It is sized like NuForce's other desktop computing products. At the other end of the scale was the 5,000€ P-18 preamplifier, with its shaved off edges and running the length of the front panel display, it will be an exciting addition to match the company's Reference 18 mono power amps.

Headphone DAC/amps are fast becoming the next big thing. Along with NuForce, ADL and Furutech launched the elegant, wing-shaped 500€ Cruise... and then there was Funk. Not the post-Pink Triangle maker of decks and arms, but Funk Tonstudioteknik to be precise. This is a pro-audio manufacturer of stereo and surround preamps, phono stages and the remarkable 700€ Headmaster



“Perhaps the most exciting of the lot for the audiophile was the upcoming Audiolab M-DAC, a half-sized DAC/headphone amp that is expected to take on the big boys.”



ll headphone amp. Remarkable because it allows impedance switching, balanced and single-ended connection, will drive anything with a large headphone jack and do it properly and even allows the sort of left/right switching and cancellation that studio engineers need and headphone fans love.

Everyone (rightly) associates Germany with big, shiny chrome turntables. Everyone that is, except Kuzma. Kuzma's new work-in-progress 14,000€ Stabi-M turntable was the antithesis of shiny, with most people asking 'is that your new record cleaner'. The deck is a large 'wife and pet-proof' deck with a lid big enough to accommodate 12" arms and a lid plus detachable side glass cheeks. As someone who has one wife and two cats, I can see the appeal, even if the aesthetics of the deck are, er, challenging. TW Acoustic also went the 'none more black' route, in a far more decorative manner with its 16,000€ Raven LTD, which really is limited to just 50 turntables. Get your orders in quick.

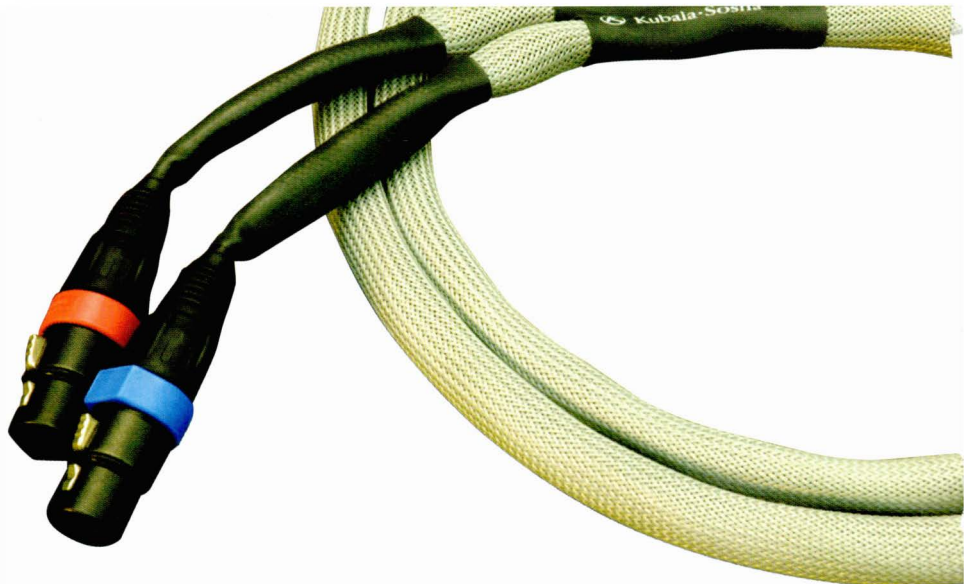
Elsewhere though, the chrome shininess of German turntablism shone through, in brands like Transrotor, Acoustic Solid and Clearaudio. This last was showing its Statement Turntable and TT1 arm, a masterpiece of magnetic levitation and non-contact drive trains, all on a built-in pendulum stand that could just about continue to play records on a rough sea crossing. The new Statement Phono, a more restrained looking two-box phono/line preamplifier with a remotely controllable input loading and a full spread of equalization curves, also joined the Clearaudio family. We didn't get a chance to hear these beauties properly and the price is in the 'if you have to ask, you can't afford it' region. And just when you thought turntables were immune to the power of the iPad, along comes resident vinyl crazy guy (in all the right ways) Dr Feickert, with his free PlatterSpeed app, which measures a 3.15kHz test tone played on a 15€ vinyl disc.

Any visit to a German hi-fi show wouldn't be complete without the wild and wacky end. They are into their big horn loudspeakers in an even bigger way in Munich. Cesaro, Avantgarde, Musique Concrete (guess what they are made from) and more are installed with manful amounts of blood, sweat and tears. And many of them made a remarkably good sound in the process. But my vote for crazed loudspeaker of the show was not even making a noise, and it wasn't finished in anything like a commercial finish, or even any kind of finish whatsoever. It was just the one horn loudspeaker on the Blumenhofer Acoustics stand and when I visited it was just about to swallow an unsuspecting audiophile. Whole.

There's a lot more. It only scratches the surface. To take in all that's new in Munich is beyond the scope of one, weissbier-fuelled hack with a camera and a broken laptop. I was notionally tasked with covering the sub-\$25,000 market, with my colleague Jonathan Valin discussing the market above and beyond that figure. Trouble is, last time we saw him, he was heading to Switzerland... +

Cable Length

By Alan Sircom



Does cable length play a key part in audio systems, and if so is there an easy way to determine optimum cable length?

There seem to be three ways people set up systems. The 'English' method (used by popular UK brands like Linn, Naim, Exposure and the like) demands the sources and amps placed together along one side of the room, with long loudspeaker cables. The 'American' style (as seen in rooms sporting Krell and its kin) once again places the sources and preamp along one side wall, but this time features long interconnect cables to a power amp (or amps) sitting between the loudspeakers, and short speaker cables. Then there's the 'keep it short' school of thought, which places the system between the speakers, thereby guaranteeing short interconnects and speaker cables. This last is also popular with demonstrators in hotel rooms, because it means the prospective clientele sits facing the manufacturer's wares for the whole listening session. But, does the placement really add up to different performance?

To test this, I experimented with stands and tables in different positions, with amplifiers commonly used in the traditional English and American layouts, and experimented with them in all manner of combinations. Sources included the now-discontinued Lyngdorf CD-1, the Heed DT transport and DA converter (used in buffered and unbuffered output modes) and a Linn Akurate DS (see next issue). Preamps included the Conrad-Johnson ET-3, the Siltech C1, a classic old ECA Vista and the Linn Akurate. Power amps included the Edge G6 and the Linn Akurate, while loudspeakers used throughout were Avalon NP2.0. Cables were from the Fascination range from Kubala Sosna (with the exception of a trusty but rusty Grahams Hi-Fi custom distribution block made out of industrial grade metal MK boxes and cooker cable) and the stands were from Hi-Fi Racks (see this issue), with no additional treatments, supports, or power conditioners.

First up, the 'Keep It Short' system, with short interconnects and speaker cables and the equipment sitting between the speakers hotel demo stylee. Audio folklore dictates that anything between the speakers ruins the sound of the system, creating a soundstage that doesn't 'gel' the way it should. This is in part understandable when using a turntable, because you are only one turn on the volume dial from feedback (with the woofers perhaps inches from the stylus tracking a groove, the possibility of one influencing the other increases). However, in reality this isn't as big a problem as first portrayed, as any DJ pumping out tunes on a Technics 1200 sitting next to a PA system will attest.

In the home, with a CD-based source, the negative effects of putting the system between the speakers were negligible. In an ideal world, you probably wouldn't put the electronics between the speakers anyway (if only not to have all those blue LEDs in your sight line), but in an ideal world, I'd be a billionaire, have a different supercar for every day of the week, would look like a young Paul Newman and get to play bouncy-bouncy games with Halle Berry. Sadly, it's pretty damn far from an ideal world and if the only place you can plant your system is between the speakers, go for it and enjoy it.

From a connectivity perspective, this is the right way to go... for most equipment. The Linn equipment definitely benefitted from very short cables all round, as did the ECA Vista and the Siltech C1 played through both the Linn and the Edge. The exception was the c-j ET-3 and Edge combination. It worked well enough in isolation, but when used in its more conventional setting, it sounded slightly peaky, with something close to a fading top end and uninspiring bass in comparison.

“However, in reality this isn’t as big a problem as first portrayed, as any DJ pumping out tunes on a Technics 1200 sitting next to a PA system will attest.”

Shifting the whole system to the traditional ‘British’ layout (short interconnects and long speaker cables) proved fascinating. Suddenly here the Linn came into its own, and the others... didn’t. The Linn system sounded more crisp and focused in this setting (more, in fact, than in any other system lay-out), where the Siltech/Edge pushed toward brightness and the c-j/Edge system sounded too laid back. The ECA/Edge was not far from the performance of the Linn in basic terms, but it was clear this wasn’t an ideal partnership in any setting. The difference was marked and clearly noticeable – the Linn did better here than in all other settings and the others did better in all other settings. It was pretty clear-cut.

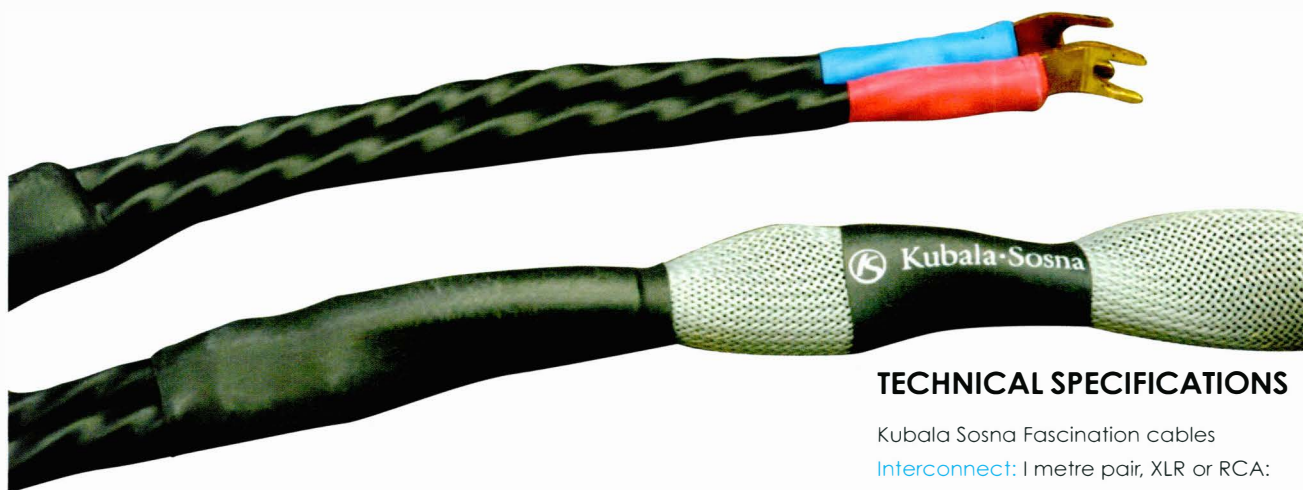
Then we moved to the ‘American’ layout, with preamp and sources on one wall and long interconnects to the power amplifier. As suggested earlier, the Linn combination wasn’t at all happy in this layout, with the top-end distinctly attenuated, while the mids were slightly indistinct and the whole soundstage (not the Linn’s strong suit, it must be said) sounding rather vague in comparison. The same could not be said about the Siltech and c-j preamps with the Edge power amp, they positively came to life under this setting. Especially the c-j preamp, this quickly proved to be its happy place and made its most musical sounds in this position. These were not life-changing experiences, but the benefits of placing the amps in their proper places were marked and made the difference between good sound and great sound.

In fact, I didn’t expect quite so clear-cut results. The Linn preamp benefitted greatly from short interconnects and long speaker leads, no matter what kind of power amp was put in the system. The c-j preamp (and to a lesser extent, the Edge power amp) both benefitted from being used in the traditional American layout with preamp and power amp separated from one another, while the rest were all equally content with whatever layout was selected. This makes me suspect that the output impedance of the preamplifier and input impedance of the power amplifier make more of a difference to performance than the length of cables used, but as ever there’s a catch; that kind of only really works with cables like the Kubala Sosna designs.

In a way, this is feature wrapped around a review that cannot happen. I make no apologies for that. You see, these Kubala-Sosna cables are actually damn good, and consistently so. I’ve heard them used in a number of systems before I started using them and they have the same properties of resolution, dynamics, detail, percussive control over transients and cohesiveness, especially when used as a complete systemic solution. They aren’t the brightest sounding cables money can buy, but that makes them more Cardas than Nordost, and just as worthwhile. Some of the best sounding rooms at shows I’ve heard have ended up using some form of K-S cabling solution, and the company offers trade-up schemes so that Fascination is merely a springboard to bigger and better things. Not that you’ll feel the need to upgrade, but should the need arise, K-S want you to keep in the K-S family, and it’s well worth taking advantage of that.

So why the non-review review? Because a lot of what makes the K-S cables good is hidden from view. The company has a welcome ethos of not coating its products in a layer of technobabble and pseudoscience, but it also doesn’t like describing much about the product at all, aside from the basic specifications and discussions of its proprietary





OptimiZ architecture that is said to provide better balance of capacitance vs inductance, lower characteristic impedance and pass a square-wave better than rivals. The net result of this is the cable gets in the way less between the output impedance of one device and the input impedance of the other (the main reason why they were selected for the task anyway). The trouble is, how these cables do this, the kind of materials used and everything else is simply not made public and is requested to remain secret. I could take a set of pliers to a cable and determine that the conductors are made of copper rather than some form of Star Trek metal and that the dielectric is not made of crab paste, but it wouldn't change much.

I suspect the secret is there is no secret. These are good sounding cables, well made and do that rare thing – sell themselves on their performance rather than their fancy claims. That might make them a bugger to review, which gives Kubala Sosna a lower profile than it deserves. Fascination is fascinating. I just wish I could say more about 'why'. +

“I could take a set of pliers to a cable and determine that the conductors are made of copper rather than some form of Star Trek metal and that the dielectric is not made of crab paste, but it wouldn't change much.”

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Kubala Sosna Fascination cables

Interconnect: 1 metre pair, XLR or RCA: £775

per extra metre : £245

Speaker cables: 1 metre pair: £775

per extra metre: £245

Bi-wire: +15% of single wire price

Digital cable: 1 metre: £530

per extra metre: £115

Power cables: 1 metre: 365

per extra metre: £100

extra half metre available on all cables at 50% of extra 1 metre price.

The Fascination range carries a 20 year warranty. K.S. run an upgrade scheme which gives the customer the following percentage of original price back against a new cable:

0-90 days 100%

91 days - 1 year: 95%

1-2 years: 90%

2-3 years: 85%

3-4 years: 75%

4-5 years: 65%

5+ years: 50%

Manufacturer: Kubala Sosna

URL: www.kubala-sosna.com

Distributed by: Audio Reference

URL: www.audioreference.co.uk

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the emotion is back



Emotion Classic 12 *by art loudspeakers*

This formidable NEW 3-way speaker is immediately recognisable as an ART loudspeaker and no matter what angle you view the 'Emotion Classic 12' from, its proportions are simply right.

Utilising reference class tweeter and mid-range units, the 'Classic 12' delivers a vista soundstage, ensuring the very smallest of details never get lost. With a formidable 12" bass driver, you simply won't believe just how low this speaker can actually go! Bass and dynamics are tight too, and so fast, allowing you to easily follow intricate bass lines and it has the slam to rearrange your insides if you so wish. A truly groundbreaking 3-way loudspeaker that most definitely puts the fun back into high end music reproduction.

The high efficiency, easy to drive 'Classic 12' is available in three versions: Standard, Signature and Silver, with the option to upgrade to a higher version at a later date. They are also available in 3 premium wood finishes: Walnut, Oak and Rosenut.

Call Jordan Acoustics to find out more.

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free unbiased advice ▶ large product range ▶ free parking ▶ 0% flexible finance*
part exchange* ▶ large selection of used items ▶ home demonstrations*

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

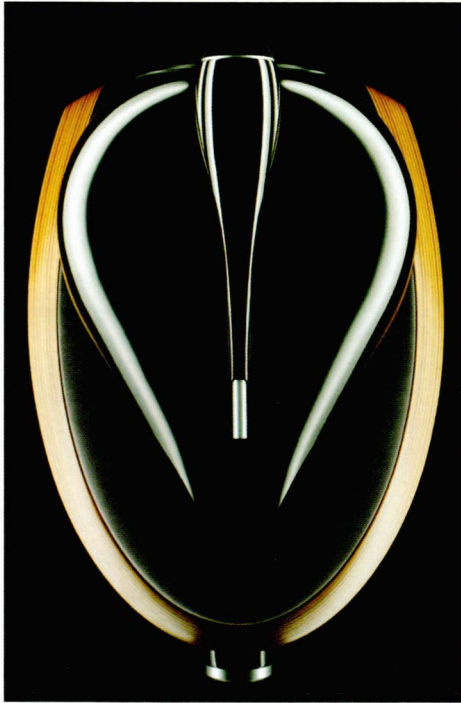
B&W 802 Diamond

By Jason Kennedy

The 800 Diamond series was launched last year to replace the 800D models but save for a silver ring around the drivers you'd be hard pressed to tell them apart. This is the third incarnation of a range that was initiated by the Nautilus back in the nineties, a speaker that was worth its weight in marketing potential if not actual sales. Still, it remains one of, if not the most elegant and sculptural speakers ever put into production and I wouldn't mind a pair if I had the requisite eight channels of top notch amplification!

For the Diamond revision Bowers & Wilkins added its diamond tweeter to all the speakers in the range, the 805 and 804 being the obvious beneficiaries here and discontinued the biggest model from the D series the 801. It's big boned proportions being presumably too much of a challenge for even the dedicated music lover in these frugal times. The 800 is thus the daddy now and rather spectacular it sounds too, this was the model that Bowers & Wilkins demonstrated in full effect at its R&D labs for the product launch, the speaker that inspired me to write an Every Home Should Have One about Arab Strap's Philophobia. However, as I have reviewed both the previous incarnations of the next model down the line, the 802, it made sense to get its Diamond variant in for assessment.





For this model the engineers at Steyning changed little on the outside but nearly everything on the inside. The main cabinet is largely unchanged as is the Marlan midrange 'head' but three of the four drive units, the cast aluminium plinth and the crossover are new. These are the bits that the company has managed to find ways of improving in the five years since the D series was launched, the rest it seems, can't be bettered.

“The tweeter retains the diamond dome that gives the speaker its 33kHz high frequency extension but the motor system that drives it has been revised with an extra magnet.”

Starting from the top the tweeter retains the diamond dome that gives the speaker its 33kHz high frequency extension but the motor system that drives it has been revised with an extra magnet. This sits right at the front of the system in front of the primary magnet and increases magnetic flux, thus raising sensitivity which is always a good thing, and particularly in a tweeter. The other important change is to the surround material which is slightly softer than before and which improves treble dispersion at frequencies above 15kHz. This should make the speaker's character more consistent from room to room and improve image precision. The free standing tapered tube housing has also been changed but for production rather than acoustic reasons, it remains on a compliant Sorbothane mounting to the Marlan head.

The midrange drive unit is very similar to that in the D series, it retains a six inch woven Kevlar cone, the low profile FST surround and the skeletal, cast chassis of its predecessor. The only change is to the bullet shaped phase plug which was formally black rather than sexy silver aluminium.

The biggest single change for the MkIII 802 is the magnet material on the bass drivers, this has gone from ferrite to neodymium. A situation that has changed the shape of the motor system which is now long and slim rather than flat and wide, which is good for rearward venting and the neodymium means higher flux at the point where the long coil surrounds a short magnetic gap. This change is reflected in a 6mm increase in coil and former diameter, and thus a different size spider that has better mechanical compliance. The cone itself remains Rohacell, a composite of a woven skin with a foam core for maximum stiffness to weight. The dustcap or mushroom that you see on the cone is smaller than its predecessor.

The cabinet is a formed laminate shell with the company's Matrix bracing system inside, this vents down onto the cast plinth which has been changed for production purposes but retains the three point fixings for four castors or threaded feet. The latter have a spike at one end and a nylon rather than rubber tip at the other, the old rubber tips were a little too soft for long term abuse resistance as I discovered with the 802D.

Most inconveniently these speakers arrived a week after the Mark Levinson No.53 monoblock power amps departed. This superb amplifier is the direct descendent of the No.33 monoblocks that Bowers & Wilkins' engineers use for their R&D work and would have made a most effective partner. This is not a particularly difficult speaker to drive however, its specified 90dB sensitivity and minimum 3.5ohm impedance means that you don't need hundreds of watts to exploit its potential. My 200 watt Gamut D200 Mk3 is not the most powerful of amps yet it reveals most of the grunt on offer, more of which was apparent when Micromega's AS-400 turned up with its 400 watts (4 ohms) of class D grip. This amp proved to be a particularly well suited partner in most respects thanks to its even handedness, resolving powers and dynamic abilities. The speaker warrants as much transparency as you can muster but revealed nothing untoward in this Apple Airplay compatible integrated.

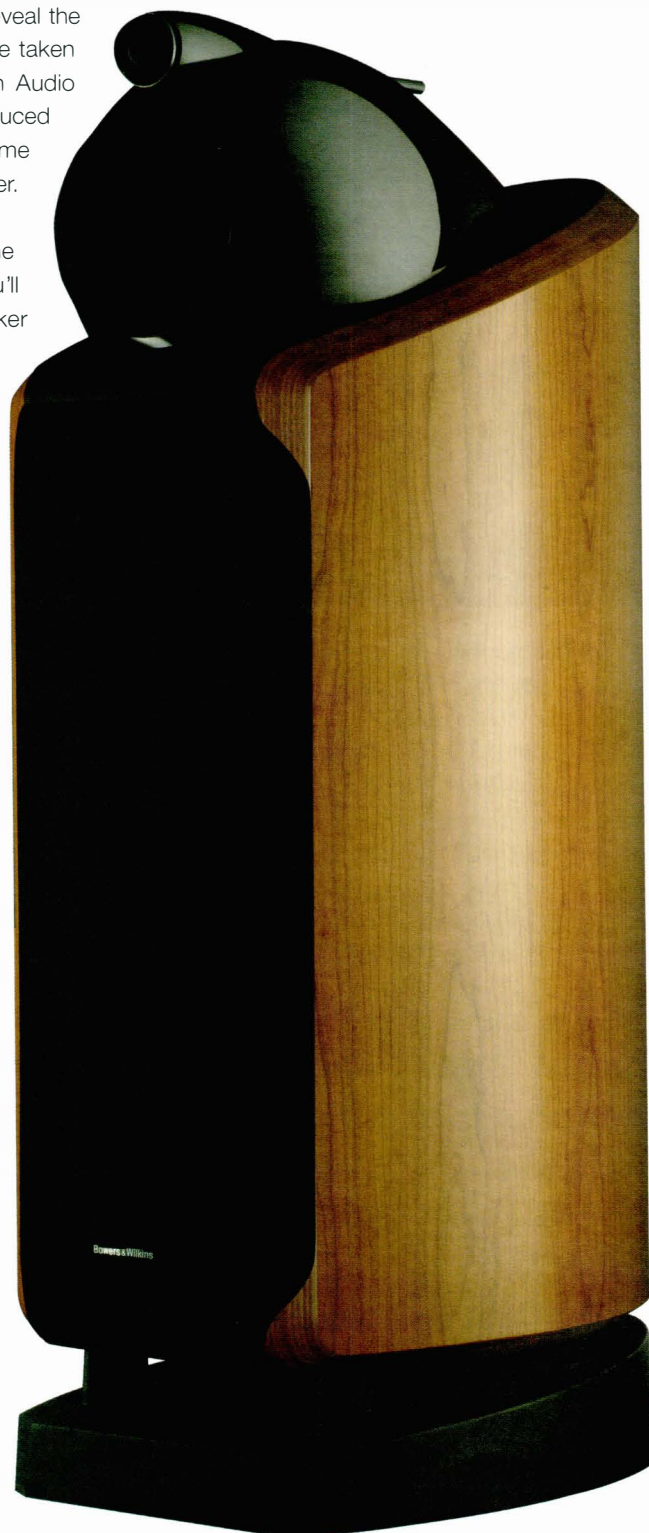
One thing that became apparent early on was that the 802 Diamond needs to be bi-wired for best results, changing from one pair of Townshend Isolda DCT speaker cables to two brought about a considerable improvement in dynamics as a result of extra speed and power in the bass. The PMC Fact8 speakers which they took the place of worked better with single wiring from the same amplifier. The bass is the most obvious part of the spectrum that the Diamond revision has improved, it is clearly more transparent and nimble so you can hear the texture of bass instruments and the full harmonic envelope

▶ of low notes. The 802D had excellent bass depth and power but was relatively leaden and sluggish, a powerful and fast amplifier could minimise this but you can get fleet footed results with the new 802 without having to shell out for such exotic beasts. Now the shape of bass notes is always very distinct and the speed with which they start and stop means that you are never far from a distracting piece of music that will obliterate your troubles and cares for as long as the beat goes on.

The aforementioned Gamut power amp helped them to reveal the electrifying presence on Gabriel's rendition of Boy in the Bubble taken from a 24/96 WAV download played through the Resolution Audio Cantata and Pont Neuf Ethernet bridge. This version produced obviously greater low level resolution than the CD of the same thing despite the removal of 10m of CAT5 cable and a computer. It did have Pure Music on its side however.

As with previous Marlan headed 800 series models the balance improves with level, visit Bowers' R'n'D dept and you'll hear why, those guys like to play loud and this is how the speaker was balanced. They have more measurement capability than most of the industry in that building but how a speaker sounds at balls-out level is what matters. Fortunately it's not necessary to emulate this at home, I rarely do these days despite the temptation that a speaker like this presents and have to say that my musical enjoyment does not suffer as a result, well just a bit. I was inspired to do an Every Home Should Have One on Rickie Lee Jones' Flying Cowboys when I heard it on the Pro-Ject RPM10.1 turntable and these speakers, it's an album I've been using to assess kit with for years but not one that often gets past the first track or two. This time I was hooked for a whole side and while the RPM10.1 is good it didn't prove to be this engaging in other circumstances. Perhaps it's one of those synergy things where recording, player, amp and source come together to create the elusive sum beating total of parts.

The 802 Diamonds continued to shine with other analogue and digital sources after this experience thanks to their ability to reveal what's going on in a non critical way. This makes them easy to live with on the one hand but it's immediately apparent when truly impressive recordings or hardware are in are hooked up. A good example is Well Tempered Labs' latest creation the Simplex, this remarkably affordable turntable has phenomenal timing, it makes the LP12 sound lacklustre in the pace department and has swung at least one prime advocate of that classic deck over to its way of playing. The Diamonds let you know exactly how good it is by producing a boogie inducing sound that your feet cannot resist whenever some Little Feat or ZZ Top hits the platter. In other words this speaker is a transparent conduit to the timing qualities of whatever feeds it, the Fact8 is





TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Tweeter: 25mm diamond dome

Midrange: 150mm woven Kevlar cone

Bass: 2x 200mm Rohacell cone

Nominal impedance: 8 ohms (min 3.5 ohm)

Sensitivity: 90dB

Frequency range: 27Hz – 33kHz (-6dB)

Cabinet Dimensions (HxWxD):

1135x368x563mm

Weight: 75kg

Finish: Cherrywood, Rosenut, piano black gloss

Grille: black cloth

Price: £11,500 per pair

Manufacturer: B&W Group Ltd, Dale Road, Worthing, West Sussex, BN11 2BH

URL: www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk

Tel: 0800 232 1513

very strong in this respect too but doesn't touch the bass extension nor power handling on offer here. I haven't heard the Naim Ovator S600 used in anger yet but would be highly surprised if that beat master could better these Bowers & Wilkins beauties.

