

Hifi Pig

EXTRA

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HI-FI WORLD



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Wadia DI122 Digital Audio Decoder

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



The Wadia DI122 Digital Audio Decoder will decode files at 24-bit/192kHz has a USB input that accepts up to 32-bit signals and support for DSD64, DSD128, DXD 352.8kHz and DXD 384kHz. It has an onboard headphone amp, a host of outputs and costs a pound under £1500. Dan Worth takes a listen for Hifi Pig

Wadia have been a big name in digital front end equipment for many years now and for me have always provided products with great styling, flexibility, feature rich options and solid sound performance. So when Absolute Sounds who distribute the world renowned brand here in the UK suggested a review of the new DI122 DAC – predecessor to the 121 which I know very well, I was happy to oblige.

The unit arrived extremely well packaged with medium density foam completely encasing the unit, with sufficient space for the included power supply and remote control. It's always nice to open a package that immediately states 'thoughtfulness'. The DI122 has an external switch mode power supply of 5v to connect with the unit, so my immediate thought was great, I can try one of my Paul Hynes linear PSUs with the unit and having the PSU outboard of a sensitive digital circuit of course is always a big plus point for me.

Also included is a remote control for the DI122. This remote control is one of the nicest I've had the pleasure of using, it's ergonomic and just so stylish, many manufacturers include these solid billet aluminium remotes with high end gear, but in my experience they are sometimes more style over substance. Often they are too heavy for comfortable use and can have sharp edges as well as being table top scratchers. The Wadia remote though is slim,

Wadia DI122 Digital Audio Decoder

comfortable, lightweight, well thought out and just so sleek looking.

The main unit of the DI122 package is equally as beautiful; a small form factor, aluminium surrounded, smoked glass lidded and very well made. It sports inputs for coax x2, optical X2 and USB, along with RCA unbalanced outputs and XLR balanced. Triggers in and out to connect to supported units are also featured along with a headphone amp and digital volume control to boot. The Wadia boasts a great platform for multiple system integrations and could be deemed at the heart of any digital setup with all of its features.

The Sound

Due to the typical Wadia rich feature list I was able to really utilise the unit to its full potential. In an alcove in my listening room I have a large wall to wall worktop as a desk and underneath lies a 150cm rack. The racked equipment feeds my main passive speakers as well as active Focals for the desk and is all connected via a highly modified Mac. I also have on the desk a nice stand with my headphones and another workflow Mac, so implementing the Wadia as the heart of this system was simple and obvious.

Firstly I listened to the active Focals with tracks from Tidal. I felt the combination being connected via the balanced outputs of the DI122 was a very good match sonically, a robust and detail rich sound presentation – highs which were never splashy or



with peaks to produce strong air and spatial awareness. I particularly enjoyed the tonality given to acoustic guitar with a top end that had strong fleshed out details. Although the Wadia isn't tremendously dynamic it's very musical and conveys a strong portrayal of natural tones and dynamics with good depth and insight into the mix, matched with the Focal's more extended and revealing top end I felt I had struck a balance which I soon became very fond of.

Vocals were again nice and natural and far from any forwardness, when near-field listening any added forwardness doesn't sit well with me at all and the combination of the Focal/Wadia setup allowed for me to enjoy even the most exuberant of performances with relaxed ease.

Bass performance was a little more rounded than my usual DiDiT 212DAC, but blended coherently with the rest of the presentation. I generally use this area of my home for any day time video viewing as I have a 32" led monitor in situ on the desk and having the DI122 as the heart of 2 channel video/audio was also a great pleasure. The strong balanced sound accompanies good imaging very well.

Before I moved to the main system I played a few tracks with my Audio Technica ATH D2000X headphones, again a detailed and punchy sound like the Focals which favours the Wadia's more natural and slightly laid back presentation. I loved what I



Wadia DI122 Digital Audio Decoder



was hearing vocally and bass performance was punchier through the headamp into my headphones than the main unit's analogue outputs, but then this of course is designated by the headphones to a great degree. Top end was also nicely laid out with good dynamics and the ability to keep the treble reined in to a suitable and pleasing standard, making long listening sessions at good volumes an easy task.

Moving on to the main system and with no need for any wiring as the unit was already setup to accommodate all my equipment at once, I can report that the Wadia DI122 does a sterling job of portraying a convincing natural performance again. Of course the quality of the accompanying components being used was greater and allowed the Wadia to really shine.

Musicality was at the forefront of the performance with strong decay being a notable characteristic of

Musicality was at the forefront of the performance with strong decay being a notable characteristic of acoustic performances

acoustic performances. Details in the top end were rendered extremely well with absolutely no harshness at all. All transducers used throughout this review are noted for being clean, from the Focal house sound, to the Audio Technica then on to my all Accuton ceramic based Ayon loudspeakers. With the Wadia being of a slightly smoother character, the matches I found myself with were a fantastic balance and allowed for music to flow effortlessly, with liquidity, great soundstaging and also real insight into the performances. Vocals were extremely strong and had a favourable and flattering

position with great focus and air.

Also at the time of review I had a nice little standmount pair of Dayens loudspeakers, which have a great ring radial tweeter. Utilising the DI122 again with the Dayens (which are not of a typically clean nature such as the other transducers previous) I could

Wadia DI122 Digital Audio Decoder



see a stunning little system in my mind. Wadia have produced matching components to compliment the DI122 – a streamer M330 and a couple of complimentary amplifiers A102, A315 and A340, along with the little Dayens would make for a gorgeous small footprint system, even the Martin Logan Motion 15's previously provided for review by Absolute Sounds would make a terrific system for all of ones digital requirements.

The bouncy and fun sound produced with the smaller standmounts in situ added to the fun factor of the system and it spurred me on to play some more upbeat, poppy music and Electronica. The flexibility of the DI122 continued to put a smile on my face as I really hoped it would as style over function is not something that sits well with me, I'm the type of person who is absolutely cool in a crisis, but get infuriated at small little problems, so if a product from a reputable company comes to me for review and quietly boasts to me on first inspection that it will be able to accommodate all my listening parameters into one easy to use unit and then functional and sonically falls short of the mark I would be compelled to make a fuss about it, I would find that unacceptable.

My final task was to unite the DI122 with an improved power supply of the linear variety. I own many Paul Hynes power supplies and I have a 5v SR5 version which I could easily lend to the Wadia. A quick change over and yes! I'm so glad I had one

to hand, the image now produced had more air and space to it, along with more accurate timing. Tonally I find the unit to retain its essence, but there was a development in character, the sound was more assured and a little more commanding in the bass, top-end details filled out a little and also had more perceivable space around them allowing primarily for more definition and attention to decays which were already strong, but now had better presence and a cleaner integration with a layered next note. Vocalists also spread their wings a little and pushed the rest of the band a little further away to allow for that portion of the stage to be more their own. Significantly different, ummm I'd probably say no, worthwhile, yes and the best thing was I knew I was still listening to the DI122.

Conclusion

With two coaxial and two optical inputs that accept up to 24-bit/192kHz signals; a USB input that accepts up to 32-bit signals and support for DSD64, DSD128, DXD 352.8kHz and DXD 384kHz. This vast array of inputs and supported formats allows music from an abundance of digital sources to be reproduced with the precision and elegance Wadia are famous for, with the option of two sets of outputs via RCA and XLR, like myself during this review the Wadia DI122 can be utilised for active and passive systems simultaneously and controlled via the stunning remote control and systems digital volume.

With a complimentary headphone amplifier, great style and a detail rich, natural and fluid sound, I can't see what there's not to like about the Wadia DI122 Digital Audio Decoder.

Pros:

Excellent flexibility
Great array of inputs and outputs
Great styling
Terrific remote
Highly musical

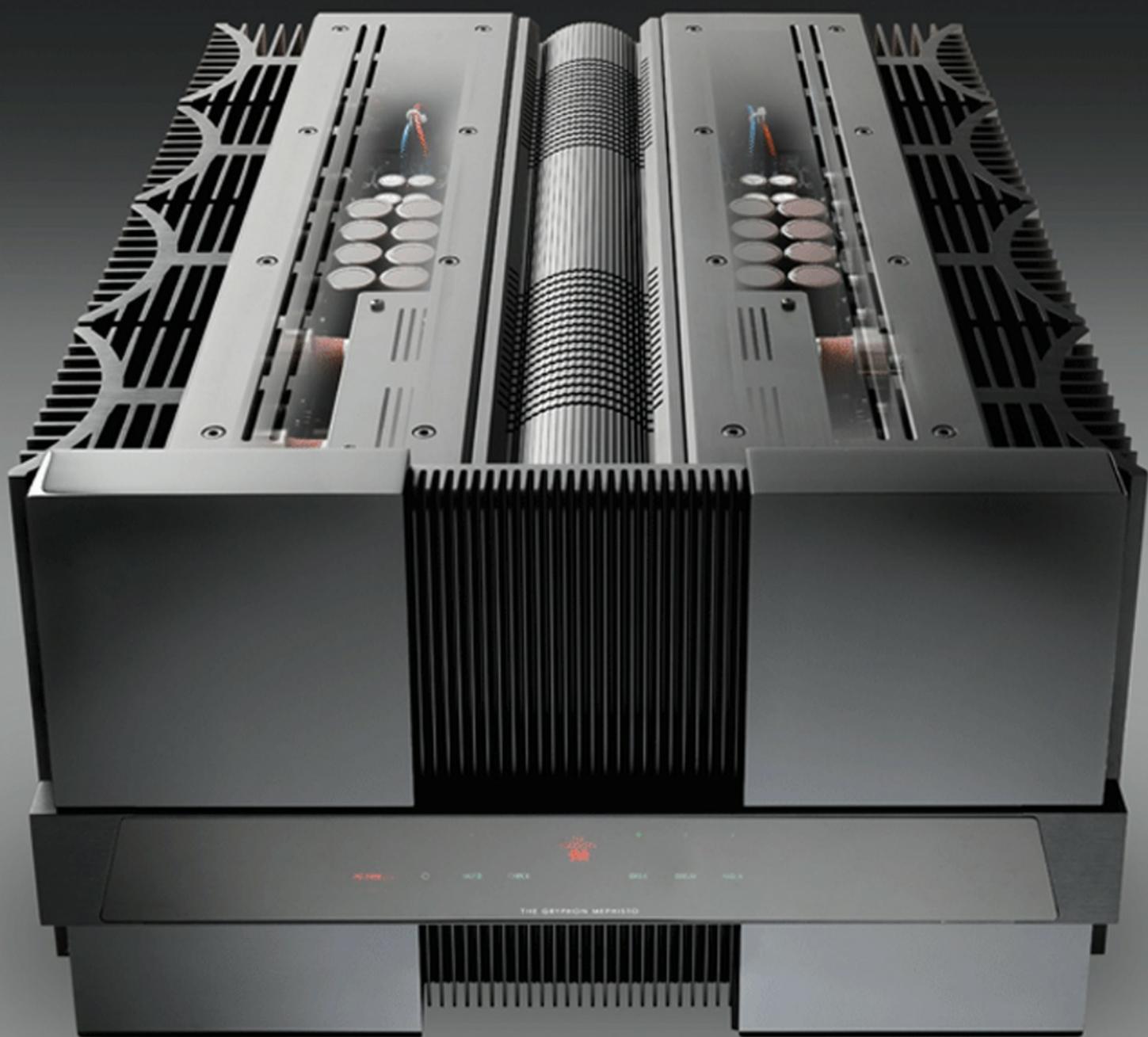
Cons:

Could be a little more dynamic

Price at time of review: £1499

Dan Worth

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Pro-Ject MaiA DS Integrated Amplifier



**Dominic Marsh
and Ian
Ringstead take
the very well
specced £699
Pro-Ject MaiA
DS integrated
amplifier for a
ride and rather
enjoy it**

How do you make a great amplifier even better? That was the task facing Pro-Ject when updating their excellent little MaiA amplifier that Hifi Pig gave an Outstanding Product Award to back in March 2015's issue.

The next logical step we can presume then would be to increase the power output, in this case from 25 watts per channel from the original MaiA, up to 50 watts per channel for the DS variant and it doesn't stop there either, with an extra cost option of the Power Box MaiA DS taking it up to no less than 80 watts per channel. Pro-Ject say the amplifier will cope with speaker loads down to 2 Ohms. Impressive!

We don't hand out Outstanding Product Awards lightly and the original [MaiA amplifier](#) won that by having no less than 9 inputs packed into a diminutive package and the DS version has that same number still, but some important changes have been made with those it seems in the DS variant. The phono section has been enhanced for better cartridge matching with the addition of a moving coil input, the DAC section can now also handle DSD data input, plus a new facility included whereby remote controls can be handled via a downloadable app to a phone, tablet or PC.

Pro-Ject MaiA DS Integrated Amplifier

Construction

I make no apologies for repeating what I wrote to describe the original MaiA's layout as they are essentially the same, which saves me a lot of typing but worth reading anyway as there are notable differences between the MaiA and the MaiA DS version.

The DS variant is still a diminutive amplifier by anyone's standards and I can easily see it fitting unobtrusively into countless domestic situations. Measuring some 206mm(W) x 72mm(H) x 220mm (230mm including speaker sockets) deep and has a slightly larger footprint in depth than the MaiA. Incidentally, these measurements were taken by me which seems to be at variance with the dimensions given on the Pro-ject website. The separate power supply provides 24 volts of DC at 5 amps and is fitted with a dual pole plug that connects it with the power inlet socket on the rear of the amplifier, with the power input to the power supply unit is via a standard figure of eight IEC socket (Suitable mains lead supplied). Other plugs and voltage matching power supplies are available for non-UK consumers. The casework is of steel construction with the choice of either a black or silver finish faceplate. Fit and finish of the casework is exemplary and the sample supplied for review was in a silver finish.

When it comes to source inputs, there is an absolute plethora available, with an impressive NINE separate digital and analogue inputs to choose from. Rarely

When it comes to source inputs, there is an absolute plethora available, with an impressive NINE separate digital and analogue inputs to choose from

seen these days although we are seeing a huge revival of vinyl playback, is an RCA phono input that caters for both moving magnet or moving coil cartridges, followed by 3 line level analogue inputs labeled 1, 2 and 3 accordingly, then on to the digital inputs which comprises 2x TOSLINK sockets, an RCA co-axial digital input, a USB input and a Bluetooth connection to APT-X standard, with a supplied external aerial which screws on to a dedicated socket on the rear panel.

There is only provision for a single pair of speakers to be connected. The group of four 4mm connectors are grouped tightly together at the far right of the rear panel (although not as tightly grouped as the original MaiA) and not insulated from each other either, plus the holes to insert bare wired cables are aligned vertically so extreme care is needed so the wire isn't pushed right through the connector

body to touch the adjacent terminal above or beneath. A good tip would be to measure exactly how much bare wire is exposed on the cable to be inserted that is less than the connector's diameter, so none of the bare wire is exposed external to the connector to negate the risk of shorting. I would not advocate or even contemplate using spade connectors for the speaker connections because of the close proximity of the naked terminals.

On the front panel reading from left to right, we have a power button with a tiny blue LED above. A real surprise was to see the amplifier perform a soft start operation with the LED blinking while it is being

Pro-Ject MaiA DS Integrated Amplifier

carried out, so no switch on or power down thumps through the speakers from this amplifier, which is rather refreshing to see. Next we have the remote control window which is a small unobtrusive plastic dome, followed by a 6.3mm headphone socket, which mutes the speaker output when a headphone jack plug is inserted. We then have a rotary volume control knob to adjust the volume by hand, although the control itself is also motorized for adjustment via the remote control handset. The control itself is quite stiff to turn by hand, although in all probability this stiffness will ease over time with usage. The remote control handset provides the basic functions of source selection, volume adjustment, muting and power on/off. Next on the front panel of the amp we find a source selector button which changes the source in upwards increments, with a bank of blue LEDs to indicate which source has been selected and screen printed in black lettering beneath those LEDs is the source names themselves, then finally another source selector button to change the source in downwards increments. Incidentally, the front panel LEDs are very small yet still bright, but don't actually provide much glare as blue LEDs are prone to do. You can tell the power is applied and which source has been selected without constantly drawing your attention to them – a nice touch.

SPECIFICATIONS

Power output:	2x 40 W / 60W at 8 / 4 ohms
Signal-to-noise ratio:	Line/MM/MC > -90dB / -90dB / -75dB (IEC A-weighted)
Channel separation:	> -65dB
THD +N	< 0,07%@ 15W
Frequency response:	20Hz – 20kHz (+0,2dB, -2,5dB)
Analogue inputs:	3 pair RCA/Cinch sockets line 1 pair phono MM/MC input (RCA)
Input impedance:	Line: 50Kohms, Phono: MM 47kohms / MC 100 ohms
Digital inputs:	USB, RCA coax, 2 Toslink, Bluetooth (aptX)
D/A converter:	TI PCM1796 Delta-Sigma
Speaker connectors:	4mm Ø banana plugs, spades connectors or naked wire
Headphone output:	6,3mm jack
Headphone impedance:	16 – 600ohms recommended
Line outputs:	fixed, variable (subwoofer, power amp)
Power supply:	24V/5A DC; 100 – 240V, 50/60Hz
Standby Power consumption:	< 0,5W
Dimensions:	W x H x D 206 x 72 x 220 (230mm with sockets)
Weight:	1550g without power supply



Pro-Ject MaiA DS Integrated Amplifier

The original MaiA was priced at circa £399.00 and naturally the DS has a price premium of around £300.00 more at £699.00, so let's see what that extra cash outlay gives you.

Sound

Unlike a standard run-of-the-mill integrated amplifier review, I had my work cut out with this one as it wasn't just a case of bunging a CD player into it and any old pair of speakers and cables for the output either. If the inputs were there, they all had to be tested which proved to be quite a lengthy and protracted process. Not only that, I had to fit the amplifier into various systems ranging from high end to budget, including ancillaries so hopefully you the reader can get a handle on it's performance envelope.

Firstly, I paired the MaiA DS with my HTC mobile phone using the Bluetooth facility and this was straightforward and easy to do when following the instructions given in the user manual. Select the "BT" source on the front panel, and then set the phone to detect any nearby devices and when the BT LED on the MaiA flashes, momentarily press the power button on the MaiA and job done with no need for passwords. I only have a small selection of MP3 tracks on my phone, but the sound quality was perfectly acceptable nonetheless given the limitations of the MP3 format. I have Spotify on my tablet PC and the sound was again perfectly acceptable from that source.

With a more accurate signal being fed into the amplifier from my resident CD player, I was stunned

**The sound moved
on into yet
another
dimension that
was snapping at
the heels of my
resident
amplifier which
cost some 10
times more than
the MaiA DS and
the MaiA**

at just how good this little amplifier sounded. Delicious treble performance which was clean and vibrant, the sound of struck cymbals were as realistic as anyone could wish for, with a defined metallic "ting" and the following decay all clearly rendered. Mid tones were slightly on the lean side giving a slightly cool balance to the sound. When it came to the bottom octaves, the extra power of DS version certainly added weight and body in the bass regions, which is where the MaiA's weakness lay, although the MaiA and the DS variant obviously share the same DNA, the DS version sounds like it has a lot more headroom with power in reserve to cope with heavy bass and fast transients.

I found it a very entertaining listen and happy to say that I was never affronted by what I

was hearing, or never once thinking to myself "Wish there was more bass, better mids, clearer treble, etc" because it simply wasn't the case. Fink's "Sort of Revolution" CD sounded palpable and full of detail, the propulsive bass line being recreated very well indeed and the treble especially so, that "ting" from the Ride cymbals in all the tracks never being overwhelmed by the rest of the music so it stood as an individual clear entity. This album is threaded throughout with close mic'd acoustic guitar recorded so the body of the instrument needs to be captured and the squealing of the finger work on the frets is integral to the performance, adding not detracting from the charm of the album.

Pro-Ject MaiA DS Integrated Amplifier

As I did with the original MaiA amplifier, I installed the DS into the wife's TEAC component system and it outclassed the TEAC amplifier in every respect. No surprise there to be honest.

Time now to really put the MaiA DS through it's paces with my resident system CD player, speakers and cabling. Now I found that the amplifier wasn't seriously outclassed at all with every component costing many times more than it did. The sound moved on

into yet another dimension that was snapping at the heels of my resident amplifier which cost some 10 times more than the MaiA DS and the MaiA. Yes it didn't have the raw grunt and outright power at higher volumes, but even so it says more about these amplifier's capabilities and what can be achieved with good design that enabled that.

Back into the CD drawer went Fink's "Sort of Revolution" and here we are talking about differences between the two amplifiers in the finite range, they were that small. Bass was 90% of what my resident amplifier gave me, treble was even closer and it was much easier now to pick up the ambience cues in the recording, but it was the mid band was where I heard the greatest difference and the MaiA provided a slightly "leaner" sound, but even that I could probably have lived with on a daily basis without real criticism in the long term, because that is a better compromise than a flabby or chesty sounding midrange which wreaks havoc with the music's undertones.

Imaging and soundstage were certainly well up to standard with good height and depth, the sound extending well out beyond the speaker boundaries.

The MaiA DS like it's smaller sibling didn't quite have the same "punch in the guts" bass power and dynamics that my resident amplifier has and frankly didn't expect it to be, but I don't see that as a

In my room and system the DS was excellent, so I urge anyone who is interested in trying one out to ask a dealer if they will loan you one on a trial basis

weakness on behalf of the MaiA DS as my own amplifier has 150 watts per channel on tap. Incidentally, the casework didn't even get the slightest bit warm during these high power runs. A highly commendable performance.

