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## Roksan's Latest Integrated



## Equipment Reviews

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Akiko Audio Tuning Sticks

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Mike New Bearing for Technics 1210

Musical Fidelity MF100 Headphones

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Roksan K2 BT Integrated Amplifier

Teufel Aureol Real Headphones

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# Hifi Pig Magazine

## DECEMBER 2013 Issue 1

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Welcome to the new Hifi Pig Magazine. Every month will be publishing a digest of the kit reviews we've carried out on the [Hifi Pig website](http://Hifi Pig website) in the previous month as well as a selection of our album reviews and exclusive content. Of course the Hifi Pig website will continue to publish reviews and up to the minute hifi news, but we think that the magazine format will be popular with those who find themselves away from an internet connection from time to time or simply want to enjoy the pleasures of Hifi Pig in a different layout.

This month we've got some great reviews for you, plus a very interesting Reader's System article, a system from a dealer with a fascinating philosophy on system building and much more. We've also got some great prizes to give away.

All the Hifi Pig team hope that you enjoy this extra little addition to the website content and if you've got any comments or want to write us a letter for inclusion then please do [get in touch](#).

*Stuart Smith*

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# Bird's Eye View

The last [little rant](#) I had on HiFi Pig concerned vinyl and my....ahem, 'feelings' towards it.

It did provoke a lot of comments and I was surprised by just how many people agreed with me, on the grounds of it needing so much tinkering and fettling to get everything sounding perfect.

I started out my life as a music fan doing what many, many of us did in the 80's, making mix tapes and listening to them on my pride and joy...the Sony Walkman that was, almost, as big and heavy as a house brick.

Of course making a mix tape was an art form in itself.

In the early days I favoured the 'taping Top of the Pops off the telly' method...you may remember this, it involved getting your mono tape recorder as close to the lovely wood effect family TV as you could and telling everyone to 'shut up' so that you could capture the latest offering from Duran Duran or whoever else was top of the pops that week.

**CDs were a lot 'cooler' than tapes though, and their covers looked like mini LPs so you still had that feeling of 'owning' the music**

The end result would almost always have the added effect of a whooping audience with your dad shouting over it that you should 'turn that racket off!'

I then progressed a bit, having been given a 'ghetto blaster' (though I imagine had I walked through any kind of ghetto with my pitiful Matsui offering the local inhabitants would have killed themselves laughing!!) with both double tape deck AND a built in radio....the luxury!

This of course meant that recordings could be done from other tapes or the radio, the mix tapes were still peppered with clunks and it was a desperate race to start and stop the tape before the DJ spoke, but there was a certain charm to it!

Of course tapes had their downside, who hasn't spent hours trying to reel in a tangled web of C90 in their time? When CD's were launched they were the last word in indestructible, modern technology.....hmm, time has proven that they can actually be destroyed, quite easily, or at least ruined. How many CDs do you have that jump or stick at the best part of a tune?

CDs were a lot 'cooler' than tapes though, and their covers looked like mini LPs so you still had that feeling of 'owning' the music That's quite a big thing for me, actually holding the CD in your hand. Flicking through a wall full of discs when you want to find something to listen to....the whole thing about having great art on album covers (admittedly at its best on LPs!)

This is what I really do not get with music's latest incarnation....digital. I

really can't get my head around paying for music...then downloading it. Never owning the actual disk and never holding it in your hand.

Doesn't make sense to me! Maybe I'm just a bit old fashioned, and perhaps all the involvement of actually having to go out and buy music for yourself from an actual shop (yes, there was a time before the internet) has left me only seeing the value in something tangible. Downloads are really convenient and great for people on the move, how much better to have all of your tunes, in high quality, on a little music player than have to lug around a bag of CDs or even worse tapes that have decided to make a bid for freedom and end up like a bird's nest?

But even so, despite the convenience and the practicality, maybe downloading is just too much like making a mix tape for me to comprehend actually parting with cash for the pleasure!



There was big talk in the music industry that digital downloads would totally kill off the sale of CDs and vinyl.

RIP CD? Not really, I think there are probably enough of us out there that still want to grasp what they have bought in their sweaty little paws.

Once you have actually got your CD it can be

ripped and then played on whatever device you like...but you still own the original, still have a collection that can fill a wall.

What really got me thinking about this subject was the fact that

Christmas, like it or not, is on its

way. Having two teenagers in the house music tends to be a popular gift. Both of them listen to music in virtual formats, but how on earth do you give a download as stocking filler?

It's not going to be quite the same on Christmas morning when the usually bulging Christmas stocking is empty apart from a code for you to log into itunes and get your gift...its hardly festive is it?

I suppose we could just go the whole hog and stick a virtual satsuma and lump of coal in there too!

Horses for courses I guess, so I will keep buying my music on CD. Mr HiFi Pig can rip them to play through the squeezebox, and I'm very happy to have my little digital music player to listen to while I am out and about. The important thing is that sat on the shelf at home is a whole collection of CDs so that there is something real and tangible to show for it at the end of the day!

**Linette Smith**



Well, Linette in her Bird's Eye View seems to be rallying against the onslaught of digital files and streaming whereas I'm once again embracing the new format. I had a great time with the little QED uPlay streamer I reviewed and this has prompted me to get hold of a Squeezebox Touch again (*this will*

***only to find a week or so later that my hard drive didn't want to play with me anymore***

*be my fifth*) to see if I can finally get to grips with digital streaming.

Many of the reasons I've previously fallen out with computer stored files have been outlined by Linette, but I just can't help thinking that it is down this path that the future of audio lies. As people are increasingly finding themselves short of domestic storage space and they look to declutter their lives, the advantages of audio stored on a hard drive become increasingly

attractive. The convenience of having all your music in one place and being able to access it over a smart phone or tablet computer are also major influencers I think.

But where do you start? OK, I've tried using the free Exact Audio Copy to rip my CDs but I'm not particularly computer savvy and found it over

complicates the process. In the end I went for the very simple to use dbPoweramp linked to the very useful Bliss software so that all I need to do is plonk the CD in my computer drive, click an on screen button and the software rips to FLAC and finds me the artwork. Simple! Actually I can't believe how simple it's all been so far and I'm waiting in trepidation for the day when all my files spontaneously delete themselves or the hard drive

goes belly up. Come to think of it there's one rule of ripping I've omitted despite me harping on to others about how important it is – **BACKUP YOUR FILES!**

I can't stress how vitally important this part of the process is, I really can't and I really do need to take myself outside and give myself a serious talking to.

The first time I tried to get into streaming audio I went out and bought myself a 1Tb hard drive and ripped about 500 or so of my CDs over a period of a couple of weeks – hardly the most interesting of tasks – only to find a week or so later that my hard drive didn't want to play with me anymore and I couldn't get into my music at all which resulted in the Squeezebox being sold and me forgetting about the whole idea for a while.

So I will persevere this time and I'll be writing about my experiences over the coming months. Wish me luck!

**Stuart Smith**

# Second Hand News



**Nobody wants to read old news so at Hifi Pig we update our hifi news pages every single day of the week.**

Hifi Pig - Snoofling out what's **HOT** in hifi!

**CLICK** for latest hifi news

**H**ifi Pig reader Richard Joyce is a professional musician whose weapons of choice are the clarinet which he's been playing since the age of six and the piano he took up aged nine. He holds a Professional Performers Diploma and a Professional Diploma in Music Directorship/Conducting from the Royal College of Music, has worked with some very big names in the industry, has performed with the BBC Concert Orchestra and now teaches Clarinet from his home in Lincolnshire.

In our ongoing and exclusive to the Hifi Pig Magazine series we ask Richard to talk to us about his current system and his philosophy on what makes a great system.





**M**y present system has remained in its current state for a fair few months now. Folk who know me will find that hard to believe but yes it's true! I've owned kit both more and less expensive, and of course made many mistakes on the way but fortunately a state of synergy - and therefore musical satisfaction - does 'click' every so often. My listening priorities - and what I therefore want from a hifi system - are very much set in stone, and I'll never deviate from that. Music contains a message - it's been a form of communication for centuries after all - and I firmly believe that whilst a hifi system just

cannot recreate the dynamics and sheer presence of (good!) live music, it can get across - relatively intact - the joy or sadness, zest or melancholy contained within.

As musicians we learn from a very young age to think of our playing as a string of long-chain molecules or 'moments' - and the music is the glue which binds those moments together. Each moment can of course be a wonderful thing in its own right, but it's only when they're held together properly - arriving at the ear at the right time, at the right pitch, at the right volume, does it *truly* make sense. My present system hopefully gets a

***Plans for the future? Really not sure but I'd very much like to try some more efficient speakers to use with the KEL84 valve amp.***

lot of this right. Of course it is always going to be lacking in certain aspects - the little ProAc's are hardly going to set the windows rattling with subterranean bass after all (and definitely not when driven by the dinky WAD KEL84!).

However, after very careful setting up, and doing lots and lots of listening, it is a fun little system to enjoy music through and handles pretty much any musical genre I throw at it - be that Byrd or B-52's. It holds onto the build up of tension and release in a musical phrase quite well, and following orchestral scores (handy when I was studying for the conducting diploma) it allows a decent amount of nuance to be heard. Tonal-wise it is certainly mid-



World Audio Designs KEL84 Integrated



# Reader's System

forward - more so with the ProAcs than the Q's - but I'd much rather have this than too much bass and/or too bright at the top.

Plans for the future? Really not sure but I'd very much like to try some more efficient speakers to use

*it is a fun little system to enjoy music through and handles pretty much any musical genre I throw at it - be that Byrd or B-52's.*

with the KEL84 valve amp.

Despite their low (on-paper) efficiency, it really does a fine job of driving the ProAcs, far better than a 15w valve

amp really should to be honest. It will get reasonably decent spl's out of them, and doesn't slow-up on dynamic peaks. The Sony ES is a better amp though, of that there is no doubt in my mind. The KEL is just such enormous fun though.

Sony TA-F770ES amplifier



## KIT LIST

### Sources:

Turntable: Pioneer PL-71 turntable/Benz Micro ACE SL cartridge/Trichord Dino phono amp/+ PSU  
MacBook (running Decibel Music Player) via async USB into...  
Teac UD-H01 DAC  
Sony CDP-X303ES (as transport)

### Amplification:

Sony TA-F770ES  
World Audio Designs KEL84

### Speakers:

ProAc Super Tablette  
Q Acoustics 2010i  
Cables by both NVA and Talk Electronics.

If you'd like your system to be highlighted in Hifi Pig Magazine then get in touch with us by clicking [here](#) or calling us on +33 297237078

# Reader's System



Q Acoustics 2010i



ProAc Super Tablette



Richard's system neatly in place



# Dealer's System

## The Future of Audio

588 Ashley Road, Parkstone, Poole, BH14 0AQ

01202 738882 or 02036 511194

Proprietor: Matthew Scott

[info@thefutureofaudio.co.uk](mailto:info@thefutureofaudio.co.uk)

### The enhancements £1645 (16.5%)

GIK Room Kit 4 acoustic room treatment

2x NMA Taguss twin silver plated unswitched

UK mains wall outlet plates

3x NMA Merit silver plated 13A UK mains

plug/fuse to silver plated IEC leads

1x NMA Platforma MkII Isolation platform (for turntable)

9x NMA cones S/S 'mechanical grounding' cones (for CD/Amp/Phonostage)

4x SSC Contact 200 isolation feet

### The support £1355 (13.5%)

AudiophileBase BetaBase 4 tier hifi rack

1pr Atacama HMS 1.1 600mm speaker stands (filled)

### The cabling £565 (5.7%)

Analysis Plus Oval 12 6m of speaker cable

Analysis Plus Oval One 1m interconnect (for phonostage)

Analysis Plus Copper Oval 1m interconnect (for CD player)

### The equipment £6432 (64.3%)

Funk Firm LSD/F5 turntable and arm

Funk Firm Achromat 3mm turntable mat

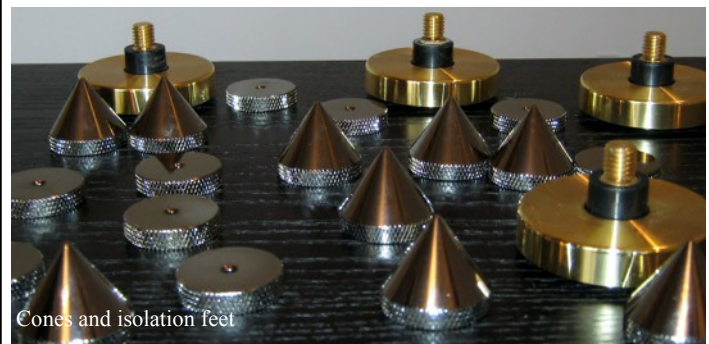
Ortofon 2M Black moving magnet cartridge

Sonnesteer Sedley MM/MC phonostage

Sonnesteer Byron CD player

Sonnesteer Alabaster 55wpc integrated amplifier

Cabasse Minorca 3-way stand mount speakers



set up in the best environment. Therefore, we address set up and environment before choosing the hifi equipment. The £10K system budget allows acoustic room treatment, a decent mains supply (though not mains conditioning) and proper support methods to be decently addressed.”

The system Matthew put together has the budget split £6432 on the equipment, £565 on interconnects and speaker cable, £1355 on the hifi rack and speaker stands and £1645 on room treatment, mains sockets/leads, isolation and mechanical grounding enhancements.

We asked why such a large proportion of the budget had been spent on room treatment, mains etc with Matthew remarking “Re-appropriating the £1645 budget for enhancements elsewhere in the system does not sound as good and we believe that

In the first of our ongoing monthly Dealer System features Hifi Pig asked The Future of Audio to put a great sounding system together for around £10 000. The company come at the whole system building concept from an interesting perspective with Matthew Scott of The Future of Audio commenting “At The Future of Audio the term hifi system is not restricted to just the hifi equipment. We offer the best sound we can, not just the best hifi. We thoroughly believe that a hifi system can only perform at its best when correctly



# Dealer's System

widespread practice in the industry short changes customers and consumers.”

The room was acoustically treated with a GIK Acoustics Room Kit 4 package which Matthew says effectively removes, as far as possible, the influence the room has on the listening experience and which he says is an ear-opening experience.

The Cabasse Minorca speakers on Atacama HMS 1.1 filled speaker stands are hard spiked to the floor to send unwanted energy from the cabinets to ‘ground’. To limit this energy returning to the AudiophileBase BetaBase rack and the equipment

***We thoroughly believe that a hifi system can only perform at its best when correctly set up in the best environment.***

upon it, the rack is ‘floated’ on SSC Contact 200

isolation feet rather than on solid spikes.

Each item of the Sonneteer electronics is then hard ‘coned’ to individual shelves to conduct the internal (micro and macro) vibrations generated in their electro/mechanical operation to the rack. Not being mechanically grounded, the floating rack dissipates this energy as movement/heat and out of the system. The Funk LSD/F5/Ortofon 2M Black turntable sits ‘protected’ on an



NMA Taguss plug and cable with their unswitched socket



Analysis Plus interconnects

# Dealer's System

NMA Platforma MkII isolation platform on the top shelf of the rack.

NMA silver plated unswitched mains outlets and leads then supply the 'fuel' to the equipment and equipment and speakers are connected with Analysis Plus cabling which Matthew says ensures the least information is lost.