This transparency works both ways of course, when a fabulous piece of review kit goes away it takes more than a little time to get used to the merely great ones that form the reference system. I spend a lot of time tweaking and trying alternative cables for both power and signal trying to get close to those peaks of experience but eventually take solace in the fact that time and new kit will take the pain away. The answer is to keep exploring new music and this after all is the point of the audiophile exercise as I see it. The plethora of new young trumpet players on the jazz scene keeps me distracted of an evening and the good ones, like the unpronounceable Verner Pohjola from Finland sound superbly open and detailed in the Diamond's hands. They reveal huge soundstage depth in which Pohjola's horn stands solid and real. I am not a big fan of trumpet recordings because they often seem to overload mics and mixing desks but this one and several others for that matter are entirely listenable on these speakers, which suggests that what's often overloaded is the loudspeakers at this end of the chain as much as anything else.

Less modern recordings such as Chick Corea's original *Return to Forever* which has recently been re-issued on vinyl by ECM, also work rather well. The precision of image placement was what struck me about this album, the speakers revealing a palpable realism to Airto Moreira's percussion instruments.

My lust for low frequency girth inspired the firing up of a Classé CA-2200 that while not the most exciting of power amps is not short on real power. This certainly did the trick of bringing extra ease to demanding material and giving Kraftwerk's *Minimum-Maximum* album the sort of grounding you need to recreate a live event in your living room. So power is still useful but not as crucial as quality.

Eleven and a half grand, it's a lot of money, but look at what the competition offers in terms of engineering and build quality at this price and you will soon see that the value on offer is pretty impressive. Can you name one high end company that can muster the R&D manpower that Bowers & Wilkins does and offers a speaker of this complexity at this price level? It looks like pretty good value in the general scheme of serious loudspeakers and positively cheap by the standards of many companies with rather less in the way of reputation.

It's not just an extremely revealing, highly capable and fabulously enjoyable speaker it's a good looking one too. So the question has to be what's not to like? Unless you feel the need to have a boutique brand loudspeaker in your system there are few competitors at the price that can get close to the 802 Diamond for sheer musical thrill power and the new solid copper binding posts are very shiny! +

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

ASR Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier



By Alan Sircom

If there's a funny anecdote about a product, ideally one that doesn't involve explosions or court cases, it's always a good starting place. Here's the one attached to the ASR; I got told there's an integrated amp coming my way one Friday, but it never arrived. As I was walking out of my front door on Saturday morning a large van turned up, with apologies because the even larger van given over to delivering the ASR Emitter II Exclusive couldn't make it down my road. The Emitter amp was weighing the van down and the delivery took up a small roomful of cardboard boxes, each one heavier than the last.

"What is a volestrangler, anyway?" asked the delivery guy (the boxes have the word *Vollverstärker*, German for 'full amplifier', written on the side).

"It's an amplifier for a hi-fi system"

"Must be a pretty big system" is the before-the-watershed, cleaned up version of his reply. He then asked for some painkillers and limped off, his Transit van visibly standing taller as it pulled away.

You see, that's the fun of the ASR Emitter. It's technically an integrated amp, but by all things normal, integrated amplifiers don't have a habit of turning up in four boxes as big as a car engine. Neither do they weigh as much as a car engine that often. Still, you gotta love those crazy Germans and their wild volestranglers.

The mental process behind all the boxes is actually quite simple and obvious when you think it through. There's the amp proper, its power supply and a pair of batteries to drive each channel of the amplifier's line-stage. The mains feeds the batteries and the whole system is there to allow you to listen to music entirely unencumbered by any form of fluctuation on the power line, because the battery takes care of that.

The basic plan of the Emitter II is over-engineering. This is the amp for beast loads in big, bad rooms. Of course, it will happily drive more down-to-earth

loudspeakers, but if an amplifier could get a solid metal bar to make music, it would be the Emitter II Exclusive. Three transformers turn out eight different individually rectified and buffered voltages. The input block is made from brass, the output terminals are rated to 100 amps and mounted 50mm apart, the PCBs are made from thick copper-tin tracks and mounted on high mass 60mm² rails, and the 20 MOSFETS in the output stage delivering 280W into eight ohms, 500W into four and 900W into two ohms. Short of shock-mounting the four boxes in their own ejector seat, this is about as macho as integrated amps get.

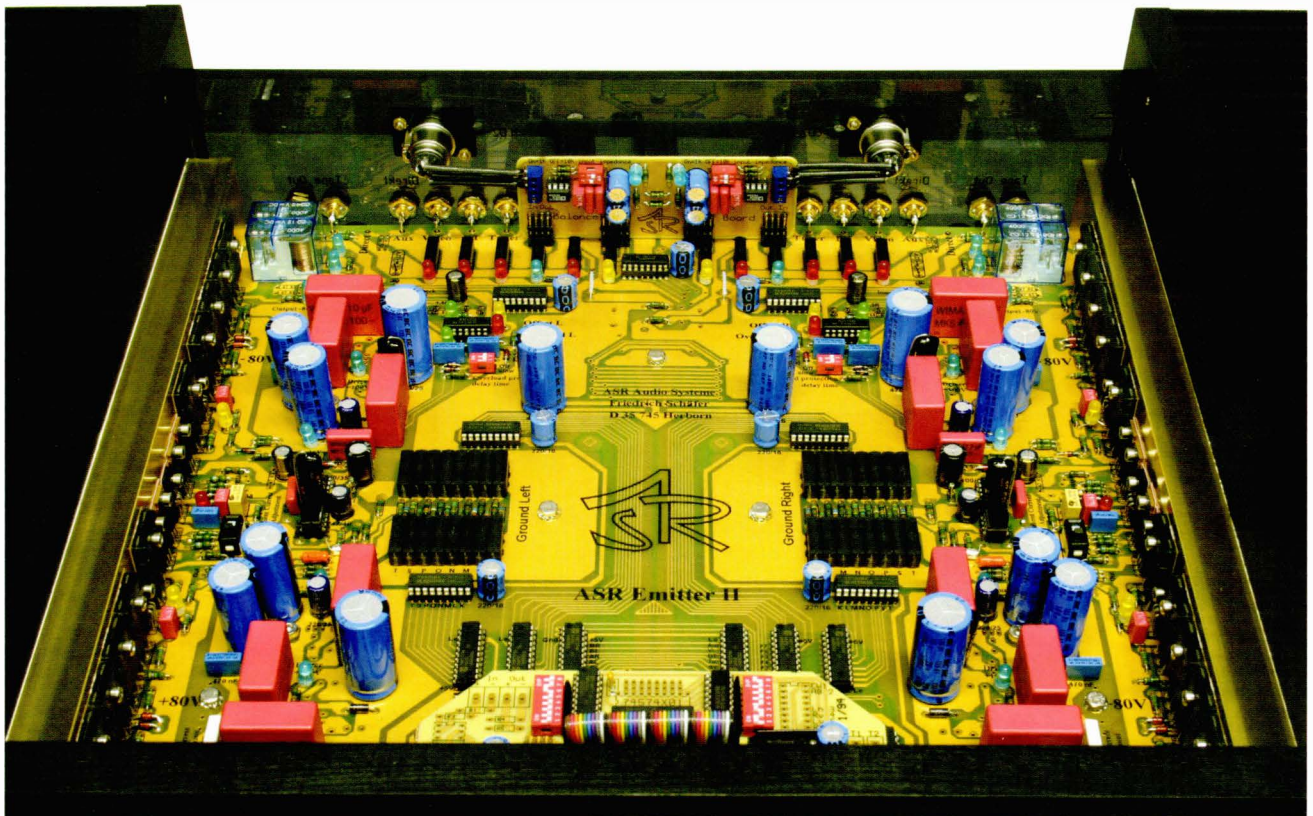
There's little point discussing the physical appearance more than this, save for the seen across the room LED read-out. And, despite looking every inch the hyperminimalist audio product, the ASR is actually a joy to use, once the pain of that hawser-wrangling installation is forgotten

about. There's six inputs as standard (with an option for a seventh, a balanced input, headphone output and two flavours of phono stage, along with the different finish options), but the best method is to stick to 'direct'. There's even a remote!

Whether it the bank of batteries, the Philbert-Mantelschnitt transformers, the 20 MOSFETs in the Class AB power amp stage, the battery arrays or the 862,000µF of buffer capacitance is unclear, but this is an amp that takes its time to come to fruition. It sounds excellent right out of the boxes, but hundreds of hours later, it sounds a heck of a lot more excellent. Given that it achieves its full conditioning from straight out of the warehouse in slightly more than eight days and it stays that way, this isn't some kind of 'wait until the warranty expires' scam. From an engineering standpoint though, aside from rechargeable batteries and their memory, the idea of electronics 'conditioning' is distinctly left-field. Regardless, a week or so after you receive new boxes, you get most of the true ASR experience.

That experience is one of absolute neutrality and accuracy. Uncannily so. There's little point banging out the old cliché about veils lifted, jaws dropped or envelopes pushed. It does all that. It does all the dynamic range you could wish for, all the detail you could want, as wide a soundstage as its possible to throw in your room and from your speakers, clarity, articulation, resolution and more. Even pulling out individual pieces of music to highlight aspects of the performance seems pointless, because you might as well list the entire record collection. And you get all this from the first bar of the first piece of music. And still you are left with more. Or maybe less.

You see this amp is so exceptionally 'right' sounding that it transcends all those hi-fi attributes. They read trite on the page. As does anything about 'musicality'; this amp doesn't do 'musicality'. It simply does what an amp ►





▶ should be doing and so rarely does. It acts like a straight wire with gain, and it shows just how rare that really is. And it shows how demanding that is on listener and system alike.

It means no compromise on source components, loudspeakers, room acoustics or room. Compromise will be immediately obvious, laid bare and open by the ASR's faithful account of what it is fed and what it feeds. It means no compromise on musical content; 'Loudness War' signal compression is exposed as an ugly, music-crushing blight on music. And such honesty and a natural presentation require natural sounds. It will make an excellent job of a spring reverb or a guitar amp, but you will be able to hear the difference between spring, plate, digital and natural reverberation all too easily and will crave the real thing through the ASR. Similarly, you'll find annoying the guitar amp's inability to process string noises and subtle tonal changes due to the fingering being outclassed by the guitar's input gain. You might even find yourself preferring the sound of a Gibson over a Fender because of the way the Gibson's humbuckers lower the noise.

In fact, lowering noise might just be the key to the ASR. If there's one hi-fi cliché worth restating in the Emitter world, it's the one where the noise floor falls away. Because that's precisely what happens. The sound of the Emitter II Exclusive has an exceptionally low noise floor, and this manifests itself to make the amplifier get out of the way of the music. Sounds don't rise out of an 'inky black silence' in real life; no-one comments on the pellucid background of the Royal Festival Hall. But when the musicians start, and if they are good, there's a stillness to the world around them, as if the music is all and the rest is silence. That's what the ASR Emitter II Exclusive can do, and it's why the amp is close to the stuff of legend.

But this raises philosophical questions. Can a device be 'too' neutral? If so, is the ASR the 'perfect' amplifier and do we either need or want such perfection? Just when you think the bar is raised as high as it's possible to be raised, an amp like the ASR comes along and does a Dick Fosbury. This sounds like nothing I've heard before from audio equipment before, refining 'clarity', 'detail' and removing a sense of high-frequency glare that you only notice by its absence. It makes other neutral sounding amplifiers appear as if they are trying to be neutral sounding. But when I try to set equipment in context, thinking who an amp would best suit, but I cannot say for certain whether someone who puts 'neutrality' at the top of their list would find this amp the most musically honest device ever placed in their system, or lacking what we mistakenly pass off as neutrality in audio.

I have to say that, despite the room o' cardboard, the fact that an integrated amplifier can take up its own rack, the pain of installation and even a conditioning period that could be measured in geological time, the thumb is distinctly 'up' for ASR. I've a nagging suspicion that it is the most uncolored electronic component money can buy. The term 'high fidelity' is overused as to

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Double- monaural-construction in a single case, mirror- symmetrical design

MOSFET Class A/B technology

Power output: 2x 280W (8 ohms), 2x 500W (4 ohms), 2x 900W (2 ohms)

Two separate power units with energy management circuitry

6x relay driven high level inputs, 1x direct input, 2x tape recording outputs
Slot for phono preamplifier or balanced input

Volume control with relay in 1dB steps

LED display as operation indicator

Infrared remote control for all functions

Protection circuits to ensure against overload, override, short circuit, excess temperature and DC voltage

Signal to noise ratio on high level input: 90 dB

Rise time lower than 0.8 μ s

Distortion lower than 0.01%

Damping factor: more than 1000 •

Power consumption in standby mode: 20 VA

Quiescent power consumption in energy- saving mode with half supply voltage of the output stage: 90 VA

Quiescent power consumption in normal mode with higher output power capacity: 200 VA

Dimensions of control unit: 57 x 47 x 23 cm

Dimensions of power units: 44 x 33 x 15 cm

Weight: 43 kg

Weight per power unit: 30 kg

Price: £14,500 (as reviewed)

Manufacturer: ASR

URL: www.asraudio.de

Distributed by: Manger Audio

URL: www.manger-audio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)161 304 0099

be almost redundant, but in its tightest, most forensic form it applies here. This amp is faithful to the original recording. Those eight words say it all, and yet don't even begin to do this amp justice. +

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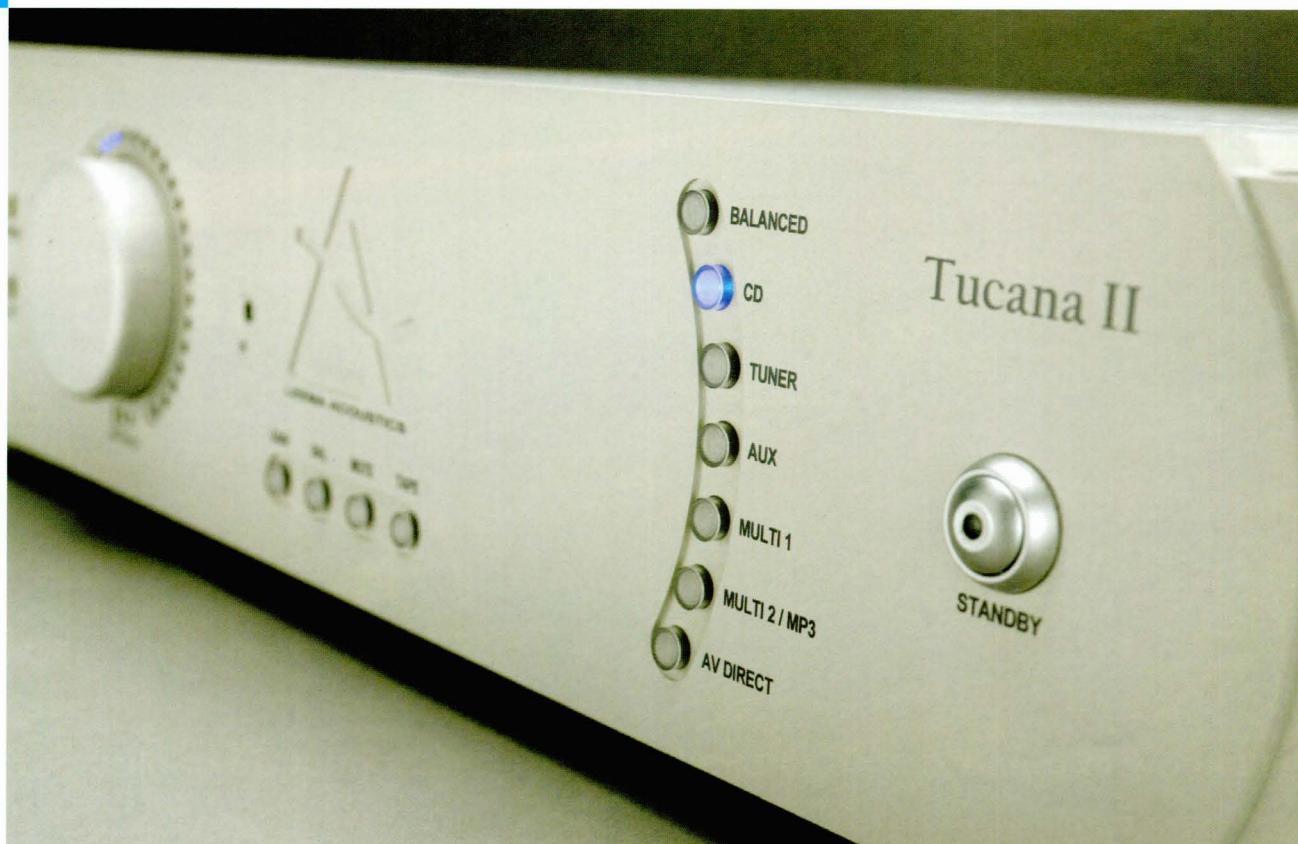
Alan Sircom, Editor
June 2011, issue 80

audience

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Leema Acoustics Tucana II

By Andrew Harrison



Launching in 2006, it certainly wasn't the brand's debut product. But the Tucana integrated amplifier was the product that tacitly marked Leema Acoustics' coming of age.

Ex-recording industry and Beeb engineers Taylor and Nicholls – whose Lee and Mallory first-names form the Lee-Ma portmanteau – had been designing and quietly selling loudspeakers since they joined forces outside of the pro arena in 1998. And while those speakers were more very competent, it's the electronics that have now earned the brand respect from contemporaries and customers.

After the Tucana integrated amplifier and matching Antila CD player there's been a steady flow of audio electronics since – from entry-level Spectrum, through the original Constellation, up to the Reference series.

That first Tucana amplifier was an undeniable cracker that more than hinted that its designers knew a thing or two about electronics and music. And while the headline of the brand remains Leema Acoustics, its now-updated long form of 'Leema Electro Acoustics' is the more fitting name.

In the Tucana, you have to look beyond the seductive casework – precisely machined from milky white aluminium, with contrasting dark side-cheek heatsink fins and a clever LED-encircled volume knob – to find that it also knows a thing or two about playing music.

Before the sound musings, it's worth reprising the essential design and functions of that first Tucana, to see how they've been gently revised for Tucana II.

When the Tucana launched, the hi-fi industry was still half-expecting an impending groundswell of decent-sounding surround-sound music. DVD-Audio and SACD had been floated five years earlier and despite being ignored by the mainstream music-buying public, there was still the chance of some nascent audiophile following snowballing and inspiring more people to populate the corners of their room with speakers.

And so it was that the Tucana was designed around the possibility of expansion into six-channel sound – only 'done right' by purist standards. That is, by acting as an analogue-only conduit to carry already decoded 5.1 discrete channels from a universal player, to a sextet of loudspeakers.

As it turned out, surround-sound music's star has fallen further since; but to go this route, the means and the hardware are still available. The Leema

Intelligent Protocol System (LIPS) lets you connect a Tucana integrated to one or more Hydra stereo power amplifiers, enabling quad, 5.1 or 7.1-systems' speakers to slide up and down in volume together, under the control of one volume knob.

There's still an application for such tech in home cinema of course, although few film fans look beyond the one-box AV receiver, with all the size and music-reproduction qualities of a rabbit hutch.

So on the rear of the Tucana's long line of RCA phono sockets, you'll find pairs labelled Multi 1 and Multi 2. By taking the analogue outputs from universal DVD/SACD/BD players, for instance, you can build a replay system free of the sound-mangling influence of many an AV processor.

It's another string to the Tucana's bow; but its core audience, I suspect, will be stereo listeners. And that's just fine with the Tucana.

At heart, the Tucana is a dual-mono integrated pre- and power amplifier, adding a basic microprocessor to coordinate electronic volume control, source switching, temperature-sensor monitoring and now, in this Mk II amp, channel balance and trimmable per-input gain control.

To help keep insidious RF noise from that controller out of the audio chain, the Tucana actually features three transformers – all toroidal, a third tiny one powering the microprocessor between two huge transformers that maintain mono operation for each stereo channel.

There are seven stereo inputs on either generation of Tucana, inscribed CD, Tuner, Aux, Multi 1, Multi 2,

AV Direct and Tape. Conspicuous by its absence is an input set aside for phono cartridge; line-only amplifiers are not so unusual, but for turntable sources, you'll need an external MM/MC stage and, say, the Aux input.

All inputs are essentially the same, except Multi, which works in sync with other Leema products in the LIPS mode; and AV Direct, which is like a fixed-gain power-amp input for surround-sound processors. While it can do unity-gain, it's actually slightly cleverer, as you can jiggle its sensitivity up or down with the knob after selection.

Fascia changes for the Tucana II include a pair of 3.5mm jack sockets at left: headphone above, MP3-player input below. The latter option, an alternative source riding on Multi 2, may be moot anyway. I'd question the need for a front-facing mini-jack, once seen as a concession to the iPod generation needing an ad-hoc input to play their choons: iPod-wielding audiophiles are more likely to plump for a cradle that can extract an iPod's digital output; more youthful music lovers, I wager, are unlikely to be packing a rare jack-to-jack cable on the off-chance they alight upon a 3.5mm fascia socket.

Source selection, once based around a small rotary-encoder knob, is now found on an arc of blue-lit press buttons. This gives the definite advantage of letting you click straight to a source, rather than cycle through every input in between.

While this amplifier is billed as Tucana II, it's actually something like the fourth iteration of the amp. Shortly after its first release, Leema made a revision to try tightening up its generous, blousy bass character. PSU transformers were upsized and the power stage's output impedance lowered. Then, an option was also offered to fit one balanced input.

Tucana II gains both mods as standard, plus the control and input options listed, and is said to benefit from changes to the power stage to increase transient response and bandwidth. This has effected by new output bipolar transistors, ON Semi ThermalTrak types, designed to track bias better and eliminate thermal distortion effects.

What impressed about Tucana the First was its appetite for volume. As you twizzled its volume knob rightwards, music gained in amplitude but not in 'loudness'. That is, the onset of dynamic compression was barely evident up to suitably thunderous volume levels.

And in terms of smoothness and composure, it maintained much the same posture, a ripeness in the upper bass the principle drift from neutrality.

Tucana II shares the tidiness of the late model Tucana I, as I found in direct comparison. Also on hand were Chord Electronics ▶



[sometimes]
technology meets art...



► SPM 1200C power and Music First passive pre-amplifiers. Loudspeakers were B&W 802D, with dCS three-box and Linn LP12 as sources, adding in replay from an Apple Mac mini via Musical Fidelity V-Link USB-to-S/PDIF converter.

Tucana I was always a good fit with rock music. It let out the swing and swagger of Primal Scream's *Screamadelica* and its jumble of rock'n'roll and dance electronica. Set against the Chord amp, there was more articulation through the midrange, a juicier palette with which to paint the spectacle. Too corpulent, at times, the laid-back bass guitar of the anthem 'Loaded' dragged too much for comfort.

This is where Tucana II takes over. It seems to widen the bandwidth at both ends; in the bass it levels out some of Mark I's tendency to still turn odd bass figures into dub reggae bombast.

At the high end, stereo depth is immediately widened by a lighter, spacier treble. With this more modern presentation – lifting the curtain to more low bass and tidying up the treble – comes better access to layers of the recording.

Maybe it's the Mk I's serendipitous editorialising, but sometimes I found myself preferring its simpler rendering of music. The Tucana II on the other hand could unravel recordings and give a much better look at the whole mix, making for a sometimes busier sound. It may be 'wronger', but the Tucana I sometimes had me more engaged with the music.

Chromatic richness was evident from both, with the Tucana II walking away with the award for best set design. While the Chord SPM 1200C kept its matter-of-fact soundstaging, bleached timbres and all, either Tucana really livened up the palette. Pace was a less certain asset for either Tucana. While the latest version is undoubtedly the tightest and paciest yet, it fractionally trailed the dearer reference.

Looking beyond the richly decorated furnishings, the pulse of timing was not as thoroughbred as other aspects of the Tucana's fine sound. Grip is tight but still short of vice-like. If metaphysical concepts like timing and pace underscore your musical enjoyment, seek out an audition to decide just how well this horse can lead your loudspeaker cart.

The original Tucana was an infectiously fun amplifier that made up with rhythmic story-telling and gregarious power placement what it sometimes lacked in bass precision and super-fi treble. Tucana II is the young adulthood version of that teenage amp. It's addressed the emphasis points with stricter control on bass drivers, a more revealing and all-encompassing soundstage, and undoubtedly a more insightful top-end. While it can still boogie, its fresh, immediate tone painting makes it eminently suited to classical and jazz too. The added microprocessor control doesn't seem to have tainted this richly analogue-sounding integrated amplifier at all. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Output power (8Ω): 148W RMS per channel

Output Power (4Ω): 285W RMS per channel

Frequency Response (±3dB @ 1W): 5Hz-80kHz

Minimum load impedance: 2Ω

Output current: > ±50A (time interval/distortion not specified)

Noise (A-weighted, min volume): -100dBm

Signal-to-noise ratio (A-weighted, ref: 285W RMS, 4Ω): -104 dB

THD (10W RMS, 4Ω, 1kHz): 0.004%

THD (Max output before clipping, 4Ω, 1kHz): 0.004%

Maximum DC offset: ±15mV

Sensitivity for maximum output (CD input): 565mV RMS

Sensitivity for maximum outputs (other inputs): 311mV RMS

Output Impedance: 0.057Ω

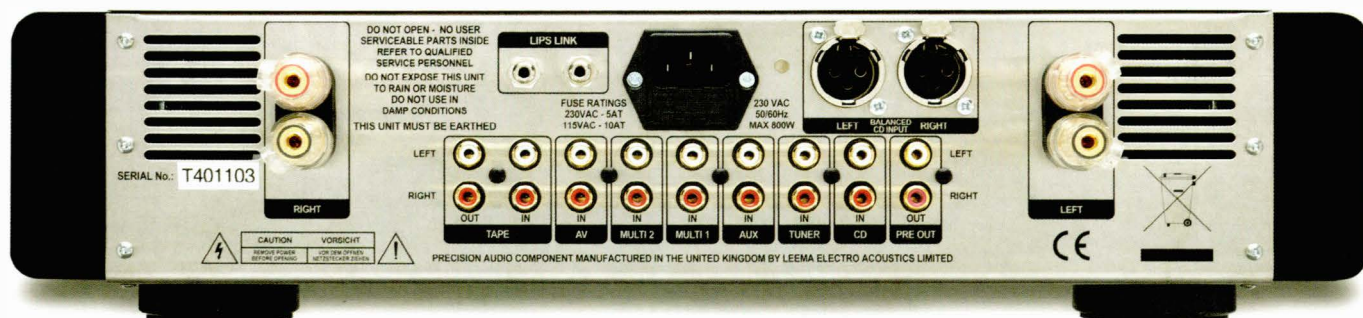
Damping Factor (8Ω): 140

Dimensions (whd): 440 x 110 x 320mm

Weight: 18kg

Price: £3,595

URL: www.leema-acoustics.com



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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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

SME Model 20/3A

By Jason Kennedy



A visit to SME's factory in Steyning, West Sussex is never less than an inspiring experience. The site of proper chaps in white lab coats meticulously machining, fettling and assembling pick-up arms and turntables in a real factory makes the heart swell with pride. The lengths that SME's employees go to in order to make their products as precise and well finished as possible is uncanny, I would be surprised to find this level of attention to detail in the audio industry outside of Japan. There are of course some pretty fastidious manufacturers in this business but few have the resources and experience that they have at SME. The black chrome plating for instance was pioneered by Alastair Robertson-Aikman himself in the company's plating shop. A place where there are so many toxic chemicals that the air has to be replaced at such a rate that it's nigh on impossible to keep the temperature up to a comfortable level in the winter. At that time of year there is no alternative but to don your thermal helmet (woolly hat) and wrap up warm. I wouldn't last a day!