Last, but by no means least, I turned to the digital input capabilities of the MaiA DS. Both coaxial and optical inputs routed from my CD player in to the DAC section were more than satisfactory with no noise or mush detected. It was

nigh on impossible to tell if the resulting sound via the DAC was any better or different to the DAC within my resident CD player because they sounded so similar. Signal lock was instantaneous although there is no indicator to show that it was. USB connection from my laptop PC was of a similar performance so no quibbles there either. As my television and satellite receiver are in another room unfortunately, I was unable to test how the MaiA DS interfaced with that equipment although I foresee no issues there either.

Conclusion

Whereas the original MaiA amplifier was fine for smaller rooms like a study or a bedroom, the extra power available from the DS version means it will provide more than sufficient output to fill a medium sized room from a good solid 50 watts per channel of clean sound, three line level analogue inputs, a switchable moving magnet or moving coil phono input, remote control, a headphone output too, no less than three digital inputs, the unique remote control facility and a Bluetooth connection as well, adds up to a versatile and highly flexible heart to any hifi music reproduction, computer, or two channel A/V system. With a genuine level of swiss army knife versatility that these Pro-ject MaiA amplifiers possess, the savings from not buying separate DACs

Pro-Ject MaiA DS Integrated Amplifier

and high sensitivity phono stages alone makes them a total steal at their asking prices.

The MaiA DS will happily integrate into budget systems, middle ranking systems and not entirely out of place or embarrassed when rubbing shoulders with the esoteric either, so I will say nothing more other than a wholehearted endorsement from me.

Pros:

The closest I could find to a Swiss Army knife in terms of connectivity and functionality.

Sound is considerably better than you would expect from a diminutive little box.

Price.

Cons:

Beware the spacing on the speaker binding posts.

Dominic Marsh

Dominic rated the MaiA DS so highly it was sent to Hifi Pig reviewer Ian Ringstead for a second opinion.

Given that Dominic rated the MaiA DS so highly I was asked if I could do a follow up to his review on the and took no persuading being a great fan of Pro-ject. The MaiA DS is basically a MaiA on steroids built to higher standards in a very nicely made case and with a solid aluminium front panel. I have owned a Pro-ject RS phono stage which was excellent, so I knew what to expect build wise; could the sound be as good?

The DS is bigger than the standard MaiA with a larger separate power supply to allow for the greater power output it produces. Like the MaiA, the DS is incredibly versatile and is a veritable Swiss army knife as Dominic said himself in his review. For such a compact unit it packs one hell of a punch with it numerous analogue and digital inputs.

I particularly like the fact the very good phono stage has both moving magnet and moving coil switching. I used both to good effect and as a reviewing tool it would be a handy amp to have. The headphone stage is useful as well, and unless you are a purist does a fine job.

The credit card sized remote is neat but could easily be lost down a cushion so make sure you don't misplace it! I tried my mobile phone with the DS streaming my music and found it a very straight forward process to achieve. The sound was good even though it was only mp3 and a convenient way of playing background music through your system for a party or meal with friends. Although the power output is only 55 watts, it was plenty with my resident Triangle speakers.

MaiA DS can be upgraded with a separate linear power supply that will almost double the dynamic per-formance power and improves the sound significantly in terms of punch and clarity. Power Box MaiA DS additionally offers convenient power wiring for customers who decide to have multiple Pro-Ject components in a system. Up to five products from the Pro-Ject family, including a turntable (DC-only products) can be connected simultaneously.

Dominic has covered all the facilities and features in his review so I'll just say I loved it as well. If space is a major issue and let's face it modern homes are smaller than they used to be or you live in a small flat or bed-sit, then the MaiA DS is a real boon without compromising on the quality front. In my room and system the DS was excellent, so I urge anyone who is interested in trying one out to ask a dealer if they will loan you one on a trial basis. As a second system amp it would be superb if you can justify the extra cost. I used it with my Pro-ject Extension 9 and Ortofon Quintet Black moving coil and had no issues with the built in phono stage and the separate phono stage I am currently trying out costs more than the DS, and although better ,wasn't vastly superior, so well done to the design team.

Pros

Fantastic little amp that is very well built and specified

Remote control

Great range of inputs and outputs

Power supply can be upgraded

Cons

The speaker terminals are closely packed together, so be careful with your connections, using good 4mm plugs.

Ian Ringstead

Some Follow

others

Leedh!



The Sound of Science

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Dayens Menuetto Integrated Amplifier



**Dan Worth
gets to grip
with a little
50watts a side
integrated amp
from Serbia
that costs just
£600 in the
UK**

It's always interesting when I receive a product for review from British distributor Iain Borthwick of LW Audio. Iain has a long standing relationship with products that provide a truly musical and value for money stance in the marketplace.

Iain was responsible for introducing the well regarded Clones Audio brand to our fair land and they followed suit with his mantra. Also coming up soon will be a preamplifier from Audio Music – again another truly musically engrossing product that belies its price. We talked about this new brand on the scene I was very receptive in appraising it on the merits that Iain pursues when taking on brands for distribution in the UK.

The Menuetto is a shoe box sized integrated amplifier with four line level inputs and an output power of 2 X 50wpc into 8ohm and 2 X 70wpc into 4ohms. The unit is of a sleek classical design with two knobs, one for volume and one for source selection and a power button – it includes a remote control. The product feels well made and has a good weight to it and a nice sturdy feeling chassis. Standard 5 way binding posts adorn the rear that are bare gold plated and not encased in plastic which is something I do not like for obvious reasons, but apart from that I can't convey any other physical grumbles

Dayens Menuetto Integrated Amplifier

with the fit and finish for a £600 amplifier.

On looking into the Dayens brand and conversing with Iain they have a few amplifier options and some interesting looking fairly priced small form factor standmount/bookshelves and floorstanding speakers which I'm sure we will investigate a little further at Hifi Pig in the future, but for now let's focus on the Menuetto.

Specifications:

Power (Watt): 2×50 / 8 Ohm, 2×70 / 4 Ohm
 Inputs: 4
 Frequency response (Hz): 4Hz – 200kHz
 SNR (dB): >92
 Dimensions (mm): 230x105x350

Sound

From experience amplifier at the £600 or so price point can be a tricky price point to fulfil competently, there have been many hits and misses in this price bracket even from some of the big boys, it toys with what is possible from a unit in the over £1000 category and can also be set upon from offerings

First impressions of the sound given by the Menuetto was a terrifically tuneful bass and dynamics that were instantly surprising

from the likes of mainstream companies such as Cambridge Audio and Rega for example. Connecting up the Menuetto was a breeze as it can really be accommodated anywhere due to its size, so my ever bloated rack which was currently burning in some other products didn't suffer and nor did my back in having to make room for the modestly sized amp.

First impressions of the sound given by the Menuetto was a terrifically tuneful bass and dynamics that were instantly surprising. Throughout Jeff Beck and Joss Stone's rendition of 'I Put A Spell On You' basslines were convincing, especially in the parameters previously mentioned and Joss' vocal was silky sounding and never forward which can be a bone of contention even with some high end kit I have listened to recently. This is a good track to ascertain vocal positioning within the soundstage and the Menuetto was bang on the money!

Intricacies from various acoustic music was clear to hear, they may not be as playful as items in my normal rig costing considerably more, but the Menuetto really outperforms many integrated amps



Dayens Menuetto Integrated Amplifier

I've heard in the £1000-£1500 bracket, giving great perception of depth and scale to minimal performances.

I really like the fact that if the Menuetto lacks ultimate finesse and presence that a high end item can offer. It's not shy in giving the listener every impression of the big boy sound. I don't sit here listening to this little amp from Dayens with the feeling that I'm being cheated in any way or that I'm missing out on any explanations of the musical picture through lack of detail or weighted scale, it's a real joy and a great find by Iain Borthwick, continuing his ever stubborn position of 'I will not support any brand which cannot offer true musical satisfaction.'

Longer listening to the Menuetto got me really engrossed in its sound, it's warm with vibrancy and surprisingly detailed and transparent, with a terrific soundstage and immediately had me searching their website to see what other interesting products they have to offer. I would only investigate further when a brand which is new to us here in the UK really impresses me and the Menuetto surely does.

Playing Felix Laband's 'Red Handed' vintage Electronica had me sat up in my seat instantly with the Menuetto conveying unforeseen power in the bass and fleshed out treble that gave the top end great density. I find the amp to not necessarily to have a sound colour to it, but it has great character and is as cohesive as I would want an amp to sound if I were a designer. The amp sounds more energetic and dynamic than its rated power, and dynamics do not fall short even at much higher volumes.

Now if I haven't praised this amp enough I will leave this review with one more opinion from listening to Nils Lofgren – if the Electronica wasn't proof enough for me Nils' speedy guitar work again was just so reflective from the Menuette, PRaT was just

Longer listening to the Menuetto got me really engrossed in its sound, it's warm with vibrancy and surprisingly detailed and transparent, with a terrific soundstage

so well conveyed and fond memories of super solid British made amplifiers come racing to the forefront of my mind but with a sprinkle more pizzazz than the colouration of the older take on the famous British sound signature.

Conclusion

The Dayens Menuetto is a modestly sized amp with modest power and an equally modest price of £600 here in the UK. It comes packed with great PRaT, an informative balance of tone and detail and is dynamically capable of conveying drama and expression that will shock

any Hifi aficionado.

Dayens for me is following the trend that has been adopted in the past few years from smaller and larger companies alike that high end sound doesn't and shouldn't cost the earth. Would I swap this for my main amps? Never, their price is far greater and equally so is their performance, so we need to remain realistic here of course, but in this price range and a couple of bands higher, the Menuetto is going to upset some of the more mainstream brands with its confident attitude and remarkable performance.

Pros:
Balanced, powerful, dynamics
Strong PRaT
More detail than expected
Midrange that sits just right
Price

Cons:
The binding posts metal is exposed and should be plastic encased.

Price at time of review: £600

Dan Worth

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Soundsmith Carmen Moving Iron Cartridge

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



**Janine Elliot
takes a listen to
the Soundsmith
Carmen Moving
Iron Cartridge
that is made in
the US and costs
£759**

My own collection of Cartridges has morphed from Ceramic to Magnetic, to MM, MI and MC. Then along came Soundsmith, one of those companies you wish you had always known. When I first heard their SG-200 I saw the light, not least because of the two LED's glowing to show power was getting to the cartridge. The Strain Gauge cartridge is like no other cartridge. Instead of inducing a signal voltage by motion by coils or magnets, the Strain Gauge cantilever movement deflects two minute silicon strain gauge elements. The blue lights are there to tell you that all is OK, and they are not electrostatic cartridges aka Stax of old, that some may have thought. And where the Strain Gauge's much reduced effective moving mass means a quicker and tireless response, the 'Carmen' up for review here uses their Moving Iron topology which means no heavy coil or magnet having to move about. Instead, a tiny ultra-low mass high-purity moving iron element wiggles about

Soundsmith Carmen Moving Iron Cartridge

between an area of fixed coils and permanent magnets. This means an effective tip mass of only 0.35g, and me setting my Rega 301 arm to 1.4g on my Townshend Rock 7. Whilst the design has a fixed permanent stylus assembly similar to that on a moving coil cartridge, it actually needs to be fed to the Moving Magnet input of your phono-stage, if you have a choice.

The relatively high output is due to the fact that the stationary magnet/coil structure can be made large, and therefore also allow for a lower vertical tracking force of between 1.2 and 1.4g. All in all this lack of mass improves the cartridge's transient response and its agile 'trackability'. All is assembled in an ebony enclosure to "enhance the performance" with a distinctive green body to distinguish it from all the others in the range. Whilst most of engineer and designer Peter Ledermann's cartridges require hefty cheque books, the Carmen, the replacement for their esteemed SMMC3, is a song at £759.00, being one of the cheapest in the range, from a company set up in 1972 and based in Peekskill, about an hour away from New York.

Where Panasonic produced Strain Gauge cartridges long before Soundsmith did, so too B&O made Moving Iron cartridges, and it was Ledermann's interest in those and his request to the Scandinavian company to use their technology long after they had chucked out their own tooling that paved the way to making Soundsmith products. The company even offers re-tipping or replacing of B&O cartridges. The similarity between the two companies then becomes apparent if the SMMC3 acronym hadn't already given it away; the indented shape of the front of the cartridge body that when looked at from above shows the stylus tip was something that I liked about the original B&O MMC 1- 5. Finding your way to the start of a groove is a doddle, rather than the guesswork from most cartridges with the stylus hidden somewhere underneath the body. Bang and Olufsen's cartridges used a cross-shaped piece of

**For those wanting
a £4000 Sussurro
but don't have the
money, the
Carmen gets
pretty close for
considerably less**

ultra-low-mass high purity iron (MMC stands for Moving Micro Cross), and the Soundsmith MI designs use stationary coils and magnets and a small piece of "moving iron".

With over 60 cartridges to his name, Ledermann is no slouch. In his career he has been a design engineer at RAM Audio Systems, working with Richard Majestic on the designs of everything from high-power, minimal-feedback power amplifiers and

preamplifiers to phono stages. He was also a senior research engineer at IBM with 11 patents to his name. As a result of his diverse experience in audio design his talents at Soundsmith extend to the CDT-4 automated audio tester, phono preamplifiers, a zero feedback MOSFET power amp and speakers. He even services major brands such as Revox, Bang & Olufsen, Nakamichi, and Tandberg.

Sound

The Carmen MI cartridge was a doddle to set up on my arm and matching the 47K Ohm and 100pF load gave a smooth, velvety, if slightly prominent midrange, but covering the entire frequency range with good bass and clean top end, and a pace and rhythm that made for detail and beauty. All was there, and I did feel that some of the crackles from worn discs paled into insignificance as the music came out, which was a pleasant outcome. My Love Song "Feel the Love" live album has a beautifully engineered drum kit and audience sound, and the Soundsmith kept the gig alive, with each instrument clearly placed on the stage, and vocal warmth that made the music quite relaxed but not slow nor losing detail, and well, very pleasant. Even the applause sounded like applause rather than rain on the caravan roof. Everything sounded exact, but for me just a little too tame. My Yes "Live from House of Blues" 180g three-LP set is one of those albums that can cause headaches on even the best set ups. Whilst I love Jon Anderson's velvety voice I really do need to be in the right mood to listen to anything other than

Soundsmith Carmen Moving Iron Cartridge

‘The Messenger’ or ‘Nous Sommes Soleil’, but putting it with the Carmen was like ‘strawberries and cream’ (or in my case ‘cheese and marmite’). This just jelled so well that I had to play the whole set.

The Carmen has a velvety property of its own, making music of all kinds just so sweet. It wasn’t slow; that lightweight frame puts that out of the question, as it allows the music to flow with nothing getting in the way. My ancient RCA Camden Classics Shostakovich Symphony No.5, conducted by Howard Mitchell, gave all instruments their own place in the soundstage, though it sounded somewhat slower than I was used to. Dmitri Shostakovich called this symphony a “Soviet Artist’s reply to just criticism”, complaining that his music could still be popular to the mass audience. The Soundsmith could justly be considered as a US engineer’s reply to those who think cartridges only work with certain types of music. This beauty just made everything sound good, with only a slight mid frequency emphasis that spoilt my listening at times. Vocals should of course work well with any cartridge named after an opera, just as the Aida, Boheme, Otello, or any of the other opera or vocal inspired names from this company should also do. That mid-lift through my Wilson Benesch/Krell setup was minimal, but through my original 1970’s Chartwell LS3/5a and Slee setup this was a more pronounced, even compared with my choice Kontrapunkt b. However, the idea of a low mass, low playing weight cartridge was for me very appealing. At 6.8g it is 2/3 the weight of my Ortofon, and plays at half the tracking force. All this means an agility and control that made me favour those high compliance cartridges back in the 80’s. Whilst this cartridge can be classed as medium-compliance, when I connected to my aged SME3/Transcriptors Hydraulic reference system, suddenly the sound opened up in a way that felt more relaxed and open. Whilst most UK and US magazines esteemed the SME 3 back in the 1980’s it has unfortunately been culled as the pink elephant of the SME brand over the years, mainly because it was only designed for high-compliance, low tracking weight MM cartridges, but also largely because of magazine politics. The SME 3 always gave a smooth and musical, almost reel-to-reel sound, and my Shure V15iv cartridge works wonders on it. I didn’t think I would be able to better this, but with the Carmen this was done quite significantly. Had I still got my SME Series 2 arm I would have tried that too, as I am sure that would have worked even better, being medium

compliance. But, to play at 1.2g on my SME3, Transcriptors, Slee and Chartwell LS3/5a set up was a breath of fresh air and I didn’t want to remove the cartridge and return it. Funny world.

Back to the 21st Century, the Carmen has a nude elliptical 6 x 17 µm stylus on an aluminium alloy cantilever with reasonable 26dB channel separation at 1kHz and a MM/MI class’ output voltage of 2.12mV. When a (very) young child I assumed that cartridges might go up in value as they have diamonds, and as cartridges go, whilst they might not be as collectable or look as much a jewel on the crown as the Koetsu’s of the world, the complete set from Soundsmith certainly look better than most of the cartridges out there, with their distinctive colours and precious stone colour effects. Whilst the colour includes to some extent their sound, I did not find this a hindrance but actually to add to my enjoyment of the music, and in a way wasn’t a million miles from that from a Koetsu.

Conclusion

For those wanting a £4000 Sussurro but don’t have the money, the Carmen gets pretty close for considerably less. With its ultra-low moving mass, reasonably high output and low vertical tracking force, this is a cartridge you should have a listen to. For those who want a sensual, intuitive and detailed sound this cartridge should be just what you are asking for.

Pros:

Agility, control and musicality

Velvety flavour to the sound

Lightweight

High output for MM phonostage

Can be rebuilt over and over for 20% of retail price, even if not the original owner

Price

Cons:

The warm velvety sound might to too coloured for some

Slightly enhanced mid-band might not suit everyone.

Price £759

Janine Elliot



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Ferguson Hill FH007 and FH008 Loudspeaker System



Ian Ringstead takes a listen to the interesting looking Ferguson Hill FH007 loudspeaker and their matching FH008 sub priced at £695 and £325

Ferguson Hill may not be a well known name to many readers or the general public, but I remember their launch of the original FH001 at a London Hifi show and being gob smacked by its unique design of a parabolic horn and its price of about £17,000. Radical looking designs require bravery and confidence in the designers mind to commit to this approach because although horn loaded speakers have been around since the 1930's and their principles are well understood, they have tended to take a back seat to the conventional box designs with dynamic drivers and complex crossovers we see as commonplace now.

Ferguson Hill FH007 and FH008 Loudspeaker System

Background

A horn loudspeaker is a loudspeaker (or loudspeaker element) which uses an acoustic horn to increase the overall efficiency of the driving element(s). A common form consists of a compression driver which produces sound waves with a small metal diaphragm vibrated by an electromagnet, attached to a horn, a flaring duct to conduct the sound waves to the open air. Another type is a woofer driver mounted in a loudspeaker enclosure which is divided by internal partitions to form a zigzag flaring duct which functions as a horn; this type is called a folded horn speaker. The horn serves to improve the coupling efficiency between the speaker driver and the air. The horn can be thought of as an “acoustic transformer” that provides impedance matching between the relatively dense diaphragm material and the less-dense air. The result is greater acoustic output power from a given driver.

The main advantage of horn loudspeakers is they are more efficient; they can typically produce 10 times (10dB) more sound power than a cone speaker from a given amplifier output. Therefore horns are widely

used in public address and megaphones, and sound systems for large venues like theatres, auditoriums, and sports stadiums. Their disadvantage is that their frequency response is more uneven because of resonance peaks, and horns have a cut-off frequency below which their response drops off. To achieve adequate response at bass frequencies horn speakers must be very large and cumbersome, so they are more often used for midrange and high frequencies. The first practical loudspeakers, introduced around the turn of the 20th century, were horn speakers. Due to the development in recent decades of more efficient cone loudspeakers, which have a flatter frequency response, use of horn speakers in high fidelity audio systems has declined.

Having given you a background to horn speaker design you can see they offer great advantages, but there are many drawbacks that require innovative and very clever thinking to overcome the problems. Stuart and his wife Linette love horn speakers (owning a pair of Avantgarde Duo's) but I have been less convinced in my past experiences.

I spoke to Tim Hill the designer of the FH007 on review here to get a feel for his philosophy and



Ferguson Hill FH007 and FH008 Loudspeaker System



reasons behind this unusual looking design.

Essentially the FH007 is a scaled down version of his flagship design the FH001 which has had great acclaim over the last few years. Tim told me his first customer was Steve Jobs the owner of Apple Macintosh who emailed him one day enquiring how he could obtain a pair when he saw them for the first time. How cool is that!! Tim gave me some details about the FH007.

“I usually recommend a running in period of about a week with the system playing, say the radio all day. It’s the moving mechanical parts / drive units etc and also all the electronics, components, cables etc that need to run in.”

Technicals

The amplifier has the crossover in the pre amp stage and sends the signal above 450Hz to the horn amps and below 450Hz to the bass amps.

There are 2 stereo class A/B power amps inside, so all four drive units are individually driven by their own power amp and have no crossover components between the power amps and the drive units. 4 x 16watts / total 64 watts.

Tim’s overall objective in designing the system was to shrink down their large FH001 speaker system whilst still keeping the features that give a good sound quality.

Ferguson Hill FH007 and FH008 Loudspeaker System

Therefore he thought it important to have the semi-full range drive unit covering a large proportion of the frequency range in a front loaded dipole horn, complemented by the infinite baffle spherical bass speakers for below the crossover frequency. They did a lot of research at Loughborough University to design the horn profile so it gives a uniform expansion rate of the sound waves from the drive unit, using their massive optical bench and techniques such as speckle pattern holographic laser interferometry etc.

The horn speaker design is basically the FH001 shrunk down to desktop size and the overall system is about 1/50th the cost of the high end FH001 system.