So what does Matthew believe this 'ground up' approach brings to the sound of the system? "We believe that this approach to system building removes distortion, colourations and reflections but does not add anything! This, and all other equipment will now perform better and so recordings are heard more clearly; more music, less mush. This technical approach increases musical and emotional results. The system has power and delicacy as required and does not favour a particular genre of music. It is tonally balanced from top to bottom with vinyl and CD, although crisp and detailed, has no nasty edges. Bass has excellent weight and extension with control and speed. Imaging, within the confines of the room, is superb in all dimensions; solo piano for example plays evenly left to right not just left, middle and right. The music surrounds you and is not just casually presented in front of you. You feel connected with all the people involved in the production and performance of every recording played. It sounds real."



Funk Firm LSD/F5 turntable and arm



Sonneteer Byron CD player



Sonneteer Alabaster integrated amplifier



Sonneteer Sedley MM/MC phono stage



Cabasse Minorca stand mount speakers

## ARE YOU A HIFI DEALER?

If you're a hifi dealer and would like your system to be considered for highlighting in Hifi Pig Magazine then get in touch with us by clicking [here](#) or calling us on +33 297237078



# Roksan Kandy K2 BT

## Integrated Amplifier

Roksan introduced the new Kandy K2 BT to retain elements of their well received K2 amplifier and improve upon it. In a World Exclusive *Danny Worth* puts the new integrated from Roksan through its paces.

In another World exclusive to Hifi Pig review, Roksan has offered us a look at their new Kandy amplifier dubbed the Kandy K2. BT you ask? Don't you mean the Kandy IV? No we don't. The BT stands for Bluetooth as the Roksan has the ability for users to stream uncompressed audio from their smartphones,

tablets and home computers to the amplifier. This is a great idea as it enables friends and family to bring their playlists to parties and if the predecessor to the



amplifiers, easily complimenting and upgrading a former Kandy system from Roksan. On the rear however is a small coaxial screw terminal for an

***Bass had that wonderful slap and sharpness to it in the upper regions, crisp and extended with good roundness...***

aerial, much the same as the ones which you would see on a router or wifi card

Kandy K2 BT is anything to go by, this is a party amplifier.

With its updated power output of 140wpc the BT remains visually in the style of the previous

on a pc to allow for the transmission of those Bluetooth signals.

The amplifier has a good solid build and weighs in at a bit of a lump, from memory slightly more than the



# Roksan Kandy K2 BT

previous incarnation, most likely due to its larger more efficient power supplies which Roksan claim will give better bass response and a cleaner clearer top end. There

are also other enhanced circuit revisions and tweaks over the K2 III which

have been selected to enhance the amplifiers pace, power and precision whilst still retaining its signature sound.

We need to bear in mind that not all equipment is suited to all types of music and component selection is critical to our own tastes. We may listen to say 70% Rock and 30% Jazz and on selecting a system which does both of these very different types of music well is no mean accomplishment. There's always a sacrifice to be made somewhere, I myself sacrifice the sheer volume of dance and trance music for the timbre of acoustic music and the cleanliness of beautiful vocals... but that doesn't mean I don't

much for my liking, the 'Solid Copper' was an excellent choice over the 'Stranded Copper' this time around, adding body and grunt to vocals, whilst

*In its price class the Roksan is an absolutely fantastic purchase*

displaying a more refined treble.

A similar scenario was true using the finely silvered copper interconnects from Graditech, they sound absolutely magnificent in my main rig, but I felt the solid core silver Audioquest Sky cables gave the Roksan that little bit of smoothness and refinement it required. There was still a bit of a bass hump which I was finding difficult to control, so next I swapped out power cables. Firstly I tried a Sablon Audio Gran Corona, which actually made the bass larger which is what I was trying to steer away from. The DH Labs Power Plus AC and Red Wave cables cleaned things up wonderfully but the top end began to sear a little

again which I had just managed to control. the Oriton AC-3 was the last option or it was just make do time, the AC-3 has a great ability to clean up the sound and at the same time relaxing it, it gave the amp a



listen to the former anymore.

So to begin with, knowing from previous Kandy experience, I'm going to go for what I expect this amp to not cope with as well and then move on to what I predict to be its strengths.

After doing some preliminary listening (once I felt the amp had come on song after roughly 100 hours of play time) I had some initial issues with certain areas of the presentation with more delicate, vocal and acoustic work. So I began to tweak the cable compliments.

I would steer away from silver plated copper cables - even with the expensive Graditech Lumi 3's 'Silvered' conductors in place the top end seared too

better and darker background, calmed the humps and made the amp sound much more natural and balanced, allowing the system to really sing and sound (to my tastes) more palpable. The upper regions still retained sparkle and transparency, air and openness yet in a more defined manner.

Shelby Lynne's performance of 'Just A Little Lovin' has a very snappy treble line following the track which was clean and natural, there's great ambience on the track and the Roksan conveyed this with an enveloping soundstage. Vocals were focused and a little on the warmer side of neutral with more of a full bodied richness to them. Bass had that wonderful slap and sharpness to it in the upper regions, crisp

# Roksan Kandy K2 BT

and extended with good roundness, a little heavy yet not bloated.

Caroline LoVelle's 'Spirit' album produces a mixture of interesting points, deep powerful bass notes, waves of mid to high frequency tones and delicate treble artefacts which when all combined can very easily cause blur. The K2 BT does a pretty good job of layering these individual portions and I was very surprised to hear how free the vocal remained, a little too projected or forward, but clean and vibrant and true to the way the album is recorded. Some finer

the BT here as even in some very high end system it can still be a struggle.

The top end on the Roksan K2 BT can sound a little excitable through my Ayons with their ceramic tweeters although through the Frugel3's there was a more natural and controlled flavour, I also had the ability to have a little play of the amp on my partner's Amphion Helium 520's which are a little more forgiving by their very nature and they sounded, cohesive and expressive, showing great air and sparkle, with full bodied mids and tuneful bass,

although this was not with my normal main system - I used her Teac Reference CD Player which was a great musical match for the

*Well I must say I was impressed!*

details can be a little subdued but this is really splitting hairs for an amplifier costing £895. Carmel Gomez' 'Freewheel Blues' showed fantastic vocal clarity from the K2 BT, accompanied with wondrous bass that although a tiny bit loose had timbre and naturalness to easily bounce the track through and underlining it with rhythmic musicality. Cymbals were clean and a little unrefined but retained a separate space in the soundstage, allowing for fantastic dynamics to come from an open and spatial soundstage. Whilst 'Big City' had good tone to the trumpet work, piano was a little forward and strangled in the higher notes and less refined than instruments within other frequencies. Faster Cymbal work in other parts of the album was very effective, showing that the Roksan can handle speed and complexity without blurring, piano is extremely difficult to communicate correctly, so we can forgive

Roksan in my opinion.

The Roksan amp really does come to life when playing dance music, it is nothing short of an absolute marvel! 'Mikado' DJ Tiesto was exhilarating and I'm inclined to think that the Roksan has perhaps been tuned by a raver! Music was huge, rhythmic, punchy and bouncy with treble artefacts that filled the entire room seamlessly, it was beyond a typical 'speakers disappeared' confrontation when blasting some dance and trance - it was completely euphoric power and got me moving instantly. I don't listen to as much of this type of music anymore as Emily, bless her with her valves overtones, can do a good job but not a great job like the Roksan can.

Likewise when listening to Def Leppard's 'Hysteria' album it could be said that the amp was tuned by a rocker. There was that that edginess, grunt and live



# Roksan Kandy K2 BT

sounding flavour that Rock music needs to sound convincing.

I also listened to a vast amount of the very latest Pop music and the easiest way to do this was with Spotify through the Touch. There's a category for the 'Top 100 Tracks' and this allowed me to give the lesser quality MP3 files a whirl. Well I must say I was impressed! The Roksan's natural speed and dynamics lent its hand to this genre much the same as dance and rock, giving an engaging, fun and enjoyable listen, fantastic for

parties. The quality and resolution of the files was excellent with the Kandy and even when turning up the wick and belting out some strong bass into the room the music remained controlled and enjoyable.

I made a comment on the Totaldac review that the dac doesn't do dance or electronica but I'll eat my words and say that when partnered with some transistors that know how to belt it out it certainly can do these genres.

I had begun to feel that the amp perhaps had a slight hump in the upper bass/lower mids and the same with the very lowest bass, along with a couple peaks around 10 and 15-16khz, but for this particular type of music I feel it has been tuned perfectly, giving a more dominating and exciting performance and reminding me of the Cyrus X Signature monoblocks with their attack and grip, pace and rhythm.

## Bluetooth

Using the Bluetooth feature on the Roksan is so easy I just laughed to myself. I was expecting a little bit of fiddling but there was none of it, I simply picked up my Android phone, turned on the Bluetooth (it found the amp named 'Roksan K2' immediately) clicked and I was connected instantly. The same scenario was true when connecting my iPad, although I did have to disconnect from the phone first.

On both devices I was able to stream music from their onboard players using Spotify and YouTube, with playback starting the very moment the source track was started. There is no connection code to enter either and you are able to rename the device if you wish.

Sound-wise... well this ultimately depends on the source material, the likes of YouTube and lower quality mp3's didn't sound as good as lossless material which sounded pretty bloody good indeed.

Obviously there is still a slight loss of quality through the wireless connection but it was not an awful lot with WAV and FLAC files, retaining the Kandy K2 BT's character.

This feature is such a novelty and I had hours of fun flicking through different music and watching a lot of live stuff on YouTube through my iPad. The feature is the ultimate party companion - after alcohol and women of course!

## Conclusions

*...the Roksan can handle speed and complexity without blurring...*

I would suggest careful speaker and cable matching to be able to obtain qualities from a larger range of music than those that the K2 BT really excels in - it's far from impossible but it takes a little commitment to finely tune. In the price bracket of the amp along with speakers I have heard in this range I would suggest Monitor Audios Silver RX6 or 8 which have the newer C-CAM2 tweeter which is tamer than the previous incarnations, or possibly some Tannoy DCT6 which are also a smoother sound that would love the kick up the proverbial which the Roksan can offer with its 140wpc into 8 Ohms. For a second-hand purchase I adored the Amphion Helium 520's but would definitely hunt down some Ruark Prologue II's, which I feel would make for a match made in heaven.

There's no denying that the K2 BT can do large dynamics, speed and attack, convey heavily weighted bass passages with ease and once suitable synergy has been obtained, the top end can sound refined and expressive leading down into the mids with great coherence.

If you're after an amplifier which bridges the gap between a live PA sound and a Hi-fi setup then look no further.

In its price class the Roksan is an absolutely fantastic purchase and if I was building a system in the price range of the K2 BT I would have it as a serious contender on my demo list, along with an Audiolab CDQ and probably some Ruarks to get that balance for my tastes in music... and that Bluetooth feature is just brilliant!

**Danny Worth**



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# Musical Fidelity MF 100 Headphones

**Musical Fidelity take their first foray into the world of over-ear headphones with their £119 MF 100 model. *Stuart Smith* takes a listen to see if they pass muster in this competitive marketplace.**

**T**he Musical Fidelity MF100 headphones are an over ear headphone and are open in design. They arrived for review well packed and complete with a choice of leather or fabric earpads, a velvet carrying pouch and a mini to quarter inch jack adapter. The headphones are clearly designed for use by the iPod generation as they have an inline control and microphone apparently...all wasted on an old codger like me who just wants his headphones to play music, but I'm sure the youngens will love this feature. They cost £119.

They're well presented, sturdy enough looking and have a single shortish cable which attaches to the left hand can – there's also a little rubber doodad on the cable to keep it all nicely wound up when not in use. Wearing the MF100s for a couple of hours with the fitted leather earpads I found them a bit "sweaty" and so fitted the fabric pads... for which procedure there is clearly a knack I evidently don't have... actually it's not too bad to fit them and I am a bit ham-fisted and impatient if truth be known.

The fabric pads are much more comfortable for my ears and were snug enough over longer periods. The padded plastic headband adjusts at both left and right sides so you can get the fit just so for your given head size. The headphones are pretty tight on the ears and were I of that persuasion I'd not hesitate to go out for a brisk jog wearing them – you can shake your head about a good deal without them



budging an inch. Actually I'd have liked them to have been a smidgen less tight.

The cans themselves are pivoted and fold flat so you can hang them round your neck (I've seen the youth on the street do this) when not in use.

Isolation is ok but being open they're not as effective as the closed design NAD headphones we tested recently, but then they were never going to be. That said this is a pretty moot point as the Musical Fidelity phones appear to be very sensitive indeed and using the Schiit Magni headphone amp (fed by their Modi

DAC) reasonably loud levels were achievable at the 7/8 o'clock point...at 10/11 o'clock they were as loud as you'd ever need them. This sensitivity is a good thing for folks using digital media players (MP3 players I've heard the young people call them) as they go plenty loud enough without putting undue strain on the player.

## Sound

When I tested the Musical Fidelity EB50s sometime ago I really enjoyed them and they have become my headphone of choice when I'm away on business or, heaven forbid, forced to use public transport and so I was eager to give the MF100s a bash.

As mentioned most of the listening was done using the Schiit desktop kit with Foobar 2000 – all files were ripped to FLAC. Johnny Cash's "American IV – The Man Comes Around" was presented with an overall nicely balanced tone. Voice was well projected and natural sounding, perhaps a little to the fore in the mix, guitar sounded pretty good throughout the frequencies. You do get a good insight into the recording and vocals in particular sound very credible.

There isn't that out of the head experience you get with very good open backed headphones, but the stereo image is pretty well portrayed and there is a good degree of feeling of width and depth for a pair of headphones at this price point.

On Jazz (Marcin Wasilewski Trio "Faithful") there is a believable presentation of piano and hats and snare hits are snappy and sparkly. You get a good depiction of the louder and quieter passages with most of the detail being kept intact – there's a touch of break up at loud volume at the upper frequencies. Actually listening at lower levels on these is very enjoyable for this kind of music and I can see myself donning them for the late night sessions when I'm shouted at for turning on the main rig or when working at my desk.

The Musical Fidelity 'phones go deep as demonstrated with the synthesised bass on Wolfgang Voigt's "Zukunft Ohne Menschen" and this is perhaps where their real strengths lay – with electronica. Kevin Saunderson's classic "The Groove That Won't Stop" is bouncy, snappy and with a 303 line that is pretty much as it should be. On "One Night In Comeme Vol III" bass

is driving, deep and hard-hitting whilst the electronic percussion is faithful to the sound of the machines playing. In fact the more I listen to bass heavy techno and electronica the more I'd say that these are very good for this genre – there's a real kick in the bass and explosiveness to the top end – Miss Kitten's

***Stereo image is pretty well portrayed and there is a good degree of feeling of width and depth for a pair of headphones at this price point.***

"Batbox" album sounds fab!!

## Conclusion

All in all and for the relatively modest asking price you get a good sounding headphone with the MF100s. They're not the last word in detail or refinement but then you wouldn't expect them to be for the money you are being asked to shell out. They are quite tight on the ears, something that has been addressed with final production 'phones I'm told, and I found that the most comfortable way to wear them was quite far back on the ears so the front of the cans are raised slightly away from the ear. I also found this positioning gave the MF100s a much more open and dynamic sound – punchier with better separation of the instruments in the mix...much more "out of the head".