SME is not just a turntable and arm maker it's a precision engineering company that works for the medical industry among other clients, the audio business has been

growing for them for over 15 years but would not support the scale of operation it runs. The company is now run by Alastair's son Cameron and he maintains his father's legendary music room in all its glory. I was fortunate enough to be given a dem of the Model 20/3 in that haloed room, it sounded pretty spectacular but in a space that large with eight Quad electrostatics and two monster class A Krells driving them one's expectations are raised. Bringing the turntable and arm home to more familiar surroundings was more informative and in many ways equally impressive. This is a very assured and powerful turntable not to mention a rather substantial one.

The 20/3 is considerably bigger than the Mk2 version which was essentially a Mk1 with a different power supply. The 20/3 is a narrower version of the 20/12 that came out a few years ago, that 12inch arm equipped turntable seemed totally at odds with the 20/2 in production at the time with much thicker metalwork and a bigger platter. At the time I wondered why they called it a Model 20 at all as it had more in common with the mighty Model 30 but this latest incarnation pulls everything together into a coherent range of turntables. The 20/3 is a substantial beast that discourages you from picking it up with the platter in place, the figure is just under 32kg including power supply but when you've got a stylus protruding from a Van den Hul Condor cartridge sticking over the front edge it's not a straightforward lift. The turntable has a fairly compact footprint especially for its mass and it would be nice to have some form of cartridge protection bar such as is built into the Model 10.

The platter itself is bigger than it used to be at 13inches and weighs 6.5kg with a soft Isodamp facing on top of the aluminium metalwork, you are ▶

► discouraged from touching the top surface with anything but an LP as it's very easy to mark. The suspension is courtesy of 40 'O' rings spread over four towers, you can adjust the height of the subchassis with a trimmer in each tower and SME provides a simple but precisely executed gauge to achieve the desired height. They also provide a 3mm ball headed driver that's made in house to adjust the trimmers and set up the pick-up arm, a touch that you won't find with any other audio brand to my knowledge. Set-up is very straightforward, you can adjust the four feet for level but as is often the case it's better to use a level surface in the first place and leave the feet tight. The deck comes with rubber tips on its feet but these can be removed to reveal stainless balls if a firmer interface is preferred. There are now fewer than seven transit bolts, two for the suspension, one for the motor and four for on the subplatter. Unlike most turntables there is no need to lubricate the bearing as its 19mm shaft sits in a sealed oil bath "for lifetime lubrication". Nonetheless a syringe of oil and a device for piping it to the right place are supplied in the box. A reflex clamp and remarkably thin spindle washer to go under the vinyl are also included alongside a 12inch strobe disc - speed is adjusted using the buttons on the power supply .

The 20/3 is a heavily damped design, each of the four suspension towers are damped and there is a central fluid damper between top and bottom plates which "disciplines sub-chassis movement". All with the purpose of killing resonance that emanates from the cartridge itself as well as the environment the turntable has to work in. There aren't many other turntable makers that go as far as SME in their use of fluid damping mainly because few others can muster the engineering expertise required. Others do accept the necessity to damped extraneous energy however, it's just that the methods they use to achieve this end are usually cruder.

This is also an immensely stiff turntable because the chassis is made from 16mm thick aluminium that's supported at four points. It's pretty much the opposite of an AR/Linn type suspended subchassis yet designed to achieve the same aim, in theory at least – there is no talk of 'following the tune' down in Steyning!

The suffix in the name Model 20/3A indicates that this turntable is equipped with SME's prime pick-up arm the Series V, as solid a piece of precision engineering as has ever graced a turntable. Enough has been written about this superbly built arm already but I would add that it remains the best thought out and easy to set-up example in the audio universe. The fact that it works rather well on substantial, well damped turntables can be taken as read.

The combination has an extremely assured, authoritative sound that is very high on detail and remarkably realistic. Compared to more eager designs such as the Well Tempered it seems a little ponderous but it doesn't take long to realise that this is a result of vanishingly low distortion, a fact evinced by the sheer depth of information it reveals. You don't have to try to hear into the mix it presents a fully three dimensional soundstage where every instrument, voice and finger click sits in its own acoustic – recording allowing. This was certainly the case with Rickie Lee Jones' Flying Cowboy which always sounds good but rarely gives up so much of its reverberant and acoustic character.

When this turntable was delivered the Series V came with a rather heavy counterweight for the Dynavector DV-20X2L moving coil I put on it, SME makes three, but it was possible to achieve the correct tracking force by using only a small amount of the pressure produced by the dial-in spring. The correct counterweight arrived a few days later and installing it brought

"The lengths that SME's employees go to in order to make their products as precise and well finished as possible is uncanny"

about a considerable reduction in the sense of ponderousness first encountered, the lower mass eliciting a more dynamic sound with greater punch in the bass and more snap to the timing and with no reduction in bass extension or power. I recently reviewed a Pro-Ject turntable and arm where four counterweights were provided in order to achieve minimal resonance from the arm and cartridge combination, their philosophy is that more mass closer to the bearing is better but it didn't work this way with the SME.

Bass is a clear strongpoint with this turntable and arm, you get real low end power out of the vinyl, power that cannot it seems be emulated by lightweight designs. In fact the only turntables that can compete are the front end damped Townshend Rock designs which made me wonder if actually using the damping trough at the bearing end of the Series V would be beneficial. Despite having used SME arms on and off for some time it's not something that's ever seemed necessary. But filling it up with the supplied syringe of silicone fluid is a fairly painless process (the reverse will be rather more so I fear) and using the variable depth dip-screw is a novelty. One pleasure of any SME product is the manual they supply, these are comprehensive in approach and rather charmingly written which is not something you can often say about instruction books. It's one indication of how much thought goes into SME products, another is the ease of ►

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Dimensions WxDxH: 440 x 350 x 172mm.

Net weight: 28.6Kg (63lb)

Speeds: 33.3, 45, 78rpm

Power Supply: 4-layer SMD PCB, user adjustable speed variation

Four point suspension

19mm high-chrome steel, hardened,

ground and super finished main bearing

Optional steel ball feet or compliant feet

Extras: Height setting gauge, 300mm

stroboscopic disc, reflex record clamp,

record spindle washer, soft cover,

operating instruction manual, set-up

tools

Price: Model 20/3 £5,993

Model 20/3A £8,561

Manufacturer: SME Ltd

URL: www.sme.ltd.uk

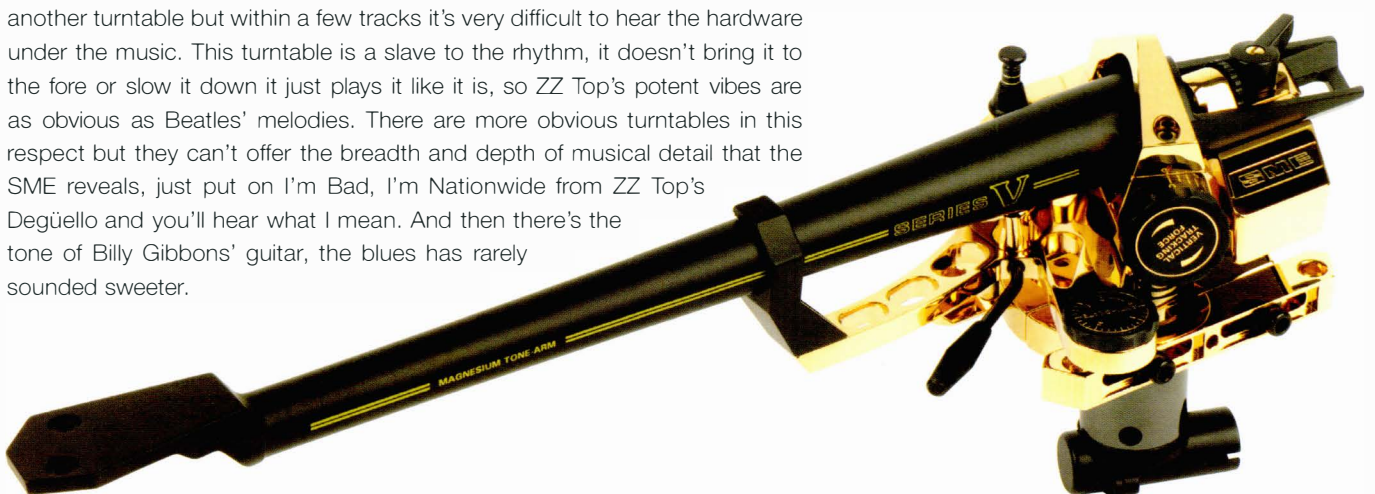
Tel: +44(0)1903 814321

► set-up that the turntable and its associated accessories offer; a new one to the Model 20 is platter braking. A heavy platter can take a while to slow down so that you can remove the clamp, by adding a braking effect SME has made it rather quicker to do so.

With a VdH Condor MC the effect of adding damping to the arm is to reveal more of the information in the groove, musical and otherwise. Surface noise is more apparent but so is the music and the end result is a distinct net gain that increases the realism of the sound. There is clearly more tone colour which is surprising and the music seems to have a stronger aura if that makes any sense. Not a subtle effect and presumably one that will affect different cartridges to differing degrees but I feel no urge to take it out. The inclination is to play more vinyl and see what else you can hear, it's a highly entertaining even contagious process that reveals just how much difference there is between recordings even of the same genre. This degree of exposure makes the influence of things like VTA rather more apparent, switch from a standard weight pressing to a heavy one and there is a distinct thickening of the sound because the stylus is sitting at a different angle in the groove. Rega founder Roy Gandy might not believe in it but VTA variations make a tonal difference even if timing and dynamics are not significantly affected.

Fortunately the damping trough on the Series V also has a thread in it which accepts a VTA adjusting pin so small variations in arm height are easy to achieve. The SME alignment protractor is designed to make it very easy to level the arm as well but it's usually best to fine tune VTA by ear once the approximate position has been established. Having done this I was in a very good position to enjoy Simply Vinyl's repressing of Al Green's fabulous Let's Stay Together album, this slice of early seventies soul has a fabulous restraint and emotional integrity to it that is abundantly clear on a turntable like the Model 20/3. Green's voice is warm and feeling and this contrasts superbly with the slightly ragged sound of the horn section. The rhythm is subtle but compelling, building up a groove with real torque in the SME's grip, although grip is not the right word because you hardly feel the presence of the machinery at all. You can hear a change in character when you switch from another turntable but within a few tracks it's very difficult to hear the hardware under the music. This turntable is a slave to the rhythm, it doesn't bring it to the fore or slow it down it just plays it like it is, so ZZ Top's potent vibes are as obvious as Beatles' melodies. There are more obvious turntables in this respect but they can't offer the breadth and depth of musical detail that the SME reveals, just put on I'm Bad, I'm Nationwide from ZZ Top's Degüello and you'll hear what I mean. And then there's the tone of Billy Gibbons' guitar, the blues has rarely sounded sweeter.

The changes to the Model 20 have brought this fine turntable in line with its stable mates and made it a serious contender in the market place. No one else can offer this build quality, not at any price and the sound takes some beating too. If all audio equipment were made this well the world would undoubtedly be a better place. +



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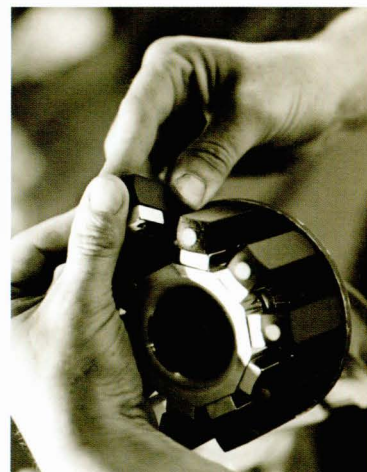
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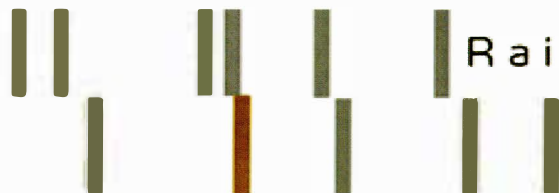
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Cabasse Riga and Santorin 30 loudspeaker system

By Alan Sircom

However which way you slice it, this is effectively a sub/sat system. The Cabasse Riga loudspeakers are crying out for the Santorin 30 subwoofer to such an extent that it would be almost wrong considering them as separate entities. And some people who have drunk deep from the audiophile Kool-Aid will dismiss them out of hand simply for being a sub/sat system. Those who listen before making snap judgments on products will find there's an awful lot to love about the Cabasse duo.

First there's the Riga, Cabasse's latest iteration of its spherical loudspeaker cabinet on a stand. This provokes strong reactions in the person sitting in front of the speakers; 'cool, refined and distinctive', 'eyeballs' or 'cocktail onions on sticks'. Or even 'eyeballs on sticks'. To misquote Yoda 'Like, or like not, there is no meh!'. Quite frankly, I like 'em; they have a refreshing look that is quite unlike any standard issue wooden box you can name.

Of course, it helps that the physics behind the main Riga 'eyeball' is sound. A spherical cabinet is one of the best ways of making internal cabinet resonance a non-issue and the use of a coaxial drive unit helps. In this case, the Riga uses Cabasse's own BC17, a combination 160mm Duocell low-mid woofer and 35mm mid-tweeter made from Kaladex (a DuPont polyester, the trade name for polyethylene naphthalate, or PEN, which behaves like PET but with greater temperature resistance). PEN's properties are such that it should retain the speed of a metal dome tweeter but without the ringing. It's not proved as popular with the hi-fi fraternity yet because it's commonly used in-car thanks to its UV and moisture resistance, but looking past that it remains a good tweeter material that is under-utilised in the audio community. Meanwhile, Duocell is Cabasse's processed version of Rohacell acrylic foam, which is used a lot in the engineering of durable, light yet rigid structures (like bike wheels). It takes hours to form in a slo-mo version of a record pressing plant, but the variable-thickness result offers similar benefits to Kaladex, except for the lower registers. A crossover point at 1.6kHz, a 90dB efficient design with a nominal impedance of eight ohms (never lower than 4.1 ohms) and power handling up to 150W (1kW peaks) and a set of speaker terminals spring out of the base plate make this a non-nonsense, easy to drive speaker.

However, it's a speaker that doesn't have much of a reach below 100Hz. Even in a tiny room and acting as near-field monitors, that roll-off makes itself known fast. Which is where the Santorin 30 subwoofer comes into its own. This borrows heavily from the digital signal processing used to correctly drive the low-end of Cabasse's La Sphere flagship, and comes with its own microphone and mic preamp. The system can be controlled





▶ by humans, but the automated option works better than we do, adjusting key parameters to establish optimum gain, delay, roll-off and phase to make the sub not only transparent to the source but exceptionally low distortion. A sealed design, with just the one 300mm 30ND40 'honeycomb' driver being fed by a 500W amp, the sub is controlled from the front by a blue LCD front panel and a five-way joypad akin to the sort of thing you'll find on a Nintendo. The Santorin 30 measures your room and gives you three set-up options, with a healthy amount of manual override if needed. It might be expensive, but the Santorin 30 is right up in top Velodyne regions in complexity terms. But for all the right reasons.

I was in a particularly French mood when playing these loudspeakers. I hooked them to the Devialet D-Premier, using the amp's subwoofer output for the Santorin, as well as through-put via the subwoofer. Using the Devialet's subwoofer output had the advantage of being instantly controllable from the remote, turning the sub on and off again. But the sound to the speakers was not impeded by using the by-pass on the subwoofer, so can comfortably be used in either guise.

The combination worked wonderfully together. Both are tough on distortion, tough on the causes of distortion and both give good detail and soundstaging. The combination works together beautifully. It's a true high-precision sound, not one dipped in a thick coat of foo, but a well-engineered sound made by combining three very well-engineered devices from La Belle France. OK, you need to feed this a steady diet of

good recordings, because it doesn't suffer audio fools gladly and turns bright into steely and dull into boring, but I suspect this is what happens when you tell it like it is.

The spherical surround for that unit really does mean a low-distortion sound. It also makes the sound from about 95Hz on up a true point source. No rectangular box, no time-domain problems and sounds emanating from a small spot in space is the stuff of no-coloration speaker sound. The Riga is such a speaker. Instruments sound like they were intended to, set in a layered soundstage that not only fills the room, but allows you to pick out individual musicians in the mix. The nearest you might find to this level of accuracy is the Quad Electrostatic, but with more dynamic range.

What this means is two-fold. First, you get a phenomenal depth to the soundstage. An orchestra – if well recorded – has a sense of three-dimensional space around individual instruments and layering between the instrument groups. This doesn't waver depending on the scale of the piece of music, either. Whether it's a lone bassoon or orchestra and choir at full shout, the sense of there being instruments in their own physical spaces is extremely well recreated here. In recordings that are less organically grown, the honest portrayal can work against the speakers, it must be said. I'm not going to name names here, but there were some well-known early 1990s superstar violinist recordings that exaggerate the size and position of the violin so greatly next to the orchestra scale that on the Riga/Santorin it can sound like King Kong is the soloist.

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Fortunately, with the downturn in the classical recording star system, the days of super close mic'd recordings seem to be behind us.

Second is that the Riga/Santorin sound is a clever balance of analysis and enjoyment. Not so 'edge of the seat' detailed that you feel listening to an album is like studying music theory, but not so blunted that you end up wondering what the music really sounded like in the studio. The end result is simply musically entertaining, satisfying... and manages to tick all the audiophile boxes in the process.

Sub/sat systems have advantages over conventional two-ways. The biggest one is obvious, when you think it through – the best place for midrange and treble is often the worst place for bass in many rooms. By moving the bass unit to a position where it can shine can often make a more accurate portrayal of sound across the frequencies. The stumbling block is set-up, as the subwoofer needs to be there as subtle reinforcement of sound, not some kind of deep-voiced carry barker. And it's here where the Santorin 30 shines. The sub integrates with the satellites almost perfectly in room. You can only hear the join if you really go looking for the join – Tom Waits voice for example. His rasping voice seems centred around the 100Hz mark, and there is a mild change in tone. This is almost always masked by his gruff manner of singing, but occasionally the point where the Riga's stop and the Santorin starts can just be heard as more of a brogue than a rasp. The fact that I had to struggle to classify this sound shows just how minor this effect is, and far less noticeable in absolute terms than a mildly chuffing port.

In fact, probably the biggest stumbling block to the Cabasse Riga/Santorin 30 combination is you, dear reader. We audiophiles can be so set in our ways as to dismiss something like this system simply because it is a sub/sat system. We fear change and no amount of demonstration, documentation, instrumentation or perspiration can open a closed mind. Well, maybe it's time to think outside the box, and for once I mean that literally. This is a nine thousand pound loudspeaker system. It does not sound like nine thousand pounds worth of subwoofer and satellite loudspeaker system. It sounds like a nine thousand pound loudspeaker system. In many respects, it does a better job of sounding like a nine thousand pound loudspeaker system than several well-respected more conventional nine thousand pound loudspeaker systems. If you don't believe me, try it. If you do believe me, try it. In other words, try it. If you managed to clear the prejudice out of your brain first, you'll get precisely where this system is coming from. And you'll probably love it.

Sapere aude, people... *sapere aude!* +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Cabasse Riga satellite
Two-way satellite standmounted sphere

Drivers: 1x BC17 170mm coaxial drive unit

Efficiency: 90dB

Impedance: 8 Ω (nominal), 4.1 Ω (minimum)

Crossover point: 1.6kHz

Frequency response: 95Hz-20kHz

Dimensions (WxHxD): 34x123x39cm

Weight: 10.4kg

Finishes: Golden Cherry / Black Pearl, Wenge / Pearl, Wenge / Black Pearl, Santos / Black Pearl

Price: £6,300 per pair

Cabasse Santorin 30 subwoofer

Driver: 1x 30ND40 300mm

Power amplifier: 500W RMS

Frequency Response: 22-200Hz

Phase: 0° to 180° in 1° increments

Dimensions (WxHxD): 38x43x36cm

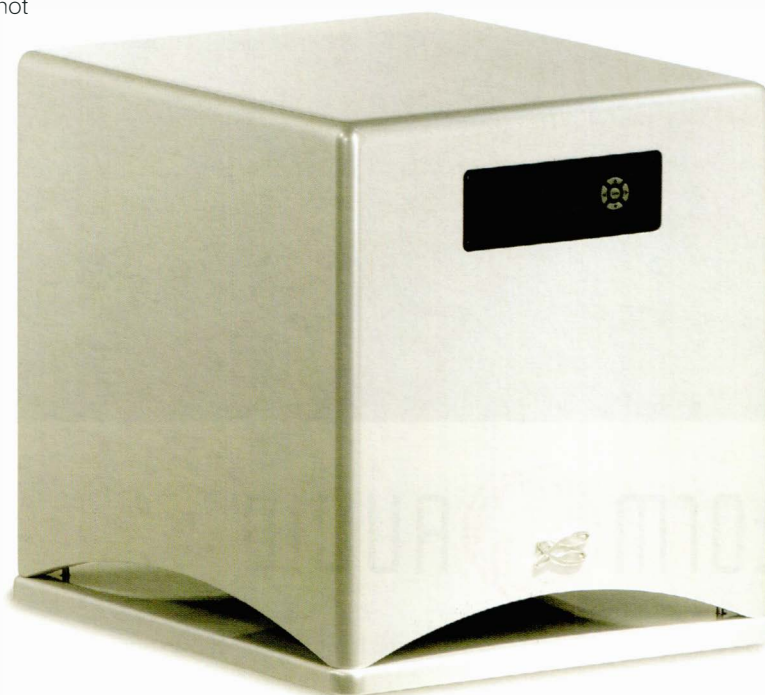
Weight: 28kg

Finishes: Pearl, Black Pearl

Price: £2,700

Manufacturer: Cabasse

URL: www.cabasse.com



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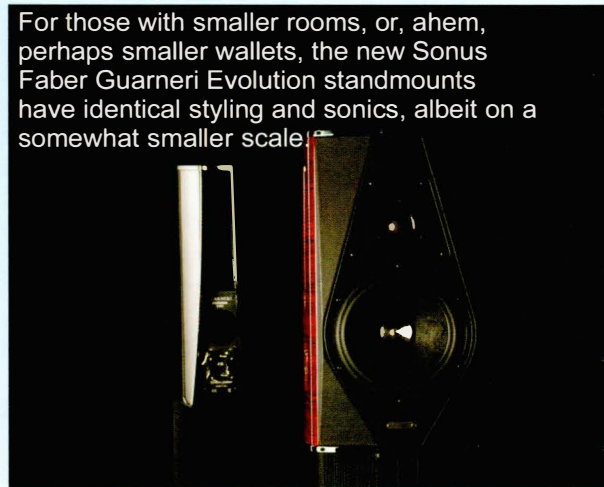
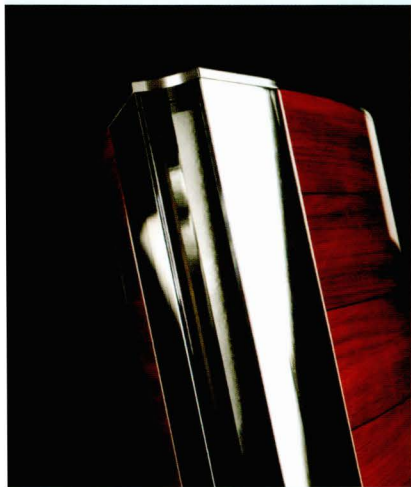
What do you listen to?

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.



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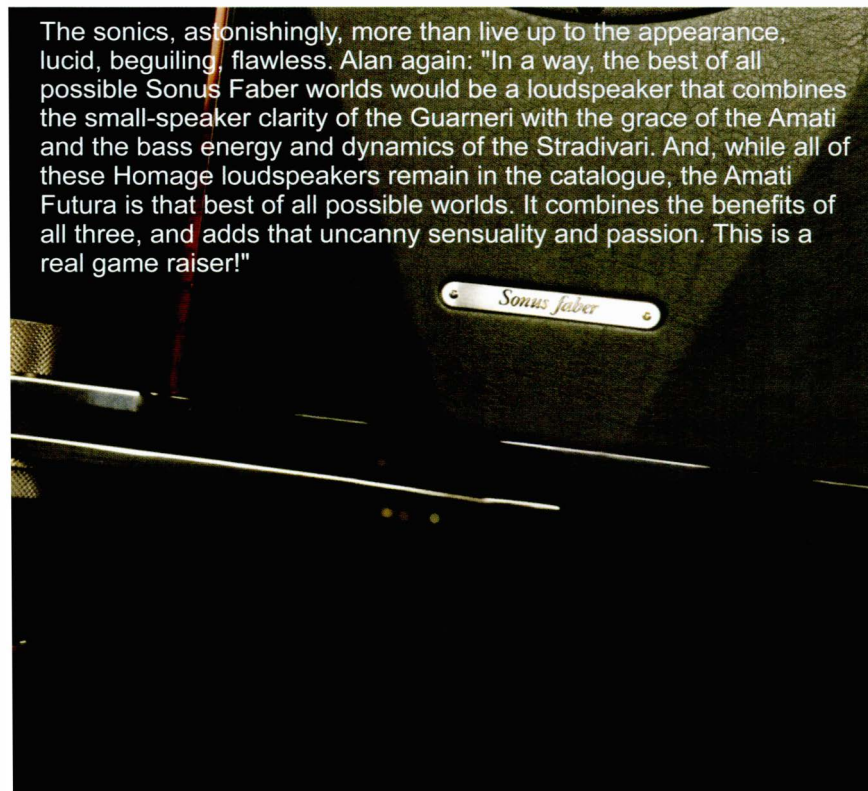
For those with smaller rooms, or, ahem, perhaps smaller wallets, the new Sonus Faber Guarneri Evolution standmounts have identical styling and sonics, albeit on a somewhat smaller scale.

We've been utterly smitten by a recent addition to our portfolio, the Sonus Faber range. Visitors here are immediately drawn to the "oh, wow!" visual appeal of the Sonus Faber Futuras, shimmering creations of high-gloss wood and mirror-finish surfaces, quite possibly the most beautiful speakers ever created. Ours are in the dazzling violin red finish (there's also a soft grey graphite), which Alan Sircom, editor of *Hi-Fi+*, described in a rave review in issue 79 as having "a glowing translucent lustre that will make you walk around and around the speakers, and not be disappointed, ever."

Indeed, Sonus Faber offer a wide range of models, from the Toy and Liuto right up to the Cremona and Homage collections, to match any music lover's room or budget. All you really need is a passion for beautiful sound.

