

FLETCHER AUDIO - KEEPING THE LEGACY ALIVE

the absolute sound's

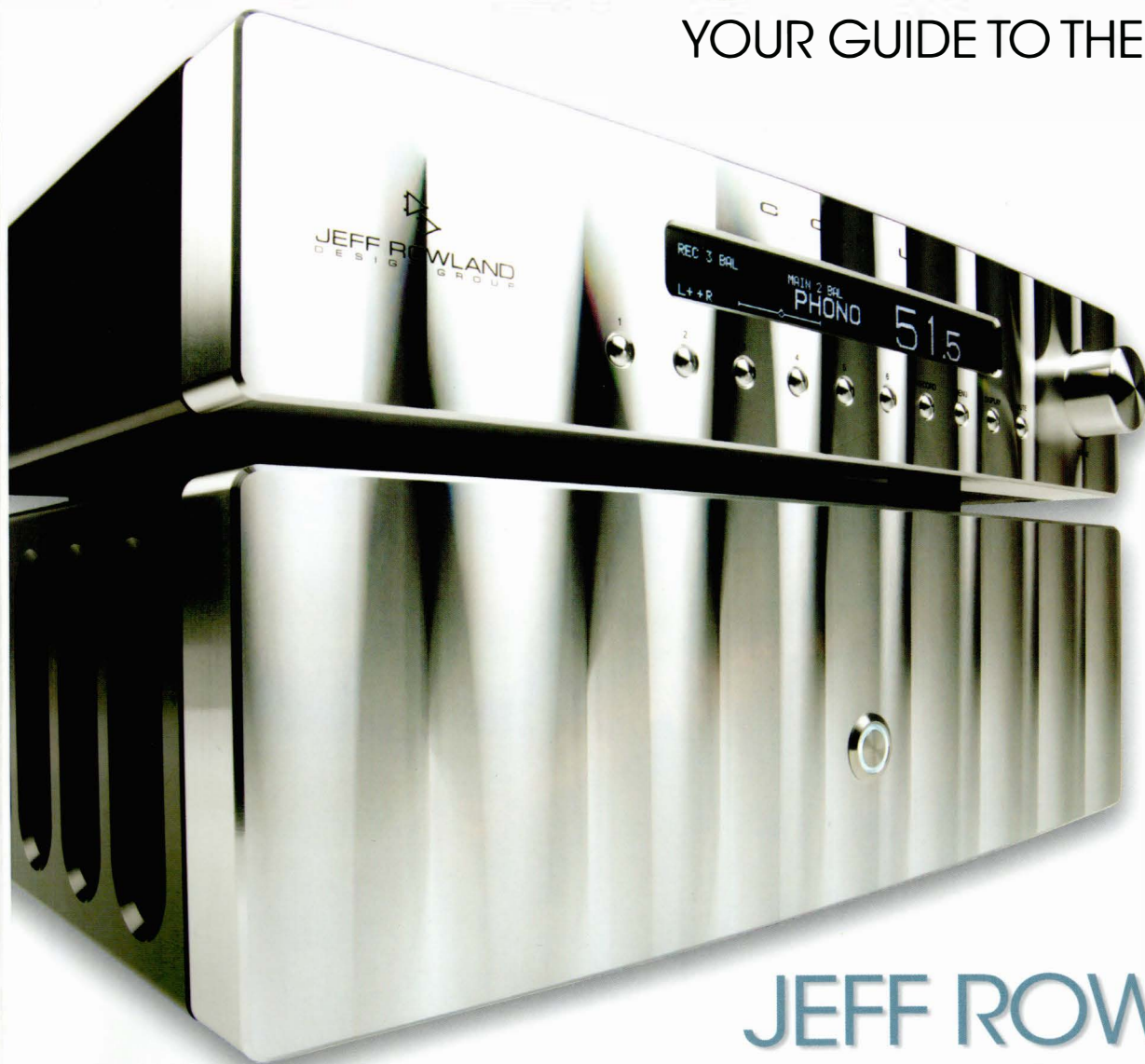
hi-fi+

REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS • 83



THE BEST OF THE BEST

YOUR GUIDE TO THE FINEST HIFI!



HIFIMAN
HE-500
HEADPHONES

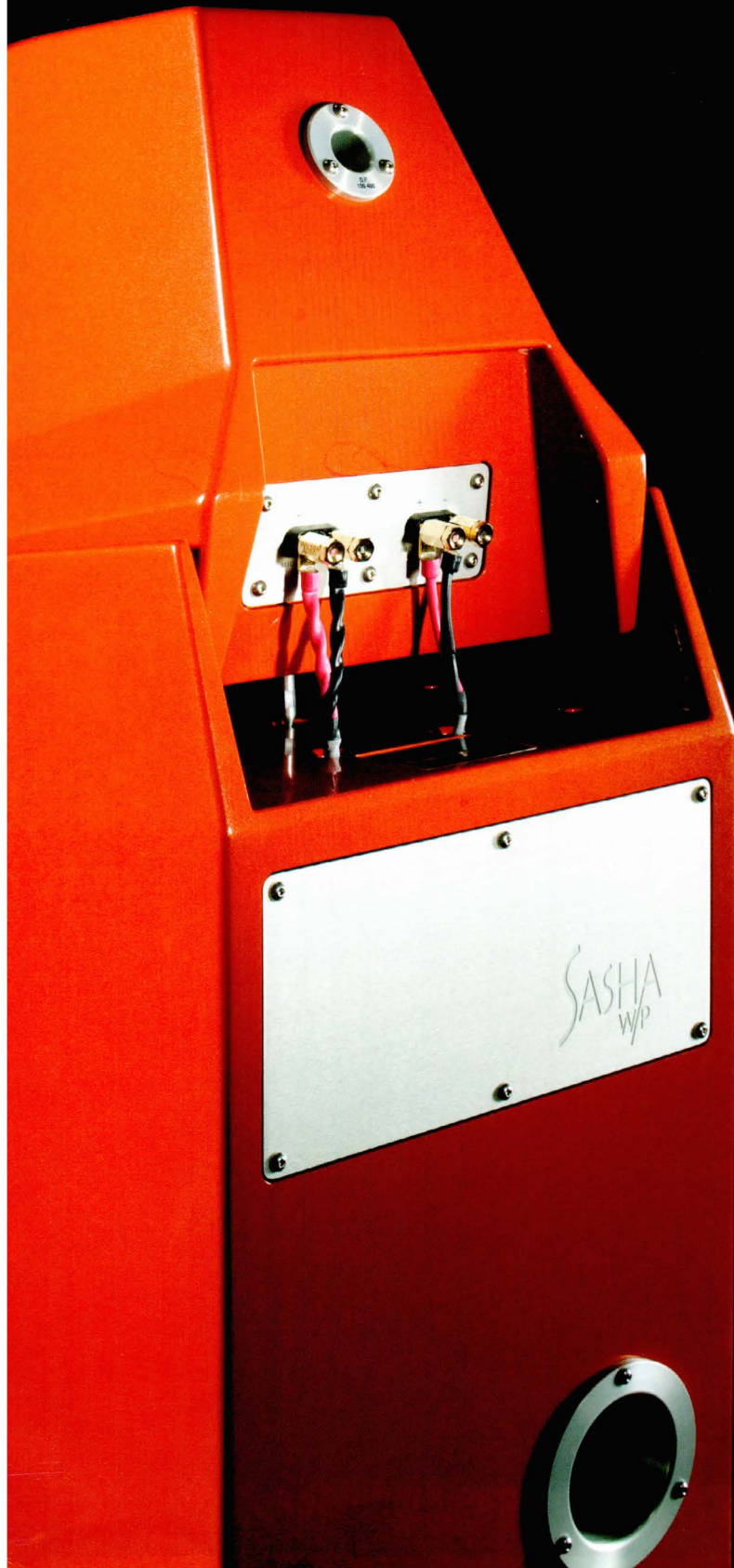
OPPO BDP-95
MULTI-FORMAT
PLAYER

REVOLVER
CYGNUS GOLD
LOUDSPEAKERS

JEFF ROWLAND CORUS AND MODEL 625

REDEFINING THE STATE OF THE AMPLIFIER ART?

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.

The result is a loudspeaker with holographic imaging, free-breathing dynamics and unrestricted sonic detail. A speaker that takes sound onto a new and rarefied plane. A speaker for people who don't know the meaning of ordinary.



editorial

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Welcome to what would normally be our Awards issue. However, this year, we decided to take a break and come up with something a little different. The reason for this is simple; Awards suggest there are products that are 'The Best' in a market where there might be no 'best' – how do you judge whether one preamp is better than another out of the context of a system and the same applies to any branch of the audio experience. In other words, what's 'best' in one system may not be 'best' in another. So we have pulled together the finest products – both from our records and from our sister title *The Absolute Sound* in the US – to come up with the longest shortlist around. Depending on you, we may alternate these concepts every year.

The fascinating part of compiling a group of components like this is just how many of them there are, in such a relatively small business like high-end audio. It's also clear that there are high-end products without the high-end price, which rub shoulders with products that cost as much as a small cottage in Wales. How do you stratify such things? The simple answer is... you don't! We've deliberately viewed these products without the benefit of their price tags – if something is good, it's good. Yes, there are products that are good 'for the money' and this is often duly noted, but there are other products that are just good. They would be good if they cost 10x as much and they would be good if they cost half as much.

The other fascinating part is the longevity of audio equipment, and I reckon this is where audio is increasingly out-of-step with the modern world, in all the right ways. We live in a disposable culture and today's technological style

icon is tomorrow's landfill. Good audio doesn't subscribe to short product life cycles and that makes it inherently expensive in the short term, but 10 years time when your latest player is still current, the resale values suggest otherwise. We've put a limit on this to products reviewed in the last two years, but there are even a couple of products from issue one of *Hi-Fi Plus* that are still made a dozen years later!

However, companies need to adapt or die, and that is perhaps why Focal and Naim Audio announced the two companies have joined forces. The two brands already had a reputation for high-tech high-end; between them, the results could be *formidable!*

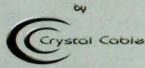
Alan Sircom
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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: UK 17TH NOVEMBER 2011 ... US 29TH DECEMBER 2012

Crystal Cable

www.crystalcable.com

ARABESQUE

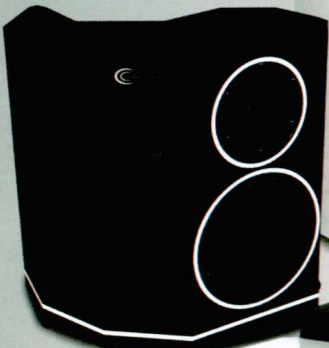
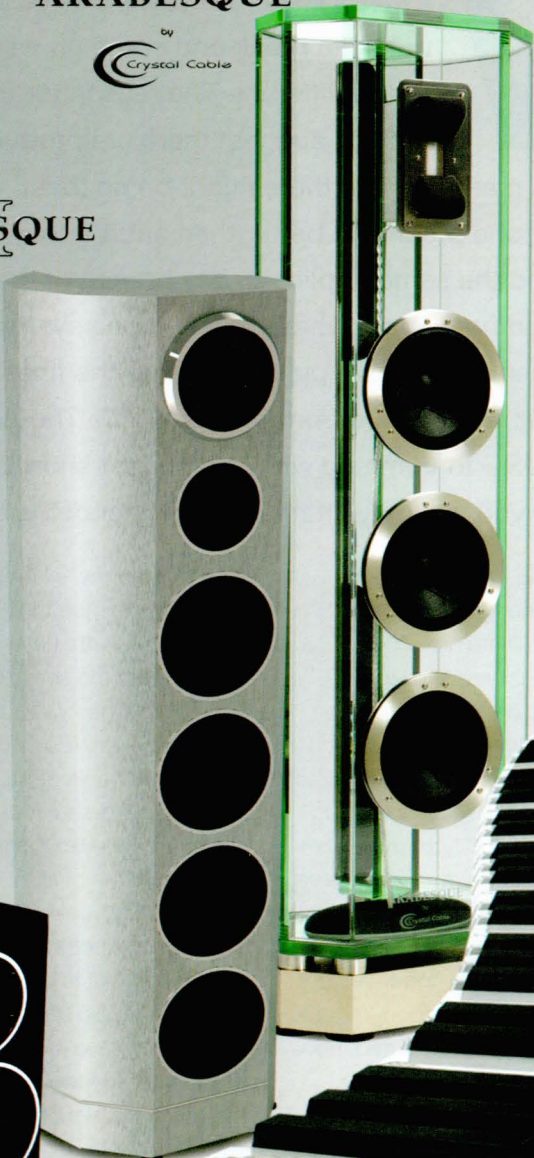


ARABESQUE

"It didn't take more than a couple of notes to realize that there was something very special going on....this room was one of the best sounds at the show". Jason Thorpe , CES report 2011

New!

ARABESQUE MINI



For all information about Crystal Cable's Arabesque range and Crystal Cable's comprehensive range of Interconnect, Speaker, Digital, HDMI FireWire, USB and AC cables please contact our UK distributor Absolute Sounds, +44 (0) 2089713909, www.absolutesounds.com

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How and why systems were put together over the last 50 years

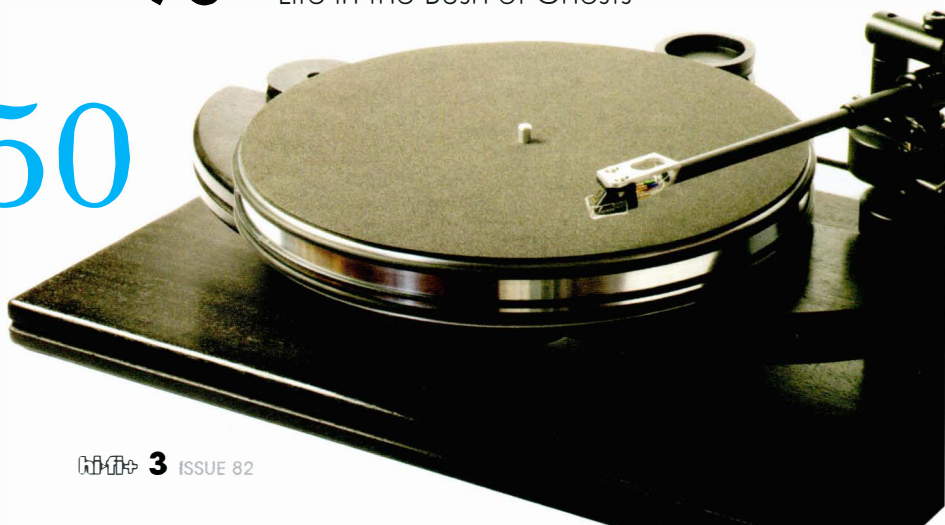
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Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming!

Point...

I was delighted to see *Hi-Fi Plus* returning to its roots, by putting a turntable on the front cover of the magazine. I can't abide the obsession magazines have with digital at all – it's good to see CD is taking a downturn and nobody I know of who takes their music seriously listens to MP3. If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well. And that means it's worth doing on vinyl. Keep up the good work.

Jeremy Kent, via email

...Counterpoint

Isn't it time we all left vinyl to die? It's been 30 years since the LP's replacement came about, and the replacement to the replacement is filling the iPods of the young and fashionable. And yet, here we are in 2011, with an antique format player adorning the front of a hi-fi magazine. Is it any wonder that hi-fi is dying off, if it still trades on its past glories? Stop looking to the past, start thinking of the future and look to the way generations that haven't retired yet play their music.

Karl Geddes, via email

Vinyl is an oddity today. In a world where even books are going 'virtual' in the shape of Kindle and Project Gutenberg files, vinyl persists. In fact, it even gains new fans from a generation of listeners born long after the first reports of vinyl's 'disappearance'. Moreover, sales of turntables are outstripping CD players today, as many of those who have gone digital have gone for digital streaming today. Around the turn of the century, most hi-fi magazines were running (or at least considering) 'final vinyl' features, for those intending their last, best turntable. More than a decade later though, and people still buy record players. It's probably never going to return to being the first choice of every music buyer, but even its strongest detractors (well, most of them) will admit to being impressed by vinyl's staying power – Ed.

Brit-fi bye-bye?

The recent announcement of Focal and Naim 'merging' (to me, it smacks of Focal 'buying' Naim, rather than any true meeting of minds) strikes me as the last nail in the coffin for Great British Hi-Fi. All the best names – KEF, Quad, Tannoy, Audiolab, Wharfedale – are now either built abroad or a part of larger foreign conglomerates. Now Naim joins the list. What is it about UK companies that they are dismissed as insignificant domestically, yet snapped up as prized assets by foreign investors? Surely a better plan would be for UK hi-fi enthusiasts to buy British, to recognise and reward British companies that stay British and ignore those that are owned by foreigners? This might not be politically correct these days, but I only buy British-only

where possible and bought Naim in part for that reason. I now feel disheartened and am strongly considering selling my all my Naim equipment as a reaction to the company 'selling out'. I doubt you'll print this, especially given that Americans own the magazine and as a result it reviews mostly American hi-fi, but if someone doesn't make a stand, British hi-fi will be lost forever, especially in today's economic climate.

'John Bull' by email

There are several points to raise. First, your Naim equipment didn't suddenly start speaking French, shrug its shoulders and turn itself into a slice of Brie. Remember too that if you buy British-made products from a multinational brand, you are still contributing to keeping British workers in employment and contributing to filling the coffers of HM Revenue and Customs. Next, it's virtually impossible today to build a wholly British (or wholly-anything) product because components are sourced internationally. Also, the hi-fi market in any one country – especially any one Western country – is fast becoming unsustainably small for a brand, unless they are content with making bespoke products as and when orders arrive; for a manufacturer to survive today, it needs markets beyond its own country borders. This means that if we decided to isolate ourselves from the wider audio world and other countries followed suit, there'd be a lot less Naim Audios left. Finally, just because Naim has become part of a larger, trans-European organisation, doesn't mean that British-owned, British-built companies have ceased to exist. It's getting hard to produce budget audio in the UK and stay competitive, but companies like SME, Funk, Leema, Music First Audio, ART Audio, LFD, Harbeth and more continue to do extremely well. So reports of the British hi-fi industry's death are greatly exaggerated – Ed.

Preamp Plea

I thoroughly enjoyed your review of the Audiolab 8200CDQ. I think products like this are exciting, because they take the best of what we currently have (CD) and add what we will be using (downloads) without sacrificing quality on either side. Where I take issue with the review is your dismissal of the need for a preamplifier. OK, so I don't own the Audiolab or have even heard what it can do, but I've heard other digital preamplifier stages built into designs like the dCS Puccini and I know this is not the right thing to do. There's nothing wrong with using the player as a player and the preamp to control the rest of the system. It sounds better than an integrated system and seems more sensible that combining the digital datastreams with the analogue source selection and volume in the same box, if only with respect to RFI.

I suggest in the same way you experimented with cable lengths in a feature, you experiment with the 8200CDQ with and without a dedicated preamplifier. I think you'll see the necessity of a preamp after all.

Tim Brewster, via email

While I don't dispute your suggestions, I think they should be viewed in the light of a distinct lack of hands-on experience with the product. My take on this is that the 8200CDQ can work perfectly well as its own preamplifier, but in some systems going for a more upmarket solution can add a lot to the overall performance in its own right. You do need to be very careful in your choice of preamps to find something intrinsically better than the built-in section of the Audiolab, although I accept there are also many systems that will benefit from a good preamp in the chain. Preamps are difficult to get right, and there are many that would be likely to partner the 8200CDQ that will do more harm than good. I think building a feature out of this for one player might be going too far, but there is a wider question that needs answering about analogue output stages against bit-reduction that needs addressing. So maybe a feature is a good idea after all – Ed.

Spread too thin

I'm sorry, but your '10 most Significant Amps in European History' was a shambolic joke. Where were the Leak TL/12s, the DTN Williamson designs, the Leak Stereo 20s, the Rogers Cadets, the Pye Mozarts, the Radford STA25s, the Quad 405s, the Armstrong 500 or 600 ranges and many more? I'm not being xenophobic here, if you were writing this in French or German, you could have filled it with French or German classic audio. But this isn't written in French or German, and you have missed so many fine classic designs (from all over Europe) by spreading yourself too thin. Either make it the 100 most significant European amps, or make it the 10 most significant British amps. Not this mess.

Terry Dyson, via email

“There were many truly ground-breaking British inventions of which we can be truly proud without dipping our toes in xenophobia.”

There were many truly ground-breaking British inventions of which we can be truly proud without dipping our toes in xenophobia. But the point of this feature was as much to reintroduce the products of Europe to the UK as it was introducing UK products to the rest of Europe. – Ed.

Maggie May

My new room is almost 7m long and 2.75m high, but it's only 3.25m wide. My current loudspeakers (Wilson WATT 3/Puppy 2) just don't work in this setting. I've tried other options but none of them seem to work well either. Unfortunately, the room is a severe limitation and there's no easy way to change this in the next few years. What do I do?

Mike Warren, via email

Long, thin rooms and conventional piston drivers in boxes don't sit comfortably together. They often tend to create an 'over there' wall of sound that doesn't really gel at the listening position. But there are a few solutions that might help. First, sit in the nearfield; if your room is 7m long, the best position is usually about 2.66m from the wall behind your ears, but in this case, you might be best sitting 2.66m from the wall in front of your nose. This may involve a more radical toe-in of the loudspeakers. It also tends to work best with smaller loudspeakers voiced for near-field monitoring.

If you decide on sitting further from the loudspeakers, you will probably need

to acoustically treat the room relatively heavily, paying very close attention to breaking up reflection and broadband absorption in all four corners of the room, and possibly even the floor-wall corners and the ceiling-wall corners.

The last option is to use loudspeakers that like the long-thin room environment and in which case we are talking panel speakers. A pair of Magneplanars (or Quads or MartinLogans) placed about 3m from the back wall but almost touching the sides walls can sound very good indeed. A good set of Maggies may help where nothing else will do – Ed.

The young folk of today, eh?

I've got a son at university. When he started college last year, I bought him a small, but good sounding audio system, comprising a Cambridge Audio CD player and amplifier, from the nearby Richer Sounds, together with some old Tannoy Mercury bookshelf loudspeakers. He – well, his stuff because he spent most of his time with his girlfriend at a succession of festivals – came back for the summer. When he went back for his second year, my wife found the system I bought him, still boxed, in the bottom of his wardrobe at home. When he emailed a few days later, I asked him about it. He said that he hasn't enough room at his digs, but I know that's not true, and he said not to worry about the hi-fi system. He loves his music, especially folk, but didn't even play his system for that first year. Are there any things I can do to make the system work? What am I doing wrong?

Jon Elliot, via email

The best thing you can do is not worry about it. Your son is at college. When I was at college, although I had a good system compared to many of my fellow students, I hardly played it at all. There were important things to get on with, such as punishing my liver, engaging in loud and pretentious arguments about basically nothing in cafes, getting silly haircuts and trying to make myself more attractive to members of the opposite sex by quoting Satre. It never worked. Listening to music was mostly confined to going to gigs, hearing semi-obscure bands through the almost-broken old pair of Celestions in the Student Union bar.

But there is a change happening in the way people listen to music, and your son seems to exemplify this. Your son very likely stopped listening to CD some time ago and possibly listens to most of his music either through his computer or his smartphone, often through small loudspeakers or headphones. Music for many today is a personal 'in-head' experience, unless it's a live event. Hopefully one day, he'll rediscover the joys of hi-fi.

Until then, if you are going to buy him anything audio, ask him what he'd like first. It saves a lot of time and money. And don't be surprised if all he wants is a pair of good headphones – Ed.

Audiophile or audiophool?

I was reading a hi-fi show report on a (non-audio) website recently. Admittedly some of the electronics were extremely expensive, but the reactions to the products by people posting comments after the report were extreme, and highly offensive. It seemed that anyone who dared to say anything positive about hi-fi was dubbed an 'audiophool' and laid into. The worst I saw was 'better a paedophile than an audiophile'. Is that really what people think of hi-fi enthusiasts these days.

Michael Chadwick, via email

The heady mix of freedom from self-censorship and anonymity can bring out the worst in people, Michael. I'd imagine few folk in the real world – even the real-world personas of those who are a hero in their own cyberspace – really feel that strongly about audio and its followers.

I'd pay cyber-bullies like this no heed whatsoever. Sometimes though, there are people online who disagree with you, but they do so by presenting their argument logically and not devaluing your argument just for it being different to theirs. Often their statements are made non-judgmentally and have thought-provoking validity. The rest never, ever heard of "I disagree with what you say, but I defend to the death your right to say it."

Psychologically speaking, many people used to product life-cycles of computer products simply cannot parse the idea of paying a premium for something that lasts. Whether it's better to buy 10 cheap products or one expensive one depends as much on how you feel about consumer electronics in general as the quality of the individual products – Ed.

news

Focal and Naim form a SuperUniti

Focal and Naim Audio have announced a merger to create what is expected to be a stronger pan-European hi-fi company. The new company - Focal & Co - will own and manage the two brands as independent entities, with their own distinctive ethos and product lines, but the two will collaborate in research and development.

"For future success the key point is that there is no future for a speaker or electronic company alone." Said Jacques Mahul, Focal & Co Founder and Chairman. "Partnership and collaboration are the way forward both in terms of investment and R&D. Working together means you can go more quickly and successfully while remaining true to the respective brands."

Paul Stephenson, Managing Director of Naim Audio and now board member of Focal & Co feels "In Focal, we have found a partner that shares our passion for music and will help us take Naim to the next level. We can achieve far more together than would have been possible alone, yet at the same time we are able to retain everything that is unique about Naim and everything our customers love us for."

The merger almost overshadowed Naim Audio's latest product launch, the £3,250 SuperUniti. An all-in-one unit



combining the strengths of its SuperNait integrated amplifier, the UnitiQute multi-source all-in-one device and the Naim DAC, the 80W per channel device is designed for those who like the idea of a one-box device but would like something 'just that little bit louder' than existing Uniti and UnitiQute devices. Naim Audio has also announced its latest software upgrade for HDX, NDX, NaimNet and Uniti devices will include internet radio access and automatic backup to NAS drives, as well as minor bug fixes. Version 1.6 software should be available from the end of this month, either as a retailer upgrade or a user CD install.

www.focal.com www.naimaudio.com

Beats go Ga-Ga over Heartbeats

Buoyed by unparalleled success in the fast-growing headphone world, HTC, Monster and Dr. Dre's profitable pairing has added yet another superstar to the Beats

headphone mix. Designed by Lady Gaga herself, the leather, studded Heartbeats earphones are a completely new lightweight design with the distinctive tangle-free cable. They come complete with six sets of ear-tips for all kinds of ear-shape and ControlTalk, which allows hands-free smartphone calls and control over iTunes music playback on Apple iPod and iPhone devices.

Heartbeats by Lady Gaga are supplied in a tough carry case and are available in black or gold for £130.

www.beatsbydre.com



Avalon's Bright Idea

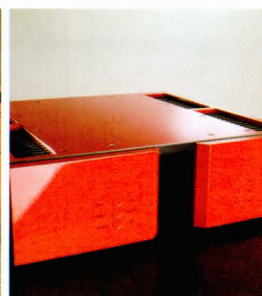
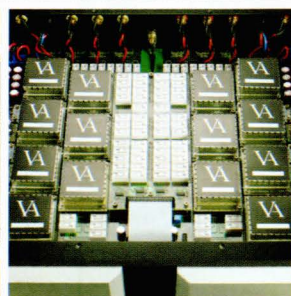
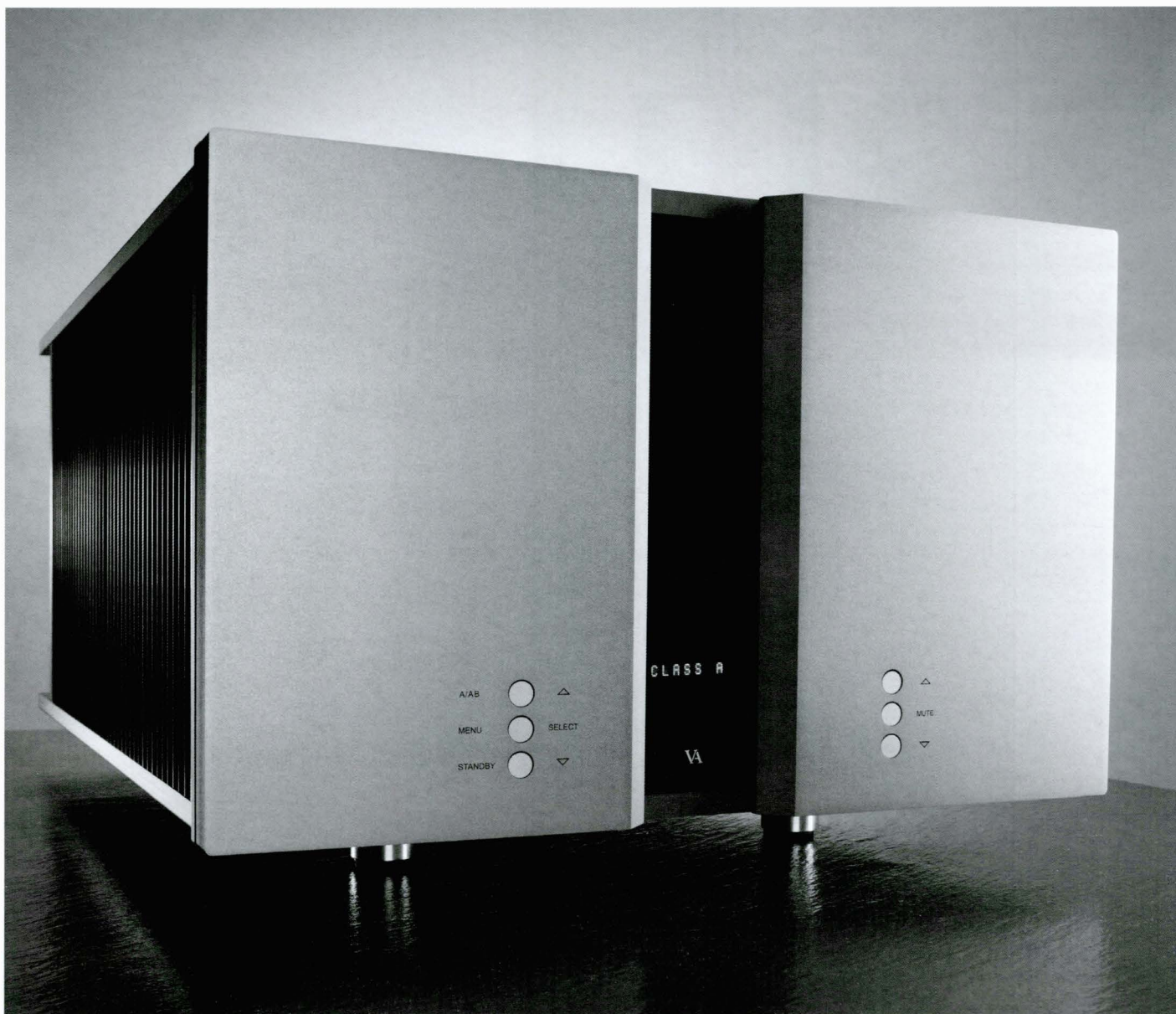
Avalon's Idea is a two-way, three-driver floorstander. Priced at £7,500, the Idea features a composite neodymium tweeter and two 177mm Nomex/



Kevlar composite mid/bass units. This makes for a loudspeaker with a claimed frequency response between 28Hz and 22kHz, an 88dB sensitivity with a nominal four ohm impedance and is designed to fit into smaller rooms that other Avalons.

avalonacoustics.com
audiofreaks.co.uk

S I G N A T U R E S E R I E S



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www.vitusaudio.com

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the Spirit of Sound

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[sometimes]
technology meets art...