Given the release date of these headphones I can see them being popular with audiophile parents wanting to give their progeny a Christmas gift that will give them a glimpse into the audiophile world and with the Musical Fidelity name attached they're sure to do well – dare I say the name may even outshine that of the ubiquitous Beats by Dre in some circles.

That said, I'd also see a good number of people for whom headphones are not their main listening media and who don't want to spend a fortune on a headfi set up opting to give these a whirl.

For those that listen to a good deal of electronic music then I reckon the Musical Fidelity MF100s would be a good, reasonably priced choice of headphone – had I heard them twenty five years ago I'd have had them as my monitor 'phones for DJing. They're also a good choice for those who want a more "out of the head" sound they're used to with in ear monitors and their portable music player.

**Stuart Smith**





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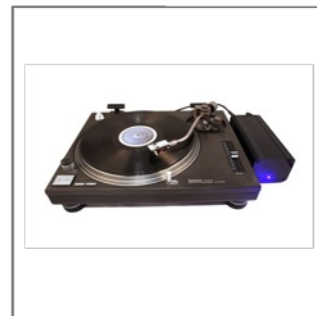
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# Mike New Bearing for Technics 1210 Turntable

The Technics 1210 turntable is gaining an enviable reputation as a high-end motor unit for which there's a growing and enthusiastic fan base. Stuart Smith checks out the £445 replacement bearing from Mike New.

I must confess I was a bit worried when I ordered a Mike New Bearing for the Technics 1210 turntable i'm experimenting with from David at Mains Cables R Us as I'm certainly no DIYist and it seemed there'd be quite a bit of fiddling to do to fit the new bearing – but I'd fitted the Origin Live PSU without too much hassle so how hard could it be?

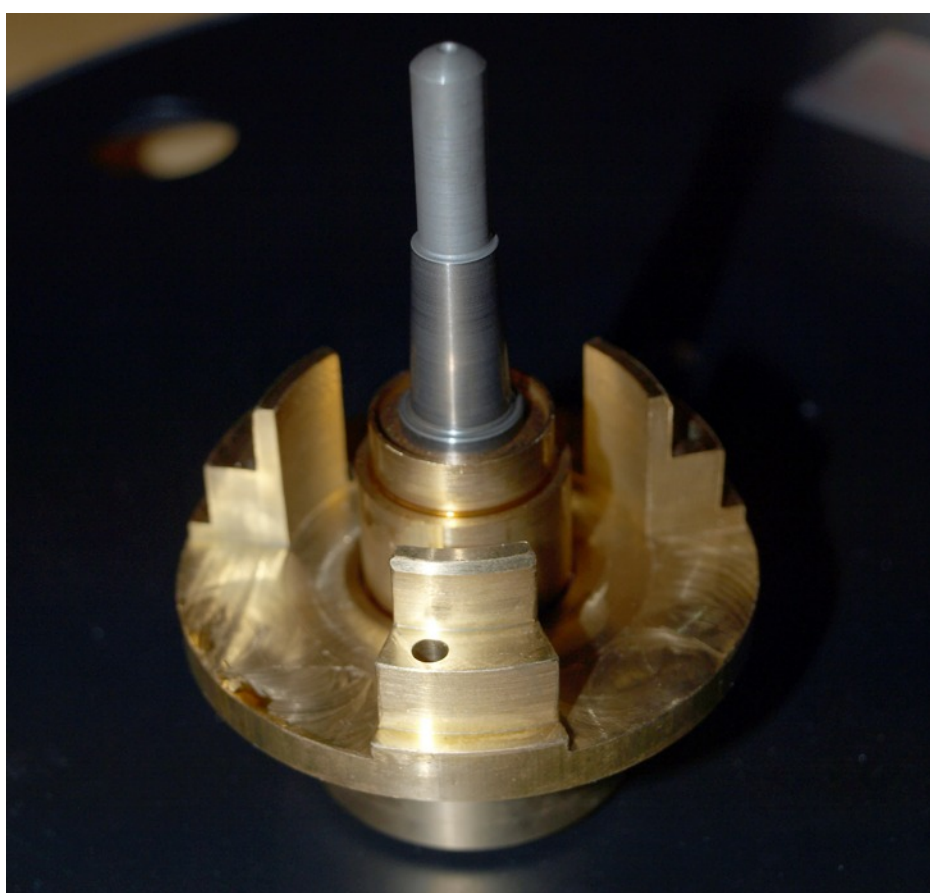
I needn't have been quite so worried (read on) – if you can drive a screwdriver and are not afraid of attacking the circuit board on the 1210 with nail clippers and a tiny file then you should be OK.

The UK price for the Mike New bearing is £445 from the guys at Mains Cables R Us.

First off a bit of description of the bearing - It's a weighty 500 grams, it's made of brass and it looks like... a bearing. In comparison to the standard Technics 1210 bearing it certainly looks far better made and far more substantial - see picture below.

**This is certainly an item that I would consider pretty much obligatory for those serious in getting the very best from the Technics 1210 and I heartily recommend it.**

The bearing housing (the brass bit) is machined from a solid billet of brass and has three locating points where it is bolted to the main chassis of the turntable.



The bottom of the housing is a little larger than the Technics' bearing housing with the intention of offering maximum contact (stability) between it and the turntable chassis.

The spindle is slightly longer than the standard spindle by 3mm and this allows the use of aftermarket mats and clamps etc. The whole of the load (platter, record, puck) is supported on an 8mm Silicon Nitride ball which "floats" in a 6mm deep cylindrical cavity and it ultimately rests on a 3mm solid carbide pad - now



# Mike New Bearing

you don't actually get to see any of this as its all in a large sealed well filled with a synthetic oil at the bottom of the bearing housing. OK, that's the techy bit (no pun intended) over and done with you'll be pleased to know.

## Fitting

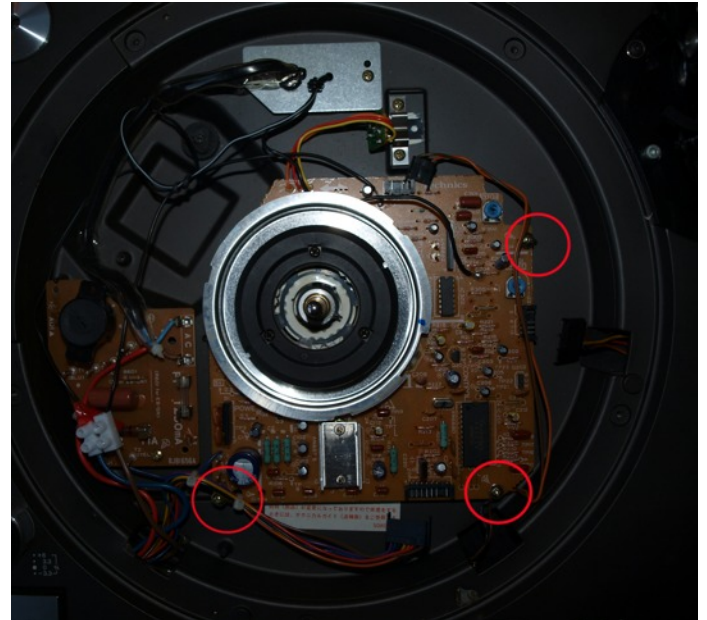
I thought it would be a useful exercise to actually go through the whole fitting procedure so that those of you out there thinking about this as a potential upgrade path for your Technics 1210 could see if it was beyond the scope of your DIY/fettling skills. MCRU say the fitting of the new bearing will take five minutes (I think this is very optimistic) but they have a fitting service available should you not feel up to the job.

The instructions that come with the bearing are printed over three and a bit sides of A4 and are clear and easy to follow, though I suggest you familiarise yourself with the procedure mentally before beginning to actually get inside the Technics.

I'll assume you know the 1210 a little and have had the good sense to remove the Perspex lid, have secured the tonearm and fitted a stylus guard to your cartridge.

First off you remove the top platter from the turntable by placing a finger from each hand in the two holes and lifting straight upwards. Then remove the round black plastic cover by removing the five screws around its edge – I'd previously removed this from the turntable when fitting the Origin Live external PSU so didn't need to do this bit.

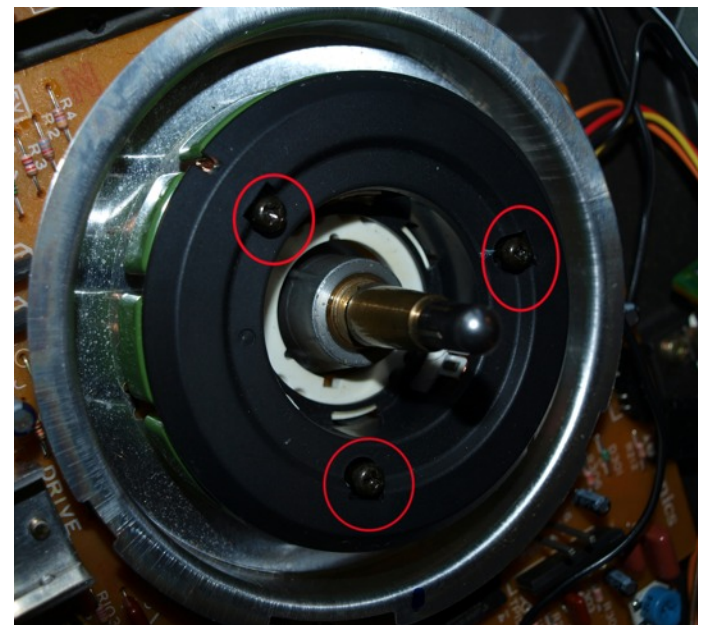
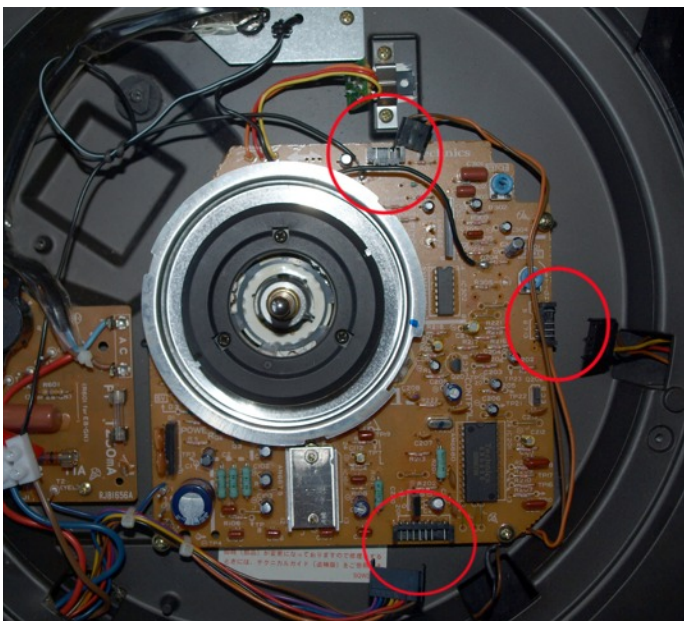
Now you're presented with the inner workings of the turntable, namely a large printed circuit board to which there are three plugs with wires coming from them attached (*see picture*). You need to detach these plugs carefully from the circuit board – they are quite



tight but do come out with a bit of gentle persuasion.

The circuit board now needs to be disconnected from the chassis and to do this you unscrew and remove three self tapping screws. I used a Phillips screwdriver and had no problems but you are supposed to use a posidrive screwdriver.

Around the motor coil assembly are three black screws and you now need to remove these. These are the screws that connect the bearing to the body of the



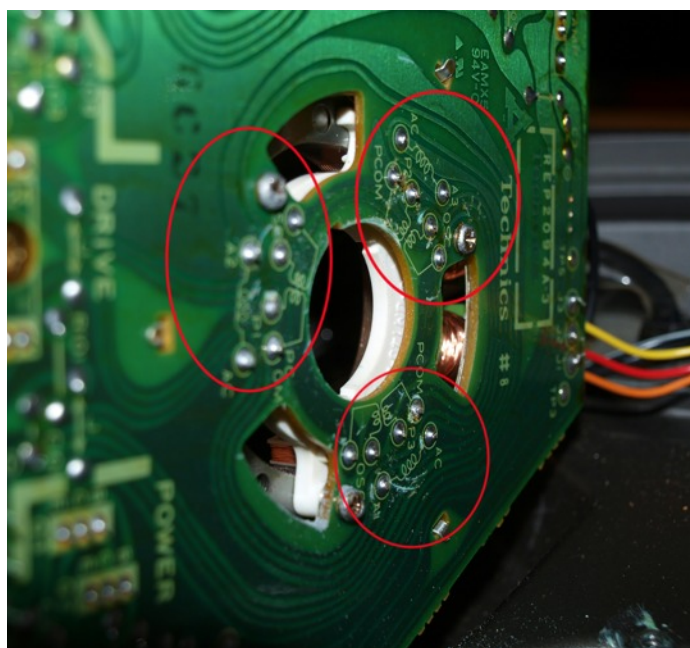


# Mike New Bearing

turntable chassis and are pretty long as you'd expect. Now you can tilt the circuit board to the left and remove the old bearing. As I was doing this I actually thought that all this was a bit too easy and going far too well! There's a black plastic cover over the motor coil thingy and apparently this is of no use so can be removed – again it's a tight fit but does come out.

You can now remove the old bearing.

Now this is the important bit and the bit where I was always going to flounder. I could tell this as this section of the instructions was printed in heavy type in a “whoop whoop ignore at your peril” sort of way. On the underside of the circuit board you've got three groups of six wires which stick out of solder (see picture below) and you've got to snip these wires right back to avoid shorting once the new bearing is fitted. I used a set of nail clippers to do this



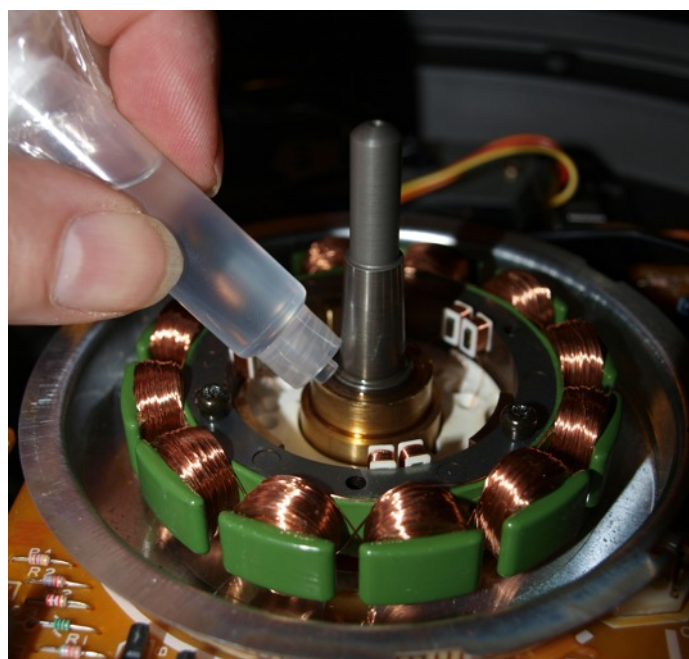
and whilst I got the wire cut as short as possible this later proved not enough – in short I fitted the new bearing and ended up with a platter that didn't turn due to the wires shorting with the new bearing. The trick here is that you MUST file each of the wires you've snipped right down so barely nothing protrudes – ignore this at your peril!

