

Hifi Pig Magazine

WWW.HIFIPIG.COM

February 2014
Issue #3



**Naim's New
\$200 000
Statement
puts the cat
amongst the
pigeons**



INTERVIEW Behind the Brands with
Scott Berry of Computer Audio Design
REVIEWS

Coffman Labs, The Cartridge Man, Simple
Audio, Oriton Audio, Astintrew, Atoll,
LessLoss

PLUS Editorial, Reader System, Dealer System, Album Reviews

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Kai Ekholm, Inner-magazines.com



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Hifi Pig Magazine

January 2014 Issue 2

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It's been a busy month here at Hifi Pig. Not only have we had lots of new kit that has come in for review but we've also covered masses and masses of news - which you can read [here](#).

CES gave us a lot to talk about on the site and as always we aimed to be first to bring this news to our readers.

We've also expanded our Facebook and Twitter feeds and the number of followers we have on our increasingly important social media feeds - it's an ideal opportunity for us to get feedback from our readers in a more informal setting. It also lets us know that what we are writing about is what you want to read about.

However, as always if you have any comments you'd like to make or have any questions then [let us know](#).

Stuart Smith

WIN

 Astintrews

fabulous Concord powered USB system worth £696 [CLICK!](#)



CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

4 Editorial

11 Readers System

16 Dealers System

REVIEWS

22 Coffman Labs G-1A Preamplifier

28 The Cartridge Man Isolator

33 Simple Audio "GO" Bluetooth Speaker

34 Oriton Audio R33 Support System

37 Astintrew Powered USB

41 Atoll Electronique IN200 SE Integrated Amplifier & CD200 SE-2 CD Player

46 LessLoss DFPC Signature Power Cables

51 COMPETITION Win Astintrew's Powered USB as reviewed by Danny Worth this month.

52 REVIEW LINKS

54 ALBUM REVIEWS

58 BEHIND THE BRANDS with Scott Berry of Computer Audio Design

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Hi-fi Show Dos and Don'ts - Listen Up Exhibitors

by Linette Smith

2014 has kicked off with what has been a very successful CES by all accounts. HiFi Pig was not there but we are hoping to make it over the pond very soon.

We are very much looking forward to the Munich High End 2014 show....just around the corner in May.

Now all this talk of shows got me thinking, I've been to a few now and noticed the good, the bad.....and the ugly!

It got me thinking that a list of dos and don'ts, from the perspective of a show visitor, might be helpful to exhibitors.

So here it is my top ten of what to do and what not to do when exhibiting at a HiFi Show:

1.Crushed velvet....be it black, red or any other colour is just not the right material to display your wares on!

I have witnessed this many times, it looks cheap and it makes your products look cheap...leaves me thinking 'tart's boudoir' not High End HiFi. It is also a pain in the butt to photograph and generally reflects in a nasty way and makes photos of your kit look bad.....and those photos are going to be

practicality in your room but a pitch black or badly lit room will make photo's difficult to say the least.

Yes the sound is the most important thing, for the people that are there, but for every person actually visiting a show there are many more who can't be there and

they will be drawn to read about your products by images, whether in print or on the web.

Some well placed spot lights can go a long way to help with both the atmosphere and the practical aspects of people getting photos of your kit.



Make sure you have music playing. Am I stating the bleeding obvious here?

on blogs, websites, facebook, pinterest.....

If you need to cover the surface that your kit is being displayed on then go for something more natural and non reflective.

2.People will want to take pictures of your kit (hopefully)! Make it easy for them, I know a balance needs to be struck between atmosphere and

rooms...and if I do, go figure, so will others.

Yes I know sometimes, kit will be being changed etc, but put up a notice or have someone welcoming people who arrive at your room while it is quiet just to let them know that the music is going to resume shortly, at least engage people...don't just leave them to wander aimlessly around your room...and then out of the door.

3.Make sure you have music playing. Am I stating the bleeding obvious here? Maybe, but I have witnessed rooms at big shows with big name kit...silent, and I have walked out of those

Beautiful looking HiFi in a silent room will only hold peoples' interest for so long before they go to look and listen elsewhere.

4.And while we are on the subject of welcoming people make sure that you do.

If you make people feel welcome then they are likely to spend more time in your room and identify with your products. A good experience at a show could turn a visitor into a clienta bad one could turn them off your brand for life.

Treat everyone well and treat everyone the same....do you have a crystal ball? Do you know who is going to want to lash out 100 grand on your products? No you don't, looks can be deceiving and

that quiet looking couple that you just ignored may well have come to the show to compile a shopping list...and now your products are not on there.

Think about it.....politeness and niceness cost nothing and arrogance can kill your business.

To the other extreme....don't just pounce on people and start trying to sell to them, if you can create a welcoming

atmosphere it is enough to let people know that you are there and can be approached if they need help. It's about creating a balance, being too pushy is as bad as being too aloof.

5.Be enthusiastic! This is YOUR brand that you are representing, in a lot of cases it is your life's work...if you are not excited about it then how on earth do you expect the general public to be? If you are employing people to represent your brand make sure that they behave as you would and are as enthusiastic as yourself. Make sure that they know your core values and present your brand as you want it to be presented.

Be sure to look after your staff too, if they are enjoying working for you they will do a much better job of promoting your brand.

I have experienced both ends of the spectrum, from teams of people that really engage you to those that stand around chatting amongst themselves whilst ignoring people who desperately try to catch their eye.

Perhaps the worst experience I have had of this was in a room where no music was playing (strike 1), nobody engaged with us (strike 2) the guy running the room sat having a loud conversation on his mobile with no regard for the people who actually wanted to hear what his loudspeakers sounded like (strike 3). Oh dear.

...no music was playing (strike 1), nobody engaged with us (strike 2) the guy running the room sat having a loud conversation on his mobile with no regard for the people who actually wanted to hear what his loudspeakers sounded like (strike 3). Oh dear.

6.The enthusiasm thing does not extend to being lectured at. Yes you want, and need, to impart your knowledge about your products, but this is a HiFi show...not a lecture hall. When your audience is fidgeting in their seats and looking at their watches it may be time to realise that shutting up and playing some tunes would be a better idea all round!

Organising your presentations so that you introduce the products and impart information, whilst interspersing this with music, is much better and more engaging for your audience than just talking at them.

7.Musical variety. Please, lets have a bit of variety. Not everyone listens to classical music, even if you think it best showcases your system be aware that people will want to listen to other genres, if you play

Editorial

a good variety then once again it will engage the audience more.....why not ask people what they would like to hear, or let them play their own music?

8. Be realistic about what will work in your room and how you set the room up.

Visitors need to be able to move around the room and see your products, they need to be able to sit down and hear the system too. Try and make it comfortable, uncluttered and a pleasant place to be. Don't try and cram in too many chairs or things that are not needed. I remember one room at Munich last year that had so many potted plants in it, it resembled a jungle, not only was it difficult to get to see the kit on offer, I expected David Attenborough to leap out at me at any moment!

Some of the most successful rooms I have been in at shows have had a really cohesive feel with their branding carried through on everything from what the staff wore to the seats. They didn't try to fill the room with everything they had in their range but selected products carefully. Matching the system that you actually have playing to the size of the

room is important too....if you don't have the space to show off the sound of your biggest speakers use a smaller pair from your range to demonstrate and just have the bigger ones on show.

9. Use the show as an opportunity to meet other people in the business. We have met so many new people at HiFi shows and some have gone on to become really good friends. The world of HiFi is actually quite a small one and everybody knows everybody else so watch your mouth and don't slag off your competition or word will get out! A show is a great place to make new contacts and form new collaborations; so much more can be achieved from working collaboratively than trying to keep everything to yourself!

10. Have fun! Yes, it is work but a show really should be fun too and if you are clearly enjoying the show and are passionate about what you do it will draw people to you and people will be talking about your brand, for all the right reasons, long after the show has finished!



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After living with them for a week and consistently rating JoSound's room at HiFi shows as one of my favourites I can honestly say I would like to own them....."

Linette Smith
HiFi Pig



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Music is our Passion

Statement of Intent!



With the announcement of their \$200 00 Statement amplifier Naim have caused quite a stir amongst some sections of the audiophile community. Stuart Smith suggests that this kind of product is perhaps very good for the industry as a whole.