The sonics, astonishingly, more than live up to the appearance, lucid, beguiling, flawless. Alan again: "In a way, the best of all possible Sonus Faber worlds would be a loudspeaker that combines the small-speaker clarity of the Guarneri with the grace of the Amati and the bass energy and dynamics of the Stradivari. And, while all of these Homage loudspeakers remain in the catalogue, the Amati Futura is that best of all possible worlds. It combines the benefits of all three, and adds that uncanny sensuality and passion. This is a real game raiser!"

What do *you* listen to? If your system beguiled at first, but now proves tiring over a evening's listening, why not give us a call? We can arrange for an audition either here at Cool Gales or in your home. For more information, reviews, and brochure downloads, visit www.coolgales.com/sonusfaber



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MEET YOUR MAKER

Cabasse

By Alan Sircom



Last year, I made the trip to Cabasse's Brest-based HQ, to see what drives a company to plough its own furrow as radically as Cabasse. After all, despite compared to the other large speaker brands in Europe, few commonly break out of the rectangular box mind-set and very few indeed would consider what looks like essentially an eyeball on a stick as a valid high-end audio concept. Cabasse clearly marches to a different beat. Why? How?

In part it all harks right back to the company's beginnings, back in 1950 when Georges Cabasse founded the company as a high-tech loudspeaker research enterprise. From the outset, Cabasse designed coaxial loudspeaker models, at first for Cinemascope cinemas in Paris. The company followed up this early design and engineering-led approach with active loudspeaker designs (not bad for 1958... that was the Jurassic Era of active loudspeaker development), underwater designs for the French Navy, monitor speakers for Radio France, custom 12-channel cinema systems for the La Géode Omnimax cinema, PA systems and even the high-efficiency horn system fitted to the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle. In other words, it don't get more hi-tech and it don't get more French than Cabasse.

As a result, coaxial designs, spherical loudspeaker cabinets and custom drive units using exotic materials are all expected, and a function of a high-technology brand. It's perhaps no surprise that Cabasse's R&D headquarters – and its manufacturing facility for its top La Sphere design – are in

Brest's high-technology park, where the sharpest tools in the audio box meet the bright young things of telecoms, laser development and the sort of hush-hush military secret plans that conspiracy theorists think come from the aliens. You don't get real estate in this kind of brains-trust business park unless your janitor has an IQ of 165. This is more than just an idyllic part of the world to work in; the smart-friendly environment gives Cabasse access to the sort of mathematical and engineering development techniques that would be simply beyond the reach of a company working even 10 miles away. It's why Silicon Valley appeared and it's why a whole enclave of Post-War audio brands sprung up around Cambridge (and more specifically around Pye, which made the first UK transistors).

Of course smart alone doesn't sell products. You need to make the things as well. About eight years ago, Cabasse – now run by Georges son, Christophe – was looking to expand the business at around the same time as Canon Bretagne was looking to sub-contract some of its manufacturing arm (this was the fax machine division of Canon, and email's wholesale replacement of the business fax had not gone unnoticed in the north-eastern French division of the Japanese giant). The deal was done and Canon began manufacturing some of Cabasse's basic lines. This meant Cabasse loudspeakers were still made in France, yet made in a manner that kept them competitive next to Chinese-made rivals. Eventually, the deal proved so lucrative to both parties that Canon made a bid to purchase Cabasse and in 2006 the French brand became a part of the wider Canon family. Cabasse still has executive control over its ►

own destiny and development practices, but now reports to Kazuhiro Otsubo, president of Canon Bretagne.

Those with long memories might recall an earlier Canon loudspeaker project, based here in the UK. In the early 1990s, Canon made a series of omni-directional loudspeakers that – although relatively well received – failed to take the audio and home cinema world by storm and the project closed down a few years later. That was a very different entity, designed from the outset as an off-shoot of Canon, rather than a separate and established company under the Canon umbrella as is the case with Cabasse.

Guy Bourreau was appointed to Cabasse's board at this time, and Canon managed to find someone with a great deal of commercial experience (Guy was previously Canon's European head of marketing in professional markets), but who came to the business as a true audiophile. Rather than simply parachuting in some MBA with big ideas about business in general but no idea about the specific business, Canon went for the smarter option, and it shows in the way Cabasse has flourished in the last five years, despite financially awkward times in many of its core markets. This demonstrates the commitment Canon has to the Cabasse brand and its intelligent approach to handling the company.

Far from spelling the end of Cabasse as a going concern, and ending up being merely a brand name on uninspiring

Canon-made computer speakers, Cabasse appears to have only benefitted from being under the Japanese company's wing. Canon's engineering team – especially its digital signal processing arm – has a worldwide reputation as being first class. These are the guys that have made it possible to take virtually noise-free images in almost total darkness, built up a commanding reputation in professional digital video out of almost nowhere and transformed optical design through advanced digital modeling. Aside from having a huge 'fighting fund' to cover the expense of local research and development, Canon can call upon its own troupe of hyper-smart mathematicians, computer scientists and DSP engineers to work on the sort of projects that would simply stump most speaker engineers, working on their own. Some of the first speakers to take advantage of this pool of super-smarts include the new Pacific range, the DSP in the Santorin subwoofer and much, much more to come.

The world of loudspeakers is a hotly contested one. There are big guys, little guys and even a few bullies. There's a good argument to say it's over-populated and could do with some predation and some draining of the gene-pool. Cabasse has nothing to fear from such an argument. Prior to being a part of Canon, Cabasse was a high-tech manufacturer of fine loudspeakers. Now, it's a high-tech manufacturer of fine loudspeakers with a very big brother to help out. +

“You don't get real estate in this kind of brains-trust business park unless your janitor has an IQ of 165. This is more than just an idyllic part of the world to work in.”



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Alan Sircom, HIFI+ magazine

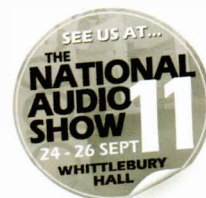
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Bryston BDP-1 and BDA-1

By Malcolm Steward

The slim-line Bryston BDP-1 is unusual among digital players in that it focuses exclusively on one task: playing music files sourced from USB drives. The £2,300 unit contains no DAC, no HDD, no ripper, or active cooling apparatus. It just has what Bryston calls “an industrial quality mainboard” and a modified soundcard with AES/EBU balanced and BNC (S/PDIF) digital outputs. It runs Linux software “optimized in ways only possible in Linux to provide the highest quality audio performance.” Unusually, the software appears to list everything in a folder, including songs, images and all manner of irrelevant files: I would not have thought it was beyond Linux programmers to filter their displays to show only music files. Where is the point in showing files with which the player can do nothing?

Regardless, the Bryston BDP-1 supports 16-bit and 24-bit files at 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, 96kHz, 176.4kHz and 192kHz sampling rates from thumb drive memory sticks or USB hard disks – either bus-powered or externally powered. The latter should use the USB sockets mounted on the rear panel, while the former can be connected through any input. While the BDP-1 can play all high resolution FLAC, WAV, and AIFF files as well as Apple Lossless (m4a), WMP and MP3, music needs to be ripped using another device: a ripping NAS, maybe, and subsequently transferred to a USB disk for playback.

Bryston suggests, understandably, that the BDP-1 is partnered with its BDA-1 external DAC. This was the set-up the importer

provided along with a £295 Kimber D-60 BNC-terminated digital cable to connect the pair. I also tested the BDP-1 through my usual Naim DAC/XPS power supply and £1,500 Chord Company Sarum Digital BNC-BNC cable. Music sources were a manufacturer-supplied 1TB personal USB drive and my own similar capacity Hitachi desktop back-up disk. I controlled the set-up, once it was connected to my network and active Naim DBL system through the free mPod app on my iPhone. It is worth noting that the BDP-1 can be operated in a variety of ways including through the player’s front panel or using a GUI on a PC, PDA, or through an app on an iPhone, iPod Touch or iPad. The network connection on the BDP-1 is only used to talk to your control device when, for example, you are using a web browser interface on your computer.

The £2,200 BDA-1 DAC is an identically proportioned and versatile convertor using dual 24-bit/192kHz Crystal 4398 DACs, and fully discrete Class A proprietary analogue circuits. Its array of transformer coupled S/PDIF and AES-EBU inputs also include optical and USB alongside my preferred BNC connections, which made switching between it and my Naim DAC just a question of changing over a single cable.

The BDA-1 can perform synchronous up-sampling: engaging the Up-Sample button brings 32K, 48K and 96K up to 192K, while 44.1K and 88.2 are integer up-sampled to 176.4. Integer up-sampling is preferred because it does not involve any calculation more complicated than a simple multiplication by 2, 3 or 4 with no processor-intensive fractional elements involved.

Listening to a selection of Diana Krall tracks through the Kimber D-60 connected BDP-1/BDA-1 system I was struck by the near clinical precision of the performance. It was highly impressive but seemed somewhat removed from the character of real music. There was little or no human warmth or passion evident in the songs. I replaced the D-60 with a similarly priced Naim DC-1 before substituting my preferred £1500 Chord Company Sarum. Each change of cable brought a marginal improvement but the most momentous change came when I switched the Diana Krall album for James Taylor’s Hourglass. Taylor’s voice is blessed with greater expression and his band plays with more feeling than the automatons backing Krall. The unexpected drum interjections in the track Gaia demonstrated that despite its overall smooth and polished presentation the Bryston combination could handle dramatic dynamic contrast. Other tracks on the same album markedly demonstrated the admirably subtle way the BDA-1 scavenged musical detail from the furthest reaches of the mix. ▶



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▶ In hi-fi terms this combination was very difficult to fault but all the while I listened I could not help but notice my laptop was sitting perfectly still on my lap. My feet were not tapping and my typed comments were not my usual adjectival brain dump: I was forming complete, structured sentences... and they made sense, which was completely out of the ordinary for me. Some part of this system was still not delivering...

I decided at this juncture to compare my rip of Lyle Lovett's Joshua Judges Ruth stored on a NAS device and rendered by my £1,350 Naim UnitiQute and the BDA-1 with the same album played through the BDP-1 and BDA-1. Through the Naim renderer and the Bryston DAC, I felt the music had more immediacy and natural warmth: the instrumental timbre was richer and more convincing, and Lovett's voice had more chiaroscuro and a greater sense of emanating from a human body. The bass was also blessed with more vivid rhythmic bounce, which set my feet tapping immediately.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Bryston BDP-1

Supports: USB hard disks & thumbdrives

Price: £2,300

Inputs: USB-2 type A sockets (X 4). Front panel connections are for low-power consumption devices, while rear ports will accommodate hard disks.

Digital Output Connections:

S/PDIF – 75-Ohm BNC

AES/EBU – 3-pin XLR

Bryston BDA-1

Digital to Analogue Converter

Price: £1,950

Digital Inputs: 1 x USB-2; 4 x S/PDIF; 2 x optical; 1 x AES/EBU

Digital Output Connection: S/PDIF – 75-Ohm BNC

Analogue Output Connections:

Balanced – XLR; Single Ended – PHONO

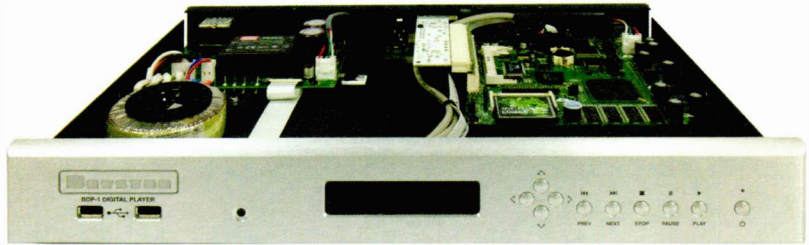
Manufacturer: Bryston

URL: <http://bryston.com>

UK Distributor: PMC

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Having compared rips of the same song played through identical systems bar the sources, one employing USB technology and the other using UPnP, playing an absolutely identical rip from the same USB thumb drive might indicate where the 'trouble' lay. So, having listened to the track from the Bryston 'demo' disk I transferred it to a super-specification thumb drive – not available for purchase – in order to level the playing field and play it on both renderers

The Naim portrayed timing more persuasively – making the band sound more enthusiastic – than the Bryston. It also rendered the timbre of the piano less clangorous than the BDP-1 had. Its portrayal overall was more attention-grabbing and better articulated. There was little about the presentation of the Bryston BDP-1 that warranted serious complaint but in comparison with the Naim it appeared lacklustre. Substituting the BDA-1 for the Naim DAC seemed to add a degree of harshness and edginess to the presentation of some music – Gnarns Barclay's Smiley Faces, for example -- like a speaker with too forward a mid-band.

Although I am sure the BDP-1/BDA-1 is certain to delight many hi-fi enthusiasts with its crisply defined presentation, I found the way it presented music rather cold and unemotional. The Naim sounded that touch more human and natural, and this swung my preference toward it.

However, my major query with the BDP-1 is where is the point in a USB only player? My experience with various USB hard drives tells me that they are excruciatingly slow and unreliable. What is more, there is no desperate need for a USB player, so far as I can see, when other devices – even the £700 Marantz NA7004 – adequately provide that facility alongside the rest of their rather more useful features. I, for one, would never contemplate using a USB drive as anything more than a back-up. I have too many sitting on my office floor that have simply bricked without warning: thank Goodness I keep more than one back-up!

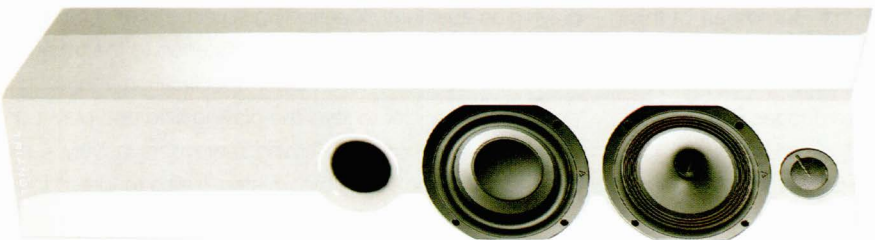
A verbatim quote of Bryston's "USB information" literature follows: "A really important point to make about the USB inputs on the Bryston BDP-1 we need to make clear is that when a disc volume (USB Hard-drive or USB Thumb-drive) is connected to one of our BDP-1 Digital Players USB inputs we are 'transferring computer data' and 'not streaming' class-1 or class-2 audio from that USB drive. In other words, we are extracting bits from a thumb drive without worry over file corruption or inducement of 'jitter' to the file."

During my test of the Bryston player and DAC, I plugged a thumb drive into my UnitiQute and streamed the music over UPnP to the DAC whose second BNC input was playing the song simultaneously from the BDP-1. I detected nothing untoward in the streaming presentation: the transmission seemed flawless. In truth, the streamed version sounded better to my ears than the USB 'extraction'. The Bryston really does not need this, what I interpret as, spin/baloney. It should allow the BDP-1 stand or fall on its own merits.

Admittedly, my preference was for the Naim UnitiQute/DAC/ XPS player but that does not mean that I cannot appreciate the BDP-1/BDA-1 combination. I certainly can and I recognize the lengths to which Bryston has gone to make this probably the finest USB player that money can buy. I just cannot figure why the company went to all the bother... The BDP-1 seems to be trying to be the modern equivalent of a CD player, and who really wants one of those nowadays? +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Townshend Glastonbury Pre 1

By Jason Kennedy



The passive potentiometer volume control is an interesting and attractive device that's been around in various forms for quite some time. I recall the engineers at Bowers & Wilkins' R&D labs using one with a pair of Mark Levinson No.33 monster monoblocks as their point of reference while developing the first 800 series, they had a pot with the requisite phono sockets soldered onto its outputs that sat boxless atop a CD player – a basic yet effective device that clearly did the job required otherwise they would have used one of the high end preamplifiers sitting idle in the same room. Martin Colloms also used one when reviewing source components for the same reason, however it's not quite such a straightforward solution. The nature of the common 10k to 20k volume control pot means that it works best with amplifiers that have a high input impedance (30k plus).

However, if the interconnect leads are long the capacitance of the cables will cause treble roll off, especially at medium to high volume settings. A further problem with resistive controls of all sorts is that they rely on dissipating the voltage and hence power of the signal which results in a flattening of the sound, resulting in a loss of dynamics.

The multiple tapped transformer (autotransformer) or transformer volume control (TVC) approach avoids these pitfalls as there is no loss of power, nor is there the capacitive loading effect. Another bonus is that the square law governing the input to output impedance of the transformer ensures good impedance matching at all volume settings and even better matching at lower output levels. Currently the best known exponent of the TVC is made by Stevens & Billington which incorporates them in its range of Music First passive controllers. But Max Townshend is never one to use an existing solution if he thinks he can do better himself and that's why he built the Glastonbury Pre 1.

The Pre 1 contains Townshend's own autotransformers which are wound on 80 per cent nickel, mu-metal laminations, a highly desirable material for a transformer because of its high magnetic permeability. They have 27 taps which combine to give a working range of 57dB in one decibel increments. It can achieve this because beside the 24 positions provided on the volume control there is also a minus 10dB and a plus 1dB function on the remote, to turn gain down completely you need to mute the preamp from the handset. As I had one of, if not the earliest sample of this product my experiences fed back into the development to give it a wider working volume range. Initially it didn't have enough range to allow low level listening through a pair of active ATC speakers and was getting near to its max when playing classical material through Mark Levinson No.53 power amps and PMC Fact8 speakers in a large-ish room. These two set ups revealed that what started out as a +10dB option would be more useful the other way round as -10dB and the position

► formally used for mute on the volume control could give the first 2dB instead, resulting in higher output at the top of the scale.

While they might use different ratios for their autotransformers the only apparent difference in approach between the Townshend and Music First TVCs is the wire in those transformers. The Glastonbury Pre has what Max Townshend calls Fractal wire in its transformers, which is copper wire that has been treated in a proprietary fashion the nature of which he is disinclined to divulge. Having given the game away when he introduced the deep cryogenic DCT process that has been copied by many, he is understandably reluctant to say what has changed this time around. When you remember that there is 300 feet of wire in each transformer it's not so hard to believe that the way the wire is been treated might affect its sound. I've heard the difference between standard and DCT cable and it's subtle but clear, the treated cable being cleaner, smoother and even quieter. So if he's refined the process and, one suspects that this is the case, it's likely to provide a distinct result over that sort of length.

From my brief experience of a Music First MkII controller and rather more extended use of the AudioZone Pre-T1 which uses Stevens & Billington autotransformers, these two products sound quite different from one another. The Pre-T1 is extremely good it has to be said but doesn't have the power and solidity available from the Glastonbury, nor for that matter the sheer transparency, there are very few preamplifiers around that are as resolute as this passive device in my experience.

Build quality is extremely high on this preamp, the front panel is a substantial 12mm thick slab of matt finished aluminium and the rest of the case is not a lot thinner and very neatly put together. Two large control knobs are machined out of solid aluminium and three facets carved onto the front produce a pointer so that show you how far the thing is cranked (preferably) before you press play. Both controls are notched, the left one for the six inputs two of which accept XLR as well as RCA phono connections while the volume knob is stepped by the attenuator it connects to. Level can be controlled with a machined aluminium remote handset which adds mute, mono and plus 1dB or minus 10dB, and as mute is only way you can turn it right down it's quite a critical feature. Remote commands are seen by a receiver that's housed underneath the front panel, the reason given being that it offers a wider angle of reception than a traditional front panel eye. This makes it a little bit vulnerable but this isn't the sort of component you throw around after all. The feet are mounted on very compliant fixings, so much so that attempting to slide the unit across even the smoothest surface is not an option.

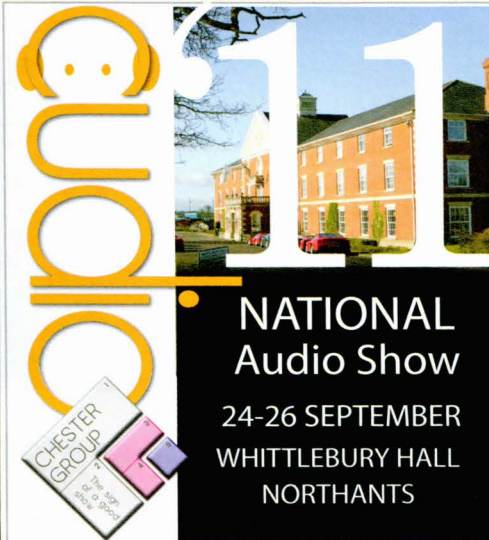
The back panel is a feast of high quality socketry that's usefully spread out to accommodate the biggest plugs and the least dainty of fingers. Also round back is a power inlet for the small power supply that drives the volume control motor and powers the orange LEDs and the switching that they relate to. The last control is a switch marked AC and DC which, in the AC position, is used to combat DC offset on an input. High quality capacitors are used to stop the autotransformer saturating and producing distortion, but as these caps introduce a degree of roll-off the Pre is best left in DC mode.

There are two versions of the Glastonbury Pre available, I had the Pre 1 which is single ended while the Pre 2 incorporates an extra eight EDCT (enhanced DCT) wound 1:1 transformers to produce a balanced output for an extra £2,000.

This preamp is part of Max Townshend's project to build the ultimate high fidelity system, a project which admittedly he has been working on for some time but one which seems to be coming together now that the Glastonbury Tor loudspeaker is in production. He also has a hybrid two chassis power amp in the pipeline and of course the Rock V turntable for which a new tonearm, the Excalibur 3, has recently been introduced. The most heavily re-worked example of a Pioneer universal player is also approaching finalisation, mind you I'm not holding my breath on that one!

That system as a whole is pretty extraordinary in its resolving powers and one suspects that this preamplifier has as much to do with that as any other part. It's uncompromisingly revealing in seemingly all respects and is uncannily open whilst avoiding the subtle hallmark that electricity seems to leave on ►





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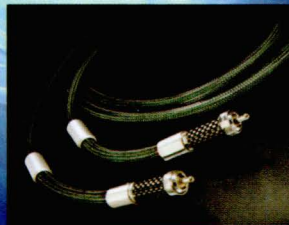
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▶ virtually all active preamps. This latter quality is not considered a bad thing in many quarters because it imbues the music with extra energy that some consider to be lacking in passive devices, however this controller proves that if you do things properly you can have your cake and eat it. The Glastonbury delivers as much grunt and energy as a powered preamp, dynamics are as wide if not wider than can be achieved with active devices and there is a sense of hearing the pure energy from the recording rather than that energy with the subtle reinforcement that even the highest quality electronics impart.

For a period I had both the Townshend and a Mark Levinson No.326S to compare and contrast and used them with ATC SCM150ASL Pro active loudspeakers and the combination of Mark Levinson No.53 monoblock power amps with PMC Fact8 loudspeakers. Surprisingly the No.326S suited the ATCs better than its natural partners, this is because that (superbly engineered) preamp is exceptionally smooth while the professional monitors are highly analytical, especially through the midband, which can prove to be too revealing with less than pristine recordings. The Glastonbury is more explicit than the Levinson, distinctly more open and transparent and devoid of the deluxe character that makes that preamp so appealing on the one hand but ultimately less revealing. It sounded better than the Levinson in both set ups but really shone with the No.53s which are extremely neutral and resolute themselves. The Pre 1 gives you considerably more three dimensional solidity and, more surprisingly, better low frequency extension. Bass lines are, to coin a phrase, 'flippin' glorious when played by the likes of Meshell Ndegeocello or Jaco Pastorius. Full of nuance and very distinct in shape.

The Townshend seems to be totally neutral in terms of timing, it passes on whatever the source is capable of, and the cables for that matter. I borrowed a sample of TMS Pulse interconnect at one point and was startled at the way this increased perceived pace by emphasising leading edges. It doesn't have the imaging nor low frequency solidity of more relaxed cables but is hard to beat on the edge of the seat front. Generally however, I prefer to sit back and enjoy a more relaxed sound with Synergistic Research or Townshend's own cables and it was these links that provided the greatest insights along with the Pre 1. I had the luxury of using it with Esoteric's E-03 as well, a solid state phono stage that is uncannily strong in tonal and detail resolution terms, making it a perfect partner for the Pre 1, the pair revealing subtleties on well worn albums that have never been apparent before. Image positioning for instance is clearly more precise and specific with Zakir Hussain's superbly recorded *Making Music* album, you can tell where the tabla player is in the soundstage in both lateral and depth terms whilst enjoying the incredible speed and power of his fingers, he almost makes John McLaughlin, also in the band, seem languid and certainly not as dynamic, but he did have youth on his side. Back in his own day there were few who could get close to the 'Mahavishnu' when he had his orchestra goading him on.

Four Men with Beards' vinyl pressing of *At Carnegie Hall* by a rather more soulful artist, Nina Simone also proved inspiring. This features her rendition of the beautiful 'Wild is the Wind' but it was 'Cotton Eyed Joe' which took full advantage of the preamp's mono setting and came through with a melancholy power that is rare in recorded music. The atmosphere of the venue and the dynamics of the performance being presented in full effect despite or

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: 6x RCA phono, 2x XLR unbalanced,

Outputs: 2x RCA phono, 2x XLR unbalanced,

Fractal wiring throughout

Mumetal transformers

Power: 15VDC 1A. (Remote control only)

Size WxHxD: 49x12x38cm

Weight: 11kg

Price: £8,000

Manufacturer: Townshend Audio

URL: www.townshendaudio.com

Tel: +44(0)20 8979 3787



possibly because of the solitary channel of the recording. It's a rare treat to be able to hear so far into that particular spotlight on the past.

In terms of fit and finish the Glastonbury Pre 1 is the most sophisticated component Townshend has yet produced, it matches expectations at this elevated price point with a substantial and precise construction where the details have all been attended to. In sonic terms it is the most revealing preamplifier that I've used, with its +1dB and -10dB switching rather than a single level control it could be a bit more user friendly but this is an enthusiasts preamp and it wouldn't be proper hi-fi if it were too easy to use. If Max Townshend can bring the rest of his range up to this standard of build there should be very little between him and world domination! +

MEET YOUR MAKER

Max Townshend

By Jimmy Hughes

In some respects, Hi Fi is a bit like football; there are lots of different opinions about how best to do things, and many key people hold strong opposing views on what works and what doesn't. I suppose one should celebrate such diversity. But at the same time it creates a somewhat confusing mix. I mean – who's right?

In the middle of June 2010 I went over to Max Townshend's place to hear some things he'd recently been working on. Max espouses strong opinions, and – as a designer and manufacturer – produces products that demonstrate his beliefs. When it comes to design, Max has always taken a very individual and unusual approach.

So it was interesting to go and hear his hi-fi system. This included a passive preamp using transformers, and a modified CD/DVD/SACD player with transformer coupled analogue output. Knowing my love of inter-stage transformers, Max guessed I'd be intrigued – and I was!

I last visited Max about 10 or so years ago. Back then, he was using the giant Townshend Audio *Sir Galahad* speakers. However, this time he had the slightly smaller *Glastonbury Tor* models – a line source design costing £19,950.00. These are quite large, without being too imposing.

For maximum strength and rigidity, the speakers feature a welded steel shell, reinforced by something called *Herculite* – a dense solid plaster-like compound. The speakers are massively heavy, weighing some 85kg, and come complete with Townshend's decoupled *Stella* stands.

Naturally, when asked to listen to a system consisting of components that are entirely unfamiliar, it's a bit difficult to work out which bit's doing what. But my first reaction was very positive. Clearly the loudspeakers were pretty special. The first track Max played was (as he put it) a 'show off' piece featuring lots of percussion.