Small, but powerful, DIVA

New to the UK, the Brunoco is a Vancouver-based company and its new £499 DIVA lives up to the acronym. Short for Digital Versatile Amplifier, the one-box device incorporates a 24bit/192kHz DAC, a 24 preset digital signal processing chipset for accommodating today's music, a two-line white on blue display, remote control, a 2x40W built in amplifier, and the choice of USB, coaxial, optical digital inputs and a single line-level pair of phono sockets. The tiny main unit is an elegant aluminium chassis just 20cm wide and 6cm tall and weighs 1.5kg, but it's backed up by a 1.7kg off-board analogue power supply.

www.brunoco.ca www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Cocktail Party

The closest thing in digital audio to a



Swiss Army Knife, the Cocktail Audio X10 is a standalone CD ripping and storage solution that can also stream music, provide internet radio access, rip analogue recordings to disk, act as a music server, USB memory player, and even comes with a built-in amplifier. Available without hard drive or in 500GB, 1TB and 2TB hard disk configurations, the X10 includes a 3.5" LFT colour LCD screen below the slot-transport CD drive.

The Cocktail X10 can rip to uncompressed WAV, lossless FLAC or the choice of OGG Vorbis or MP3 lossy compression systems in a choice of compression rates. As a rough estimate, the 1TB hard drive version of the Cocktail X10 will store around 1,300 CDs in WAV, roughly twice that number in FLAC and up to 15,000 CDs in MP3. The X10 also supports It can support WMA, AAC, M4A and PCM files and Playlist (M3U, PLS).

Line inputs and outputs are 3.5mm stereo mini-jack sockets, but there is also a Toslink optical digital output and a Fast Ethernet port, and the X10 connects to the electronic world through the Samba server protocol.

Prices for the X10 depend on hard drive, rising from £279 without a HDD up to £429 for the 2TB version.

www.cocktailaudio.com www.audiosanctum.co.uk

NEWS IN BRIEF

This year's Home Entertainment Manchester 2011 show looks set to be a bumper event, with currently 73 brands signed up to the event, the show is as ever at the Renaissance Hotel, in Blackfriars Street, Manchester on the weekend of Saturday 22nd and Sunday 23rd October. Not only do they have a cellist playing live this year, we will be playing our regular chill-out room. Tickets £7 for adults, Senior Citizens and Students £4 (and students get a free pair of £15 headphones with their ticket) and accompanied under 16s go free!

www.manchestershow.co.uk



Sonos, the multiroom-on-a-shoestring music server system has gone platinum. The system is now in a million rooms around the world. And it's popularity is growing exponentially... it took nearly 2,000 days (a little under five and a half years) to reach it's first million, but expects to hit the two million mark a little over a year from now.

www.sonos.com

NAD's new £1,495 T 757 AV receiver is the latest product in the company's line to feature its innovative Modular Design Construction framework. In the hectic, ever changing world of modern audio/video devices, the multichannel, 60W per side design sports pluggable modules to ensure that it's current 3D-ready, Dolby TrueHD, DTS Master Sound, 1080p HDMI performance – state of the art today – isn't left out in the cold when the next round of upgrades hit the streets.

www.nadelectronics.com www.armorhe.co.uk

In perhaps the most tenuous link to 'news' we've received to date, Formula One driver Bruno Senna (nephew of the late, great Ayrton Senna) is installing a brace of active AML2 monitors from PMC in his Monaco-based studio. When he's not pelting round some of the finest racetracks on the planet, Senna, ranked 23rd in last year's F1 Series, remixes house and trance music from his luxury pad in the Riviera. Jealous? Me? OK, perhaps a little, but Bruno Senna is also a really nice guy, which probably makes it worse!

www.pmc-speakers.com

A Brief History of Synergy

By Alan Sircom

For as long as there has been hi-fi, there have been people telling you how to apportion the budget for that hi-fi. Along the way, there have been some nefarious schemes dreamed up to help bolster sales, some dead-ends and some truly masterful and innovative ways of putting a system together. A history of the last 50 years shows the changes along the way. It also hints to a way you can match components old and new in a system.

Things in audio are not set in stone. Products come and go and the methodology behind the synergy of a system are in a constant – if slow-moving – state of flux. So, what was the right way of putting together a system a decade or two ago is not today's methodology. And, as we move into a file-based world where headphone audio predominates, so the concepts behind system synergy will change and change again.

With an edition dedicated to the best components *Hi-Fi+* has ever seen, what better way of working out the best way of putting them together than looking back over more than half a century of audio, to see how the process has changed.

The early days

From the birth of hi-fi up until the mid 1960s, the concept of synergy was not a key feature in putting together an audio system. In part, this was because measurement predominated to such an extent that amplifier designs were considered functionally identical if the products delivered similar on-paper measurement. Although a turntable or an open-reel tape recorder varied on its propensity to rumble or its wow or flutter measurements, the main variables that were considered important were the transducers – the phono cartridge and the loudspeaker, but mostly the loudspeaker.

This didn't mean there were no inexpensive electronics – the likes of a Quad 22/Quad II combination and the legendary Marantz and McIntosh products from the late 1950s to the early 1970s were very expensive for the time – but the products were sold on the basis of long-term reliability (as many of these products are still in daily use, they got that one right), improved functionality, better measurements than the norm and simple deluxe build. Product selection largely hung on how powerful the amplifier was against the operating demands of the loudspeaker. The idea of how the two were to sound together was an idea still some years away.

This was considered one of the first Golden Ages of audio, with pipe-smoking technologists unafraid of pointing people toward the output of an oscilloscope. DIY – especially in loudspeakers – was commonplace and audio magazines were pitched for someone halfway between an electronics hobbyist and a classical music fan. Magazines like *Hi-Fi News* in the UK and *Stereo Review* in the US began to emerge around this time.

The comparator years

The first audio demonstrations really began in the 1960s. This represented a profound shift in the typical audio buyer, away from someone led by engineering to someone who may know little or nothing about the electronics but loved their music. However, the idea that electronics could actually sound different still rankled with many hi-fi buyers at the time.

The concept that the loudspeaker was the most important part of the system remained a key tenet of this time. However, this left buyers with a bewildering array of seemingly identical (in performance) products to match with any given pair of loudspeakers. The comparator box was developed to make life easier; the potential buyer was faced with a host of record decks, radios, open-reel players and amplifiers, each with a corresponding button on a board. Press the button and one amplifier could be exchanged for another. No one considered the idea that the comparator box itself might be interfering with the performance of the audio system itself, because everything that isn't a speaker was considered to more or less perform the same.

As such, selecting components was just a question of matching the right functions and right power output to the best choice of loudspeaker. In this function, the comparator box was an excellent tool. Systems were still mainly built around the loudspeaker, however, and it became increasingly apparent that most of the budget was apportioned toward the transducers. With the rise of ever-cheaper Japanese models with ever-higher specifications at ever-lower costs, the amount spent on the loudspeaker soon became disproportionately high.

The 'source first' demo

Beneath the scenes, however, a revolution was in full ferment. A few visionary engineers, manufacturers and reviewers began to question the accepted



SOURCE

1 2 3 4 5

LOOP

MONO

INVERT

BERNING
ZOLL PRE ONE

L ATTENUATE

ATTENUATE

VOLUME

ERROR

MUTE

POWER

AC

DC

David Berning

David Berning

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www.qat-audio.com



► wisdom of the time. The underground movement began in earnest with the launch of *Stereophile* magazine in 1962, but gained significant momentum in the early 1970s with the growth of the high-end audio business. By 1973, *The Absolute Sound* began publishing purely subjective reviews in the US, while in the UK Linn Products began to show just what a really good turntable can do for the sound.

These events sparked a radical rethink about the way music was demonstrated in the dealer's shop. In most cases, out went the comparator, replaced instead with a listening room, an attempt to replicate the sort of rooms in which the hi-fi system might be used. Eventually, this became known as the single-speaker demonstration room, because it was felt the room sounded more like the real deal if there was just one pair of speakers in the demo at any one time.

In the UK especially, the Linn ethos completely up-ended the previous concepts. By placing emphasis on the source component as the primary 'shaper' of audio (using the then very current computer phrase 'Garbage In, Garbage Out'), this often meant listeners might spend more than half their total budget on a turntable. This also introduced the idea of the 'upgrade'; if the listener's initial budget didn't stretch far enough, they could buy the

best source component today, knowing they could improve the amplifiers and loudspeakers at a later date.

Over the years, this went from radical concept to mainstream, and saw its benefactors and detractors alike, but it's noteworthy that many of the companies founded at this time still continue to make high-end audio equipment.

The concept of synergy in audio components grew out of this time, and the selection of products suddenly moved out of the hands of the end user and into those of the dealer, who mixed the resultant systems either like an alchemist or something altogether more ham-fisted. This further distanced the end user from making his or her buying decisions. Also by making the assembly of a system appear some kind of magic trick, this did place a great deal of power in the hands of a small number of dealers, it meant they could dictate some changes to the way products went together. This meant for example that loudspeakers became increasingly difficult loads, requiring powerful amplifiers to drive them, culminating in the almost impossible Apogee speakers that could really only be fed by behemoth power amplifiers like Krell.

The SET set

The idea of a source-first system began to wane toward the end of the 1980s, beset by economic uncertainty and the rise of a digital audio format that largely swept aside all in its path (sound familiar?). The next (albeit short-lived) synergy schema was to suggest the amplifier was all-important – perhaps not surprising, given sources and speakers had already been 'done'. Products like the Audio Note Ongaku and Pioneer's A-400 effectively book-end this ethos. The advantage for audio here is many of these amplifiers were not powerhouses, and loudspeakers returned to being more efficient and easier to drive. Even in the US – forever the home of 'big is beautiful' audio – the slow climb-down from loudspeakers 'in search of an amplifier' began, as a reflection of people taking 3W triode amps as seriously as 300W solid-state designs.

The success (and the price tag) of the Ongaku began resurgence in interest in pre-war single-ended triode designs. This was quickly followed by a raft of highly specialised specialist dealers; no longer just an audio dealer, these specialists became experts of the narrow, but deep school of audio. Dealers and magazines solely dedicated to high-end turntables, valve amplifiers, horn loudspeakers and almost any specialist sub-set of audio sprung up. In most cases, these specialists appeared and disappeared in just a few short years, but they set a powerful precedent. This was ultimately a double-edged sword; it paved the way for boutique stores single-mindedly keeping vinyl alive during turntable's lean years, but it also allowed some high-end stores to simply cast off the need to support the more down-to-earth end of the market. On balance though, the rise of the über-specialist in the 1990s was a good thing, as it did keep two-channel audio alive when most dealers were converting to home cinema and multi-room stores.

Life is too short for boring Hifi

 Densen Audio Technologies



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The unfair advantage - the new Storm Audio Ri-70



► 21st Century Synergy Man

Toward the turn of the century, two significant changes happened in audio, and in many respects we are still reeling from those quantum leaps today. The first was the rise of the internet, challenging both the bricks and mortar audio store as the place of purchase, and magazines as first port of call for advice. In both cases, on the surface at least it's not hard to see why this change has happened, because things usually cheaper and faster online. This has led to a democratization of knowledge; why spend more money for a dealer's advice and demonstration facilities, when you can get things cheaper online, and why wait weeks to have your question printed in a magazine, when your question can be answered in seconds on a forum?

The other great change in audio was the shift from CD to iTunes-like services, and especially the massive success of the iPod. Although sales of the ubiquitous player are waning now (users are shifting to smartphones, such as the Blackberry and iPhone), its domination of the 2000s music scene means people equate a music collection with a collection of virtual files stored in your pocket, rather than a physical wall of LPs or CDs, and that idea long since permeated in the minds of the majority of people under about 35. This has, however, only just permeated the high-end audio barrier, and effectively creates some fixed points in system synergy – the method of acquiring and storing music is, in most cases, handed over to the computer industry and any thoughts of assembling a synergistic system begin at the point the computer ends.

Synergy, today and tomorrow

Which brings us to right now. Faced with hundreds of products and potentially millions of combinations, which ones work and work definitively? Unfortunately, there are few easy answers. Generally, a good dealer has done the grunt work, finding products that work together well – if you like the sound they make, trust their judgment... and don't then run off and buy it cheaper online.

Often, products from the same broad family work well together (for example,

Audio Research electronics work in close harmony, it's hard to find a better power amp to suit an ARC preamp than an ARC power amp, and they also all work well with Wadia sources and Sonus Faber loudspeakers from the same group, but this is no guarantee of compatibility.

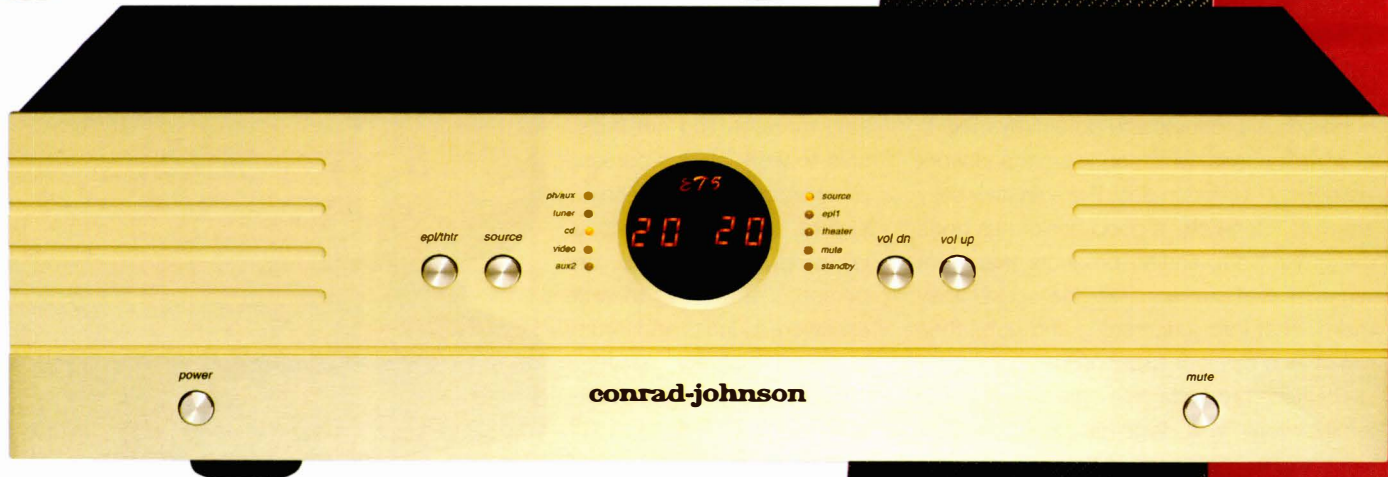
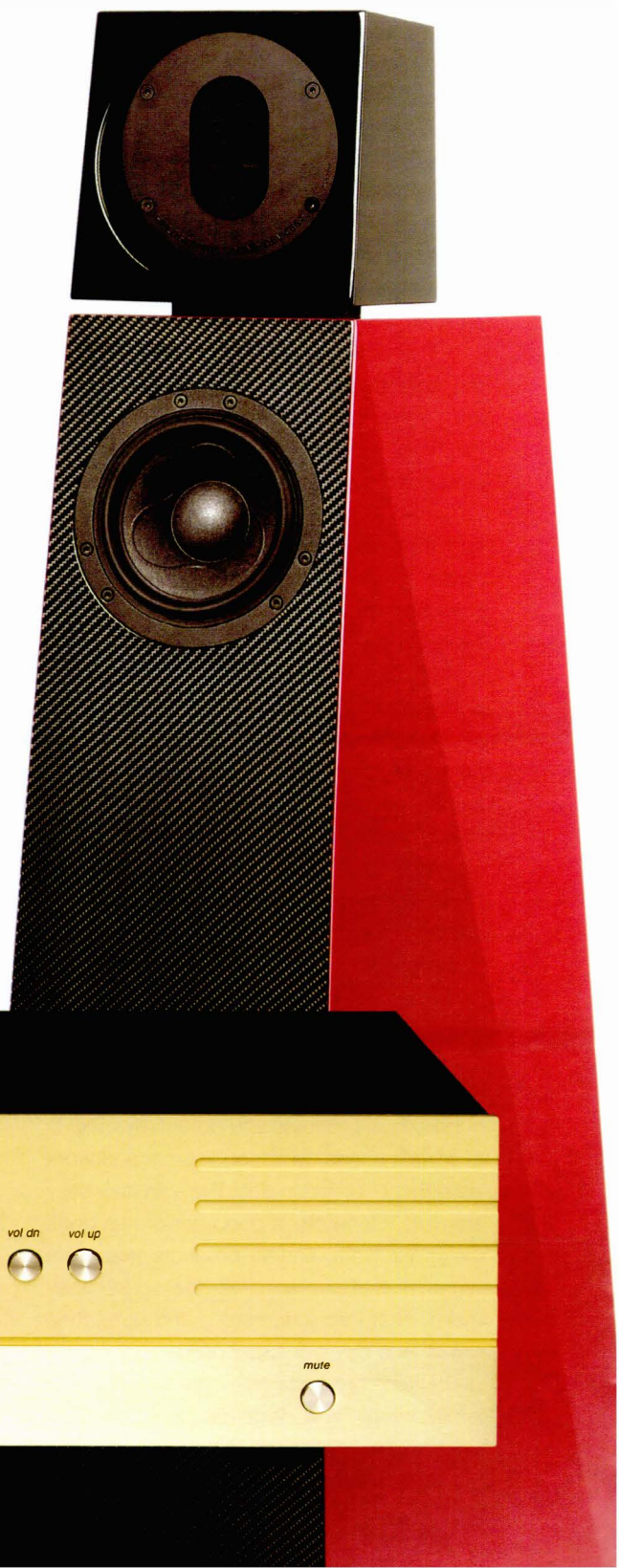
With many of today's products a rule of thumb is to adopt a sense of balance; spending £50,000 on a pair of loudspeakers to be driven by a £500 amplifier and a £50 CD player is going to be a sonic disaster. However, I have heard a number of successful systems where all the electronics combined cost almost exactly one-third the cost of the loudspeakers. In such cases though, the system invariably required a good deal of careful system matching and used an enlightened and systematic approach to power, cables, and equipment isolation.

So, today, the onus is on you, the listener, to try and select a synergistic collection of products out of the masses. And right now the best way is to approach the task synoptically; if a system comprising XYZ is said to work, find out if it's said to work by one person or a consensus of people. Unless such consensus is simply plagiarising one person, if a number of writers, reviewers, pundits and forum posters actually agree about something, chances are it works well. +



THE HI-FI+ GUIDE TO
THE CRÈME DE LA CRÈME

Recommended Components



Hi-Fi+ has traditionally run annual awards, to highlight the best products of that last year. While everyone loves a ceremony, there's something about this that has never quite sat right. A product receives a great review, deserving of an award that it duly wins and then... nothing. Zilch. Silence. Audio might be embracing the computer ecosystem now, but the products audio manufacturers make in the main still have product life cycles measured in years – or even decades – rather than the year or less of a typical PC.

Potentially, this means a product might get all its reviews over and done with in its first few months, then slowly gets forgotten over the next few years, as newer products from rivals get their moment of glory in the spotlight.

We don't think that's fair, both for the products and for the people buying those products. Let's be honest here: audio is not always the fastest moving stream in consumer electronics and the constant demand for novelty and the new is not entirely healthy. Audio products that were reviewed in the last few years are still on the market for good reason... they still do the musical business. Of course, there will always be products that are no longer with us, either replaced by newer models or fall as the result of companies changing direction their direction, or simply because the brand has gone out of business. But where a computer title would struggle to recommend anything made more than a year ago, we have the luxury of not having to call something from 2009 'legacy'.

Audio, however, is in a massive state of flux when it comes to digital source components at this time. This is slowly settling down, but the state of the digital streaming art from three or four years ago may still be on sale, but it's more likely eclipsed by newer and better solutions. This has meant we have sifted through our past and weeded out a few products that might have been Masters of the Universe (2006 edition) but look just too tired today.

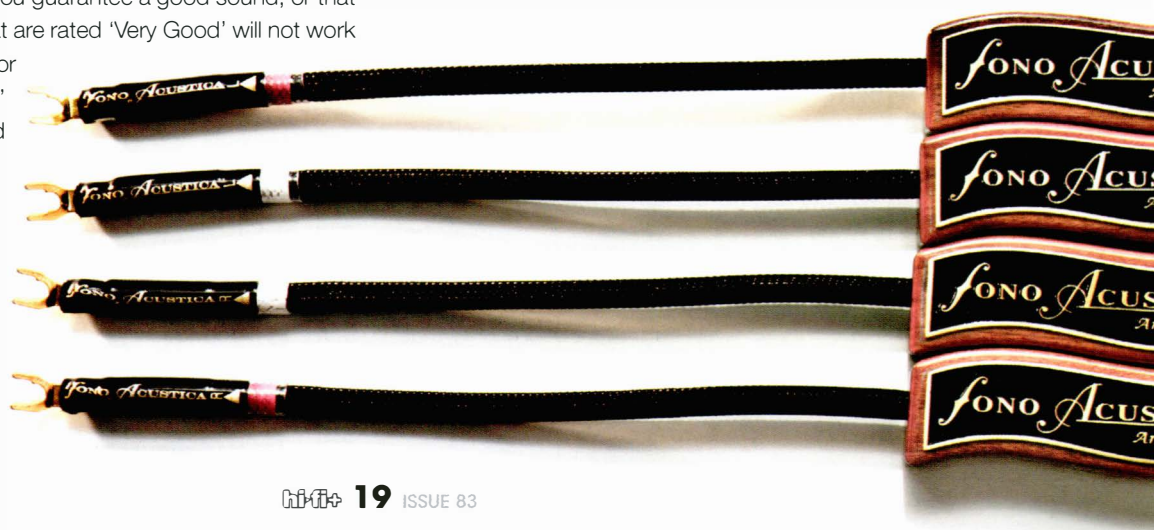
We also decided not to try to put these products into some form of ranking, deliberately. There is an understandable – but sadly, in most cases unfruitful – idea that if you put all the 'Top Class' products together, you guarantee a good sound, or that somehow the products that are rated 'Very Good' will not work with 'Excellent' products, or worse of all 'Grade One' products somehow sound better than 'Grade Two' products. Unfortunately, the honest reply – not necessarily – is both vapid and vague and people often end up putting together systems that don't necessarily

work well together just because they fall into the same price band or the same grouping by the magazine's staff. A personal view of the history and state of system synergy accompanies this list of the best of the best.

We still think the best way of putting together a good system is to put yourself in the hands of a good dealer with excellent demonstration facilities and an approach that mirrors yours (if your budget falls between £1,000-£3,000, there's no point visiting a dealer who builds systems starting at £20,000, and if you think spending more than £10 on wire is immoral, then visiting a dealer who thinks every system should be carefully fine-tuned using a range of exotic cables to match your tastes will probably be an exercise in mutual frustration). Our guide to the best we've seen over the years is merely a finger pointing the way.

In compiling this selection of the best of the last few years of *Hi-Fi+*, there was some sadness in seeing some of the great products (the Lyra Connoisseur preamp in particular) that leave a significant, virtually unfilled gap in the audio world. However, despite some of the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression recently, surprisingly few of the big names of a decade ago have gone to the Great Listening Room in the Sky. Some have changed, granted and many have moved some or all their production Eastwards, but they are still making good audio, and striving for even better performance.

We are in a strange time. The last decade has seen some of the best audio products ever made hit the streets, at a time when most people have all but forgotten about anything audio that wasn't an iPod. Rather than roll over and die, the audio industry has survived and sustained... and is finally beginning to see the backlash against the iPod generation in the shape of the young's interest and excitement in vinyl. Hi-Fi is officially a counter-culture again. Our next goal is to make it cool, and who knows... perhaps one of the products in our Recommended Components list will act as a cool catalyst. +



THE HI-FI+ GUIDE TO THE CRÈME DE LA CRÈME

Vinyl replay



Burmester Top Line 100 phono stage

£££££

Issue 77

Is it a phono stage, or is it a museum-grade LP transcription device to archive vinyl for digital posterity? In fact, it's both of these things and more. Sumptuously built to last, the Burmester Top Line 100 includes a set-up disc (because your previous tracking force will have been clouded by the phono stage, for example) and connectors to allow your turntable to run in balanced mode as it should, this phono stage redefine precision, quiet backgrounds and cartridge-matching adaptability (with even a range of MM cartridge loadings on offer). While it's RIAA only, whether played into your system or into a computer using its on-board 24/192kHz ADC, the Burmester takes your vinyl seriously.

www.burmester.de

Benz Micro SLR Gullwing cartridge

££££

Issue 79

At more than 12g, the denuded Benz Micro SLR Gullwing is not the lightest moving coil cartridge around, because a considerable amount of the design is made from brass. With its Micro-Ridge Gyger S-tip stylus fully exposed to the elements and a relatively low output, it's a demanding design, requiring an excellent arm and equally well-engineered phono stage, but we found it has a level of insight and energy that makes your vinyl sound like new.

www.selectaudio.co.uk

Audio Research Reference Phono 2 phono stage

£££££

Issue 72

Capable of adjusting cartridge loading or equalization curve from the comfort of your listening chair puts the Reference Phono 2 in exalted company. The best of breed valve phono stage forms a key part of Audio Research's Reference series of products, and early indications show that not only does the Reference Phono 2 raise the bar for vinyl replay, but its performance has also trickled down into its more affordable PH6 and PH8 phono stages.

www.audioresearch.com www.absolutesounds.com

Bergman Sindre

££££

Issue 74

2010's turntable Award recipient is an air-bearing turntable with matching air-bearing tonearm. The elegant deck is cast in subtle shades of black and brushed aluminium with an acrylic platter. Cleverly, the three boxes are designed to work in the same room, meaning the air compressor motor is one of the quietest on record. It's also fuss-free, so long as you play the deck often enough to keep its airway open. The deck is a neutral, accurate replayer of vinyl; perhaps not as deep or as funky sounding as some, but the freedom from fuss and the freedom from tracking distortion will prove captivating.

www.bergmannaudio.com

www.midlandaudiox-change.co.uk



Clearaudio Innovation

££££

Issue 82

Taking inspiration from its astronomical Master Reference turntable, Clearaudio's new Innovation turntable borrows the same chassis design, but calls upon the company's extensive experience in materials science to deliver a chassis sandwich construction of aluminium and acrylic, which manages to stay inert and elegant, coupled with a thick POM platter. The resulting sound is a clean and remarkably stable sounding turntable, with none of the excess warmth and soft character of some older turntables. If you want a turntable to deliver an honest and accurate sound that blends well with digital sources, the Innovation is the ideal candidate.

www.clearaudio.de

www.audioreference.co.uk

Kuzma Stabi S-12/Stogi S-12

£££

Issue 80

The Stabi S and Stogi S combination of a brass T-bar for a chassis, a motor in its own housing and a easy, unipivot design... what could be better? How about a 12" version of both. Bringing the fuss-free, unforced solidity of the Stabi/Stogi-S and adding the vanishingly low tracking distortion makes this a tough combination to better at the price, especially as it can take a very wide variety of cartridges, from cheap Denon 103s to true exotica costing more than the deck itself.

www.kuzma.si www.audiofreaks.co.uk



SME Model 20/3

££££

Issue 81

Some of the parts of the SME Model 20/2 were becoming hard to source, so SME took the opportunity to rework the already excellent design. The result is a bigger turntable (like a narrower version of the 20/12 that went before it and almost more in common with the Model 30), but retains the heavily-damped suspension of its predecessor. It has always been a strong contender, but is now more than just a tank-like build and more than a match for the accompanying SME V tonearm that is strongly recommended to use with the deck. It's a perfect and neutral platform for a good cartridge, too.

www.sme.ltd.uk



VPI Classic (now Classic 1)

££££

Issue 68

Designed to look like one of the great turntables from the 1970s – in place of the high-tech appeal of previous VPI designs – the Classic is a simple 'fit and forget' deck. No suspension, no fancy speed control, not even arm options. Just a good solid plinth, a belt drive AC motor and a stripped-down JMW 10.5 unipivot arm. The result has much of the immediacy of a direct drive with the sort of subtlety that can put many more expensive turntables to shame.

www.vpiindustries.com www.analogueseduction.net



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Digital Audio

Arcam rDAC kw

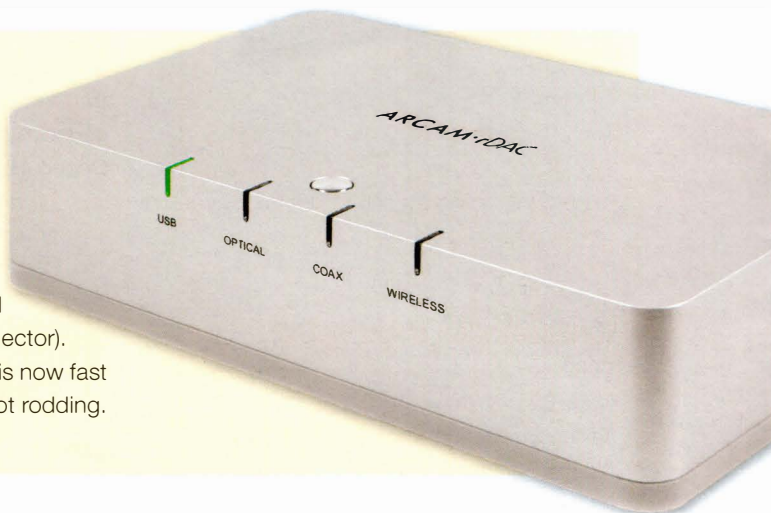
£££

Issue 80

People forget that Arcam was the one of the first companies on the planet to launch a standalone DAC, so the brand does know a thing or two about digital. The rDAC was originally launched with Asynchronous USB input, but now it includes the Klear wireless protocol that can beam up to lossless digital audio files across the room (either via a USB or an Apple i-connector).