You're now ready to fit the new bearing which is a pretty simple job of pushing it through the hole in the PCB, screwing the three long black bolts through the bearing and onto the chassis, rescuing the PCB with the three posidrive screws and refitting the three circuit plugs you earlier removed (the ones with the wires). Almost there.

Add a few drops of the supplied oil to the reservoir at the top of the spindle, add a bit of Vaseline or silicone grease to the spindle itself and replace the platter. Jobs a goodun!

## Listening

The Technics I have was a good condition second hand unit and up until the bearing being fitted I'd added an Origin Live external PSU, feet and mat, plus an OL Silver arm and a Audio Technica 33EV cartridge.



Once the bearing was fitted I put the turntable on the shelf and left it running constantly for a few days as recommended in the instructions – they say 30 hours but I gave it a good deal longer.

Eventually sitting down and listening to the 1210 with the new bearing I was immediately confronted with a sound that was clearly an improvement over the original bearing. There is instantly a feeling that something is very much improved in the overall presentation. A feeling of solidity.

Listening to Concerto Aranjuez (John Zavadin/Philomonia of London) there is a sensation of there being a greater amount of space between instruments in the orchestra - I know this is clichéd but there's more of a sense of listening in three dimensions to the music. This piece sounded really huge with each instrument and group of instruments being perfectly “visible” in the stereo image and with each instrument having its place in that space - both left and right and forward and back - a walk in kind

# Mike New Bearing

of quality perhaps. Guitar notes appear to be a good deal better defined than with the standard bearing and with a somewhat more detailed quality to them when listening closely.

Bass guitar on Israel Vibration's "Jericho" feels to be more precise in its portrayal and with a tighter more hard-hitting element to its structure – more real bass guitar sounding if you like. Again there is an impression that the soundstage is more defined in space and has a more rock solid base to it – the image is constant and doesn't drift.

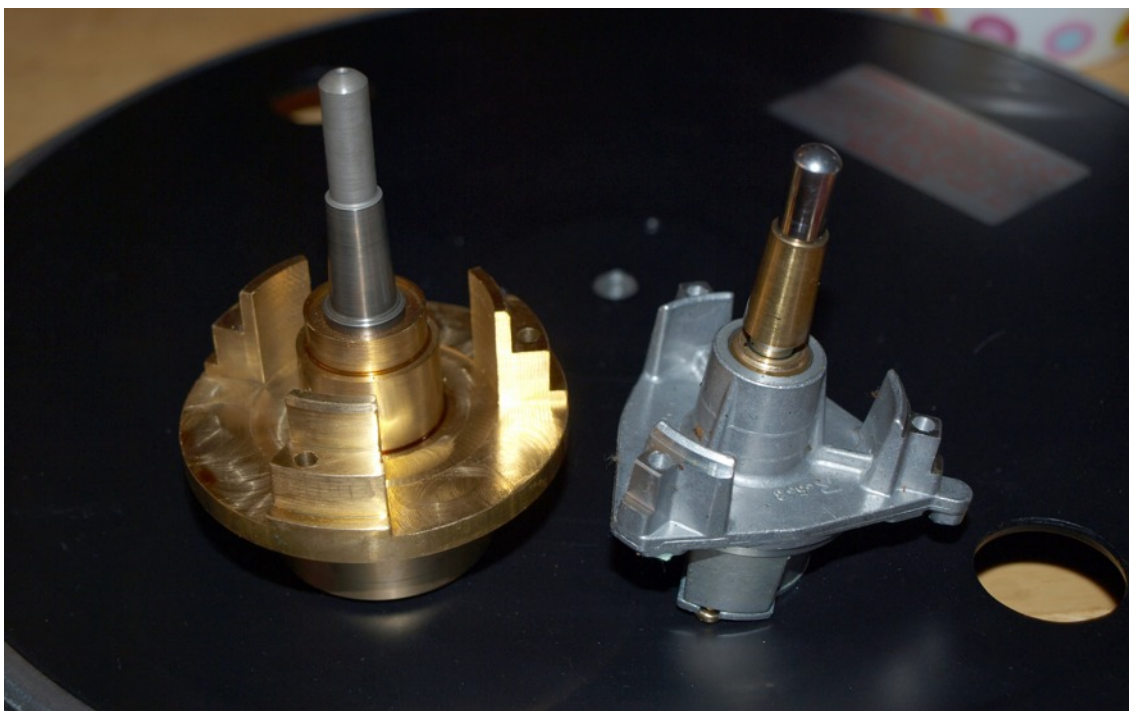
Putting on the brilliant "Techno Picker" by Adrian Legg you get to hear every little detail of his fingers on the fret-board as well as a very good feel that it is indeed an Ovation electro-acoustic he's playing. There's a cleaner feel to the way the music is heard and it's as if another layer of detail has been opened up across the frequency range – "lifting of a veil" hyperbole is taking it too far into hifi pundit jibber jabber but you get my meaning I'm sure.

Popping Yello's "Stella" album onto the platter what hits first is clearly a very 80s production to the album (there's a better insight into the recording with the new bearing) and that soundstaging thing again is very much in evidence. Drums are hard hitting and precise, bass is deep and defined and there's an overall balance to the sound. Good stuff!

## Conclusion

The replacement bearing for the Technics 1210 was a bit of an eye opener for me – I'm on a journey with the turntable to see just what is capable from the humble DJ spinner (which I consider to be an excellent motor unit and chassis by the way) and was expecting some slight improvements, but this upgrade is certainly a tad more than subtle.

Of course I've done other upgrades to the Techy prior to fitting the Mike New bearing, but at each



step I've carefully analysed the upgrades and reported on what each of the upgrades brought to the party.

I'd say that the bearing offers a significant improvement in performance, way above and over that of the standard bearing and so if you're looking to take the 1210 to another level it should certainly be on your shortlist of things to add sooner rather than later.

What you are left with is a turntable motor unit that offers a very high level of performance and (when matched with a suitable arm, cartridge, power supply, mat and feet) something I think will give many mid to high-end turntable a good run for their money.

I know there are folk out there in Hifi-Land that don't see the point on spending what is a considerable amount of dosh on the 1210, but what you get with sensible and worthwhile upgrades is to my ears a very good turntable indeed that once fettled is pretty much plug and play.

This is certainly an item that I would consider pretty much obligatory for those serious in getting the very best from the Technics 1210 and I heartily recommend it.

**Stuart Smith**



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# Dynaudio Excite

## X14 Loudspeakers

**The £900 Dynaudio Excite X14 is a relatively small loudspeaker in a busy marketplace. Can such a diminutive speaker deliver sonically or will *Jerry Jacobs* be left wanting?**

**D**ynaudio's Excite range has been around for a while, addressing the lower echelons of the audiophile loudspeaker market. After a recent overhaul, the 4-strong Excite range now starts with the X14 at £900 and extends up to the 3-way, 4 driver floorstanding X38 loudspeaker at £2850, and includes a center speaker for AV applications.

The X14 are small - 170 x 285 x 255 mm (whd) - standmount speakers weighing in at 6.5Kg each. Two way with a fabric dome tweeter and mid/bass cone driver, single-wired with just one pair of cable posts, and rear ported. Quite low in sensitivity at 85dB/W as you'd expect from a small speaker, but an easy (genuine) 8 ohm impedance load.

The grilles are cleverly designed to attach magnetically - no unsightly holes or attachment points are visible. I must admit though, that I found the mid-grey colour of the grille cloth looked a bit drab against the lovely pristine coolness of the white lacquer cabinets of my review pair. But I wouldn't keep the grilles on while listening anyway - more on that later!

The Excite X14 is available in a choice of real-wood veneer finishes: walnut and rosewood, and also in Satin Black Lacquer and Satin White Lacquer finishes. The tweeters are protected in transit by a neat (bright orange!) plastic cover that attaches into 3 allen bolt holes around the dome. Clever - and also useful I would imagine if there are any small fingers around that might take a curious prod at the tempting little domes when the speakers aren't in use. It's astonishing how few toddlers can resist prodding at tweeters, bless them!



### Background and some Technicalities

Founded in 1977, Dynaudio has been such a fixture in the audiophile speaker market for so long that I for one kind of take them for granted. "Dynaudio? - ah, yes, they're one of those Scandinavian speaker manufacturers, aren't they. Danish, isn't it?"

But actually, as well as touching most of the hifi price brands - from affordable sub-£1k speakers up to the astonishing \$100,000 range-topping Dynaudio Evidence Master - they are also a technologically innovative brand in ways I wasn't aware of before doing some research for this review.

Drive-units are developed and manufactured in-

house at their factory in Skanderborg, Denmark. They even use their own cone material (MSP – Magnesium Silicate Polymer) designed to optimise the balance between stiffness, lightness and inner damping.

Woofers and tweeters use *aluminium* wire voice coils. This is unusual, as most other speaker manufacturers use copper. However Dynaudio argue that aluminium is much lighter and has better thermal behaviour (it stores less heat). More voice coil windings than if copper were used, while still

***The X14s, though, pretty much nail this with a well-focused image embedded within a natural reverberant acoustic halo.***

achieving lower mass than an equivalent copper-coiled unit, and increased power handling allows the speaker to follow the amplifier signal more precisely without changing characteristics much when driven hard. This small speaker could certainly soak up power and provide a surprisingly full range and dynamic sound - so the theory would seem to be right on this point!

Focusing down on to the review model in particular, the X14 has a "high 8 ohm" impedance, that is, without the dips down to 4 ohms or less, commonly found in others. So they should be an easy load for an amp to drive.

The woofer is a long-throw design with a long voice coil and a lot of mechanical headroom in the spider/suspension, so while cone area is quite small a decent amount of air can nonetheless be moved! Once again, this technical advantage was obvious on audition.

The tweeter is a 27mm coated soft dome design with a special coating material, and its aluminium voice coil is damped in a magnetic fluid (ferrofluid). Dynaudio prefers soft domes because of the suitability of their roll-on/roll-off characteristics with no resonance peaks, allowing an even transition to the mid/woofer and they say they have an even sound radiation/dispersion, matching that of the mid/woofer driver.

#### Setup ...

These are standmount speakers, so, yup, you guessed it, they need stands! Because of the rear-firing port,

shelf mounting is not recommended, they do benefit from some space behind them.

Dynaudio recommend their own Stand 3X stands, but I didn't have these to hand, so I used some mass-loaded Atacama stands of identical (620mm / 24 inch) height. The traditional balance / compromise between image focus and soundstaging openness was optimised for me by having the speakers point a little way behind my listening chair. Dispersion is good, you don't need your head clamped in a vice to keep it in a narrow sweet spot to ensure well balanced

sound, and so good sound is not limited to a single listener in a room.

#### Sound ...

Oh my - those grilles have just *got* to go! Transparency and detail are substantially improved when those covers are removed. To my ear, this easily doubles the speakers' sonic prowess. Take them off when listening is my firm advice.

This is a small speaker in a lower cost band of Dynaudio's extensive range. You cannot expect them to do everything well, and they don't. But their considerable virtues were rather different from what I had anticipated! Read on ....

Soundstaging and imaging is accurately atmospheric. My ultimate test track for this is Loreena McKennitt's heart-rending song, Breaking the Silence (a tribute to Amnesty International) on her Parallel Dreams album. Near the start there is a flute-like pipe playing, set well back and to the right. So many systems and components totally fail to reproduce this image placement accurately, often resulting in an ill-defined amorphous blob of sound. The X14s, though, pretty much nail this with a well-focused image embedded within a natural reverberant acoustic halo. Lovely! So many components fail at this, they really do.

Staying with the Parallel Dreams album, the 3rd track - Huron 'Beltane' Fire Dance - is as testing as any when it comes to foot-tapping rhythm. The X14's performance here was good but not top drawer. There is a slight lack of midrange articulation that robbed the music of some of its frankly awesome rhythmic swagger. Toes were tapping, but not as fervently as they might!

# Dynaudio Excite X14

## Articulation and lucidity ...

As previously mentioned, there is a mild slackness in articulation and this is noticeable on percussion.

Deeper voices, as well, lose a little lucidity due to this. The track Plastic Age from the superb 1980 pop album Age of Plastic by The Buggles shows this well. The percussive thwacks that underpin this track (and much of the album!) lack a little in impact and precision. It's not bad at all, and is as good or better than many, it's just not up there in 'best of class'.

To assess resolution and transient speed in the treble and upper mids, to my mind you really cannot beat a well recorded harpsichord. Alan Cuckston's heartwarming performance of Handel's harpsichord suites are an excellent example. With the X14 speakers the spangy spikiness was just a little smoothed over, the individual notes slightly blending together. It still sounded yummy, but the excitement of the playing was a little more relaxed and less immediate than it can be.

High frequencies were slightly emphasised, and the last smidgeon of crystalline clarity eluded these speakers. Some listeners will prefer them for that very reason - not everyone wants to be as close to the music as I do!

Bass ... the X14 are surprisingly full range for their size. I played James Blake's Limit to Your Love expecting a lightweight rendition that failed to even begin to capture the depth and power of *that* bass-line --- Wrong! I couldn't help but chuckle as these tiny speakers filled the room with deep vibrant low frequencies. No, intestines were not pummeled as they can be with genuine full-rangers, but this was pretty damn good!

Piano, though, revealed the smaller cabinets limitations. There wasn't the natural heft and sheer scale that a grand piano emanates at whatever volume level it is played at. The X14's 50Hz lower

limit is a bit high to capture the full natural resonance of a grand piano, it's a bit lightweight compared to a larger full range speaker. The new Naxos CD of classical works by Marcel Tyberg shows this well -



wonderful music, by the way!

## BIG music ...

The Chandos recording of Shostakovich's 10th symphony, conducted by Neeme Jarvi, is one of the finest recordings of orchestral music that I know - hugely powerful, whipcrack fast, exquisitely transparent. The symphony's 2nd movement - allegedly a musical portrait of Stalin, full of aggressive punchy driving remorseless energy - is a real system-buster of a track. Most systems can't get near this, many a full range speaker has been seen to quake in its boots when this track gets going! Well, this was a surprise of jaw-drop magnitude. The tiny X14s gave one of the best renditions of this massively dynamic and musically breathtaking torture track I have ever heard, putting many a large and far more expensive speaker to shame with their



dynamism, precision and explosive energy. Cor, what an unexpected treat! Genuinely superb.

Blues for Klook, on Eddy Louiss's album Sang Mele, was also excellent, the jump-factor snap well caught and the deep powerful synth bass chords were, well ... deep and powerful! As you would expect, the very deepest bass from this track was missing, though. Nonetheless, amazing stuff.

***But they image superbly and, counter-intuitively, these little babies excel at large scale music.***

**Yeah, OK, but can they rock?**

Nazareth's Hair of the Dog album contains a completely awesome rock classic that very few folks seem to know about!

Nearly 10 minutes long and carrying a huge emotional punch, the track "Please don't Judas me" was conveyed with power, energy, precision, drive and, all-importantly, passion.

I love the emotional power of this song, and played appropriately loud it sounded truly fine through the Dynaudios.

The view from the distaff side (i.e. what my wife thought!) ....

We had just listened and watched a DVD video of Gilbert & Sullivan's operetta Iolanthe - one of our favourites.

"So, what did you think of the little speakers?" I asked.

"They really look good and well made, I like them a lot" she replied.