The sound was big and effortlessly commanding, with enormous power and presence – remarkable immediacy and impact. The low frequencies were hugely impressive – exceptionally clean and deep, with massive power. Bass drum thwacks sounded solid and weighty, as though moving huge amounts of air.

It was immediately obvious that the bottom end was extremely extended, yet at the same time unusually clean and free from boom. Max claims the response extends down to about 15Hz, and (judging by what I heard) I can well believe it. Despite the fullness and power of the lower frequencies, there was no sense of overhang.

The bass was 'there' and then it was gone. The impression was one of speed as well as weight and attack. Indeed, for much of the time, the sound seemed deceptively light and transparent. Overall, there was a crisp airy openness that was beautifully subtle and delicate. The music sounded effortlessly clear and natural.



As a result, when a bass drum was struck, it came as something of a shock because the contrast was so great – you heard this massive sound that seemed to come from nowhere. This is just as it would be in real life. Having such deep clean bass gives the whole sound a wonderful foundation, and helps improve the upper frequencies.

Subjectively, having extended low frequencies impart a nice tonal sheen and richness to the mid-band and top. Max uses four aluminium-coned bass/mid drivers based on a design by Ted Jordan. They're light and fast, and cover a wide frequency range. Being housed in such a massive heavy ported cabinet helps them perform at their best.

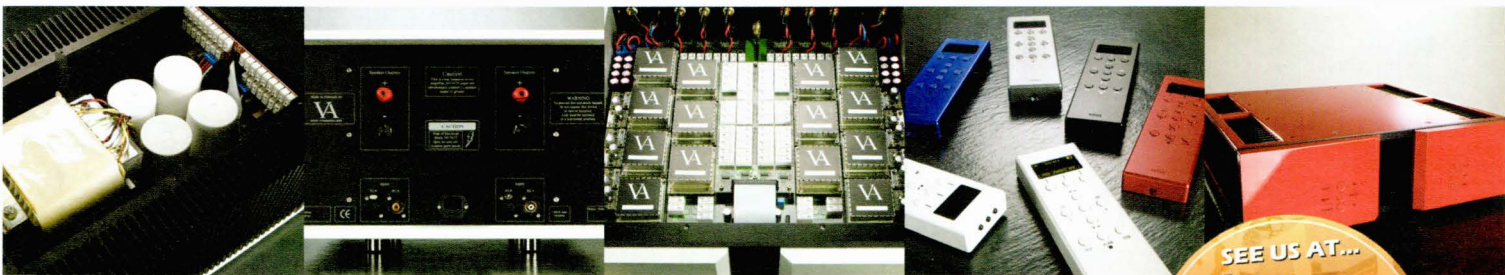
Moreover, the decoupled *Stella* stand ensures that the speaker combines precision and focus, with a nice relaxed clarity that allows each instrument and voice its own space. Even during complex passages, the sound never 'crowds up' – it never lost its clear see-through transparency.

The crossover point is 5kHz, using a 6dB/Octave first order filters. There are six front-firing ribbon tweeters, arranged in a vertical line and 'spaced' to produce a time-aligned wavefront. Also included is a rear-facing 'ambience' tweeter, and Townshend's famous *Maximum* super-tweeter.

Max has a medium-sized room, and sits about 12-15ft (4-5m) back from the speakers. They're carefully toed-in to produce a precise stereo image. Back in the days when Max was using the giant *Sir Galahads*, he had certain issues with the way these speakers *imaged*.

Basically, he felt he was slightly too close to the speakers to hear them at their best. Being a tall speaker with multiple drive units, he concluded that the different arrival times, due ▶

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► to having spaced drivers, was creating slight problems with phase coherence. So, he changed the spacing of the tweeters on the new speakers to tackle this.

Inevitably, this makes the *Glastonbury Tor* something of a 'sweet spot' design. You get very solid precise imaging, but need to sit in the right place to hear things at their very best. While the sound doesn't fall apart if you move out of the optimum zone, central images will probably be slightly less focused and solid.

Going back to the bass performance, I have to say I was amazed that such deep and powerful low frequencies could emanate from four relatively small drivers. When Max left the room briefly, I nipped over to the speaker and started to touch the lower baffle area – looking for another driver!

I was half expecting to find a 15in monster there, but – nothing. Later on Max played some organ music with some exceptionally deep pedals, and I could actually 'feel' the bass – my rib cage was vibrating! Indeed, because the room is of limited dimensions, we couldn't hear the full depth of the bass being reproduced.

To hear lowest frequencies, we had to go *outside* the room. While listening in the stereo hotseat, my impression had been that volume levels were fairly generous. So much so, I asked Max if his neighbours ever complained. He said they didn't because the sound wasn't actually that loud, and therefore didn't travel.

I later went into an adjoining room, and was surprised at how little sound I could hear there – even though it was only separated from the living room by a wall. It was as though the sound seemed 'loud' because it had such presence, focus, and immediacy. However, in terms of decibels, it wasn't nearly as loud as it seemed.

On my visit ten years back, I recall Max playing Grace Jones' *Slave to the Rhythm*. It sounded pretty amazing. The fact that I still recall it a decade or so later is testimony to that. Back then, Max's system stuck me as hugely impressive but not especially easy or comfortable to listen to. It was a big imposing sound that grabbed you by the lapels.

Max' current system sounds no less imposing – indeed, in some ways it's actually even *more impressive* – but now it's much more listenable. It combines wide bandwidth with fast transient attack and lots of fine detail, yet presents everything in a surprisingly relaxed and coherent manner.

It's absolutely terrific on the big 'show off' recordings, but equally impressive on simpler smaller-scale music that requires subtlety and delicacy. It's a very revealing system, yet it's not merciless. Because it images so precisely, you're able to hear faults in microphone placement on some recordings. But the music was still enjoyable.

I've gone on at length about the *Glastonbury Tor* speakers because they delivered the end product, and were clearly of exceptional quality. But the

source component and transformer preamp were clearly doing their bit, helping to create a sound that had a clean solid focused quality.

My experience with *interstage* transformers is that they impart a 'solid' quality to the sound. I'm not sure how else to put it. The music sounds more focused and immediate – as though the singers and instrumentalists were right there in front of you. As a result, you don't need to play things loudly to achieve room-filling presence.

Max's system had precisely these qualities. Of course, it's not just down to a single thing. The decoupled *Stella* speaker stands enhance the impression of relaxed ease and clarity, as do the famous *Isolda* speaker cables and EDCT interconnects. But the quality of the source and amplification is vitally important too.

Clearly these components were aiding the overall impression. Going back to football, it was like a combination of 'stars' that nevertheless played together as a team. There was no showboating – no limelight hogging. If the speakers impressed, it was only because they were getting such great service from the amplifier and source components.

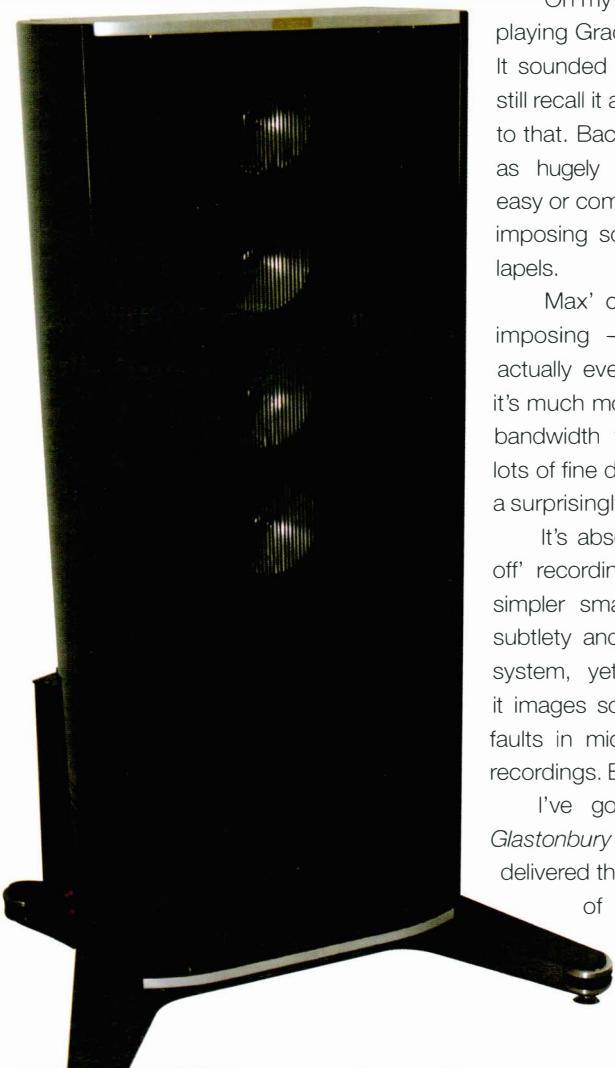
The amplification was an interesting and eclectic mix; a transformer-coupled preamp, with a 300W class D solid-state power amp for the bass, and 3 Watt Class A tube amp for the high frequencies! The speakers offer medium efficiency, and can play very loudly indeed, if this is required.

As previously mentioned, the source component was a relatively humble Pioneer CD/SACD/DVD player – albeit, heavily modified with transformer-coupled analogue output stages. While it was difficult to evaluate this component's individual contribution, clearly it was doing a pretty amazing job.

While there are people who don't believe in Townshend's decoupled speaker stands or his impedance-matched speaker cables, I think even the most hard-bitted sceptic would have to be won over by the sound Max is getting. Max's hi-fi system demonstrates that his ideas and concepts work. I was *massively impressed*. +

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Croft Acoustics Micro 25 and Series 7 By Paul Seydor

There's a famous Aesop fable about a wager between the wind and the sun as to who can get a solitary traveler to remove his coat sooner. The wind blows up a gale but the man only wraps the garment all the more tightly around himself. Comes the sun's turn, he warms the day ever so gently until before long the traveler removes both overcoat and waistcoat. Extending Aesop's characterizations to audio, some components are wind, some sun. The winds grab you by the lapels, pull you in, hand you a drink, and usher you right to table and feast. The suns, by contrast, invite you in, take your wraps, allow you a moment or several to collect yourself, then inquire how and what they might serve you.

Croft Acoustics' new all-tube Micro 25 preamplifier and tube/transistor hybrid Series 7 stereo power amplifier have unquestionably been schooled in the arts of gentle persuasion, but their performance is

nonetheless consummate. Right at the start they passed the "first bite" test more deliciously than any new components I've sampled in a while: a vintage Vanguard LP of the Alfred Deller Consort singing Christmas carols from Old England reproduced with such warmth, glow, liquidity, and utterly rounded dimensionality as to disarm criticism. By conventional audiophile standards this was hardly an arduous task, the group numbering just the countertenor himself, a soprano, a baritone, and a tenor, and accompanied by only lute and recorder. But as Deller's was an unusually pure voice with a distinctive timbre and as he surrounded himself with voices of similar purity though distinctly different in range and timbre, there's enough here that needs to be kept separate and clear, yet also coherent, to screw up the midrange if components are not at least competent. The first carol, meltingly beautiful, was sufficient to reveal this pair as a whole lot better than that. What sweeter music, indeed. (It helped that the units had been broken in for fifty hours before shipping.)

This foretaste was only confirmed in the remainder of the evaluations, where musical beauty was clearly ascendant over laboratory truth. The auteur is Glenn Croft, while hardly a household name, has been designing preamplifiers and amplifiers, including some near legendary OTLs, for over a quarter century, along the way having acquired a reputation among British audiophile cognoscenti for modestly priced products of immodestly high performance.

Even by the standards of high-end designers, Croft idiosyncratic, somewhat intransigent in his thinking, yet utterly free from pretense; does not court the spotlight, scarcely even promoting his products (literature nonexistent, Web site ▶

“The black metal casework, which Croft proudly says is UK sourced, is utilitarian but by no means cheap in look or feel.”

▶ primitive); and holds to his design principles with a tenacity rivaling that stone’s grip on Excalibur. The core conviction is a minimalism triangulated by vacuum tubes, discreet parts, and the simplest possible circuits with the shortest signal paths. If Thoreau were resurrected as an audio designer, his designs wouldn’t be much different from these Crofts, which embody the very essence of economy in its highest sense: performance and function paramount, needless complexity and extravagance scrupulously avoided, wastefully expensive and overspec’d parts eschewed in favor of moderately priced ones carefully selected by testing and intensive listening, and all glitz, glam, and luxury shunned with a disdain almost Puritan in its severity.

Croft doesn’t even supply an instruction sheet, let alone a manual, not that any is needed, so minimal are the functions—I almost wrote “functions and features,” except there isn’t a feature in sight, unless you consider the preamp’s on-board phonostage a feature. (The closest might be that both units’ outputs are muted for about a minute after turn-on while the circuits stabilize; when the muting goes off the LEDs turn from red to green and are ready for play. No on/off thumps here—very salutary.) The Micro’s front panel has just three knobs (one for source selection among phono and three high-level inputs, one each for left and right volume), two toggle switches (mute, on/off), and an LED; the Series 7’s sports even fewer (power switch and LED). All jacks are RCA or binding posts that accept bananas, spades, or bare wires.

The black metal casework, which Croft proudly says is UK sourced, is utilitarian but by no means cheap in look or feel. In fact, I find the both units elegantly svelte in their Spartan simplicity, perhaps because audio

is filled with almost embarrassingly luxurious electronics today, with amps so large and crushingly heavy my foundations would doubtless need buttressing to support them. This duo I can carry under one arm. Open the hood and you find lots of empty space to keep audio signals well separated from power supplies, no circuit boards (which Croft seems to regard as an invention of the devil), tidy point-to-point wiring, the shortest possible signal paths, and impressive toroidal transformers (again proudly UK-sourced). Assembly is therefore by hand.

No surprise there’s no remote handset, and if you’re one of those audiophiles with a pathological aversion to dual volume controls, be warned the Micro’s configuration may be your worst nightmare, the pots neither ganged nor clutched but continuous in action with no indicator markings surrounding the knobs. If you’re too neurotic to set them by ear—a neurosis baffling to me, as there’s more left/right imbalance out there than you might imagine, especially from phono sources—the handsome round knobs have extrusions that taper to thin rectangular edges with indicator lines, making it easy to match settings by sight (when the straight edges are parallel, levels are theoretically identical). Perhaps perversely, I found the Micro’s arrangement among the easiest I’ve used—almost, in fact, preferring it to typical volume-cum-balance configurations and absolutely to the insanity of having no control over balance at all (but then I am unusually sensitive to even minute level shifts from channel to channel).

The preamp is all tube, but the hybrid Series 7 amp, with a single tube at its input and rated 45Wpc, is Croft’s first concession to solid-state, the output stage using MOSFETS, which he says behave like tubes while offering several advantages (notably a simplified output network).

Priced at £700 each the Micro and Series 7 can be purchased separately, but I used them mostly in tandem, starting with my Quad 57s (Wayne Piquet restored); then moving to my 2805s, a more tonally neutral, dynamic, and extended in range Quad ESL; and finally spending an afternoon at Robert E. Greene’s with his Harbeth Monitor 40s to hear how the amp handled a typical dynamic speaker with large woofer. Allowing for the expected differences in rooms and associated equipment, the Crofts’ sonic identity remained consistent throughout.

What is that identity? Some caveats first. A liability of analytical writing is that drawing attention to something lends it an emphasis often disproportionate to its actual prominence. As is the case with almost all contemporary electronics, the effects and tonal characteristics I’ve hinted at in the Crofts and am about to describe are by no means gross, obvious, or crude. Listening casually you wouldn’t notice them and even listening critically you mightn’t notice them outside of strict comparisons to other components. Plug them into a system you’re very familiar with, however, and you will certainly hear a change if you listen attentively. But I shouldn’t want anything I say to obscure just how thoroughly I enjoyed them: Their deviations from neutrality proved so musically rewarding day in and day out that I regard my criticisms, if you can even call them that, as mere obeisance to reviewing form, if not vaguely churlish.

More than anything else the Croft combination evoked to my ears classic tube sound brought wholly up to date. Since I started with vocal music, I continued through a number of familiar LPs and CDs ranging from the antique, like The Christmas Revels, to such classic fare as Sinatra, Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, Sam Cooke, and Julie London. All yielded the same impression of a pretty, liquid, dimensionally rounded presentation that I’d broadly characterize as a little more beautiful than what I hear on systems I know to be more ▶



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hi-fi+ Review, Issue 80, Alan Sircom

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Hi-Fi Choice Review, June 2011, Richard Black

"Near faultlessly neutral in the midband...precise and stable images with very good depth definition... we were delighted to hear excellent dynamics on offer; swinging from loud to soft effortlessly without compression or exaggeration."

"They are both rather characterless; that is, they don't impose themselves on the music. Unless you are of the mindset that likes to regard cables as tuning devices, that's very much a point in their favour; neutrality being a hi-fi Holy Grail".

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▶ literally source accurate. The same goes for instruments and ensembles. Ben Webster's tenor sax was reproduced in all its fat, voluptuous glory; Sonny Rollins's on *Way Out West* [Acoustic Sounds] is similarly large but less expansive, and it can also be edgy with some real bite, which the Crofts fractionally smoothed.

Subjectively, the pair has either a slightly downward sloping top or a slightly softened one that results in more or less the same impression (see sidebar for more on this); a lovely, refined, and beautifully open midrange; and a nicely fleshed out bottom end that suggests natural bass as opposed to hi-fi "punch" or "slam." Indeed, "natural" recurs in my notes more than any other adjective, and next comes "romantic." But I wouldn't call the Crofts forgiving because that implies a lack of detail and resolution, which is not the case, as the quietest of the piano chords that bleed through Jacintha's headphones on her a cappella "Moon River" from *Autumn Leaves* [Groove Note] were easily audible. "Forgiving" also implies compromised transient response—but *The Christmas Revels* abounds in period percussion that certainly puts paid to any worries about the Crofts' transient response. Or take the phenomenal young prodigy Yuja Wang's hair raisingly virtuosic performance of *Three Movements from Petrushka* [DG]: scintillating in rhythm, explosive in impact. Transparency just misses being on the level of the very finest electronics, but I mean by less than a smidgen.

Despite its power rating, the Series 7 doesn't slouch on dynamic range. The only time I heard anything that might indicate constriction was while driving REG's Harbeths to levels I never indulge except while reviewing, and even then the principal sonic casualty was just a slight loosening and loss of impact in the very deep bass on really big orchestral material. Otherwise, the sheer composure of the 7 left me astonished.

Everything I needed to know about the Crofts was summarized during the *Bernstein Carmen* [DG], a recording ranging from vocal and instrumental solos to full nineteenth century orchestra, chorus, and children's chorus, not to mention everything in between. Robert Craft once called it so closely miked that if the soloists had communicable diseases, the home listener would be in danger of contracting them. That's a large exaggeration, but it contains a kernel of truth, as the sonics are tremendously vivid, transparent, and dynamic. The top end in particular is, shall we say, a little extrovert, with cymbals and triangles crystalline and, though hardly in your face, glitteringly there. The Crofts did not disappoint even as they evinced a mild buffing off of edges, a softening of the snarl from the brass, the tingle of the triangles, the brashness of the cymbals, with a small consequent reduction in sheer immediacy. None of which, I hasten to add, was in the least detrimental to involvement in this always supremely involving performance or to its overwhelming dramatic impact.

And something more, an ace up the Crofts' collective sleeve which I've withheld until now: an ability to throw a three-dimensional soundstage unsurpassed by any electronics I've used. This *Carmen* as staged for the microphone is one of the most convincing sonic recreations of a theatrical event I know. I'd be hard-pressed to imagine even multichannel capable of a spatial presentation more holographic, and I've rarely heard it presented with better focus, precision, and organic wholeness than from these Crofts. For all I know, their ability in this regard may be as much an artifact as their tendency toward romance, but if so, it's a powerfully persuasive one.

For all my enthusiasm, it's not easy to place the Crofts in the current market. At £1,400 the pair they're more than fairly priced given their design, construction, and performance. However, the identically powered NAD

C326BEE integrated is less than £300 yet can also claim an appealing sonic personality and perhaps greater neutrality; and Quad's outgoing 99/909 combination costs slightly more than the Croft duo and is three times more powerful and unquestionably more tonally neutral without yielding one whit of musical naturalness, beauty, and authority. But cults have built up around components as distinctive as the Crofts, so I suggest you audition them, but only at your peril. If you are seduced—as I surely was—nothing anywhere near their cost and maybe nothing else period will quite reproduce their particular garden of delights, more heavenly no doubt than earthly, by which I mean, than real. But how many music lovers will complain of that? +

First Published in The Absolute Sound issue 213

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Micro 25 preamplifier

Frequency response: Line (0.1Hz–200kHz 1dB), phono (20Hz–20kHz +/- 0.5dB)

Sensitivity: Line, 150mV for 0.5V output; phono, 1mV for 0.5V output

Inputs: One phono, three line-level

Tube complement: Three ECC83

Dimensions (WxHxD): 40.5 x 7 x 27cm

Weight: 3kg

Price: £700

Series 7 hybrid power amplifier

Frequency response: 0.15Hz–150kHz +/- 1dB

Input Tube: One ECC83 input

Output: MOSFET, 45Wpc into 8 ohms, 50Wpc into 4 ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 40.5 x 7 x 27cm

Weight: 5kg

Price: £700

Manufacturer: Croft Acoustics

URL: www.croftacoustics.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)5601 639905



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

NuForce Icon 2/Amphion Helium 410 desktop system

By Alan Sircom

I'm going to make a confession. For every hour I spend in front of the main system, I must spend two or three behind a computer screen. And I suspect I am not alone in this. While not all of this computer time is spent playing music, the sound of that computer's output has shifted from a bonus to a necessary evil to an increasingly vital part of my listening day.

This bipartisan system is a little more 'hi-fi' in outlook than most 'computer speakers'; it's more like 'computer separates'. The NuForce part is a slim, standalone combination USB DAC, headphone amp and amplifier proper called the Icon 2. It's a 24W switch mode amp, coupled to a small headphone jack and a 24-bit DAC for the USB input. It also has an input jack for an iPod should you wish. It's a closed loop system, even the speaker cables use RJ45 connectors at the amp end, rendering the 2m limit a strict one. If you want anything

beyond 24/96, look elsewhere (possibly elsewhere in the NuForce catalogue) and if you use loudspeakers of more than 92dB sensitivity, you'll hear the switching and you'll pass on the Icon. But the Amphion Helium 410 is only 86dB sensitive. And an easy eight-ohm load.

The two-way (25mm titanium dome tweeter and 114mm paper mid/bass), single-wired and rear ported speaker is finished in pure black or white (which is surprisingly effective on a computer table, coloured grids for the mid-woofer are available) and even comes with mounting holes for wall-brackets. As ever with Amphion speakers, the crossover point is a touch lower than usual – in this case 1.6kHz – thereby putting it at the no-so-obvious end of the presence region. Amphion put the -3dB roll-off point at around 60Hz, but in reality, this speaker really stops at 'upper bass'.

Stick the system in place of your existing PC speakers and you'll be smitten... after a few days. Because, despite the concept being on the 'magic beans' side of audio engineering, the system needs a while to come on song. In the world beyond audio, people might let the idea of the loudspeaker's cones and cone surrounds requiring a bit of a shakedown, but not electronics – they are just good to go from the get-go, aren't they? Well, no... not in this case. Here, the Helium 410s jump out the box raring to go and the little Icon 2 takes a few days to bed in and come to life. For the first day or two there is a harsh and distinctly edgy graininess to the midband that simply goes completely away a few days into its allotted task. And then never comes back. This isn't a subtle change; it's like two different amplifier sounds.

My advice, leave the system on some porn repeat frenzy for a weekend. That way, not only will everything sound right when you start listening proper,

your neighbours will call you Captain Viagra if you play it loud enough. Then, once the one-handed entertainment weekender is spent, you are left with something that sounds really rather fun.

There's an 'right' quality to the presentation; it's direct, fast, taut and surprisingly coherent. There's even a stereo stage; instead of the vague mono or the 'hole in the middle' sound that passes for music at many computer workstations. It's a 'no messing' sound, bright and articulate and detailed, but also – rare given the context – not something that sounds lost and confused when you play a Mozart piano sonata. But it can also pump it out; the 24W might seem like a bit of a limit, but as you are about a metre from the speaker's front baffles, it's not enough to cause concern when playing air guitar to ZZ Top's La Grange at your desk when no-one's around.

OK, by 'proper' system standards, you can get a more dynamic sound and there's an octave or two down below that only gets mentioned in dispatches here, but you could point those fingers at any near-field monitoring system,

“Best of all though, it achieves that goal with a smile on its face, and the sense of fun is infectious.”

and you could hook a sub to the system. You could also point to the amp as the weaker of the two devices, but that kind of defeats the object. This simply makes your desktop computer sound one hell of a lot better than it currently does, good enough not to need to reach for the listening room behemoth. And it achieves that desktop sound enhancement process without the slightest whiff of BS. Excellent!

That is more than a nebulous 'goal', it's a clearly-defined aim of Amphion and why Amphion and NuForce are working in harmony in this case. I got an earlier sample with a bigger, notionally better set of Amphion speakers, complete with the more normal (for the Finnish brand) and slightly bigger aluminium bass units. While this bigger system worked better with my carefully-massaged ALAC files (more bass, more detail in the bass) the slightly softer, less demanding sound of the smaller paper cone bass unit of the Helium 410 does help the broader range of sounds you might get from the myriad sources you get on a computer.

A computer speaker system has to cope with a vast range of sounds with no guarantees of audio quality, all the while being well integrated enough to work within arm's reach of the listener. This is a harsh environment for good sound but the Amphion/NuForce hook-up passes muster brilliantly. Best of all though, it achieves that goal with a smile on its face, and the sense of fun is infectious. Fun enough in fact that it might cause some big-league head-scratching when you return to your more highfalutin' but not as ultimately entertaining hi-fi system.

There are two ways of looking at the Amphion/NuForce system; the wrong way is to think of it as a posh method of getting your computer to make noises. On the other hand, if you are as time-poor as the rest of us and don't want to prostrate yourself before the shrine of audiophilia every time you want to play a piece of music, this is the answer. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Amphion Helium 410

Two-way ported bookshelf loudspeaker

Drive Units: 25.4mm titanium dome

tweeter, 115mm paper cone woofer

Crossover point: 1.6kHz

Impedance: 8 ohm

Sensitivity: 86dB

Frequency response: 60Hz-20kHz ±3dB

Power recommendation: 20-80W

Dimensions (WxHxD): 13.2x26x22cm

Weight: 3.5kg

Colours: black, white, full white and colour grids

Price: £599 per pair

Manufacturer: Amphion

URL: www.amphion.fi

NuForce Icon 2

Input: RCA analog maximum 2Vrms

USB DAC: USB 1.1, 2.0 compatible.