A fine sounding, great value proposition in its own right, which is now fast becoming a platform for power supply and galvanic isolation hot rodding.

www.arcam.co.uk



Audiolab 8200 CDQ

££££

Issue 82

The digital audio equivalent of the Swiss Army knife, Audiolab's 8200 digital platform can be specified in a number of ways, but the full enchilada – complete with CD player, USB input, a range of filter settings and built-in preamp – represents the New Wave of audio products. Designed by the legendary John Westlake, the 8200 CDQ digital hub is all about detail, focus and precision. It's a tight sound that might not flap the trousers of bass hounds, but the rest of us will love it for its, er, unflappable sense of order. Just add power amp for a fine performance. All-in-one audio never sounded so right.

www.audiolab.co.uk



Ayre QB-9 DAC

££££

Issue 72

The DAC that first brought the digital revolution to the heart of the audiophile world. Now upgraded to 192/24 precision (a follow-up review is in the pipeline), the QB-9 manages to combine top-notch soundstaging and detail with some of the up-beat musicality that is sometimes considered a uniquely British preserve. An excellent DAC that has seen many a good CD player fall from grace by comparison.

www.ayre.com

www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

dCS Puccini/U-Clock player

£££££

Issue 73

We were already big fans of the dCS Puccini, the company's one-box 'entry-level' CD/SACD player. But the level of improvement we got when we added the U-Clock still managed to surprise us. A combination high-precision clock and Asynchronous USB input helped raise the already high standards of the Puccini still further. Not only does it add a very fine computer audio option to the existing player, the level of pitch stability and precision the U-Clock bestows on the already very precise Puccini makes it the combination very highly desirable indeed. Cambridge's finest just got better.

www.dcsLtd.co.uk



dCS Debussy

££££

Issue 78

It's perhaps a mark of just how much the audio world has changed recently. Although not a hardcore CD supporter, dCS has a commanding reputation of providing some of the best disc spinners around, but its latest product is a DAC, designed to bring out the best in computer audio, as well as a range of digital audio sources. Designing its own Asynchronous USB input from first principles (and then licensing it to Arcam), the 192kHz/24bit Ring-DAC equipped Debussy features a host of dCS-derived technology, but most importantly delivers a sound that is extremely open and detailed. Potentially upgradable too, thanks to a U-Clock.

www.dcsLtd.co.uk



HRT Streamer II+

£££

Issue 82

HRT has undergone a continuous improvement programme since the products first hit the streets in 2009, and has recently added an iPhone chummy version, but the concept remains the same. These are simple, low cost, high performance, USB-only digital converters, made for specific computer to audiophile conversion. Even the first generation were astoundingly good, but the hot spot is the 2011 version of the Streamer II+. Supporting up to 24bit, 94kHz sampling and featuring an HRT-designed Asynchronous USB input, this USB-powered DAC can easily stand toe-to-toe with any digital converter on the market. It really is that good, and must represent a hard act to follow.

www.highresolutiontechnologies.com

www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Neodio NR22 CD player

£££££

Issue 76

The French Neodio NR22 CD player proves there's life in the old CD dog yet. While it does have a USB input, the NR22's great strength is as an all-rounder CD player, managing as it does to combine much of the performance of the true greats of CD replay in one. It's a lithe sounding player that manages to dig into the detail of any disc it plays, and yet manages to extract a lot of musicality and insight in the process. A truly world-class player from a brand that deserves to be much better known outside of *La Belle France*.

www.neodio.fr www.selectaudio.co.uk



Wadia 781i CD player

£££££

Issue 69

Wadia's top one-box CD/SACD player is closer to a one-box audio decoding computer than a mere disc spinner. Using the latest iteration of Wadia's Digimaster software effectively makes it a 24-bit, 1.4GHz device, with a host of configuration and control options. Regardless, the sound quality – whether from the disc or through one of its many digital inputs – is little short of astounding, and its three filter options perfectly ally it to any system. If you like your music, well, musical the 781i must be the best single box around.

www.wadia.com www.mdc-hifi.co.uk

THE HI-FI+ GUIDE TO THE CRÈME DE LA CRÈME

Amplifiers

Aesthetix Rhea, Calypso & Atlas Signature

£££££

Issue 76

Aesthetix Rhea Signature phono stage, Calypso Signature line stage and Atlas Signature mono power amps are the third generation of a product line that has always proved popular. Aesthetix ethos has been to use valves for their linearity rather than as a tone-shaper, and the absence of 'valve sound' is clear here. These are neutral and honest, yet powerful, controlled and almost dry sounding amplifiers. They get out of the way of the music like all good amps should, but so few do in reality. Nice!

www.aesthetix.com

www.audioreference.co.uk

conrad-johnson ET5

££££

Issue 82

The trickle-down effect is strong at c-j, and the new ET5 line stage is clearly a very close relative to the company's top GAT preamp, both in terms of performance and sound quality. Using a near-hybrid design – which uses both a carefully placed triode in the amplifier stage with a MOSFET buffer – the ET5 sounds far more like the harmonically rich GAT than it has any right to, given it's half the price of the flagship. It seems c-j has hit its purple patch.

www.conradjohnson.com

www.audiofreaks.co.uk



ASR Emitter II Exclusive

£££££

Issue 81

King of 'how do they do it for the money?' amplifiers, the full ASR Emitter II Exclusive is a super-heavyweight four-boxer integrated amplifier, with battery-powered line-level inputs, a healthy 280W per channel power output and an internal architecture that bespeaks very high standards. The amp takes an age to come on song, but when it does it just gets out of the way so well, you begin to think zen-like thoughts of the sound of no amplifiers. Transparency takes on a new dimension through this vast four-box, one-box line-level spectacular. Those who suggest there's a specific 'German' sound haven't heard just how free from artifice the full ASR can be.

www.asraudio.de www.manger-audio.de

David Berning ZOTL-One/ZH-230

£££££

Issue 80

David Berning has long been known for his excellent OTL power amplifiers, such as the powerful Quadrature-Z. Recently though, he has turned his hand to preamp manufacture, and in the process come up with the sweetest sounding small OTL power amplifier. All tube, deceptively light and aesthetically 'interesting' they may be. They might eschew even the modern basics like a remote control, but this small line-and-phono preamp with the brilliant rear mounted headphone socket and its matching 30 watt power amp cut audio to the very quick. Handbuilt and wonderful!

www.davidberning.com www.blade-audio.com

Devialet D-Premier

£££££

Issue 75

Perhaps the most exciting amplifier launched in recent years, the D-Premier uses a wholly new amplifier category – Class ADH – to deliver both the sweetness of Class A with the efficiency and motive force of Class D, which is why it can pack hundreds of watts into an amp the size of a pizza box. It's also a state of the art high-resolution power DAC, and converts line and phono sources into high-resolution digital datastreams internally. And it's upgradable too – the latest firmware is so good, it demands a retest, and allows bi-amping and soon wi-fi streaming. This is tomorrow's amplifier, today!

www.devialet.com

www.absolutesounds.com

DartZeel NHB-458

££££££

Issue 77

Making monoblocks is easy if you have a stereo amp, unless you are DarTZeel and want an amplifier that actually sounds better too. Then you need to really raise the game. And that's precisely what the NHB-458 does. A 450W monoblock design designed from the ground up to better the company's NHB-108 power amp means something really special. Practically everything is custom built for the project, the amp is deceptively heavy, costs as much as a Porsche Panamera and sounds almost supernaturally fast, precise and musical, like a flea-power amp that brings a big friend along for the ride. And what a ride! In a way, there's few better arguments for Capitalism than the NHB-458.

www.dartzeel.com www.absolutesounds.com



Electrocompaniet EC4.8 and Nemo

£££££

Issue 69

Tested in conjunction with EC's own top-loading EMC-1UP CD player, this proved a system of almost limitless power in most settings. The name 'Nemo' came about because the amps (600W, 120A and a lot of that power in Class A) were designed to power the mighty B&W Nautilus. The system is designed to be used in balanced mode and the performance is effortless; refined, yet highly detailed too. Proof that big power is not a uniquely American pursuit, the Nemos are powerful enough to drive even the most demanding speakers, and sound sweet while doing so.

www.electrocompaniet.no

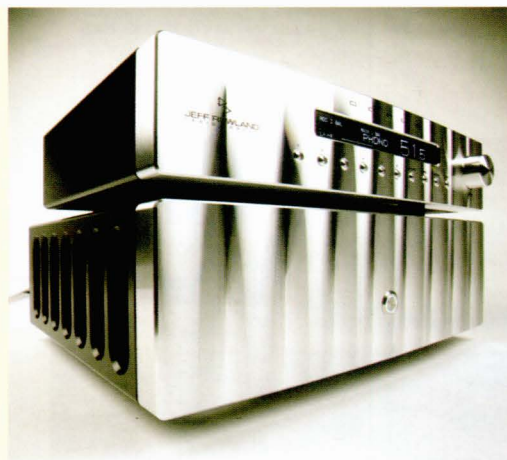
Jeff Rowland Corus/Model 625

£££££

Issue 83

Jeff Rowland Design Group has long been something of a champion for Class D power amps, but the model 625 stereo power amp represents something of a return to its roots. It's a 300W Class AB stereo power amp, set in Jeff Rowland's inimitable chassis. It is the perfect partner for the Corus preamplifier. You can read about it starting on page 42, but put simply it's the most complete and near-flawless sounding solid-state pre and power amplifier package this magazine has encountered in a very long time. Their sound is every bit as polished as the look of the amplifiers.

www.jeffrowland.com www.mdc-hifi.co.uk



Leema Tucana II

££££

Issue 81

The Welsh Leema brand is one of our country's hidden gems. Its original Tucana integrated amp was a highly enjoyable amplifier that played to its rhythmic strengths, at the expense of the frequency extremes. The new Tucana II keeps the fun factor but gives a sweeter treble and deeper, more controlled bass. And with nigh on 150W per channel on tap and the ability to drive anything down to two ohms, this is an amp that combines fun and power too. The latest version is not just an amp for rock and rollers, it even attracts classical and jazz fans with its balanced mix of the cerebral and the visceral.

www.leema-acoustics.com



Naim Audio UnitiQute

££££

Issue 77

This is an odd product to categorise. Is it an amplifier, or a streaming device. The answer, of course, is that it's both. But which one predominates? Not so easy to answer. Perhaps it's best not even to think about classifications and simply settle down to the sound it makes, because that's what it does so wonderfully well. It makes a sound that's musically cohesive and deceptively powerful. That it does it and connects so well to the next generation of audio (especially if you use an iPad, and listen to internet radio) makes it the first choice of the new user. In fact, we'd go so far as to say the UnitiQute leads the charge for good audio to begin to reassert itself to the lost generation of audio enthusiasts who store all their music on computer and might just want something outstanding sounding and not too tweaky in the living room. Is this audio's Renaissance product?

www.naim-audio.com



StormAudio V35 Vertigo

££££

Issue 77

From the front panel, this French amplifier could pass for just another good, minimalist product. But the key to its success is the StormFocus adjustment on the rear panel. This allows you to perfectly impedance match the amplifier to your loudspeakers; and 'focus' is the right word, when correctly matched the V35 snaps your loudspeakers into focus like an active loudspeaker system. While this makes it almost impossible to pin down the sound of the StormAudio products (the V35 is one of two amps from the new brand), we expect to hear a lot from this clever French brand.

www.stormaudio.com www.kogaudio.com

VTL IT-85

££££

Issue 76

This one-box 85W tube integrated amp is one of the most immediate 'yes' products you'll ever hear. Just a few seconds in front of it and its charms are apparent. It's an enticing, clean sound with excellent soundstaging, plenty of musicality and a deep, full bass. As we are increasingly moving into a world of headphones, the IT-85 scores a bonus, because its built-in phono stage is one of the best money can buy. This is the amp for people who like the sound of valves, but don't want the hassle of modern valve amplifiers. Excellent.

www.vtl.com www.kogaudio.com



A GENUINE CLASSIC UNIQUELY QUAD

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Aux

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- Ken Kessler, Hi Fi News

"The amp brings out tonal richness in everything you play..."
- Jason Kennedy, Hi Fi +

"...rarely have I experienced a sound as captivating as that presented with the Quad in the driving seat."
- Andrew Everard, Gramophone

THE HI-FI+ GUIDE TO THE CRÈME DE LA CRÈME

Loudspeakers

Avalon Time

£££££

Issue 71

The Avalon Time sets the standard for today's speakers. Unfailingly musical, requiring top-notch electronics and careful installation in a big room, the three-way, four-driver Time lives up to its name, thanks to its exceptional temporal precision, but also delivers the ideal dynamic shading for the music playing, whether it's a whisper or a cannonade. If you judge music by emotion, rather than a collection of frequencies, this one's for you.

www.avalon.com www.audiofreaks.com

Cabasse Riga/Santorin 30

£££££

Issue 81

There's a knee-jerk reaction to subwoofers in audio systems, and this speaker set shows how that's purely based on prejudice. The distinctive Riga satellite speakers are excellent, but not full-range. The Santorin 30 is an active subwoofer with a great line in DSP. When the two meet the result is remarkable.

The Riga disappears better than many other designs (the lack of standing waves inside the cabinet and their near perfect point source help guarantee that), while the sub brings up the bottom end in a controlled and perfectly room optimized manner.

www.cabasse.com

Focal Stella Utopia EM

£££££

Issue 79

This tall, jointed three-way floorstander features the company's inverted Beryllium tweeter and this is joined by electro-magnet driven 330mm bass units. For once, this is an ultra high-end loudspeaker that isn't powerfully demanding on its electronics, so that you can get a great sound from the equipment you want, not the equipment the speakers demand. Few speakers are this transparent to the recording and arguably integrate even better than the Grande flagship.

www.focal.com

B&W 802 Diamond

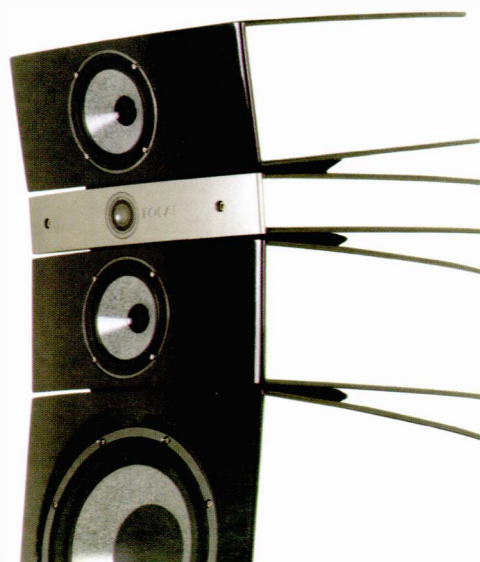
£££££

Issue 81

The easy way would have been to just slot in the diamond tweeter in place of the traditional metal dome. But Bowers & Wilkins took the more arduous route, redesigning the whole 800 Diamond range in the process. The result is a loudspeaker with better separation, more refinement, more frequency extension and more accuracy. For mid-to-large UK rooms especially, the

802 Diamond sits in something of a sweet spot; the perfect size for good in-room sound. Best of all, for all those Beatles Remastered fans, this give you the chance to hear what they sounded like at the mixing desk itself, because B&Ws were used in the remastering process. These speakers bring Abbey Road to the home.

www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk



Kaiser Acoustics Kawero! Vivace

£££££

Issue 82

This strangely-named two-and-a-half way 82kg floorstander can sport a range of upgrades and improvements, including a lot of technologies from both Stillpoints and Vertex AQ. It's an expensive design even in its base model state, but elements like the surprisingly complex bullet-proof Tankwood cabinet and a standalone Mundorf-produced Air Motion Transducer treble unit all add up. It is also an exceptionally musically revealing transducer – not tonally flat, but tonally engaging, with an almost total absence of cabinet contribution. It's one of those speakers that gets under the listener's skin, and you find yourself unable to listen to anything else.

www.kaiser-acoustics.com

www.rightnote.co.uk



Magico Q5

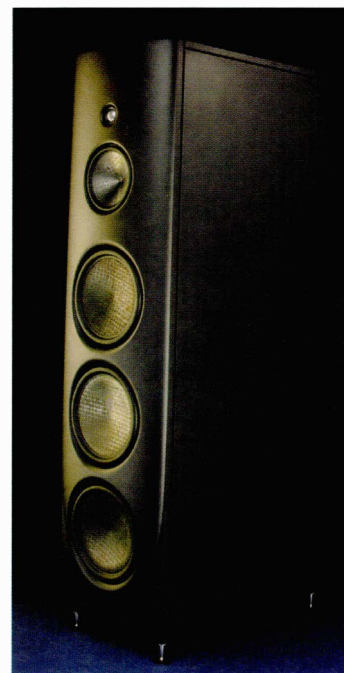
£££££

Issue 74

Magico continues to take the audio world by storm with its hyper-neutral loudspeaker designs. The Q5 really shook the tree, thanks to the complete absence of tree in the design. The aluminium endoskeleton faced with thick aluminium plates all add up to something designed to handle well, and cope with high-velocity impact without complaint. The four-way, five-driver sealed box speaker needs a lot of good power and space, but can turn in a sound that redefines low coloration, low distortion and precise audio sound. If you want to extract the maximum information from your system, look no further.

www.magico.net

www.absolutesounds.com



Magneplanar MG1.7

££££

Issue 82

The MG1.7 is an ideal Maggie for these shores. It's small enough to work in our rooms and doesn't need a powerhouse to drive it. We the MG1.7's happy place in the arms of a 90W Accuphase integrated. These three-way planar magnetic loudspeakers have a learning curve, but they excel at portraying the texture of sound, presenting the layers and structure of the music with sublime effortless.

www.magnepan.com

www.decentaudio.co.uk



PMC Fact 8

Issue 73

The Fact 8 is PMC's first domestic-led loudspeaker. It still offers the Advanced Transmission Line, but where previous PMC speakers have been ruthlessly revealing, these beautiful two-way, three driver floorstanders are simply the right window on the musical world. The whole is also greater than the sum of the parts, making this a consummately musical loudspeaker that sounds as good as it looks.

www.pmc-speakers.com

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www.dcsLtd.co.uk | info@dcsLtd.co.uk

Manufactured in the UK by Data Conversion Systems Ltd, Unit 1, Buckingham Business Park, Anderson Road, Swavesey, Cambridge, CB24 4AE



Sonus Faber Amati Futura

£££££

Issue 79

The Sonus Faber Amati Futura loudspeakers are the ultimate audio austerity antidote. With their elegant chrome detailing and a finish so fabulous that you'll get admiring glances from visiting Ferrari owners, the Amati Futura are forcing designers to re-evaluate what goes into a high-end speaker. Of course, the speaker would be as nothing if it looked great but sounded poor; fortunately, this combines the pace, the beauty and the detail of the three Homage models below it.

www.sonusfaber.com

Spendor A9

££££

Issue 77

Spendor is one of the keepers of the BBC legacy, in that it still produces thin-walled loudspeakers that follow the traditions of legendary monitor designs from 40 years ago. But it isn't hide-bound by convention and makes a range of elegant slimline floorstanders that bring the basic tenets of BBC monitors to a wider audience. This three-way flagship floorstander uses drivers custom made for the company and delivers a sound that carefully balances old-school vocal-led neutrality with a more modern demand for powerful frequency extremes. This makes it the kind of speaker that gets handed down father to son.

www.spendoraudio.com



Triangle Color

£££

Issue 77

Small, brightly coloured two-way rear ported loudspeakers are nothing new, but ones that sound good on a very wide range of musical styles without costing a fortune) are rare in the extreme. Triangle got the little Color speaker so right from the outset in every respect. The bright red colour scheme with the contrasting white grille, the ease of drive and installation, and the easy on the ear fun factor, make the Color the perfect choice for downshifter and upgraders alike.

www.triangle-fr.com



Vienna Acoustics The Kiss

£££££

Issue 80

The Kiss' distinctive handed, side-mounted L-shaped stand and adjustable separate tweeter cabinet give the speaker an aesthetic unique in the audio world – but still highly attractive. And its sound is just as distinctive, presenting a harmonically rich environment in favour of the bells and whistles of modern audiophile intent. If you think music is all about dissection of sound, look elsewhere, but you won't find a speaker more musically passionate.

www.vienna-acoustics.com www.audyus.co.uk

THE HI-FI+ GUIDE TO THE CRÈME DE LA CRÈME

System components



Atlas Asimi loudspeaker cables

££££

Issue 77

Like the Asimi interconnects before it, Asimi loudspeaker cable takes the Ohno Continuous Casting concept used so successfully in its copper cables and applies it to silver. With six silver strands of three different thicknesses per cable leg, each separated by very low dielectric insulation, Asimi turns in a very high-resolution, fast sound that brings you closer to the structure of music.

www.atlascables.com

Audience AU24e loudspeaker and interconnect cables

££££

Issue 80

Audience makes solid-core OHNO copper cables that strip out all the artifice of audio and get to the core of the sound itself. As a consequence, you hardly ever see them second-hand. These aren't cables-as-tone-controls and care should be taken in highly RF-polluted environments, but the AU24e simply get out of the way of good audio equipment in a very even, level-headed manner.

www.audience-av.com www.highendcable.co.uk

Crystal Cables Diamond Standard loudspeaker, power and interconnect cables

££££

Issue 80

Crystal misses out on much cable ire, thanks perhaps to its small physical size. Or perhaps it's because of the pride of ownership that comes with Crystal Diamond Standard cables. These slim, silver-gold cables are beautifully made, beautifully presented and sound ordered and coherent, perhaps down to their goal of limiting current-domain distortion and very low induction. The treble extends beautifully, the bass is deep and powerful and the midrange open and inviting, but best of all the whole sound hangs together brilliantly. A true cable system, the whole is even better than the sum of the very good parts.

www.crystalcable.com www.absolutesounds.com

Fono Acustica loudspeaker and interconnect cables

£££££

Issue 82

These are high-end designs, destined for high-end systems. These cables made from undisclosed rare metals give a beautiful, harmonic coherence and charm to an already graceful system sound. Insight and detail exposure is not the Fono Acustica goal, instead going for making music more enveloping and alluring. This is a glossy sheen on an already high-gloss presentation.

www.fono-acustica.com



HiFiMAN HE-500 headphones

£££

Issue 83

The shift from loudspeakers to headphones is a significant trend in audio today. Whether its down to diminishing funds, diminishing room sizes or simply that they are more used to listening to recorded music through headphones, the upcoming generation of proto-audiophiles are spending more on cans and less on boxes. Fortunately, a New Wave of headphone designer is there to meet their demands with outstanding designs like the HiFiMAN HE-500 planar magnetic models. Although they need a good headphone amp to drive them, these headphones combine much of the openness of electrostatics with the energy of dynamic designs, and knocked the Sennheiser HD800 off pole position for the Editor.

www.hifiman.us www.highendworkshop.co.uk



Hi-Fi Racks tables

£££

Issue 81

While we are strong advocates of the 'equipment support as audio component' school of thought, there's sometimes when all you need is a really good rack! And Hi-Fi Racks tables fit the bill perfectly. Custom made to order (from a range of options) and made out of chunks of real tree, Hi-Fi Racks tables are the audiophile equivalent of the butcher's block, only with spikes for grounding and decoupling. No frills, no claims to sonic improvement, no 'charge like a wounded buffalo' price structure. Just good, honest, well built equipment supports at real-world prices.

www.hifiracks.co.uk



MIT Oracle MA-X loudspeaker cables

£££££

Issue 79

We decided to move from prices to '£££' simply to prevent screams of 'How Much???' when encountering prices in the upper atmosphere. But even we struggle to cope with the price tag of Oracle MA-X speaker cable. OK, so you get the large Adjustable Articulation Response Module, which allows you to tailor the cable to the system, but the price still lingers. Then you hear what the Oracle MA-X does, how it manages to encapsulate the information and the energy of the music played through the system, how it takes the system forward and how it precisely allies itself to the sound, and suddenly that good saloon-car cost doesn't seem so threatening.

www.mitcables.com www.audiobility.co.uk

IsoTek Aquarius power conditioner

£££

Issue 68

The Aquarius power conditioner takes IsoTek's ever popular G3 MiniSub and pimps it to the max. It features the company's EVO3 technology, an auto-sensing filter that adapts to current draw and divides between a pair of 16A sockets for power products and four 5A sockets for sources and preamps, all galvanically isolated from one another. Add a new choke for even greater power regulation and you have something that raises the game for hi-fi, especially when it comes to making high frequencies shimmer. Best of all, it's upgradable, if you add the new Super Titan, but for that you'll just have to wait for the next issue.

www.isoteksystems.com www.soundfoundations.co.uk



Nordost Sort Kones isolation/anti-resonance cones

££-£££

Issue 73

Nordost's enlightened approach to system synergy covers cabling and field effects, but until recently its approach to equipment isolation was limited to Pulsar Points. That all changed with the Sort Kones, a good, better, best solution that relies on the same resonance control technology, just with better materials, the three element Kone. Strategically placed, the Kones simply allow you to extract the maximum information from your system, sometimes radically changing your appreciation of the performance in the process. An upgradable, highly addictive – but in a good way – means to consistently bring out the best in your system.

www.nordost.com

www.nordost-cables.co.uk

Quantum QB6 power block

£££

Issue 73

The QB6 is a six socket power distribution block incorporating elements of the field generating Quantum Resonant Technology system (four and eight socket versions are available to US and EU users, but our odd three-pin sockets place limits on such blocks). The QB6 brings out the system within your system, maximising its performance and getting to the music it plays in the process. And also like the Sort Kones, it can be the start of a world of field discovery and its effect on the system's performance. Not only a power block then, but also a gateway drug to a lot of Quantum boxes.

www.quantumqrt.com www.nordost-cables.co.uk



Running Springs Audio Elgar power conditioner

££££

Issue 81

Running Springs Audio has a powerful reputation in the US for being the best in audiophile power conditioning. It also has a commanding reputation for making the most back-breakingly heavy boxes in audio, relative to their size. The Elgar is smaller, lighter and cheaper than most RSA conditioners, but doesn't skimp on performance one iota. The Elgar also does the most, least to the system, in that it filters the power better than most, making the system sound more like it should sound, but does no harm to the sound quality in the process. In simple terms, it's all good and is the perfect power conditioner for small to medium four-component systems.

www.runningspringsaudio.com www.audiodfreaks.co.uk



Vertex AQ Hi-Rez Moncayo loudspeaker cable

££££

Issue 79

Perhaps the best expression of what the whole Vertex AQ approach to audio is all about, the Hi-Rez Moncayo speaker cables brought about new levels of dynamic expression and vividness to the system, far more so than any normal jump from copper to silver might bring. This is in part because that's what happens when you eliminate the maximum possible interference between amplifier and loudspeaker. This should not be thought of as a starting place in Vertex AQ, but more the end result of years of clever, structured and systematic development in your system (so you don't get here without discovering the rest of the Vertex AQ system), but Hi-Rez Moncayo is proof positive that the strategic, systemic approach works!

www.vertexaq.com





TL-5.5II Preamplifier

Fully balanced differential linestage
 Two balanced / five single ended inputs
 Balanced / single ended / rec outputs
 Optional internal MC/MM phono stage
 (with adjustable gain/load/RIAA/rumble)
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 Tube life extender circuit
 117 step differential volume control
 Full RS232 control, programmable
 input offsets, HT pass-through
 Luxurious precision machined cosmetics
 Fully featured aluminium remote

True music lovers have long admired VTL amplifiers for outstanding performance and lasting value. Incorporating modern features (such as precision-regulated power supplies, auto-biasing, comprehensive fault sensing and remote control) whilst providing both the dynamic realism and tonal purity that can only come from an elegantly designed valve amplifier, VTL stands tall amongst its peers with this unique approach. Intelligent design ensures that convenience never compromises sound quality; VTL amplifiers simplify where it matters - short, pure signal paths and user-friendly, intuitive ergonomics. The result? Truly modern equipment that is simply a joy to own.

VTL

Pure Tube Pure Passion Pure Music

MB-450 Series III

Monoblock Amplifier

450 Watts Tetrode Mode,
 200 Watts Triode Mode.
 Fully balanced differential circuit.
 Zero Global Feedback.
 User-adjustable damping factor.
 Precision-regulated screen and
 bias supply for longer valve life
 and precise sound.
 Enhanced interleaved and
 coupled output transformer.
 Premium Mundorf silver/oil
 coupling capacitors.
 Improved Auto Biasing, fault
 sensing and protection.
 Standby Mute function for
 increased tube life.



The new Series III version of the long-standing MB-450 features a fully balanced design that offers the power and dynamics to bring your system to life, while at the same time delivering the subtle sonic cues that tell you it is real. With fully automatic biasing and comprehensive fault-sensing, valve ownership is now even easier than ever.