Finally the Bluetooth receiver V4.0 was added as many customers enjoy the convenience of wirelessly streaming their music from a smart phone or tablet, however he believes the system is certainly revealing enough to show the benefit of using a high quality source such as high resolution music with a really good DAC, or a good turntable with a good phono stage.

Tim and his team have used a front end of an Avid Acutus deck, SME arm and valve phono stage built by David Wright to great effect he says!

“I know that some of our customers purchase the system without a demo on the looks alone, and then are pleasantly surprised by the sound, but the system was designed with the sound quality as totally the first priority and the looks are secondary” says Tim.

I think what Tim has said pretty well sums up the FH007 design. It comes packed in an attaché style box very similar to an iMac computer for those who have one, which makes for very convenient unpacking and creates a first class impression of the product. If the designer takes this much care over the box alone then they obviously care about the product and are proud of its capabilities.

Tim also sent me the matching sub woofer, the FH008 to compliment the FH007. This was finished in a very classy looking piano black but white is available too.

Subwoofer dimensions

Height 32 cm Width 30 cm Depth 30 cm
Specification

Amplifier 100W per channel class A/B

Infinite Baffle enclosure

Drive unit 20cm dia/8 Ohm

Frequency response 45 to 150 Hz

This product conforms to EMC Directive and Low Voltage Directive

Colours, gloss black or gloss white.

As Tim pointed out in his design philosophy earlier, the FH007 is definitively not a case of style over function. They look fabulous, but that is a bonus.

Sound

The sound was pretty amazing once I had run them in as advised by Tim. Most speakers require this so don't think it is unique to this design alone. I always felt that horns were highly coloured in sound when I listened to them at shows many years ago and even today some have a distinct character that takes some getting used to. It's a bit like Marmite, love it or hate it. (I don't like Marmite, but my wife does!)

I'm glad to say they sounded fabulous. I used them both in my living room and upstairs in my office/work room to get a true feel for their applications. In my office they were used on a desk without the sub whilst I was doing some electronics work (I love to dabble) and they easily outperformed any desk top speaker system I have used in the past, and there have been a few.

Downstairs in my living room and used with the FH008 I was truly amazed what they could do for such a compact design. They produce a very clear open soundstage with a full frequency response. Top end was very good with high frequency detailing being precise and with great placement in the soundstage. Vocals can be coloured on horn designs I've heard in the past, but they were very well portrayed with the likes of Tracy Chapman, Eva Cassidy and Alison Krause all sounding very lifelike and enjoyable. Rock, jazz and classical were handled equally well with the same clarity and openness. My wife even said they sound nice and she is fussy! Friends who saw the speakers were intrigued by their

Ferguson Hill FH007 and FH008 Loudspeaker System

looks and this split opinion, but generally it was a thumbs up.

The FH008 is well matched to the rest of the system and I wholeheartedly recommend its use if you are seriously considering using the FH007 as a main system. That lower octave or so adds the icing on the cake to fill the sound out even more. Set up is very straight forward and once you have dialled in the correct values to taste and room response you can sit back and enjoy. The FH007 set up is a doddle. Even though there are four speakers (top horns and bass/mid spheres) the wiring is fixed and only requires the user to put the colour coded mini jack plugs into the back of the amp. The amp is a beautifully made compact cube with just a volume control and bright white led to indicate power. On the back are the four jack sockets for the top and bass/mid units, two per channel, and the optional active sub. Inputs are catered for on a set of RCA phonos and a 3.5mm jack socket. All the relevant cables are supplied and are of generous length with good quality gold plated connectors. Also supplied is a plug in blue tooth transmitter so you can connect your mobile wirelessly and stream your favourite mp3's.

Conclusion

I applaud Tim and his design team for being brave enough to run with this design and carry on the

obvious success of the FH001 in a truly affordable scaled down version for the masses.

Like the recent Munich High End show I attended, flagship designs from innovative companies can be breathtaking in design and sound, but also out of the financial reach of the masses. The FH007 is a great way to own a slice of the FH001 dream and can easily be accommodated in most homes. (It makes a great second system in a conservatory or study)

Pros:

- Value for money**
- Superb design that is stylish and compact**
- Active design really works well**
- Excellent desk top or main system use**
- Easy to set up and use**
- Great sound especially with the FH008 sub**

Cons

- None really apart from the fact the looks wont suit everyone's tastes**
- The number of inputs makes connectivity limited, but the intention is for simplicity and users of this system probably won't find this an issue.**

Price	£695.00	FH007
	£325.00	FH008

Ian Ringstead



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Scansonic M-5 Loudspeakers



Scansonic are Danish and share the same parent company as Raidho, indeed they share the same designer. The M-5 loudspeakers are a small standmount costing £399 without stand and unusually at this price point sport a ribbon tweeter. Ian Ringstead puts them through their paces

Scansonic is a newish brand to me that I have heard of, but had no experience of before now. Dantax A/S was founded in 1971 with the aim of building high quality hifi loudspeakers the are the parent company of [Raidho and the Scansonics are designed by Michael Børresen](#), creator of the Raidho range. Many things have changed since the start in the early 70's – and today Dantax A/S has evolved into a competitive international company, offering a wide range of own “in-house”, Danish designed and developed hifi and home cinema loudspeakers, tabletop radios and hifi products under the Scansonic brand that matches consumers' preferences with regard to modern functional design, quality and attractive pricing. If you look at their website you'll see how big they are.

The M-5 speaker is a compact, two-way, standmount mini-monitor. The speaker is designed around an ultra light ribbon planar tweeter and a paper-polypropylene compound bass-midrange driver membrane. The speaker is crossed over at 3.5 KHz with a second order filter. They come finished in either piano black or piano white, I received the

Scansonic M-5 Loudspeakers

white finish with the floor stands in order to audition them properly.

The finish is very smart and attractive and several friends commented on their appearance and neat size. Being a small stand-mount/bookshelf speaker they fit easily into any environment and look very stylish on the matching curved floor stands which are designed to angle the speakers back slightly to provide the best sound presentation. The stands are flat packed so require building, and although not complicated they were a bit fiddly due to the nature of the design and brief instruction sheet. If you have built Ikea furniture before like myself (and plenty of it) then it is not difficult, just awkward. Once built the stands are very stylish and finished in the same piano black paint. The speakers sit on top of the stands held in place by a bolt that screws into their base. Because all the fixings are hidden (to aid the stylish appearance) this is where the fiddly assembly comes in. The stands aren't spiked but come with screw on feet to complete the neat appearance and allow for practical placement on floors. Scansonic also supply wall mounting brackets if you wish to hang them on a wall, but obviously they perform at their best stand-mounted in free space.

Technical information

Size: (WxHxD) 151 x 265 x 151 mm

Weight: 3,4 kg

Freq. response: 55 Hz – 30 kHz

Impedance: > 6 ohm

Crossover: 3.5 KHz 2. order acoustic slope



Enclosure: Heavily braced, ventilated box design with front loaded port

Drive units: 1 sealed ribbon tweeter with kapton/aluminum sandwich membrane
1 paper-polypropylene coned 4,5" bass/mid driver with underhung magnet system

Finish: Black-piano or White-piano

Sound

The M-5 are single wired so no messing about with bi wire cables and I hooked them up with my Van Damme and also the superb Way Silver 2 cables to really see what they could produce. For such a compact speaker, once run in, I felt they were pretty amazing. They are front ported with a slot running along the bottom edge

of the cabinet to aid bass output and efficiency. The bass they produced, although limited, was fantastic given their constraints and I marvel at how modern speaker design and materials now contribute to some astounding smaller speakers. I have reviewed quite a few compact designs in the last year and all have impressed me. Harking back to the eighties when I started in retailing, compact speakers had definite limitations that modern designs just shrug off now.

Not only was the bass performance pretty amazing, it was the treble that I felt was the pinnacle of this speaker's prowess. The ultra light weight ribbon tweeter design is amazing for the modest cost of this speaker (£399). Ribbons have traditionally been expensive to manufacture due to their complex design and usually have only been incorporated in more expensive models where the cost constraints allow. Well miraculously Scansonic have obviously

Scansonic M-5 Loudspeakers

cracked the cost issue in order to use it in the M-5 and boy does it show. I generally like soft dome silk tweeter designs as I feel they give a smoother treble than metal dome tweeters don't to my ear, but here this ribbon tweeter proves that a light weight foil design can conquer. The detail in all the recordings I played, whether vinyl or CD, was fabulous.

Percussion, bells, cymbals, you name it soared and the detailing was so lifelike that I had no problem hearing everything with crystal clarity. Live recordings from Capercaille were stunning because the complex rhythms of the band's instruments were beautifully reproduced and Karen Matheson's angelic voice was superb and clearly portrayed.

Scansonic recommend high quality amps of 50 watts or more and I can concur this. My Meridian 556 rated at 170 watts loved these speakers and drove them to high levels with no distortion issues at all. They can certainly rock, but they also liked all forms of music and classical was reproduced equally well, with the sound stage being really open and detailed. Now I am not saying these speakers are perfect, nothing is, but for the money I think they are superb. Compared to electrostatic designs like Quad and Martin Logan which are considerably more expensive, I feel the M-5 gives an insight into that type of sound with its lovely open presentation. Scansonic do floor standing versions higher up the range which I heard briefly at one of last year's

shows and they sounded very good there as well. They have the obvious bass extension the M-5 can't reproduce but that's for another time if I get the chance to audition them.

Conclusion

As a large successful manufacturer Scansonic's expertise and economies of scale allow them to produce a really great value for money product range. The M-5 is the baby in the HD series and having seen and heard the results it can only get better.

Pros:

Great sound from a compact speaker
That ribbon tweeter
Stylish modern design
Excellent value for money

Cons:

Stands are fiddly to build if you choose to buy them, but compliment the speakers well.
Modern design look may not be to everybody's taste

Price M-5 £399 with single pillar stands £499

Ian Ringstead



Audio GE – Sincerus 80 Loudspeakers



John Scott takes a listen to the Audio GE Sincerus 80 loudspeakers from Lithuania which cost 1300 euros with eco leather finish and with natural wood veneer 1200 euros

Audio GE is a fairly new speaker manufacturer from Lithuania. Managing Director and designer Gediminas Racevicius grew up surrounded by music; his father Rimvydas was a composer and pianist as well as chief sound engineer for Lithuania's national television and radio network. As a child, Gediminas would spend many happy hours sitting on the floor of the recording studio in front of orchestras and big bands, providing him with an unique perspective of the sounds they produced. Gediminas' love and appreciation of music was further nurtured by weekly visits with his father to to opera or ballet. After studying engineering and electronics at university, Gediminas began to build speakers for friends as a hobby, finally expanding this into a business with the aim of

producing speakers that could faithfully reproduce the quality of sound that he heard in the studio during his childhood.

Technology can be both a blessing and a curse. When Gediminas emailed me to let me know that a pair of his Sincerus 80 floor standing speakers were on their way to me from Lithuania, he included a link to an online tracking service so that I could monitor their progress. It was a great pleasure to watch them wend their way inexorably westwards through Lithuania, across the width of Poland, into Germany then Belgium and France. Finally they traversed the Channel and slowly inched up the length of England before crossing the border into Scotland and arriving at my doorstep. The curse here of course was that I

Audio GE – Sincerus 80 Loudspeakers

felt compelled to check on their progress around every 90 seconds or so – hands up if you would have done any different. No, I don't believe you. I hovered over the on screen map with fascination as the courier pulled in to a service station to refuel and tutted with increasing frustration as he deviated from the motorway presumably to make another pick up or drop off. I knew, of course, that no matter how many times I checked up on their progress, I wasn't going to make the speakers turn up any more quickly but I was hooked. This was like some new drug and not even my wife's increasingly fraught exhortations to "put down that bloody iPad" could stop me.

Unboxing and Appearance

Their arrival brightened up a mundane Sunday teatime and I immediately set-to, unboxing them and getting them into position. The thick cardboard boxes and internal foam protection ensured that the speakers had arrived safely and as the bases were pre-spiked, there was nothing for me to do apart from manhandle them into position and cable them up. I did get one slight surprise though. On the basis of a couple of photographs I had seen on

Audio GE's Facebook page, I had been expecting the speakers to be veneered in wood. This particular pair were wrapped in black "Eco leather" (leatherette). She Who Is Correct In All Things described them as being quite masculine looking. At risk of undermining my own masculinity, I thought I would probably prefer the veneer versions, but their rugged elegance did grow on me during the time that I lived with them. I think my chest may have got slightly hairier as well.

The Sincerus 80s are floorstanding loudspeakers with a tuned quarter wave design. The speakers are front ported with treble and mid/bass drivers. The tweeter is a 2.5 soft dome unit and the mid/bass driver features an 18cm aluminium chassis with a glass fibre cone. Both drivers are manufactured by Scanspeak. To aid smooth internal airflow, which Gediminas feels is key to the success of the quarter wave design, the crossover, designed personally by



Gediminas and using high quality components by Jantzen and Mundorf, has been removed from the internal cabinet and mounted in the loudspeaker plinth. The crossover is originally designed and the components used in the crossover are audiophile quality, manufactured by Jantzen and Mundorf.

Specifications

Dimensions (HxWxD): 940mm x 220mm x 260mm

Dimensions with spikes (HxWxD): 956mm x 220mm x 260mm

Weight: 15 kg each

Sensitivity: 89 dB

Power handling: 100 W rms

Nominal impedance: 8 ohm

Front ported

Crossover: 2nd-Order

Crossover frequency: 3300 Hz

Audio GE – Sincerus 80 Loudspeakers

Frequency response (in-room environment): 37-25000 Hz \pm 3 dB

Recommended amp: 20-200 W

Drivers: Scan Speak 2,5cm silk dome tweeter, Scan Speak 18cm aluminium chassis fibre glass cone midwoofer

Main finishes: eco leather (black, white and bordeaux)

Optional finishes: natural wood veneers (sapelle and walnut)

Sound

I connected them to a Naim Superuniti that I have here for review and my initial impression was one of...disappointment. John Martyn's Solid Air album is one that I know like the back of my hand. When I

play the title track I am accustomed to hearing the music hang between the speakers like a smokey haze. On this occasion the music seemed closed in like it was struggling to escape the confines of the boxes. I tried a range of tracks from folk to classical, rock to reggae and I was left feeling dissatisfied. It then occurred to me that if I had spent three days in the back of a van trundling across Europe in near to frozen temperatures I probably wouldn't be at my best either so I decided to give them a couple of days to acclimatise. An exchange of emails with Gediminas also revealed that he had recently put new drivers into this particular pair of speakers and that they had not had the usual amount of running in that he would normally have given them prior to dispatch.

I decided to suspend any critical listening for at least a week while I let them run in. It was clear from casual listening however that things were improving. Revisiting Solid Air, the soundstage was greatly enhanced and following Gediminas' recommendation to extend the distance between the speakers, further improvements were achieved. My usual listening position favours the left speaker slightly and some gentle toeing in and a very tiny adjustment to The Superuniti's balance control helped to address any imbalance.

And so to some serious listening. My initial instinct – I was unaware of Gediminas' background at this point – was that these would be speakers that were suited primarily to acoustic and classical music, although that wasn't going to stop me from throwing a bunch of other stuff in their direction. I started off fairly gently with Richard Thompson's Acoustic Classics album. This is an excellent recording and the Sincerus 80s showed it off really well. On I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight, the attack of Thompson's pick on the strings was tangible and it was easy to appreciate the contribution that the body of the guitar was making to the sound.



A CONCERT HALL ... IN YOUR LIVING ROOM



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Time for a bit of classical and one of my favourite orchestral pieces, Mussorgsky's Pictures At An Exhibition. I have a few versions of this and this time I chose Herbert von Karajan's recording with the Berlin Philharmonic. This piece makes really good use of all the instruments of the orchestra in various combinations and the '80s allowed me to envisage the position of each set of instruments from trombones to triangle. In the brassy fanfares of the Great Gates of Kiev I've sometimes found that the supporting instruments get lost behind the wall of horns, trombones and trumpets but this time each instrument held its own.

Changing the mood completely with Smoke On The Water from Deep Purple's classic Made In Japan live album I was impressed by the sense of the hall's acoustic but slightly disappointed at the entrance of Roger Glover's bass. There was plenty of detail there in the texture of the notes but it lacked a certain grunt in the really bottom end. I was, however, impressed by the way that the 80's allowed me to follow his playing all the way through the performance along with all the other instruments. Ian Paice's ride cymbal rang out clearly and I could hear each thump of the bass drum regardless of how busy Blackmore or Lord got on their respective instruments.

As I spent more time with these speakers, I found that their roll off at the bottom end was my only cause for concern but one that I became more comfortable with, the more time I spent with them. Top, midrange and upper bass were all highly detailed and it was only when I wanted that feeling of moving air, that thud in the chest, that I was left feeling disappointed. Having said that, the Tidal stream of Sorry from Beyoncé's new album Lemonade still grooved like a joiner's chisel and had the floorboards rumbling, and my go-to bass monster track, Why So Serious from The Dark Knight soundtrack, still had plenty to offer.

Conclusion

All in all, the Sincerus 80's are well-built, insightful (as I write this I've just noticed a xylophone detail in St Alphonso's Pancake Breakfast from Frank Zappa's Apostrophe album that has previously eluded me), detailed

and musical. If you are a fan of heavy rock, dub reggae or dance music then you may find them to be just a little refined for your tastes. Otherwise, they offer excellent value and I'll certainly be sorry to see them leave.

Pros:

Natural, detailed sound

Work well across a broad range of musical styles

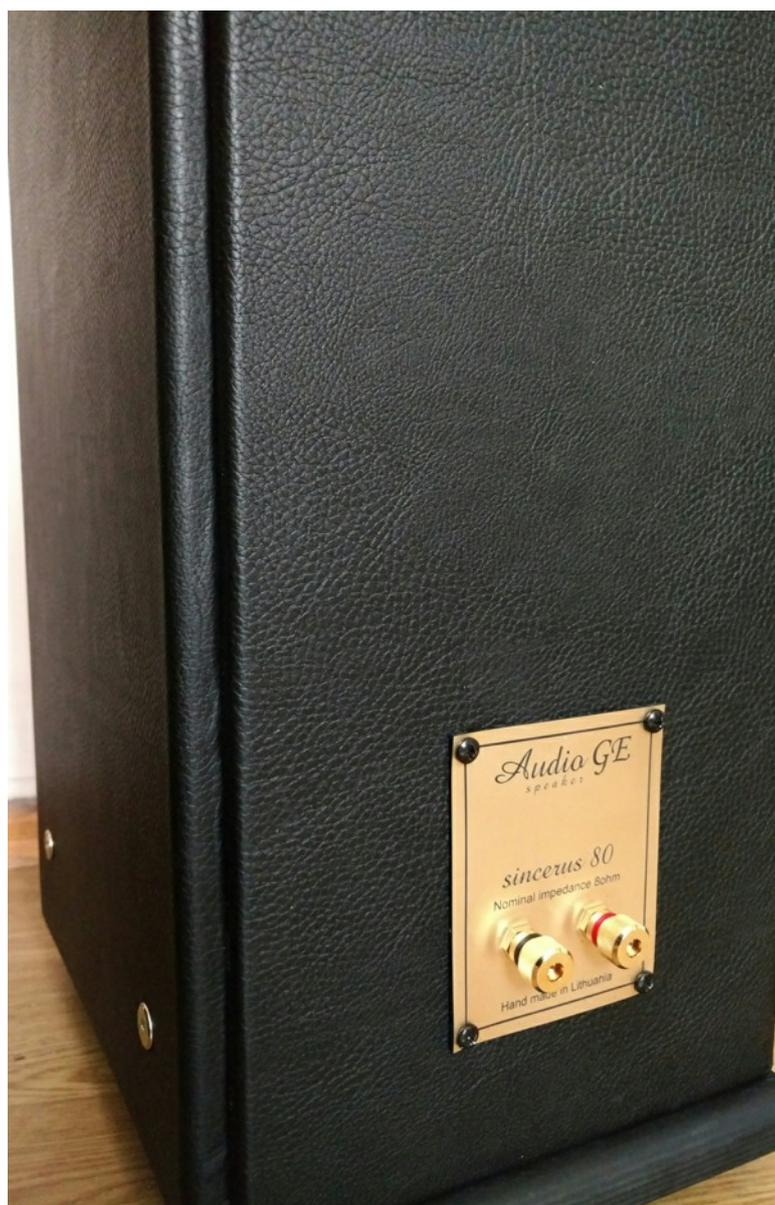
Cons:

Not bass monsters. If this is a priority, you may have to look elsewhere.

Price with eco leather finish 1300 euros

Price with natural wood veneer 1200 euros

John Scott





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Paradox Audio Cables

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Paradox Audio hail from Oslo in Norway and headed by Tore Magnus Wilhelmsen, founded early in the year 2010. They produce a range of cables aimed squarely at the high end of the market and the company's tagline is "Probably the world's most honest cables". Dominic Marsh plumbs them into his system

The philosophy behind that is Paradox Audio says that only the finest materials go into their cables, which directly affects the music coming out. Bold words, so let's see if that claim is substantiated.

Three cables were submitted for review, in the shape of the Soundwave single ended RCA interconnect of 1.5 metres in length priced at US\$ 1619 (£1,062), then a 1.5 metre Velocity power cable with Schuko inlet connector priced at US\$ 2349 (£1,541) and lastly a 2.5 metre pair of Singularity speaker cables fitted with 4mm banana plugs priced at US\$ 1549 (£1,016). All of the cables are handmade. They appear to be second up from the bottom of the Paradox Audio range.