"What about the sound quality?" I inquired.

She kind of looked at me. Not usually reticent in such matters, I was surprised when she asked "What do *you* think?".

"Clarity is good" I opined - "*Very* good" said the missus.

"Bass is impressive for such a small speaker" I hazarded. - "I preferred the bass to your big speakers, I don't like it going so low" she replied. Women! Hah. What do they know?

Should I depart this mortal coil sooner rather than later, the wife says she may well be onto eBay pronto

to sell my beloved MBLs and would invest in a pair of these little Dynaudios!

Hmph. Women, eh.

Amplification can be varied to suit your taste in presentation. My 250wpc Krell amp really got a grip and the Dynaudios seemed to have a limitless capacity to soak up the power. They just got louder as the volume level was upped to lease-breaking

levels, no sign of degradation or limiting, let alone clipping. Power handling is specced at ">150W" - that seems fair.

Everything was rather more relaxed and restrained with a 27wpc Topping TP60 t-amp. It went sufficiently loud in my 4x7m room, but it did lack the feeling of awesome power and control from the bigger, higher current amp. And some folks will prefer the more relaxed take on the music that this gives. Make your own choice in amplification, the Dynaudios will respond accordingly.

## Conclusions ....

The Dynaudio Excite X14 is a small speaker and at £900 a pair excluding stands they aren't at all expensive as such things go. So it's only fair to expect some compromises. And compromises you do get - but probably not those you were expecting!

They don't quite have the fine detail resolution of the best mini-monitors, and they lack just a little in rhythmic swagger, sounding a tad 'four-square'. And obviously they don't do really deep bass, although they do surprisingly well for their size.

But they image superbly and, counter-intuitively, these little babies *excel* at large scale music. If you want big music conveyed with precision, power and passion from a beautifully presented small speaker and are considering spending a £grand or so, then these Dynaudios really should be on your audition list!

**Review system:** MBL 116F speakers, Krell KAV-250a and Topping TP60 power amps, Restek Consens active and Glasshouse passive pre-amps, Vincent CD S7 & McCormack UDP-1 CD Players.

**Jerry Jacobs**

# *MoonTails*



*By*

## *Jade Audio*

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# QNKTC AB-1.2 Digital to Analogue Converter

The QNKTC AB-1.2 DAC, or to give it its full name the Quantum Noise Killed the Cat AB-1.2 DAC needs to deliver on sonics if it's going to get away with a name like that. *Danny Worth* takes a listen to this curious beast from Norway.



The AB-1.2 lets you play high-resolution audio (up to 24 bits at 192kHz) from Windows, Linux and OS X computers. It is a hardware implementation of the Audio Widget open source project – a project started by an online group who wanted to develop a good solution for a USB DAC. The AB-1.2 will operate in both USB Audio Class 1 (UAC1) and UAC2. In UAC1 it supports more than CD quality, 24bit/48ksps. In UAC2 it uses up to 32bit/192ksps for high quality audio. The actual DAC chip receives 24-bit samples. The USB audio protocol is asynchronous with both UAC1 and UAC2. That means the analogue part of the AB-1.2 minimizes jitter errors. UAC1 is available with built-in drivers on Windows, Mac and Linux. UAC2 is available in Mac and Linux. For UAC2 on Windows

you must install a driver. The driver is recommended even if you don't need UAC2 playback qualities. The Windows driver will let you play back high quality audio using ASIO capable players such as JRiver Media Center and foobar2000. Windows UAC2 will not work in generic Windows programs like web browsers. For that you will have to use UAC1. The good news about that is that "Pling - You Got Mail" will also not play on Windows UAC2. So with the listed players you can listen to music on Windows UAC2 without such interruptions.

The DAC is an open Source product which allows for the playing around with and modification of hardware, firmware and drivers.



# QNKTC AB-1.2 DAC

Connected from my Mac Mini the (dubbed for this review) Q DAC was fed with Wireworlds Starlight 7 USB A to Mini B cable. From the DAC to amp were Chords Crimson VEE 3 interconnects, the amp being my Emille integrated with my Ayon Seagull Loudspeakers.

A quick click into settings on the Mac, navigate to the sound menu and Q N K T C USB DAC was highlighted with another quick click and I was good to go creating playlists through Amarra 2.5.

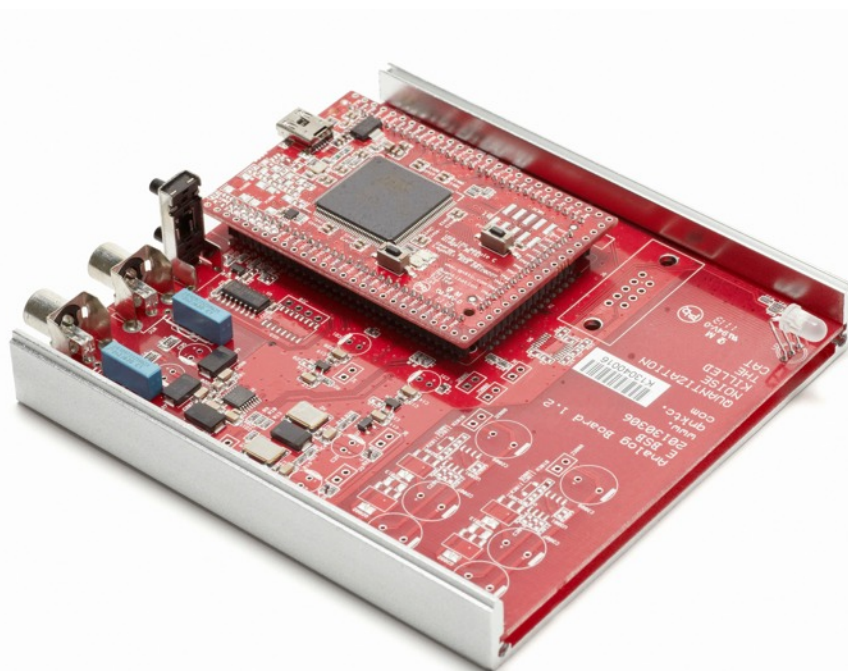
Playing Chris Jones' 'No Love For Me' simply spelled out I' M H E R E and ready to boogie! The Q DAC pushed the track into the room with fantastic top end and mid range transparency coupled with a large warm undertone to the mid range and a bouncy bass that straight away conveys a grown up sound. Guitar strings were plucked with beautiful vibrancy and all the small tweaks and strums were absolutely clear in a large soundstage that although not as layered and developed as higher end DACs, certainly was far better than I even could begin to anticipate in any way from this puny \$170 single input DAC.

'Would not Have It Any Other Way' showed great tone and timbre qualities to instruments, I could just about go as far as saying the DAC was rendering them naturally.

Chris' vocals had all the body and grunt I'm familiar

**The Q DAC pushed the track into the room with fantastic top end and mid range transparency coupled with a large warm undertone to the mid range and a bouncy bass that straight away conveys a grown up sound.**

with and projected well from a very busy soundstage, reminiscent of a valve type presentation. I literally listened to the entire album of "Moonstruck" before finding something else to consider for the review dialogue! Fleetwood Mac's 'Little Lies' conveyed all the tracks immediate dynamic flares and out of phase ambient



backing vocals which really give a substantial 3D image. All the dynamic vocal variations in the track stand out as they should with absolute ease with that bouncy beat flowing in parallel to the music. Imaging is solid and tracks across the soundstage from right to left properly.

I actually had to revert to the manufacturers website to see if I had got the price correct \$170 I said to myself, nah....it's bloody true I tell you! There it was in black and white.

Christina Aguilera and Alicia Keys performing 'Impossible' kicks straight into a large heavy drum beat with immediacy and Christina's vocal just projects into the room, controlled beautifully by the Q DAC. Her tones were

flowing cleanly from a strong centre focus with an array of ambient transients really showing off the transparency and ability to convey what I would describe as a solid, musically convincing performance. My PS Audio Reference DAC only belted out her extended upper mid range a little bit more controlled.

# QNKTC AB-1.2 DAC

Being super critical the Q DAC will lack the ultimate in smaller delicacies but I haven't heard a DAC even triple its price that comes close.

I remember reviewing the Miniwatt USB Headamp



and Dac a while ago at \$500 and it's not even in the same league as the Q DAC I'm afraid to say.

Deep Forests' album and track of the same name displayed great stereo separation and really conveyed all the subtle dynamics across the soundstage and out past the speakers. There's no overshadowing in areas of music or what we can refer to as smear, of course again being ultra critical and comparing to the likes of the Totaldac there would be comparisons to be made, but the little Q DAC does more than it should to impress me greatly.

Jack Savoretti 'Dreamers' produced a much more upfront position in the room than I was used to, but it was still enjoyable. I took out the Chord cables and popped in my Audioquest Sky interconnects, silly money with a DAC of this price but I wanted smooth things out a little and at the same time see what effect the cables would have with added data retrieval.

Essentially now my main system in place and just the Q DAC and Wireworld USB.

What a result, the forwardness was still apparent on the track, more so than normal but the increase in inner detail, delicacy and ease of staging was a strong step up.

Lise Delangea 'All The Answers' appreciated the added delicacy I would guess with the acoustic guitar and oboe harmonies. Lise's vocal is another favourite of mine, very strong and country in nature and was very enjoyable and not too unlike the way I've heard on solid state DACs previously.

Now that it have a grip on the character of the DAC and it's big robust, detailed and gorgeous midrange with a slightly more forward nature I began to listen to various genres, such as Reggae, R&B (old and new), Electronica and a little bit of Rock and Classical ...I just want to convey a few findings.

R&B and Reggae music sounds terrifically

rhythmic and bass heavy as it should in my eyes, the more modern stuff with its computer generated studio attributes sounds great with the amount of detail the DAC can put across, older stuff had particularly good instrument tone.

Electronica and Dance is upfront bold, hugely three dimensional and room filling with strong beats and slam, with female artists soaring through the soundstage.

Rock sounded edgy, forward and with lots of grunt to heavy electric guitar solos. I don't really listen to a lot of this type of music, maybe some 80's rock but I'm no hardcore rocker for sure but what I did hear was pretty good, maybe a little bit bass heavy on some of

**Rock sounded edgy, forward and with lots of grunt to heavy electric guitar solos.**

the harder stuff for me.

Classical was surprisingly good, I should have anticipated this really as there is that fullness in the lower mids and upper bass which I find suits piano well and also gives great body to wood and stringed instruments. The Q DAC is also very dynamically

# QNKTC AB-1.2 DAC

strong and large orchestral passages were very intuitive and explored the performance in a more captivating and engaging way than any other DAC I have heard anywhere near its price range. I'm sure most classical fans would stick to vinyl for critical listening, however if you listen to Classical through the PC or laptop this DAC would make a great partner for you

## Conclusions

How would I describe the Q DAC's sound character if I had to nail it?

Vibrant, detailed, transparent, fairly largely dynamic, a little upfront and forward, the mids are completely full bodied and not strangled in any way, coupled with fantastic ambience all under-toned with a big robust solid bass that just makes it sound so grown up.

If I had any gripes with the DAC it would be its name, to be honest it annoys me to the point that I want to throttle the guy who made it! It is such a beautiful sounding, bonny little thing that even with

the explanation of what all those letters stand for it just doesn't float my boat, every time I look at the front panel I can hear the clock ticking and me under pressure to see what word I can make out of the countdown conundrum presented before me.

However, when it sounds as good as it does at the price it is I wouldn't mind whatever he called it, I love it and take my hat off to a man who obviously has his ears firmly in the correct place!

With the DAC's circuit being open source, if voiced as well as the Q N K T C incarnation, would prove for any mid priced HiFi manufacturer an add on internal module for an integrated amplifier that would give a performance well above its implemented costs, the Q DAC for me is an absolute winner and I would hands down recommend it for anybody wishing to get more from their computer/laptop into a current system which doesn't require a full blown DAC full of features and inputs. This is my budget product of the year so far and gets a well deserved recommendation.

**Danny Worth**



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**Linette Smith**  
**HiFi Pig**







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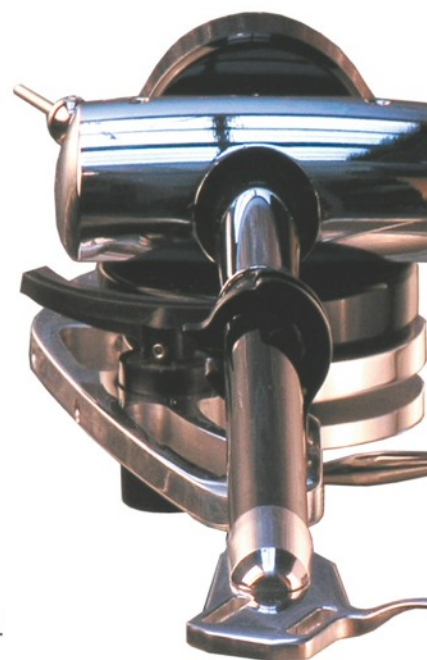


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# QED uPlay Stream Digital Streamer

**The uPlay Stream is a no frills, £150 streaming device with onboard DAC that you can use to stream music around your home. Computer phobic Stuart Smith takes a listen.**

When the uPlay Stream arrived for review a week or so ago I have to say I was a bit apprehensive to say the least as me and computers/streaming and all that kind of stuff just don't seem to get on with each other. Indeed, I had warned family members that there would no doubt be shouting.

The little uPlay Stream from QED comes with a wall wart, a short ethernet cable and a minijack to stereo RCA cable. It's really small and unobtrusive and has no buttons on it other than a tiny little sync button on the back. Around the back you get an ethernet socket, the input for the wall wart and that's about it. On top you get 3 little glowing icons to let you know it's turned on, connected to the wifi and functioning properly.

It's compatible with all the main file formats including MP3, FLAC, WAV and what not and has an onboard Wolfson DAC which is 24-bit/96kHz compatible. The uPlay is DLNA/UPnP compatible and can be controlled from your iPad or Android doodad. You can have up to eight of these beasties dotted around your house and it will play tunes from your tablet or smartphone, your PC or NAS drive or even from Drop Box and Sky Drive.

Now here's where there's going to be the shouting bit as it's time to get the uPlayer hooked up to the

WiFi and get it playing some tunes. Well there wasn't ANY shouting at all and set up is very simple



indeed. Download the free app' to youngest son's iPod Touch (I did need help with this bit), plug the device briefly into the router, press a few virtual buttons on the iPod, unplug from the server and plug into a free input on the pre amp and we're off - it finds the server automatically and tells you when it's connected properly. All that I had to do now was drag a few tunes into Media Player and that's it. Really very simple indeed and nothing for even a luddite like me to have any fears over.



# QED uPlay Stream

Playing tunes is as easy as scrolling through your titles on the iPod and pressing play. The app worked flawlessly for me - it's intuitive and simple to navigate and find your tunes.

The onboard DAC is absolutely fine for most listening - it's actually very good indeed - but I would have loved to have been able to bypass this and plug the unit into the VAD DAC in the main system. However, for the modest asking price of £149.90 including VAT moaning about this would be churlish in the extreme!

There's actually not a great deal to say about the unit as there's not a great deal I didn't really love about it. It's great for when you've got visitors round as you can make up a playlist and play that, it's fab for playing tunes whilst doing other stuff and it's

perfectly acceptable and high resolution enough to satisfy most folks.