THE HI-FI+ GUIDE TO THE CRÈME DE LA CRÈME

The Best of The Absolute Sound

Vinyl:

Pro-Ject Xpression III

Issue 191

\$\$\$

The Xpression III features an acrylic platter, machined cone-feet, a carbon-fiber arm tube, and other refinements rare at this price. The ensemble generates a wide deep soundstage, and has the ability to resolve complex musical passages. Its overall sonic character evinces clarity and smoothness, erring on the side of too much mellowness, but not a bad place for a budget component to land.

www.project-audio.com www.henleydesigns.co.uk

VPI Classic 3

Issue 216

\$\$\$\$

The VPI Classic 3 is an exceptional effort by a company that knows the analog landscape like few others. Arriving complete with the Classic 3 unipivot tonearm, an HR-X center weight, and a PRC ring clamp to fully flatten stubborn LPs, the Classic 3 is fast, lucid, and responsive. The tonearm is also brilliant, with on-the-fly VTA adjustability and removable armwands for the slickest cartridge swapping in town. Simply put, a class act.

www.vpiindustries.com www.analogueseduction.net

Basis 2800 Signature Vector Model 4 arm)

Issue 180

\$\$\$\$\$\$

Built to an amazing degree of mechanical precision, the Basis 2800 Signature is nothing short of revelatory in its ability to seemingly disappear from the playback chain. This table imposes no discernable colorations on the music, allowing a deeper and more immediate connection with your LPs. Music emerges with startling immediacy and vitality from a jet-black background, and the bottom-end is staggeringly deep and dynamic. This performance is with the 2800 fully optioned with the Calibrator Base, Syncho-Wave power supply, and Micro-Thin drive belt, which boosts the price to \$25,770. Winner of 2007 Product of the Year and Golden Ear Awards.

www.basisaudio.com www.selectaudio.co.uk

Digital:

Musical Fidelity M1 DAC

Issue 213

\$\$\$

It's hard to focus on any deficiencies of the Musical Fidelity M1, such as they are, because the M1's overall performance is so solid and downright musical. Unlike budget components of yore, where pleasant "greyish" sound was the best you could expect, the M1 is musical, arresting, and involving in the way a good audio component should be, regardless of price. Expect Asynchronous USB upgraded version soon.

www.musicalfidelity.com

Esoteric K-03

Issue 213

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A brilliant concept beautifully executed, the Esoteric K-03 is much more than a CD/SACD player. It is also a full-fledged DAC, with ample inputs, multiple upsampling and filtering options, and even provisions for an external word clock. Its USB interface is state of the art, supporting the highest resolutions and asynchronous clock control. As a DAC, the K-03 has few peers. Both the S/PDIF and USB interfaces are among the best too.

www.esoteric.teac.com www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Meridian 808.3 Reference Signature

Issue 204

\$\$\$\$\$

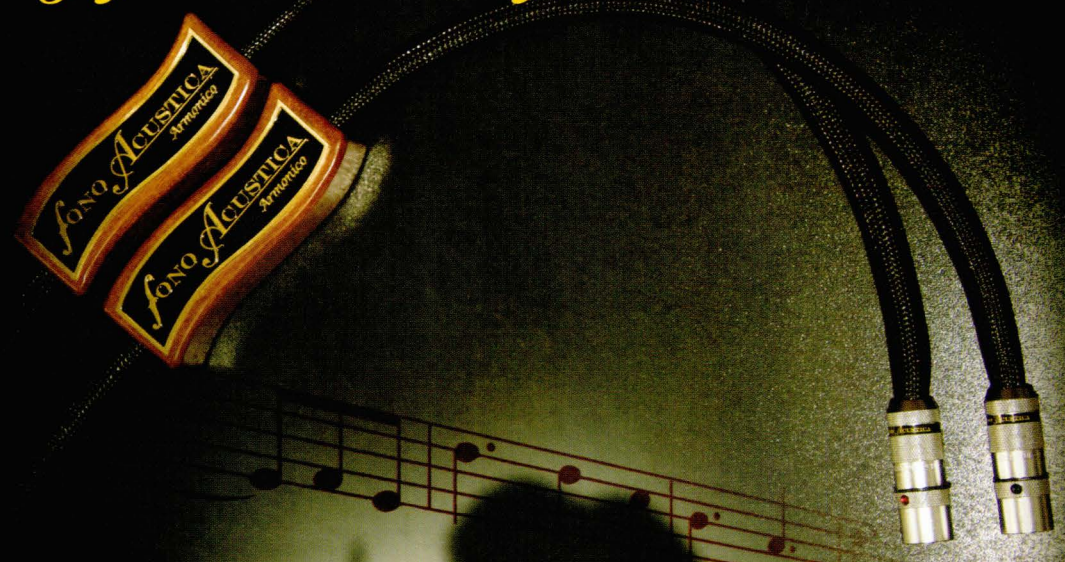
This update to the spectacularly great 808.2 adds a network card that allows it to integrate with the Meridian Sooloos music server. This new model also includes full preamplifier functions and volume control, allowing the 808.3 to drive a power amplifier (or Meridian digital loudspeakers) directly.

What makes the 808.3 special is its unique "apodising" digital filter that not only eliminates pre-ringing (a time-domain distortion) on playback, but also removes what is already in the signal. So listening to CDs through the 808.3 is like listening to an audiophile remaster. The sound is completely lacking in hardness, glare, steely timbres.

www.meridian-audio.com

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"Armónicos are musical to the max in any language.

ROBERT H. LEVI - May 2011
POSITIVE FEEDBACK ONLINE

"Armónicos' richness and romance were so pronounced that I found it easy to imagine many listeners immediately falling in love with them"

MICHAEL FREMER - JUNE 2011 issue



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twenty

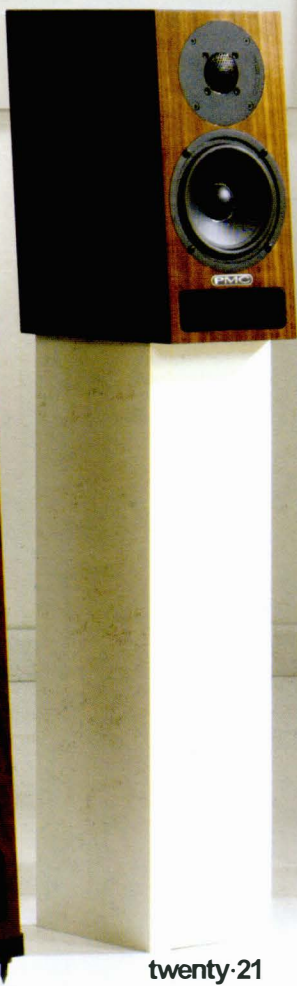
Celebrating 20 years of truly great loudspeaker design

Platinum
Twenty Year Warranty

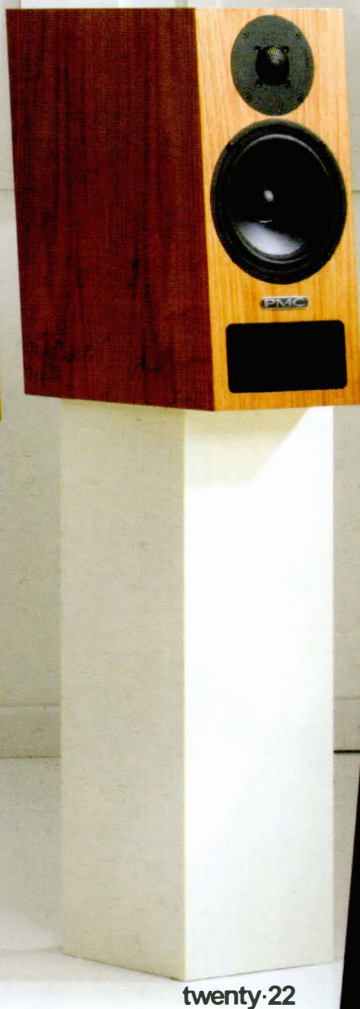
twenty series, the next generation of beautifully elegant, handcrafted, British loudspeakers from PMC. Four stunning new models that reveal every nuance, every breath, every element that brings music to life - *pure musicality*



twenty-23



twenty-21



twenty-22



twenty-24

musicality(n.) the property of sounding like music

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sales@promonitor.co.uk



PMC[®]
www.pmc-speakers.com

Amplification:**Cambridge Audio Azur 550A**

Issue 200

\$\$\$

Though it has been revitalized on the outside, the real news about Cambridge's integrated resides on the inside, where it has been equipped with an oversized toroidal transformer, and a high-current output transistors capable of 60Wpc. The 550A has a sweet and stable sonic character with natural midrange timbre and lower midrange heft and transparency.

www.cambridgeaudio.com**Naim Nait 5i**

Issue 183

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One of the great bargains in high-end audio, this new version of the Nait 5i brings more than a taste of expensive separates to a mid-priced integrated amplifier. The Nait is sweet without sounding rolled-off, presents a huge sense of space and tremendous separation of images, and, most importantly, sounds like music.

www.naim-audio.com**Classé Audio CA-M600**

Issue 210

\$\$\$\$\$

Seldom has a more devastating piece of amplification been enclosed in such a reasonably sized enclosure. This Classé monoblock, which delivers 600 watts, represents cutting-edge technology married to exquisite sound, right down to a kind of hypothalamus drawn from advanced medical technology monitors the temperature of the amplifier!

www.classeaudio.com**Pass Labs XA100.5**

Issue 186

\$\$\$\$\$

These masterpieces from Nelson Pass offer the virtues of Class A in a more efficient package. These virtues include a wonderful palpability, warmth, and truth in timbre through the midrange that is reminiscent of the best tubed amplifiers. In fact, the XA100.5 monoblock is as close as solid-state gets to the sound of tubes. The minimalist circuit is the culmination of decades of research and refinement by legendary designer Nelson Pass. In addition to being the best-sounding amps Pass has ever made, this new series runs cooler than previous designs. Front-panel meters show whether the output stage leaves Class A operation. The build-quality and metalwork are first-rate. Winner of our 2008 Product of the Year Award.

www.passlabs.com www.selectaudio.co.uk**Loudspeakers:****B&W 685**

Issue 176

\$\$\$

The B&W 685 is an affordable small speaker that offers excellent overall tonal balance, remarkable rhythmic authority, a large and open soundstage, bass response that defies size, and an extended treble response. This British-designed, Chinese-made two-way plays loudly without strain. A 2007 Product of the Year Award winner.

www.bowers-wilkins.com**Paradigm Mini Monitor V.6**

Issue 190

\$\$\$

The newest version of Paradigm's second-least-expensive speaker provides more than a taste of what music sounds like played through speakers made by people who care about the sound of live music. The Minis offer a surprising level of sonic quality for a ridiculously low price. They aren't elegant looking, but if you close your eyes you won't care.

www.paradigm.com**Vandersteen Model 7**

Issue 206

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Creating speakers that pushed the edge of the art was not in Vandersteen's playbook—until the Model 7. Using innovative drivers made from carbon-fiber-clad balsa wood, the time-and-phase-coherent Model 7 exhibits a clarity and resolution that are breathtaking. The midrange and treble are totally seamless, devoid of tonal colorations, and free from textural grain, while the bass from those 12" woofers is powerful too.

www.vandersteen.com www.alternativeaudio.co.uk**Wilson Audio MAXX 3**

Issue 194

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The MAXX 3 may be the baby brother of the stupendous Alexandria X-2, but it doesn't concede much ground to its sibling. The MAXX is a music-making machine par excellence. It possesses the earthshaking thrust of the space shuttle on liftoff, but the MAXX is never less than refined and elegant. Particularly notable is its excellent octave-to-octave balance. This powerful, luminous, and dynamic loudspeaker has been significantly improved over the MAXX 2 and is easier to drive. Meanwhile, quiet passages emerge with great finesse and fidelity; the percussive sound of a piano is captured by few other loudspeakers with such precision.

www.wilsonaudio.com www.absolutesounds.com

THE HI-FI+ GUIDE TO THE CRÈME DE LA CRÈME

How to choose your next hi-fi component

So there you have it. The greatest products we've seen at *Hi-Fi+* in recent years, as well as a smattering of some of the best our sister title *The Absolute Sound* has to offer.

We decided to break with convention and opt for price bands ("£££" or "\$\$\$\$") simply because we've observed sales of hi-fi usually fall into one of these five bands. Yes, there's potentially a world of difference between a '£££' product costing £1,000 and one costing £9,999, but we figure within most of these categories most products even out. In other words, of the '£££££' loudspeakers in our list, most were in and around £20,000. Besides, it's all too easy to look at the price tag rather than the performance.

Here's what we mean. Think in terms of your own experience. All of us hold an idea of how much we can afford, and that can hold our attention so well that we fixate on products in that price. It's possible that the product that is best for you is actually cheaper than you think and you dismiss it because it doesn't fit into your preset idea of how much you are going to spend. And the reverse is true; you might feel you want to spend £5,000, but the product that best fits your needs costs £6,000 and – although you can easily stretch to the extra grand –

you never go there because your budget was fixed at £5,000. By thinking of these products in terms of very broad price breaks, you get to select what suits without fixating on a specific, set price.

Each person has his or her own way of buying equipment. Some choose a level of performance that suits them and stays there, simply buying replacements rather than improvements as and when the need arises (such as adding new technologies... the one great bonus of audio over other technologies is it's rare to find something that either renders your previous system redundant or encounter a product that is broken beyond repair, although some CD transport mechanisms and loudspeaker drive units from 20+ years ago are hard to replace now). Others consider each successive change in system to be a step forward.

There is a peculiar British disease here, however. Our desire for understatement can often tip over into a dislike for the trappings of success and even resentment for those who choose the finer things in life. It's why we like our products 'minimalist' (a polite term for looking like they were made in a shed). While this drive for understatement has great benefit (we tend to like what sounds good, not simply what looks good) it can have great downsides (we tend to dismiss what looks good, even if it sounds good too, because we declare that too much money was spent on the outside).

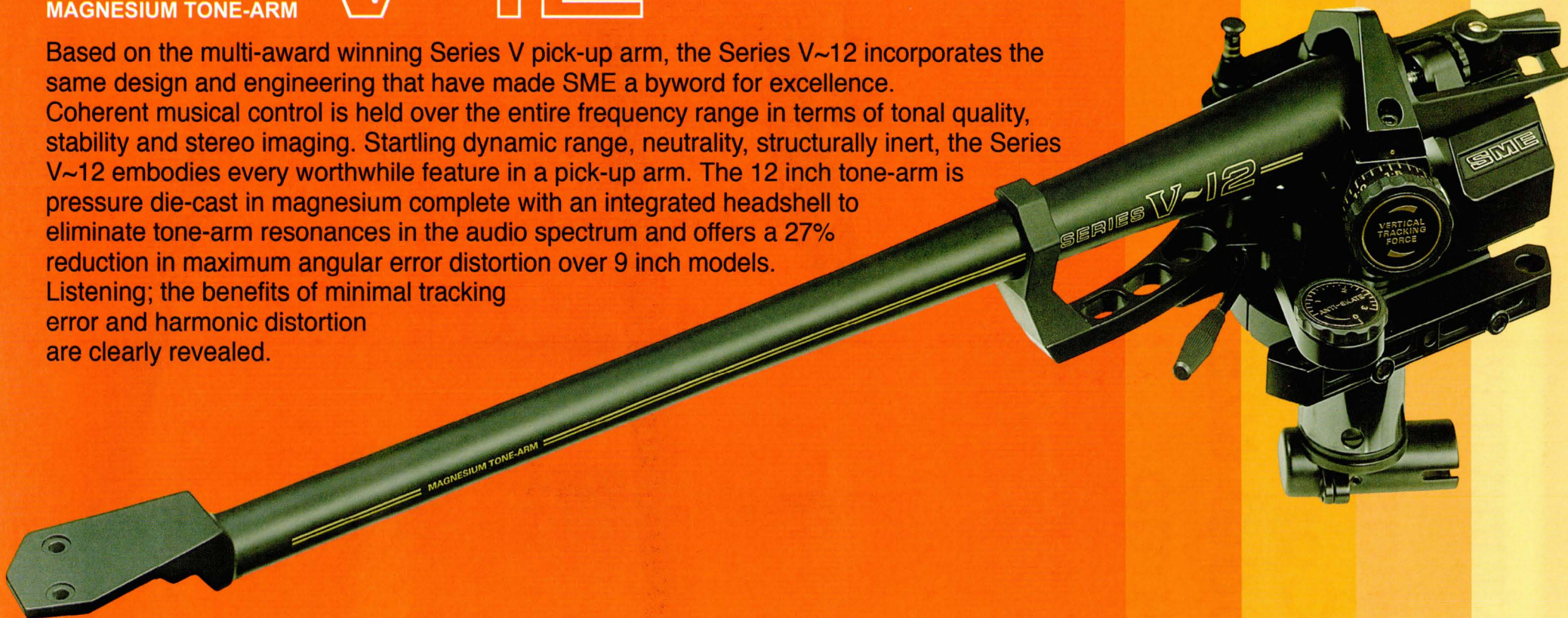
Whether you stay in your own financial happy place, or go for the best you can afford, it's one heck of a ride. And, as this round up shows, there's a lot of room for growth. +



SERIES V~12

MAGNESIUM TONE-ARM

Based on the multi-award winning Series V pick-up arm, the Series V~12 incorporates the same design and engineering that have made SME a byword for excellence. Coherent musical control is held over the entire frequency range in terms of tonal quality, stability and stereo imaging. Startling dynamic range, neutrality, structurally inert, the Series V~12 embodies every worthwhile feature in a pick-up arm. The 12 inch tone-arm is pressure die-cast in magnesium complete with an integrated headshell to eliminate tone-arm resonances in the audio spectrum and offers a 27% reduction in maximum angular error distortion over 9 inch models. Listening; the benefits of minimal tracking error and harmonic distortion are clearly revealed.



SME

“The best pick-up arm in the world”

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Jeff Rowland Design Group Corus Preamplifier and Model 625 Stereo Power Amp

By Roy Gregory



Absolutes are dangerous things – especially if you are an audio reviewer. No sooner do you declare something to be the “Best” than something else will come along that’s better. Yes, absolutes allow you the luxury of effortlessly embarrassing yourself – and none more than categorical statements that this or that technology, this or that design path, can’t possibly work.

JRDG (Jeff Rowland Design Group) has never been shy of embracing high-tech solutions and the Corus and 625 combination contains enough cutting-edge technology to make any early adopters out there purr with anticipation – whilst sending the resident technophobes diving for cover. Indeed, on paper at least, these products offer a veritable laundry list of features to raise eyebrows if not serious suspicion amongst the less is more, back to the future brigade; op-amps (gasp); switch-mode power supplies (groan); milled from solid aluminium chassis (mutter); connections and facilities to trim, name or adjust every conceivable parameter, as well as incorporate the units into a (shock/horror) home cinema (Pahhh!).

But look a little closer and you’ll find other facets of these designs that should appeal to even the most resolutely retro of listeners: transformer coupled inputs and outputs (tick); ultra-short signal paths (tick); star-earthed circuitry (tick); totally dual-mono construction - even down to physical isolation of the two halves of the circuit (BIG tick).

You see, every time you try to pigeonhole these products, you uncover some detail, feature or function that allows them to worm away from such pat classification. None of the normal labels quite do the job simply because these JRDG units are genuinely different. Those neat, compact and incredibly elegant exteriors are completely at odds with the sheer range of features, functionality and technology crammed inside them.

Each unit is built into a milled from solid chassis, mated to the almost equally massive and Rowland trademark diamond burnished front panel. The complex housing that includes the beautifully sculpted heat-sinks for the power amp has to be one of the most impressively elegant examples of CNC I’ve ever seen. The pre-amp actually consists of no fewer than four separate elements (audio circuit, psu/controller, remote control handset and separate remote receiver) all milled from solid billet. Inside the main audio chassis, the various elements of the left and right channel circuitry are housed in independent pockets, carved from the solid body. The main units each have dimples machined into their bases that locate the Delrin spheres used as feet/high-frequency isolators.

Both the Corus pre and 625 power amps rely on high-speed switch-mode power supplies, incorporating JRDG’s proprietary Power Factor Correction technology. A conventional power supply places rapid, cyclic (100 or 120 times a second) current demands on the AC line, drawing current each time the voltage peaks. This results in substantial ripple and harmonic distortion that gets fed onwards into the audio circuit as well as dumped back into the mains. The PFC circuit aims to precisely synchronize constant current draw with the voltage cycles, thus eliminating this pollution and delivering a pure, high-voltage DC feed to the audio circuits.

The Corus preamplifier employs a fully complementary, ultra-short, star grounded signal path based on Burr Brown OPA1632 op-amps, built onto high-tech, four-layer ceramic circuit boards. The four balanced and two single-ended inputs and two balanced and two single-ended outputs are all transformer coupled, offering improved noise rejection/isolation as well

as identical levels across all inputs/outputs irrespective of type. The power supply is entirely isolated in a small (but incredibly dense) milled aluminum outboard chassis. This is linked to the audio circuit with separate DC umbilicals for the left and right channels. Each channel of each input can be individually trimmed in 0.5dB steps, while single-ended Output 2 can also be user trimmed. The phase of each channel can be inverted – ideal for placing and checking speakers, or correcting the overall phase of recordings. Balance can be adjusted in 1.0dB steps, while the optically coupled volume control offers two-speed 0.5/1.5dB adjustment, depending how fast you spin it through its 99.5dB range.

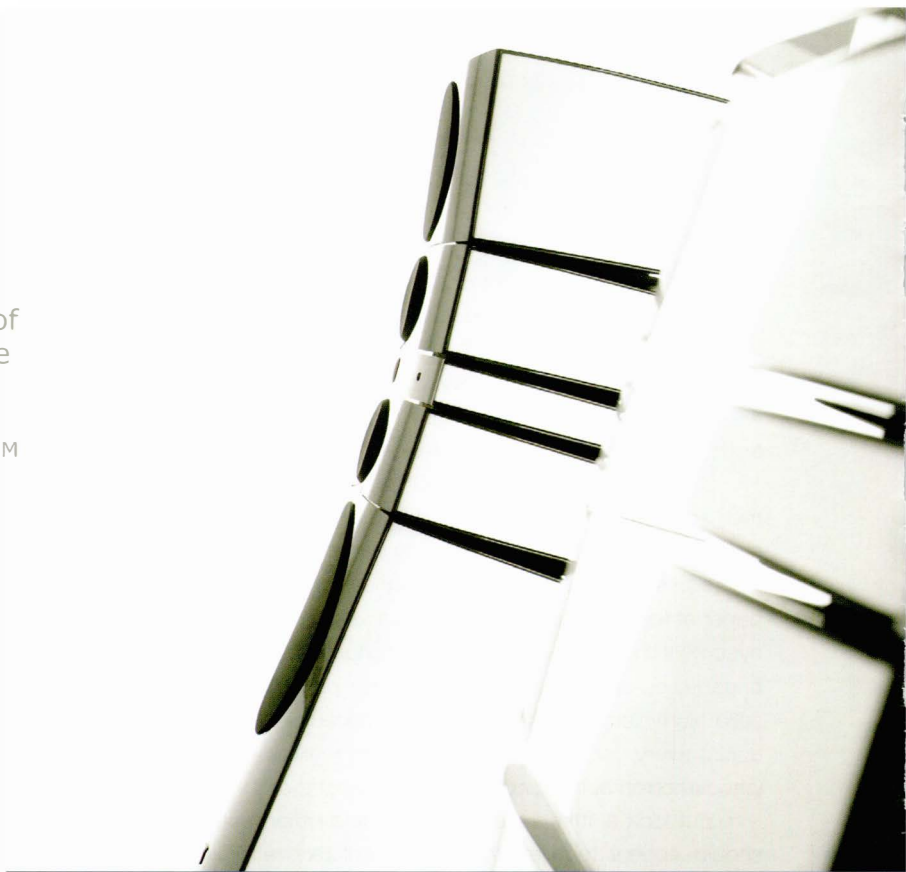
The 625 power amp seems a model of simplicity when compared with its matching preamp, but thus it ever was. Balanced XLR sockets feed an input transformer, separate voltage and current gain stages and a class AB, bipolar output stage in a dual differential, dual mono configuration. A rear switch handles power on, with a front panel standby button, while the IEC AC input is of the large, rectangular 20 Amp variety. One other nice touch is the heavy duty, high-purity copper bus bars carrying current for both the input and output stages. Two sets of speaker connections per channel are provided, although being of the Cardas common post variety they are most at home with spades, although 4mm plugs can be pushed through at a pinch. If your cables are 4mm terminated and the 625 crosses your acquisition radar, factor in the cost (and inconvenience) of re-termination too.

As well as the nuts and bolts that have gone into the 625 and Corus, considerable thought has gone into the user interface too. The basic input control and labeling functions are a model of simplicity, despite the limited number of control buttons available; and that’s not always the case, believe me. But the nicest touch of all is the housing of the remote receiver in a small, machined “matchbox” connected to the control unit by a two-meter umbilical cord. This means that the electronics can be placed anywhere, even in a closed cupboard, without compromising remote control, just as long as

"Never have I had such a sense of palpable presence, of attendance at a musical event."

Roy Gregory, Hifi+

Grande Utopia EM



utopia

electra

"I just wish more hifi was like this"

Steve Dickinson, Hifi+

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▶ you can see that little box. The display brightness can be set at three different levels, while the display itself can be set to stay on, or switch off after five or fifteen seconds, and the volume readout for the 199, 0.5dB volume steps is large, clear and easy to read, even from across the room. Likewise, the rotary control for the volume is beautifully weighted and speed sensitive for large or small adjustments.

The remote handset is sensibly sized, not stupidly heavy, and offers control over all the pre-amp's functions and menu settings. It also offers a two-stage mute and inversion of absolute phase (indicated on the front panel) which was to prove very useful indeed.

Listening to the Rowland amps has been both an engagingly enjoyable and rewardingly instructive experience – in no small part because their contribution to the performance of the system (and realizing the performances captured on disc) has been at once both obviously apparent yet hard to pin down. How so? Well – it's obvious that the system is sounding great, but it's less obvious exactly why; at least at first. That's because the JRDG combination's greatest attribute is their unobstructive, uncluttered fluidity. The musical performance flows unmolested and unimpeded, unsullied by unsightly paw-prints and apparently unlimited when it comes to breadth or scale. I say "apparently" because, in absolute terms (and compared to the best of the competing product sitting in large and generally heavy heaps around the listening room) the Rowland amps do impose some limitation in terms of dynamic range and scale, but they are so evenhanded, so polished and poised in their delivery that short of direct comparison you are unlikely ever to notice the shortfall.

One thing is for sure. Put a Corus/625 combination in your system and you'll be hearing a lot more of your speakers and front-end. The Rowland electronics have an almost uncanny ability to disappear, leaving the rest of your system sounding more like itself than ever before – which can be a double-edged sword; fabulous if the system is well-balanced and well set-up, but not so great if your previous electronics were selected on the basis of their ability to paper over the cracks. When it comes to the system as a whole, small changes in alignment, level or state of tune are immediately apparent. That absolute phase button on the remote control isn't just there for show; once you start using it, it's going to become compulsive. And if you don't believe that small changes in VTA are audible, you will now. Oh, and while we are on the subject of tweaks, coupling the rock solid chassis of these units to a suitably dispersive surface pays huge dividends.

Does that make the Rowland amps unlistenablely critical? Nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, they seem to have an uncanny ability to bring out the best in both partnering equipment and recordings, whilst also responding to the subtlest of tweaks or adjustments. I've never had them sound bad – but boy do they respond to careful input.

When it comes to understanding just what the Rowland electronics are bringing to the party, discussion of the sonic attributes of the units is rather less than helpful, mainly because there are so few stand-out aspects of these designs; they do pretty much everything, very, very well. Imagine a three-dimensional plot (rather like the "waterfalls" used to display speaker performance) reflecting the performance of the Rowlands and you'd think that the measurement plane was blank, so mirror smooth would it be, with barely a ripple to disturb the seamless, coherence of the musical "surface". Which, as impressive as it is, is no help at all in understanding quite what makes them so special – because they surely are.

This is what got me thinking about musical character – and the relationship between that character and the sonically specific. In short, the importance not so much of what attributes a component might possess, but what it does with them – and perhaps most importantly of all, how it balances them. Now clearly, the Rowland is an outstandingly balanced performer (in every sense of that term) but how do we get a handle on what that means in overall musical terms? ▶

▶ One real giveaway is their ability when it comes to throwing an expansive, yet natural image; by which I mean not just big, but appropriate. The Rowlands are remarkably true to the source, delivering width when its present and capable of a remarkably coherent sense of height, depth and space where the engineers captured that information. Carefully constructed soundscapes are beautifully rendered, with soundtrack material as so often, providing the most obvious examples. So, on the *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou* OST, the hammer strikes of the chain gang that underpin 'Po Lazarus' are laid in a beautiful spaced diagonal row, out to behind and beyond the left-hand speaker, while the cup and chain of the water butt are also perfectly positioned. I could mention the incidental restaurant noises on *Angel Heart*, or just about any of the dialogue sections from *Pulp Fiction*, but you get the picture.