Construction

Sadly no construction details are given on the Paradox website for the Soundwave interconnects but I can tell you they are a flat ribbon design and fitted with the Neutrik Reen RCA plugs. Conductor material is said to be of very high purity copper with a choice of having a shield or not fitted. Being a flat ribbon design means you have to be careful when handling the cable as it is all too easy for the cable to

Paradox Audio Cables

loop over itself and kink and once kinked, an impression of the kink could be left permanently. This cable is also available in XLR balanced configuration.

The Velocity power cable has an outer diameter of 13.4mm and is fairly flexible. Conductor material is high purity oxygen free copper with 3 conductors of 11 AWG (3 x 4mm) each with 3 layers of copper and aluminium shielding. Insulation is by way of PE and PVC layers. Connectors fitted to the review sample were an alloy bodied Schuko inlet connector and a large plastic bodied IEC connector. Power handling is said to be 89 Amps maximum, although the connectors are rated at considerably less than that figure. The outer covering is an expandable mesh sleeving, with a choice of colours available. Mains inlet plugs available for USA, Australia, UK and Schuko connections, as are high current IEC connectors.

Lastly, the Singularity speaker cable is again a flat ribbon design with an outside diameter of 11.9mm. Conductor material is said to be high purity copper and arranged in “modules”. Each one of these modules has what appears to be a range of conductors in descending order of gauge to make up 12 AWG in total. Additional modules can be added according to application.

The review sample was fitted with 4mm “Z” plugs and spade connections are also available to order.

Sound

The first cable I inserted into my resident system was the power cable and immediately I could tell this was a cable that was not shy of delivering high current. Bass became fuller and more taut, with a complete lack of boom or overhang – the benchmark of a good power cord. I particularly liked the look and feel of the alloy Schuko connector, although connection quality was no better or worse than other boutique connectors as it could be wiggled in the socket although actual connection was never lost. Next in went the interconnects, which added a small level of additional fine details over my resident cables, with the remainder of the frequencies on an equal par. Finally, the speaker cables were connected up so I now had the full ‘loom’ of Paradox cables installed. The speaker cables added a small level of refinement and better top end clarity. The collective result was very good performing; the added piquancy in the upper treble was very welcome to hear.

Time for some music to be played through the cables and into the CD drawer went my trusty test disc in the shape of Fink’s “Wheels Beneath My Feet” live album. Track one called “Biscuits For Breakfast” begins with the drummer gently striking the Ride cymbal as the intro, which has to portray the metal ringing in the cymbal to be accepted as real and any masking here shows up instantly and readily. The Paradox loom gave a good account of themselves with this test and I could find no criticisms to level at these cables. Kick drum was portrayed with good weight and solidity, a good solid rhythmic pounding of the drum with impeccable timing, bang on cue



Paradox Audio Cables



with each beat, so no cause for concerns there. Moving on to track 12 “Sort Of Revolution” we should be able to hear a clear distinctions in the change of venue ambience as each of the tracks on the album were laid down at different locations throughout one of Fink’s many European tours. This track contains a large element of audience participation, with rhythmic hand clapping that shouldn’t sound like bacon frying in a pan, catcalls and cheering from the audience should also be very clear and concise too and the Paradox cables passed this test with flying colours.

As a contrast to that and considerably more technically challenging too, I followed on with some electronic music in the shape of Tripswitch’s excellent album “Geometry”. There is some superb layering in this album and it takes a very competent set of cables to unfold and pull back all the layers so each strand is separated out and clearly defined in every respect. The bass lines really are deep on this album, rather subtle in places too and can easily be muddled by the music around it. The Paradox loom handled this task rather well, especially around the bass which has to be deep and not collide with other instruments in the mix, but once or twice did momentarily get recessed into the rest of the music, although there is no real cause for concern here as other cables in a similar class demonstrate the same trait.

Conclusion

These cables occupy an already crowded and very competitive market sector, so it is extraordinarily difficult to place them in any order of ranking amongst their contemporaries. To their credit, Paradox Audio make no claims about their cable’s performance, so in that respect they are indeed “honest cables” and so presumably they allow their target audience to discover for themselves if that is the case.

My favourite cable of the three was the power cord, in it’s ability to transfer plenty of current when needed and being overhang and boom-free in the bass registers. Speaker cables too were impressive for their fine balanced and detailed sound. For the asking price however, I felt that the interconnects deserved better quality plugs than the Neutriks fitted by Paradox and I was left wondering if better quality plugs would have made a difference in sound quality. Of course, I have made my views known to Paradox Audio.

We are talking about a high end price tag here and do the cables give a high end performance to match? Well yes they did in my resident system, but whether they perform the same in your system is an unanswered question, naturally and hand built cables are never cheap to begin with. They are fine cables nonetheless and if their price doesn’t faze you, then do put them on your audition list.

Pros:

Sublime detailed sound with plenty of refinement. The power cord did impress.

Cons:

Not for those audiophiles with shallow pockets. I would expect RCA plugs better than Neutriks fitted at this price level.

Dominic Marsh

RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY
JANINE ELLIOT



Last month I looked at a turntable design from Garrard that if it had taken off might have meant no need for CDs at all, allowing as it did the possibility of up to 5 hours playing from an LP. Alas its lifetime was little more than my interest in MiniDiscs. This time round I conclude my look at turntables and arms with other ideas that could have changed the fortunes of vinyl before its revival (or should that be revinyl) in the 21st Century. Whilst the Garrard invention meant an increase in playing time, another invention from across the pond would effectively lead to a halving of the playing time. This idea, and published in the US High Fidelity Magazine in 1956, was for a clever lateral playing tonearm developed by Truline that contained two cartridges kept a finite distance apart. This allowed the Cook Livingston method of stereo whereby the two legs of stereo were kept as two distinct tracks side by side on one side of an LP. This was to be confusingly known as Binaural stereo, not to be confused with dummy-head-stereo. Emory Cook believed the stereophonic record as we know it today, which was

Turntable designs that could have taken off. Part 2

invented in 1933 by EMI's Alan Blumlein, was not good enough.

Blumlein's idea had each leg on the two sides of the record groove kept at an angle of 45 degrees to the vertical, and does mean that crosstalk of information will find itself infecting the other leg. Blumlein joined EMI's central Research Laboratories at Hayes, Middlesex, in 1931 when Columbia and The Gramophone Company merged in the same year. Over his lifetime he was a prolific inventor, responsible for much of the stereo we take for granted today. After a night at the cinema

with his wife he was frustrated that the sound from a character on screen never seemed to appear where the image on the screen was. He looked at how to re-create the features of the sound-field that we pick up from our ears by creating the coincident-pair microphone system (also called Blumlein pair), whereby two microphones were placed close to each other and toed out for left and right. Many audiophile sound engineers use this approach for un-processed un-complicated true-stereo recordings. Incidentally the very first stereo microphone system was actually by mistake at the great Elec-

trical Exhibition in Paris in 1881 by a Clement Ader, who was demonstrating an early telephone system similar to what we now call the spaced-microphone stereo technique. No one took an interest in this idea then, so he went on to invent the inflatable bicycle tyre and then started playing with aeroplanes, calling his first plane 'A Vion. Of course these two words were later joined together to become the generic name used in the French language.

Blumlein's next task was to look at how to create stereo on a gramophone yet still remain compatible with the existing mono records and record cartridges. His idea involved creating a complex cut on the gramophone record with two imprints at 45 degrees to the vertical on either wall of the groove that could be read simultaneously to playback the new stereo (Binaural) audio. On the 14th of December 1933 the first wax disc was cut in a test recording of stereo sound at the auditorium of the EMI site, a number of years before the invention of PVC and the 33 1/3rpm LPs. Another stereo experiment from the late 1920s involved playing a record vertically on a special record deck with two arms, one for either side of the disc, with one for left and one for right. Alas, this idea didn't catch on. With only Blumlein's idea being taken seriously for stereo replay, Emory Cook considered the invention not developed enough to be effective in terms of stereo separation – indeed one of the arguments highli-

No one took an interest in this idea then, so he went on to invent the inflatable bicycle tyre and then started playing with aeroplanes, calling his first plane 'A Vion.

ghted in the promotion of the CD – and that the only successful approach to having two distinct legs was literally by having two separate grooves. Because it came a bit too late and wasn't compatible with conventional mono or stereo LPs the idea died pretty quickly. Also, because of the lower fidelity and high frequency distortion of the inner groove due to its effectively slower speed, he used two *lateral* grooves with a 500 Hz crossover in the inner track to try and compensate. It didn't work. Also, with the duration of the "long" playing record now being similar to the shellac 78s from before, its improved audio wouldn't make up for the reduction in playing time. Stereo separation has of course been a major issue in vinyl ever since, and cartridge tilt and azimuth are central to providing the best crosstalk from your cartridge. Some manufacturers such as Jolida and their Foz XT-R Crosstalk Reduction Device aim to improve image focus and soundstaging electronically from any cartridge, though this idea is limited to 40dB separation.

My final look at turntables that could have changed the world was my favourite ADC Accutrac 4000, which was a very able direct-drive turntable with automatic track selection and a computerized memory bank. The American company was actually owned by BSR (The Birmingham Sound Recorders) who were Garrard's main competitor in their heyday. This turntable

could play tracks in any order from the comfort of your armchair, something we now take for granted with other forms of replay. The Accutrac wasn't however the first ever "automated" turntable. That one was by Toshiba back in the 70's, but it is this unit that will always be remembered by me not least because of the very 21st century silver "bulb" receiver for the remote control handset. I have looked over the last two months at forward thinking ideas that could have made a big difference to vinyl replay in terms of quality and playback-duration. It seems weird that having been accustomed over the last thirty years to mass-storage, long playing times and ease of playing from MP3, WAV, HD Audio and CD, audiophiles are now working their way back in droves to playing a 24 minute vinyl with limited crosstalk and scratches. Perhaps the Cassette tape will be the next to return. Now, where is my Nakamichi Dragon...?

Janine Elliot



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FIDELITY MATTERS

A LIFETIME OF MUSIC AND AUDIO EXPERIENCE AND COMMENT...BY IAN RINGSTEAD



Most people would assume that as long as there is a power supply designed to use a device, then the quality is not important as long as it works and is fit for purpose. Back in the eighties that was generally thought to be the case with hifi components until companies like Naim decided to rewrite the rule book and introduce separate add on power supplies (SNAPS). Naim argued that the built in power supplies of their amps, which in standard mode powered the pre amp as well, could be greatly improved in sound quality and power output if a separate high quality power supply was added.

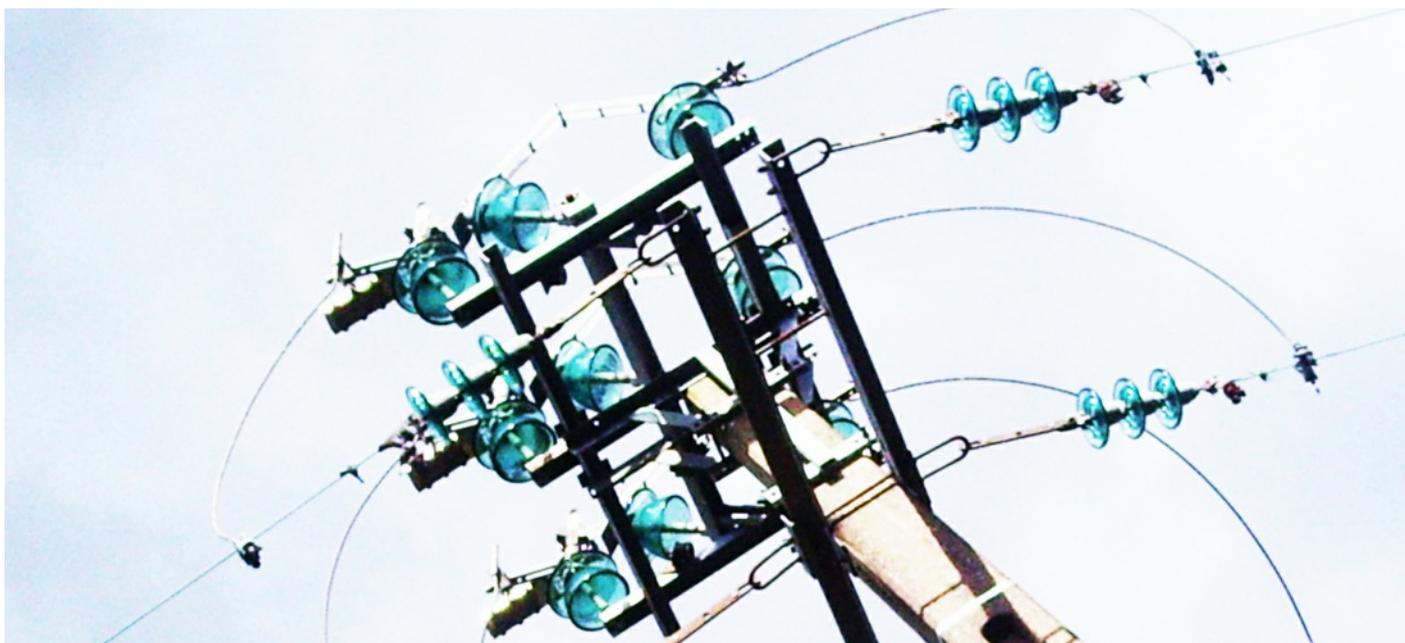
Cyrus also followed suit in their amp range with their integrated amps being offered with the addition of a PSX power supply. Having owned and used both amp ranges and used the add-on power supplies I can wholeheartedly recommend their benefits. A better power supply is like a bigger and better car engine, in that the performance takes on a whole new level of improvements that the integrated standard unit struggles to keep up with. It took

The vast majority of electronic devices require a power supply, whether it is a linear power supply or the now popular switch mode power supply (SMPS). Whatever the type, we take them for granted and we rely heavily on them to power or charge all our electronics doodads

quite a few years for other companies to adopt Naim's ideas (Julian Vereker being the main driving force originally), but now add-on power supplies are common as an upgrade to many manufacturers ranges. The accessory market has also benefited and the performance of good components can be lifted substantially with an upgrade.

I recently invested in a new custom made DC power supply for

my Project Extension 9 turntable. It comes with a standard wall wart SMPS that probably only costs a few pounds and does a decent job, but I got to thinking that surely a dedicated linear power supply would lift the performance like it had done with my amps in the past. I had read many enthusiasts had improved their turntables performance by getting a specialist power supply and seen a few companies offering their own. Some are reasonable but others are



rather expensive upgrades. I opted for a good quality unit at £300 which I felt was commensurate to my needs and wouldn't break my wallet. Value for money is close to my heart and although a more expensive supply may be better, I can't justify the outlay. Having used the new power supply for a few weeks now I can say it was worth the expense. The soundstage is far more open and detailed than before and I get less hum issues. This was therefore an upgrade I am truly pleased with and could be extended to other components like phono stages, headphone amps etc. Companies like Graham Slee do just such an upgrade with his units which again I have used very successfully.

Another variation I am currently trying out is a valve amp where the power supply is in a separate case to the pre amp, transformers and valves. For a sub £1000 amp this is exciting and delivers excellent results. Battery power supplies (going off grid) are also an alternative which some purists swear by and even go as far as to have a whole bank of large

cumbersome batteries in their system. The results may well be excellent as there is no influence or contamination from our normal AC mains borne supply, but cost and practicalities spring to mind again for most music lovers.

A controversial subject is the use of mains conditioners and purifiers to alleviate the pollution problems of our mains supply from the National grid. We take electricity for granted like we do breathing, but think about it, there is pollution in the air all around us which we inhale 24 hours a day and the same is true of our mains supply. Obviously the rate of pollution varies dependent upon where we are and crucially the time of day has an influence too. If you think of the times when your system seems to be on song and sounding great it is usually late at night when many people are in bed and industrial activity may be lower. I have found this to be the case on numerous occasions.

I won't get embroiled in the arguments for or against purifiers and conditioners, I have tried

several in my system and differences are tangible, but the cost of many units I find hard to swallow. (That is down to you the reader to decide) A dedicated, separate mains spur was one of the most effective things I have done, with an additional earth ground from outside in my garden to aid isolation. The improvement in the bass was palpable.

To conclude my experiences have been that a good mains supply coupled with a decent mains block, sockets, mains leads and where possible upgraded power supplies all contribute to a great sounding system. Get the foundations right and the rest will follow. I'm not saying good equipment choices aren't important, it's just that without these good foundations everything won't gel as well, and long term may crumble through listener dissatisfaction and loss of interest in this marvellous past time. Now we don't want that do we?

Ian Ringstead

THE VIEWS OF STU!

COMMENTS, RANTS AND THE
OCCASIONAL TEMPER
TANTRUM...BY STUART SMITH



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For the last few weeks my bedtime reading has been Howard Massey's excellent book "The Great British Recording Studios" which goes into loads of detail about individual studios from the fifties onwards, detailing how they were acoustically designed and treated, the kind of mixing desks they use, the monitors they use, the microphones and outboard they use... let's just say it is very comprehensive. Reading the book and musing how the different gear used in studios would affect the final records we get to listen to, something struck me.

Pretty much exclusively the monitors used in all the studios discussed were either Tannoy Reds/Golds in Lockwood cabinets or JBLs fed with Crown or Amcron amps... in earlier studios and before the days of solid state circuitry amps were valve/tube Quads and Radfords. Everything went through the main desk to the multitrack tape recorder and then

More ramblings and incoherent musings from Stuart; this time he questions why we aren't all listening to pro monitors and pro amplifiers and finishes off with a mixed case of reds for good measure

to two track tape (predominantly Studer A80s or similar) before being sent to the cutting room where a lathe would make a master disc. The engineers and producers know the sound they are looking for, much of which was accomplished with various mic'ing techniques, outboard gear, the recording room's acoustic etc, but the common denominators in all of this were the amps and the

chosen monitors. So here's the question; if we as music lovers, and specifically as audiophiles (yes there is a difference), are looking to get to as near a sonic experience as the producer created in the studio, then why aren't we all using pro-amps and Tannoy/JBLs being fed by huge tape machines playing direct from master copies? I'm obviously talking here of the pre-digital age!

"I've not heard a better preamp, and I've been looking for more than 30 years" Sam Tellig - *Stereophile*, October 2012

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The final bit of that question is pretty straightforward to answer; studio quality, professional tape machines are expensive to buy and tricky to keep in perfect playing order and, unless you know someone behind the scenes, copies direct from the master recording are rarer than the proverbial rocking horse crap. Yes there are a growing number of specialist reel 2 reel companies providing pre-recorded tapes direct from masters, but the vast majority of popular albums will remain unobtainable to the masses in this format.

The first part of the question is a bit trickier to pin down. I've mulled this over a good deal and, if we look at this in logical terms, any person looking to get as close to the original recording as possible will want to have the aforementioned loudspeakers and amplifiers in their home...surely! But it's not quite as simple as that is it? We all have different rooms with different acoustics and, more importantly I'd suggest, we all have different preferences in the way we like to have our music presented to us. I've spent enough time in studios over the years to know that the sound produced in there is not going to please the vast majority of people long term and in a domestic environment.

In short, and in my opinion, the vast majority of audiophiles are not trying to get as close to the original recording as possible, they

are trying to get as close as possible to the kind of sound they prefer, in their own space. For example, I use the Avantgarde Duo XD loudspeakers, and whilst they sound absolutely stunning, dynamic and "clean" I know that what is coming out of them is not an absolutely true representation of what the producer heard in the studio. As a bit of an experiment, if you are able, play a few tunes on your current preferred speakers and then swap them out for a different pair. The sound will be completely different of course, but which version of reality is correct? The answer in short is neither is either totally correct, nor entirely wrong. The only thing that is "right" is what you the listener prefers, and what you favour will depend on a whole host of factors. Some will have a preference for a slightly rolled off sound at the top end, some will choose a more in your face presentation, other may favour a less detailed sound... you could go on and on.

I suppose what we're getting to in the final analysis here is that what comes into play in the home listening environment is TASTE. Yes, it is pretty obvious to anyone with any experience of different gear that there are clearly good products and others that are, let's be kind here, less good components, but take a series of what are widely regarded as "good" components and within that group you'll have a host of different flavours to cater to a host of different tastes. We see it all the

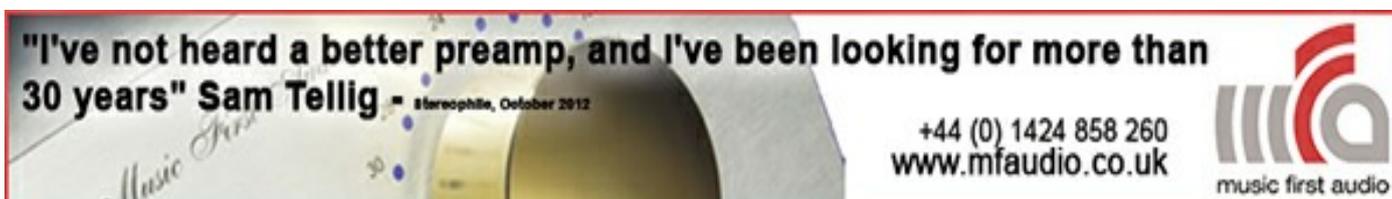
time at shows and on social media where one group of people will declare a love of all things valve/tube powered, whilst others will say that the only way to the "panacea" of "straight wire with gain" is solid state and that the tubeheads are actually reacting to (and preferring) the sound of odd-order harmonics. Some will prefer a BBC monitor style speaker, others horns, others open baffles...we could go on and on and on an on...

So Who Is Right?

No one is correct and everyone is right, which I suppose could be seen as a bit of a cop out, but if we look at an "everyday" analogy it soon becomes clear that this is the only conclusion one can make. *Take a dozen bottles of what are widely regarded as being good red wines and sit with friends and taste them over the period of an evening. I pretty much guarantee that everyone in the room will be able to appreciate that each of the fine beverages on offer has its merits, but different folks will prefer different grapes, different appellations, different terroir, each of which gives a unique nuance to the wine in our glass ...and so it is with audio. We all prefer different things in life and the way we listen to music is no exception and all I can say is vive la difference!