## Conclusion

This is a wonderful bit of kit that allows you to play all your digital files easily and without fuss and I'm certain it will be a huge seller for QED. If you are a serious audiophile looking to add the ease of use that digital files allow to your system, but don't intend them to be your main source, this is for you! If you are a music lover who wants to have easily controllable and inexpensive access to your digital media around the house then again this is for you. No, it doesn't have the benefit of a digital out which would have made it just perfect, but for the price the uPlay Stream from QED really is a no brainer!

**Stuart Smith**





# Competition

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# Akiko Audio Tuning Sticks

Dutch manufacturer Akiko Audio make some pretty bold statements for their passive tuning sticks so we thought we'd give them to *Danny Worth* to see what they are all about.

Akiko Audio is a Dutch company dedicated to allowing audio enthusiasts to obtain the very best from their already well constructed systems by offering a range of products/tweaks which could give you a couple percent more positive attributes from the sound.

Such tweaks, I feel, are not and should not be claimed to be game changing in their effects, however when combined with a well put together system can prove to have a beneficial effect on the systems performance as a whole.

The Tuning Sticks themselves are very unobtrusive devices, slim barrels with a variation of connectors which are plugged into a spare socket on a component and claim to aid in its grounding potential and clean up background noise and thus enhance detail. The AC versions have your country's designated power plug fitted and can be plugged into a spare wall socket or spare socket on a mains extension block.

Sent to me were a few variations, an RCA male version (€129), XLR male version (€129), a UK 3 pin AC version (€119) and a pair of Velcro on Tuning

Sticks (€99 each), which are suggested for use actually on cables themselves.

## Implementation

*Treble extension was better controlled as a whole allowing for more micro details and dynamics to come through delicately and cleaner, more easily heard and appreciable.*

I began by trying the RCA in the front end, namely my Squeezebox Touch (SBT) once the amp had been on for an hour (I always leave my sources switched on). Yes, I could hear a benefit there appeared to be a little quieter background and very slight clean up of grain around the sound. The top end had a little bit more of a cleaner and sparklier sound.

Instead of adding another straight away I wondered what effect the same stick would have on the amp, so I removed it from the SBT and placed it into one of the spare input sockets on the amplifier (Akiko state that any input or output socket can be used as they are all connected to the common ground). The effects of this were very different to the SBT, I could here a stronger midrange which held a more defined focus





# Akiko Audio Tuning Sticks

in the soundstage, accompanied by a little more slap on the upper bass, interesting....

Unfortunately I only had one RCA Tuning Stick but the next best thing was a male XLR version which I could use with the DAC. I'd have liked to have had two RCA versions to try in combination.

So, I popped in the XLR version to the rear of the Totaldac, on the AES/EBU connection which I am not using. The effect was a stronger interpretation of what I experienced previously with the SBTs and with the RCA back in the amp (after a quick removal to have a listen) the combination of effect was very pleasant indeed lending its hand to an even deader background, gaps between tracks were virtually silent, with only the smallest amounts of electrical noise heard with one ear close to the speaker.

I can imagine many people already beginning to smirk at this review and I don't think that is fair. If a person has tried a product that falls into the category we are addressing here and it didn't work for you then fair enough, but please don't make assumptions and make claims against something which you haven't personally tried and tested. There are many cases of this kind of behaviour on internet chat where the person saying a product has no effect has not even tried or heard the product. I have a very open mind about anything which is sent in for review, I don't make any assumptions, nor do I read reviews prior to determining my own thoughts and writing them down and I believe this ethos for conducting reviews without any outside influence is essential.

Up until this review I had never heard of Akiko Audio but from the previous few paragraphs I hope you can understand that I am personally appreciating their benefits.

Right, next up, I think I will have a go with the velcro versions which have the same barrel design but are simply equipped with two velcro cable ties which pull the barrel nice and snug to the cable they are used on. I placed them onto my Audioquest K2 speaker cables but I was dubious them having any effect as the cables have the external 72v DBS battery system attached, or even if the sticks could pose a potential problem interacting with the DBS.

Akiko assured me when I contacted them that they have tested Audioquest cables with DBS before with their sticks and there were no issues. Playing music proved to me there were no issues and also suggested that the more of these Tuning Sticks you have in the system the more benefits they offer - cleaning up grain but not adding a brightening effect to the sound and also lowering the noise floor even further.

Annie Lennox is always tough to listen to at high volumes, the Akikos, whilst cleaning up the presentation, gave her higher pitched vocals a better sense of control and somewhat easier to listen too without cringing.

Bass notes were a little bit tauter and the a Tuning Sticks didn't go so far as make the bass so tight it became dry.

Treble extension was better controlled as a whole allowing for more micro details and dynamics to come through delicately and cleaner, more easily heard and appreciable.

Adding the final power plug version of the Akiko Tuning Sticks to the spare wall socket made the small amount of noise through the speakers all but invisible, remember I am using an all valve system so for it to be completely eradicated would be wishful thinking! Music sounded organic, more ambient and harmonic, as if someone had rubbed out the child's pencil from colouring outside of the lines, the picture still retained the same colours but all the edges were clean and the picture had an overall cleaner description and was easy to see... or in this case hear.

Now as a little last test to see if it was only higher-end systems that could show the effects of a Tuning Stick I popped an adapter onto the RCA version of the sticks which converted it to a 3.5mm jack and took it into the kitchen and plugged it into my Internet/DAB radio.



# Akiko Audio Tuning Sticks

I listened to a couple 128kbps stations and felt that the sound was definitely cleaner sounding and streaming music from the NAS to the radio seemed to behave in the same manner, maybe its due to the radio only having a two core power cable that the effect was more apparent or maybe the Tuning Sticks do what they do regardless, adding their obvious ability to clean up background hash and noise regardless of situation circumstance?

Either way their effect is noticeable and sustainable.

## Conclusion

The Akikos are a truly remarkable and somewhat magical product, there's no snake oil here I don't believe, just an influential process of increasing great grounding without needing to bury twelve foot rods in the back garden and trailing armoured earth cable into the listening spot. The effect is that the system has a cleaner, clearer response and allows for the music to really sing. I'd liken this effect to the way in which the listener has chosen and tuned a system to his liking yet to a better more efficient degree. A possible comparison could be the benefits of a linear

regulated power supply over a stock switch mode wall wart but on a lesser level. I'm not saying that the Akikos will dramatically transform your system, but as an additional tweak to an already well sorted system I would conclude that their benefits are worthwhile and noticeably positive.

To form a preconceived opinion of this product without first trying it in your system could be seen as arrogance and to allow you to make up your own mind Akiko do offer a money back guarantee.

Ordinarily there would be no hesitation in giving a recommended award for a product which I personally felt improved overall system performance. However with the Akiko Tuning Sticks, like some other products on the market of this type they can cause controversy amongst the hifi community, so based on this I'm giving them the recommended award anyway!

Try them or don't try them, love them or hate them, I have formed my own opinions from my own experience with them and what I heard them do.

**Danny Worth**



# Akiko Audio 音



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# Teufel Audio Aureol Real Headphones

**Teufel Audio is a German manufacturer that sells direct to the consumer in a bid to keep prices as keen as possible. Their Aureol Real headphones are just £80 but will they deliver on sound quality. *Stuart Smith***

Teufel are an interesting company who began trading in Berlin, Germany way back in 1979 selling loudspeaker components and construction kits. In 1990 they launched the M-Series loudspeaker, selling it directly to the consumer 66% cheaper than if they'd have included a retailer in the supply chain. This "sell direct and pass on the savings" philosophy came of age in 1997 when Teufel launched their online shop along with offering customers an impressive 8 weeks home test and up to twelve years warranty on products. Today the company has an entire international division and a wide range of audio products to choose from.

I have to admit to not having heard Teufel products before, so when we were approached to have a listen to their €99.99 (£79.99) including delivery Aureol Real headphones for a few weeks I was a little sceptical to be honest.

The Aureol Reals are a lightweight design weighing in at just 180g and this is in the main down to their plastic construction - they are however well built and feel sturdy enough. The lightness of these headphones makes them extremely comfortable for wearing for long periods and the soft fabric covered ear pads are also very cosy on the ears. The headband has nice padding on the underside, is flexible and the

***At the price I'd say they are pretty damned good value for money***

fit can be adjusted with simply sliding the cans on their metal rods. Being quite large the cans do cover



the whole ear which I like!! They are available in white or black and I got sent the black ones.

The Aureols come with a couple of cables; a 1.3m cable with a minijack plug and a 3m cable with the quarter inch jack. This latter cable is a really useful length for listening at home whilst the former is great

for use with a portable media player.

Cables are easily interchangeable and slot into the left hand can via a minijack. The cables are quite thin and manageable and covered in a woven fabric that looks great and seems robust enough. There's also a nice little carrying pouch included but the

headphones are quite large and do not fold flat so portability is not as great as with some others.

Drivers in the Aureols are 44mm with an impedance

# Teufel Aureol Real Headphones

of 50 Ohms and a quoted frequency response of 20 – 22000Hz ... the phones are open in design.

## Some Music

In the house I used the Schiit Audio Magni headphone amp and Modi Dac with Foobar 2000 playing FLACs. I also used them with the HiSound Studio media player whilst on the move.

## At Home

Listening to Deadmau5 the bass is good, tight, deep and “pumpy” with a nice snappiness to the top end.

On to Neil Young’s “A Man Needs Maid” soundstage is agreeably done with orchestral instruments being well placed in the virtual space. Vocals are slightly recessed in comparison to the upper and lower registers, but not so much as to complain about it and overall there’s a good tonal balance to these headphones, particularly at this price point – they’re certainly very easy on the ear over long periods. There is plenty of detail in the acoustic guitar on “Heart of Gold” and the raspiness of the harmonica towards the end of the track is nicely conveyed.

With Hawkwind’s “Hall of the Mountain Grill” you get a great sense of the stereo effect and there is a good “out of the head” feel in evidence which I like a lot. Bass lines are easy to follow and there’s that nice and lively feel to the hats. Again I’d say that mids are not as to the fore as are the extremes of frequencies.

Massive Attack vs Mad Professor’s remix of “No Protection” sounds great and these phones could have been made for this heavy dub style which suggests to me that they’ll be very popular with those that listen

to lots of this kind of music but don’t like the sound of, or don’t want to spend on, Beats By Dre.

## Out and About

Changing the cable and plugging the Aureols into the HiSound Studio playing some more Massive Attack I’m again immediately struck at how well these relatively inexpensive headphones produce bass heavy music - it’s not flabby but well controlled and tight. You’re pretty well isolated from outside noise, but then I listen quite loud any way and these cans certainly seem to go loud without getting the media player flustered in anyway.

The beginning of Bowie’s “Five Years” from the Ziggy Stardust album has loads of detail to the drums and guitar and vocals are clear and well defined.

## Conclusions

Bass and treble are to the fore in the Aureols and many will like this presentation, particularly those who enjoy modern electronic music, but that’s not to say that they don’t produce perfectly acceptable results over a wide range of musical styles...they do!

At the price I’d say they are pretty damned good value for money and if this is what you have to spend on a pair of cans then you should certainly consider them both for home and out and about. You get an 8 week “trial” period, a great guarantee and overall a well made, great sounding headphone. Some will be put off by the plastic construction, the more youthful colour scheme and the fact that they don’t fold flat for transport, but if you can live with this then they’re an excellent buy.

**Stuart Smith**

## A TEEN’S PERSPECTIVE *Harry Smith*

**A**fter using the Teufel Aureol’s for about a week I could tell that they offered a high-quality sound and a weightless feel.

These headphones work brilliantly, the bass is punchy, even though the top end is slightly lacking, but overall the sound is amazing for the mid-range price point.

When wearing the Aureol’s it’s almost as if you are not wearing headphones. The open-ear design means

that they don’t block a lot of the sound from your surroundings and the sound leaks out of the back of the headphones, which was not a big problem for me, although it could be a problem if using these on public transport as it may annoy fellow passengers. However, if using these when on your own it would be fine.

The materials used in the making of the Aureol’s feel high quality although I don’t care for the felt ear

pads. I would much rather have leather pads but this is more of a personal preference.

Overall the Teufel Aureol’s are a great pair of headphones giving you a high-end listening experience for a mid to low range price. They are extremely comfortable and are very portable. At their price I’d certainly recommend these headphones from Teufel.



# Waterfall Audio 'Victoria Evo' Loudspeakers

These eye-wateringly beautiful loudspeakers from French manufacturer Waterfall certainly look the part with their sleek lines and glass cabinets, but are they a case of style over substance? *Jerry Jacobs* finds out.



**W**ell, I don't know about you, but I've seen the glass-chassised Waterfall Audio loudspeakers in magazine adverts, skimmed a review or two, even popped my head into Waterfall Audio dem rooms at hifi shows. But I have to confess I've never really taken them at all seriously. I mean, glass cabinets - that's just a blingy fashion statement designed to lure the gullible and musically unsophisticated, right? - where appearance is all-important and sonic performance is neglected?

They aren't intended for the likes of us, who have experienced the musical delights of genuine audiophile design, surely?

Nope - it's often wrong to judge a book by its cover, or a loudspeaker by its appearance!

It turns out that these are very capable high fidelity speakers with some innovative acoustic design features and they deserve to be taken seriously. They have quite a distinctive sonic presentation that is well worth your time to experience; the stunning appearance may well then just be the aesthetic icing on the musical cake.

Perhaps not surprisingly, both the design and the manufacturing process for Waterfall Audio's range of superbly finished glass chassised loudspeakers took quite some time to work out, and it was after 3 years of speaker design work and manufacture prototyping that Waterfall Audio started trading in 1999. They are based in Provence, in the South of France. The subject of this review, the Victoria Evo, is the middle of three in the Krysta line of floorstanding Waterfall speakers and is currently priced at £3,250. There is also the smaller £2,500 Iguasçu Evo and, at a big jump in price, the £20,000 Niagara. Waterfall Audio also manufactures the very distinctive looking Ultra Flat Line in-wall, on-wall and standmount speakers and a series of matching subwoofers.

The Victoria Evo is a 101cm tall, 25cm square, 16.3kg, 4 driver loudspeaker. The drive unit complement is sourced from French speaker driver specialist Atohm - one 20mm soft dome tweeter, two 150mm mid/bass cones and a passive bass radiator driver which faces downwards mounted on the bottom of the speaker in the die-cast aluminium plinth. Interestingly, additional weights can be screwed on to the passive radiator to modify its technical characteristics - this has quite a major

impact on the sonic presentation, so more on this later!

The two mid bass drivers cover overlapping but not identical frequency bands. The upper cone covers midrange and upper bass, the lower driver extends further down into the mid bass.

Removable circular grilles are provided for the two midrange/bass drivers on each speaker, but the tweeter remains exposed.

**Glass cabinets - many will think that they look wonderful, or at least interestingly distinctive, but what are the technical advantages of using glass as a loudspeaker cabinet material?**

## Glass loudspeaker cabinets - pros & cons ....

So, OK. Glass cabinets - many will think that they look wonderful, or at least interestingly distinctive, but what are the technical advantages of using glass as a loudspeaker cabinet material?

I can certainly think of some disadvantages!

- all is visible and the internals must look as attractive and uncluttered as possible. So no resonance damping wadding is allowed, no unsightly internal bracing, no rat's nest of crossover and connecting wiring. Even the rear of the drive units has to look pretty!