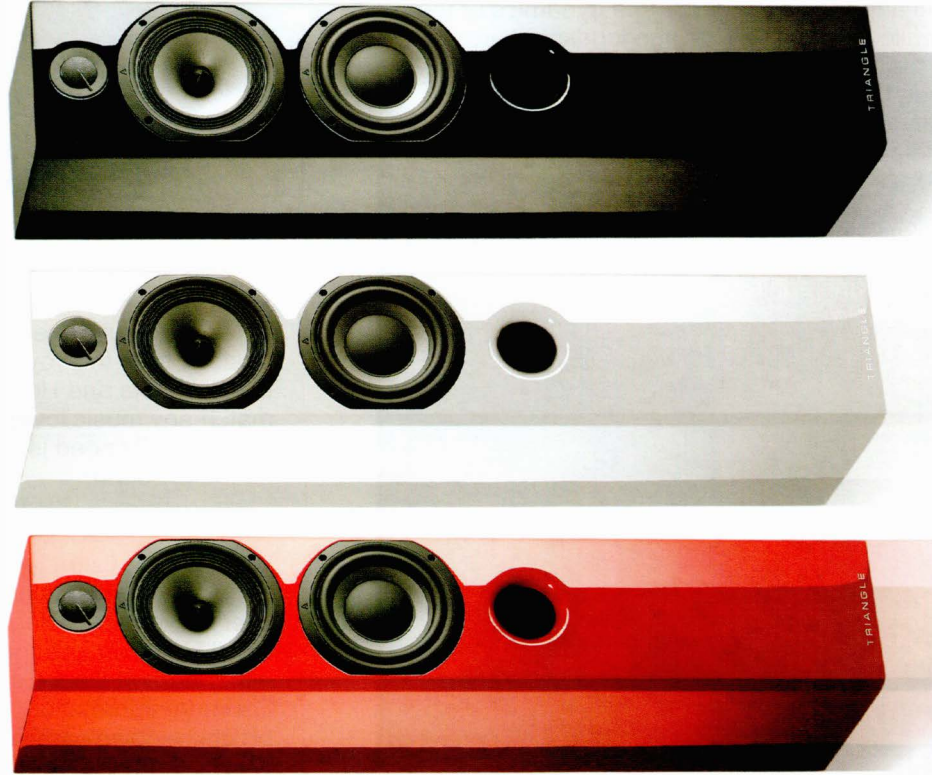
At the other extreme, recordings devoid of any real acoustic or manipulated separation sound flat and homogenous. *21* is undoubtedly a great pop album (and Adele surely has an impressive set of lungs) but a great recording it isn't. The Rowlands make the most of the mish-mash of layers and overdubs that create the wall of sound, giving the music a real sense of weight and momentum, but there's no mistaking the heavy hand of the production. This ability to reflect the spatial content of recordings, the production techniques and venues involved, all without pulling about the music itself plays a large part in the second, less obvious but ultimately much more important attribute, the one that elevates these amps into that select group.

What emerged after lengthy listening to the Rowlands – and what links them to the other products mentioned above – is the uncanny ability to bring a natural voice to recordings; to allow them to speak for themselves. It's

something that's perhaps most apparent when listening to different performances of the same classical piece; to hear not just the sound of a different orchestra and venue, but more importantly, to be drawn into a different interpretation. But it's actually just as critical with any form of music, and just as obvious once you realize what you are looking for. Listen on the Rowlands and the difference between the graceful, easy momentum, the natural flow and holistic shape of Barbirolli's reading of the Sibelius 2nd Symphony (beautifully re-issued by Chesky from the Reader's Digest tapes), and the dramatic contrasts and dynamic fireworks of Berglund's EMI recording are laid bare. One is carefully shaded, sweeping and emotive, the other a study in black and white, a tour de force of musical and emotional contrasts. But by the same token, the character and attributes of Elvis Costello on *My Aim Is True* stand starkly against those of Ian Dury's *New Boots and Panties*, despite being the product of the same time, the same social and musical milieu. In fact, the two albums ▶



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What do you listen to?

≈ COOL GALES

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

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

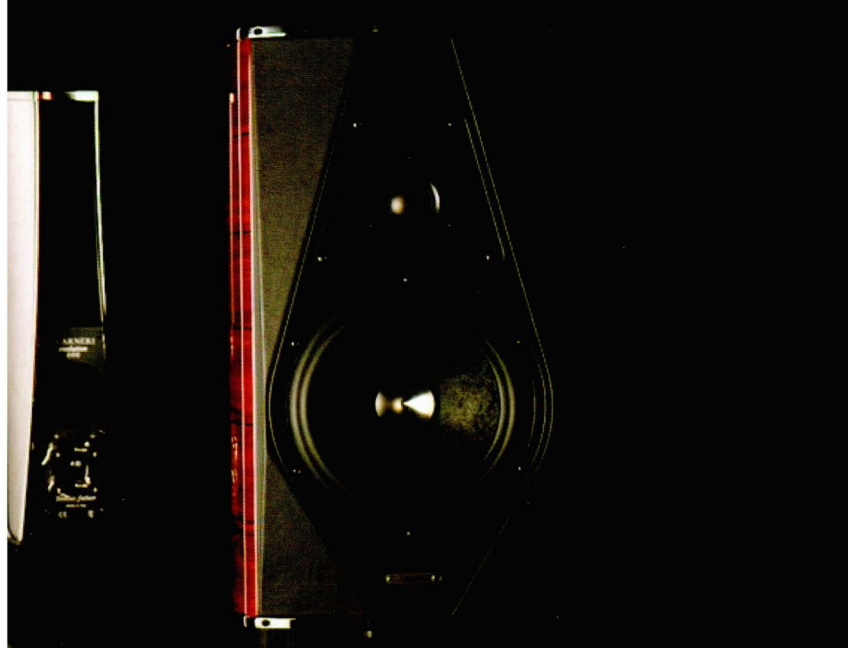
We've been utterly smitten by a recent addition to our portfolio, the Sonus Faber range. Visitors here are immediately drawn to the "oh, wow!" visual appeal of the Sonus Faber Futuras, shimmering creations of high-gloss wood and mirror-finish surfaces, quite possibly the most beautiful speakers ever 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."

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!"



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.



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.

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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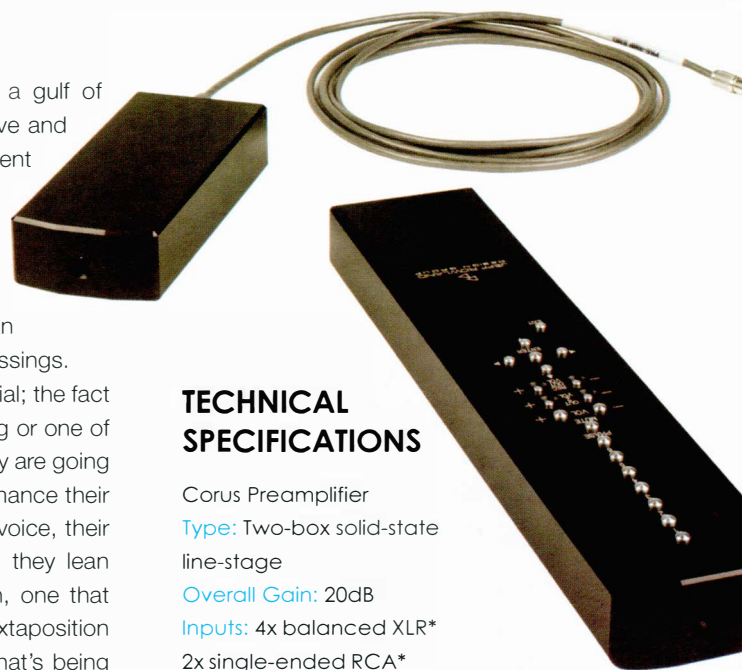
▶ are separated by only a couple of months, but by a gulf of personal experience, the one energetic, bright, sensitive and chippy, the other darker and deeper with a very different kind of power. Turn to something altogether lighter like Getz/Gilberto and you'll marvel at the difference between the sonic and musical quality of the original Verve CD issue and the recent LIM re-issue with its incredibly natural sense of flow and expression, an infectious rhythmic integrity to rival the best analog pressings.

And that's exactly what makes the Rowlands special; the fact that whether it's a great performance, a great recording or one of those all too rare occasions when the two coincide, they are going to let you hear that. By allowing recordings and performance their own identity and character they allow them their own voice, their own emotional connection and impact. In so doing, they lean slightly to a smoother, more progressive presentation, one that favours overall shape above the construction and juxtaposition of individual phrases, a subtle elevation of the what that's being played above the how. But combine that with the solid, grounded and contained quality they bring to performances and there's an unburstable confidence and presence to the music they deliver. Yes, the Connoisseur/Berning combination gives you greater transparency and separation, greater insight into individual technique and a perspective that brings smaller scale acoustic recordings to life, but that comes at a price. The Rowlands are great all-rounders, taking anything and everything in their stride, without fear or favour – and well able to interface with all but the most demanding of speakers (there's a mono version on the way for that!). They also act in concert.

Both world class products, I'd rate the 625 as the stronger performer of the two (just), sounding slightly less contained than the line-stage, breathing a little freer and easier. But, impressive enough on their own terms, use these two products together and that's when they really deliver. It's their completeness that makes them so special; the completeness of their musical presentation, their all-embracing functionality and elegant aesthetic; their versatility and polished performance. In every sense that matters, from the way they look to the way they work, but most importantly of all, the way they sound, the Corus and 625 really are the complete package, allowing you to simply listen, the mechanics of reproduction receding into irrelevance.

In a world where every review seems to be good and so many products exhibit so few specific, identifiable sonic flaws, these Rowlands represent a different level of achievement. It's that attention to detail, that perfectionist insistence on the right over the easy, that has created them – and recreated the musical performances they've played to such emphatic effect.

If you are feeling jaded and you are losing confidence in the promise and performance of high-end audio, the JRDG Corus/625 combination is just the antidote you need. Exquisitely constructed components with their feet planted firmly on the path to musical gratification – they'll plant yours there too. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Corus Preamplifier

Type: Two-box solid-state line-stage

Overall Gain: 20dB

Inputs: 4x balanced XLR*
2x single-ended RCA*

Input Impedance: 40 kOhms

Outputs: 2x balanced XLR
2x single-ended RCA

2x record out (1x XLR, 1x RCA)

Output Impedance: 60 Ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD)

Audio Chassis: 394 x 99 x 311mm

Power Supply: 119 x 99 x 279mm

Weight

Audio Chassis: 10kg

Price: £11,995

Model 625 Stereo Power Amp

Type: Class AB solid-state amp with bipolar output stage

Overall Gain: 27dB

Inputs: 1pr balanced XLR

Input Impedance: 10 kOhms

Rated Output Power:

300 Watts into 8 Ohms

550 Watts into 4 Ohms

Outputs: 2prs Cardas binding posts/
channel

Dimensions (wxHxD): 394 x 146 x 413mm

Weight: 24.5kg

Price: £12,495

Manufacturer:

Jeff Rowland Design Group

URL: www.jeffrowland.com

UK Distributor: Musical Design Company

URL: www.mdc-hifi.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1708 229308

Fletcher Audio Omega Point 3 turntable and Zero arm

By Alan Sircom

The audio world is diminished with the passing of turntable expert Tom Fletcher. But he left a resounding legacy. Not only in the Nottingham Analogue turntables and arms but with the new Fletcher Audio range. While there are a lot of common threads going on between the two designs, the Fletcher Audio range takes advantage of those extra years of development. And the new Omega Point 3 deck and Zero tonearm are the perfect examples of that additional development time.

Back in the 1970s, when everyone else was forgetting to get their hair cut, Tom was making industrial-strength cups of tea and learning about resonance, and the way it travels through a turntable. His Dais, Omega Point and Mentor turntables were the result, but came at a time when high-mass deck designs were very out of fashion. It was not their time, but later Nottingham Analogue Spacedeck, and Hyperspace turntables were the result. These decks survive to this day simply because they are still damn good, and in an act of true altruism he passed these designs on to his family and factory when he became ill.

The Fletcher Audio brand began as collaboration between Tom and his ever-faithful Danish distributors. It was started because, although terminally ill, he now had time on his hands and began to develop new ideas that went past the Notts Analogue limits, still based on the resonance smarts he fostered way back in the 70s. But where Notts Analogue decks used alloy platters bedecked in graphite and an MDF plinth, the Fletcher Audio use a heavy, thick aluminium platter and some secret sauce hardwood (I'm guessing something of the genus *tilia*, like the basswood, lime or linden tree... but it's only a guess, because no-one's disclosing the secrets and even the UK distributor knows nothing. This is the audio industry's secret blend of 11 herbs and spices or the recipe for Coca-Cola, only without the bazillions of dollars at stake should the secret get out) for both baseplate and the half moon plinth. Hard plastic feet, the same kind of hard plastic used in the armboard, separate the two. The alloy platter has a resonant ring if used on its own, but it comes with a pair of rubber bands to damp the platter.

As with Notts Analogue decks, there's an 'always on' low torque motor; this doesn't have enough grunt to move the platter, just enough to keep it in motion once you give it a push. This sits in its own housing and connects to the platter using a silicone rubber round belt. Simple, but very effective, and the motor is completely silent and speed control means repositioning the belt on a second spindle. This might cause some consternation for those who routinely switch off everything at the end of a session (either due to OCD or in an effort to save electricity, money and the planet), but the motor seems stable and doesn't draw great swathes of power.

Tom Fletcher had a bit of an eye for a good bearing. The story of people coming round Tom's place of an evening, finding him in front of the TV, watching *Corrie* with a cup of increasingly cold tea by his side, hand-lapping the bearing on a Spacedeck, are too numerous to discount. And his love of good bearing extends to

the decks that carry his name into the 21st Century. The table features a bearing of a combination of metals, such as steel, tungsten and brass. The



EQUIPMENT REVIEW / FLETCHER AUDIO OMEGA POINT 3 TURNTABLE AND ZERO ARM

idea is to make the parts of the bearing that need to be hard, as hard as possible and those that need to bed in are designed to do just that. In case you think a metal-on-metal bearing means a short life expectancy, remember there are people with Notts Analogue decks with a similar bearing construction who have had the deck playing pretty much constantly since the 1980s. If you are in your 50s and reading this, you could play six albums a night and the Omega's bearing will still probably outlive you.

So, it's simple, cleverly and naturally well damped, has almost nothing on it to go wrong and will last a lifetime. What's not to like?

The Zero arm is a fine match for the deck. It's also the more elaborate part of the package. Although 'elaborate' is reaching a bit, as the arm is as solidly utilitarian as the deck. Like Tom's earlier arms, it's a

sort of unipivot design (the bearing is decoupled from the yoke), with a unique no-resonance bias system, which allows you to adjust anti-skate while you are playing a record. This is an ingenious arrangement, there because Tom felt anti-skate is best applied by ear. Adjustment of VTA on the fly would be the icing on the cake, but you can't have everything. The lead-out cables are good quality, although they win no famous-name branding exercises. But, fancy cables and expensive flummery was never Tom's strong suit.

The combination is a great platform for a cartridge. The UK suppliers are very fond of the Ortofon 2M series – for good reason, these MM cartridges work well and track like a dream – but unless you have a cartridge that has the compliance of a cold chisel and the mass of a small planet, cartridge matching is a breeze. People use these arms – almost uniquely in ▶





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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 Qb/Qx installation, the benefits of the Qv2 are both complementary to the Qx 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 QBASE, a Qx (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

▶ Fletcher Audio decks – with Deccas, Lyras, Benz Micros and the rest. And they use them just as well with moderately expensive MC cartridges like the Denon DL104 as they do with the true esoterica that costs more than deck and arm combined. It's an unfussy platform from the brain of a clever, unfussy man.

I remember hearing a Nottingham Analogue turntable years ago, in the days when you had to make apologies to your friends for not using an LP12. Despite this heavy bias toward Glasgow, the Notts Analogue deck was impressively quick sounding and engaging next to the LP12. And the Fletcher Audio deck takes that impressive sound and runs with it still more. The three words that keep appearing in my notes are 'cohesive', 'powerful' and 'expressive'. You never get a feeling of music being a collection of disparate sounds, no matter how avant garde the album – even gnarly free jazz that sounds like someone waterboarding a saxophone, waterboards that saxophone in a controlled, solid and integrated manner.

Then there's that powerful sound. Music is extremely dynamic (not in an outrageous, OTT manner... just in the way music can be dynamic) and this can be surprisingly shocking, even on well-known music. I recently bought a copy of Fleetwood Mac's Rumours on 45rpm thick-as-a-dinner-plate virgin vinyl. Tracks like 'The Chain' – which practically everyone knows backwards – took on a rhythmic drive and energy that made you forget the bass line and guitar solo are the soundtrack for Formula One and remember it as a complete, powerful song in its own right. The fact it does this from a very silent background only adds to the pleasure.

I dug out an old favourite; 'Paganiniana', with Ruggiero Ricci on violin and Brooks Smith on piano on Water Lily Acoustics. This is an acid test of the ability for a turntable system to 'flow'. It's all about expression, precision of transients and detail. The Fletcher deck and arm excelled at the first two and was no slouch at the third. You could hear the master at work; by then an old master, with almost 60 years of playing under his belt, but what Ricci might have lacked in youthful energy, he more than made up for in expression, and this is what the Fletcher Audio package is made for. The potential problem here is a deck can focus on the expression and flow, and miss the leading and trailing edges of the music, but the Fletcher Audio deck starts and stops on a sixpence. You hear the attack, decay, sustain and release of each note on the Steinway Concert Grand perfectly.

Why pay more? Put simply... detail. This is a good, fast, musical and dynamic performer and at this price you'll struggle to find a deck that does more without sacrificing

one of more of these attributes. What other decks will do better at the price is that sense of forensic detail, some will have greater bass depth and some will present a bigger, deeper soundstage. If you throw caution to the wind and your wallet at a dealer, you'll find a handful of top-table tables that will combine all these strengths under the same plinth. But be prepared to suffer some sticker shock in the process. What you'll struggle to do at any price is find a deck that is as cohesively musical sounding as the Fletcher Audio deck. In many cases, what you'll gain in the detail and twinkly bits around the music, you'll lose in the music itself. For myself, I'd rather make the sacrifice at the audiophile end of things, trading some nice soundstage finery for an integrated and musical, cohesive whole. In other words, this is a real keeper.

There's a bittersweet end to this tale. The first Fletcher Audio decks in the UK arrived in the same week Tom Fletcher died. He never got to see the production version of his latest turntables and would never know how well received they would become, but in a way, that doesn't matter. This wasn't about ego, it was about playing music on vinyl. Tom's legacy is enduring, and it is not simply for today. Like the Nottingham Analogue decks that still prove so popular, this is a design for the long haul. And that holds both in terms of the company, and the decks themselves, because Tom's designs go on working forever.

He wouldn't have it any other way. +

SPECIFICATIONS

Fletcher Audio Omega Point 3 turntable

Weight: 20kg

Price: £2,699

Fletcher Audio Zero tonearm

Weight: 1.2kg

Price: £1,999

Manufactured by: Fletcher Audio

URL: www.fletcheraudio.co.uk

Distributed by: The Audio Boys

URL: www.theaudioboys.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1536 765531

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Tannoy Definition DC10T

by Alan Sirhan

I had started down the Tannoy review with high hopes of Mercury superlatives. I'd backed up Kojima's "1," and expected to begin my Definition DC10T review with something like "wow. Had a day later, all I'd get is "if you can hang your head when all about you are turning it down and starting in on "too" and "too like a Tannoy Man, my son!" Hardly worth the effort really, out at least Kojima fans can sleep safe in knowing the score goes unfurnished for another month.

But the Definition DC10Ts are worthy of some epic words. Because they are epic. They look good, sound good, are easy to drive, will sound fine in big rooms and small, are practically impossible to blow up (you'll try, believe me, and put a huge smile on your face).

These are the largest of a three-model range (the others are a smaller DC10T floorstander and a single two-way driver upper-middle Tannoy tier - above this come the Dimension and Prestige ranges) and the mighty Kingdom Royal. The DC10T features Tannoy's distinctive 254mm (10-inch) Dual Concentric driver - a large doped paper driver unit with a 25mm "Tubo Waveguide" horn-loaded titanium cone tweeter in one of Tannoy's WoodBass designs, extending up into the super-tweeter range. A matching treated poly 254mm bass driver (only without the tweeter) sits below the dual concentric driver.

Tannoy's love of the super-tweeter (this one reaches to 35kHz) is based in part on the idea that instruments have extended ranges beyond the audible and the "Oshroth" experiments that show human brain states are more in line with the original unamplified music when listeners are played with the original unamplified music than when they are played with recorded music that retains the extended frequency range. Compromising all ranges over the relevance of this in real-world listening, but regardless metal dome tweeters that extend far outside of conventional hearing are routinely less prone to ringing effects in our audible range.

The cabinet is a thing of beauty: it's a high glass curved and elegant tower with two rear-firing ports above the tweeter panel and a chrome curve along the bottom edge to match the cone surrounds, which looks fantastic in the room. It's a bottom-heavy design that's broken up with a large loudspeaker's grille, don't need to be broken up by the speaker grille, as they are affixed magnetically. Physically, it's a size of speaker that demands a medium-to-large room, even though the speaker doesn't seem troubled by the room itself. The speaker is best a couple of feet from the rear and side walls, but once again



Photo: 42

The speaker is not that busy and from range can help out the speaker up against the rear wall.

One of the unique aspects of the rear panel is that some speaker terminals. It's an earthy lag connection for amplifiers with a similar grounding terminal, which is used to enhance dynamic range and cut down on the interference. I say "cut down" because subtly grounding itself amplifies, was the on the ground chat (listen when the review was in progress, believe that terminal is some density "heavy" technology, ergonomically treated components in the crossover network and driver detail high quality copper in the hook-up wire.

Like most Tannoy speakers, the DC10T is happy with quality over quantity when it comes to amplification. It's best as a 50W efficient, right class impedance loudspeaker, but although that means an input it can be given by practically anything, it needs greater amplifier muscle than it first seems. It was happier with more power like the Musical Fidelity MD power amp, sealed in this case, and with the Devient D-Chrome (sealed, but sealed than it was with lower power amps. However, a good low powered amplifier worked well too, and the Sugden A2-SE delivered a fine performance.

"This size of speaker demands a medium-to-large room, even though the speaker doesn't seem troubled by the room itself."

My biggest job as a reviewer of these loudspeakers is not to overstate their biggest strength. But it's difficult: there are occasions the most fun you'll have with a set of speakers. During these is listening to a baroque score or late time jazz and so being the excuse for a party. In the case of the DC10T, you'll end up buying Dual Pure and Black Steel Press albums... and loving them. This is because they can take a lot of equipment, go loud in an acceptable manner without tiring, and by close a wicked bass line.



Photo: 43

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Revolver Cygnis Gold loudspeaker

By Paul Messenger

When Walter Chrysler famously commented: "there's no substitute for cubic inches", he was of course talking about car engines. Had he been in the loudspeaker business, I'm sure he would have said something similar referring to square inches.

That was my first reaction on connecting this pair of large loudspeakers to my system. By pure chance they took the place of a pair of much smaller stand-mount models that I'd been using for the previous couple of weeks. And although those stand-mounts were unquestionably high quality examples of the type, I was truly shocked by the dramatic sound quality improvement that occurred when I replaced them with Revolver's big Cygnis Golds.

It was a powerful reminder that a good biggun will always beat a good littlun, though it must be stressed that the crucial word here is 'good'. 'Big' and 'good' often fail to come together in loudspeakerland, first because it's much harder to control a large enclosure, and secondly because it has a much larger surface area to radiate unwanted distortions.

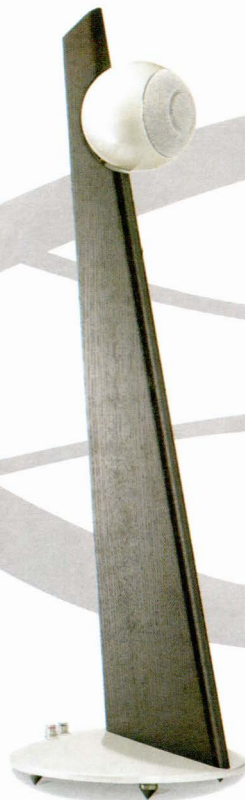
For those reasons, cheap floorstanders are often better avoided, and high quality big loudspeakers are both rare and costly. At nearly £14,000/pair the Cygnis Gold is certainly expensive by any normal standards (if not today's decidedly over-inflated 'high end'), but is it money well spent?

Revolver isn't exactly known for large and costly loudspeakers, and since the brand was relaunched by Charles Greenlees and Mike Jewitt in 2002, most of its activities have concentrated on the more price-sensitive mainstream speaker market. It doesn't therefore have much of a track record in developing a serious high end speaker such as this, so it's not unreasonable to question its credentials in this market sector. Ask the Cygnis Gold any questions you like, however, and it continues to come up with some thoroughly convincing answers. I might have begun listening without any particular expectations, but it only took a couple of tracks to get me readjusting my sights, and by the end of the first disc I was coming to realise that this speaker was actually something rather special. ▶

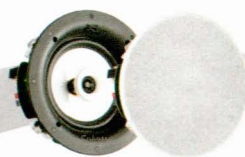




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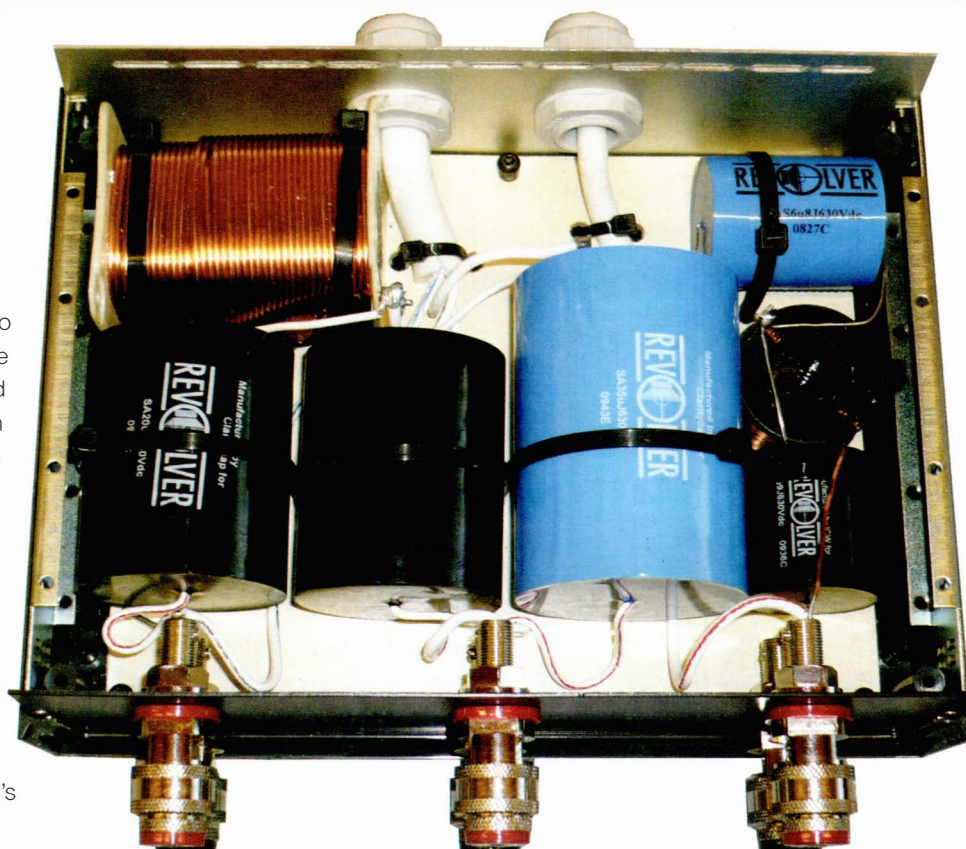
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► Inevitably, one's first reaction to changing a pair of speakers is to compare the newcomers to those that preceded them. When the Cygnis Golds came in following a pair of high quality stand-mounts and flaunting their 16-inch bass drivers, I couldn't help anticipating a bass end with 'woolly mammoth' characteristics. Happily, I couldn't have been more wrong. The Cygnis Gold certainly delivers a big sound with a full sense of scale, but there's nothing woolly or overblown about its delivery. However, one might describe its dynamic range and grip as positively elephantine, and it also shares that animal's legendary delicacy and lightness of touch.

There doesn't appear to be anything dramatically radical here, though the shape is a rather attractively styled variation on a fairly familiar theme. It naturally builds on the original Cygnis (reviewed in this journal by Roy Gregory in 2008), sharing a very similar mid-plus-treble 'head' unit above a bass enclosure, but in this reviewer's opinion (and his wife's) this Gold variation is actually rather better looking.

Managing to make a combination of 16 inch (417mm) bass unit and 117 litre enclosure look attractive is quite an achievement in itself. The tricks here include extending the curved and sloping front edge of the head unit into a raised section of the bass enclosure's front panel surrounding the edge of the bass driver, and in finishing the whole enclosure in fashionable high gloss black. The end result will never look small: it's a big speaker, no question, but also one that looks reasonably discreet, squat and purposeful.

All three drivers come from Chinese sources, but are also so distinctive I'm sure Revolver had plenty of design input. That very large bass driver promises good rigidity from a 320mm diameter cone made from a two layer Kevlar sandwich with a honeycomb centre. (To save you getting out your calculators, that cone area is roughly equivalent to seven 165mm drive units, not including the port!). The unit has a cast chassis and double magnet



motor, and its large enclosure has extensive bracing. The whole thing sits on spikes and cones that raise it 70mm above the floor. This feature, plus the listening room floor, are both taken into account in the alignment of bass driver and port.

The 15 litre sealed midrange/treble enclosure is apparently fabricated from an advanced composite material with a Kapex foam core. It's bolted via spacer-washers to the top of the bass section, and has just sufficient frontal area to accommodate the two drivers comfortably. It's quite deep, which seems sensible enough, while the sides and top form a continuous curve (possibly parabolic in shape). The midrange is handled by a 165mm driver with a 120mm glass fibre cone. The rather unusual tweeter has a 29mm polyester dome with a dimple in the centre, indicating that it's damped in the middle and the edge; a low resonant frequency and ultimate extension to 38kHz are claimed.

Connection arrangements are unconventional, in that the crossover is external, its components fitted within a small metal box that sits on the floor behind the speaker. This box has three multi-way input terminal pairs, allowing bi- or tri-wiring and/or -amping, and then feeds the bass enclosure via two very hefty locking connectors. Besides the advantages of mechanical and acoustical isolation, this network uses high quality components – laminated and air cored inductors, polypropylene capacitors and silver plated OFC wiring. Crossover slopes are all very gentle, minimising the component count and ensuring wide driver overlap.