When Naim announced at the recent CES exhibition that they would be launching a preamp and power amp combo that would leave purchasers with a \$200 000 hole in their bank account it was inevitable that there a certain degree of backlash from some quarters would come...and come it did.

Now we live in a world that is full of injustices for better or worse, but claims that the introduction of the Statement amps from Naim are “obscene” and “bad for the industry” just doesn’t register with me I’m afraid. What Naim has done here with the introduction of the Statement amplifiers is say to the world “Look at this, it only plays music but it costs more than a sports car. Take notice!!” and that is just what people out there will do – they will take notice.

As a marketing exercise the Statement amplifiers will ensure that Naim (and high-end hi-fi in general) is spoken about beyond the hi-fi media and this is a good thing. Let’s face it, the audiophile community can be very inward facing and more than a little of a “closed shop” and so anything that creates attention for the hobby from the outside world has to be a positive surely.

I’ll explain my thinking and I’m aware some will disagree: If Mr and Mrs Bloggs are reading their Sunday supplement, or watching yet another home design program on the television and see an article about a beautifully furnished home that has (God forbid) something other than an iPod dock and pair of lifestyle loudspeakers in there, then perhaps they may just think “why don’t we have a decent way to play back our music”. It’s true that for the vast majority of people \$200 000 is a sum of money that they would never contemplate spending on a “music centre” but that’s not the point here! Mr and Mrs Bloggs could say “Well I can’t afford to buy into that level of hi-fi, but what I can do is have a look around and listen to something that is in my price bracket that will surely sound infinitely better than what we have at the moment. After all, it seems everyone else has a good hi-fi”.

This is what I would call the trickle down effect in action. We see it in other markets and so why not in hifi. In the fashion industry the haute-couture fashion items we see on the backs of models strutting the catwalks of London, Paris and Rome are unbelievably priced and well beyond the means of all but the most

well healed of individuals, but put your latest creation on a celebrity or top model and get it photographed in the right magazines and it will get talked about by a wider audience. Now this wider audience may well not be able to afford the latest Dior creation from the show so they buy the ready-to-wear range and if not that then they buy a bottle of the brand’s perfume at Christmas.

Likewise an individual reading about the Statement amps may not be able to afford to nip out and buy them, but they will see them as being the pinnacle (I’ve not heard them so can’t comment) of what is achievable and may well consider buying something from Naim’s other more affordable range of products...and if not Naim then perhaps another brand. Good for the industry as a whole!

Within the audio world beats by Dre have managed to create a huge market for themselves and a whole new market in general for relatively high-priced headphones. They have given the world cans that are perceived to be better than anything the average kid on the street would have thought previously about buying and they’ve got celebrity endorsement behind them. Said kids on the street can’t afford to buy the jewellery and cars that the celeb’s can, but they can (at a push) afford the same cool and perceptively better headphones their idols are sporting this week...and so a whole new market was created.

I’ve seen people, some with a vested interest and some without, say that the ticket price of the amps is disgraceful as there can’t be more than \$15 000 worth of components in there, but they’re choosing to ignore the huge sums of money that go into research and development. And anyway, so what if it costs \$200 000? A product is worth what an individual perceives it as being worth and if there is a market for an amplifier costing \$200 000 then someone should jump in and supply to that market... and good on Naim for stepping up to the plate! The average person buying hi-fi doesn’t have the same buying pattern as the mega wealthy person has. The wealthy want what is the perceived best and they want it because not everyone else can have it.

Personally I wish Naim nothing but success for having the bottle to put the Statement amps out there. I hope they sell a good few to those with the money to splash and I hope that they create a bit of interest in high-end audio outside the audiophile world.



Black Pearls

DIVE DEEP INTO YOUR SENSES



In this month's Readers System we asked Hifi Pig Magazine reader James Lines to tell us about his hi-fi history, his current system and what the future may hold.



As a child, I always had a keen interest in music and I fondly remember taping hours of music off the radio onto cassette for later

listening. But it wasn't until I turned 18 that my interest in trying to improve the quality of music reproduction at home started. I can clearly remember almost falling off my chair when my parents agreed to buy me a Cyrus 3 amp for my 18th birthday. Little did I see the slippery slope in front of me!

Over time I added to this a Rotel RCD-965BX LE Discrete (surely the longest model name in history?!) CD player and a pair of Mission 760i speakers. At this point I knew there was potential for music to be reproduced at far higher quality than I had previously thought possible. The question was and still is to a certain extent, which route to take through the hi-fi equipment maze to deliver the best possible sound quality in my listening room.

'Best possible sound' is not a universal position on which we all agree. One mans highly detailed is another mans bright. Some prefer the lure of valves which in some equipment imparts a warmth to the

Best possible sound' is not a universal position on which we all agree.

sound that others might term wooly or lacking definition. The system I'm trying to create is one which places tone, weight and scale ahead of strictly 'what's on the disc'. More on this later.

So, fast forward 18 years and my system is unrecognisable from the Cyrus/Rotel/Mission system that got me started. In the intervening years I have been through countless bits of kit and spent far too much money, trying different paths along the way, from sub/sat systems to fully active speakers being driven directly by a DAC, all of which have led me to the system I have today.

I'll describe my system in the order in which I've bought it and describe the benefits/drawbacks of each item along the way.

First up is my Shindo Monbrison preamp. Shindo-San hails from Japan and has built a global reputation for amplification, turntables and speakers that major on drawing listeners into the musical performance. Each model is packed full of esoteric

Reader System

and hard to find parts including out of production NOS valves and old capacitors/resistors.

For me, having a decent preamp in the chain is very important. It is the preamp which takes that rather thin sound emanating from most CD players and adds weight, increases the soundstage and all round scale of the sound which you hear. I only realise quite how important the Shindo pre is in my system when I a) remove it or b) replace it with a less competent pre. All that weight, tone and scale that I so much enjoy about my system is down to the Shindo. It may not be strictly accurate to the source but without the Shindo my system turns into a highly

accurate and resolving system which is devoid of any emotion. Boring!

The only drawback I can level at the Shindo is that in my system it has too much gain. This is something I intend to remedy at the DAC or power amp end in the near future.

Next up are my speakers which are Tune Audio Prime's. These are a three-way folded horn design with 95db sensitivity and finished in olive ash. Both drivers are supplied by Fostex but are then fettled to meet Tune Audio's requirements. They're about 55cm deep and my wife nearly had a heart attack when she saw them in situ (my hopes of them blending into the room were quickly dashed!). I've only had these speakers for just over five months but I think this time it's love. For the first time I now have the scale and dynamics which I've been seeking for several years.

These speakers reproduce a wonderfully natural tone.

The treble is beautifully extended without any trace of harshness. I have positioned my speakers in both corners of the room to aid bass loading which works well. There's nothing I can fault at this stage with these speakers.

One area I've spent more money on than any other area in my system is DAC's. In the last few years I've