- glass is stiffer and denser than the more usual MDF used for speaker cabinets - so while this will likely reduce the overall level of resonances, this tends to punt the resonances that are created to higher frequencies. Glass has an often well-deserved reputation for being a bright and brittle sounding material in an audio context.

So, what are the advantages then?

Slightly tinted, toughened glass is used, the same material as in car windscreens. 6mm thick in the Waterfall Audio application, this has a very low resonant signature. This is the principal reason given for the use of glass as an enclosure material. Here's an excerpt from some of Waterfall Audio's presentation material....

*... it is the movement of the driver and not the vibration of the case that gives the sound. In fact when the case starts vibrating, the quality of the sound reproduction is altered, producing colouration. This is why many speaker manufacturers use structure reinforcing devices to*

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*increase rigidity. The ideal solution so far has been to use inside panels filled with sand, for its density and inertia. Glass is sand!*

***The whipcrack synth transients in Eddy Louiss' Blues for Klook are conveyed with very good snap and speed.***

So the highly interesting choice of glass is not just for its aesthetic qualities but also for its extreme density, so no vibration of the case will come to colour the sound reproduction. Well, I can think of many speaker designs which take a very different philosophy -- there's the whole British "BBC monitor" approach, for example, where thin, resonant plywood is deliberately used as a cabinet material. And there's even a speaker manufacturer who adds a resonating external board or two to their speakers to deliberately induce audible colourations. --- well, I'm with Waterfall Audio on this one.

Personally, I think that reducing resonances is a good thing!

What, I suspect, turns the glass cabinet from a pretty sonic failure into a beautiful audio success story is Waterfall Audio's patented Acoustic Damping Tube (ADT). This is the technology that allows proper functioning of a loudspeaker driver in a non-damped structure such as a glass

enclosure.

This ADT is located at the rear of the mid-bass drivers, forming a driver sub-chassis with an open mesh at the rear, and limits the return of the back wave from the cone into the glass speaker cabinet. The ADT has 3 main functions:

- Damping control of the midrange frequencies with the integrated damping chamber.
- "Hydraulic damping" in the lower frequencies which assists in controlling the excessive movements of the cone, so reducing distortion in that area, and also increasing the power handling.
- Mechanical decoupling of the mid/bass drivers from the glass structure.

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The floor standing Victoria Evo and Iguasçu Evo speakers also use Waterfall Audio's "acculinear" filter technology in the tweeter crossover, intended to deliver a 'very smooth and soft treble', or so says the sales blurb -- we'll see!

Cleverly, the internal wiring linking the drivers with the external, rear mounted binding posts is implemented using copper traces on the inside of the glass cabinet, so turning a potential eye-sore into an attractive visual feature. A clever idea, well implemented.

Of course, the ultimate and only really relevant test of all this audio technology is the sound produced - how close do the speakers get to sounding like real music? When it came to the sound of these speakers, I was expecting "different" but would it also be "better", at least in some ways, and how would the inevitable originality of the design show itself sonically? I was genuinely interested in finding out ....

## But first ... a side note on the Aesthetics ...

Made of high quality subtly tinted glass with a semi-mirrored finish and beautifully bevelled edges, these speaker cabinets remind me of the Italian glass furniture that my art dealer uncle collected. If they haven't won design awards, they should have done! They really are a joy to behold.

On entering my music den and seeing these Waterfall Audio speakers for the first time, my wife exclaimed "Oh, they're really beautiful!".

So there you have it - an audiophile loudspeaker with a very high WAF (wife acceptance factor). A dream come true for many of us!

## The Sound of a Waterfall ....

These speakers place you about midway back in the concert hall - they lack the immediacy and crispness of some, but they also don't wallow around and sound mushy. Yup, about half way back.

That's not to say they are slow and boring. The whipcrack synth transients in Eddy Louiss' Blues for Klook are conveyed with very good snap and speed. Bass doesn't quite plumb the stygian depths of this demonstration-class recording, though, but the sound isn't lightweight by any means.

Tonality is good, and clearly of low colouration - very colourful, but not coloured. Woodwinds,

*These speakers place you about midway back in the concert hall*

always a harsh test of tonal accuracy due to their very distinctive harmonic characteristics, are beautifully rendered. In the finale of Dmitri Shostakovich's 10th Symphony, the flutes cut through the mighty orchestral swathes with realistic ease and bite not to mention tonal colour. Very fine



indeed.

Staying with this superb Shostakovich recording, the orchestral heft of the astonishingly energised 2nd movement of the symphony is conveyed with excellent scale and authority. The Victoria Evos really respond well to large scale classical music, the foundation of which generally resides in the mid and upper bass, so suiting the frequency response of the Victoria Evos.

Brass, as well, sears through the orchestral tumult



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with appropriate abandon. There's a slight warmth and smoothness to the treble ensuring that the music doesn't screech at high levels.

Following on from the symphony on the CD is Shostakovich's Ballet Suite No. 4.

.... Ballet Suite? - pah, music for girlyies, right? Ha! - no way! The first movement contains one of the most powerful and

extended (and tuneful) orchestral crescendos and climaxes I have heard in the classical repertoire - and it is magnificently conveyed on this Chandos recording. Some systems don't even come close to capturing the sheer scale, energy and complexity of this track; there is so much going on here that there is a tendency to lose the plot and smooth things over, or for speakers to screech their heads off. The Victoria Evos do better than most speakers; there is a small loss in intelligibility when things really get going, but the musical complexity is not smoothed over to a significant extent and, mercifully, listener fatigue from an out of control tweeter is not an issue.

Hmm, yeah. Really quite excellent.

Moving on to The Buggles wonderful 1980 pop album Age of Plastic, an early Trevor Horn classic; mid-bass punch on the drums is excellent and the overall driving excitement of the music is enthusiastically reproduced. Once again you are a little distanced from the startling immediacy of this recording; some will prefer it this way, others will crave an even more explosive sound.

Power handling and the overall dynamic envelope is excellent - at 89dB/W sensitivity and 8 ohm impedance (min 4 ohms) the Victoria Evos are quite easy to drive, but they can also soak up the power when it's available. Very high, undistorted volume levels were easily achievable with a suitable

powerhouse of an amp, such as my 250wpc Krell. But they were also well suited to a 27wpc class D t-amp.

Bass is good - solid and quite powerful - down to the mid-bass, but the low bass isn't really there. Lovers of large pipe organs or technodance music who like their intestines to resonate with the music probably won't be satisfied, but for most music the Victoria Evos do just fine. Varying the distance from nearby walls a little can fine tune the bass characteristics nicely.

I've been wheeling out the big musical guns so far, so let's relax a little now and enjoy Caroline Lavelle's very beautiful song Farther than the Sun on her Brilliant Midnight album. Her

breathy, throaty vocals sound wonderful here - nicely focussed and present, and brimming with sad, wistful emotion. The subtly placed bass synth is well caught and musically right. Yum.

Soundstaging, as exemplified by the superbly focused but wonderfully atmospheric track Breaking the Silence, from Loreena McKennitt's Parallel Dreams album is well caught, with the vocal front/centre and the backing instruments accurately



placed around the singer in depth as well as side to side. So often, this track emerges as an amorphous unfocussed blob of sound, but not with these Waterfall speakers.

The glass cabinetry does seem to reap rich rewards when it comes to low colouration. Vocals in particular are very naturally presented. Vocal sibilance is not at all exaggerated, if anything it is

***Do they sound good and look absolutely fantastic? Yep, sure they do!***

slightly subdued.

Out came my scrumptious Decca album of Italian baroque songs, 'If You Love Me', by mezzo soprano Cecilia Bartoli. I had intended to listen to just a couple of tracks from this beautiful album and then move on. But no, I sat back and let the album play all the way through - I thoroughly enjoyed the natural musicality of the presentation.

**Setup** -- I like a presentation that errs on the up-front side of neutrality, so for me the circular grille on the middle (midrange / upper bass) driver comes off for a bit more immediacy and detail. The second grille, over the lower bass driver, can also be removed, but the gains in immediacy are much less, and I also preferred the look of the speaker with just the one grille removed.

That passive bass radiator ...

... Small brass weights can be easily screwed onto the threaded centre of the passive bass radiator; weights of 27g and 7g are provided. Just lean the speaker onto its side, look at the base and the threaded attachment at the centre of the driver is obvious. These weights extend the lower frequency limit of the speaker from 50Hz, to 45Hz and then to 40Hz, respectively.

I didn't take to the 27g weight at all - it seemed to slow the whole presentation down. Yes, the speakers did gain a little in bass heft, but the baby/bathwater syndrome comes to mind here - too much was lost for just a small gain. Mind you, some folk like to luxuriate in a relaxed and enveloping sound, so maybe the 27g weights will work for them!

For me, the 7g weight seemed to be a good compromise between bass depth and overall detail resolution. With no weights attached to the passive bass radiators the presentation was a touch faster but a little too lightweight and 'boppy' for me.

**In SUMMARY**, apart from their appearance where I am sure that many people will agree they are genuinely stunning, these aren't "Wow Speakers". I

suspect you are unlikely, on first hearing, to think "Wow, that's fantastic clarity / bass / imaging / dynamics /

whatever".

What the Waterfall Audio Victoria Evo speakers do is provide genuinely good sound quality across a broad swathe of music types. Vocals, in particular, benefit from the low colouration of the glass cabinet. These speakers don't provide the very bottom octave of bass, so true bass-heads will need to look elsewhere.

They present a mid-hall perspective; not up close and personal, but not distant and vague either. It's a slightly relaxed view that can be enjoyed for long periods with no real danger of listener fatigue.

Are you paying a little extra for the fancy glass cabinet? Yep, sure you are.

Can you get sound as good for a bit less money?

Yep, sure you can.

Do they sound good and look absolutely fantastic?

Yep, sure they do!

For the 'value conscious' music lover who wants to get the very best sound per £, I guess I'd suggest that these speakers may not be for you.

But if the price range suits you, and you desire very good sound quality in an amazingly, perhaps uniquely, attractive package, then these fine loudspeakers should definitely be on your audition list.

**Review system:** MBL 116F speakers; Atoll AM-80, Topping TP-60 and Krell KAV-250a power amps; Restek Consens pre-amp; Vincent CD S7 CD Player. RFC Pluto & Oscar's Audio Dark Knight i/c and Tellurium Q Black speaker cables.

**Jerry Jacobs**

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# Album Reviews

## Bird Radio - The Boy and the Audience

by Stuart Smith

**B**ird Radio (Mikey Kirkpatrick) is originally from Hereford, is a graduate in music from Goldsmiths College in London and has his own production company (Avacado Music) which has produced over 30 recording projects.

The world needs more artists like Bird Radio who are not afraid to stand apart from the mainstream musical dross with which we are bombarded on a daily basis. Bird Radio eschews the X Factor-radio-friendly format and very much walks his own path. Indeed, he is a one man band armed with a suitcase that takes the role of kick drum, a flute which he loops in on itself along with other instruments and an interestingly quirky vocal delivery that lies somewhere between medieval troubadour and a wicked Daavid Allen. He sets his stall out from the very start of the album as being that

a drum which could come from a few centuries ago... and so could a lot more of the album - there is a nod to the past with "Who Killed Cock Robin".

At first listen lyrically you'd be forgiven that this was an album of folk music from the middle ages, but the content is very much of today and idiosyncratic in its nature- "Imagine what goes through the mind of an owl and write it in a letter to the one you love".

"Devil at the Door" is loops of a simple distorted guitar lick and a reverberating beating drum and it casts a dark and eerie musical shadow on proceedings. It's menacing and a bit White Stripes...ish...in a sort of it's not like White Stripes at all style.

"Black Car" is the most "upbeat" of the tracks on the album and swings from simple looped claps and flute to full on distorted guitar and bellowed vocal delivery



pretty much unique in both content and delivery - it's not electronica, it's not folk and it's not indie - loopfolk perhaps?

"Aeolian Flute" loops and twists in ever increasing circles around a simple and repetitive theme and defies categorisation. And this essentially sums up Bird Radio and "The Boy in the Audience" - you just can't put your finger on its style, but like Monty Python it could only come from the mind of an Englishman. The final track "Time to Go" (featuring Othon) begins with a simple and beautiful piano theme with voice and builds and builds and is a great musical moment on the record.

If you like your music to be thought provoking and unconventional then you'll love this album.

Bird Radio is like a demented Pied Piper cum Cat Weasel character for the Ableton Live generation - fail to listen at your peril!

**"The Boy in the Audience" - you just can't put your finger on its style, but like Monty Python it could only come from the mind of an Englishman.**

little different from the norm - and that's a good thing!

Where the hell do you pigeonhole "The Boy and The Audience" (out on Strike Force Records) then? - I for sure have absolutely no idea what-so-ever! The opening title track is simple affair of voice, tambourine and a single beat of

- heady stuff and more than a little disturbing!

There are snatches of Jethro Tull here and there - there's bound to be as he was inspired to take up the flute by the music of Jethro Tull and their leader Ian Anderson - but all in all Bird Radio can be said to be



## Pearl Jam - Lightning Bolt by Stewart Hall

**O**f the slew of '90s/alt/grunge acts releasing albums of late, Pearl

convey an energy and emotion that can't be faked. The band members (all original I might add) seem to be having as much fun as they did when they released 'Ten' all those years ago... or when they gleefully boycotted Ticketmaster...

Besides Vedder's tuneful vocal warble, nothing much on Lightning Bolt bears resemblance to their early '90s "grunge" works. They've continually grown and evolved over the interceding years and have become quite simply an accomplished rock band which now sits somewhere between Neil Young, U2 and Bruce Springsteen. High praise indeed, and well deserved. However, that's not to say this album is an unequalled masterpiece...

It's a good effort, but not earth shattering. There are some breathtaking highlights for sure, but there are also some pretty humdrum moments. The first single "Mind your Manners" while initially sounding tough and uncompromising, on further inspection reveals itself to be a pretty watered down attempt at hardcore punk... like a limp Bad Religion. Yeah... don't do that please. I'm not sure the terms "hardcore punk" and "Pearl Jam" ought to be used in the same sentence.

There's a bit of filler material, which isn't terrible but is far from inspiring. "Sirens", "Infallible" and "Future Days" are all reasonable, and along with "Mind Your Manners" serve to merely flesh out the disc... which is still relatively concise at 47 minutes so at least they haven't attempted to strangle every last available second out of it.

However, there are very few (if any) albums that are utter genius from start to finish, and Lightning Bolt boasts some super-impressive highlights. Following the irritating "Mind Your Manners" is the far more interesting (although it bears some weird similarities to Soundgarden's "Dust") and angular new-wave-esque sound of "My Father's Son". Yes, more like this please.

"Swallowed Whole" is one of the tracks which showcases Vedder's vocal prowess. It features a strummed acoustic guitar line, an eminently singable (if you're a great singer.... I can picture drunken karaoke participants murdering it!) chorus and a tasteful guitar solo from Mike McRae. Actually the latter is an element that's effectively utilized but not overdone on the record... it takes a few listens to appreciate it, but it's there.

"Sleeping by Myself" is a quieter track but it's also one of the album's strongest. Great vocal harmonies, inventive chord progressions (which give it a sombre alt-country feel), and another evocative guitar solo make a lasting impression upon the listener and it really showcases the band's softer side.