The simple measurements taken gave very impressive overall results. Unlike many (though not all) large loudspeakers, there was no excessive bass under our far-field in-room measurement conditions. In fact it's remarkably well balanced, especially for such a large ►

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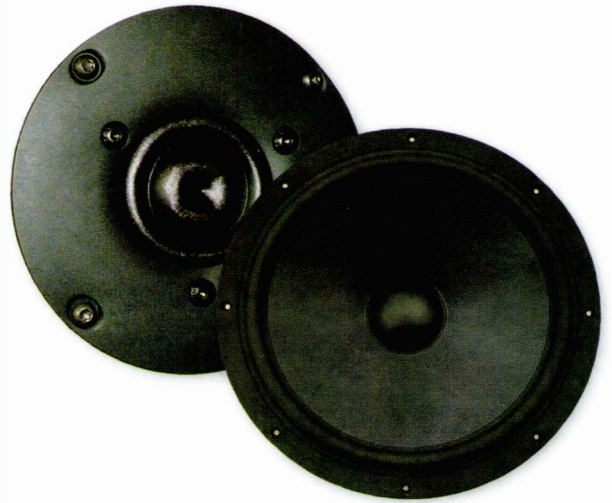
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► loudspeaker, holding within +/-3dB above 100Hz and +/-4.5dB above 20Hz. It's not quite flat – some mild upper-mid emphasis 600Hz-1.4kHz (or alternatively a slight lack of output 250-500Hz) is evident – but it's certainly more neutral than most. Midband sensitivity is a generous 91dB on our measure – actually matched by the room-assisted output of a stereo pair right down at 20Hz. This decent sensitivity and fine bass extension is also largely uncompromised by an amplifier load which stays mostly higher than 5.5 ohms (falling slightly below that figure above 6kHz).

As mentioned earlier, this speaker sounded immediately engaging, and continued to impress over several weeks. Most of the time I simply hooked them up to my regular system – Naim NAC552/NAP500 amplification and Vertex AQ Hi-Rez Moncayo cables, fed from vinyl (Linn/Rega/Soundsmith strain gauge), FM radio (Magnum Dynalab MD106T) and CD (Rega Valve Isis, Naim CDS3/555PS) sources. I also tried the all valve amp arrangement of a Quicksilver Audio Full Preamp and my Howes PX4 monoblocks.

More than most speakers I can think of, the Cygnus Gold combines the fine stereo image focus and precision of a small loudspeaker with the sort of bass weight and headroom that is only available from seriously large loudspeakers. Fine dynamic range and expression is partly due to excellent time-coherence, and a testament to the considerable care that has clearly gone into refining the whole bass section. Although the upper midband is just a shade over-projected, it's also clean and largely free from colorations.

Perhaps its greatest strength lies simply in its discretion. Whereas many competitors seem to feel the need to flaunt their hi-fi credentials in an assertive or even aggressive way, the Cygnus Gold simply serves the music smoothly, efficiently and without drawing attention to itself. Put these speakers on and it's very easy to forget that you're listening to a



hi-fi system at all; you simply get into the music, or whatever else you might want to play.

Impressively neutral and easy on the ears, the Cygnus Gold certainly doesn't take prisoners. It was very easy to hear the differences between, say, the solid state and the valve amplification, and both clearly lived up to their stereotypes.

It's certainly true that some speakers out there look and sound more dramatic than Revolver's Cygnus Gold. But that's exactly the point. This speaker is no drama queen; instead it simply gets on with the vital task of serving the music. One suspects that using an external crossover might be playing its part in delivering an excellent and well balanced all round performance, with great timing and full bandwidth coherence, fine neutrality, superior dynamic performance and low coloration, from a unit that's physically less intrusive than many alternatives. What's not to like? Revolver's new flagship deserves a ringing endorsement. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Frequency response: 25Hz-30kHz +/-6dB
(35Hz-28kHz +/-3dB)

Sensitivity: 92dB

Impedance: 8 ohms (min 5.1 ohms)

Crossover frequencies: 300Hz, 3.25kHz

Amplifier power: 15 – 300W

Finish: high gloss piano black

Dimensions (WxHxD): 46x113x48cm

Weight (each): 55kgs

Price: £13,995/pair

URL: www.revolveraudio.co.uk

Tel: 01752 638768



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Ensemble Zorbo isolation platform

By Alan Sircom

Based out of Switzerland, Dr Urs Wagner's Ensemble products are very much part of an underlying ethos. The Zorbo isolation platform is merely one link in the chain, but it's perhaps the gateway to the Ensemble way of life, because it tries to apply that Dr W natural sound to whatever you rest on it.

The Zorbo is designed to simultaneously isolate the product from its surroundings, and attenuate internal resonance. It's also not one platform, but four constrained layer sandwich platforms. So long as your equipment doesn't weigh more than 20kg or its feet stand proud of the 43cm width and 34.6cm depth of the platform, each foot is decoupled from its pals.

Does this make a difference to performance? I'd say a qualified 'yes'. If you own a SME turntable, however, you can remove that 'qualified' part – the deck takes on a life and openness that it's hard to live without. I've always loved the SME design on a number of levels, not least because it's the kind of turntable you can imagine Brunel approving of... but it can sound 'statuesque' rather than 'exciting'. The Zorbo brings out the SME's natural dynamics and detail, but without turning the music into boom-tizz fireworks and makes the whole sound slightly livelier in the process.

There is a commonality to the sound of equipment placed on the Zorbo; it makes sounds seem more 'organic' and a lot less 'hi-fi' sounding. How much 'more' and how much 'less' does seem to vary, as the best players seem to be going in this direction anyway, the improvement at the top of the top end is not so monumental. In the sub-£5,000 range though, this makes a lot of sense. It brings a sense of naturalness to the sound that is pointing in the right direction and hard to come across through other means.

It's a very different presentation to some systems, but it works nonetheless. The harmonic richness and strain-free Zorbo presentation makes a lot of sense. I only have the one Zorbo, but I could see them breeding, especially as they effectively isolate the device so well from the surroundings.

So is it worth seeking out? If you have an SME, get a Zorbo. For the rest of the world, it's still worth seeing if the Zorbo makes your sound more grown up. If you think its time to put away childish things, the Zorbo is a welcome step on the path to audio maturity. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Finish: satin grey lacquer

Dimensions (WxHxD): 43x3.8x34.6cm

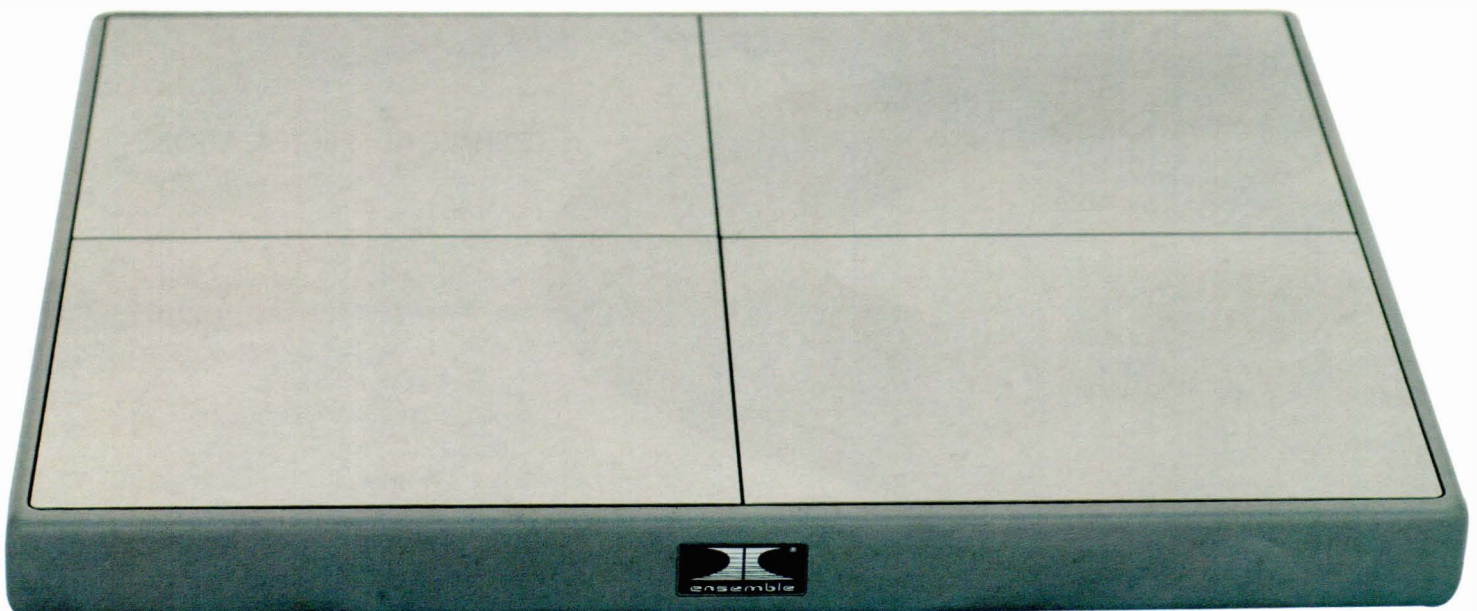
Weight: 3.6kg

Price £560

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URL: www.ensembleaudio.com

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Alan Sircom, Editor
June 2011, issue 80

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

HiFiMAN HE-500 Planar Magnetic Headphones

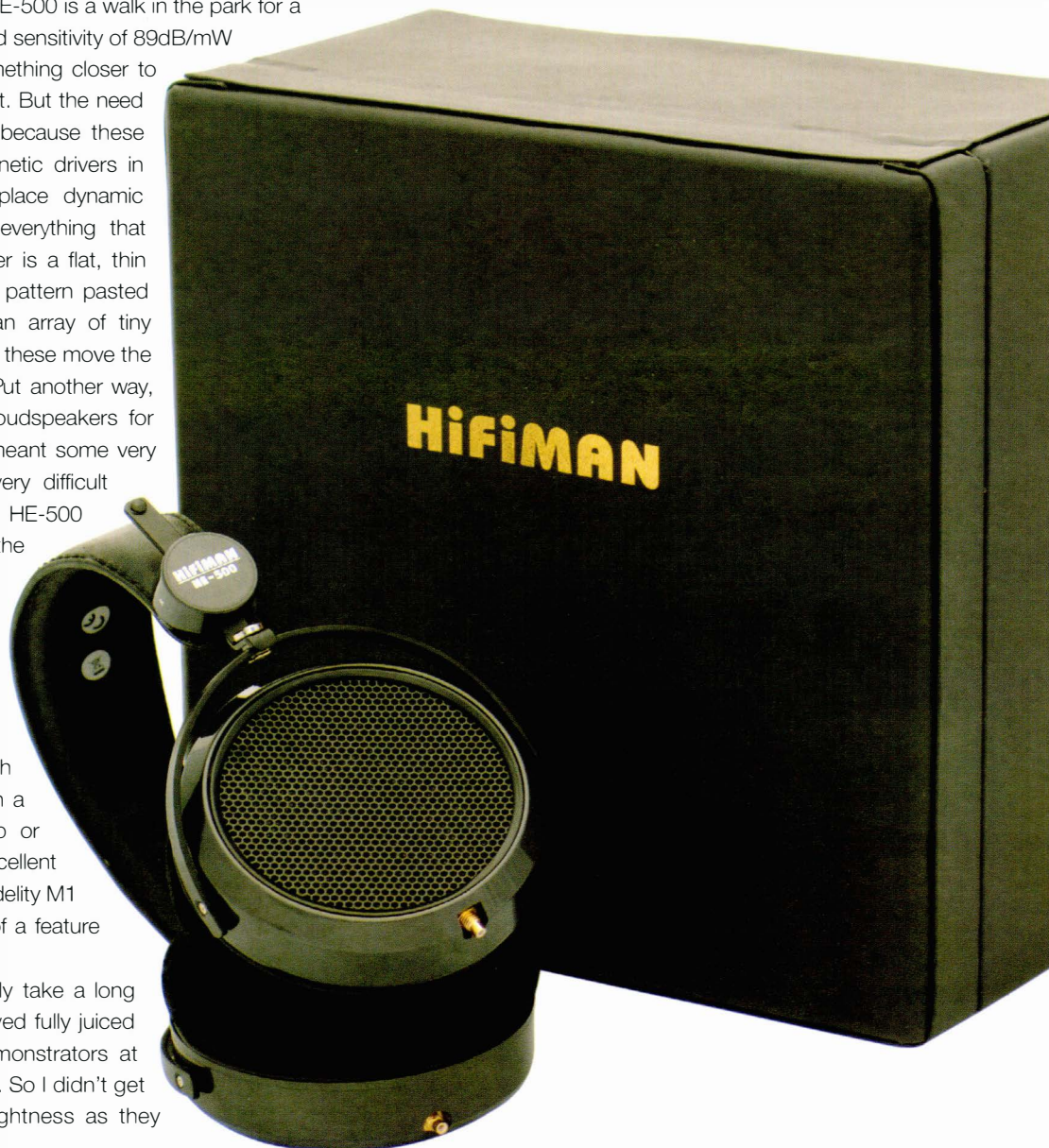
By Alan Sircom

HiFiMAN is a relatively new name to UK ears, but it has hit the ground running. Its range of headphones and headphone amplifiers form a key part of the New Audio Underground, the Head-Fi brigade who want every bit as good a sound out of their headphone systems as high-enders get from their top-line audio equipment.

We've held off on some of the more extreme end headphones from HiFiMAN, simply because they are notoriously difficult to drive. Not that the HE-500 is a walk in the park for a headphone amp, but at a rated sensitivity of 89dB/mW at least it doesn't require something closer to a proper power amp to drive it. But the need for power is understandable because these headphones use planar magnetic drivers in place of the more commonplace dynamic drive units found in almost everything that isn't made by Stax. The driver is a flat, thin membrane with a conductive pattern pasted on its surface. This meets an array of tiny magnets and when energised, these move the membrane as a diaphragm. Put another way, these are like Magneplanar loudspeakers for your ears. To date, this has meant some very exotic, very expensive and very difficult to drive headphones, but the HE-500 represents the HiFiMAN for the everyman. OK, these are still headphones that need a headphone socket with some muscle behind it, but it's really the first HiFiMAN that doesn't demand a headphone amp. You could use these with a good headphone socket on a well-designed integrated amp or CD player. I used it with the excellent it'll-drive-everything Musical Fidelity M1 HPA that will be the subject of a feature next issue.

The headphones allegedly take a long time to run in... but mine arrived fully juiced up having been used as demonstrators at the Cool Gales summer show. So I didn't get the two weeks of peaky brightness as they

break in. Instead, I got a nice box with a pair of very fine headphones and a removable cable. This last has three big advantages; replacement if the cable gets damaged, better cables than the good standard issue cable with its ¼" jack and two locking sockets, and the option to lose the jack altogether and go balanced if you shoot the moon with the headphone amp. But that's a fight for another day... we just used it with the standard cable, through a standard jack. ▶



▶ To date, the best headphone I've used – that isn't a Stax – has been the Sennheiser HD800. Its overall balance, detail and dynamic range were, to my mind and ears, unassailable. While others aren't so smitten with the HD800 – some feel it lacks some top-end coherence and some with smaller faces find its large over the ear cups end up being over the cheekbone – to me it was the best I've heard. The clue here is the past tense. I've found a new headphone champion.

The reason is the sense of balance. The HE-500 is one of those game-changer products. It has that top-to-toe coherence and sense of musical order that makes most loudspeakers sound like artifice when you return to regular listening. Other headphones – good headphones – will really only point out the overt limitations of the loudspeaker box (obvious cabinet colorations, noticeably chuffing ports and so on), but these do it no matter how good the loudspeaker. Those who have made the transition to headphones are also in for a treat, because these make most headphones appear either 'peaky' or 'missing something'; in many cases, both.

This is most readily apparent at the bottom end. You can get headphones that give good bass, but not to the same level as the mids and treble, or you can get lots of bass, but not with the same subtlety and accuracy as the rest of the frequency response. To date, most good headphones go the accuracy route and in fairness, most get close to delivering decent bottom end in the process. But the HE-500 is in another league, because of it ticking both 'power' and 'accuracy' boxes and integrating effortlessly with the rest of the frequency range.

How this manifests is simple. You play a piece of music, say 'cor' or 'wow' or something earthier. Whatever your personal superlative of choice happens to be, you'll repeat it in short order as you plough through more and more pieces of music, both in your usual comfort zone and those dusty oddities you rarely roll out. Nothing foxes the HE-500 and it sounds like music whatever you choose to play on it. Vocals are particularly chilling – we talk about 'articulate' loudspeakers and headphones, but you realise here this is

spoken of more in the breach than the observance. You don't even think about vocal articulation here, because it sounds like people speaking or singing. We are such voice-oriented mammals that the presence region where those sounds concentrate is vital to us, but once you get past the fact voices sound like voices, you begin to realise everything else sounds about right too.

The net result of all this is an 'oh!' moment. As in, 'oh... that's what it's supposed to sound like'. Music here ▶



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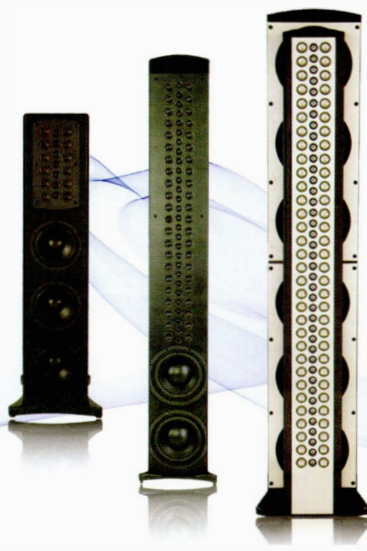
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▶ sounds more like the instruments it was made with than usual. Yes, in moving back to conventional loudspeakers, you get that three dimensional sense of a soundstage that you just don't get in anything like the same manner through headphones under almost any circumstances, but you pay in terms of directness, transparency and detail. Far from being a compromise for music on the move, or a late-night, keep the missus sweet musical sacrifice throw for your hi-fi, the sound through the HE-500 represents the sort of performance you'd struggle to make through loudspeakers. And there's no "...at this price" qualifying caveat on the end of that sentence. If you got this kind of sound in room, you'd be happy whatever the cost of the system.

All that being said, there's no such thing as the perfect headphone. Different heads, different ears, different tastes in headphones. With the HE-500, the headphone isn't the lightest around, and a relatively old-fashioned circular ear cup that's comfortable, but 'clampy' doesn't help this. There's also a slight upper-mid graininess that seems to be common to planar magnetic drivers; while a few will grumble, most won't notice it, and many of those who do will view the overall balance as more important. Personally, I fall into the latter camp and feel you need to step up to Stax levels of performance to get something better.

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Accessories: Hard-sided storage case

Frequency response: 15Hz – 50kHz

Weight: 502 grams (without cables)

Sensitivity: 89 dB (1 mW input)

Impedance: 38 ohms

Price: £795

Manufacturer: HiFiMAN

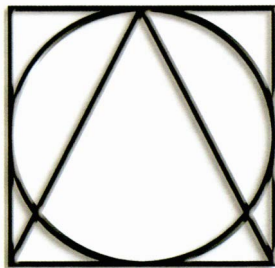
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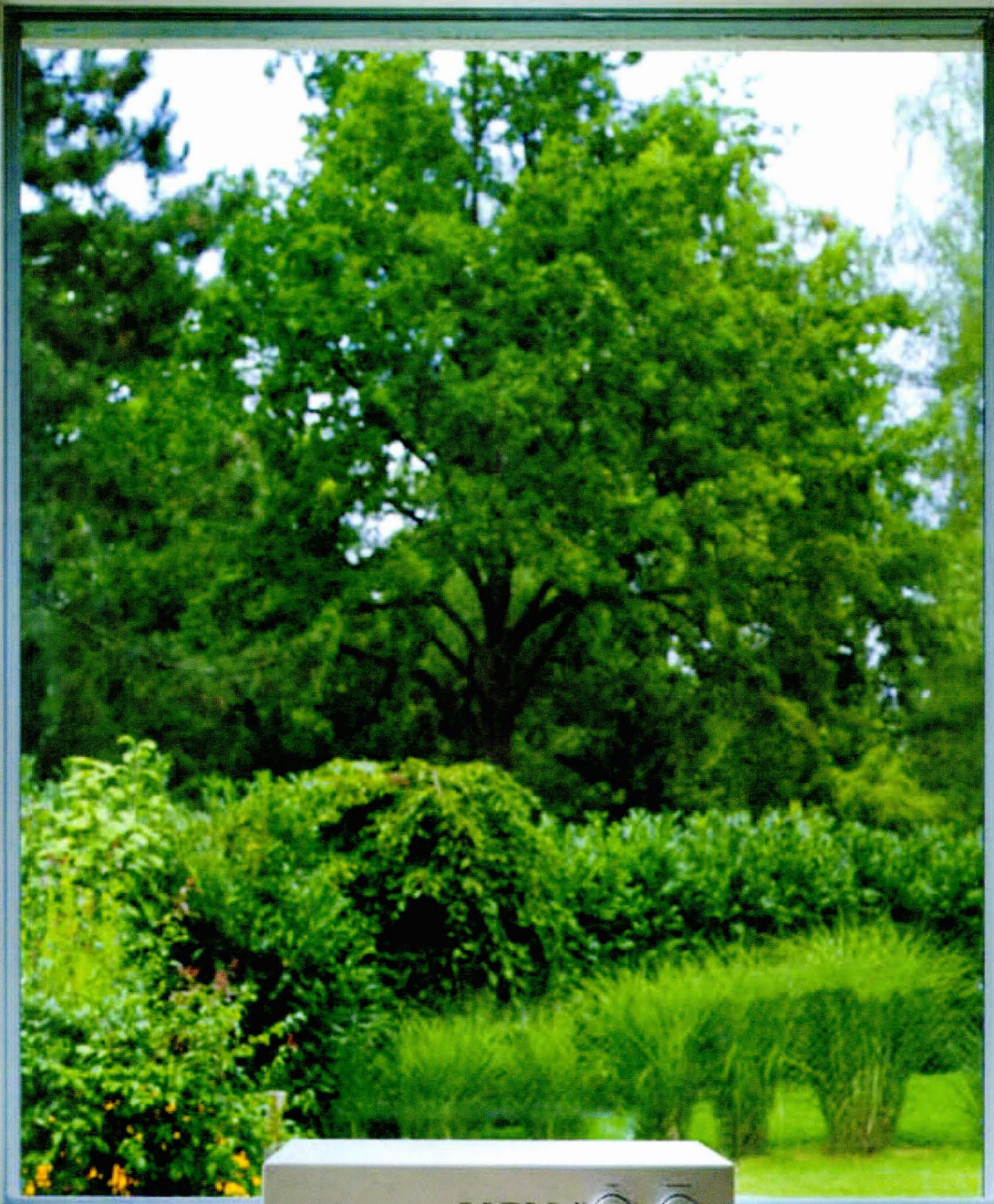
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



M2Tech Young DAC

By Malcolm Steward

The M2Tech Young is a 32-bit 384kHz Asynchronous USB DAC – or convertitore digitale/analogico as the Italians rather more romantically refer to such devices. It is a compact, minimalist unit – albeit with a rather striking design, which people will either love or loathe. The main body of the case is a 5cm tall and 20cm square natural aluminium sleeve with an M2TECH logo machined into the top panel. Inset into the fascia is a black-painted metal mesh through which protrude two controls: an on/off button and a source selector that cycles though the inputs. Between these there is a large, red dot-matrix display that illuminates to indicate which input is selected

and then, when a signal is present, it shows the relevant sampling frequency. This has all the subtlety of Blackpool Illuminations and I consider could usefully be improved with an off switch or a dimming facility but neither is present.

At the rear of the unit there is an unremarkable black panel housing all the input and output (RCA) connections along with the power socket, which is fed by a wall-wart connector. Whenever I see one of these, my immediate reaction is to wonder whether, and by how much, the unit would benefit by being used with a more substantial power supply. M2Tech gives specifications for adventurers who wish to try an 'alien' supply but naturally warns about your warranty being void if you do. I understand that the UK importer offers high performance alternatives to the standard supply, which, by repute, are worthy of consideration. My only other negative concern about the construction is the use of adhesive rubber feet, which may be appropriate on a cheap DAC, such as the Cambridge DACMagic, but is hardly fitting on a convertitore with an RRP of £977.95.

Five inputs include AES/EBU through an XLR connector, S/PDIF through BNC, S/PDIF through RCA, TOSlink, and USB2. The Young will handle ▶

▶ sampling frequencies of 44.1kHz, 48k, 88.2k, 96k, 176.4k, and 192k through all its inputs, except that its Toslink input will accept nothing greater than 96kHz. The 352.8k and 384k resolutions are only available through the USB connection. In terms of resolution all the inputs will accept 16 to 24-bit signals with just the USB being able to accommodate 32-bit.

The USB input is asynchronous (receiving only music data and generating its own clock stream) and was developed from the technology used in the well known and widely respected M2Tech hiFace USB to S/PDIF converter. This has been further enhanced to allow for the higher sampling rates the Young provides. You will need appropriate driver software to implement these speeds and currently there are drivers on M2Tech's website for Windows 7, Vista, XP, 2003 and OSX Snow Leopard. So Linux masochists might have to look elsewhere or don their coding hats.

The custom digital oversampling filter, which is separate from the DAC chip, uses a programmable logic device, a Xilinx Spartan family FPGA, to implement minimum-phase filtering and low pre-echo in order to optimize

the sound quality. The digital filter in the 32-bit Burr-Brown 1795 DAC chip is bypassed to allow for 768kHz internal operation to deliver an exceptionally low noise floor, and the output stage and buffer use high grade, class-A biased, low-noise op-amps.

I listened to the Young in my regular Naim active DBL system, where it was fed predominantly by a Naim HDX SSD hard disk player (with music stored on NAS) and a Chord Company, BNC-to-BNC, Sarum Digital interconnect. I also used music stored on an Acer laptop connected with a Furutech GT2 USB cable.

I fully intended to test the Young with 32-bit 384 kHz recordings but a search for them proved fruitless and, indeed, frustrating with lots of '16 bits are all anyone needs' and 'what is the point of high resolutions?' type forum comments appearing from recording engineers and internet 'experts' quoting Nyquist. The highest resolution files I could find were 24-bit 352.8 khz – works of Britten, Haydn and Pink Floyd – and a host of 24-bit 192kHz Studio Master recordings from Linn Records in FLAC format, with whose quality I am already well familiar. These recordings can sound breathtaking through an appropriate renderer and DAC combination but can overwhelm lesser equipment so I used them along with more 'mundane' 24-bit/96kHz, 24-bit/88.2kHz, and 16-bit/44.1kHz files.

M2Tech suggests a run-in time of at least 100 hours before you can expect the DAC to function at its best, and I was happy to comply with this instruction. The sound and presentation of the Young seemed free from the artefacts that make less capable DACs sound so obviously digital (and that is not a compliment). The Young had a vividly fluent and fluid quality to the way it portrayed music. It sounded simultaneously easy-going yet exquisitely dynamic. Leading edges were distinctly marked but there was no hardness or exaggeration about the way they were presented. The claimed low noise floor was readily appreciable from the outset.

An overall sense of naturalness pervaded the proceedings: nowhere more so than in the splendid 24-bit/192kHz recording Natsukashii by the ▶



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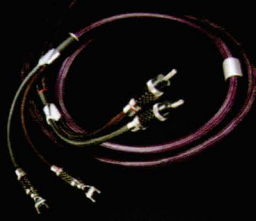
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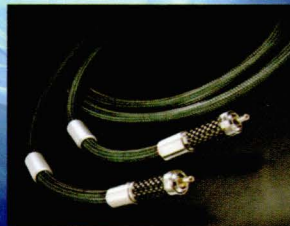
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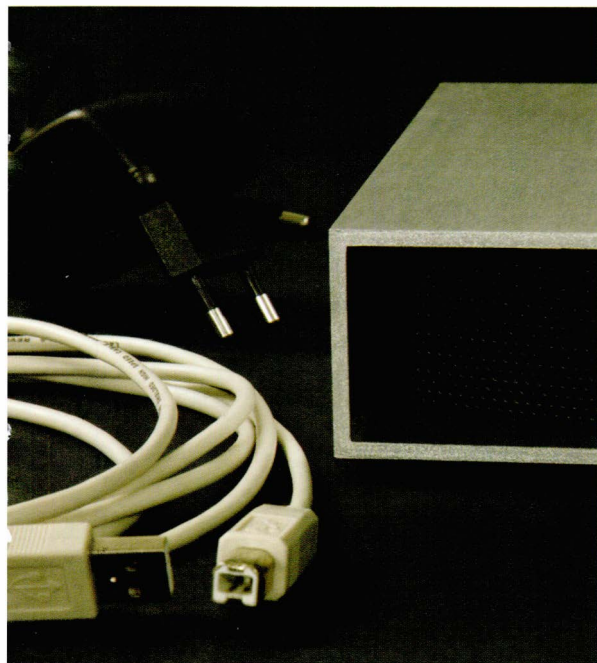


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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Sampling Frequencies(kHz): 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4 (not Toslink), 192 (not Toslink), 352.8 (only USB), 384 (only USB), Maximum Resolution: 24-bit (S/PDIF, AES/EBU, optical); 32-bit (USB)

Frequency response: 10-20kHz +0.1/-0.5dB (fs = 44.1kHz) 10-90kHz +0.1/-0.1dB (fs=384kHz)

SNR: 121dB (A weighted, 192kHz, 24 bits, 20kHz bandwidth)

THD+N: 0.0003% (192kHz, 24 bits)

Inputs: 2 x S/PDIF (RCA and 75 Ohms BNC) 1x AES/EBU (XLR) 1x optical (Toslink) 1x USB (USB female Type B)

Output: single ended on RCA

Output voltage: 2.65Vrms (7.5Vpp @ 0dBFS)

Supply voltage: 15V-18V DC

Supply current: 240mA@15V

Size (WxHxD): 20x5x20cm

Weight: 1Kg approx.