Power supply for the power amp by Maplin



Temple Audio's diminutive Bantam Gold poweramp



Reader System

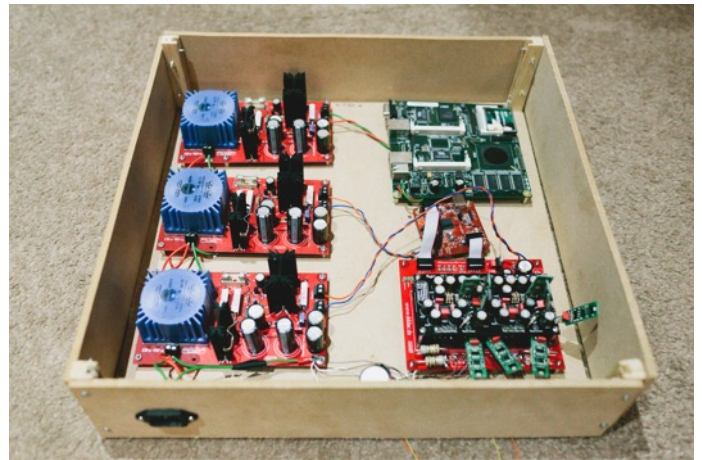
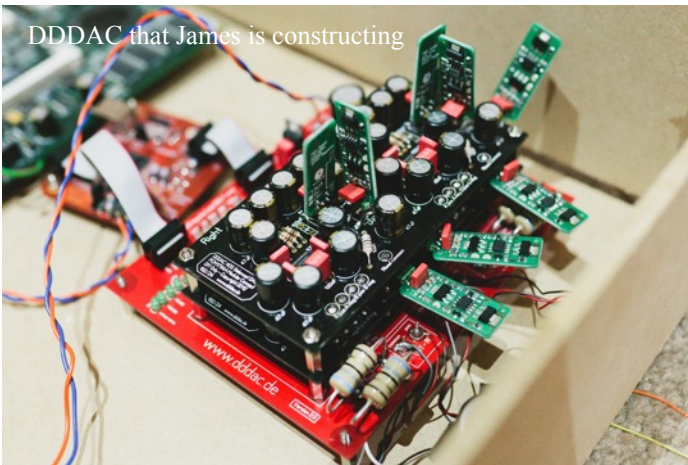
owned an M2Tech Young, Weiss DAC202, Metrum Octave, Bel Canto 3.5vb and a PS Audio Perfectwave DAC. Don't ask me where this obsession with DAC's came for as I honestly couldn't tell you. But I'm certain that not all DAC's are created equal. In my view this has less to do with the DAC chip and more to do with the output stage. The box of bits you see in the pictures is my current DAC. It's called the DDDAC and it uses 1794 DAC chips in dual mono configuration on each DAC board. I'm using two boards but the design will support up to eight boards and possibly more. The small green boards you can see sticking out at

which runs from a CF card installed on the Alix board. There is a remote app called MPad which I use on the iPad to control the music.

As you can see from the pics, this DAC is still a work in progress. I've some further tweaking to do before I find a suitable enclosure for it. Total spend so far is about £800 which isn't bad for a DAC which comprehensively better any of the aforementioned DAC's I've owned. This project may well lead to further DIY projects in the future.

There are two downsides to the streamer software that I've selected. Firstly, it has no Spotify interface.

DDDAC that James is constructing



Shindo Lab's Monbrison preamplifier at the heart of the system



Reader System

Secondly, my Linux skills are rather limited, so when something goes wrong with the software or network connection it takes me a long time to fix it. This happens infrequently though and I'm sold on the idea of integrating a streamer in with the DAC. The answer might be a wandboard running Squeezelite but I need to look into this further.

The final piece of my system is a very modest looking Bantam Gold amplifier from Temple Audio. I think this is a huge bargain at £190 and it drives my speakers very well. The Bantam outputs a maximum of 25w depending on the supplied voltage. I'm using a linear power supply from Maplin to drive mine. It can be adjusted to provide 16v which is something I intend to do soon. There are also reports of these amps working well with battery power, but I'm lazy and will likely forget to recharge them. Just recently I've been trialing a room correction software package from Dirac.

This entails measuring the room with a microphone at various positions to create a sonic map of the room (for want of a better description).

From this map the software creates an optimised filter which is then used during playback from the software. I'm surprised at how

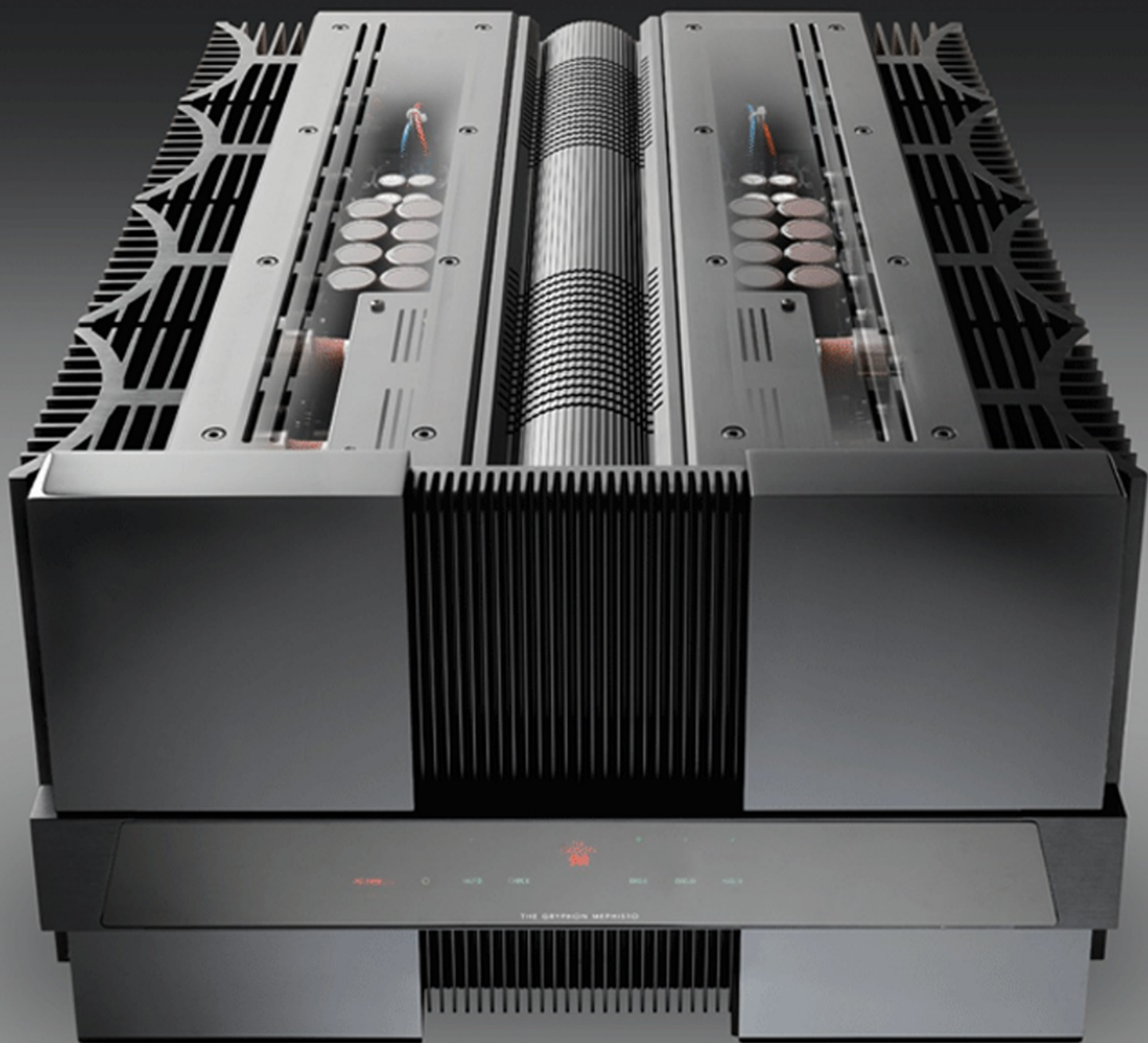
much if a positive impact this software has had. The soundstage is now more focused and any looseness in the bass has gone. More listening is needed but I'm encouraged by what I hear thus far.

So, what does the future hold for my system? A case for my DAC for sure and also perhaps some valve monoblocks.....the slippery slope continues.



The full rack showing the Tune Audio Prime loudspeakers

THE GRYPHON



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www.gryphon-audio.dk

Dealer System

Hifi Pig first met Geoffrey Armstrong of Sound Galleries a few years ago whilst we were visiting the Top Marques supercar show in Monaco and as a side attraction we attended a small hi-fi show Geoffrey had organised in one of the principality's hotels. It turned out the hi-fi was actually much more interesting than the cars and we got to listen to some pretty amazing kit that Geoffrey sells. Here we've asked him to put together a relatively high-end system using a computer as the system's source.

Sound Galleries (Monaco)

Telephone Monaco 97 98 32 60

[Website](#)

[Email](#)

Many years ago I was frustrated by the huge gap between my HiFi rig and live music. I'm a frequent concert goer, and listening to Jazz in a small club the sheer vivacity and excitement of acoustic instruments was always a shock compared with what I was getting at home. The first speakers that brought me much closer to that experience were High-Efficiency and Horn loaded speakers. I think that's why the level of realism this type of speaker is capable of often comes as a shock to most people. They are difficult to ignore or use as background music, even at low levels, because they have such an uncanny ability to draw you into the music. The speaker I've picked for this system is perhaps a bit of an unsung hero in this class. It's the Rethm Saadhana. By augmenting the main driver with a sealed Isobaric active bass system, which also employs fast paper cone drivers, the experience is extended all the way down to 20 Hz. This bass can easily be perfectly integrated using the controls on the Saadhana, resulting in a top to bottom, full range coherent sound.