*Drink in moderation of course!

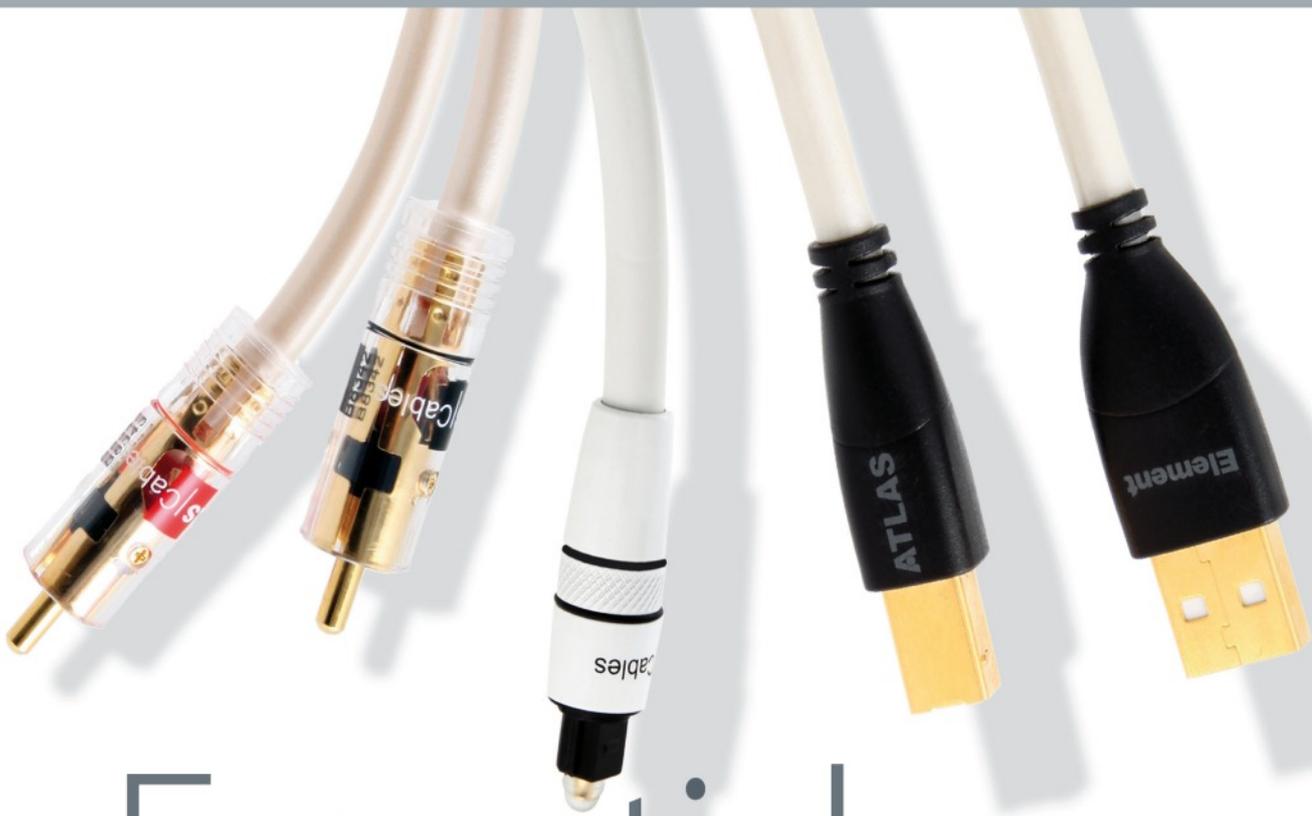
Stuart Smith



"I've not heard a better preamp, and I've been looking for more than 30 years" Sam Tellig - *Stereophile*, October 2012

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BIRD'S EYE VIEW



AUDIOPHILIA AND MORE FROM THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY LINETTE SMITH

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I have heard people say quite often (and been guilty of it myself) 'that's it, my hifi is as good as it will ever get, it cannot be improved upon!'. You have spent a long time, possibly years, auditioning different components, upgrading piece by piece until it finally happens, that epiphany moment when everything falls into place. It sounds perfect, it couldn't sound better if winged cherubim flew gently down from heaven and sang sweetly into your ears. The electronics are right, the speakers are positioned perfectly, the room is treated properly, the cables cannot be improved on. You've got the racks right. The turntable/tonearm/cartridge combo is stunning. Seating is sorted for the adoring audience. You don't even need to change any valves this time...damn, it even looks perfect. This. Is. It. You proudly take to your friendly neighbourhood facebook group of like-minded beings and post up a few pics. Then you make a fatal

Linette searches for audio Nirvana but pops another audiophile rock in the pipe instead

error. 'I am NEVER buying any more hifi. It sounds PERFECT'. Oh dear. Now what you have done there is actually the worst thing possible. You have left the fold of fellow addicts, you have done it, shaken the addiction and broken free. Your addict friends do not like this one little bit, they will be

hell-bent on drawing you back in. 'Just one more hit, for old times.'

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BIRD'S EYE VIEW
AUDIOPHILIA AND MORE FROM THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY LINETTE SMITH

This state of bliss could go on for weeks, even months. You are happy rediscovering long lost musical gems and new artists on your wonderful system, you wouldn't even change it for the fabled 'Lottery Win' money-is-no-object system that you used to dream about. Once an addict though, always an addict. So you browse a few hifi review sites, maybe buy a magazine....there's no harm in just looking ...is there? Some fellow audiophiles pop round for the evening and of course they are discussing your system and how wonderful the sound is. Then one of them says 'I really love your speakers, but I heard them with such and such amps at a show and they sounded even better than this!' Better? You can't believe it...or can you? Could it be possible?? The creeping self doubt begins. Perhaps you should try those amps...just to see? And there you go, back down that slippery slope again. You could give in to the shakes and the shivers, tough it out and go completely cold turkey...crawl back up the slope and become a normal, functioning human being who doesn't wake up in a frantic sweat at 3am because you think that an intruder may have broken in and be touching your hifi. But let's be honest, where's the fun in that?

So will enough ever really be enough when it comes to tweaking your system?

all-in-one phone dock! It may be an addiction, but there are worse addictions you could have.

Right Here, Right Now

Even if the holy grail system is achieved to your satisfaction and you manage to resist being drawn back in to the box swapping game again, life has a way of turning things upside down, when you least expect it. Life changing events, marriage, kids all can throw a spanner in the works of your perfect hifi. You have kids or the kids grow up and leave home so you have to baby-proof the hifi or you need to downsize so you can move to a smaller abode. Suddenly your previously perfect system doesn't fit with your new way of life. But these challenges are actually a lot of fun, finding a new system that entertains you and suits the changes awakens the old excitement.

So will enough ever really be enough when it comes to tweaking your system? Probably not because you are in it for the ride, not just the destination. Is there such a thing as the perfect hifi? No, but there is perfect for right here, right now, and it really doesn't matter if that 'perfect' changes later down the line.

Linette Smith

The End Game

Is there really such a thing as The End Game System? Probably not, because for most audiophile types the journey is just as important as the result. Sharing and discussing with other audiophiles leads you to discover something new and try it in your system. There is always something to learn and nobody knows absolutely everything. When you think you have become some kind of all seeing hifi Yoda, that's usually when you find something new. It may be some new technology that you discover or something old school, like getting back into vinyl or reel to reel. It's a hobby and like most hobbyists we like to collect, even hoard. Hand's up everyone who has enough pieces of hifi equipment stashed away to build several systems? Bringing out an 'old friend', every now and again, to try in the current system set's us off on that journey again, trying different combinations...tweaking away once more. By our very nature, us audiophiles and hifi nuts have boundless curiosity...if we didn't then we would probably all be sat listening to mp3s from an

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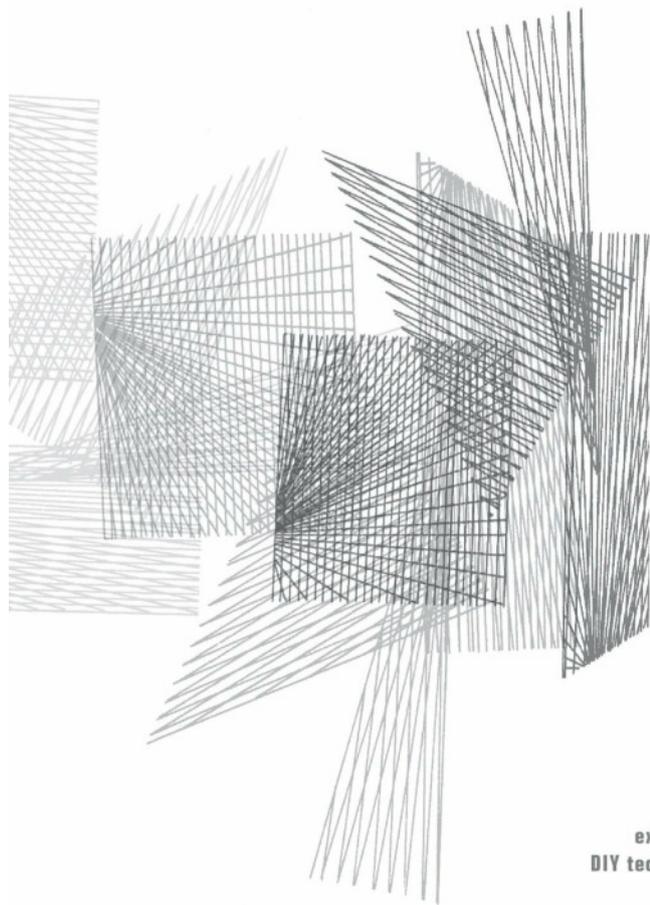
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MUSIC REVIEWS

Close To The Noisefloor – Formative UK Electronica 1975-1984 (Cherry Red)



**CLOSE
TO
THE
NOISE
FLOOR**

formative UK electronica
1975-1984
excursions in proto-synth pop,
DIY techno and ambient exploration

I've had this album on MP3 promo for a good while now and it's a great piece of historical documentation of the underground, DIY electronic movement that took place between 75 and 84. It's a sprawling four CD set with 61 tracks and around 9000 words of sleevenotes by Dave Henderson of MOJO. You'll know some of the names herein (Human League, OMD and Blancmange) but it's the other, less well known bands that really make this album the gem that it is.

The ethic here is distinctly DIY and there are no big buck productions to be had here. No, what you have is the spirit of Punk Rock with an aesthetic taken from the likes of Cluster, Tangerine Dream, Floyd and Hawkwind. Most of the music on this collection is made at home, in bedsits by bands made up of just one bloke twiddling his oscillator and recording the

results to four track tape. My mention of Punk is no accident. The early electronic movement in the UK was underground, lawless, anarchic and full of experimentation and boundary pushing sonic outpourings that sometimes worked and sometimes (often purposefully) didn't work in the context of what the world had come to expect from what was accepted as being acceptable aural fodder.

Much of what we have here could be termed "lo-fi" (it is) and it encompasses everything from proto synth-pop, embryonic four to floor techno and avant-garde soundscapes that push the envelope and the machines that make the music to the limit. Not all of this is of

course comfortable music, but that usually means that it's exciting, boundary pushing and attention-grabbing.

A quick look at some of the less well known names and track titles on Close To The Noisefloor will give you an idea of what this is all about: R.A.M, Inner City Static, British Electric Foundation, Final Program, Instant Automatons, Robot Dance, Konstruktivist, Legendary Pink Dots... you get the picture I'm sure.

There's a lot of good and interesting stuff on this album that deserves your attention if you have any interest at all in electronica, synth pop, techno... well just about any kind of modern music. Yes, at times some of the tunes are a bit much and can be a bit jarring but they show the roots of much of what has come after.

MUSIC REVIEWS

Track Listing:

DISC ONE

1. FIVE TIMES OF DUST – Computer Bank
2. THE KLINGONS – R.A.M.
3. CHRIS AND COSEY – Re-Education Through Labour
4. MALCOLM BROWN – Sedation Strokes
5. STORM BUGS – Little Bob Minor
6. THOMAS LEER – Tight As A Drum
7. BLANCMANGE – Holiday Camp
8. INNER CITY STATIC – Fractured Smile
9. WE BE ECHO – Sexuality
10. BOURBONESE QUALK – God With Us
11. NAGAMATZU Faith
12. O YUKI CONJUGATE – Disco Song
13. BRITISH ELECTRIC FOUNDATION – Optimum Chant
14. KEVIN HARRISON – All Night Long
15. VOICE OF AUTHORITY – Stopping And Starting

DISC TWO

1. COLIN POTTER – I Am Your Shadow
2. BRITISH STANDARD UNIT – D’Ya Think I’m Sexy?
3. FIVE TIMES OF DUST – The Single Off The Album
4. SPÖÖN FAZER – Back To The Beginning
5. GERRY AND THE HOLOGRAMS – Gerry And The Holograms
6. THE PASSAGE – Drugface
7. JOHN FOX – A New Kind Of Man
8. 100% MANMADE FIBRE – Green For Go
9. THOSE LITTLE ALIENS – Sentimental
10. FINAL PROGRAM – Protect And Survive
11. THE HUMAN LEAGUE – Being Boiled
12. INSTANT AUTOMATONS – New Muzak
13. CULTURAL AMNESIA – Materialistic Man
14. WORLDBACKWARDS – (Leaving Me) Now
15. ALAN BURNHAM – Music To Save The World By

There’s a lot of good and interesting stuff on this album that deserves your attention if you have any interest at all in electronica, synth pop, techno...well just about any kind of modern music

16. ORCHESTRAL MANOEUVRES IN THE DARK – Almost
17. EYELESS IN GAZA – Kodak Ghosts Run Amok
18. SCHLEIMER K – Broken Vein
19. NATIVE EUROPE – The Distance From Köln

DISC THREE

1. ZORCH – Adrenalin (Return of the Elohim Pt 1)
2. SEA OF WIRES – Robot Dance
3. RON BERRY – Sea Of Tranquility
4. MFH – Mistral
5. ADRIAN SMITH – Joe Goes To New York
6. MARK SHREEVE – Embryo (Extract)
7. EG OBLIQUE GRAPH – Triptych
8. CARL MATTHEWS – Encounter
9. PAUL NAGLE – Ynys Scaith
10. O YUKI CONJUGATE – Sedation
11. KONSTRUKTIVIST – Western Vein
12. ATTRITION – Dead Of Night (Excerpt)

DISC FOUR

1. THROBBING GRISTLE – What A Day
2. A TENT – No Way Of Knowing
3. PORTION CONTROL – Go For The Throat
4. DC3 – Eco Beat
5. RENALDO AND THE LOAF – Dying Inside
6. BLAH BLAH BLAH – In The Army
7. LEGENDARY PINK DOTS – God Speed
8. MUSLIMGAUZE – Muslin Gauze Muslim Prayer
9. SUISSE – Live At Longborne
10. ALIEN BRAINS – Menial Disorders, Extract B2
11. STORM BUGS – Himeal (And She Blew)
12. THIRD DOOR FROM THE LEFT – In The Room
13. AL ROBERTSON – Dignity Of Labour
14. bcGilbert, gLewis, russell Mills – Mzui (Extract)

Stuart Smith

MUSIC REVIEWS

John Martyn – Solid Air (Half Speed Master) (Abbey Road)



According to Howard Massey in his excellent book “The Great British Studios”, half speed mastering originally came about when John Lennon arrived in the Apple cutting room to master his new 45 “Power To The People” and wanted it “loud”. As a result the engineers came up with the ingenious idea of cutting the disc at half speed. This meant playing back the master tape at half speed and having the cutting lathe cut at half speed too, resulting in the engineers being able to get more level on the acetate but “with much better bass too”.

The Abbey Road website has this to say about the advantages of half speed mastering “The vinyl L.P. is an analogue sound carrier. Therefore the size and shape of the groove carrying the music is directly related to whatever the music is doing at any particular point. By reducing the speed by a factor of two the recording stylus has twice as long to carve the intricate groove into the master lacquer. Also, any difficult to cut high-frequency information becomes fairly easy to cut mid-range. The result is a record that is capable of extremely clean and unforced high-frequency response as well as a detailed and solid stereo image.”

This particular album has been cut from a hi-rez digital transfer from the original quarter inch

analogue masters replayed on an Ampex ATR-102 tape playerfitted with custom made extended bass response playback heads.

So that’s the technical bit out the way, but what about the music? Solid Air is a classic album from John Martyn that was originally released on Island Records in 1973. It’s widely acclaimed as one of THE records you should hear and Q magazine rated it the 67th greatest British album ever made. It was recorded in December 1972 at Basing Street Studios and Sound Techniques and is very much in the laidback, folk-jazz-rock-blues style...if that’s even a thing and remains one of the favourite albums ever here at Hifi Pig towers. It’s a record I’m sure many readers will already own, or at least know, so why bother with this particular version of it?

Well, I was a bit apprehensive when we sent for this album if truth be known as it’s music I already own and it was twenty five quid. It arrived a couple of weeks ago, along with a certificate of authentication, but I wanted to wait for just the right moment to finally pop it on the record spinner...and I’m glad I did. From the first few bars of the opening track “Solid Air” it is clear that we are experiencing something quite special in sonic terms. Yes there are the promised exceptionally clear and pin sharp upper frequencies, but what really shone out for me was the clarity and purity of the acoustic bass on the record.

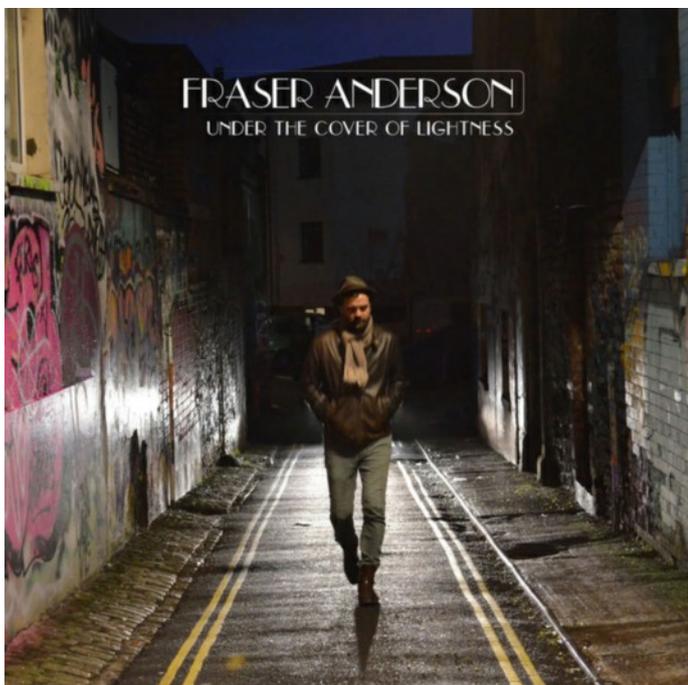
There is simply more of everything on this copy and it makes the music even more enjoyable in every way. Close your eyes and the mix is laid out before you in three dimensional space to the point of it being almost tangible.

So, twenty five notes for a bit of vinyl? Damned right! I’d suggest that even if you wanted to get this record just to show off what your vinyl front end can do when unsuspecting and dubious friends come over it would be well worth it, but in addition to the sonic fireworks you also get great music that, to my mind, is presented in the very best way it can be short of getting hold of the master tape. Superb and highly recommended if you are in any way, shape or form interested in hearing how truly great vinyl records can sound. If you buy just one record this month then make it this one – yes, even if you already own it in another format!

Stuart Smith

MUSIC REVIEWS

Fraser Anderson – Under The Cover Of Lightness



Fraser Anderson has been a father, a son, a brother and a husband. All of these relationships inform his songs as he sings about love, loss and loyalty. The ties that stretch and fray as they bind us to others. Anderson was born in Edinburgh and cut his musical teeth as a drummer in hip hop bands. A meeting with Scottish musical institution Dougie McLean drew him into the folk world. Moving to France with his young family, Anderson crafted his songs while working in kitchens and on building sites, building a fan base through local gigs. Returning to the UK in 2013, Anderson immersed himself in Bristol's musical melting pot. Now with three albums behind him Anderson has released his best album yet, the crowd funded *Under The Cover Of Lightness*.

From the first strokes of the skittering, brushed drums and the muted horns of opening song, *Simple Guidance*, I was reminded of John Martyn. That's a good thing – I love John Martyn. *Simple Guidance* segues into *Beautiful Eyes* and a completely different set of influences. An electronic wash under acoustic guitar and a supporting vocal from Beth Baxter suggests a mostly unplugged Portishead. The electronic influence builds in *Go On Wide Part 1*; glitches and beats drive the song as Anderson's

All different but all heart-deep, resonating like the woody tones of the acoustic bass lines that underpin them

vocals float lazily on top. Bird song and the sound of oars on water take us into part 2; all gently picked acoustic guitar and shimmering electrics. A sleepy summer sound, it's over too soon. *The Wind And The Rain* matches acoustic guitar with a string quartet, drums and a low flute before a gently swirling Hammond.

The spoken rhymes of *With You All* retrace Anderson's hip hop roots before, cradled by string quartet and string bass, *Crying From My Heart* introduces a trio of songs that forms the album's emotional centrepiece. These songs: *Crying From My Heart*, *Five Days* and *Rising Sons* examine three kinds of love, fraternal love, lost love, and paternal love. All different but all heart-deep, resonating like the woody tones of the acoustic bass lines that underpin them.