Price: £977.25

Manufacturer: M2Tech S.r.l., Italy

UK importer: Purite Audio

Tel: +44(0)208 815 5878

► Helge Lien Trio. The piano, bass and drums lucidly came to life through the Young. The piano had visceral texture and glorious tonality, and it displayed thoroughly realistic note shape with superb decay. Bass had more power and substance than I had heard before on this recording: at points it sounded like the rumble of distant thunder yet its LF was neither overblown nor sloppy. Meanwhile, the percussion exhibited phenomenal delicacy and realism, with the quietest of strikes still having a precisely etched, detailed character. This confirmed M2Tech's claims for an ultra low noise floor. The only area in which it lost out to a DAC costing more than twice as much was it lacked the extreme finesse of the more expensive DAC. Given its price, however, and the clean pair of heels it showed to many popular competitors, it almost seems churlish to bring up this minor digression.

Playing a 24-bit/352.8kHz recording of Britten's Boisterous Bourre, I was impressed with the way the Young presented the music with great insight into the way the arrangement worked and how the various instrumental lines inter-related and combined to such effect. All the instruments exhibited such complete tonality and fine detailing, making their lines supremely easy to follow and distinguish from those of other players. The overall portrayal was vivid and animated. Bass instruments had credible body and substance while the violins positively glistened, although not in any artificial sense. All round, the portrayal of the Young was both musically persuasive and cosmetically alluring.

On another 24/352.8 recording, this time a string quartet by Haydn, the music had a delightful vigour and again the interplay between the instruments was lucidly portrayed. Notes had splendid ADSR envelopes and sparkling dynamics. The recording displayed a wholly natural verve and vigour. Once more, vibrant tonal colour and beautiful texture brought the music to life, as did the recreation of the ambience of the recording venue. There was a truly authentic solidity and palpable substance to the sound of all the instruments: the result was a truly credible and captivating portrayal of the quartet.

The 24/192 Linn recording of William Carter playing baroque guitar, Fernando Sor – Early Works, clearly demonstrated the ability of the DAC to differentiate subtle dynamic contrasts. Quietly plucked strings were still clearly audible beneath those that were more robustly played. There was, again, a radiant texture to the guitar: it was easy to hear exactly how his fingers were fretting and plucking its gut strings. There was also a fine recreation of the recorded acoustic, and the music had credible vitality but was certainly not too forward or overbearing.

While the Young presents a very powerful case for music at higher resolutions, making the best 24-bit recordings sound considerably superior to 16-bit, it regularly appeared to get more out of 16-bit than other DACs. For example, it made the Dandy Warhols' "Bohemian Like You" extraordinarily musically persuasive as well as being cosmetically highly communicative. The presentation had true substance and authority.

In summary, the Young is an exceptional performer that truly punches above its weight. Even if you have no interest in high resolution music, it would be a mistake to leave this little gem off your list of DACs to audition. +



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Oppo BDP-95 Blu-ray/ Universal Player

By Chris Martens



Over the past several years, Oppo has steadily been carving out a healthy chunk of the disk player market and for all the right reasons. From day one, the firm has followed a singular vision that involves building versatile players that combine often shockingly high levels of performance and value in equal measure. As a result, Oppo's disc players have been winning friends, influencing people, and merrily re-writing the rulebooks that define exactly how much sound (and picture) quality one can reasonably expect from universal disc player for a given sum of money.

But one other aspect of Oppo that's also deeply admirable is their practice of continuous product improvement. Let's call this the "never-miss-an-opportunity-to-make-a-good-thing-better" impulse that, in my view, defines Oppo as a true high-end manufacturer (albeit one whose products are, by design, affordable).

Those of you who have followed Oppo since its inception know that the firm's practice has been to produce really good, full-featured standard models, but then to offer somewhat more costly hot-rod models targeted specifically toward sound quality-conscious music lovers. This basic practice continues with the firm's new second-

generation Blu-ray/universal players, where Oppo's BDP-93 (£499) serves as the standard model, while the just-released BDP-95 (£899) stands as the flagship, audiophile-grade model.

In the past, Oppo's flagship players were often "tuned to the nines" versions of its standard models, but that's no longer the case. While the BDP-95 shares some features in common with the BDP-93, it is in fact an entirely different player in ways that run more than "skin deep." Let me begin this review, then, by listing some of the BDP-95's distinguishing features and characteristics.

Audiophile Highlights

Apart from externally obvious differences, the BDP-95 differs from the BDP-93 (and from most other competing Blu-ray/universal players on the market), by providing a distinctive array of audio features, as highlighted below.

- Very high quality 32-bit DACs: The BDP-95 uses two 8-channel, 32-bit ESS SABRE32 ES9018 Reference Audio DACs. The ES9018 is similar to the DACs some high-end manufacturers use in extremely high-end, two-channel CD/SACD players.
- Dedicated stereo analog output: The BDP-95 offers a dedicated stereo analog output with "specially optimised ES9018 DAC and output driving stages," where "each output is driven by 4 DAC channels stacking together to achieve even higher performance." The stereo output offers two sets of output connectors: one set with RCA single-ended connectors and the other with XLR balanced connectors.
- Multichannel analog output: The BDP-95 also offers a set of 7.1-channel outputs, which are driven by the second of the player's two ES9018 DACs.
- Substantial, low-noise power supply: The BDP-95 incorporates a toroidal power supply "custom designed and built by Rotel," which is said to offer "superior power efficiency and much lower exterior magnetic field over traditional laminated steel core transformers."
- Coaxial and optical digital outputs.

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- ▶ ■ Expanded bass management options: Relative to earlier BDP-83-series players, the BDP-95 gives users an expanded range of subwoofer crossover options, including settings for: 40 Hz, 60 Hz, 80Hz, 90 Hz, 100 Hz, 110 Hz, 120 Hz, 150 Hz, 200 Hz, and 250 Hz.
- Powerful connectivity options: The BDP-95 is equipped with a hard-wired RJ-45-type Ethernet port, a wireless-n Wi-Fi adapter, an eSATA port, and two USB 2.0 ports. As shipped, the player can play music, video, or photo files from USB or eSATA drives, and can also stream certain types of content from the Internet. It cannot, however, function as a USB DAC, although it unofficially provides DNLA Server-like “Experimental Functions” that potentially allow the BDP-95 to play digital audio files stored on PCs attached to your home network.
- Rich disc and media format support: The BDP-95 is a true universal player that supports: Blu-ray Disc, Blu-ray 3D, DVD-Audio/Video, SACD, HDCD, CD, Kodak Picture CD, AVCHD, MP4, DivX, MKV, FLAC and WAV from recorded discs or, where feasible, from USB or eSATA drives.

Meanwhile, for those of you who are home cinema enthusiasts, let me simply mention in passing that the BDP-95's video features are every bit as versatile and performance-minded as its audio features. To learn more about the video aspects of the player, visit AVguide.com where you can read the review

I recently published for our home cinema-oriented sister magazine *The Perfect Vision*. But for now, let's focus on the BDP-95's sound.

The BDP-95, like many high quality players, benefits from a generous amount of run-in time and need plenty of warm-up time before giving of its best. It also tends, as do many other high-end players, to benefit from extra care taken in selecting associated power cords and signal cables, so that some experimentation is the order of the day. Odd though this may sound, the BDP-95 deserves—and in a sense almost demands—to be used with very high quality cables that could potentially cost as much (or more) than the player does. Once these preliminary issues are resolved, however, the sound of the BDP-95 becomes very special indeed—especially if you choose to listen through its balanced XLR outputs.

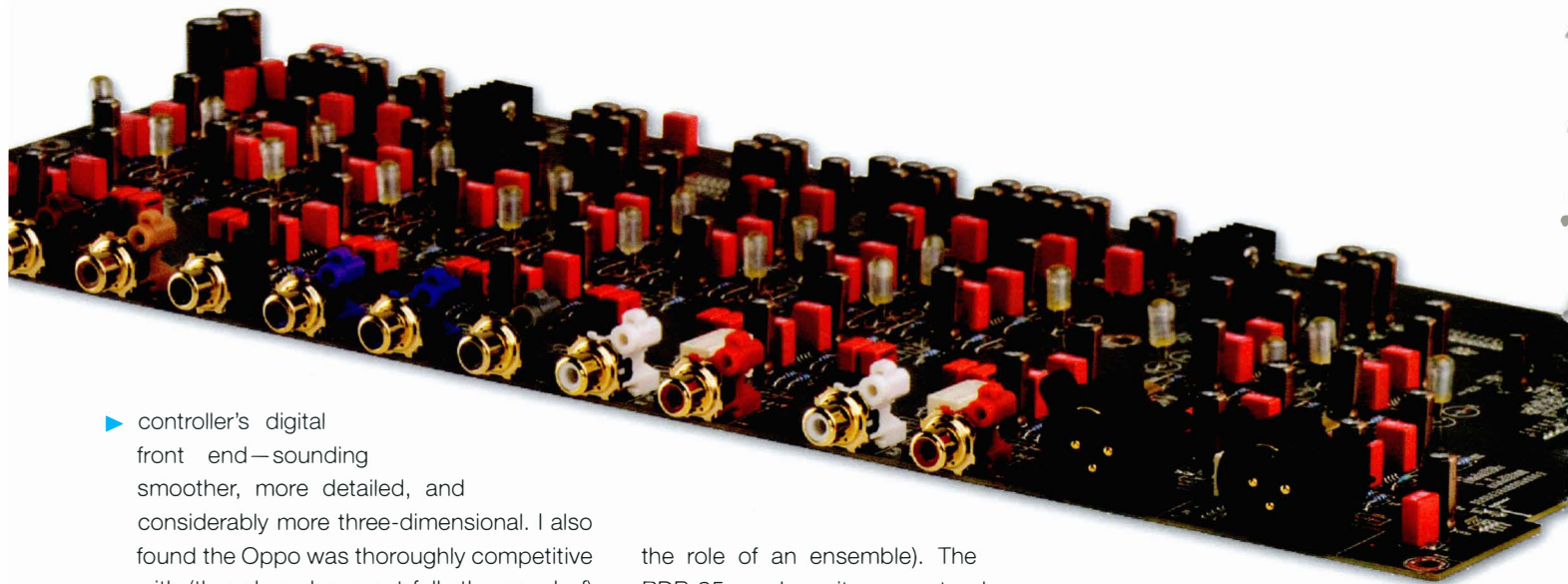
As I perceive things, the BDP-95 has three signature qualities that set it apart from the competition. First, the player has a highly detailed sound, yet a sound where the different aspects of “detail” are so thoroughly and beautifully integrated that you tend not, at first blush, to notice just how much sonic information the player is able to retrieve. When I use the term “detailed” to describe the BDP-95, then, I am thinking of a complete package that includes subtle timbres, textures, harmonics, transient sounds, reverberations and echoes, and especially spatial cues. Put all of these elements together and listen to a familiar piece of music and you may conclude that, with the Oppo in play, there's suddenly more “there” there.

Second, the BDP-95 is remarkably smooth sounding, which is all the more impressive when you consider that it also highly detailed. In my experience, the qualities of detail and smoothness don't necessarily travel well together, so that it's a rarity to find them working synergistically as they do in the Oppo. There's real sonic “magic” in this combination of virtues—sort of the audiophile equivalent of gain without pain. In the case of the BDP-95, detail may be what draws you in at first, but the player's relaxed, effortless smoothness is what keeps you listening, hour after hour.

Finally, the BDP-95 is capable of exceptionally three-dimensional presentations, assuming your chosen recordings are up to the task. Three-dimensionality, more than any other quality, gives the Oppo an overarching and holistic quality of sophisticated musicality, making it sound like a higher-priced component than it actually is. During my listening tests, I compared the sound of a series of discs being decoded by the digital front end of the excellent Anthem Statement D2v A/V controller vs. the sound of the same discs played through the BDP-95. I also did similar comparisons between the BDP-95 and two comparatively expensive reference players I had on hand: a Musical Fidelity kW SACD player and a Rega Isis CD player. The results were eye opening.

First, I found the BDP-95 consistently outperformed the Anthem ▶





▶ controller's digital front end—sounding smoother, more detailed, and considerably more three-dimensional. I also found the Oppo was thoroughly competitive with (though perhaps not fully the equal of) my two high-end reference players. While I ultimately preferred my reference players to the Oppo (no great surprise, given the 8X-to-9X price differentials involved), the Oppo was in no way outclassed by them. On the contrary, the Oppo sounded, in a qualitative sense, much more like the premium-priced reference players than unlike them. In short, the Oppo proved to my satisfaction that it could “play with the big boys.”

Let me provide a handful of illustrations to show how these qualities play out with real-world recordings. As a starting point, listen to Musica Nuda's cover of the classic Beatle's tune “Come Together” from *Live à Fip* [Bonsai Music]. Musica Nuda represents a category-defying collaboration between vocalist Petra Magoni and acoustic bassist Ferruccio Spinetti, where the duo's core sound has roots in acoustic jazz, but with classical, pop/rock, and even techno/punk influences also in evidence. Thus, the track opens the Spinetti vigorously playing the familiar opening theme of “Come Together” on his acoustic bass while we hear what turns out to be a processed form of Magoni's voice supplying what would normally be percussion and other instrumental accents. As the song evolves, it becomes clear that Spinetti's bass will not only be used to supply the traditional “bass part” of the tune, but will also—through Spinetti's sheer dexterity and inventiveness—provide other instrumental parts, as well (so that, in essence, one hears acoustic bass playing

the role of an ensemble). The BDP-95 makes it easy to hear Spinetti apply various playing techniques as he draws multiple distinct voices from his chosen instrument.

At the same time, Magoni applies her expressive and malleable voice in a highly creative way as well, sometimes supplying traditional vocals, but at other moments shifting radically in pitch and texture to produce what almost seem like sounds produced by otherworldly instruments or even a synthesizer (an illusion reinforced by selective use of presumably soundboard-controlled reverb and echo effects). Again, the Oppo is so detailed that it invites you to explore and savour not only the core sound of Magoni's voice, but also the many unexpected twists and turns it takes along the way. Though there are basically just two people performing, the illusion is that of hearing a large and eclectic ensemble at play.

But one subtle yet very important aspect of the Oppo's rendering of the song is the deft manner in which it provides low-level sonic cues that let you know the song is not—despite its occasional use of electronic effects—a traditional studio recording, but rather a live performance. In an almost subliminal way, you become aware that—behind the occasional technical pyrotechnics—the performance is being captured in a real recording venue before a live audience (you can almost feel the energy of the crowd). A delicious three-dimensional moment occurs about a minute into the song as Magoni belts out the song's signature chorus line “Come together...” from centre stage, only to have a voice positioned at the far right rear corner of the soundstage complete the line, softly singing, “...over me.” As the song powered to an abrupt close, the pent up energy of the crowd erupts into enthusiastic applause that, through the Oppo, sound remarkably believable and realistic—not like “canned” white noise.

For another fine example of many of the Oppo's musical strengths at play, try listening to the third (“The Alcotts”) movement of Charles Ives *A Concord Symphony*—a piece originally written as a piano sonata and later orchestrated by Henry Brant, played live by the San Francisco Symphony conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas [SFS Media, Multichannel SACD]. Though only a bit more than six minutes long, this movement spans quite a range of orchestral moods, from gentle, contemplative woodwind themes, to vigorous and at times quite angular string passages, on through to powerful and sometimes deliberately dissonant brass and percussion outbursts. ▶

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Jonathan Carr, Lyra Designer



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Throughout the movement, the BDP-95 impressed me favourably in several ways. First, it caught the distinctive timbres of each orchestral section in a rich and vibrant, yet never overstated way. Instead, you hear what Brant once described as the “athletic surefootedness” of the orchestration conveying Ives’ musical ideas in “clear, vivid, and intense sonorities.” This player is all about getting the tonal colours and textures of instruments right.

Next, the sheer smoothness of the BDP-95 allowed it to navigate the more angular and dissonant aspects of Ives’ themes in a way that revealed their intentional (and sometimes startling) idiosyncrasies, while at the same time allowing their richness and underlying beauty to shine through. Some disc players tend to turn Ives music into a strident, jagged-mess, but not so the Oppo. String tones, for example, sounded rich and buttery smooth, while brass section sounds had appropriate energy and bite, burnished with golden overtones. While the Oppo never hid the at times quirky aspects of Ives’ themes, its inherent smoothness and tonal richness invited listeners to embrace the broader sweep and flow of the composition.

Finally, the BDP-95’s three-dimensionality lets me hear that this was a live recording (captured in Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco), so that through myriad small sonic cues I got a sense of the orchestra as a living, breathing entity interacting with hall and the audience. Specifically, the Oppo’s ability to retrieve low-level details gave me a sense for the acoustics of the recording venue and, on louder passages, to hear how the orchestra energized the entire hall, filling it with sound. It is important to bear in mind, though, that the Oppo isn’t one of those players that pursues detail for detail’s sake; instead, the player’s many small sonic details coalesce to form an integral, organic whole that simply “sounds right.” If you stop to think about it, that’s one of the highest complements any disk player could earn.

Are there caveats, here? There are a few, though it seems almost churlish to mention them given the many things the BDP-95 does well, and for so little money. From an operational standpoint, and with the needs of a coming generation of computer audiophiles in mind, I would love to see Oppo configure this player so that it can serve as a USB DAC, and I would also love to see the player’s DLNA Server-like “Experimental Functions” become fully supported. Sonically, the Oppo already delivers very good-to-excellent performance in most areas, so that the player could perhaps best be improved by simply expanding upon its current core strengths: detail, smoothness, and three-dimensionality. About the only area where the BDP-95 might immediately benefit from a bit of extra work would be in the area of low bass performance, where some competing players do offer a somewhat deeper and more powerful presentation with a bit better pitch definition in an absolute sense. But with that said, let me also be clear on one fundamental point: absolutely nothing I’ve heard at or even vaguely close to the BDP-95’s price can compete with its sound quality.

The bottom line is this: the BDP-95 is by far the finest Blu-ray/universal disc player Oppo has yet produced. If you can afford one, then put the Oppo right at the top of your short list. If you can afford something more expensive, strongly consider buying the Oppo anyway. It’s that good. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Oppo BDP-95 Blu-ray/
Universal Disc Player

Disc/file formats supported: Blu-ray Disc, Blu-ray 3D, DVD-Audio/Video, SACD, HDCD, CD, Kodak Picture CD, AVCHD, MP4, DivX, MKV, FLAC and WAV from recorded discs or, where feasible, from USB or eSATA drives.

HDMI audio bitstream support: Dolby TrueHD, Dolby Digital Plus, Dolby Digital; DTS-HD Master Audio, DTS-HD High Resolution Audio, DTS-Digital Surround; SACD via DSD bitstream or LPCM conversion, LPCM 7.1-channel, 5.1-channel and 2-channel.

Onboard decoder support: As above.

Outputs 1080p at: 24Hz, 50Hz, 60Hz

Video outputs: Two HDMI, one component video, one composite video.

Digital audio outputs: Two HDMI, two digital (one coaxial, one optical).

Analog audio outputs: one 7.1-channel output, two stereo outputs (on single-ended via RCA jacks, one balanced via XLR connectors).

Frequency response: 20 Hz – 20kHz (-0.3 dB ± 0.05dB), 20 Hz – 96kHz (-2.5 dB ± 0.05dB)

Signal-to-Noise Ratio: >130 dB (A-weighted, mute), > 115 dB (A-weighted, unmute)

Other connections: Ethernet and Wireless-n (for firmware updates, BD-Live content, Netflix and Blockbuster-On-Demand content streaming, and for “Experimental Functions”), two USB ports (for content playback from USB drives), eSATA port, IR in/out, RS-232 (optional).

Dimensions (HxWxD): 10x43x31 cm

Weight: 7kg.

Warranty: One year, parts and labor

Price: £899

Manufacturer: Oppo Digital, Inc.

URL: www.oppodigital.com

Distributor: Oppo BD UK Ltd.

URL: www.oppo-bluray.co.uk

Tel: 0845 060 9395 (UK only)

Focal & Naim – a marriage of ideals?

music matters

By Alan Sircom

Unfortunately, once again plans to continue to cover Room Acoustics have been thwarted for yet another issue. My apologies.

There has been a lot of column inches and a great deal of hot air about the Focal and Naim merger. A lot of it based on a thorough and well-researched heap of nothing. There were obvious exceptions, but the default state seemed to be a heady brew of cynicism and misplaced *schadenfreude*, all wrapped up as scepticism. Some sailed very close to libel, and could have ended in litigation if the Naim and Focal folk were more thin-skinned. Having spoken to people from both parties at the Top Audio show in Milan (report next issue), it seems the cynics are wrong again.

Part of the cynicism hails from ham-fisted attempts to follow the money, and an obsession with who bought whom. While fascinating, it really doesn't say anything constructive at all about what happens next at either Naim or Focal. Whether a merger is entirely egalitarian and mutual, or a completely hostile takeover, it's what happens after the event that counts.

Naim prior to the hook-up was a small, successful manufacturing business. Focal was a larger, successful manufacturing business. The key words in both cases, however, are 'successful' and 'manufacturing'. Both companies built their business on professional manufacturing practises, and that statement holds irrespective of whether you like the companies or their products.



Gérard Chrétien of Focal seen forcing Paul Stephenson of Naim to drink French alcohol, according to the conspiracy theorists

The more I spoke with people from Naim and people from Focal, the more the hook-up seemed a natural step in the right direction. Here are two fiercely independent companies, both passionate about audio (albeit with passions that lie in very different sonic directions) that share more than they disagree over, looking to pool resources. Not in everything – I doubt Naim will begin using beryllium tweeters or Focal will start experimenting with BMR units – but by creating centres of excellence in R&D, the two brands can continue to forge their own identities and join forces on key products for the future. The natural first step here would be integrated streaming products that combine the strengths of Naim's Uniti range and Focal's Bird series. Doubtless, there will be naysayers, moaning that this cheapens both ranges and undermines the Britishness or Frenchness of their particular pet brand, but I walked away from such off-piste conversations with people from both companies feeling there was a palpable sense of excitement. Far from being a shotgun marriage, this is a meeting of minds, ideas and ideals. And while I'd love for the receptionist at Naim to start answering the phone in the style of Officer Crabtree from 'Allo 'Allo! ('Gid moaning, may I deflect your cowl?'), in reality I think 'Business As Usual' is the key phrase. No Français Required!

In fact, I suspect Focal & Co will not be the last to buddy up like this. Already, we have seen the likes of Wadia, Audio Research and Sonus Faber join forces, and the results are better products all round. It's a very different world out there today, and there are a number of SMEs (Small-to-Medium Enterprises, not necessarily the turntable manufacturer, although SME is an SME!) that could benefit from being part of a bigger group, or even some 'coopetition' (co-operative competition), where even arch rivals work together for their mutual benefit. It might seem a paradox, but it's a key way the little guys keep going! +

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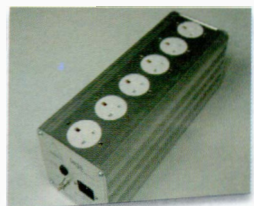
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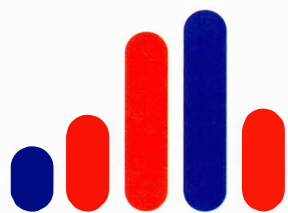
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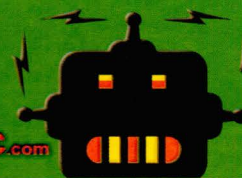
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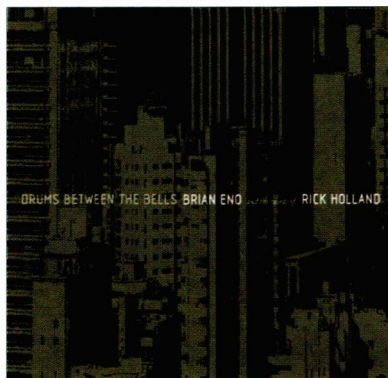
The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and – where possible – serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

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:

- DD** – Dennis D Davis
RSF – Richard S Foster
MP – Mark Prendergast

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Brian Eno **Drums Between The Bells**
 WARPCD214X

For years Brian Eno's thin voice always came surrounded by fabulously new music. There have been occasional vocal forays and *Another Day On Earth* in 2005 was a full vocal album, but this is different; a completely new take on vocal recording utilizing the poems of Rick Holland. Inspired by 1950s jazz poetry, elements of old rock and roll and country music and above all the sprechstimme or speech-song of Schoenberg, Eno has here done it again, produced a completely new kind of record. From the out there is an urgent metropolitan feel to the music as Eno intones "bless this space". And as the album progresses we are lost in the world of Blade Runner, Vangelis-like atmospheres bathing you in translucent keyboard tones. Eight other vocalists add colour to the proceedings and we travel through a variety of moods until Eno stops everything on 'Silence', an empty track and an obvious tribute to his greatest hero John Cage.

Track down the 2CD edition as it contains the album again in Ambient mode. It's breathtaking in its shimmers and vibrations and colourations. Eno is helped on both discs by Leo Abrahams on guitar, Seb Rochford on drums and Nell Catchpole on violin. And after years of isolated experiment and installation work Brain One has again come up smelling of roses. Fascinating. **MP**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Jean-Michel Jarre **Essential & Rarities**

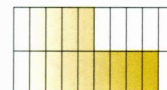
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Jean Michel Jarre has sold 80 million albums worldwide, but he is also seen as a propagator of safe easy-listening early 1980s Euro schlock.

Oxygene is a mesmerizing collation of synthesizer rhythms and memorable keyboard riffs, most notably on 'Oxygene Pt 4' the track that propelled him into the international mainstream. But then came a slew of albums that all failed to match the initial spark of that 1976 masterpiece. On Disc 1 of this career-spanning remastered box (all music pressed on black vinyl-replica discs) we get favourite moments from albums like *Equinoxe*, *Magnetic Fields* and *Zoolook*. The most impressive fare comes from *Oxygene* and the 1982 set *Concerts In China*.

More interesting is the second disc of rarities; 14 experiments detailing Jarre's fascination with oscillators, analogue synthesizers, Farfisa organs and of course his trusty Revox tape machines. Jarre and Peter Schaeffer worked together in the late 1960s, but Jarre sought a fusion of Classical harmony, with pure pop, musique concrete and electronic tones. Some of it sounds like Tangerine Dream at a disco, some of it like a French version of *Switched on Bach*. By the final two remixes 'Le Cage' and 'Erosmachine' you feel you have heard enough of Jarre's noodlings. Inessential. **MP**

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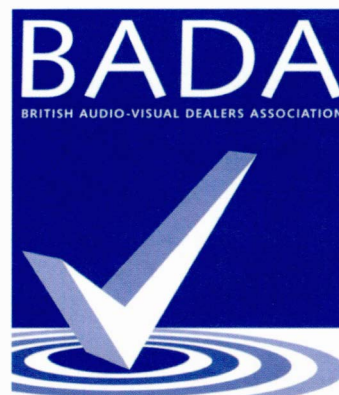


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FEATURE

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By Alan Jones

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Baden Powell

Solitude On Guitar

180g

Speakers Corner/Columbia C 32441

Brazilian guitarist Baden Powell, recorded this LP in Germany in 1971, where it was first released on German CBS with a rather boring cover, then reissued in the US with a cover with two almost naked women. Speakers Corner gives us this German record (reissued by a German company) with the US cover. No doubt they couldn't find the original German artwork.

The title suggests this is a solo guitar effort, but on most cuts Powell is accompanied by drums and in some cases bass. In any event the focus is totally on the romantic and longing sound of Powell's playing of his compositions and arrangements. I first fell for Powell's music when one of his compositions was featured in the 1966 movie 'A Man And A Woman', and anyone who remembers the mood of that movie will have no trouble knowing what to expect with the LP. Baden Powell died at the age of 63 and never had the longevity to shore up his reputation as one of the finest guitar players of the 20th Century. *Solitude on Guitar* is perhaps Baden's finest LP and an exceptional album by anyone's standard. Speakers Corner has given us a first rate reissue of a very well recorded session. Now how about some Luiz Bonfá? **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Gil Evans

Great Jazz Standards

180g

Pure Pleasure/World Pacific WP 1270

Back in the 1950s and 1960s jazz orchestral records were plentiful, with Gil Evans perhaps the most successful proponent of the form. Evans recorded a fabulous series of albums for Impulse!, Verve, Pacific Jazz and World Pacific that sound fresh today and are the inspiration for today's orchestral leaders such as Maria Schneider. Evans was able to reach a larger audience than he might otherwise have achieved because of his famous collaboration with Miles Davis. All of his early albums (up until the mid-60s) combine great music and sound.

In *Great Jazz Standards*, a band of almost 30 players, including greats Elvin Jones on drums and Steve Lacy on soprano sax and clarinet, is made up of the top band players of the day. They play — you guessed it — mostly jazz standards, but in such inventive arrangements by Evans that they sound fresh. World Pacific was a Los Angeles based record company founded by Richard Bock and was home to a host of "west coast" players. They produced fine recordings, if not quite the equal of nearby Contemporary Records. This mono recording is no exception and presents a nice spread of the orchestra with plenty of detail. The LP was remastered by Ron McMaster of Capitol Records, the parent of which owns the World Pacific catalog. This is a little known gem and I highly recommend it. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Janis Ian

Between The Lines

180g

Boxstar/Columbia. 88697691871

Jan Ian never pulls any punches. No subject is taboo. Her career spans three periods between which she seemed to lay off, waiting for the world to catch up. She wrote her first hit, about interracial dating, while in high school in the mid-60s. Her second period produced her biggest hits and her masterpiece, reissued here by Boxstar Records. This moody record made you want to know Janis. You knew that she saw deeper into human nature than you could, and she could turn these observations into lyrics and music so transformative that the LP became a fixture on your turntable. And *Between The Lines* sounded great, a real audiophile disc at a time when the term usually promised second-rate music.