The Saadhana is a highly resolving speaker and most people drive it with tubes. With this type of driver though a very slight peak can occasionally be detected in the "presence" region, which is heard as being a little "white" sounding in this area. Using the Saadhana while in the normal listening position this is almost impossible to detect and is not likely to bother anyone using high quality tube amps. However, listening on axis (with a Saadhana basically firing straight at you) this peakiness can be detected. Last year I had a revelation when a customer brought his NCore amp in and we tried them on the Saadhana. Even on-axis the peakiness could not be detected. What was happening? Most of you know that the impedance measurement of a speaker is "nominally" rated, most commonly at 8ohms; but "nominally" translates to "approximate", meaning it will vary depending on the frequency the



Rethm Saadhana loudspeakers move the air in this system

Dealer System

amp/speaker is being asked to re-produce. NCore amps seem to have an uncanny ability to respond so instantaneously to changing demands in power, that they smooth out any peaks and dips in the frequency range. This suggests that any slight peakiness you may detect with this type of wide-band driver, is probably due to the amp/speaker interface and not the driver itself. So I'm going to take the unusual step of combining a pair of NCore Mono-Blocs with these speakers, even though they deliver far more power than the speaker really needs to sing. In audio it pays to have an open mind!

I find the NCore's are also highly-resolving with no smearing of transients or added texture. At the same time they manage to avoid sounding clinical. This certainly leaves this system in the high-resolving/truth telling camp, so why not continue down this route and use the latest Antelope Zodiac Platinum DAC? This is just about the highest resolution DAC known to me and is also the most advanced, supporting DSD and the ability to up-sample all DSD to 256 (256 x the sample rate of CD). With its remote volume control allowing fine adjustment, it also makes an excellent pre-amp. We

Side view of the Rethms



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Dealer's System

can thus feed those NCore mono-blocs directly with the Zodiac via XLR.

Now we just need to add our source. This is going to be a Computer Based audio system using a Mac mini with iTunes to manage our music library and specific choices for the software audio player.

I had a real bully of a dentist when I was a teenager. He assured me that if I didn't give up Mars bars, Coca-Cola and sugar in my coffee, very nasty things would happen to me. He would personally see to that. It worked! A customer heard this system recently and was very impressed by it. The one observation he made is that compared to his tube based system, it would be like giving up sugar in coffee. At first it would taste a little too strong. After a while though, he would adjust, and if after that he tried to take sugar again, it would taste way too sweet. I think it's a good analogy.

In the age of Computer Audio the software audio player has a significant outcome on the sound in my opinion. It really is the source of your system and instead of comparing different CD players which

may cost thousands to tens of thousands, we can now try out software players which, in any case, cost far less to buy.

The customer I just mentioned found his sweet spot when I played some DSD files using Audirvana +. It's one of just two players which support DSD on the Mac and I think it's the best choice. DSD tends to sound more "analogue like" and sweeter than the PCM we are all much more familiar with, since it is the format of CD's and most other higher resolution music files. Audirvana + is also a popular choice for playing PCM files on most systems. On this system though I prefer to take my PCM with Amarra; a player that most listeners agree imparts an analogue like sound to PCM audio. Through this system Amarra for PCM and Audirvana for DSD would be all the "flavouring" I would need.

This system is truly "transparent" and not just in the usual sense of that term, that there seems to be nothing between you and the performers. Srajan of 6Moons already noted in his review of the Saadhana's that they provide "deep insight into musical performance". Couple them with NCore

Antelopes Zodiac Platinum dealing with the zero and ones



Dealer System

amps and the Zodiac Platinum and this "transparency" is taken to the nth degree. This allows the real meaning of the music to come through, which is what I need to become both emotionally and intellectually engaged in the music.

I would hook up the system with TelluriumQ cable, which really does seem to do as it claims in terms of helping to rid the system of any timing errors. I was shocked at how big a difference it made when I swapped their Graphite speaker cable in place of another company's highly regarded cable in an Avantgarde Trio based system. The Graphite was so much better in the context of that system. Since then they have introduced their ultimate Black Diamond cable. I am using their Black Diamond USB cable together with Ultra Black balanced interconnects and speaker cable, in this system.

A simple 2 shelf rack will suffice for the components in this system as they are all compact and run cool. I favour the Quadraspire Sunoko-Vent racks as providing excellent performance for the price and

Pricing inclusive of VAT/TVA:

Rethm Saadhana, Pair €13000
Zodiac Platinum 384khz PCM/256 DSD DAC/Pre-Amp €5000
Ncore Mono Block Power Amps €5000 - €7000 (Depending on exact model/options)
TelluriumQ Black Diamond 1 Meter USB cable €800
TelluriumQ Ultra Black Balanced XLR interconnect 1m Pair €653
TelluriumQ Ultra Black Speaker Cable 2M pair €1256
TelluriumQ Blue Power Cables €432 x 5 = €2160
Quadraspire Sunoko-Vent 2 Shelf Rack €500
Mac Mini Suitable as source for this system, Approximately €1000 - €1500 (Depending on exact model/options)
Audiophile grade player software from Audirvana + at €59 to Amarra Symphony with IRC €580

Total System Price from €29428 to €32449 depending on options.

blending in well with existing furniture.

Putting together what I call a "traditional audiophile system" such as this is a lot of fun. The most rewarding part for me is when a smile spreads over the customers face and you know you've hit on the combination which really pushes all his/her buttons.



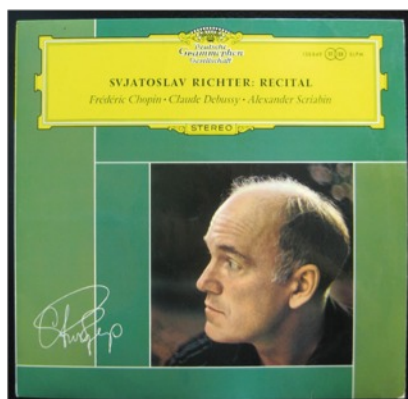
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Coffman Labs G-1A Preamplifier

by Stuart Smith



First of all let me say that I absolutely love the aesthetics of G-1A from Coffman Labs with its purposeful and almost steam-punk looks. It's beautifully put together and feels bomb-proof. I also love the way the knobs on the front of the preamp feel – the selector switches clunk into place and they have a firm and solid feel to them – they're also of a size that just feels right. On top of the rack it looks absolutely fabulous and is something of a work of art to my eyes.

OK, so it looks great but what do you get for the not inconsiderable sum of \$5500? Quite a lot actually! There's a separate and visually matching outboard tube rectified (5AR4) power supply which connects to the main unit by a thick and sturdy umbilical. You get a phonostage with a step up transformer moving

coil input and moving magnet input, a headphone amplifier, three line level inputs, two variable outputs and a tape output. Feature-wise the asking price is starting to stack up to seem pretty reasonable and then we look inside where we have NOS paper in oil capacitors sourced from cold war Russian, the switches are military aircraft grade and designed for millions of operations and all wiring is point to point and by default labour intensive. Then there's the fact that there will only ever be 500 of the G-1A made and so you actually get to own something that has a degree of rarity value too.

So who are Coffman Labs?

Based in Oregon, USA Coffman Labs is the brainchild of Damon Coffman a classically trained violinist and physicist (that classic combination)

whose stated aim is to “create products that reproduce the natural sound experienced during live performance”. Damon comes from a background in developing and patenting specialised medical passive monitoring devices and was involved in creating a visual stethoscope which allowed cardiac care decisions to be made by medical assistants in rural 3rd World countries.

Expectations are High!!!