John Scott

MUSIC REVIEWS

Scott Wainwright – Every Man Has His Critics



Scott Wainwright hails from Barnsley, as do I, and so I was really keen to give this album a listen. He describes himself on his Facebook profile as “Maverick Blues, Gospel and Hip Hop Musician. Husband and Father. Thinker, Optimist, Man of Faith” and if anything I’d have added “a bit quirky” to that list too. I follow Scott on Facebook and he never seems not to be playing a gig somewhere or other and he’s going to be playing at the [North West Audio Show](#) at the end of June too and I’m really looking forward to seeing him live.

Every Man Has His Critics is a single album with a gatefold sleeve and plays at 45rpm, despite there being eleven tunes herein. It’s been put together with the help of Alan Clarke of Kralk Audio fame.

Just to give you an idea Scott plays guitar, harmonica, piano, banjo, percussion, melodica, jewish harp, bass, toys and he sings too and it’s all a bit one-man-band goes into the studio and takes his musician mates along to help out...this is no bad thing and the result is a beautifully raw and honest record that it’s difficult not to love.

There’s bits of country, bits of blues, a smidgen of hip hop and a smattering of Captain Beefheart in

There’s bits of country, bits of blues, a smidgen of hip hop and a smattering of Captain Beefheart in there and the tunes are unpolished, unrefined and sincere

there and the tunes are unpolished, unrefined and sincere. This is not to suggest the tunes aren’t well crafted, they are, it’s more of a comment on the insight into the writer and musician that you get with this kind of unadulterated, straightforward and unpretentious record. Scott comes across as the kind of bloke you’d happily spend time chewing the fat and having a few pints with after the gig and whilst Every Man Has his Critics is unlikely to trouble the charts, it is the kind of record that will be talked about by folk who love and enjoy their music ‘real’.

Here’s what Scott himself has to say about Every Man “The album is about hope, loss, the cosmos and our place in it... and Shoes. The album represents to me artistic freedom, the start on a journey I knew I would one day take. It was the first time I was fully in charge of a musical project, where I could sound like I wanted to sound.”

[Go buy it](#), go see him!

Stuart Smith

CLASSIC ALBUM

John Scott makes the most of the sunshine (well, it was shining when he started to write this) and listens to Linton Kwesi Johnson's 1980 reggae classic

Despite an early fondness for Desmond Dekker's Israelites, I found myself in my late teens with a distinct lack of interest in reggae music. I'd loved the live version of Bob Marley and The Wailers' No Woman No Cry – who couldn't love that? – but tracks like Could You Be Loved and Three Little Birds from 1977's Exodus album struck me as lightweight. Similarly, Third World's hit Now That We've Found Love did nothing for me. I needed a way in; something that I could relate to and in the Summer of 1980 I found it in Linton Kwesi Johnson's Bass Culture album.

Now don't get me wrong: I was a young white kid from a small mining town in south east Scotland; I wasn't fooling myself that I had anything in common with the challenges that life as an Afro-Caribbean immigrant in one of Britain's inner cities presented. But, I was a fan of both Bob Dylan and John Cooper Clarke who both, in very different ways married together poetry and music and Linton Kwesi Johnson, or LKJ as he was known, seemed to be doing something similar.

Born in Jamaica in 1952, LKJ moved to Britain in 1963. He attended school in the London borough of Lambeth where he joined the Black Panthers then



graduated from Goldsmiths College in 1973 with a degree in sociology. He seemed destined for a career in education, receiving a C Day-Lewis Fellowship and becoming Lambeth's writer-in-residence in 1977 but some work writing sleeve notes and advertising material for the Virgin record label's reggae releases led to label boss Richard Branson funding an album, Dread Beat An' Blood by Johnson and musician Dennis "Blackbeard" Bovell. Credited to Poet and The Roots, the album featured Johnson's poems set to Bovell's music and would set the template for LKJ's subsequent releases.

Dread Beat An' Blood was released in 1977 and was followed the next year by Forces Of Victory. LKJ's poems reflected the racial tension that was prevalent at the time between the authorities and the Black community and this theme was carried over into 1980's Bass Culture. At this time the "suss" law gave stop and search powers to the police and this power was generally seen as being abused when it came to policing within areas with a high Afro-Caribbean population. Notting Hill's annual Carnival would regularly erupt into riots. London Metropolitan Police's Special Patrol Group – the SPG – seeming had total autonomy to take a heavy-handed approach to crowd control. This led to the death of New Zealand-born special needs teacher Blair Peach during an Anti Nazi League demonstration in 1979. This is Bass Culture's reality.

CLASSIC ALBUM

In title track Bass Culture, LKJ places reggae music at the heart of his culture. "For the time is nigh, when passion get high, when the beat just lash, when the wall just smash, and the beat just shift and the culture alter. When oppression scatter." One way or another, a change is coming. This is muscular music, the bass at its core, driving it on. Drums knocked into the beat, horns and organ adding texture. Blackbeard at the controls spins guitars skywards.

Street 66 takes things at a funeral pace. A harmonica foreshadowing dread. A house party in the early hours, relaxed and high. A knock on the door... the police. "Step right in and take some licks." What happens next is left to our imagination, but it is all too easy to guess.

Reagan Fi Peach opens with celebratory horns. The story of Blair Peach's death at the hands of the SPG. A tribute and a tragedy. "Everywhere you go it's the talk of the day, everywhere you go you hear people say that the special patrol them a murderer, we can't mek them get no furtherer."

Inglan Is A Bitch pulls no punches in spelling out the disillusionment of Commonwealth immigrants who came to Britain in search of opportunity and found a life of racial hatred and discrimination instead.

Lorraine is possibly the album's only misstep. Serving as light relief, it feels out of place. LKJ knowingly parodies Tin Pan Ally moon, June, spoon rhymes but I'm not sure that it quite works. Fortunately, the song is rescued by a dubby instrumental fade out.

The final two tracks provide the most successful melding of LKJ's poetry with Bovell's music. Reggae Sounds is exactly what it says while Two Sides Of Silence is an almost avant-garde, free jazz tone poem, breaking down everything that has preceded it into pure expression. As great an album as Bass Culture is in its own right, you really need to have the dub versions of these songs as well. Dub, where the music is stripped back to its essential elements, often just bass and drums with other instruments and vocals being flown in and out of the mix, twisted with heavy, creative use of echo effects, is a reggae tradition and there is, for me at least, nothing better than hearing these songs being

followed by their dub versions. Some of the dub versions are available on the LKJ In Dub album, along with dubs of songs from Dread Beat An Blood and Forces Of Victory and LKJ In Dub is a great listen – Iron Bar Dub, the dub version of Sonny's Lettah from Forces Of Victory is worth the purchase alone. Johnson's compilation album Independent Intervenshan goes one better and has almost all of its tracks followed by their dubs, as they rightly should be. This might be the only time when I would recommend the purchase of a compilation over its parent albums. It really is a must-have.

Bass Culture paints a picture of Britain at the end of the 1970s every bit as vividly as Never Mind The Bollocks or the first Clash album. You need it in your collection.

John Scott

AT A GLANCE

Released 9 May 1980 (UK)

Recorded Gooseburry Sound Studios, London

Genre Dub Poetry

Length 31:28

Label Island

Producer Linton Kwesi Johnson

Dennis Bovell

"Bass Culture" – 6:04

"Street 66" – 3:43

"Reggae fi Peach" – 3:09

"Di Black Petty Booshwah" – 3:36

"Inglan Is a Bitch" – 5:26

"Lorraine" – 4:08

"Reggae Sounds" – 3:09

"Two Sides of Silence" – 2:13

BEHIND THE BRANDS

Eunice Kron heads up KR Audio Electronics located in Prauge, Czech Republic, a manufacturer of hand-crafted, high quality tubes (all glass is hand blown) and audio equipment. Hifi Pig goes Behind The Brands with her



How did you get into/what was the first job in the industry?

I married into the job although at the time I didn't know it. When you fall in love, you marry not only the man and his family, their feuds and history, but share your husband's successes and failures of his work and career.

Who was the biggest influence on your career?

Certainly it was Riccardo and his drive to find a perfected way of reproducing music as if it was live.

What was the proudest moment of your career?

When I first heard the stereo amplifier playing a piece of classical music that made me cry. The notes of the arrangement were so clear and dynamic.

What was your very first system?

This I do not remember.

Tell us about your system history.

The system history really started with the creation of the first vacuum tube after 54 years of world non-tube production. The tube was called VV52 (this after three years of hard R&D and much money). It was a design based on a superior 300B. We went to Milano Top Audio and placed the only two tubes we had to up-grade the Audio Note Kego. The people were quite marveled about the difference in the sound performance. This was in Sept. of 1994.

What component/product have you never gotten rid of?

This is a hard one to answer. We have a vast "library" or better put an archive of tubes and tube designs. The tube really is the heart of the amplifier.

What is the best system or single component you have heard?

Again here we are in a subjective world of audio applications. I have been around the world many times and heard many very good sound in many different countries, but have also heard terribly distorted musical systems being proposed as ref. systems. May I just add that women over all have better hearing than men and superior aural memories.

Tell us about your current system.

In the KR listening room we currently have connected the VA 830, the specially designed speakers done by my husband and the very anonymous wiring. The idea here is to show or for all intent and purposes educate the listener. With the development of the KR tubes

BEHIND THE BRANDS

and the reverse hybrid design application (solid state first and then the tube application in the second stage), the amplifier has moved from the sound engineer's text book as being 20% to what some say is around 50% of the stereo system. Our case in question is we have a push-pull amplifier at a modest price that give 40 Watts output with a 300B application.

The State of the Industry

What are your views on the valve renaissance?

This is fairly easy to answer now. When we started, Riccardo and I were alone. Most thought he was too visionary to abandon modern solid state and return to a dinosaur technology. How many times did I see men shake their heads without murmuring the thoughts out loud that, "This man is crazy".

Basically the long road has been these past +20 years since the development of the tube in the beginning of Feb. 1992 of one of patience.

Riccardo was vilified in the Hifi journals as well as lauded. Competitors find us a hard adversary to beat and there is a definite sense of frustration when KR will not conform to their ideas. We continue to do demos and show the public in both public and private auditions what real music should sound like.

What are my views on the state of the industry? Where do I think it is going? What will it look like in five years?

I hope given the time the company has dedicated into training young men and women both in the technical teams as well as the commercial network that this legacy will continue and thrive. My greatest asset is Marek Gencev, the only real tube designing engineer. His age will put him in an excellent position as head of the Product

Development at KR to lead the industry in the future into accepting better tubes for audio purposes.

Analogue will remain as a valid option for two channel stereo.

What are the industry's biggest cons?

This is also a big question. Many companies are forced by commercial reasons to sell or manufacture what is convenient, This may not be the best for musical fidelity.

The Way You Work

Presuming the measurements are fine, what do you listen for when assessing products?

I think we should turn the concept around a bit. The product or products should should dynamic and real. Measurements are only a detail.

You have asked what is my sound preference and mention the following descriptions: 'smooth, listenable music, foot-tapping involving sound, neutrality and transparency' All these descriptions can be heard in our KR tubes and sets. If I could add that medically we have done tests and clear, truthfully reproduced music lowers heart beat and reduces stress levels. These techniques are being employed in operating theatres for the patients as well as in certain therapies.

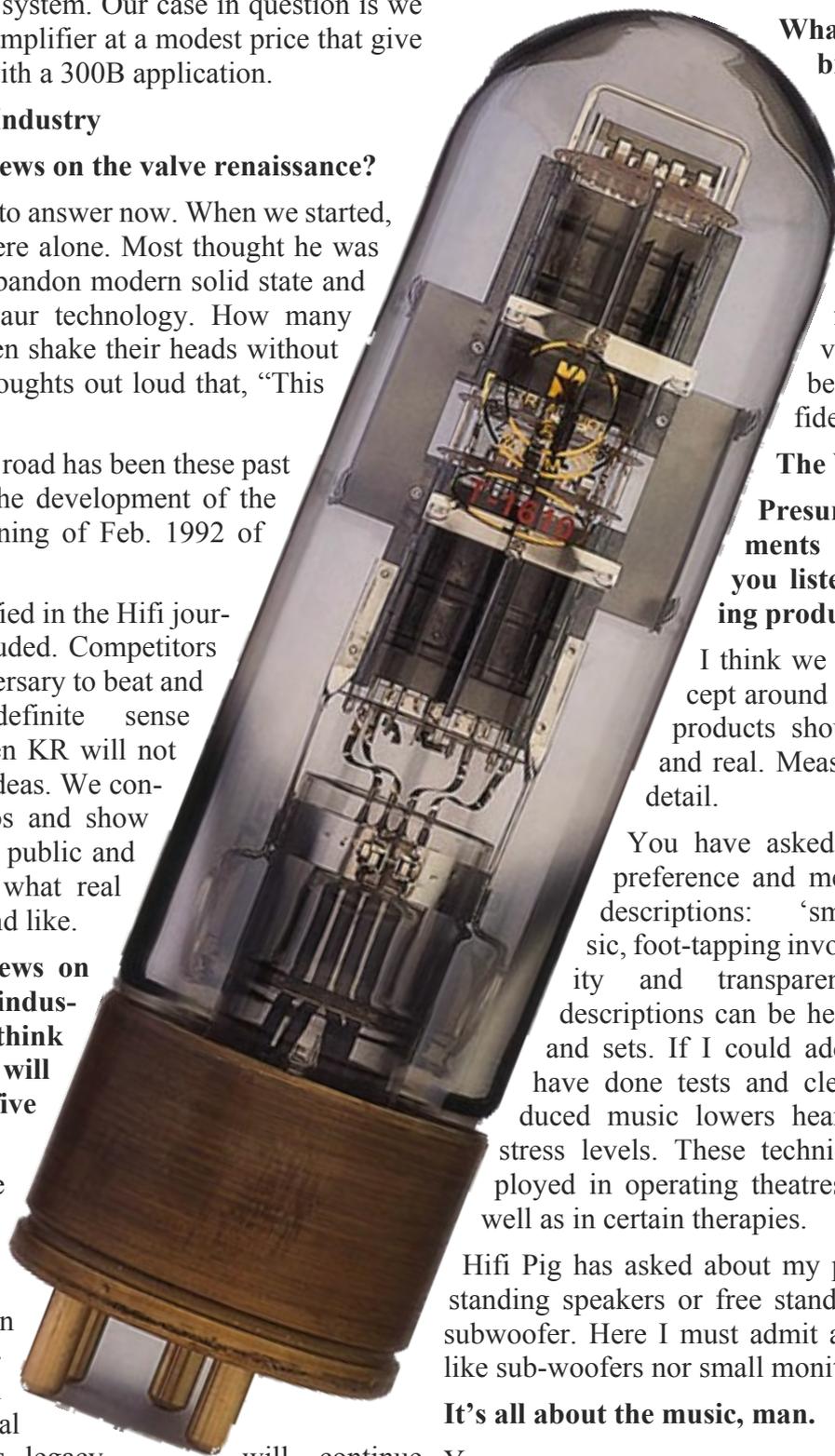
Hifi Pig has asked about my preferences for floor standing speakers or free standing monitors with a subwoofer. Here I must admit a prejudice. I do not like sub-woofers nor small monitor speakers.

It's all about the music, man.

Yes...

What is your favourite recording?

I have no real favourite and like all music equally if it is well mastered and recorded.



BenQ GW2270H Monitor

BenQ certainly have a monitor for everyone. Here at GadgetyNews we've reviewed a few high to mid spec screens but it is now time to check out something more entry level so we give you the GW2270H.

It is easy to get excited about the latest gaming panel or 4K display but not everyone needs, or wants that kind of monitor.

For instance, my needs are going to be different to someone who just nips online to update FaceSpace and Twitagram inbetween filing tax returns or making pie charts.

What we have here in the BenQ GW2270H, hopefully, is a no fuss but decent monitor.

BenQ GW2270H Design

The GW2270H is not an unattractive monitor. It might look a little basic but the quality that



we've all come to expect from BenQ is still there.

The matte black case is slim and the monitor is adjustable as far as the standard tilt from -5° to 20° goes, although it does miss out on

the height alteration. The monitor's textured bezel means that it won't pick up too many noticeable fingerprints.

I do really like the pattern on the rear of the monitor too!

The footprint of the pedestal is minimal so you don't need much desk space, even should you decide to use more than one at a time. The stand is very easy to fit, which is always a bonus. There's enough connectivity options to sate most users, thanks to a single VGA and a pair of HDMI ports as well as headphone output.

BenQ GW2270H Performance

The GW2270H features a flicker-free LED 22-inch AMVA panel placed within its reasonably thin matte black bezel.



Ben QGW2270H Monitor

This screen has a dynamic contrast ratio of 20,000,000:1, and a native contrast of 3000:1. Response time is an unassuming 5ms and its maximum resolution of 1920 x 1080 rounds up the more important specifications.

I can sense the gamers out there already dismissing the GW2270H based on the high-ish response time but, for the majority of users, these specs will be more than ample for everyday tasks.

Even though the GW2270H might lack the lure of an IPS screen or extras such as DisplayPort connectivity, this monitor still makes use of the usual BenQ line of image improvement features.

You get such things as low blue light, Senseye 3, and an improved native contrast ratio.

The image quality is pretty decent, it has to be said and the 178°/178° wide-viewing angle is also noteworthy.



Granted, it's not going to taunt one of the latest IPS panels but everything appears perfectly clear with a deep range of fairly realistic colours.

Stills and video are sharp without being not fatiguing. Casual gaming can be had, but that's not what this monitor is built for.

You do get some graining when the monitor is having to display a bright, solid block of colour but you really have to be wanting to see it, if you get my meaning. I

dare say that most users would be more interested in the image being displayed than the matte panel's slight graininess.

BenQ GW2270H monitor Conclusion

The BenQ GW2270H is certainly good value for money. My other half wanted to swap her BenQ DL2215 for the GW because of its more eye-friendly smarts such as flicker free viewing. The GW2270H may be entry level but it is well designed and comes in at a price that you cannot really argue about for an office monitor.

BenQ GW2270H Price and Availability

You can buy a BenQ GW2270H on Amazon now for less than £80!
Overall score: 7.9
Build quality 8/10
Ease of set-up 8.5/10
Picture quality 7.5/10
Performance 7.5/10
Value for money 8/10



Devil Volt Power Pack

Do you remember the Devil Buds earphones GadgetyNews reviewed recently? Looking for more devilment? Here is the Devil Volt power bank.

Do you find that your regular power bank lacks in the horn department?

Never fear as EMIE has done it again and added more devilment to what are, and let's be perfectly honest here, usually the blandest items in your gadgety packing.

So, should you be willing to use the power of this little devil to charge your mobile devices? Let's find out.

Devil Volt Power Bank Design

The Devil Volt, as the name suggests, looks like a little devilish imp.

A friend of mine, who shall remain nameless, did suggest that it also kinda looks like something you might purchase from a more



adult themed, lingerie store on the high street.

Ignoring that line of thought, the Devil Volt has been playfully designed (out of the gutter folks!).

There are a number of patterns, colours and finishes to choose from and I have been sent the 'Summer' version from the Doodle Edition line which has cupcakes running

around hungry looking mountains whilst the Devil Volt grins menacingly. So, the designer obviously had some sugar-induced nightmares at the time of thinking up ideas I reckon.

In the box you get a lanyard so you can wear the Devil Volt, as USB charging cable and a neat protective pouch – although my one was emblazoned with the legend "Happy New Year".



The Devil Volt is a compact 5.7- x 5.7- x 2.0-inches and weighs in at 300 grams.

The neatest feature, for me anyhow, is that the chrome devil horns on this little thing actually light up different colours, depending on what it's doing at the time.

Devil Volt performance

It might look a little twisted thanks to that odd design, and perhaps a little evil, (being a devil and all)

Devil Volt Power Pack

but the Devil Volt is actually a decent and reliable power bank.

The Devil Volt is not only fun but packs in safety measures, so there's no risk of overcharging or short-circuiting. The battery cell is actually a Samsung Lithium-ion unit.

The bank holds 5200mAh of power, which is enough charge to give your Android or iThingies sufficient backup power for the day.

As previously mentioned, the horns light up to show its charge status with red indicating a full charge, blue horns for 70% and then green for 30% or less.

The Devil Volt takes about 3-ish hours to charge fully but then has enough juice to recharge an iPhone – twice! It handled my Nexus 6P too, albeit with a USB A to USB C cable.

Devil Volt power bank review conclusion

This has definitely been the funkiest power bank that I have seen, let alone tested.



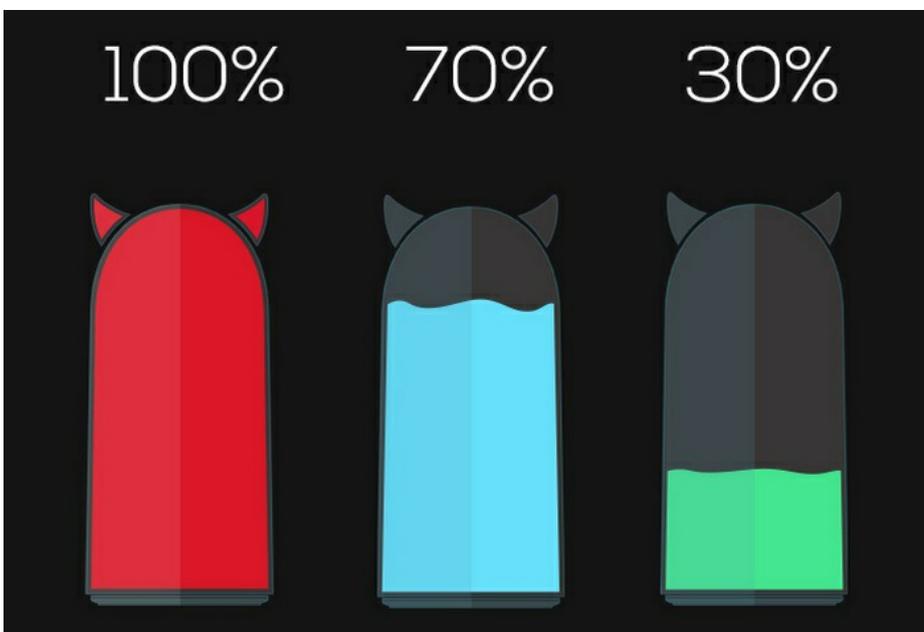
It's fun (something I never thought I'd say about a battery) and is available in a range of colours and designs.