USB native bit rate: 32, 44.1, 48, and 96 kHz, 24bit maximum

3.5mm Stereo jack

Speaker Outputs: NuForce RJ45 to banana plug speaker cables (2m)

Output: Peak power: 30W x 2 (4 Ohm)

Output power at 1% THD+N, A-weighted: 24W x 2 (4 Ohm), 18W x 2 (8 Ohm)

Gain: 22.2 dB

THD+N: 0.02%

Frequency Response: 20 to 20kHz +/- 1dB SNR > 90dB A-weighted

Headphone output: 80mW x 2 @ 16-Ohm (THD+N 0.05%)

Line Out (for Subwoofer) connection 60W 100-240VAC worldwide voltages PSU is included

Dimensions (WxHxD): 2.5x15.2x11.5cm

Weight: 2.2kg

Colours: black, red, white or blue sleeve, black fascia

Price: £250

Manufacturer: NuForce

URL: www.nuforce.com

System price (as tested): £849

Distributed in Europe by: Robytone

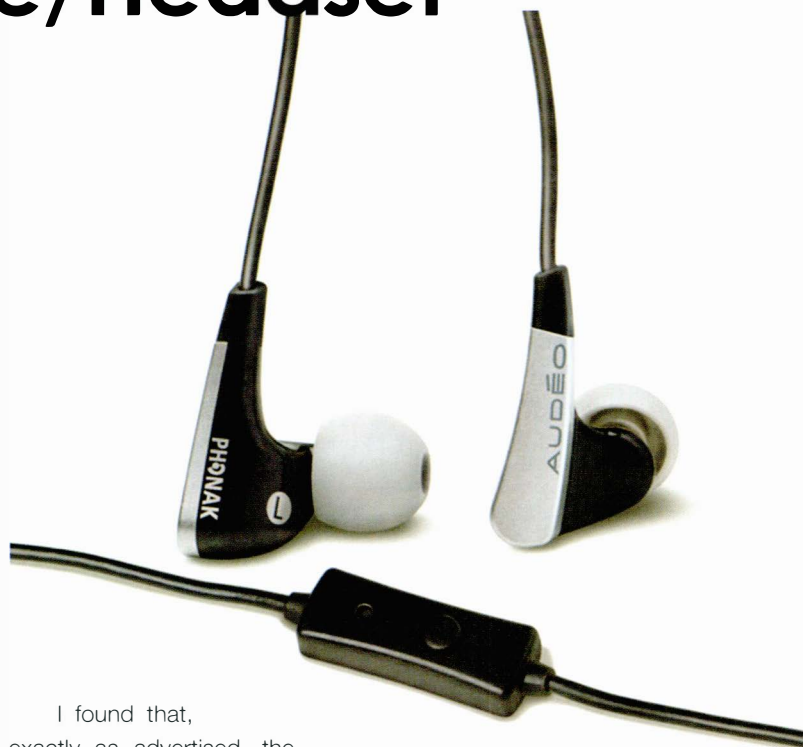
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Phonak Audéo PFE 122 In-Ear Headphone/Headset

By Chris Martens

Newspapers seem to be full of ads from manufacturers touting highly sophisticated hearing aid products, yet it has been rare to see such firms leverage their considerable technical expertise to create headphones for music lovers – until now. The Swiss firm Phonak, one of the world’s largest and most respected developers of hearing aid technologies and devices, has taken the plunge into our world, offering its family of Audéo Perfect Fit Earphones, which promise extremely high sound quality at real-world prices. This, the £130 Audéo PFE 122 in-ear headphone/headset, represents its flagship model.

The time spent in audiology clearly shows. The PFE 122 earpiece is designed to be easy to handle and to insert, so that wearers can quickly achieve a good seal between the PFE 122’s eartip and their ear canals and is sized and shaped to comfortably fit a very wide range of users. The PFE 122 ships with three sizes of silicone eartips along with a set of Comply-brand compressible foam eartips. Phonak points out that the silicone tips “are washable and better for use during exercise,” while the Comply tips “are better at filtering out ambient noise, making them the best choice for travel or use in noisy environments.” It also comes with a set of silicone ear guides that route the earphone’s signal cables up and over the wearer’s ears, and are said ensure a “perfect fit and reduced cable noise.”



I found that, exactly as advertised, the PFE 122 is unusually easy to handle and to insert, so that fitting the earphones to my ears was a snap. One design touch that really helps here is the “leg”-shaped outer section of the Phonak earpiece, which provides a just-right amount of offset from the eartips (a point many designers overlook), and that gives you a convenient structure to grasp as you snug the earphones into a comfortable position. The only question users will need to settle for themselves is which of the PFE 122’s four different eartip options give the best overall fit and seal. I preferred the silicone eartips overall, though the Comply foam tips can also give excellent results (if, of course, they fit your ear canals well).

Then, users need to decide whether or not to use Phonak’s included silicone ear guides for the PFE 122’s signal cables. Normally I find such cable guides to be more of a bother than a benefit, but Phonak’s ear guides proved an exception to this rule. They helped to keep potentially unruly signal cables under control while at the same time providing a flexible and silky-smooth fit.

The influence of Phonak’s long experience in the hearing-aid marketplace can most definitely be seen in the PFE 122’s use of passive audio filters that help shape the earphone’s response curves to match user’s tastes or ear characteristics. It offers three color-coded types of passive audio filters: black, which are said to “provide stronger bass and treble” (and that, on paper, offer what may be the most accurate tonal balance overall); Grey, which “provide stronger middle tones” and Green, which are claimed to deliver “stronger bass while still maintaining high-quality midrange.”

One of the first points to bear in mind about the PFE 122 is that, in terms of tonal balance, it doesn’t have just one sonic character, but three ▶

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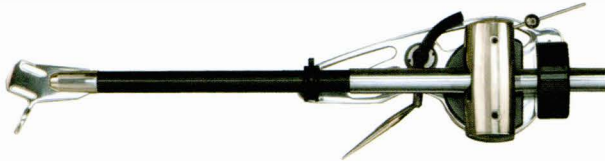
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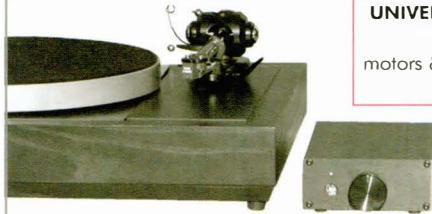
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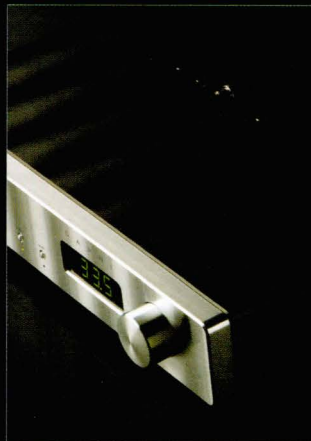
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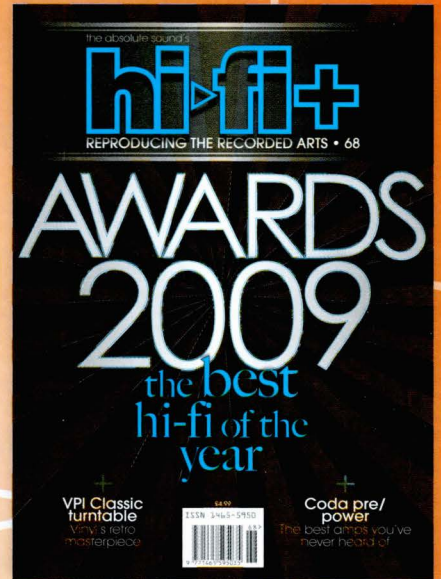
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► — depending on which sets of passive audio filters you choose to install. I found that Phonak's Black filters yielded an extremely clear, well-balanced and neutral sound—one I found very musically satisfying and suitable for enjoying many different types of musical material. Although these were not my personal preference, I could see how a case might also be made for Phonak's optional Grey filters, because they provided a relatively restrained touch of midrange-emphasis—one that many listeners might find to give a more vivid, intense, or “up close” musical presentation overall.

Phonak's Green filters, contrary to what I expected on the basis of the description provided on the firm's Web site, didn't so much provide “stronger bass,” but rather rolled off the PFE 122's highs (and to some extent trimmed midrange response, too), thus yielding a considerably darker sound overall. The Green filters might be appropriate in cases where listeners seek to use darker tonal balance as a means of compensating for low-frequency background noises or, perhaps, as a way of solving problems with recordings that sound excessively bright or edgy.

Back in Black, Phonak's PFE 122 offers a remarkably open, transparent, and fine-grained sound—the sonic equivalent of stepping up from a low- or medium-resolution digital camera to a very high-resolution model. Indeed, I felt the Phonak sounded much more like an earphone from the £250-and-above price class than it did a model selling for well under £150. What I mean by this is that the PFE 122 effortlessly reproduced small, fine, low-level textural details that tend to “fly beneath the radar” for most mid-£100 ‘phones. But what is important is not just that the PFE 122 captures these details, but the way in which it handles them. Some ‘phones create a false sense of detail through the expedient of exaggerated treble response, but that isn't what the Phonaks do at all. On the contrary, the PFE 122's let sonic details unfold in a perfectly natural, comfortable, and almost self-effacing way, without any hyper-dramatic “spotlighting” at all.

Transient response is another area where the PFE 122 sounds more expensive and sophisticated than its actual pricing would suggest. So much vital information is (or at least should be) found at the beginnings and endings of individual notes, because transient sounds enable us to tell whether notes are played softly or aggressively, presented with a smooth or more vigorous touch, and left to ring out and sustain or deftly damped and quieted. And when sophisticated combinations of transient sounds come along in the music, the Phonak consistently surpasses expectations by rendering transients with speed and cat-quick agility, yet also with an effortless and unforced quality that tells you the PFE 122's aren't having to work hard to deliver their transient magic. Can really expensive universal-fit in-ear headphones surpass the PFE 122 in this area of performance? Yes, but typically they do so only at much higher price points.

What's also fascinating is to hear how the PFE 122's convey a sense of space within the soundstage, showing how some instruments are positioned more distantly from the microphone array (but perhaps closer to the walls of the recording venue), while others are obviously closer to the mic array and thus sound a bit more “alive” and immediate. And because the Phonaks

offer such high levels of resolution, listeners can use the timing and tonal aspects of reverberant sounds, which are easily heard through these ‘phones, to judge the overall size and acoustic properties of the recording space, adding a heightened sense of realism.

These observations document desirable sonic qualities that would be welcome in earphones priced well above £250, but are really remarkable for a model that sells for a much more accessible £130, meaning that Phonak's PFE 122 is a legitimate bargain. The value proposition of Phonak's PFE 122's is compounded further still by their clever passive audio filters, which give users three different voicing options to choose from—options few if any other earphones offer. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Phonak Audéo PFE 122 In-Ear Headphone/Headset

Accessories: Three pairs of silicone eartips (S, M, L), one pair of Comply foam eartips, one pair of silicone over-the-ear cable guides, box of six audio filters (2 Grey filters/4 Black filters) with changing tool, cleaning tool, carrying pouch

Frequency response: 5Hz – 17kHz

Weight: 15 grams

Sensitivity: 107 dB SP/1 mW

Impedance: 32 ohms

Warranty: 2 years, part and labour

Price: £130

Manufacturer: Phonak

URL: www.phonak.com

Distributed by: AUDÉOWORLD

URL: www.audeoworld.com

Tel: +41 58 928 48 48

Sonic Studio Amarra 2.2.1

By Alan Sircom

I've held off from reviewing Amarra because of an irrational fear of the iLok. It's the little plastic key that holds the secrets to your download codes, and I know too many ProTools users who have lost or broken them and others who swear they cause software clashes and crashes, boot failures and more.

Pro audio brand Sonic Studio has dropped the iLok for Amarra in favour of a more conventional download and key purchase, and we are back in business. So, what is Amarra? It's a Mac-only program that sits between iTunes and the computer itself, effectively by-passing a lot of core parts of the music playing part of the Apple operating system. It takes over and automates aspects of music replay such as changing sampling rate (traditionally this meant exiting iTunes, launching Audio MIDI, changing sampling rate and restarting iTunes) and potentially supporting rates up to 384kHz. It also works with a RAM-cache (if you have the RAM for the task... we're talking at least 4GB), and includes different dither algorithms and advanced equalization. The latest version brings a standalone Playlist memory player and allows iTunes to play FLAC files (iTunes supports ALAC instead) by converting them on the fly, as well as an ability to play CDs in memory without ripping them.

AS TESTED:

Amarra Junior £65

Amarra Mini £190

Amarra £475

Produced by: Sonic Studio

URL: www.amarraaudio.com

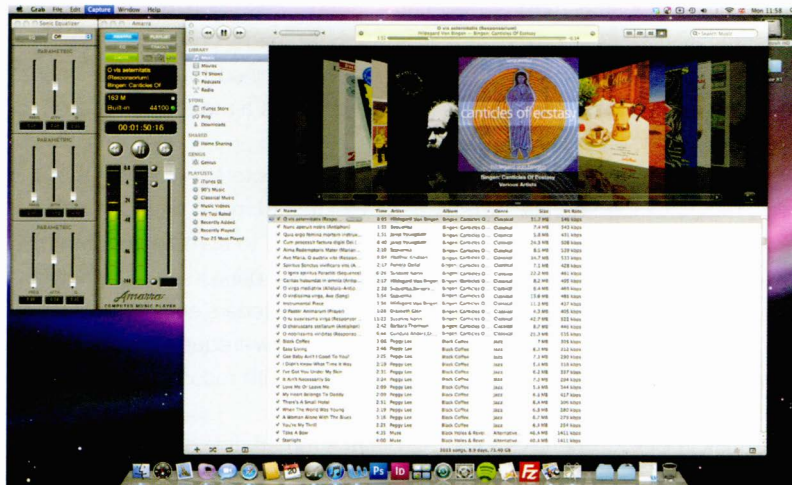
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The ability to adjust sample rate is desperately important because it helps retain bit perfect playback – if you are playing back a 16/44.1 file and the Mac is set to replay 24/96, it's reinterpreting your music for you, and sometimes this process is not as elegant as you might like. That Amarra does it automatically is a boon, but so do many other programs that cost a lot less than Amarra. Similarly, playing your files in RAM appears to make them more taut and crisp sounding than when playing off a hard disk, but many programs also include some form of memory player and cost a lot less than Amarra. In fairness though, if you just want FLAC conversion, sample rate conversion and automated dither adjustment – and are prepared to live with 24/96 files – there's a cut down Junior version, and a Mini version that adds the memory player and some EQ and brings the sampling rates supported up to 24/192. Whichever flavour you decide upon, consider it to be the cheap part next to the DAC you use to play it through.

Full Amarra 2.2.1's best features are likely the ones least desired by audiophiles. It's EQ performance is remarkable, as it's able to both help dial out the iniquities of the recording process and correct some subtle errors in your room's acoustics. If we get over our knee-jerk dismissal of tone shaping and actually experiment with the concept, you start to view Amarra as a vital aspect of the whole audio chain.

Amarra was the first out of the gates to offer improved sound over baseline Mac iTunes. It didn't have that market to itself for long; Pure Music, Decibel, Fidelia and Audirvana are all in the same market offering programs that vary in cost from free to about the price of a couple of decent opera box sets on CD. In contrast Amarra costs as much as a box in a decent opera house. At the moment, I still think Amarra has the edge – it sounds makes standard iTunes sound listless by comparison in standard mode, is dynamic and expressive in standalone player mode and the EQ settings really help de-screw up some of the worst excesses of the recording studio, and can help a bad room.

But I'm not finished here. Mid way through the review Apple announced that it will soon launch a new version of its OS called Lion. This will have radical implications on aftermarket processes like Amarra. We'll revisit the state of the Amarra art (and hopefully compare it to the big rivals) when the Lion has been tamed. +

Hi-Fi Racks Podium Trio

By Alan Sircom

Audio supports fall into three categories; the good, the bad and the neutral. I believe (a belief based on nothing more than anecdote, in fairness) that what separates 'the good' from 'the bad' comes down to personal choice in most cases – with people split between 'loving' and 'hating' a potentially bewildering array of wood, metal, acrylic and glass tables, struts, wires and the rest. The harder job in a way is towing the 'neutral' path, creating a product that everyone has equal respect for. Hi-Fi Racks seems to have done just that.

Hi-Fi Racks is very much in the 'butchers block done right' school. The platforms are inch thick solid hardwood affairs, with a choice of three (Podium Trio) or four (Podium Reference) bushes designed to hold the 8mm threads of the squared off wooden uprights on the underside and three or four metal spike shoes act as isolation and prevent the 8mm spikes from scratching your wooden surfaces. Everything bolts together with great ease; just remember that one platform (the one with the little metal badge on the underside) goes on top, because it has no inset spike shoes. The uprights come in a range of sizes, from stumpy little ones for the base platform, to ones long enough to accommodate a big power amp. The whole caboodle comes in a range of woods, too.

The repeated phrases 'three or four' and 'a range of' suggests this is no one-size-fits-all arrangement. In fact, Hi-Fi Racks builds to order and to your own specs. Yes, it has off the, ahem, shelf sizes and finishes, but the main pulse of the family-run company is the

bespoke end of the business. So, when you need to find a suitable platform to house your one-off power amplifier that has the dimensions of a WWII naval mine strapped to a filing cabinet, the Hi-Fi Racks team can accommodate you.

That makes reviewing one of Hi-Fi Racks products a little difficult. We settled for a slightly oversized three-tier, three-legged platform, made of oak, which turned up in flat-pack form. Build is excellent and assembly is quick and easy, thanks to relatively clear instruction diagrams. Having encountered stands that seem to require a degree in aeronautical engineering to put together, this comes as a relief. The only build-up observation is when siting spikes into their respective spike feet. You can struggle to fill all the holes at once, and end up skidding along the top. Disturbingly, I think I've said that before, but I was under oath at the time.

Little spike shoes are provided for those not wanting to take divots out of their wooden floor, but the rest of us should go for spikes alone.

This is the ideal platform for someone who thinks equipment isolation is a good thing on principle, but doesn't want to burn valuable money on a table that explores that principle at great expense. As a consequence, the Hi-Fi Racks stand is intellectually – and tonally – neutral. It doesn't improve inter-product coherence or transform the dynamics or low level clarity of components resting on its shelves, but neither does it act like a set of boat anchors or a ringing bell, holding back the performance of the products it supports.

If you are in the market for equipment supports that cost as much as a BMW and add to the performance of a system, look elsewhere. The Hi-Fi Racks is a non-nonsense design at a no-nonsense price. +



AS TESTED:

Podium Trio from £149 per tier

Manufacturer: Hi-Fi Racks

URL: www.hifiracks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0) 1572 756447

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Running Springs Audio Elgar

By Alan Sircom

Power conditioning expert Running Springs Audio has a powerful reputation for getting mains right that last year made it to UK shores. But until recently, the RSA range was geared toward supporting the kind of Big Power beloved by our American counterparts. However, the new £1,300 Elgar entry-point reaches out to a British audience (not surprising, given the name), with our preference for lower power solid-state integrated equipment. The RSA benefits are all still in place, but this time without a spec sheet that might be considered overkill when feeding our less ostentatious systems.

The UK version of the Elgar sports just four regular (but fully isolated) 13A outlets, with one socket turned through 90° to prevent it's cable getting close to the IEC input. It is a 15A device, so no demands for a 20A plug and socket, and comes with a standard black molded 13A IEC lead as standard (although like all RSA devices, it loves a good power cord) and weighs a lot less than its bigger brothers. It retains the same look and behind the scenes sports the same filtration approach common to all RSA devices.

It's a completely passive filtering device – there's not even a switch and absolutely no signs of LEDs or power meters. Inside is a lot of voltage regulation in a purely differential layout, featuring a host of RSA's own high-quality components (and as RSA



is the company behind many of the world's best sounding capacitors, RSA knows a thing or two about high-quality components). The Elgar uses the company's own 'CNDI' inductors and 'DMS' filters and some extremely high-grade platinum-foil capacitors (naturally) on a non-magnetic aluminium chassis resting on four pucks of Sorbothane-like material. Even the carbon-fibre front panel is part of a resonance control system.

The key to any power conditioner is not necessarily what it does, but what it doesn't do. A power conditioner historically did more harm than good by filtering away the dynamics while trying to improve the background noise. Most have now nailed this problem, but have instead found the performance perspective is still flattened in some places, especially the lower mid/upper bass, and many compensate by making the upper mids and treble, or the lower bass, more 'brightly lit'.

The thing about the RSA is that it doesn't go for the cheap shot. It doesn't hold back the dynamics, or mids or any part of the presentation. It simply cuts away the background noise. This shouldn't make any difference at all because the noise floor of most electronics is below the typical basal noise in most listening rooms, but lower the noise floor it clearly did. This manifests itself best by opening up the detail in the performance, allowing you slightly deeper into the music. It doesn't draw attention to itself and certainly doesn't light up the music with the sort of immediate impressiveness that draws people to systemic changes in audio. It goes for the slow burn, assuming that you didn't choose your system because it needed some specific enhancement and a power conditioner that provides such enhancement is making a change for the sake of change. If you just want an overall lift that makes your system sound like it does after midnight and just brings out its best, this is the one to go for.

It's easy to damn products like this with faint praise, for doing precisely what it is supposed to do, because we are naturally drawn to shiny things. This doesn't make a bad sounding system good, and it doesn't make a good sounding system better, but it does get rid of the impediments that can stop a good sounding system from sounding as good as it can. That's a remarkably honest approach and one that deserves a lot of attention. +

AS TESTED:

Running Springs Audio Elgar

Price: £1,300

Manufacturer: Running Springs Audio

URL: www.runningspringsaudio.com

Distributed by: Audiofreaks Ltd

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0) 208 948 4153

If I could hand out medals...

music matters

By Alan Sircom

I'm sorry for breaking the timeline once again on my room acoustics feature, but I picked up two wonderful stories at Munich – nothing really to do with the High-End show itself – which for once make me feel good about the world. Amid all the conflict and cash crises that afflict many of us, it's great to hear just a couple of snippets of good news.

Both concern Alan Shaw or Harbeth itself (eagle-eyed Plusicans might have spotted an in-brief news item about Harbeth supporting the victims of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami a couple of issues ago). The first, is a simple tale of altruism; Alan left his smartphone in a cab and the cab-driver returned it to his hotel. Nothing special, really, but rather than being plunged into the technological stone age while the cabbie got to play eBay trader, this little slice of honesty highlights that we haven't all descended into savagery and barbarism after all. But that's not the point.

More significant though is what has happened in Japan with Harbeth after the March 11th events. Harbeth is extraordinarily popular in Japan – far more so than it is in the home country – and many of its clients were in the earthquake zone.

Typically in Japan, those with damaged consumer electronics are advised by the retailers to replace their damaged equipment. But the problem has been that the cost of insurance that covers earthquake and tsunami damage is understandably high in Japan and many are either underinsured or not covered at all and the cost of replacement is prohibitive. It may be a trivial thing next to a wholly wrecked home, but many of these Harbeth users were inconsolable at the damage caused to their loudspeakers, because they consider the wood cabinet of a loudspeaker to be something close to embodying the emotional core of the music, so a broken wooden cabinet is like breaking the soul of the music.

Now it's here where the story turns remarkable. Makoto Sasamoto, Harbeth's distributor in Japan has taken it upon himself to provide a service unheard of elsewhere. Sasamoto engaged the services of a master craftsman to repair – where possible – the damaged loudspeakers and restore them to factory condition. He has been pivotal in rounding up these damaged speakers and has waived the labour and service charges involved in the project for end users. He will do this no matter how long-winded or time consuming the repair project. Moreover, for his troubled dealers, he has replaced (free of charge) any damaged store display and demonstration stock of loudspeakers.

Naturally, on hearing of the actions by Harbeth's Japanese distributor, the UK end rose to the challenge, supplying parts

and spares at no charge for the repairs and replacements. The company has increased its monthly air shipments to Japan to cover the repair process and is said to be 'shocked' at the number of speakers damaged by the events of March 11.

Normally a company would use such a course of action to extract marketing brownie points, in showing the world just how humanitarian it can be. In fact, I had to almost force this tale out of Alan Shaw, him not seeing in any way how this touching human interest story would have any equity outside of his company's user group.

Harbeth could easily make hay from pointing out that many of these loudspeakers are less damaged and more easily repaired than they could be because of the way the speakers are constructed. It could make a big thing of the building essentially being held up by a pair of , but the story only muscled its way out of the company by overhearing it on the company's stand. Of course, word of this has leaked out in the audio community in Japan and the result is Harbeth is bucking the trend there; while Japanese people around the country are living a life of self-enforced ascetic minimalism in sympathy for those who saw all their possessions washed away, Harbeth's Japanese sales are on the increase, probably because of the benevolent actions of one distributor.

Sasamoto clearly is not your typical distributor. In fact, he's a one-man, one-brand operation, with the sort of dedication you don't tend to find that often. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of the brand, the kind you cannot get when you handle more than one company. That sort of knowledge is demanded by Japanese people if they are to succeed, and the sort of distributor that could only really succeed in Japan. However, even in that setting, Sasamoto goes the extra mile, and then some.

I have never met the man, but I think I'd like to. +

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MUSIC INTERVIEW



Lenny White

By Jason Kennedy

Lenny White is a drummer and producer who's best known for his work with seventies jazz-rock fusion band Return to Forever (RTF) alongside Chick Corea, Stanley Clarke and Al Di Meola. White started playing professionally in the late sixties with Jackie McLean but he made his name in 1969 when he played on Miles Davis' groundbreaking invention of jazz-rock Bitches Brew with musicians including John McLaughlin and Wayne Zawinul. From there he went on to play with Freddie Hubbard and then to RTF with whom he made four albums in the seventies and one in 2009 that celebrated the band getting back together again after 30 years. White cites Tony Williams, his predecessor in Davis' band, as a major influence, his personal website stating that Williams is "the person I channel whatever it is I do on the drums through". There is little obvious similarity between their two styles however, white clearly has his own styl whatever the influences. White has been recording pretty much solidly throughout his career but some of his recent work has included the hip-bop project Urbanator in 1995 and a tribute to Earth, Wind and Fire in 2004.

As white explains the reformation of RTF acted as a catalyst for a variation upon it which is a collaboration with Chick Corea and Stanley Clarke that has resulted in an acoustic jazz trio called simply Corea, Clarke & White. This band picked up where it left off

by touring extensively in 2009 from which an an album simply called Forever will be released in June, this is a two disc set with with live and studio sessions.

I caught up with Lenny in Italy where he was working in the studio prior to touring with Corea and Clarke this July and asked him how the band had come to be back together after so long.

JK: What prompted you to reform the band and why did it take so long for this to happen?

LW: It was a pretty iconic band and everybody had gone on and done their own separate things and then there was a demand for us to get back together. There was a reach from a promoter to try to do something and we thought about it for a while and it turned out to be very well. In 2008 we reunited for the first time and then we did in 2009 just as a trio.

JK: Who was in the 2008 band?

LW: It was Chick, Stanley, Al Di Meola and myself. It was electric and we did a DVD Live at Montreux 2008 [and an album Returns in 2009].

JK: The musical style bears very little relation to Return to forever of the seventies?

LW: Basically the Forever record was a documentation of the tour done by the trio of chick Stanley and myself. We had started out as a trio but we never really documented it and gone out and played as a trio. Chick has been in a lot of different acoustic situations, I have been in a lot of acoustic situations and Stanley too. But the three of us had never gone out together as a unit and played acoustic music, so we decided to take a shot at it. We did a gig at the Hollywood Bowl that included Bill Connors, Jean Luc Ponty and Chaka Khan so that's where the second CD comes from. Those [tracks] are basically rehearsals done for that concert.

JK: Does the style reflect the way that you are playing these days?