So knowing what we had learned about the history of Coffman Labs and the background of the main character behind the brand expectations were naturally very high when the unit arrived for review. A quick read of the instructions – there’s a specific sequence to follow when turning the unit on and off – and it was plumbed into the system and left to warm up for a while. We settled back to listen to

music through this new wunderkind on the block only to look at each other and say “this doesn’t sound right”. Perhaps it needs more warming up so

...it is a wonderful piece of equipment that sounds really beautiful in our system with whatever kind of music we throw at it.

we persevered. Nope, this thing sounds screechy and positively headache inducing and we were of a mind that Damon, given his violin background, had tuned it specifically for this instrument ...surely not. I contacted Damon and explained that I didn’t think I could review the preamp as it didn’t reach our



The Coffman Labs G-1A main box on the left and its power supply on the right

Reviews

benchmark and he suggested there may be a problem with the power supply and so sent out a new rectifier tube...nope, still the same problem. We popped it in front of different amps, we tried different sources and still the same.

Soundstage is very wide and deep, bass bouncy

Without any further comment from me a new unit was shipped to us at great expense to Coffman and after the usual French custom hassles we had a hopefully working preamp to play with.

Expectations are Low!!

I have to say we were both a little nervous when we plugged the newly arrived unit into the main rig and to be absolutely honest I was of the mind that the G-1A was a bit of a lemon and Coffman Labs had

produced something that was tuned specifically to Damon's hearing after our first experience!

However, I can truthfully say that having lived with this preamplifier for a good while now it is a wonderful piece of equipment that sounds really

beautiful in our system with whatever kind of music we throw at it. I can only assume that, despite the excellent packaging the original review unit arrived in, somewhere

along the line it was damaged in transit. The unit's been sent back and I'm sure Damon will do a thorough investigation as to what was wrong with the first pre – certainly there seemed to be no physical damage!

In front of the Iridium amp you get a wonderfully balanced sound with no frequency band dominating and that is absolutely crammed full of detail.

Specifics

Lots of ins and outs, plus moving magnet and moving coil phono for the vinyl fanatics.



On the Moving Magnet input using the variable loading at 47K (95K, 70K are available too) using the Cartridge Man Music Maker the word that immediately springs to mind is coherence. Soundstage is very wide and deep, bass bouncy and tight on Dillinger's "Cocaine" with the vocal track being clearly forward in the mix. Each instrument is easy to identify in the mix and there's an overall very pleasing tone to the sound. The lead guitar that comes in at the end of this track is particularly realistic sounding which had me reaching for the Latin rhythms and virtuoso guitar of "L'Ame de Baden Powell" by Baden Powell. The close micing of the guitar is very evident in the recording and the illusion of there actually being a stage in front of you is very real indeed with the G-1A in the chain. There's a bit of microphony from the valves in MM mode (evident if you tap the top of the preamplifier)

but I'm fortunate to have the electronics in a separate and relatively isolated part of the living space so this really wasn't an issue for me. Had I the time and

On poor recordings the Coffman pre is pretty unforgiving and would suggest that whatever it adds to the sound it not trying to mask the original recording in any way.

inclination I'd have loved to have explored a bit of tube rolling to see if this could be cured for the sake of Audiophillia Nervosa. On poor recordings the Coffman pre is pretty unforgiving and would suggest that whatever it adds to the sound it not trying to mask the original recording in any way.

Switching to the MC input and the Technics 1210/Origin Live Silver/AT33EV combo the microphony is still evident when you tap the unit. From previous listening there is no doubt that on acoustic instruments this pre is really a top class

Purposeful looking and purposeful feeling switches and knobs



Reviews

performer but now it's time to throw a bit of techno at it in the form of 3 Phase and "Current 1" and the Coffman copes very well indeed. The soundstage opens up even further than with the MM input and you get a very 3 dimensional and enveloping sound which is layered with loads of detail. In comparison to my own Electrocompaniet phonostage I'd say the Coffman

Labs clearly outshines it by a country mile. In comparison

to the recently reviewed Van de Leur the flavour is slightly different but overall I'd say I preferred the Coffman, particularly when using the MC input – it's slightly more 3 dimensional in its presentation.

Switch to the line input the microphony disappears completely. There is still the feeling that this pre is something very special indeed with that all enveloping sound. It's still got a degree of "neutrality" but I wouldn't say it is completely transparent and it definitely brings something to the party that may not be everyone's idea of "high-fidelity" in its strictest sense but by God does it allow you to really enjoy the music. On Neil Young's "Cortez the Killer" Young's distorted guitars are clearly layered and have that "in the room" feel again. Hats are crisp and that overhang thing that I really hate on bass and drums just disappears. The stereo image is clearly defined and your left with a sound that is delicate and yet visceral and very, very lifelike.

On the subject of bass this is an interesting aspect of the Coffman Labs preamp. My initial impression was that bass was perhaps a little light but you soon realise that it's not – it's just not overblown and, as I said, the overall sound is very balanced.

I had the opportunity to test the headphone amp with a few pairs of headphone amps we have in the house at present and it's very good indeed. As I've said previously I'm not a huge headphone listener and most of the listening I do is on little and relatively inexpensive desktop systems so my experience of top-top flight headphone amps is pretty limited. However, the Coffman Labs performed as well as anything we've had in the house over the last couple of years and was easily a match for my prototype

headphone amp I have used for the last couple of years as my reference.

Conclusion

\$5500 (£3350 at today's exchange rate) is a good deal of money to spend on a pre-amplifier and the Coffman Labs amp is clearly aimed at a pretty high

My initial impression was that bass was perhaps a little light but you soon realise that it's not – it's just not overblown and, as I said, the overall sound is very balanced.

end market. However, given the quality of the unit overall, how well it is specced and the fact that it is handbuilt in limited numbers I'd say it represented very good value to anyone living in the US. Add delivery and taxes to the EU and you're getting closer to a preamplifier that costs upwards of £4250 so the relative value thing becomes a little more blurred, but I'd still say that the Coffman Labs offers excellent value against anything I've heard in this price bracket available in the EU!

The sound is open and balanced and decidedly incisive. It's not the last word in neutrality but then again it's not hugely coloured either – it's certainly not a "warm" sounding preamplifier by any stretch of the imagination and it is transparent to a large degree. Feed it with good quality recordings and you will be rewarded admirably, feed it with sub standard recordings and it is unforgiving. Listening to the amp in my system I found myself lost in the music and I think that for the Iridium amplifier from Tellurium Q it is a perfect match.

It excels with acoustic music but pop in rock or techno and it's equally superb.

On the downside the issue of microphony on the phonostage may be an issue for some but by isolating it well I had no issues other than when tapping the unit with my finger.

Without a doubt well deserving of the Recommended award and I defy anyone who hears this pre in a decent system to say otherwise. Had this review been written in 2013 the pre would have been my joint "electronics" product of the year along with the Iridium power amp I'm now using. Do I hope to do a deal for the demo unit? – yes I do !



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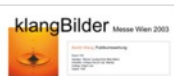
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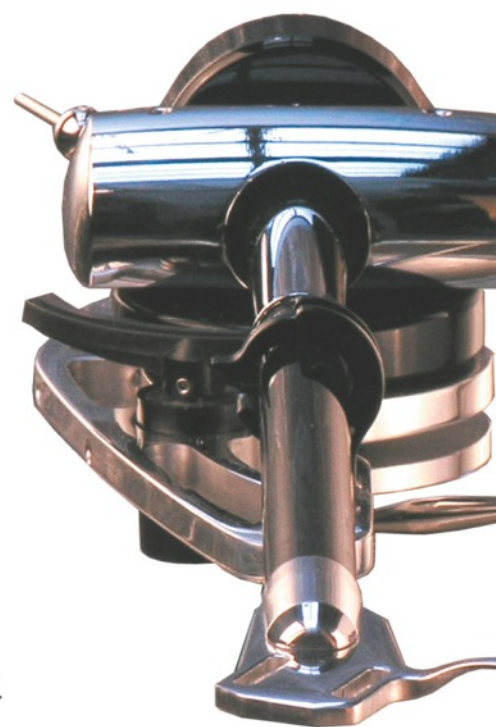