But the winner is...(drum roll please).... the title track! Yeah, easily the album's best song, it contains everything great about Pearl Jam. Infectious riffing, driving beats, melodic inflections and a magnificent vocal performance from Vedder that could shatter glass. This is an epic track that soars high above the rest of the album and is truly one of the band's finest moments to date. Brilliant.

Overall this album is strong. It didn't necessarily have to be, the band's name alone is a huge money-spinner; they could crap on a cd and people would still buy it (Lulu anyone?), but after all these years they're still driven and creative enough to put out a record which confirms their status as a truly great band. It's not a masterpiece but it's good enough and long time fans & newcomers alike should be more than happy with it.

7/10

Jam is pretty much the only one which boasts a steady line-up and a consistent timeline of releases dating back to their debut.

They're late to the party if you choose to compare the most recent release dates, but they've been omnipresent for the last two decades. This could work either for, or against them; on the one hand the members' experience and familiarity with each other may contribute to the album's cohesion, but on the other hand they may be missing some youthful exuberance and simply going through the motions... 20 years is a long time and Lightning Bolt is their 10th album...

The good news is that the phrase "going through the motions" won't be mentioned too often in relation to this record, if ever. The band sounds invigorated and driven, the vocals of Eddie Vedder in particular

# Arcade Fire - Reflektor

By Stewart Hall



Arcade Fire. The Canadian indie heroes have been pretty quiet of late... the only murmurs that have permeated our newsfeeds were allegations of pop diva Delta Goodrem ripping off their classic track "Rebellion (Lies)"... Until they announced they were releasing a double album!

It's a brave (or very silly) move releasing a two disc set in the current musical climate. We are as a society increasingly time-poor and more inclined to consume and discard musical titbits... either via streaming or downloads, the content of which is often relegated to some dusty hard drive never to be heard again (or deleted completely) unless it was totally mind blowing. There are exceptions of course, die hard music collectors and audiophiles are still out there (this reviewer's musical completism borders on the obsessive compulsive) but the only artist in recent memory to release a double album was Neil Young and... well, he's Neil Young.

Inspired in part by vocalist/guitarist Win Butler and multi-instrumentalist Régine Chassagne undertaking a trip to Haiti, the album exhibits a few telltale signs: a Caribbean beat here, a steel drum-esque

album. Hook laden bass & synth lines with layers of guitar, multitracked vocals....and a few more synths for good measure.

Being as most of the band members are multi-instrumentalists, it's difficult to know just who's playing what, but interestingly for a rock/pop album, the synth and basslines drive & shape the songs and are the heroes of the record. Not to take anything away from the other instruments, but therein is the pulse of Reflektor.

The first disc is loaded with pop treats and interesting sonic explorations. "Here Comes The Night Time" and "Joan Of Arc" both begin with surprisingly quick tempos but glide down to an easier pace in what is a really interesting application of rhythmic dynamism. The latter in particular begins as if it's gonna be a hardcore punk beatdown, but it quickly morphs into the swinging tempo that's the backbone of the song. Initially this leaves you feeling a little let down and emotionally short-changed, but the track is terrific and the infectious bassline (not to mention the great vocal harmonies) underscores just how important it is to the album.... and this song in particular.

synth there, but by and large it's danceable indie pop... and yes, amazingly given their success, we can still call them indie:

Thank you Merge records.

Kicking off with the unremarkable title cut (ignoring the pointless pre-gap hidden track), the album gives one a fearful notion that they are to be bored to death by two discs of meek Canadian quasi-disco, however, the second track "We Exist" leaps quickly to the rescue. This track demonstrates what is to be the meat-and-potatoes of the

Ok... disc one is a winner; pure, classy and imaginative pop music. Come on disc two, don't let the team down!

Beginning with the familiar (to those old enough to remember) ascending cadence of bloop bloop bleeps that marked the beginning of side B of certain cassette tapes, the main body of track one follows. "Here Comes The Night Time II" is a morbid reprise of its namesake, the smouldering ashes of part I... hang on... oh no... "part II", "reprise"... oh shit, we're sailing dangerously close to pretentious concept album territory...

Following are "Awful Sound (Oh Eurydice)" and "It's Never Over (Oh Orpheus)"... Oh Orpheus?... Oh no! Suites? The pompous spectres of Yes and ELP are upon us! Thankfully "Awful Sound" is pretty decent with a crescendo befitting its title, however the cracks are beginning to show... and become crevasses. Much of disc two is really second rate... I mean, with a double album you expect some filler, but you don't expect it all to be crammed onto the second disc like it was a bonus of studio outtakes or some shit like that. Not a single track on disc two manages to get its hooks into you like practically every song on disc one does. I don't know if this is an anomaly that applies only to me... but after the musical highs of disc one, what's offered up next is really quite irritating.

It's not "bad" music exactly; stylistically it follows suit, but it lacks the focus and drive of its predecessor. Quite a bit of it is undefined droning synth-slop, which, while not unpleasant, is comparatively uninspiring and the eject button beckons increasingly with every arpeggiated synth line. Take the final track "Supersymmetry"; 11 minutes of inoffensive, bland and unnecessary formlessness. No thanks. "Afterlife" is dance worthy but unremarkable and the aforementioned "Awful Sound" has it's moments, but gimme disc one!

Once again a band reduces the impact of its work by padding it out excessively.

'Reflektor' is a frustrating release. Fantastic in parts (the first part) and tiresome elsewhere, it would have received a much higher rating were the second disc up to the quality of the first... or omitted completely

6.5/10



## Mutation - Error 500 *by Stewart Hall*



There's been a bit of a trend recently towards metal supergroups (the heavy music community is practically salivating at the prospect of Killer Be Killed), but Mutation is one that may slip under the radar. Well I'm gonna do my best to see that it doesn't.

Describing themselves as a "collective", the band is comprised of a seemingly disparate group of musicians. Shane Embury (Napalm Death), Ginger Wildheart (The Wildhearts), Mark E. Smith (The Fall), Jon Poole (Cardiacs), Rich Jones (Amen), Chris Catalyst (Sisters of Mercy), Denzel (Young Legionnaire), random members of alt metallers Hawk Eyes and Japanese electro-terrorist Merzbow.... plus heaps more which are too numerous to mention.

With that lot cloistered together in a studio, you can bet Error 500 is not gonna be your average rock record, particularly since it's being released on Mike Patton's Ipecac label...

Aficionados of avant garde rock may have been through a bit of a lean patch the last couple of years. Mr Bungle & Naked City are long gone and Fantomas & The Secret Chiefs 3 have been pretty quiet. Japanese grind popsters Melt Banana have released an (excellent) album recently but that's about it unless you're wicked

underground and are hoarding avant-gems to yourself.

Speaking of Melt Banana, there's more than a little of their approach spread across this release. It's... umm... imagine Deerhoof jamming with Napalm Death on Beach Boys tracks and you're somewhere around the mark... except way off. This is an extremely hard album to pin down. It jumps between genres no question,

but unlike Naked City or Fantomas who are sometimes frustrating in that they'll leap out of a groove just as you were beginning to dig it, the songs on Error 500 have recurring themes and cyclical song

***With that lot cloistered together in a studio, you can bet Error 500 is not gonna be your average rock record.***

structures. While the overall sound is fairly uncompromising there's no frustrating musique concrete or phrases of plain noise for noise's sake.

There are passages of furious grindcore, with blastbeats being applied liberally where necessary for sure, but some of the rhythmic and melodic progressions exhibit damned impressive musicianship; their jerky dissonance and unconventional construction is sure to catch the ear of the most discerning prog-ster. If you're one of those music fans who likes to count, there's enough maths going on here to satisfy you. Conversely, if you simply enjoy crushing brutality, fear not. There are plenty of distorted and weighty riffs for the hardened deathster to enjoy. No doubt contributing to this heaviness is the inclusion of two bass guitar tracks: Shane Embury's filthily distorted rumbling combined with Jon Poole's cleaner bassier sound.

But perhaps the most surprising element is that there is also a pervading sense of melody and pop catchiness! This record has hooks which belie its unorthodox composition. While some of Ginger's distorted vocals are hard to interpret (I could have done with a lyric sheet to accompany the cd), there are some truly inspired vocal harmonies floating over the underlying brutality and complexity. This is where the Cardiacs influence is most evident, "White Leg" and its partial reprise "Sun of White Leg" are among the best tracks and are harmonically akin to what Yes might have sounded like if they were trying to play death metal!

Such is the apparent disparity between the contributing musicians, I had a horrible suspicion that this album would be a sort of patchwork quilt of their various influences glued together with Pro Tools trickery, however it's anything but. Perfectly executed non-linear tempo shifts and meter changes add to the overall cohesiveness and Error 500 sounds very much like the work of a band rather than a bunch of hastily assembled musicians.

The album is best consumed as a whole (and at speaker killing volumes) but the standout tracks are the stop-start ascension and chilling breakdown of the magnificently titled "Computer, This is Not What I...", the epic yet infectious spazzcore of "Innocentes In Mortes" and "Utopia Syndrome" and the virtually indescribable (yeah, I tried but it's vague at best) suite of "White Leg" and "Sun of White Leg"... the latter in particular features a soaring harmonic crescendo of rhapsodic proportions. Of course this record won't be for everyone, but for those who enjoy the bands mentioned earlier in the review (and those who feel said bands would have been better if they paid more heed to metal) then this album is not just recommended... it's essential. A heady cocktail of visionary heavy music... with a twist o' lemon! 8.5/10

## Polyphonic Spree - Holiday Dreams



Let me go on record by saying that I'm a bit of a fan of The Polyphonic Spree. Let me also say that I'm a bit of a sucker for all things festive. So I was quite excited when "Sounds of the Holidays Vol One Holiday Dream" dropped through the letterbox recently.

However, I've put off listening to it as we're not allowed to mention the C word until after 23<sup>rd</sup> November – it's a long and complicated story I won't bore you with here.

This is the first time the special edition package, resplendent with its two bonus tracks and DVD of the band live in London, has had a European release so I was pretty pleased to have received it. Basically what you're getting with Holiday Dream is a collection of the band's favourite Christmas tunes given the trademark sprinkling of Polyphonic Spree fairy dust.

The stand out track for me is the band's rendition of Lennon's 'Merry Xmas (War is Over)' but to be fair if you want to get into the whole spirit of the season there's not a bad track on the record at all.

The DVD is a nice touch but I'm not a huge fan of music videos so it got a cursory skimming over and nothing more.

This CD will certainly be getting an airing on Christmas morning in this household and if you want to get in the mood for the season all I can suggest is you sit up in front of the fire, pour yourself a large glass of whatever tippie takes your fancy, break out the mince pies and pop this album on the old music centre. Instant Festivities and highly recommended!

# Caught You Looking

**Hifi Pig Magazine** Issue #1 December 2013

**Roksan's Latest Integrated**

**Equipment Reviews**

- Akiko Audio Tuning Sticks
- Dynaudio Excite X14 Loudspeakers
- Mike New Bearing for Technics 1210
- Musical Fidelity MF100 Headphones
- QED uPlay Stream
- QWTC AB 1.3 DAC
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# Behind the Brands

**R**andy Kunin is the owner of and driving force behind Randall K Designer HiFi. The company was started a little under a year ago with one mission; to make audio cool again and get people passionate about wanting to share music and audio the very same way it was infused in us. They are currently looking for 10-15 Dealers in the US and 10-15 International Distributors that would like to offer the Randall K designs.



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

I started on the 12volt side building demo vehicles, testing products, sales director and consultant and took the plunge to work from home almost 4 years ago.

**Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?**

Two people come to mind immediately, Alon Wolf (Magico) when he was really designing and building pieces that were cutting edge, but mainly Josh Stipich from Electronluv. Literally right after the first time I saw his tube amps I was out in my shop building

**Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?**

It was the day that my father asked me to make him a set of loudspeakers as it was him who got me into home audio 25 years ago.

**What was your very first system?**

First semi real system was a Sony STR-DA1ES receiver, Sony CDP-C7ES cd player, Infinity Kappa 200 Bookshelves and all IXOS cabling.

**What component/product do you miss the most/wish you had never got rid of?**

Boulder 865 Integrated, as it was on loan from Boulder and had to give it back.

**Best system (or single component) you have ever heard (no brands you represent please...!)**

This still has to be my father's old rig, Coda preamp, California Audio Labs CD player, Threshold and Adcom amplification and Nelson Reed loudspeakers and subwoofers. This has always been my benchmark.

**Tell us about your current system(s)**

The main test rig is an Oppo BDP 105 player, Korato KVP-10 tube preamp, Belles 150A amplifier, BPT conditioner, Audience interconnects, Skogrand speaker cable and Randall K Sentinel loudspeakers

**What's your view on the valve renaissance of the past 20 years or so?**

I love it; I am a fan of both topologies (Tube or Solid State) and enjoy either. There is some magic though that I have heard on a tube rig that can't be replicated in my humble opinion.



**What are your views on the state of the industry/where is it going/what will it look like in 5 years/what will typical systems look like?/What will happen to prices?/What will happen to the high end – will it carry on regardless?**

Our industry just like any other goes in cycles, though I feel our cycles tend to be longer. I think the problem with ours is relevance and an inability to connect with the next generation. Companies these days are all fighting over the same every shrinking audiophile demographic because they don't know how to create product and market to people outside the audio circle. I think we will also continue seeing a huge separation in pricing from accessible to outrageous and a decreasing middle market. I think major players in the high end market will carry on but need to figure out how to justify pricing other than name recognition or huge price tag

**What are the industry's biggest con(s)?**

Just the all-out snobbery in all levels. From manufacturing, retail and media. And it's those people who

complain that the market is shrinking. They have yet to figure out that we all need to work together to grow our numbers. The good news is that there is a regime change going on with the next generation of people like myself taking over or creating companies that are accessible and just good people.

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

In regards to my own, I listen for coherency and enclosure coloration. When you have both of these things addressed, speakers disappear and you start obtaining a performance and not playback.

**Your sound preference - 'Smooth, listenable musicality', 'forward, driving, 'foot-tapping', involving sound' or 'detailed neutrality and transparency'?**

I am a beauty is in the imperfections person. When you are on the edge of your seat listening and noticing every imperfection instead of sitting back and getting involved then IMO you need to pack up your



# Behind the Brands

rig and get into something else. I feel that your system should impose as little coloration as possible without sacrificing emotion.

## **Your preference - Full-range floorstanders or freestanding mini monitors with a sub?**

I believe you can have the best of both worlds. People feel that you can't get a disappearing act with a floorstander than you can with a mini monitor. I have been proving that theory wrong a lot lately.

## **What is your favourite recording?**

Louis Armstrong playing St. James Infirmary on the Satchmo Plays King Oliver pressing

## **Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings.**

Buddy Guy (Anna Lee), Dianne Reeves ( Feeling of Jazz), Nils Lofgren Band (Bass & Drum Into Live)

## **What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures?**

A Japanese Throat singer called Yat-Kha doing covers

## **Having safely ushered your loved ones out of the house as it is burning down to the ground, you ignore all standard safety advice and dash back inside to grab just one recording – what is it?**

TOOL (Undertow) on vinyl.



## Involved in the Industry?

If you think Hifi Pig readers would be interested in finding out who's behind your brand then get in touch with us by clicking [here](#) or calling us on +33 297237078