LW: It's what I started playing, what I grew up playing. The misconception is that what we played with Return to Forever and what we did on Miles Davis' Bitches Brew that was called jazz-rock, basically it was jazz musicians playing their version of what they felt rock and roll was, that's what we continued to do basically. Chick's a jazz player, Stanley's a jazz player, so am I. That's the world that we come from but we helped to create this style that was called jazz-rock and later on called fusion, but we're jazz musicians.

JK: Did you make any records when you were a trio in the seventies?

LW: I have a personal recording that I made of the first gig that we did, but there was nothing really documented and put out commercially.

JK: When was that?

LW: About 1972/73. What happened was that Chick Corea's original Return to Forever recorded two records, one called Return to Forever on ECM and a record called Light as a Feather on Polydor. I recorded an album with Chick, Stanley and Pat Martino on guitar, Dee Dee Bridgewater on vocals along with Andy Bey and Art Webb but it was Stanley's first recorded album called Children of Forever. Then Billy Connors got in the band and we recorded Hymn of the Seventh Galaxy and after that Al Di Meola joined the band we recorded Where have I Known You Before, No Mystery and then Romantic Warrior.

JK: How did you choose the material for the Forever tour?

LW: We wanted to go out and play jazz standards and we did some unplugged versions of Return to Forever tunes. All of the tunes that we included in our repertoire for the tour were not included on the album, this is just a sampling of the things that we did. We did 53 concerts and so we have a lot more.

JK: Do you think that any more will come out?

LW: We talked about it, we talked about taking an iPod Nano and including everything, like all 53 concerts for a collectors limited edition! There's a possibility that we might do that.

JK: What's your favourite track?

LW: Everybody has his personal favourite, Chick would have his, Stanley would have his, I think of the overall album to be a great statement for the three of us. I like Señor Mouse, I like the way I play on that.

JK: As the producer what were your goals with this record?

LW: With anything, any record you do as a producer is to take the artist's perspective and make it presentable to the general public. It's a little tricky when the artists are your friends and you're one of the artists (laughs) so you rely on talking to everybody and seeing if they're OK with this or OK with that. Generally it worked out very well, everybody acquiesced and said "you're the producer, we'll go by what it is that you go with, But! We going to let you go, but!... But!" But it was OK, I relished the challenge of trying to make it happen and it was good.

JK: What makes a good sound, what are you looking for in the studio?

LW: Jazz music is ambient music just like classical music. Meaning that with pop music you have direct miking, you have things so that you can hear everything up close. The nature of pop music is the instruments, the musicians play parts and they support the vocal. But with classical music there is a whole orchestra, a hundred piece orchestra that supports a theme or supports a passage where a soloist plays and the idea is for the support to be just as present as the soloist. So you have an ambient sound as opposed to having the first violinist who plays the solo way above the orchestra. It's the same thing with jazz music, it's ambient music because basically, if it's a trio you have three composers composing at the same time in present tense, so you want to be able to hear everyone. It's not a situation where the piano is louder than the other instruments because then you wouldn't get the support, you wouldn't get the full dynamic range of what is happening; the conversations that are happening between the three different musicians.

Basically I look to have a real good clear sound on each of the instruments and to have an overall perspective that supports the music.



► **JK: What music do you listen to?**

LW: I always look to my old favourites, I go back to Miles Davis, Led Zeppelin, John Coltrane, Jimmy Hendrix, Radiohead. I listen to a lot of different things. I'm more into music and artists that take chances, as opposed to artists that come out and do what is the norm. The new R'nB is not interesting to me, it's not as interesting as the classic R'n'B and the new rock is not as interesting as the classic rock, like the bands that really made the genre. I think that affects all the kinds of music that I listen to, I'm not saying that there's no one out there that's doing anything new or different it's just that I tend to lean towards artists that take chances.

JK: Are you working on any other projects at the moment?

LW: I just finished a project with a Neapolitan singer. Her suggestion was how do we take her culture, Neapolitan songs, along with some Italian songs and English songs and make them fit for a 21st century audience. From a jazz perspective. We took her culture and my culture and combined it and we got this 21st century music that's a hybrid of Neapolitan melodies and jazz sensibilities and it's special. Chick played, Ron Carter, Patrice Rushen, Gato Barbieri. The singer's name is Letizia Gambi.

JK: Will you be playing with Chick and Stanley in the UK this year?

LW: We're doing a tour this summer and we're going to be in Europe for the whole month of July.

JK: What's your take on downloading

LW: I particularly don't relish the fact of anybody stealing from the artists. Record companies stole from the artists for so many years and now we have somebody else to contend with. To be honest the policy that I would have is that if somebody were to download my record I would like for them to buy my record.

For details of Corea, Clark & White's European tour go to:
ccwtrio.chickcorea.com

JK: What about the quality of MP3 downloads?

LW: Of course, everybody has their iTunes library and it's a very interesting perspective because it's not a musical perspective it's a philosophy from the standpoint of how people process music now, how they listen to music now. Before music was really recorded people would come out and hear it live, and they got a really great response from hearing it live. Then they got into the point where they recorded music and you could buy recorded discs and the quality wasn't good but as the years got on technology got better and the quality got better. And then there was the analogue versus digital debate and you got into the digital realm and you had CDs and now CDs are phasing out and you're having just downloads. But people now listen to music not on home stereo systems, they listen to music on iPods or on phones. So how people process music and the role that music has has changed, so this is the big issue as opposed to what it sounds like. Now you can buy a whole album for \$9 or you can download a tune for 99 cents and it's a pick and choose situation, you can select and have what it is you want and play it any time that you want. And the quality doesn't have to be that great any more. As an artist who came from the 20th century and now is in the 21st century I will always try to use the technology to get my sound to be the best I can get it to be, but unfortunately it falls on deaf ears (laughs) because people listen to music with earbuds.

You can spend a whole lot of money making the quality of your music great and as presentable and as high quality as you can get but the medium that they play it on is inferior to the quality of music that you put on the CD. I just did an audiophile record with a percussionist from the NY Philharmonic, Mark Sherman, and a percussionist who played with Simon and Garfunkle, Jamey Haddad. It was all percussion and it sounds incredible.

JK: Which label was that for?

LW: It's called Explorations in Space and Time on Chesky, they do binaural and soundfield recording. Check it out. We had no pretexts, I went in and said let's do 'war' and we did that then we did 'wood', 'metal', 'wind' stuff like that, 'tranquillity'.

Unfortunately it's [high fidelity] a dying world. It's a shame because to listen to high quality sound is like being there and this is again like the original intent when you went to see an orchestra or a jazz group play and there was good sound. You really enjoyed yourself because of the energy that came from live musicians playing.

JK: Do you have a decent system at home?

LW: Actually I do, I have a set of studio quality JBLs, power amps and all of that in my studio. But I listen to music on my home system that's my surround sound with my TV, it's pretty good quality, great separation, depending on the quality of the recording of course.

JK: Do you still play vinyl

LW: Yeah I have a very big record collection, very, very big.

JK: Any particular turntable?

LW: I have pretty good quality stuff, I haven't gone out and gotten, I have friends who have audiophile shops. Ron Carter is a real big audiophile, his system is maybe \$100,000. He's like "come on over and hear my new speakers man, they cost like \$50,000 apiece". +

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record reviews

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

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

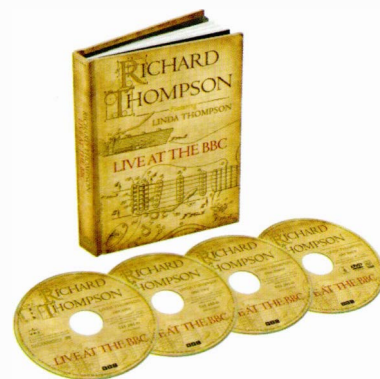
This issue's featured reviewers are:
 Contemporary – Alan Sircom **AS**
 Jason Kennedy **JK**
 Audiophile – Dennis D. Davis **DD**
 Classical - Richard S, Foster **RSF**

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Richard Thompson

Live at the BBC

Universal



Considered by many to be the best folk guitarist alive – and quite a few consider him the best guitarist alive regardless of genre – Richard Thompson is one of the country's best known and yet still undiscovered treasures. Richard Thompson's followers are loyal to the point of mania and fearsome collectors. He has had a prolific career spanning five decades and there's a lot to collect. Nevertheless, there's was a big and obvious hole in many collectors portfolio – he has had many different BBC sessions over the years, for John Peel, Andy Kershaw, Tom Robinson, Bob Harris and a variety of folk and rock programmes from the 1970s to the present day, both as a solo artist and with his ex-wife Linda. Until this year, these tracks remained locked away in BBC hell, so the only way to access these tracks was through bootlegs.

That all changed with *Live at the BBC*, a heroic effort to piece together all Richard Thompson's work with the broadcaster. It's not completely authoritative – there's at least five different versions of '1952 Vincent Black Lightning' that aren't supplied here, but even so, 61 tracks spread across three CDs (58 of which have been completely unavailable to the public until this release) and a further DVD with an extra 18 additional songs on video... that's gold dust to the Richard Thompson completist.

The first CD is all made up of Richard and Linda Thompson collaborations, which run from the early 1970s to 1982 (the marriage ended in divorce in 1981 and aside from a tour in 1982, the two went their separate ways). These are extremely good slices of 1970s English folk rock, from the *I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight* era. Sound quality is extremely variable during this time and all credit to the engineers for not trying too hard to clean up what can be some hissy and distorted early recordings. By

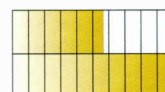
the *Peel Session* of November 1975, the quality improves immeasurably, although sadly 'Dimming of the Day' (a *Folk on Two* recording from 1982) is perhaps the most emotionally charged and remarkable recording... and sounds like it's recorded on a cheap ferric cassette.

CD two is all solo work, mostly from the 1980s and kicks off with three tracks recorded for Andy Kershaw in 1985. These tracks have spent a long time in the basement somewhere and it shows. The band sounds more like Talking Heads and the cut seems best left for AM radio. Things get better quickly with a live concert from the Hammersmith Palais in 1986 and just keep on going. Richard Thompson at the time was using internal microphones for his guitar and it has that clean, string noisy and slightly thin sound, but this and the vocals are well recorded in a very live manner.

Disc three brings us into the 21st Century and every one of these tracks is exceptionally well recorded. Perhaps without the expansiveness of audiophile recordings but these are tracks recorded for maximum detail rather than soundstaging.

Regardless of recording quality, what comes across here is the scope of Richard Thompson's songwriting skills, the passion he brings to singing those songs and his excellent guitar playing. Collectors already know this, but non-collectors seeking one of the finest musicians this country has to offer will quickly get past the variable sound quality and enjoy this package immensely. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Bon Iver

CD 150g

Bon Iver

4AD

If you are into indie, there's no point reading this. Justin Vernon has followed up his epic *For Emma, Forever Ago* with an equally good second album, that's a bit more lush than the first one but still a joy to behold. If you haven't already played this album 50 times over yet, you should be ashamed of yourself.

Bon Iver the album shows a broader scope for Bon Iver the 'band'. Yes, there's still the finest falsetto this side of Wayne Coyne, there's still the ability to take indie-folk past its banjo stage with bigger productions and orchestration, but this second album has more variation than ever before. You can go from 'Holocene' (which sounds like classic Bon Iver) to 'Beth/Rest' (which is packed full of DX7 synth sounds, drum machine beats and widdly-wee Satriani-style guitar solos and sounds like something Peter Gabriel might have dreamed up for a 1980s film score) and all points in between. And yet, it all hangs together beautifully.

It's an album that demands – and takes – repeated listening to burn into your brain. But when it does, it stays there. Vernon's got some indie skills on him and, while this isn't the most hi-fi of recordings (I'd put it in the 'raw' camp rather than 'lo-fi') neither is it heavily dynamically pushed. But it's the musical content that wins here. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Elvis Costello

CD 180g

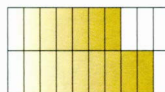
This Year's Model

Mobile Fidelity

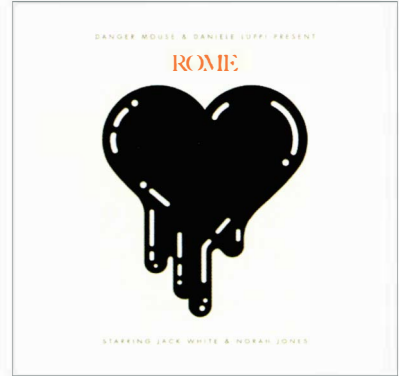
Diana Krall's husband followed up his debut *My Aim Is True* with 1978's *This Year's Model*, an album that cemented his reputation for clever lyrics and driving beats. It's a remarkably intense and punchy album with a lot of confidence and brio. Costello was an angry young man who knew how to put together a tight pop song whilst avoiding the clichés of the form. There are a number of great songs on MOFI's mastering, a version that has UK gatefold artwork on heavyweight American style card with the US tracklisting. A selection that omits '(I Don't Want to Go to) Chelsea' and 'Night Rally' but adds 'Radio, Radio'. Highlights include 'Pump It Up' and 'Little Triggers' not least for the contrast between them, the former is defined by its title, an intense beat that's propelled by everything including the keyboards and Costello's uptight posturings. 'Little Triggers' takes the tempo down and gives the singer time to curl his lip more expressively, it's an emotionally charged song about the torments of love that reels you in very effectively.

The sound is not as lean as the UK original because the bass is distinctly fuller, this brings out some superb basslines and smoothes out the mid so that you can play louder without it grating. And that's got to be good. **JK**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Rome

CD 180g

Danger Mouse & Daniele Luppi

Parlophone/EMI

Rome wasn't built in a day. This was five years in the making, features vocal interludes from Jack White and Norah Jones and sounds like the best spaghetti western you never saw. No really... they even went as far as using Ennio Morricone's old studio and reuniting Cantori Moderni – the choir used in *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*. Strangely, where it falls down is when it breaks cover – tracks like 'Two Against One' (with Jack White on vocals) don't sit right because his fragile voice doesn't tally with the big, smooth production values. And Norah Jones turns out not to be the breathy songstress everyone thought she was... outside of her comfort zone.

Tracks like 'The Gambling Priest' however work and work brilliantly. Play this and try not to imagine it's 1968 and you are in an aftershave commercial. Or facing off unshaven cheroot-smokin' bad guys with animated eyes.

There's a close parallel with the cheesy listening movement of the late 1990s, but where that was done ironically, this is done with dead seriousness and a true passion for 1960s Italian film music. The result is a wonderful, albeit a touch hot, recording. I could say more, but I left my sunglasses in my Alfa Romeo. *Arrivederci!* **AS**


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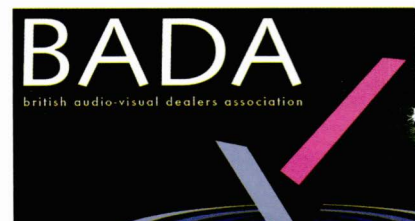
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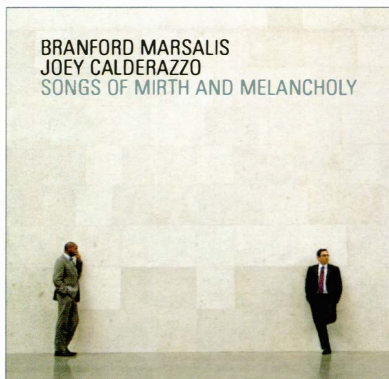
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Branford Marsalis & Joey Calderazzo

CD

Songs of Mirth and Melancholy
Marsalis Music

The pairing of soprano sax player Branford Marsalis and pianist Joey Calderazzo is well into its early teens, but the musical duo really found their métier at the 2009 Newport Jazz Festival. This album was almost an inevitability.

It's jazz cut to the quick, nine tracks that cover almost every subset of the medium. Even the opener – 'One Way' – shifts from a stride boogie-woogie to some seriously crunked Monk-like spikiness, while 'La Valse Kendall' really hits the 'Melancholy' part of the title. As does the delicate 'Die Trauernde' (the mourner) by Brahms, while the closing 'Bri's Dance' is perhaps the most upbeat slice of modern jazz you'll hear this year.

The two don't put a foot wrong in the whole album, and it's an intelligent piece too, weaving elements of everything from Wagner to Weather Report in there. And it's intelligently recorded too. The interplay of piano and sax is well handled, it's keenly dynamic and there's a sense of space between and around the instruments.

Jazz long grew out of its populist roots and became an alternative to the classical canon for the musically adept. This album shows just how intelligent jazz has become. Bravo!
AS

RECORDING
MUSIC



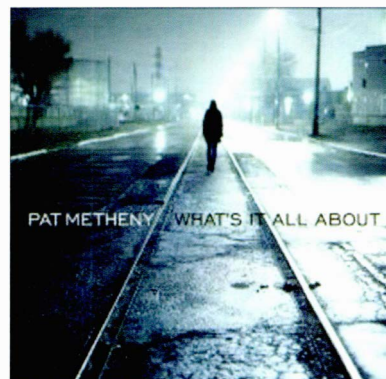
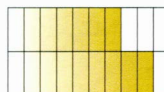
Nina Simone
At Carnegie Hall

180g

Pure Pleasure

Judging by the seven other titles on the back cover of this 1963 recording Nina Simone had quite a following back in the day, and rightly so. Simone was a singer of rare ability, a strong voice with wide range that could sing the blues like few others and put emotion into standards that few could match in such convincing fashion. This early stereo recording features six pieces one of which is a medley of two tunes; 'The Other Woman' and 'Cotton Eyed Joe', so it's really seven, and the standard is extremely high throughout. There are two instrumentals in the form of film themes which she plays with considerable panache – it's not hard to hear why The Cinematic Orchestra have used so many samples of her voice on their albums. She has an ability to put her feelings into a song so effectively that it's hard to believe it isn't her own work, but that's the mark of a great performer. This is obvious on the opener 'Black Swan', an atmospheric, down tempo song about loss, a subject that Simone seems to be particularly good at putting across. It's beautiful as is 'Will I Find My Love Today', a tale of longing and hope that is utterly compelling, even heartbreaking. There have been few singers in Simone's class and this superb pressing reveals her at her peak. **JK**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Pat Metheny

180g

What's It all About

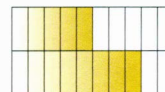
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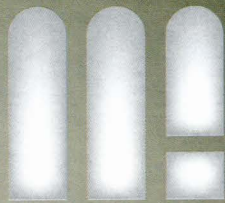
After his experimentation with automata music, Metheny goes back to his roots. This is a solo effort, with seven out of the ten tracks played on a baritone guitar, but with harp-guitars and the rest, all recorded late at night in his New York home, live, acoustic and with minimal post processing.

He's gone back to his musical roots too. Instead of new compositions, he's pulled up a decalog of Top 40 tracks during his childhood and teenage years. His music may have morphed far beyond chart since then, but these tracks still stay with him. So, we have unaccompanied solo guitar versions of 'Alfie' and a very glum version of 'The Girl from Ipanema'. This is a highly introspective album – tracks like 'Pipeline' were tracks Metheny first learned to play when he was a fledgling guitarist.

From an audiophile perspective, this is not an outstanding recording. These are simply recorded, relatively close mic'd tracks with no overdubs and some reverb. However, that 'some' reverb swamps the sound and the close microphone technique makes even the harp-guitar boom and cuts back on a lot of air. It almost seems like the loudness war has breached the jazz world now. **AS**

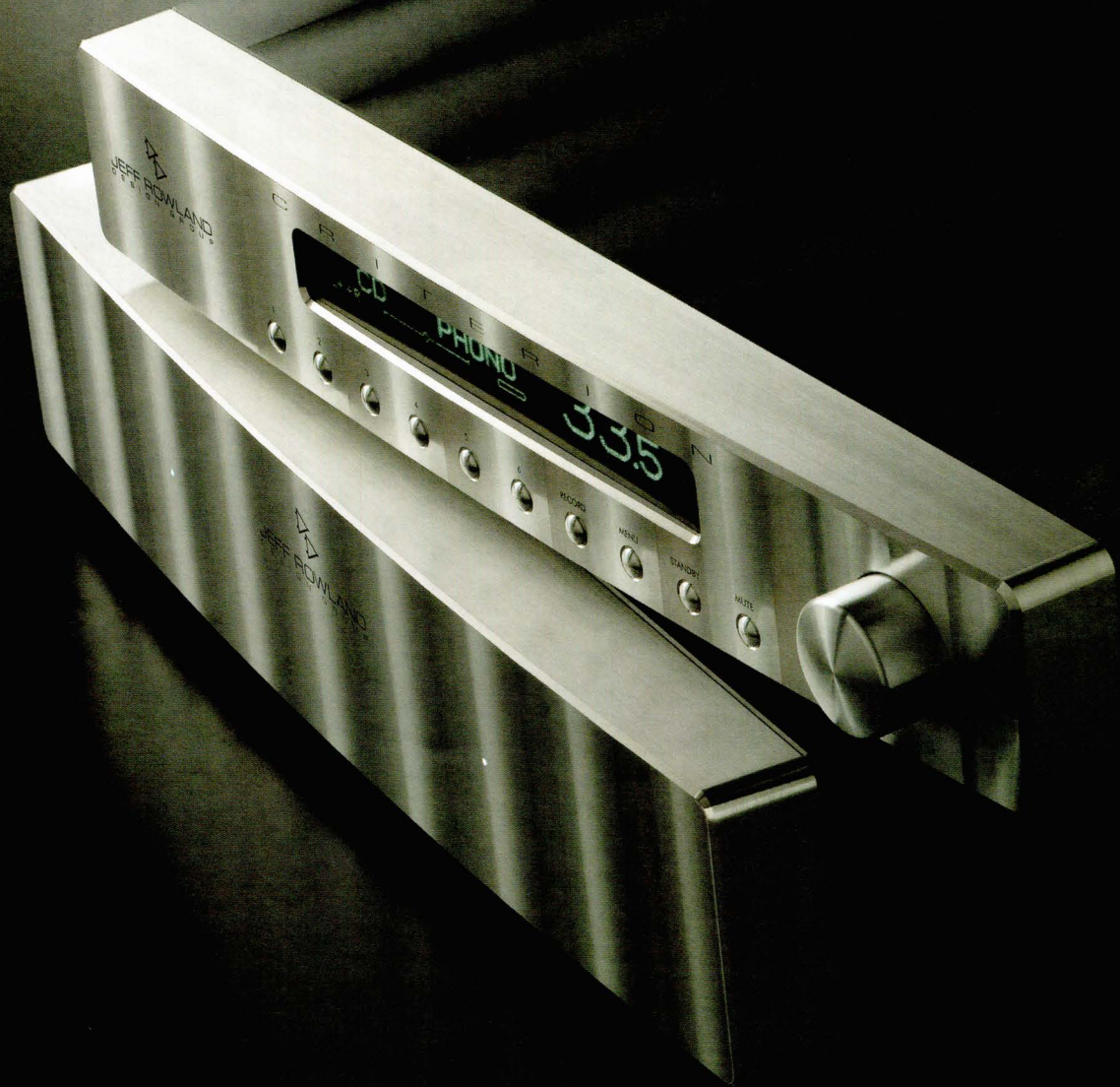
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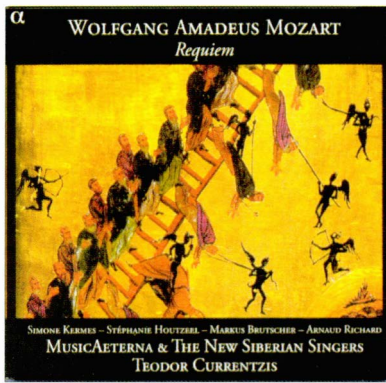
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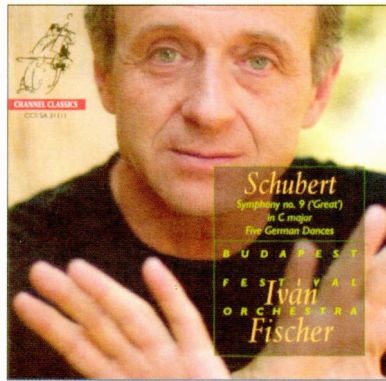
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MusicAeterna & The New Siberian Singers conducted by Teodor Currentzis
Alpha 178

Teodor Currentzis directs Kermes, Houtzeel, Brutscher and Richard along with the Siberian Choir and the orchestra, MusicAeterna in an absolutely wonderful performance of the last of Mozart's works. I find this new release to be of exceptional interpretation. While some readers will shy away from hearing a from listening to works with chorus, I can assure you that this may be the CD to change your mind. This is an eight part work that captures the imagination like no other. The engineering, by Hughes Deschaux is exceptional. This is an absolute masterpiece in the history of music and this performance is justly exceptional. One of the most admired works of Classical Music, Mozart's Requiem is music that should be in every classical music collection and this might just be the one for you. I can't tell you how important the engineering is for this music. The placement of the soloists and the main chorus is extremely important. Here we have a performance that stands alone in the care and attention to detail that makes it definitely a labor of love. This is a near perfect performance of this masterpiece and offers exceptional sound quality. Not to be missed.

www.alpha-prod.com

RECORDING
MUSIC



Franz Schubert: Symphony No. 9 ("Great") in C minor, D944; Five German Dances, D89 SA^{5.1} CD

The Budapest Festival Orchestra conducted by Ivan Fischer
Channel Classics CCS SA 31111

There is no doubt today of the wonderful works this prolific composer has left us. The powerful and romantic 9th symphony is given an outstanding reading. I've listened to this several times and find something new to enjoy on each hearing. The five German dances are a delightful addition and make for an added appetizer. The wonderful acoustic of The Palace of Arts offers the listener experience. There may be other performances for some, but I think this will be on the top of anyone's list. It is very hard to find fault with anything here. The string section of the BFO shines both in the symphony and in the 5 dances (composed when Schubert was only 16). The recording itself is outstanding and will deliver reference quality sound on the SACD layer. The CD layer itself is quite exceptional and there is hardly anything that should hold one back from diving into the world of Schubert. Excellent in every way. I am beginning to wonder if this orchestra and conductor can do no wrong.

www.channelclassics.com

RECORDING
MUSIC



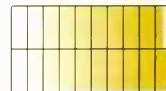
Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Symphonic Fantasy, after Dante SA^{5.1} CD

Mikhail Pletnev conducting the Russian National Orchestra
PTC 5186 385

In a continuation of his new Tchaikovsky cycle for PentaTone, Pletnev and his Russian National Orchestra deliver an outstanding performance of this great masterpiece. As is the case with several of Tchaikovsky's compositions, the fifth contains some of the finest melodies ever written. Pletnev's control over his orchestra is not heavy-handed and the RNO does an outstanding job in delivering a near reference performance of this warhorse. I commented last year on my like of the Eschenbach Philadelphia Orchestra performance available on Ondine of this same symphony. I must admit that I consider the Pletnev performance in the same league. It is a thrill to have this as a reference quality performance. The symphonic fantasy, Francesca Da Rimini is a lovely work full of heartfelt tragedy. Tchaikovsky presents a symphonic interpretation of the tragic tale of Francesca da Rimini, a beauty who was immortalized in Dante's Divine Comedy. The sound quality produced on this disc is definitely reference quality. While the CD layer satisfies nicely, the SACD layer shines a brighter light.

www.pentatonemusic.com

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Bruce Springsteen – Born to Run

every home should have one

By Alan Sircom

THERE ARE THOUSANDS AND THOUSANDS OF ALBUMS THAT ARE DESERVING OF INCLUSION IN THE EVERY HOME... SECTION, BUT A SAD EVENT IN THE MIDDLE OF JUNE THIS YEAR PUT THIS ONE RIGHT TO THE FRONT OF THE PILE. The death of 69-year-old saxophonist Clarence Clemons, a.k.a. 'The Big Man' on June 18 as a result of complications following a stroke has left a hole almost impossible to fill in the E-Street Band. For almost 40 years Clemons and Springsteen stood together on stage and in the studio and Springsteen called his loss 'immeasurable' and it's easy to see why when listening to Springsteen's 'breakthrough' album, *Born to Run* from 1975.