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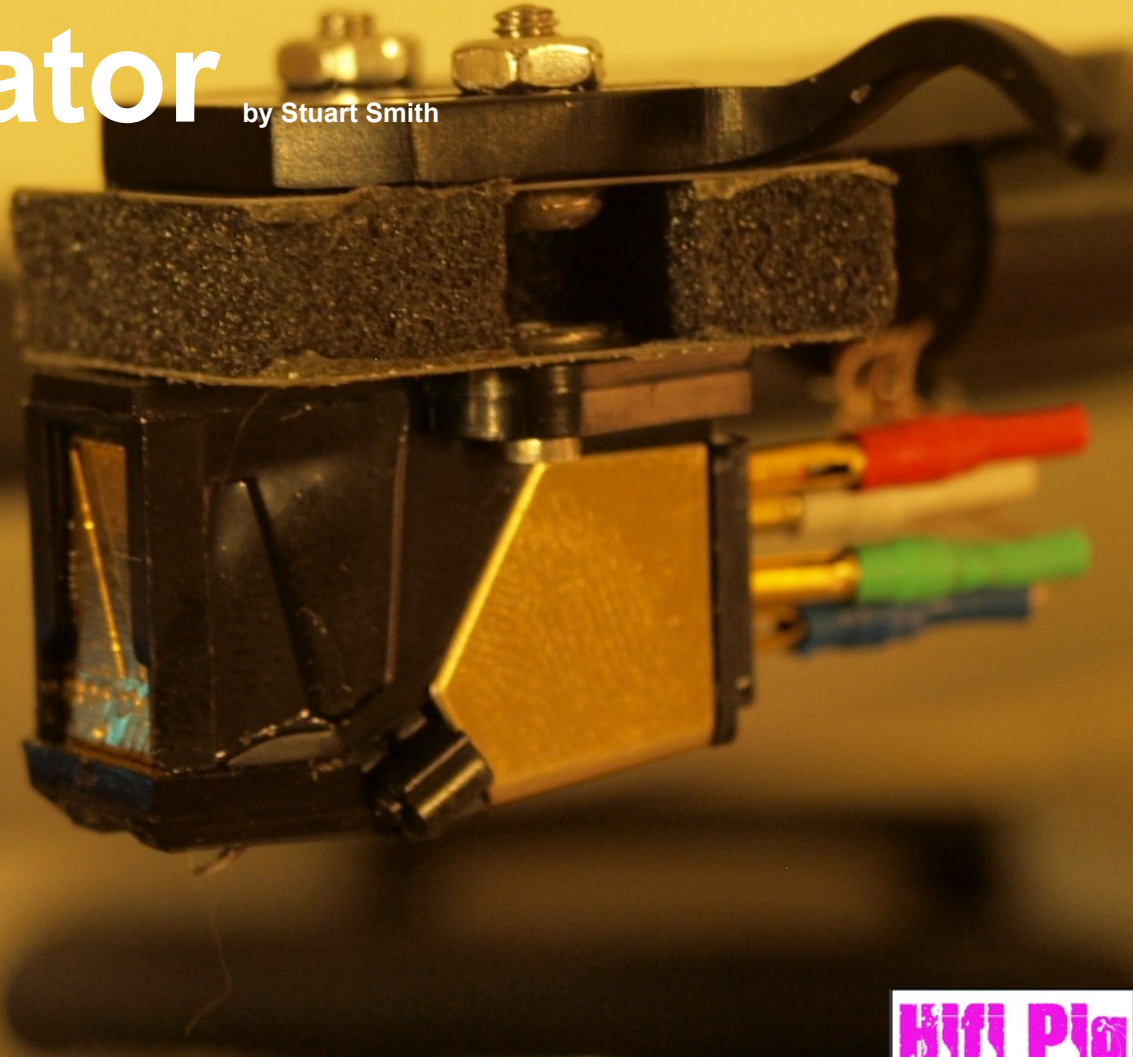
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The Cartridge Man Isolator

by Stuart Smith



The Cartridge Man Isolator is an interesting and somewhat off the wall concept I thought. I reviewed the brilliant [Cartridge Man Music Maker III](#) cartridge a few months ago and since then it's been sat on the end of the Origin Live Silver arm attached to my Wilson Benesch Circle turntable. Truth be known, much to Len's (The Cartridge Man) annoyance I'm sure, I really didn't want to interfere with what was a lovely sounding analogue set up. However, the isolator had been sent for review and so a couple of weeks ago I bit the bullet and decided to fit the isolator to the cartridge.

So what is the Isolator then, I hear you ask. Well it's a sandwich of soft spongy material between two very thin metal plates – have a look at the picture. It measures 25mm x 20mm x 5.4mm and it has a mass of 2g. It's an unassuming bit of kit and if truth be

known I was not hopeful of this little device's efficacy.

To fit it you basically peel off a bit of paper protecting a sticky surface, stick the sticky surface onto your cartridge whilst aligning the attached locating pins and then tighten the attached bolts to your arm with the supplied nuts. It's a bit of an odd experience not having the bolts go through the actual cartridge body and it be just stuck there by glue, but all seems pretty secure. Literally a two minute job!

Of course once you add the Isolator you need to realign your cartridge and set it up again... and add an extra 5.5 mm to the arm height.

On Neil Young's "Out on the Weekend" there appears to be a good degree more naturalness to the overall sound, particularly with the quieter guitar which now seems to be more apparent in the overall

mix – there's also more insight into the recording space which I love to hear. I know that "naturalness" and "apparent" are pretty vague words to use in a review, but overall the character of the music you're hearing doesn't actually change, there just seems to be more detail and that nth degree of magic that we strive for in our systems. On the next track "Harvest" there is more air and space around the instruments and in the mix as a whole. The soundstaging feels more true to life and there's that feeling of being in front of/in the recording space again.

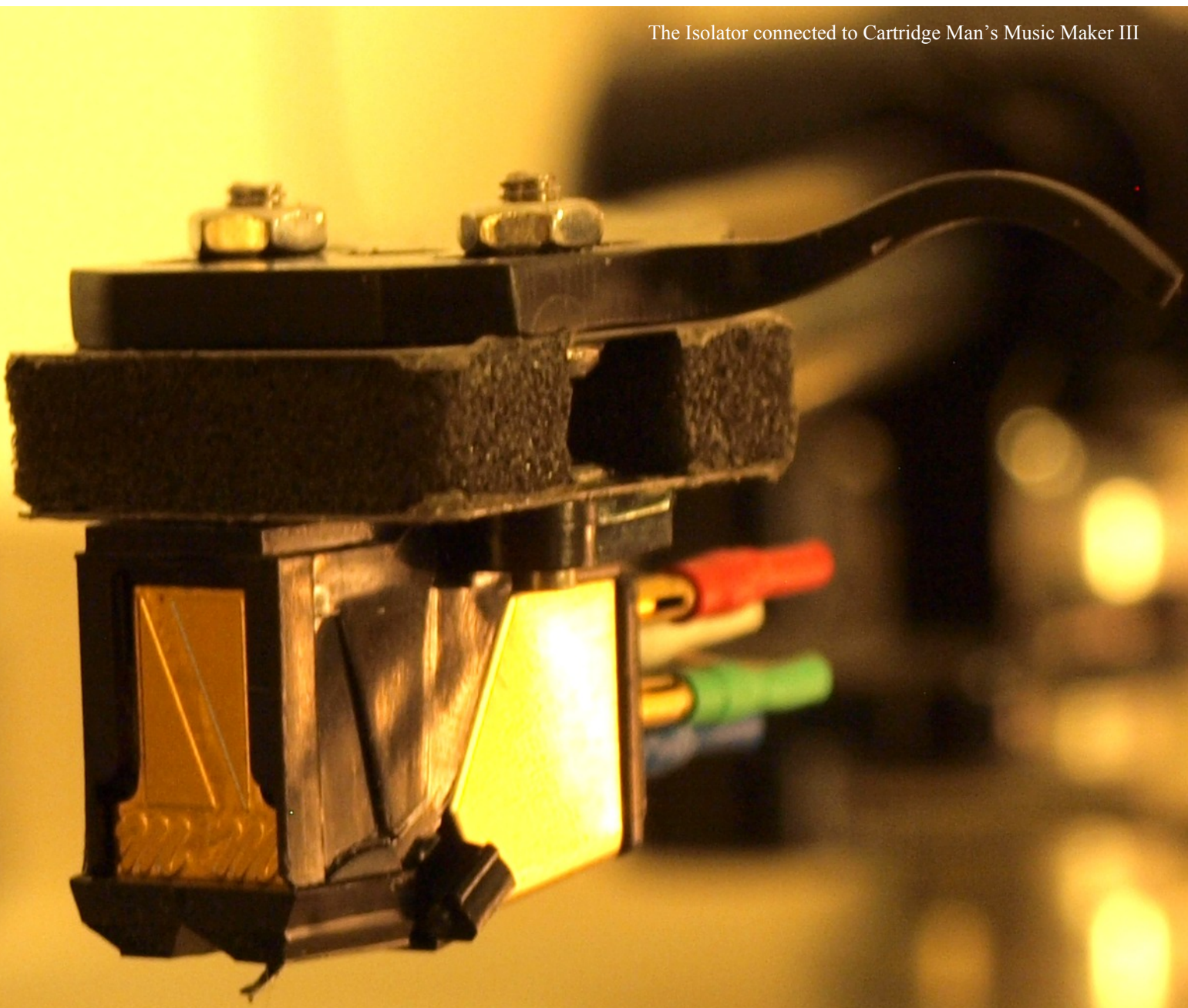
The change in sound is not as subtle as my description may point to and that feeling that what you are hearing is far better (more detail, more space, and more insight) than without the Isolator in place is immediately apparent. I've striven for an analogy with this and the nearest I can get is an optical one. It's like being happy with your spectacle prescription