It comes with everything you need and, as with the Devil Horns, the packaging is pretty swish too. I actually could see this as making a decent gift.

Devil Volt price and availability

You can buy the Devil Volt power bank now direct from the Emie site for \$36.99 or £29.15 from Amazon.co.uk.

- Overall score: 8.3**
- Build quality 8/10**
- Ease of use 9/10**
- Portability 8.5/10**
- Performance 8/10**
- Value for money 8/10**



Eyejusters Reading Glasses

My parents, as many other people do, tend to pick up those ‘one-size-fits-all’ style reading glasses that you can generally find on stands in pharmacists. I watch them adjust their focus by bringing the newspaper or a book closer and then further away until it’s comfortable. Eyejusters, however, allows each person to adjust the lenses to how they need them.

As a long-time glasses wearer I practically take for granted the fact that I can go in to any high street and find an opticians, book an appointment and get my eyes tested and then buy some new spectacles. Even better is the fact that I can get vouchers to cover the price of the eye test and towards any new glasses if my prescription has changed.

In developing nations, many people aren’t afforded the opportunity to visit an optician. Eyejusters originally set out to bring their brand of adjustable lenses to areas such as those and they continue their work in these parts of the world.

So, continuing my ‘unusual things that GadgetyNews gets to review’ I have had these glasses, “aimed at



the over 40s” sent over. These Eyejusters can be bought in range of modern designs for those who now find themselves uttering the phrase “let me just put my readers on”.

Eyejusters Design

At first glance these glasses look like any other set of specs. The pair that I have been sent are in black coated stainless steel. These have been formed from a single sheet making them strong

and lightweight. You can choose from stainless steel or combination frames that come with high quality finishes, acetate or stainless steel arms and comfortable nose pads.

The clever bit is the adjustment wheels which are located discretely behind the frame.

Turning these screws allows the lenses to adjust independently of each other and so allows them to more closely match the individual wearer’s needs. Let’s face it, who



Eyejusters Reading Glasses



has identical prescriptions for both eyes – I certainly don't.

Eyejusters Performance

In order to bring these glasses to the masses the company has developed an adjustable lens technology called SlideLens. This consists of a pair of lenses which act together to correct an individual's eyesight.

The lenses are adjustable from between +0.00 to +3.00 Dioptres which should cover most cases of mild longsightedness.

The beauty of this is that no professionals are required in the process of distribution or fitting. You can pretty much do this by yourself through trial and error or a simple reading test.

Eyejusters Conclusion

I found the reading glasses remarkably easy to adjust and the black frames are smart enough to wear out without drawing unwanted attention.

The SlideLens tech really does work and I can definitely say that



the 5 years of research that the Oxford-based company has put in to Eyejusters has no doubt already changed many people's lives.

There are estimated to be 670 million people around the world living without the glasses they need, with 95% of the people in sub-Saharan Africa who need them going without. This is due to there being an average of one optometrist per one million people in that part of the world, compared to one per 10,000 in the United States and Europe ... which is a frankly shocking statistic.

Closer to home, I can see Eyejusters being a popular choice for those that may have just started

noticing that reading is getting a little tricky but are not yet ready to get their eyes tested. Saying that though, you really should have your eyes examined regularly by an optometrist or ophthalmologist.

Eyejusters Price and Availability

Eyejusters are available now direct from their website with prices starting at just £69 with free shipping.

Overall score 8.7
Build quality 8.5/10
Ease of use 9/10
Performance 9/10
Value for money 8.5/10

Guild 1.5AH Hammer Drill

The Guild hammer drill – powertools aren't really a feature on GadgetsNews but, as my aging B&D drill can barely hang on to a charge these days, it seemed as good a time as any to test something that's budget-friendly but capable.

The Guild hammer drill does not set itself up to be the most powerful out there, neither will it appear on most professional's shopping lists but that's not what I, or most of you out there, will need.

Back when I practically rebuilt a house, the tools I used were of at least mid-tier ranking as I knew that there was at least two years' worth of cutting, drilling, sanding and screwing (stop that sniggering at the back!) ahead of us. These days, since moving to London, I have been in rented accommodation so the need for me to make repairs, or make any significant changes to the fabric of my abode, have severely decreased.

So, why the need for a drill? Well, I still have to face flat-pack furniture on a fairly regular basis and the garden attached to my rented house requires new trellising and other bits, such as



storage, to be built. Besides, I am from a generation that was brought up to believe that we should always have a range of tools in a shed or, at least, under the sink.

Guild Hammer Drill Design

The Guild lime green is very much in evidence but, once my eyes adjusted, I was very happy with how compact the drill is when

compared to my early 90s Black and Decker.

The soft grip handle feels comfortable and the girth of it should prove to be ergonomic for most users.

Looking around the drill there are no fewer than 23 torque settings whilst, at the top, there are two gear settings.

On the side is the usual direction push switch.

Up front is a 10mm keyless chuck underneath which is a handy light for when drilling in those darker recesses of the home.

The rechargeable battery is really easy to remove and really balances the drill in the hand when attached.



Guild 1.5AH Hammer Drill

The Guild hammer drill also features a rather handy belt clip which is almost priceless when working up a ladder.

With the battery attached, the drill weighs in at a very reasonable 1.7kg.

Guild Hammer Drill Performance

The Guild hammer drill is definitely more lightweight and compact than what I am used to. The rechargeable 1.5Ah lithium battery pack has kept the drill going for around 3 hours so far which is looking good to match the 3-5 hours charge time quoted by Guild.

There is a battery level indicator on the left-hand side of the drill just above the trigger which comes on when in use. This should stop you from getting caught out halfway through a job.

Thanks to the 23 torque settings and 30Nm of torque output, this hammer drill can easily drill and drive screws into masonry, wood and metal. Guild gives figures of 25mm of wood, and 10mm of both steel and masonry apiece. That should be plenty enough for chucking up a few shelves.

I've not yet found anything that has stopped it in its tracks during my flurry of light maintenance.

The drill is rated with a max speed of 400-1450rpm – depending on which setting you have it on

Guild Hammer Drill Review Conclusion

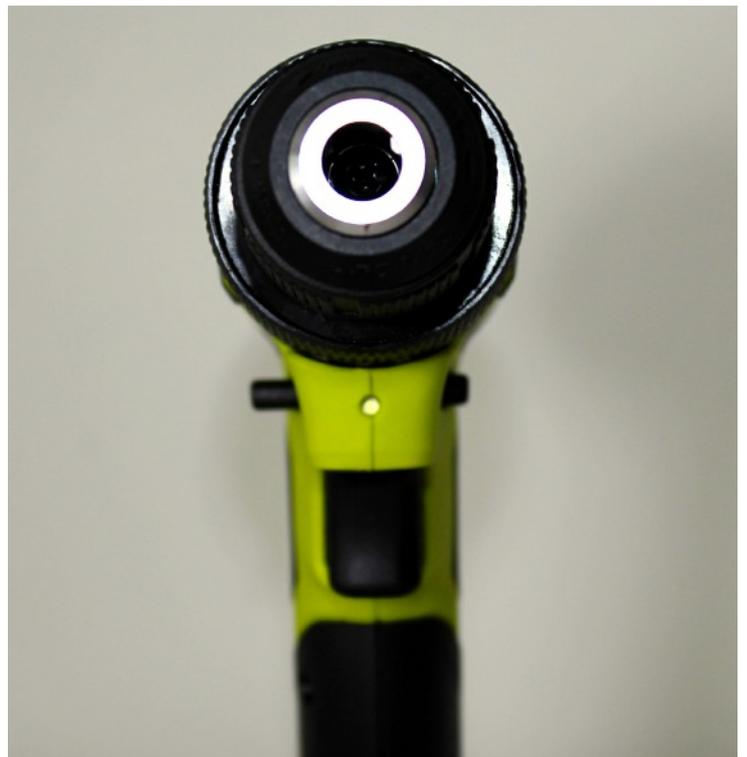


Yes, there are more expensive drills but the Guild hammer drill should feature in most people's armory if they have moments of light DIY.

I am finding it hard to knock the Guild hammer drill, short of its almost toy

tool appearance. It has everything that I was looking for – lightweight and a decent charge matched with comfortable use without breaking the bank.

All Guild power tools come with a free 2 year guarantee. So whether you are using a drill to put up a shelf or tackling some flat-pack furniture, it hopefully should do the job for quite a while.



Guild Hammer Drill Price and Availability

You can buy the Guild hammer drill now from [Argos for £49.99](#).

Overall score: 8.3
Build quality 8/10
Ease of use 8.5/10
Battery life 8/10
Performance 8.5/10
Value for money 8.5/10

Huawei MediaPad M2 10.0 Tablet

The Huawei MediaPad M2 10.0 is set up to be the Chinese company's challenger to Apple and Samsung. Huawei have made no secret that they aim to actually overtake those two over the next couple of years. Has the MediaPad M2 got the chops though?

Months without a new Huawei device to review and then there's two in a matter of weeks – not that I am complaining, of course!

Following on from my P9 review, I have just spent the last 10 days living with the premium version of the MediaPad M2 10.0. This is a landscape-focused, 10-inch Android tablet that's both thin and light and has a classy aluminium build.

This, on paper at least, makes it a direct challenger to Apple's iPad Air 2. It certainly looks and feels more polished than the Samsung Galaxy Tab S2.

Could this be the iPad and Samsung Tab S2 alternative you've been looking for?



Huawei MediaPad M2 Design

The Huawei MediaPad M2 10.0 kinda looks and feels like an aluminium iPad.

The M2 is constructed from an aluminium alloy. Its full-metal body features precision-crafted curved edges and a sandblasted finish.

It feels like an expensive tablet – no one that has held it has rightly guessed how much it costs with everyone estimating way over the asking price.

You get not one, two or three Harman Kardon speakers – but four, one at each corner!

In a rather unusual twist, the MediaPad M2 10.0 favours landscape orientation for its buttons.

The power button and volume rocker are on what would be the 'top' side of the frame when you hold it in portrait mode. This, to me, seems to be a way to encourage users to hold the tablet in landscape mode so that it's on the more natural right side.

The fingerprint sensor follows this aspect appearing, as it does, on what be the lefthand side bezel if held in portrait. The lower bezel in M2 terms.

The Huawei MediaPad M2 10.0 has a 7.35mm body. That's pretty thin, although nothing record-breaking from a tablet maker – the iPad Air 2 is a skinny 6.1mm, for example. Some of that chunk on the M2 must be from the speakers though.



Huawei MediaPad M2 10.0 Tablet

The Huawei MediaPad M2 10.0's dimensions are 239.8 x 172.75 x 7.35mm, and it weighs 490g. The iPad Air 2 that this tablet draws so much inspiration from is 437g.

Huawei MediaPad M2 10.0 Performance

The MediaPad M2 is equipped with a 10.1-inch display featuring a full HD IPS screen and 1920 x 1200 resolution.

Not satisfied by simply taking on the 9.7-inch iPad, this premium version also seems to fancy its chances with the iPad Pro and comes loaded with the M-Pen stylus. Its handwriting feature has an impressive 2048-level pressure sensitivity.

Under the hood the engine-room is powered by a Hisilicon Kirin 930 processor with a faster quad 2.0GHz chip and energy-saving quad 1.5GHz chip. The 3GB of RAM also helps this tablet move along fairly slickly.

Mated with all that is the Mali-T628 MP4 (680MHz) graphics



chip taking care of all the visual duties.

The Huawei MediaPad M2 10.0's battery is a 6660mAh lithium polymer power pack.

Although I do tend to laugh at people taking photos and video using tablets this one has two cameras: a front-facing 5MP shooter and rear-facing 13MP camera with autofocus, flash and a f/2.0 aperture.

While the tablet runs Android, it's not launching with Android Marshmallow. Instead, it's like a lot of last year's Google-powered tablets and sets off by running Android 5.1 Lollipop.

On-board storage on the premium version is 64GB but there is a 16GB standard offering too – remember that this is expandable via microSD card.

When it comes to design, the MediaPad M2 10.0 greatly resembles Samsung's Galaxy Tab



Huawei MediaPad M2 10.0 Tablet

series. It even sports a nearly identically shaped fingerprint reader. Its metallic unibody chassis is quite thin too, measuring 7.35 mm, and it feels super sturdy and well built. Weighing in at 500g, it's a bit heftier than the latest iPad Air. The tablet also comes in a choice of Luxurious Gold or Moonlight Silver. Overall, it's an attractive tablet but not a unique one.

MediaPad M2 Audio

The Huawei MediaPad M2 10.0 speaker system is thanks to Harman Kardon almost all the way down the line.

They've used two drivers for mid and high range and two bass radiators on the bottom — four speaker units in all, which is way more than I am used to seeing on a tablet. This tends to be more the realm of gaming laptops as far as I am aware.

The M2 10.0 also uses Harman's Clari-Fi technology, which restores the audio quality of compressed digital music.



Huawei has thrown in their own SWS 2.0 tech which does its best to approximate surround sound.

So how does it actually sound? The MediaPad M2 10.0 is certainly the loudest tablet I have had the pleasure of testing.

The audio sounds richer and more immersive than the audio from my Shield Tablet, which I think is fairly reasonable.

Volume is one thing but the clarity of the M2 is also darned fine. It is

not going to replace a decent Bluetooth speaker or plugging in some decent cans.

MediaPad M2 in use

The MediaPad M2 10.0 runs on a HiSilicon Kirin 930 processor with 3 GB of RAM.

Unfortunately, the unit that that we tested was not a final tablet for the U.S. market, and as a result we could not run benchmark software and other apps from Google Play. That said, performance seemed pretty good overall.



The tablet packs in a 13 MP rear camera with an f/2.0 large-diaphragm lens and a 5 MP front camera, which has an 88-degree ultra-wide angle lens that is great for video calling. Overall, the tablet's cameras are quite good for what is generally expected from tablet snappers. Skype and Google Hangout vid calls were clear.

The fingerprint reader works well, and this has been a consistent finding throughout Huawei's products.

Huawei MediaPad M2 10.0 Tablet



I was really impressed by the M2's bundled M-Pen stylus. This is as good as anything I have tried from Wacom and its 2048-level pressure sensitivity really made using it a truly interactive and pleasurable experience.

I really liked the circular menu that appears when you hover the M-Pen over the 'page'.

When it comes to apps, the tablet comes preloaded with a healthy selection of apps, including Huawei cloud+, Kids Corner (basically a parental control app), WPS office, Bamboo paper (handwriting using the stylus), and some useful tools including a mirror app, a flashlight app, and a file management app. Apps load quickly and flicking from page to page is smooth without any noticeable lag.



Huawei MediaPad M2 review conclusion

The Huawei MediaPad M2 10.0 tablet is a 10-inch Android slate that costs much less than an iPad but, looking at build quality and usefulness, really challenges the fruity tab.

The M2 10.0 is a well-rounded tablet with a decent feature set and an attractive, albeit safe, design. I am afraid that the MediaPad M2 10.0 dropped points for running an older version of Android.

For me it's the Harman speaker system and the M-Pen that really makes the M2 stand out over others. This is definitely one for media, pen-toting types.

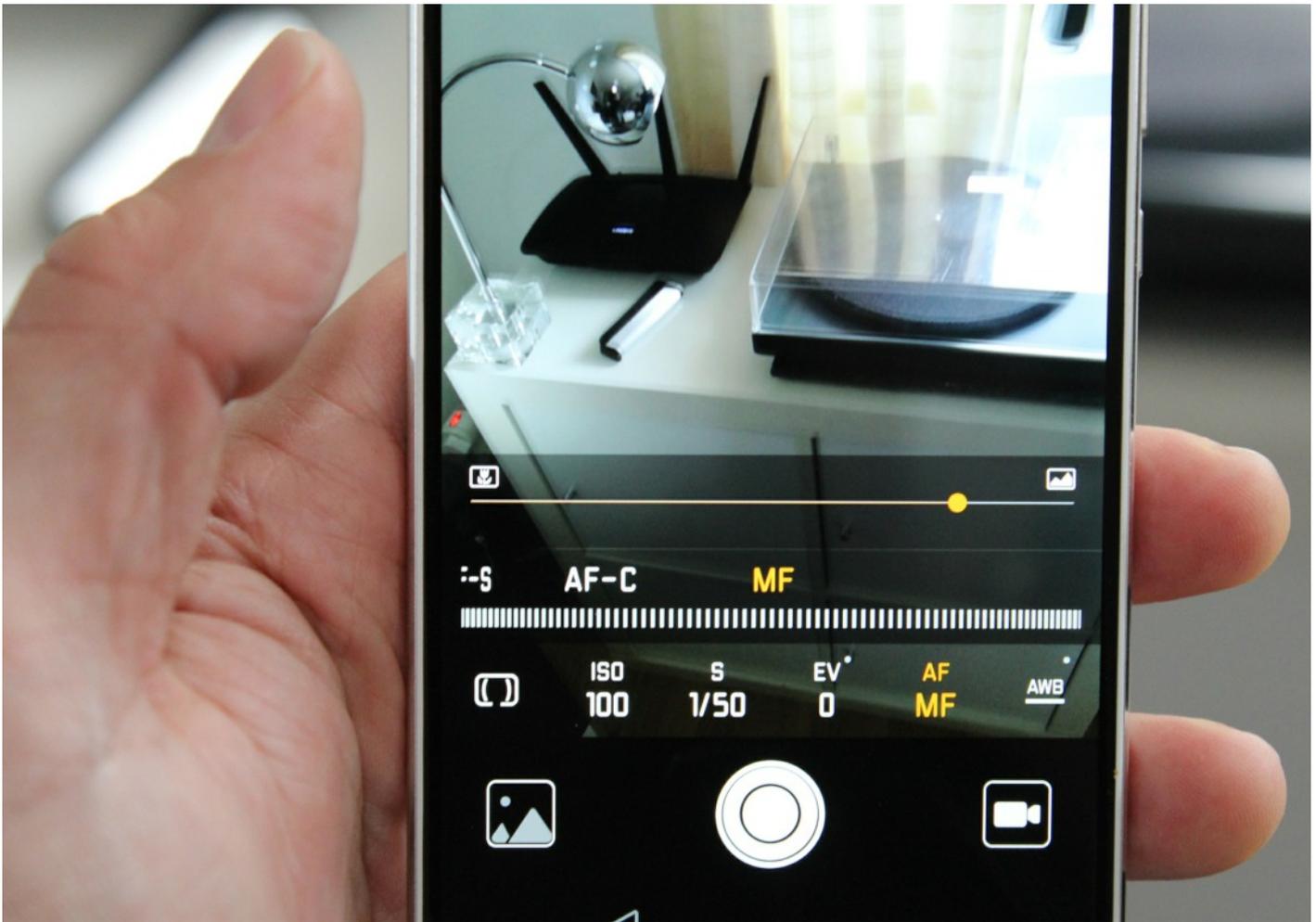
Huawei MediaPad M2 Price and Availability

The Huawei MediaPad M2 10.0 premium, with its 64GB of storage and bundled in M-Pen, will cost you £329.99, whereas the 16GB standard version can be had for around £250 from Dixons Carphone. Personally, I think it's worth spending the extra for the pen and the additional storage.

- Overall score: 8.3**
- Build quality 8.5/10**
- Ease of use 8.5/10**
- Battery life 8.5/10**
- Performance 8/10**
- Value for money 8/10**



Huawei P9



The Huawei P9 was launched almost three weeks ago and GadgetsNews [was there](#). Since then, I have been living with the phone that packs Leica camera smarts and no fewer than three snapper sensors – one up front and two around back.

Huawei is still trying to win over the Samsung and Apple returning customers. It's not like they're unheard of either. Google for one used Huawei to design and build their Nexus 6P, which is an amazing mobile.

With all the chat about the P9's photographic credentials, has Huawei got it all wrapped up with their latest flagship phone?

Huawei P9 Design

The Huawei P9 is a 5.2-inch smartphone. This places it nicely betwixt and between 5.1-inch Galaxy S7 and the 5.3-inch LG G5.

The P9's aluminium unibody construction gives it a nice cool touch.

The sandblasted finish on the rear not only helps with traction and less accidental slips, it also makes it less of a fingerprint magnet. The gently rounded edges also adds to the premium feel of this smartphone.

The top edge of the phone is only home to a microphone.

At the other end is where you'll find the headphone and USB Type-C ports, along with another microphone and a single speaker. Down one side you get the volume rocker and power/lock button. Whilst at the other side is the combined SIM and SD card slot.

The finish to this phone can only really be described as high-end. Everyone that has looked at it as had to pick it up and this is probably the only time I've seen Samsung-ites and Apple fan-folk agree – they all say it's a well made and a lovely thing to hold.

However, flip the P9 over and there you find the main talking point. The two smoothly integrated Leica cameras that sit in

Huawei P9

the housing just above the fingerprint sensor.

Almost underlining this collaboration between the famous camera people and Huawei is the Leica name displayed proudly, yet subtly at the top right-hand corner of this side of the phone.

The Huawei P9 measures 145 x 71 x 7 mm and weighs in at 144g. This adds up to quite a compact and light Android smartphone.

Those incredibly skinny bezels gives an above average screen-to-body ratio at the front. In fact, the cheap clear rubbery case I bought for the phone makes it look like it has an edge to edge display!