I wore out and replaced my first copy with a white label promo. How much better could this record sound, I wondered when I heard it was in queue for reissue by Boxstar. Was I wrong. In addition to having much better bass articulation, the new issue just fleshes the images out far better than the original, giving us an eerily good sounding LP. Boxstar's David Fonn and Larry Marks brought in Kevin Gray to perform his remastering magic. This one is on my short list for best reissue of the year. And I can't wait for the gold CD, which is on the way. **DD**

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MUSIC



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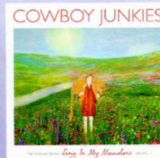
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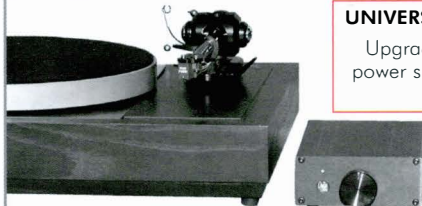
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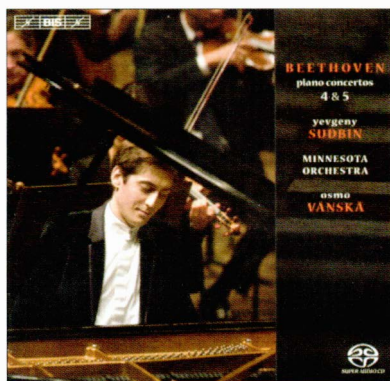
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Ludwig van Beethoven: 180g
Piano Concerto No. 4 (Op.58) No. 5 (Op.73, "Emperor")

Yevgeny Sudbin, piano with Osmo Vanska conducting the Minnesota Orchestra

Bis SACD 1758

This is the first release in an intended project of all five concertos and Sudbin brings his own imagination to bear in these here. The orchestra echoes his warm approach and what we have here are performances more in line with the Romantic period rather than looking back to the Classicism of the 18th century.

These are wonderful performances with the recording quality that provides great definition of detail and an approach to phrasing that does not fail to delight the listener.

The Fifth Concerto opening movement shows a performer and performance that has something new say about this all too familiar music that marks the personal stamp of Sudbin.

Finally, if you are unfamiliar with Vanska and the Minnesota performances of the Nine Beethoven Symphonies, you owe it to yourself to test the waters with any disc you can find. They are all superb readings with outstanding sound quality. That continues with this disc and I do hope you will add this to your collection. It is really very special. **RSF**

www.bis.se



Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky: SA^{15.1}
Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op.36; Overture 'Romeo and Juliet'

The Russian National Orchestra conducted by Mikhail Pletnev

PentaTone PTC 5186384

This marks the first in a new Tchaikovsky Symphony Cycle for PentaTone from Mikhail Pletnev and the RNO. Pletnev recorded the cycle for Deutsche Grammophon in 1996 and for this symphony the timings for this performance of the 4th are a little slower and offer a greater appreciation for the magic Tchaikovsky has wrought. For this session, Pletnev's seating of the orchestra is somewhat different (violins placed left and right of the conductor) and this lets the inner instrumental lines of both selections to be clearly heard. The sound quality Polyhymnia engineer Erdo Groot and his associates create the probably the best sound quality of any Tchaikovsky 4th I am aware of.

While others may enjoy different performances, I move this performance (both interpretation and sound quality) to the head of the class. It appears that Pletnev has rethought his previous 4th and here has created a tight, very insightful reading that is sure to please even the most discerning collectors of this great composer.

Most highly recommended. **RSF**
www.pentatonemusic.com



Russian Cello Sonatas: 180g
Rachmaninov, Borodin, Shostakovich

Alexander Chaushian, cello; Yevgeny Sudbin, piano

Bis 1858

The works on this disc were composed between 1860 and 1930 and hail from a momentous period of Russian music. One of my personal favorites, the Rachmaninov Sonata in G is given a wonderfully romantic reading. This is the first time I've heard Chaushian's cello and he is quite formidable. Sudbin as you already know is a favorite pianist of mine and these two individuals were meant to play together. The sound quality offered us by the engineers is exemplary. Recorded at St. Georges' in Bristol, England, the ambient information in this recording puts the listener right in the hall with the artists. This is a very intimate recording with an excellent job by producer and sound engineer Jens Braun.

The Borodin Sonata was inspired by a theme from Bach's sonata for violin in G minor which. This alone is a surprising inspiration from a totally "un-Russian" source. This is a warm and entertaining composition to be sure.

The Shostakovich is given a splendid reading. This is a rousing work with strong romantic overtones. Highest recommendation. **RSF**
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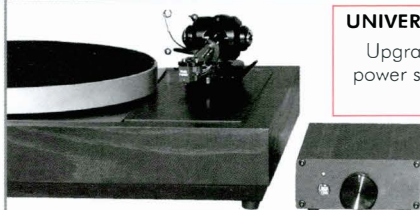


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Brian Eno & David Byrne – My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts

every home should have one

By Alan Sircom

Cast your mind back 30 years or so. CD had just been announced, the musical behemoth that is rap had just taken its first tentative steps into the studio and the Space Shuttle had just started fretting the firmament. A time of great societal and musical change, 1981 saw Brian Eno take time out from his Ambient series of albums and David Byrne working outside of Talking Heads to make an album of found sounds, of what would become known as world music, ambient and electronica.

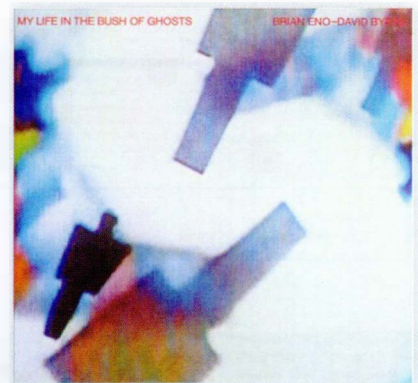
It's a clever and sophisticated combination of sampling styles, both in terms of the radio recordings, the random chants and incantations and Middle Eastern pop songs, and in terms of the random funk-rock styles brought together for this album. Using some of the best musicians of the time (among them Bill Laswell on bass and fellow Talking Head Chris Frantz on drums), the album defies easy categorization, blending worldbeat and pop styles with ambient and a lot of early 1980s funk.

The 'found sounds' sampling was particularly innovative, because the nearest music got to sampling 30 years ago was a DJ scratching. Although the first Fairlight CMI sampling synthesizers began to appear in recordings in 1980, the sounds sampled were short sounds like glass breaking. The other option was the field recording movement, such as the John and Alan Lomax recordings of 20th Century folk and blues, which treated the original recordings as sacrosanct. The idea of using extended snippets of found sounds as essentially the melody or lyrical content of another piece of music was simply not thought of. It would be some years later when Akai samplers and then computers entered the musical domain that sampling would become so prevalent.

The eleven tracks on *My Life In The Bush of Ghosts* are at once spooky and mysterious. It's a taut, angular sound, very much of the time but also as fresh as it ever sounded. Of those eleven tracks, 'America is Waiting', 'Mea Culpa' and 'The Jezebel Spirit' stand out, both on the album and in terms of how their sound resonates in albums to this day. The album – in various forms, with and without outtakes and bonus tracks, has been consistently in print for 30 years.

It's still argued precisely how big an influence ...*Ghosts* had on music in general. In fairness, it didn't act as catalyst or drive the sampling boom that came later, and it didn't spawn a series of me-too albums. Also, it could be argued that Eno's Ambient series is the force behind chilled out bands like Sigur Rós than anything on ...*Ghosts*. On the other hand, it is cited by many producers in the way created a generation of people to sample freely from TV programs, radio broadcasts, old movies and more. Overall, it's more influential than many people might imagine.

In a way, it's still providing an influence today. The website bushofghosts.wmg.com set up by Nonesuch records on the 2006 reissue allowed DJs to sample the samples and use them (under a Creative Commons license) in their own work. The 2006 mix is a complete (and hotter) remaster, but brings an additional seven tracks on a second disc. +



MY LIFE IN THE BUSH OF GHOSTS

BRIAN ENO & DAVID BYRNE

Recorded: August 1979-October 1980

Released: February 1981

Principal Artists/Producers: Brian Eno and David Byrne

Label: Original Sire/EG. 2006 edition Nonesuch

Original track listing

- 1 "America Is Waiting" – 3:38
- 2 "Mea Culpa" – 4:57
- 3 "Regiment" – 4:11
- 4 "Help Me Somebody" – 4:17
- 5 "The Jezebel Spirit" – 4:56
- 6 "Very, Very Hungry" – 3:21
- 7 "Moonlight in Glory" – 4:30
- 8 "The Carrier" – 4:19
- 9 "A Secret Life" – 2:31
- 10 "Come with Us" – 2:42
- 11 "Mountain of Needles" – 2:39

2006 remaster includes the following bonus tracks

- 12 "Pitch to Voltage" – 2:38
- 13 "Two Against Three" – 1:55
- 14 "Vocal Outtakes" – 0:36
- 15 "New Feet" – 2:26
- 16 "Defiant" – 3:41
- 17 "Number 8 Mix" – 3:30
- 18 "Solo Guitar with Tin Foil" – 3:00

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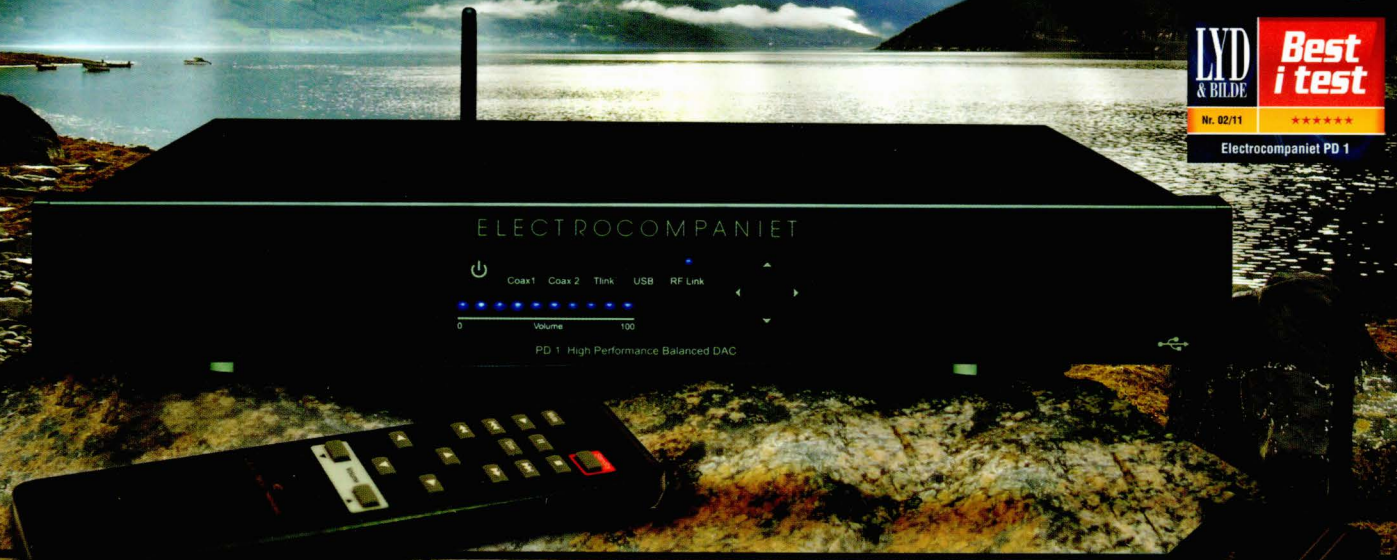
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In this edition of *PULSE*, we celebrate IsoTek's 10th birthday by looking back at the company's rise from humble beginnings to become the world's leading manufacturer of specialised power conditioning solutions (see p4). Now, as ever, we remain dedicated 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!

Keith Martin

Founder & Managing Director, IsoTek

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A new CD created by IsoTek aims to improve your system's sound by ensuring it is correctly set up and ready to perform at its best. The Ultimate System Set-Up Disc contains a mix of stunning music recordings from the legendary Opus3 audiophile record label, each one chosen to test specific elements of audio performance such as timing, dynamics and soundstaging, with additional non-music tracks to help with things like speaker positioning and give your system a thorough 'spruce-up'.



The six music tracks include an interpretation of Frank Zappa's *Dog Breath Variations/Uncle Meat* by the Omnibus Wind Ensemble, *Everybody Loves My Baby* performed by Eva Taylor, J.S. Bach's *Tocatta in D-Minor* with organ played by Mattias Wagner and an exclusive track from Eric Bibb's new album, *Blues, Ballads & Work Songs*.

Contact your nearest IsoTek stockist for more information.

Solus Evolves

ISOTEK'S SOLUS MAINS CONDITIONER UPGRADED TO EV03 STATUS

Power conditioning specialist IsoTek has launched an all-new version of its popular Solus six-outlet mains conditioner for audio systems. Positioned between the entry-level Sirius and highly acclaimed Aquarius in IsoTek's range, the new EV03 Solus builds upon the original design by incorporating a number of technologies trickled down from the company's top-end power conditioning components.

The sophisticated delta filter network deployed within the original Solus has been further enhanced, increasing its effectiveness in cancelling both common mode and differential noise in the mains supply. Newly devised individual

differential filtering is applied to each of the unit's six outputs, preventing cross-contamination between connected audio components, and IsoTek's proprietary K.E.R.P. technology is now integrated into the design, equalising resistance across all outlets.

Silver-plated oxygen-free copper wiring is used throughout, while the unit's sturdy aluminium casing ensures it is built to last. Combining class-leading mains filtering with instantaneous, repeatable protection against spikes and surges, the new EV03 Solus is a superbly cost-effective way to enhance and safeguard any high-quality audio system.



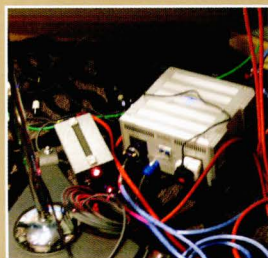
UNIVERSAL POWER

UMG USES ISOTEK COMPONENTS TO MAKE LATEST AUDIOPHILE RECORDINGS

If you've experienced IsoTek products, you'll know that the company's power conditioners can make huge improvements to the sound of audio systems in the home. But did you know that discerning recording studios also use IsoTek components to improve the quality of the recordings they make?

The audiophile arm of major record label Universal Music Group (UMG) uses IsoTek equipment while making many of its recordings. The latest albums by George Lam, Prudence Liew and RubberBand were all recorded with the following IsoTek power conditioning components in the recording chain: Titan (for microphone power supply), Nova (for mic preamp and compressor), Sirius and Syncro (for microphone power supply) and Sigmas (for computer and AD/DA converter).

"We chose IsoTek power conditioners because of the sonic improvements we knew they'd bring to the recording sessions," said Ernest Lau, head of UMG's audiophile recordings division.



ON TOUR WITH ISOTEK



From their base in Hampshire, England, IsoTek's representatives travel the world to conduct training sessions and product seminars - a vital part of their commitment to support each of the 45 countries in which IsoTek products are sold. In recent months, the company's travels have encompassed Germany, Switzerland, Italy and Hong Kong, as IsoTek's founder and MD, **Keith Martin**, explains.

One of the most important global events in the audio calendar is Munich's HIGH END show, held annually in May. Unquestionably, this has become Europe's premier showcase for high-performance audio equipment, so for a company like IsoTek it's vital to be present.

Celebrating its 30th year, this year's HIGH END show attracted 337 exhibitors from 29 countries, all vying to impress the 14,079 visitors to the many halls and atriums of the M.O.C. exhibition centre during the show's four-day duration. For IsoTek, it was the perfect opportunity to introduce our new, flagship Ultra Reference system, consisting of the state-of-the-art Super Titan power conditioner

and our forthcoming regeneration device called Genesis.

Set to launch later this year, Genesis is unlike anything currently on the market: a multiple regenerative system that rebuilds the complete mains sine wave in class A/B to deliver 600W of clean, distortion-free electricity. Together, Genesis and Super Titan form an epoch-making partnership that guarantees a perfect supply of electricity in keeping with the world's finest audio systems.

We were truly delighted with the reception these groundbreaking components received in Munich; they are true reference products and therefore not cheap, but the show's visitors showed a clear understanding of the influence of the electricity supply on sound quality, and a keen interest in the new technologies that IsoTek's Ultra Reference series brings to the market.

Having enjoyed German hospitality in several of Munich's excellent beer gardens, we travelled to Switzerland for a series of dealer visits. In four days we visited eight hi-fi stores, each undergoing full training to become a certified IsoTek dealer - a critical process that ensures all our end-users receive the level of service they deserve.

Following a brief spell back in Blighty, we headed back to the continent in June for another dealer tour, this time in Italy. Taking in Torin,



Milan and Genoa, a further six stores were visited, trained and certified. After pausing briefly for the best pizza I've ever tasted, washed down with some sublime Chianti, we returned to Hampshire once more.

We focused on the UK throughout July. Then, in the early part of August, we were off again - to the Hong Kong High End Audio Visual Show, the largest audio-visual event in Southeast Asia. Around 30,000 visitors witnessed two IsoTek Super Titan conditioners feeding four massive VTL MB-450 Series III monoblock

power amps and Rockport's mighty Arrakis speakers, with an IsoTek Nova delivering clean power to the source and preamp components. Asia is a truly vibrant market for high-end audio products, and this system was voted 'best sound at the show' by the attending audiophiles - like the planes that carry us from country to country, IsoTek's global reputation continues to soar...



were just as enthusiastic, branding the Titan "the most impressive mains filter we've ever heard".


A number of now-familiar IsoTek design concepts were born as a result of the Titan/Nova project, and in 2006 these began to filter down to less costly conditioning components.






















The first of these was Sigmas, sporting Direct Coupled Design and Adaptive Gating technologies that earned further prestigious awards, including 'Best Accessory' and 'Best Mains Conditioner' in *Hi-Fi News* and *Hi-Fi Choice* respectively.

The Titan, Nova and Sigmas remain key components in IsoTek's current range, alongside the latest EVO3-generation products like the Mira TV filter and Sirius entry-level mains block. Another EVO3 component is the Aquarius, launched at the end of 2009 to replace the GII Mini Sub, arguably IsoTek's most iconic product. Clearly, Aquarius simply had to deliver – and boy, does it ever! According to *Hi-Fi Choice*, "the lift in performance is quite remarkable", while *Hi-Fi World* describes it as "extremely effective" and *Hi-Fi+* says it is "very highly recommended".

In 2011, IsoTek's appetite for innovation remains as keen as ever. Critics are confirming the recently launched Super Titan – first product in the flagship Ultra Reference range – to be a power conditioning colossus beyond compare, while the more readily affordable EVO3 Solus six-outlet conditioner is preparing for imminent launch. The awards and accolades continue to arrive with unerring regularity, and leading audio manufacturers consistently recommend IsoTek power conditioners more than any other brand.

For me, IsoTek's importance is straightforward: the company's products enhance my hi-fi system, enabling it to deliver the music I love with greater clarity, atmosphere and emotion. IsoTek power conditioners cut through the noise, raising the ability of each connected component to communicate with sweet, sonorous eloquence and strengthening the connection between the music and the listener.

When I explain this to Keith, he smiles. "Music has always been our motivation," he says. "We wanted to make it sound better but the product we needed didn't exist, so we decided to make it ourselves. We've travelled a long way in 10 years, but instead of pondering on the past, we're focused on the future." For IsoTek, it seems, the journey has only just begun. 

WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ 2010 What Hi-Fi? Best Product Ultimate Guide to TV IsoTek Vision	 2010 Hi-Fi World 5-Globe Winner IsoTek Aquarius	THE 2010 HI-FI AWARDS! MANY COMMENDATIONS  2010 Hi-Fi Plus Highly Commended IsoTek Aquarius	 2011 Hi-Fi World 5-Globe Winner IsoTek Super Titan
WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ 2008 What Hi-Fi? Best All-Rounder Ultimate Guide IsoTek GII Mini-Sub	BEST BUY  2008 Hi-Fi Choice Best Buy IsoTek Sirius	WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ 2008 What Hi-Fi? Best Cost-No-Object Ultimate Guide IsoTek Titan	 2008 Hi-Fi Choice Silver Award IsoTek Sirius
EDITORS CHOICE  2007 Hi-Fi Choice Editors Choice IsoTek Audio Grade IEC	 2007 Hi-Fi Choice Category Winner IsoTek Sigmas	 2007 Sound & Vision Category Winner Hungary IsoTek GII Mini Sub	WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ 2008 What Hi-Fi? Best All-Rounder Ultimate Guide IsoTek GII Mini-Sub
 2006 T.A.S. Editors Choice Nordost Thor by IsoTek	HI-FI NEWS  2006 Hi-Fi News Category Winner IsoTek Sigmas	PRODUCT OF THE YEAR  2006 Hi-Fi News Product of the Year IsoTek Sigmas	 2006 Hi-Fi Choice Category Winner IsoTek Sigmas
WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ 2005 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek Titan	 2005 Hi-Fi News Category Winner IsoTek Titan	Product of the year  2005 Hi-Fi Review Product of the Year Hong Kong IsoTek Titan	WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ 2006 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek Full System Enhancer CD
WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ 2004 What Hi-Fi? Category Winner IsoTek GII Vision	 2004 Hi-Fi Plus Category Winner Nordost Thor by IsoTek	WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ 2005 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek Gemini-6-Way	EDITOR'S CHOICE  2005 Hi-Fi Choice Editors Choice Nordost Thor by IsoTek
 2003 Hi-Fi Choice Category Winner IsoTek Mini Sub [Mk1]	 2003 Hi-Fi News Category Winner IsoTek Mini Sub [Mk1]	WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ 2004 What Hi-Fi? IsoTek GII Vision	 2004 Hi-Fi Choice Category Winner IsoTek GII Mini Sub
 2002 Hi-Fi News Category Winner IsoTek SubStation	WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ 2003 What Hi-Fi? Editors Choice IsoTek Mini Sub [Mk1]	EDITOR'S CHOICE  2003 Hi-Fi Choice Editors Choice IsoTek Mini Sub [Mk1]	WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ 2003 What Hi-Fi? Category Winner IsoTek Mini Sub [Mk1]



2005
Titan arrives, introducing IsoTek's innovative Direct Coupled Design concept



2006
Sigma launches, incorporating technology trickled down from Titan



2007
Arrival of Mira TV filter heralds new EVO3 generation of products



2009
EVO3 Aquarius replaces GII Mini Sub a critical component in IsoTek's range



2011
IsoTek unleashes Super Titan the world's most powerful mains conditioner



▲ FULL SYSTEM POWER CONDITIONING BAR
ISOTEK SIRIUS

Power to the People

From Sirius to Super Titan, there's an IsoTek mains conditioning component to suit every system and every pocket

So, you've invested in a great audio system—congratulations, we hope it will give you many years of pleasure. But did you know that its performance is affected by the electricity you feed it? 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 the performance of audio components. What's more, all the electrical items you use in your home, from computers to washing machines, affect the supply and erode your system's potential. If you're serious about sound, it's a major problem. The solution? IsoTek.

The improvements delivered by IsoTek power 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'.


There are IsoTek products to suit every pocket and every system, from entry-level to ultra-high-end. For those on a tight budget, the EVO3 Sirius is ideal – IsoTek's entry-level mains block, brimming with proprietary technologies like Inductive Resistance Gate (which optimises the isolation between each of the six outlets without compromising transient power ability) and K.E.R.P. (which delivers a more coherent sound because it enables a pure, symmetrical signal path), all housed within a rugged aluminium case.

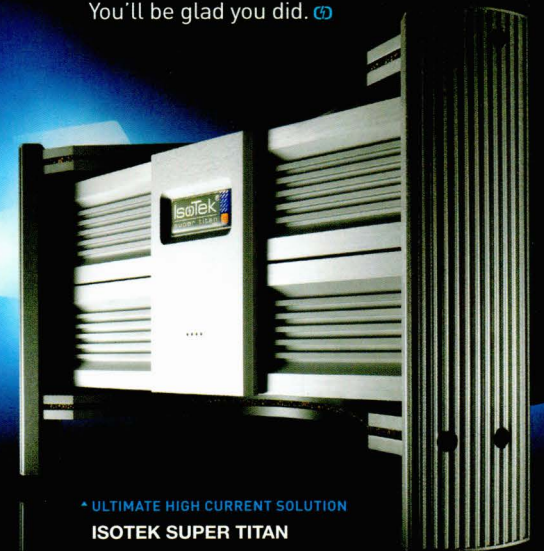
As independent reviews confirm, the EVO3 Sirius delivers superb value for money. "A great, real-world product that usefully and inexpensively upgrades your system", says *Hi-Fi World*, while *Hi-Fi Choice* declares: "We would not hesitate to suggest the Sirius as an effective upgrade for any system". The most recent review, published by US-based 'e-journal' *TONEAudio*, describes the EVO3 Sirius as "one of the best upgrades you can make", concluding that it is "highly recommended".

At the opposite end of IsoTek's range lies the mighty Super Titan, the most recent addition to the company's power conditioning

ranks. Designed specifically for high-current applications – powerful high-end amplifiers, in particular – the Super Titan can deliver 7,360W of continuous current, with 35,500W of transient power on tap, making it the world's most 'powerful' mains conditioner.

The Super Titan has just received its first review in *Hi-Fi World*, and the magazine was bowled over by its quality. "What I heard surprised and shocked me – for the first time I was listening to the music and not the hi-fi," declared the review's author, Paul Rigby. He describes how he heard "tremendous instrumental separation, drained of distortion by the Super Titan", concluding thus: "Beautifully built and presented, this is an extremely effective mains conditioning device... worth every penny".

Between the EVO3 Sirius and the Super Titan, there are many more power conditioning devices within the IsoTek range. To find the best match for your system, visit www.isoteksystems.com. Discover IsoTek and unleash your system's full potential. You'll be glad you did. 



▲ ULTIMATE HIGH CURRENT SOLUTION
ISOTEK SUPER TITAN



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A BRIEF HISTORY OF ISOTEK

This year, IsoTek celebrates its 10th birthday. As **Tim Bown**, former editor of *Hi-Fi Choice* magazine explains, the company's rapid rise from humble beginnings to become the world's leading power conditioning specialist is a story for lovers of great sound to savour.

It's February 2003, and I'm peering through the doorway of a packed hotel room in Bristol. I'm attending Sound & Vision, the hi-fi and home cinema show, scouring the corridors for fabulous new audio gear to feed my passion, and that of *Hi-Fi Choice's* readers. One particular room has caught my eye – and my ear. A fervent young gentleman with long hair and a 'Feel the Power' T-shirt is talking passionately about mains conditioners. I glance at the posters behind him – his company's name is IsoTek. "Interesting," I ponder, "I'll take a seat and have a quick listen."

Half an hour later and I'm still riveted to the chair. The chap with long hair is Keith Martin, IsoTek's principal founder, and he's demonstrating the Mini Sub, the latest product from a fledgling brand. The sonic improvements it makes are emphatic: more focus, more clarity, more presence.

"I'll have to try this at home," I decide – and when I do, my admiration grows... Thus begins a long-term relationship between my hi-fi system and IsoTek components – from that moment onwards, listening to music without IsoTek in situ would be unthinkable.

Rewind two years to the spring of 2001, and the IsoTek brand is only just beginning. A small, talented group of music fans with an eye for innovation and a passion for great sound decided to form a company with a singular purpose: to deliver power filtering products that were more effective than the inadequate solutions available at that time.

"The early days were chaotic, but great fun," recalls Keith. "I remember making the first 50 IsoPlugs (a plug-in noise suppressing device) on my kitchen table; the larger products were assembled on the landing upstairs. We were driven by our desire to make something better, to design mains conditioning components that improve sonic definition and detail without the dynamic restrictions commonly introduced by products already on the market.

"It was all about innovative thinking – new ideas that broke new ground. We wanted to make people aware of how mains electricity affects sound quality and deliver an effective solution to the problem. We deliberately manufactured full-width conditioning components, because we wanted IsoTek products to be considered a vital part of any hi-fi system, alongside source and amp components, rather than 'just another power strip'."

IsoTek's first product was the Substation, a modular conditioning component that introduced the company's innovative thinking to the audiophile world. This was swiftly followed in 2002 by the Mini Sub, an affordable, six-way conditioning unit that was more than a match for anything close to its price point. The company's reputation grew rapidly within the audiophile community and hi-fi critics began to take notice;

here was a bright, young British company with fresh ideas and products that were demonstrably better than those of its competitors.

By 2003, it was clear that the company needed to restructure in order to progress. Manufacturing was moved to a 2,500 sq ft industrial unit, thus greatly increasing production capacity, and a new generation of 'GII' IsoTek products was readied for launch in early 2004. The first to arrive was the GII Mini Sub, a major redesign that attracted universal acclaim and brought mains conditioning to the attention of music lovers worldwide.

Around this time, IsoTek began working with Nordost, the highly regarded cable manufacturer, to create a mains conditioning component to be sold

under the Nordost brand. The result, launched later in 2004, was Thor – a product that further stoked the flames of IsoTek's international reputation, which by now was beginning to blaze.

The plaudits from audio critics continued to roll in. The GII Mini Sub was voted the year's best mains conditioner by *What Hi-Fi?*, *Sound and Vision*, *Hi-Fi Choice* and *Hi-Fi News*, with the Nordost Thor scooping the same accolade in *Hi-Fi+*. By 2005, IsoTek's turnover had tripled.

"The team was pushing incredibly hard," recalls Keith. "We were working more than 16 hours a day just to keep up. By now we had distribution in most key territories around the world – it's amazing to think how far we'd come in just four years."

At this point, some companies might decide to calm things down a bit, perhaps rest on a laurel or two... but that's simply not IsoTek's style. Instead, the company launched the Titan and Nova – two reference-level mains conditioners, one tailor made for power amps, the other for preamp and source components, both aiming to deliver a higher standard of performance than anything else on the market.

Both components were highly praised, with the Titan, in particular, earning rave reviews. "The Titan is a revelation," enthused *What Hi-Fi?*, *Sound and Vision* in a deeply impressive five-star review. The esteemed critics at *Hi-Fi News*



A DECADE
OF AWARD
WINNING
EXCELLENCE



2001

IsoTek launches first product the Substation mains conditioner



2002

First generation of iconic Mini Sub power conditioner arrives



2004

IsoTek restructures with new production facilities and enhanced design team



2004

GII Mini Sub mains conditioner launches to great critical acclaim



2004

IsoTek collaborates with Nordost to create Thor power conditioner