and getting on perfectly well with it day to day and then having your new glasses with your new prescription arrive and only then do you realise that actually you were missing quite a bit of finer detail.

Pop on Horace Andy's "Book of Dub" and the deep bass is a little more natural, tight and taut than without the Isolator in place and that feeling of getting a little bit more of everything throughout the mix is obvious. The mix is definitely more clearly defined in the stereo image.

Moving onto Jethro Tull's "Aqualung" there's a cymbal sound at the start and with the Isolator in the chain it's easier to pick out and the whole tonal presentation of the music has that feel to it that it's just sounding a little more true to the original recording.

The Isolator connected to Cartridge Man's Music Maker III



Reviews

As I'm writing this I'm well aware that the review may seem a little hazy in the way I'm describing what the Isolator is doing to the sound of a cartridge that I already thought was very good, but plonk this weird looking thing between the Music Maker III and the tonearm and it lifts it another rung up the ladder - almost as if the cartridge is getting more out of the grooves ...I'm sure it's not, but you do HEAR more in the music. Looking at the Cartridge Man site he says the Isolator *"has been shown to reduce the noise floor level by 3dB (a cut of 50%). This reduction allows far more low level information into the audio picture, improving sound stage, imaging and resolution"* and this seems to make sense and is a pretty accurate description of what I heard!

Conclusion

Ok, I'll be honest here and say that for £85 you don't seem to get a lot of hardware for your money, but the Isolator has been granted a patent and at the end of the day it's what improvements it makes to the sound that is important. Does it work and is it worth £85? Yes it does work (much to my surprise) it works very well indeed. The Isolator is well worth the asking

price and much more in sonic terms and as such it comes highly recommended.

If I was to be given the option of spending £85 on the Isolator or on a handful of albums then I'd definitely go for the Isolator- it will add another level of listening pleasure to the records you already own!

If you own a Music Maker III cartridge then I'd say that this is an essential purchase and I'm surprised it doesn't come bundled with the cartridge. If it has the same effect on other cartridges (I have no reason to suspect it won't) then, going out on a limb, I'd suggest it will be one of the best tweaks you will make to your vinyl front end where "bang for buck" is concerned.

I'm dying to take it off the Music Maker III and put it onto the other deck's AT33EV to see how it performs on non-Cartridge Man cartridges, but from what I've heard of it I really don't want to risk spoiling what it does in its current home, but I'm sure in due course I'll be ordering another.

concord

by **ASTINTrew**®



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“Had this review been written in 2013, the pre would have been my joint ‘electronics’ product of the year...” -Stuart Smith



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Simple Audio “GO” Bluetooth Loudspeaker

by Harry Smith



Simple Audio has a new mini Bluetooth speaker on the market, the Simple Audio Go.

It's a light and small device, which is compatible with almost every phone or tablet on the market. (I tested it with a 4th generation iPod Touch).

It is perfect to carry around with you (in its little bag) so that you can share your music with your friends, on the go.

The Bluetooth pairing is very simple. Press and hold the pause/play button on the speaker for 3 seconds then select the speaker on your preferred device and you're ready to go.

If you don't have a Bluetooth enabled device you can use the provided mini jack cable which works just as well.

Once paired you can expect a huge battery life - I charged it after every 2 or 3 days, using the provided micro USB cable, and it never ran out of juice.

The controls work well on the actual speaker, although I rarely used them and used the controls on my iPod.

The buttons feel a bit “flimsy” but this isn't a huge drawback as the rest of the features on the Go are

near perfect. On the bottom of the speakers, there are two rubberized feet that provide great stability on most surfaces. There is also an integrated microphone, although I didn't test this feature.

I can see that Simple Audio concentrated a lot on the design of the Go, it's easy to use and looks minimal and stylish. Proof that simplicity can be excellent.

One disappointment however is that the Go is only available in black at the moment and I feel that it should be more customisable (with a range of colours to choose from.)

The sound quality is very good, the bass is surprisingly rich and the high notes are pretty clear too.

More importantly for what it is, this speaker is loud and can easily fill a medium/small room. It surprised me the first time I used it, as I didn't expect such good sound reproduction from such a small compact design...it really was a ‘wow’ moment when I first played Deadmau5 on it and this was in one of the largest rooms in our house. When I moved to a smaller room, my bedroom, the Go really filled the space with music.

Being ultra portable, I was also able to use it both outside and in the car where it sounded equally good.

Oriton Audio R33 Support System

by Stuart Smith



Mike Stone is the man behind Oriton and his background in the military has led him to take a path of designing audio components (racks, cables and cones) with vibration control very much to the fore. Danny has [reviewed Oriton cables](#) in the past and very much enjoyed what they did.

The R33 Support System looks for all intents and purposes to be a regular and straight forward hi-fi rack, but look a little closer and you begin to see that first impressions can be deceptive. The pillars are made of carbon fibre, the whole thing is very light and each of the four removable shelves is isolated from the rack by four cones which allow the individual shelves to move around. The whole rack is quite wobbly and this was initially a bit of a worry, but it needn't have been – the R33 will happily take my not inconsiderable weight and once in situ and with kit on it it's certainly not going anywhere.

Putting the rack together was a simple enough affair but care is needed as tolerances are very tight, but fifteen minutes was all it took for me to have the rack ready for the kit it was going to be housing.

Finish on the rack is exemplary and whilst the yellow and black colour scheme I got may not be to everyone's taste I really loved how it looked. Mike tells me that other colours are in the pipeline and so those wanting a more subdued colour scheme will be well catered for.

There are a set of hefty spikes on the bottom of the rack which in turn sit on some specially made pucks and it's the spikes you adjust to get the whole rack level. Each of the spikes has a 4mm hole through it so you can stick in a suitable implement and adjust the level of the spikes so you get the rack dead even – actually I was able to turn the spikes quite easily by hand. Again the finish on the spikes is really first rate and they really add to the high-end feel of the rack. Fortunately I chose a spot that was pretty much level and so I didn't really need to adjust the spikes very much at all, but for the sake of completeness I can report that the whole procedure is really simple and straightforward.

You definitely get the feeling that the R33 has been designed from the ground up with no buying in of off the shelf items and, despite its very modern appearance, it really does exude a certain luxury and high-end feel to it – much in the same way that a

modern super car does. It may not be all polished wood and whatnot, but the modern materials used and the way they're put together lend it a feeling of being a quality item

Spacing of the shelves is not uniform (ie spaces between the shelves are not the same) as you can see from the photograph but you can set the rack up pretty much as you like to accommodate the equipment that you have and I'm sure that you can tell Oriton exactly what you want and they'll build something accordingly – I had the biggest shelf in

The Oriton rack certainly works, looks great and performs well, offering great isolation from negative external forces as well as offering a positive effect on overall sound quality.

the middle to accommodate the valve DAC... I put the Technics 1210 on top of the rack, then the CD player, then the DAC and I sat one of my power supplies on the very bottom shelf.