Despite the phone's thinness of less than 7mm, Huawei has managed to shoehorn a 3,000 mAh battery inside. Some people might complain about this cell not being replaceable, but I've never replaced a phone battery since my 90s Philips brick.

There's a combined SIM and microSD slot housing and, apart from that, the Huawei P9 has no moving parts.

Huawei P9 Performance

Huawei P9 Display

The 5.2-inch display is a Full HD LCD panel.

This gives decent contrast and good sharpness. Saying that, the competition out there is strong and can not only bring to the table brighter screens but higher resolutions, as well as more contrast and saturation.

On the rare sunny days we've had thus far, the P9's IPS panel sometimes lacks the luster to shine through but colours are vivid with blacks as deep as I've ever seen on an LCD display. Whites are displayed at the perfect temperature and, should you need

to make adjustments, you can do so through the settings.

The auto-brightness setting is usually pretty accurate, but it can falter in strong sunlight – but, simply by turning it off in certain situations can help you get the most out of the display.

Where Huawei trumps the others on the market is the P9's almost-not-there 1.7 millimeter-wide edges of the display which have a soft feel to them thanks to the 2.5D design.

Huawei P9 Power

The revised HiSilicon Kirin 955 processor is largely the same as in the Huawei Mate 8. The P9 achieves comparable performance with that of the Galaxy S7, however, gaming-wise the P9 will be left in the rear-view mirror of S7.

LTE performance is above average in the Huawei P9. The connection



Huawei P9



is swift and the signal jumps seamlessly from antenna to antenna. This might be at least in part due to the Huawei P9 packing multiple antennas that enable parallel Search and Smart Switching via quick changeover from transmission tower to transmission tower.

Storage space is a fairly standard 32 GB but this can be expanded via microSD card - More on that later.

Huawei P9 Audio

Audio from the bottom mono speaker performs well enough during hands-free calling and sound from the ear speaker is balanced and clear enough to work even in noisy environments.

Plugging in my NAD VISO HP50 and Oppo PM-3 I was really impressed by the P9's headphone output. Bass is clear and powerful and nuances that I usually rely on my Oppo HA-2 to pick out on my other portable devices seem to be all present and correct without assistance on the P9.

Huawei P9 Camera

The double Leica Camera is no doubt the star of the show.



Like many other smartphone cameras, the Huawei P9 also offers quick launch functionality. Pressing the volume down button twice takes a picture immediately. It might just be me but these instant pictures are often pretty shaky though. Perhaps I am too eager to snap in the moment.

When the camera is running, the volume down button is defaulted as the shutter release trigger – but you can assign it other duties via the settings.

Both main cameras have 12 MP sensors with an aperture of $f/2.2$. The selfie camera has a resolution of 8 MP with a slightly smaller aperture to $f/2.4$. These are not industry-leading specs but, in practice, deliver better pictures than what you might expect of a smartphone.

Both cameras come equipped with a 'Leica Summarit H 1: 2.2/27 ASPH'. The Summarit H is Leica's special lens brand name for Huawei smartphones. The numbers 1:2.2 stand for the lens aperture, while 27 is the equivalent

of the focal length of a full-frame camera in millimeters. ASPH denotes that it is an aspherical lens. I thought I'd let you know as I found all that out.

The idea behind doubling-up on cameras is quite obvious. In a smartphone's small body there is not enough space for the large sensors that are used in SLR cameras. So two sensors have been used in the P9 to make up for this, and the images from both are then combined by the software. The best parts of both images are used to give an overall better image than what's possible with only one lens.

The lens setup of both cameras is identical with each utilising 1:25 micrometre pixels. The difference comes in that one of the P9's sensors shoots only in monochrome to measure the contrast of its subjects. The second sensor converts available light into RGB information with 16.7 million colours.

When the information from both sensors' are combined this gives

Huawei P9

90% more information per picture than is in a photo shot by the Galaxy S7 (apparently).

All that tech stuff aside, I am really impressed by the detail and dynamic range that can be captured by this smartphone camera. The downside is that you have to become more aware of what you're shooting and how steady your hand is as I have found it all too easy to blur snaps.

In Professional Mode you can set ISO, white balance, shutter speed and other settings as you like. In addition, you shoot the images in RAW format. With JPEG compression you might notice some distortion and image quality loss if you are a keen photographer.

There was much said about the Bokeh (background blur) talents of the P9 and it took me ages to

find out how to achieve this because, me being me, I was trying to do it via the Pro menu. Wrong!

To take advantage of the pseudo aperture control that will give you this effect, which isn't based on a real, mechanical aperture, but applied using software – you'll have to be in the colour camera mode. Here you will find the aperture icon (in orange, bottom left-hand side of the screenshot above).

This then gives you your point of focus when you tap the screen, and then you are presented with a slider that changes the 'aperture' setting. You can see the F value and the slider on the screen between my keyboard and the base of my PC rig.

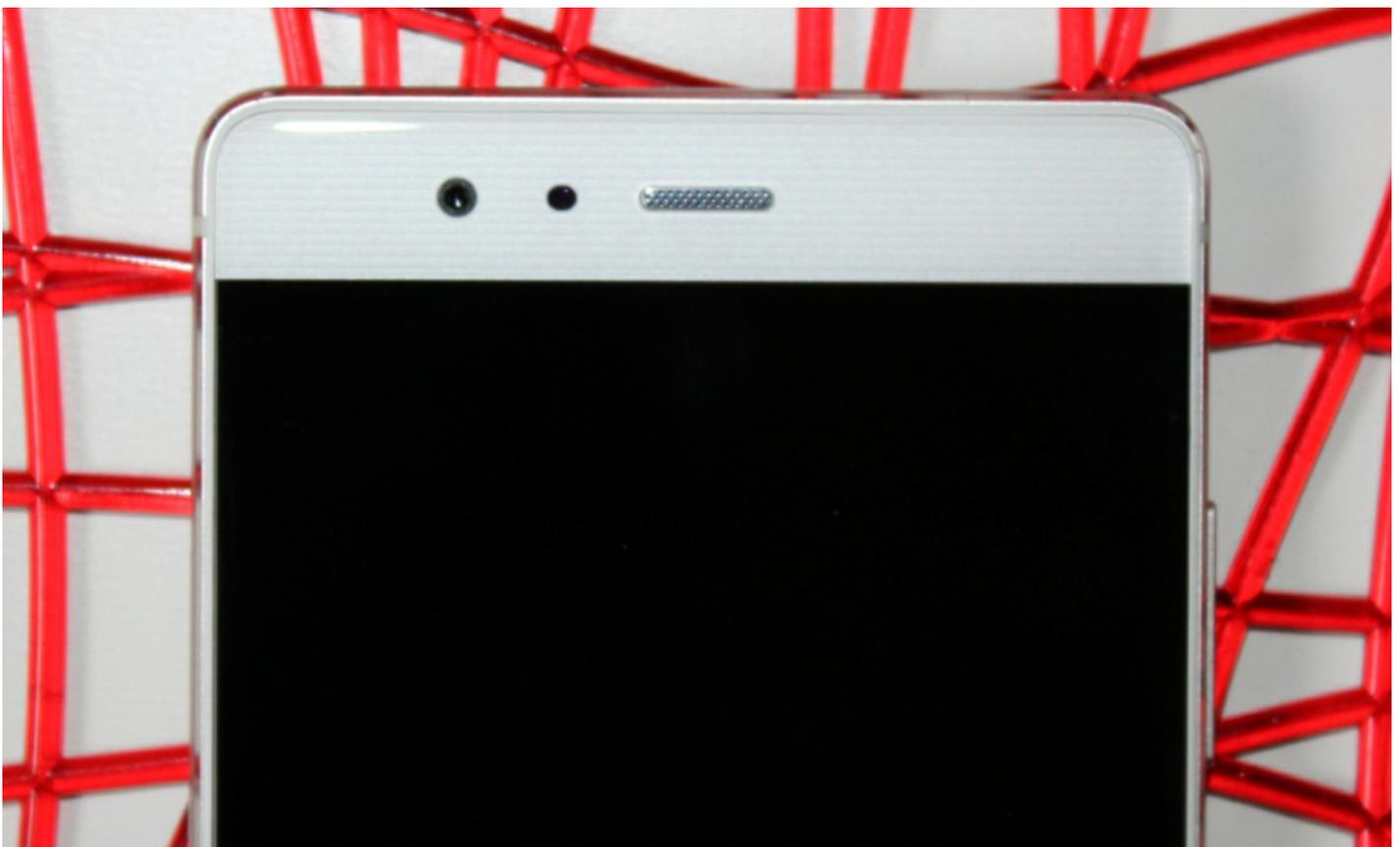
It is a neat thing if used judiciously. You have to remember that this is all software-based and is therefore

at risk of looking like someone has attacked your shot with the blur tool in photoshop. The upside to this software cleverness is that, once you've taken the shot, if you decide that you need more or less on the slider you can alter it after the fact.

There are a couple more Bokeh snaps in the gallery you may have seen earlier.

I think most people will be more than happy with the Auto mode of the P9 – Exposure, white balance and colour saturation seem to be spot on. Moving from natural to artificial light doesn't seem to confuse it, and focusing is practically instant. The latter is thanks to the smartphone's hybrid laser-, depth- and contrast-informed method.

Like autofocus, shutter response is just as instantaneous, almost



Huawei P9



regardless of lighting conditions; burst capture is so rapid you might as well be shooting a 30fps video.

I have been particularly impressed by the P9's low-light performance. It seems to capture most of the natural light available to it without too much artificial enhancement by way of jacking up the exposure.

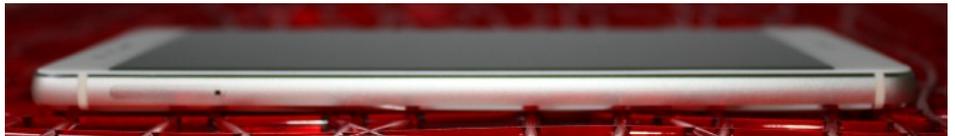
Selfies and video calls are certainly not an afterthought for Huawei and its P9. That 8MP snapper is capable of some good quality shots and, thanks to Huawei's beauty slider, your blemishes can be smoothed away should you be wrapped in anything but perfect skin.

Huawei P9 Software

Huawei provides gesture control both with the fingerprint sensor and the display. The fingerprint sensor can be configured as a menu button as well as using it to access the camera with a swipe.

You can also knock twice on the display with your knuckles to generate a screenshot.

Not everyone likes EMUI but 4.1, which is loaded on the P9, is not really all that bad. I do think that if you're coming from an iPhone to the P9 you'll find it easier to live



with than from pure Android though.

There are little quirks in Huawei's skin of Android 6.0 such as the Notifications, home screen settings menu and Quick Settings being structured differently – but, if you jumped from Android to iOS or vice-versa you'd have to still adapt, wouldn't you?

The design, such as with the launcher, is heavily inspired by the iPhone's iOS interface. An app draw is not provided, meaning that all apps are displayed and accessed on the home screen. Just as in iOS. So, this means you'll need to create folders to keep your app collection tidy.

I am in two minds whether I like the fact that the notification pull-down splits quick settings into its own little tab. I am, however, certain that I do like that you can access music player controls, the calculator, the flashlight and a few more bits and pieces from the lock screen (like the Control Center on iOS).

The user interface can be changed with various design packages,

which replace app icons, wallpaper and the lock screen image. To download new themes, you just need to log in with a Huawei ID.

I will hold my hand up and admit that I added the Google Now Launcher after the first week as I was jumping from my 6P to P9. I've recently taken delivery of the Huawei M2 tablet and intend to leave EMUI on it while it's in my possession just to get better acquainted.

Under the hood are useful extras such as backup management, but so are features that mean well but sometimes prevent normal service – I'm looking at you energy management.

Huawei-installed Bloatware

This is where I really love my Nexus 6P – the lack of pesky additional that just sit there taking up space. The P9 is full of what I'd class as spam, to be honest.

It's clear that these are pre-installed sponsored games and apps and, thankfully, most can be completely uninstalled. These apps

Huawei P9

chew up a significant chunk of memory, so you're left with around 21 GB from the full 32 GB of internal storage if you don't ditch them.

Despite running Marshmallow, you can not format the microSD card to be used as internal memory. Therefore, you can only swap photos, music and a portion of your app data onto external storage.

Huawei P9 Battery

The battery life of the Huawei P9 is very good and suitable for heavy users. Even after several hours of play or photographing the battery lasts for a decent amount of time. It'll last you for a full day before needing to be charged.

The 3000 mAh battery is non-removable and charged via a Type-C connector. At least for the first couple of percentage points, charging is quite rapid. After 10 minutes of charging you'll get five hours of standby time. Overall, the battery takes about three hours to charge until full.

It seems odd that they fitted a USB Type-C without adding compatibility with Quick Charge 3.0 or other fast charging methods.

Huawei P9 Review Conclusion

The Huawei P9 is a great smartphone for photography buffs, with its image processing being some of the best you'll find on any phone.

Yes it is well made, with decent design and performance. Is this enough for a flagship phone though?



The P9 has certainly made a huge splash amongst this year's new releases but the money being asked for it is also top flight. To buy it outright is more than the top iPhone SE and almost the same price as the Nexus 6P (also built by Huawei) and £50 less than the LG G5. The iPhone 6S and Galaxy S7 are 'only' £100 more.

On contract it's about the same as the iPhone SE and only just slightly cheaper than the G5 – the latter making some very bold changes.

Personally, I go from thinking that this is the best value for money

phone out there right now to pining for my 6P.

I think Huawei have built their best phone so far that isn't a Nexus. The P9 is a very capable phone and does almost everything brilliantly but safely.

Now, it's down to the public to show Huawei if it has the pricing right.

Overall score: 8.5
Build quality 8.5/10
Camera 9.5/10
Display 8/10
Battery life 8.5/10
Performance 8/10

Tascam TrackPack US-2x2 Home Studio



Home studios have always been popular but it's only really over the past 10-15 years that they have actually been in the reach of most people. I remember getting my first tape 4 track recorder but, since the cost of a digital set-up such as the Tascam TrackPack US-2x2, has become affordable and the knowledge required to record something has also been simplified, now is a great time to get tooled up.

First I must apologise for the delay in posting this review. This has not been the fault of the tools sent to me to review but rather my insistence of having something half decent recorded through the set up. Unfortunately, the more pressure I put on myself to record something better than half-baked the more unhappy with what I was producing I became. Then, after a sit down with my friends Jim Beam and Jack Daniels, something hit me. That thing was the epiphany that I was supposed to be reviewing the hardware – not my musical ability and not even the supplied DAW software.

Throwing those shackles aside – it's time to move on. Getting your musical ideas down these days can be as easy as using your phone to record yourself and your mates – but that's not always good enough. The next step can be quite expensive and time-consuming if you haven't got the facilities at home.

The Tascam TrackPack 2x2 promises to pack everything you need to get up and running with your own home studio set-up, all in one box.

Tascam TrackPack 2x2 Design

Tascam US-2x2 Audio Interface The 2x2 audio interface, which is the brain of this set up, gets its name simply because it possess two mic/guitar inputs on the front, meaning that as well as the mic included in the pack, you can add another set of vocals or an instrument in to the mix at the same time.

The US-2x2 consists of a metal chassis with an attractive set of end plates that tilt the unit back by a few degrees. That slight rake makes the front panel a bit more

user-friendly than if it were sat flat on the desk.

Around the back is a USB socket, power inlet (the unit is usually USB powered when used with a PC or Mac but you'll need an optional PSU and a suitable camera adapter kit to use it with an iOS device), balanced line-outs to connect your monitors (or any other line-out you need), and 5-pin MIDI in and out so you can plug-in your drum machine or synth.

As mentioned earlier, the front panel is home to the two channels' combi input sockets. Both inputs have a mic/line or instrument switch, a gain control (up to 57dB) and signal present and peak LEDs. There's also a phantom power switch that covers both channels.

On the right hand side is the section for line out level, a headphone socket and level, and a monitor mix control to balance how your your input/computer tracks mix through your headphones or monitors.

Tascam TM-80 Condenser Microphone

Tascam TrackPack US-2x2 Home Studio

If the US-2×2 is the brain then the TM-80 condenser microphone is its heart.

The TM-80 mic comes bundled in the TrackPack and is a cardioid pattern condenser with an 18mm aluminium capsule.

The mic comes with its own little shock-mount and mini tripod, as well as a six-foot mic cable. This mic looks the business and has been designed to be small and sleek.

The TM-80 is perfect for capturing vocals and instrumental music, but can also be exposed to far louder sounds thanks to the maximum sound pressure rating of 136dB SPL. So grab your axe and turn it up to 11.

Tascam TH-02 Studio Headphones

Finally in the hardware line-up are the TH-02 Headphones. These over-ear headphones have a good flexible band and cups that can rotate all the way up (making them easier to pack up and carry).

These are described as being studio-grade 'phones and so feature the large-size jack. The ear cushions have been stuffed with soundproofing to stop bleed from the cans leaking into the mic.

Digital Audio Workstations (DAW)

Bonus inclusions are a pair of digital audio workstations. These are available as two separate downloads – Cakewalk SONAR X3 LE and Ableton Live Lite 9.



In the box you get two small cards included in the TrackPack which give you download details and a redemption code. Both downloads are 'lite' versions of the full programmes, but offer enough functionality to get you recording, and editing.

Tascam TrackPack 2×2 Performance

Hooking everything together could not be easier. Let's face it, if this bass player can manage it then anyone can.

If you're used to USB mics then this is more-or-less like that, except with the benefit of being hear what's being recorded as it's happening.

OK, so it might get a little more involved than that – but only on the recording side of things.

If you're rocking a Windows machine then, as per usual, you'll need a driver download. This includes the settings panel where you get to select sample rate up to 96kHz, buffer size, decide if your inputs are a stereo pair or two mono and if your outputs are a mix of the inputs plus the signal from the computer, or just the computer output.

It probably makes more sense when you're actually playing with all that.

There's also a Software Mixer which allows you to broadcast/karaoke what you're

Tascam TrackPack US-2x2 Home Studio



recording rather than sending it to the DAW.

Once the driver's in place then getting to the business of recording your stuff is as simple as plugging-in the USB lead to your computer and opening whichever DAW you've decided to choose. A little word of wisdom here – do not be unduly alarmed by the USB light shining red, for this is a good thing. Now, I don't know which bright spark at Tascam decided to use a red light to indicate that the USB is correctly connected, but they have. So don't worry.

The interface is easy to understand and the control layout is pretty straightforward and simple to use. I dare say that most people setting out with this for the first time will find everything intuitive and that all works as expected.

To be honest, it was the mic that surprised me in this bundle. As most expectations would be

focused on the audio interface itself I just assumed that Tascam would've spent their time and money on that with the mic and headphones (we'll get to those in a sec) as almost afterthoughts.

This silvery gem of a mic will handle everything from loud, overdriven guitar cabs to the spoken word. It is quite amazing for a 'free' mic.

I found that the TM-80 possesses a pretty flat frequency response and really sounds open and honest, especially on vocals and acoustic guitars.

When recording in front of cabs having about 12-inches of air between the mic and source seemed most effective. Also moving the TM-80 slightly off-axis helped when recording bass or chuggy (or djent, as the kids say) guitar.

Now, the headphones. These were the items I feared the most. It's nothing personal but I generally mix through headphones as a last resort – my preference being through some near-field speakers. Add in to the mix that these are bundled in with a package... I wasn't expecting much from these

However, the TH-02s aren't actually that bad. I would even go as far as say that they were pretty capable to the point that I started to enjoy using them to listen to my playlists instead of using my PM-3s! Now, I'm not saying that you'll see me rocking the Tascam cans (Tascans?) on the commute, but they are good enough to monitor with.

The cans are more comfortable that I was expecting and they have a fair amount of isolation thanks to their closed back design.

Tascam TrackPack US-2x2 Home Studio

I found that they revealed plenty of detail for mixing and nicely responsive – they were also plenty loud enough being able to handle even full output from the 2x2, which is not recommended.

The US-2x2's gain control which sits next to each input enables you to alter things on the fly instead of leaving it until post-production which can get a bit fiddly.

Another good thing about all of this kit is that it is very mobile. Granted, it's not as mobile as the Tascam [US-366](#), but you can throw all of this rig in to a small bag and record through your laptop or even an iPad as it's iOS compatible.

Tascam TrackPack 2x2 Review Conclusion

The burning question here is “Can you record using only what's in



the box?” and the answer is a firm and definite “Yes”.

Want to record some spoken word, whether it be Beat Poetry or a Podcast, then this set-up will do that.

Band tracks are also easily within reach – note that neither instruments, musicians, nor talent, are included in the package.

In my testing, as well as the desk tripod, I did use my full size mic

stand, a pop shield and [portable vocal booth](#) which did improve the results – just not to the point where I am ready to share them with everyone. Yeah, I am one of those types.

I have no qualms in saying that the Tascam TrackPack 2x2 is a great way to get your home

recording off to a great start. It has everything you need, and they are all of a decent quality. This means that when you need to add more you won't feel that the first thing you need to do is replace any of it, instead spend the money on stuff like a vocal booth or mic stand.

It's also a darned site more compact than my [TC Electronic Impact Twin](#) so your precious desk real estate won't get overrun by your home studio.

Don't forget – if you feel like you need more than two inputs on the go at a time Tascam also do a 4x4 version – the TrackPack comes with two mics and two sets of headphones too!

Tascam TrackPack 2x2 Price and Availability

The Tascam TrackPack 2x2 is [available now](#) for £149 and more information is available on the [Tascam site](#).

The TrackPack 4x4 is [£250](#).

Overall score: 8.4
Build quality 8.5/10
Ease of use 8/10
Sound quality 8.5/10
Performance 8/10
Value for money 9/10