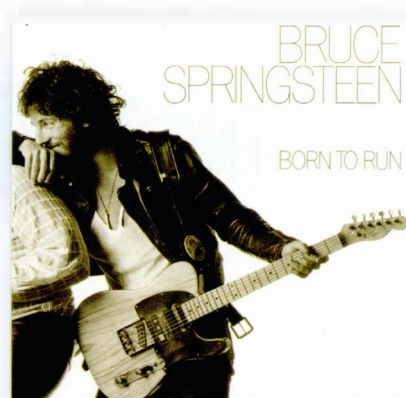
Each track is performed at full-tilt, leaving everyone (including the listener) breathless. Springsteen and the band toured frenetically at this time (the studio wanted a solo artist, Springsteen kept things together with extensive tours) and the sense of a cohesive unit rather than a collection of session musicians permeates the album.

Clarence Clemons is absolutely vital to that cohesiveness and that sound. Although Springsteen's compositional and recording method involved working round a core of vocals, drums, piano, bass, adding the other musicians contributions after laying down the central track, imagine *Born to Run* without that sax solo. The Big Man was so much a part of the backbone of the *Born to Run* sound that he's the only artist (apart from Springsteen himself) on that iconic Eric Meola black and white cover with its narrow font and minimalist approach.

While it's not audiophile grade sound, there have been a number of different versions of the album on sale. There have been different masters for CDs in the US and Japan, half-speed masters on LP, Mastersound 20-bit SBM releases on 24-carat gold CD. Collectors will argue over which is the best version for the rest of time, but the fact is even the best of them sounds a bit like an AM radio. It's loud, shouty, compressed and designed to make a two-inch loudspeaker sound wonderful. On a good system... it still sounds like a two-inch loudspeaker trying to sound wonderful. The holy grail for collectors, are the super rare early pressings with graffiti-style text on the sleeve and with *Meeting Across The River* printed with its original name 'The Heist'. Everything else is only mildly collectable.

Personally, I'd say scrap the whole attempt to find the best pressing and go for the cheapest (a second-hand early LP pressing), or the mostest – in 2005, Sony released a 30th Anniversary box set CD, that includes a remastered original album and two DVDs – one of the legendary Hammersmith

Odeon concert from 1975 and the other a lengthy and Grammy winning 'making of' rockumentary entitled 'Wings for Wheels', all served up in a long box. The Hammersmith Odeon concert DVD might not have the best picture and sound, but the performance should be required viewing for any aspiring rock gods to see just how it should be done. The remaster itself is cut loud compared to the original vinyl, but it's not got that much in the way of dynamic range to lose. It's destined to be played loud anyway, especially that sax solo, because that's the way the Big Man played it! +



BORN TO RUN BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

Recorded: Record Plant, New York, 1974-1975

Released: 25th August 1975

Produced by: Bruce Springsteen, Mike Appel, Jon Landau

Released by: Columbia

Track Listing

All songs written by Bruce Springsteen

"Thunder Road" – 4:49

"Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out" – 3:11

"Night" – 3:00

"Backstreets" – 6:30

"Born to Run" – 4:31

"She's the One" – 4:30

"Meeting Across the River" – 3:18

"Jungleland" – 9:34

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Hello...



Welcome to the Summer 2011 edition of *PULSE* – the perspicacious periodical from

IsoTek. Inside you'll find the latest news from the world's leading brand of power conditioners for audio systems, including the launch of our flagship conditioning unit, the Super Titan – see page 3. We also report on our DC-correcting mains cable, the Syncro, currently basking in a wealth of critical acclaim (page 2) and a special two-page feature suggests five ways to improve your system's sound (page 6).

This year, IsoTek celebrates its 10th anniversary. When the company was formed in 2001, the concept of power conditioning for audio had been around for some time, but the solutions available were inherently flawed. Driven by our



passion for music, we knew we could bring fresh ideas to the table that would result in significant sonic improvements – and so it proved.

Throughout the past 10 years, IsoTek has remained the top-rated power conditioning specialist in the UK and around the world, gathering award after award from

the most revered audio publications in numerous countries. In 2011, our core design team remains the same as it was at company's inception, dedicated to continually pushing the boundaries through science, innovation and sound engineering. Our solutions are practical, our technologies unique – if you're thinking about power, think IsoTek!

Until next time, happy listening...

Keith Martin
Founder & Managing Director, IsoTek

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY ABOUT ISOTEK

"IsoTek is the leader in mains conditioning products"

HI-FI NEWS

"IsoTek in the UK's biggest name in mains filtration"

HI-FI CHOICE

"Not all mains conditioners are created equal... IsoTek delivers the sonic goods"

HI-FI WORLD



For more information about how cleaner power can benefit you, visit our website:

www.isoteksystems.com

WHY POWER CONDITIONING?

- ▶ The first input into any audio or AV system is electricity and the quality of the electricity supply has a fundamental effect on performance.
- ▶ The mains supply is polluted by numerous contaminants. We are constantly bathed in a sea of RFI and EMI, which corrupts the electricity supply and degrades sound and picture quality.
- ▶ What's more, all the electrical items in your home (and your neighbours' homes), from computers to washing machines, affect the supply and erode your system's potential.
- ▶ As the electronic devices we use proliferate and the demand for electricity escalates, the quality of the electricity we feed our systems continues to slide – and it's only going to get worse.



WHY ISOTEK?

- ▶ IsoTek is the world's no.1 brand of specialised power conditioners for audio systems, trusted by more than 50,000 music lovers in 45 countries
- ▶ IsoTek's unique technologies enhance sound and picture quality by filtering and regulating the mains electricity supply.
- ▶ IsoTek products deliver unrivalled protection from damage caused by lightning strikes and power surges, and extend the lifespan of electronic components via stringent supply regulation.
- ▶ All IsoTek products are designed for purpose, manufactured in Europe and built to last. Discover IsoTek and unleash your system's full potential – you'll be glad you did.



▶ IsoTek Syncro
See page 2

Unlock that late night sound whenever you listen

ISOTEK SYNCRO



IsoTek's latest power cord is much more than just a mains cable – Syncro also incorporates innovative electronics that enhance audio performance still further.

The electronics are housed in an anti-resonant aluminium case positioned part way down the cable's length. This unique circuitry is designed to synchronise the mains supply in order to promote a perfectly symmetrical sine wave, delivering significant sonic improvements when used with any hi-fi separates system.

One of the problems the Syncro tackles is often referred to as 'DC on the mains'. This is caused by all manner of electronic products plugged into the mains supply, which create a 'backwash' from their AC-DC rectification. As a result, where the waveform should have zero voltage, it is displaced slightly (usually about a volt or so), and this displacement is constant over the whole AC cycle. In audio terms, this manifests itself as a low-level mechanical hum, which translates into microphony and therefore increased noise in the audio signal.

Syncro's clever electronic circuitry tackles this problem by rebalancing the AC sine wave. The result is a reduction in the noise floor, enabling sonic performance with greater clarity and reduced 'grain'. You can play your system louder with less harshness, and low-level details are more clearly defined.

The cable itself is identical to IsoTek's top-of-the-line Extreme power cable. It features heavy-gauge, triple-screened, 20A oxygen-

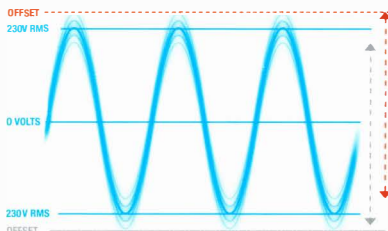
free copper conductors suitable for high-current demands, coupled to top-quality connectors at either end.

Audio critics around the world are unanimous in their praise for the Syncro. In the UK, *Hi-Fi World* found that "the most obvious aspect of the performance was a major reduction in harshness and 'mush'". The reviewer also noted "a complete lack of low frequency strain", concluding that the Syncro is "a highly impressive piece of kit". Meanwhile, *Hi-Fi Piac* in Hungary found Syncro "delivers serious improvements", declaring that "it's really not a question of whether to purchase, but when".

In his review, Alan Sircom of *Hi-Fi+*

compares the Syncro's effect to listening to a hi-fi system late at night, with all the electrical appliances in your house – and your neighbours' houses – switched off. "The acid test of any component is what happens upon its removal," suggests Mr Sircom. "Do you say

'oh well' and put it back in the box, or do you immediately plug the thing back in place. The Syncro is very much in the latter camp. You know that magic audio quality you only get late at night? Syncro unlocks that sound, whenever you listen." [🔗](#)



Above: Syncro corrects the offset in the mains supply's waveform, directly benefitting sound quality

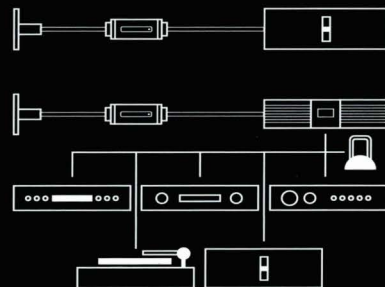


HOW TO USE SYNCRO

The benefits of Syncro's DC-corrective properties may be incorporated into a tremendous range of audio systems, and used in a variety of ways. It can be plugged directly into an audio component – an amplifier, for example – and deliver instant sonic improvements. Alternatively, it can be used to power one of IsoTek's multi-outlet power conditioning components, such as the Sirius, Aquarius, Sigmas or Titan.

In the latter configuration, Syncro takes the mains electricity supply and realigns its waveform, prior to filtration of contaminants (RFI etc.) by the conditioning unit, which then feeds each hi-fi component, thereby improving the performance of every link in the audio chain.

Because it's a cable, existing IsoTek users can incorporate Syncro whilst continuing to use the conditioning equipment they already own.



USING SYNCRO WITH AQUARIUS

The line diagram above shows how Syncro may be plugged directly into a single audio component, such as a power amplifier, or connected to a multi-outlet mains conditioning unit, thereby benefitting every component in the audio chain. The critically acclaimed IsoTek Aquarius power conditioner, pictured above, makes an ideal partner for the Syncro – please contact your nearest dealer to find the right combination of IsoTek products for you.

"Syncro makes a significant step up in performance"

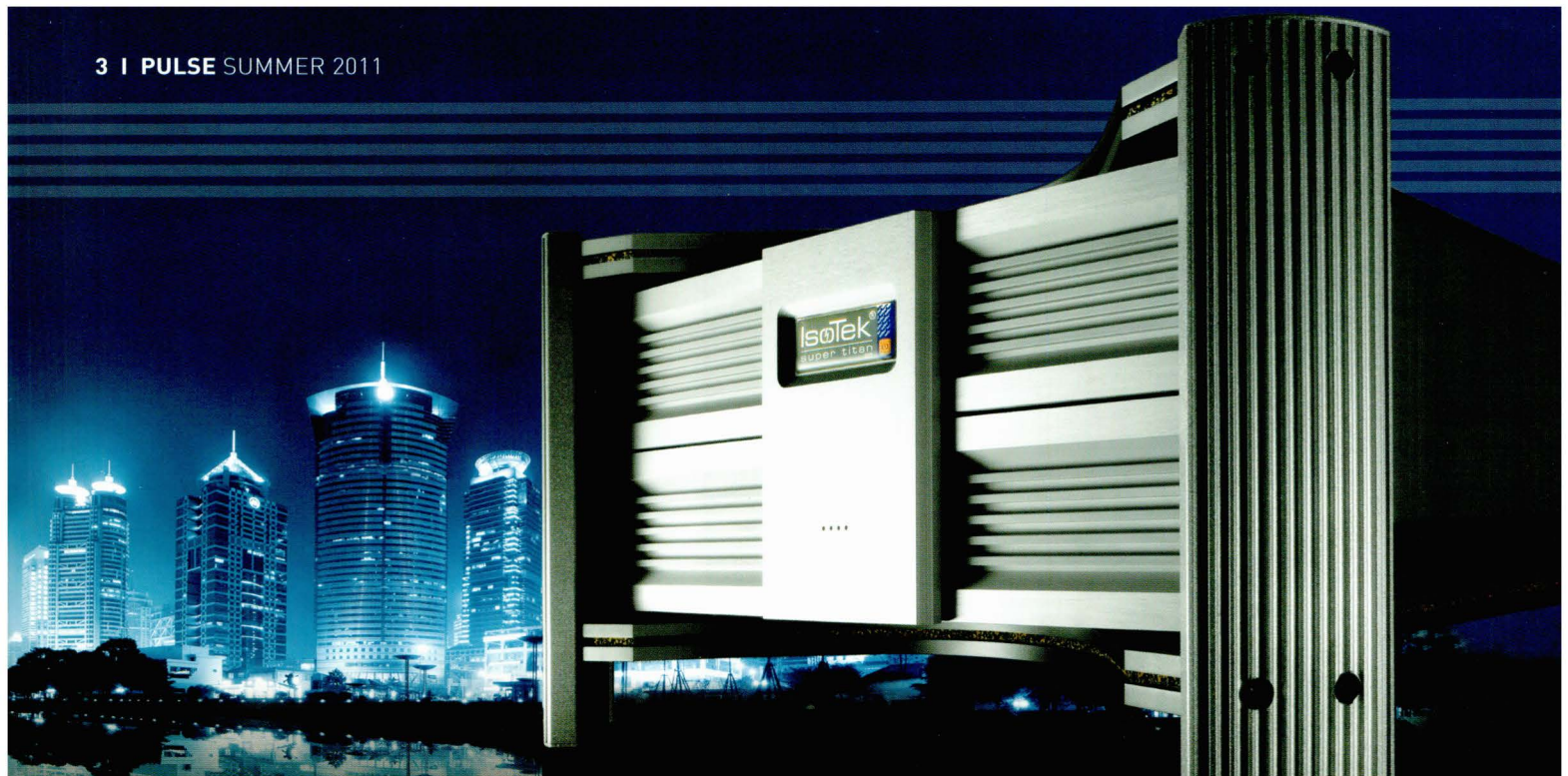
HI-FI+ ISSUE 77

"A highly impressive piece of kit"

HI-FI WORLD MARCH 2011

"Syncro delivers serious improvements"

HI-FI PIAC ISSUE 87



Building the foundations of great sound

Following two years of intensive development, IsoTek's Super Titan – the world's most powerful mains conditioner – is finally available.


Building upon the design of the existing Titan, IsoTek's new flagship was inspired by the emergence of a new breed of super-powerful high-end amplifiers whose current demands set specific challenges that are not fully met by existing mains conditioning products. In the process, IsoTek has designed a power conditioner that outperforms all others currently available, both on paper and in practice.

In the six years since its launch, the multi-award-winning Titan has built a reputation as the finest mains conditioner on the planet, described by the critics at What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision as "a revelation" and by those at Hi-Fi News as "the most impressive mains filter we've ever heard". Its innovative technology, designed specifically for power amplification, forms an epoch-making partnership with the IsoTek Nova, which delivers the same exacting level of quality for source components and preamplifiers.

While the Titan remains a critical component in IsoTek's product range, the arrival of Super Titan

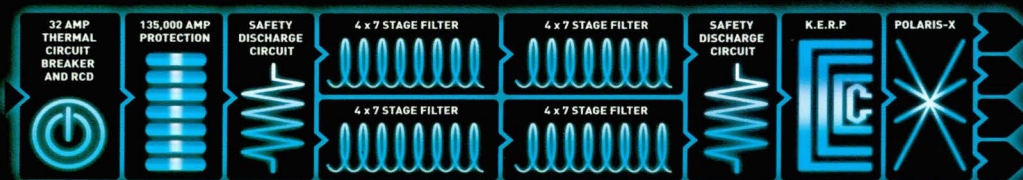
heralds the start of a new high-end range of power optimisation components called Ultra Reference. It takes the Titan blueprint and enhances every element of its design to deliver a new benchmark in the field of mains conditioning for high-performance audio and AV systems.

"When we launched the original Titan in 2005, it was designed to be the very best power conditioner we could make," said Keith Martin, founder and managing director of IsoTek. "In the six years since, our R&D programmes have enabled us to push the boundaries still further; the brief for the Super Titan was to design the finest power conditioner in the world for high-current audio applications, and that is precisely what we have delivered. It is our flagship product for those who demand the very best, and the improvements it brings to sound quality are emphatic. We can confidently say that no other power conditioner comes close."

The second component in IsoTek's Ultra Reference series, a multiple regeneration device called Genesis, will be launched later in 2011. More details will be revealed in the autumn edition of PULSE. 

ISOTEK SUPER TITAN KEY FEATURES

- ▶ First component in IsoTek's new Ultra Reference series
- ▶ Unrivalled current capability: 7,360W continuous current and 35,500W transient power (almost double that of Titan)
- ▶ Unique filtering circuits: four seven-stage filters in a series parallel configuration with specialised choke designs
- ▶ Direct Coupled Design[©] ensures optimal high-current filtering, eliminating mains noise without restricting transient power
- ▶ KERPO[©] technology secures a pure, symmetrical signal path throughout the unit
- ▶ Polaris-X[©] network reduces crosstalk and improves component-from-component isolation
- ▶ Integral ISIS[©] support structure uses special materials to isolate Super Titan from all forms of resonance



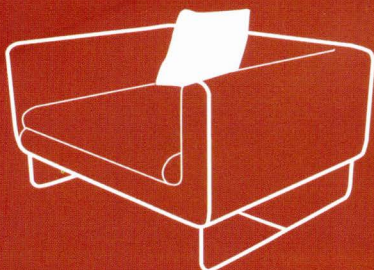
Left: System diagram showing Super Titan's innovative circuitry, including its unique set of four seven-stage filters in a series parallel configuration. A simple comparison may be drawn to multiple-cylinder engines.

Buying a high-quality audio system is just the beginning. Here are five things you can do to ensure your system is performing at its best.

4 Room Furnishings

The acoustic environment plays a crucial part in determining the quality of the sound we hear. Well-heeled audiophiles with the luxury of a dedicated listening room may choose to apply specialised acoustic room treatments to reduce unwanted reflections and optimise the acoustic characteristic of the room in question. However, most of us have to place our audio systems in a room that's also used for other purposes, which means we're limited in terms of the things we can do to optimise the acoustic space.

That said, a degree of fine-tuning is still possible. Try clicking your fingers; if there is a slight echo, then your room is described as 'live' from an acoustic point of view – not ideal for sound quality. The use of soft furnishings will help to dampen a 'live' room and soften the sound if it's too hard and bright. If you have a hardwood flooring, a rug placed between the speakers and the listener may be beneficial, and the use of curtains and cushions can help to absorb reflections that degrade stereo imaging and tonal quality. It may be worth considering hanging rugs or tapestries on walls at reflective points, too. All rooms are reflective to some degree, but the use of furnishings – even things like bookcases – can help to reduce the most sonically damaging reflections and greatly improve sound quality as a result.



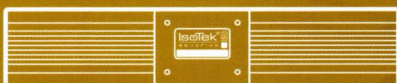
5 Mains Supply

The first input into any audio system is electricity. It flows through the system, used by each component in turn to create the signal that eventually moves the speaker's drive units. What we hear is ultimately fashioned by, and from, mains electricity – it's the 'raw material' from which the 'art' is created and has a direct influence on sound quality.

The supply of electricity we use in our homes is constantly eroded by a barrage of pollutants: noise created by the switch-mode power supplies in common household appliances; the sea of RFI/EMI in which we are bathed, exacerbated by the proliferation of wireless devices in our homes. Power conditioning components can be used to improve the mains supply via sophisticated filtering and regulation, with instantly audible results.

IsoTek is the world's leading brand of specialised power conditioners for audio systems, with more than 50,000 satisfied customers worldwide. There's an IsoTek conditioner to suit every system and every pocket, from the entry-level Sirius to the new flagship, the mighty Super Titan, alongside a comprehensive range of mains cables.

The improvements made by IsoTek mains conditioners are immediate and emphatic. The noise floor drops and the sound gains greater focus, with reduced grain and improved clarity. Bass is tighter and better defined, treble gains space and 'air', and the overall musical performance appears more solid and dynamic, and hence more 'real'.



RUSSIAN PRESIDENT DEMANDS 'CLEAN' POWER

A recent story in the *Guardian* newspaper revealed that Russian President Dimitri Medvedev is something of a committed audiophile, having assembled a hi-fi system worth a cool £130,000. What's more, he obviously knows a thing or two about the importance of 'clean' power: his entire system is powered by IsoTek mains conditioners and cables, with the top-end Titan feeding his power amps and the Aquarius taking care of his preamp and source components.

Other British audio manufacturers feature heavily in his system, including Avid (turntable) and Naim (CD player). So, what does Mr Medvedev play through this assemblage of sonic majesty?

According to the *Guardian*, he likes nothing better than a spot of Deep Purple. Putin, on the other hand, is said to prefer patriotic ballads.



IsoTek®

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simply the best



5 WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR SYSTEM'S SOUND

1

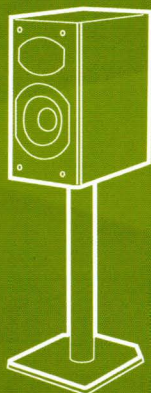
Positioning

Where you position your speakers and audio components makes a big difference to sound quality. Speakers should be positioned so that the tweeter is at ear-height – a pair of specialist speaker stands will help to achieve this with compact speakers. Avoid placing speakers in corners; the same rule applies to electronic components, too.

Experiment with speaker positioning – some are designed to work well when placed against (or close to) a wall, while others perform best when sited in free space. Resonant characteristics vary from room to room, which is why it's important to experiment with speaker positioning in situ. Bass is most obviously affected; even relatively small positional shifts can improve bass that was previously too heavy and 'bloomy', or too thin and weak.

In terms of your listening position, aim to form an equilateral triangle with you at one tip and the speakers opposite. Place the speakers at least two metres apart; it's also important to ensure that the distance between the speakers is no greater than the distance between the speakers and the listener.

Experiment with toeing in, too: start with the speakers facing directly forwards, then gradually angle them in towards the listener until the optimum position is found. Speakers differ with regard to toeing in, but as a general rule, angling them towards the listener will narrow the width of the soundstage and increase stereo image focus. If you find the sound is a little on the bright side, reduce the toe-in.



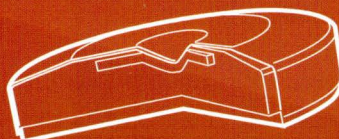
2

Support & Isolation

Audio components need to be well supported to perform at their best. They also need to be isolated from external vibrations, both airborne and transferred through the floor, which are detrimental to performance. We recommend using a dedicated audio equipment support, which will ensure that components are level and firmly supported. Ensure there are sufficient shelves to house all your components, one per shelf. Avoid the temptation to stack one component on top of another; this is not good for performance.

A good-quality equipment support will provide a degree of isolation for the components that are placed upon it, by using vibration-damping materials between the shelves and the support frame, for example. Isolation platforms or individual 'feet' can be purchased separately to provide further isolation between the shelf and each component.

Specialised audio equipment supports usually come with spikes to couple with the floor, as do floorstanding speakers and speaker stands. These aid stability when used on a carpet, and also help to isolate from vibration. Spike shoes – small discs with an indentation to take the spike – can be purchased to protect hardwood flooring whilst enhancing the isolating effect. We recommend Blue Horizon Spike Shoes for this purpose – their multilayer-layer construction combines special resonance-damping materials inside an aluminium shell to enhance sonic performance (www.bluehorizonideas.com).



3

Signal Cables

The interconnect and speaker cables you choose make a significant difference to the performance of your system. They won't alter the fundamental characteristics of the sound you obtain, but they will fine-tune it. The ideal signal cable doesn't add anything to the sound but, crucially, it doesn't take anything away either, so your system components and speakers perform at their unsullied best.

Don't skimp on the quality of the cables you use – as a rough rule of thumb, you should allocate at least 15-20 per cent of your overall system budget to signal cabling. It's usually a good idea to purchase interconnect and speaker cables from the same range to ensure consistency, rather than mixing and matching. It's also a good idea to clean the contact surfaces regularly, using a specialised cleaner to remove oxidation and contaminants and thus reduce signal loss. We recommend Blue Horizon's Clean-IT solution for this task (www.bluehorizonideas.com). You'll be surprised at the difference it makes to sound quality.



ISOTEK IN ISRAEL

With distribution in 45 countries, IsoTek has a truly global reach. The company's representatives regularly travel the globe, carrying out training sessions and product seminars as part of their commitment to fully support each and every market they serve.

At the tail end of 2010, one such trip took Keith Martin, IsoTek's founder and managing director, to Israel for the first time. A special training event was hosted by Sabo Audio, IsoTek's Israeli distributor, and supported by Alon Glan, editor-in-chief of HiFi Music Israel, the country's leading online audio publication.

During the event, IsoTek undertook a series of live demonstrations to show the benefits of effective power conditioning. A top-of-the-line MBA CD player was coupled to Plinius' excellent Hautonga integrated amplifier, with a variety of IsoTek equipment attached in turn. From a starting point without any mains products, IsoTek's entry-level Sirius mains block was

added, followed by the Elite and Optimum mains cables. Then the Sirius was swapped for an Aquarius conditioning unit and finally, the Titan high-end conditioner and Syncro DC-correcting mains cable were introduced to the system. The step-up was clear and emphatic each time, ably demonstrating the upgrade path offered by IsoTek's range.

"It was a fascinating and hugely successful trip," recalls Keith, who has already undertaken similar visits to Sweden, Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary and Austria in the three months since (not to mention his now-legendary demonstrations at Sound & Vision – The Bristol Show in the UK). "We received a magnificent reception and were clearly able to demonstrate why IsoTek is the leading power conditioning brand in the world. We look forward to a long and hugely successful relationship with our Israeli friends." 



ISOTEK'S FIRST CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

The world's first store to be awarded IsoTek's new Centre of Excellence status is Jordan Acoustics in Bournemouth, England. The store stocks the full range of IsoTek mains conditioning components and cables, with full and permanent demonstration facilities of all products right up to the new, flagship Super Titan conditioner. Free home trials are also available, with expert customer service at every step.

"Our Centre of Excellence status for IsoTek means we can offer unparalleled choice and service to our customer base from a range of mains conditioning products proven the world over to be the very best," says Tim Jordan, founder and managing director of Jordan Acoustics. "Purified mains is the foundation on which our high-end systems are based and performs the essential role of lowering the noise floor, bringing you closer to the music."

A new initiative for 2011, only dealerships that comply with IsoTek's stringent criteria may apply for Centre of Excellence status. Jordan Acoustics' Bournemouth store is the first; more are expected to follow. For more information about Jordan Acoustics, visit: www.jordanacoustics.co.uk

ISOTEK CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE KEY FEATURES

- ▶ Full IsoTek range in stock
- ▶ Expert customer service
- ▶ All IsoTek products available for demonstration
- ▶ Free home trials available

IsoTek®

▶ IsoTek is distributed and sold in 45 countries. To find your local dealer or distributor, visit: www.isoteksystems.com