For the last twelve months I've had a turntable on a wall mounted shelf and the second turntable (the Technics 1210) has been on a IKEA type rack on suspended floorboards rendering it all but unusable unless everyone was told to sit down and not move whilst I was playing records on it – hardly an ideal situation with regards domestic harmony - and so I was keen to see how the R33 from Oriton would cope with the Techy sat on top. Walking around pretty heftily causes the rack to wobble quite bit but the needle refused to jump. Walking around the room normally you'd be forgiven for thinking the turntable was actually on a wall shelf and I couldn't detect any footfall at all through the headphones. Put the stylus on the record without the platter spinning, tap the turntable and you get the expected thud in the headphones, but tap the shelf the turntable is sat on and this thud is reduced a good deal. You need to tap the legs of the R33 quite hard to get a sound through the headphones at all with the stylus sat on the record and as I say I couldn't perceive normal footfall at all.

My kit is pretty well isolated from the loudspeakers as the electronics are in a different part of the room, but it would seem that the Oriton rack doesn't just limit external vibrations from reaching your equipment and it does seem to be doing something to

Reviews

the overall sound of kit placed on it to a greater or lesser extent. I'm suspecting but have no way of confirming that internal vibrations within the kit is being subdued somewhat.

The effect on other kit (CD Player and DAC) is less dramatic than with the turntable, but still very evident to my ears and I've listened long and hard to try and make sure this is an actual effect rather than "expectation bias". Bass frequencies appear to be somewhat tighter and the effect is one of there being an increase in definition of the stereo image... which has to be a good thing. On vocals there is an increase in the overall clarity and the stereo image (possibly as a result) seems to be more accurate. Taking the CD drive and the DAC on and off the shelf by way of experimentation, I'm convinced the effect of this tightening and increase in definition is very real and indeed positive to the overall sound.

Conclusion

The price of the Oriton R33 is to be confirmed but, given the materials used, the way that it is clearly very well thought out and put together and with its overall luxury feel, I doubt it is going to be bargain

basement fodder - I suspect it to be a major purchase for most given the price of units that purport to offer similar benefits. The R33 rack screams luxury in a high-tech and high-end kind of way.

The Oriton rack certainly works, looks great and performs well, offering great isolation from negative external forces as well as offering a positive effect on overall sound quality.

I couldn't test the efficacy of the R33 with amps and pre amps as my current kit just doesn't fit (both pre and amp are big and hot) but I'd certainly be keen to try having the amp sat on a purpose built version of the R33.

On the negative side (and for my specific purpose) the vertical rack format doesn't really work for me and I'd have liked to have seen a 3 shelf high unit made double (or triple) width, but keeping each individual shelf isolated from each other as they are now – but then not everyone is forever pulling kit and cables out of their rack as I am. I suppose an alternative would be two shorter units placed side by side.

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Astintrew Concord USB

by Danny Worth

The Astintrew Concord USB is a powered USB cable which uses a separate power supply for the 5v part of the USB.



The Astintrew Concord USB falls into the category of 'powered USB cables' utilising a separate power supply for the 5v portions of the cables inner conductors. Somewhat different to other USB leads of this nature the Astintrew has a patent which covers the power supply, which is quite intriguing and leaves one wondering about the exact technology utilised within the boundaries of the patents broader description. The cosmetics of the power supply itself are very appealing indeed, a fantastically well constructed design with quite beautiful lines. In the blurb from Astintrew it's stated that the power supply will sit

neatly at the rear of the rack or on the floor, I quite proudly had it sat next to the Mac so it was clearly visible on a shelf as it looked great. The cable which comes with the Concord is user

The Astintrew Concord USB falls into the category of 'powered USB cables' utilising a separate power supply for the 5v portions of the cables inner conductors.

selectable on purchase. There is an option to have what I would deem 'the standard' cable - which is a USB split into the two portions (data and power) with data connecting the music source direct to the DAC and the power having a DIN plug which firmly connects to the power supply.

Reviews

The other option available means you can use a USB cable of your choice. This consists of a short tail with a USB B type female socket to accommodate the existing cable, which serves data duties accompanied by the same power sectioned portion as previously for the power from the supply.

Each of the cables are thin and lightweight and are constructed from solid core copper, have a 1.5m length and are very well made and terminated ensuring ease of routing and placement of the power supply which has an IEC inlet for choice of power cable and length required.

Instruments sounded more developed than previously and were more finely textured

The Sound - using the Standard cable

First up I plugged the Astintrew Concord into my Mac using the 'standard' cable, fed into the Totaldac D1 Tube - I used a standard power cable. Creating a usual run of the mill playlist in Amarra

2.5 I sat back and began to have a quick listen not expecting much due to the unit being new and not burned-in yet.

Tones were nice and relaxed and unforced, there was an ease to the sound, a silky flow to the music and, most importantly, the nasty upper bass hump that the Mac has was smoothed out beautifully giving a far better balance to the sound overall. There was possibly a little more openness to come from the sound and I felt a bit more width and depth could be a plus point, so I left the Mac switched on with Amarra on repeat for four days in order to put about 100 hours on the unit before listening again.

So, four days later and time to listen again, I turned on the amp and walked away concerning myself with other "to do's" and allowed the amp to warm up for a little over an hour at a moderate to low volume.

Walking back into the room during Chris Jones' 'Angel From Montgomery' which is one of my favourites from the Moonstruck album, I was extremely pleased with the sound that presented itself.

Power in and power out for the Concord



Instruments sounded more developed than previously and were more finely textured than in the days before burn-in. A definite opening of the soundstage was apparent allowing for a better perception of depth and width. The overall tonal character remained the same - balanced, gentle and silky and best of all the bass hump was still nowhere to be heard.

Listening through more acoustic and vocal work from other artists was also a treat, with that midrange silkiness, good interaction between instruments and their recording surroundings and with an overall neutral and very open character. I was very much enjoying the Concord.

Gutsier vocals had a cleaner lower-mid to them with the Concord sounding more natural and truer.

There was also a better range of perceivable detail. Bass notes also had more detail and conveyed a more substantial layering effect after cleaning up of this dirtier area of the Macs presentation.

With the nature of its presentation becoming very apparent and even though not my first choice of music, I could imagine that the Astintrew would

be excellent with classical music. I have the odd album and compilation along with the option of Spotify, so I played some classical tracks and was correct in my assumption. Instruments once again had a natural timbre and reverb, soundstage placement was correct and dynamic transients were wonderful. The ease of approach the Concord has and it's openness really (and to my surprise) allowed dynamic shifts to slam, leaving smaller details to flow in open space with the timing being very much on point - no muddiness or confusion of layering in busier passages was audible and I felt if anything that the dirty power supply of the Mac itself would be only contributing a smallish percentage to what could be an even more engaging performance.

Using the Enhanced Digital Output software on the Squeezebox Touch (SBT) connected to the Totaldac I connected the Astintrew Concord. I thought that this would be an interesting test as the SBT already

uses a very high quality Paul Hynes power supply.

The midrange especially had an added openness and vocal depth was greater, the top end had a little more air and was actually a little bit smoother and refined but did seem a little sparklier with a cleaning up of grain. I didn't feel that the Concord had the same effect to the lower-mids and upper-bass as with the Mac, which was a blessing because it's already balanced and so thinning out of this area would have destroyed the whole balance of the sound for me.



Dan though the Concord too good looking to hide behind the rack

The Option Cable

There is a full review of the Tellurium Q Black Diamond USB published on Hifi Pig and being of a similar price this is a good comparison to the Astintrew Concord. They do have a different presentation, the Tellurium is more energetic, faster, punchier and upfront, but retains a great balance across its presentation, whereas the Concord although fantastically balanced also has an ease of character that washes over you and gives a more intimate appeal.

So what would these two flavours be like once combined?

Into play come the 'option' cable from Astintrew, the one which I mentioned before which can utilise a listeners own USB cable for the data side of things. Very interesting indeed, the combination of the two to my ears extracts more prominence in the smaller

Reviews

details of upper frequencies and a more robust and upfront midrange, with a stronger vocal. The bass hump of the Mac is still smoothed out nicely but there is a tiny bit more grunt to the lower end of male vocals. Bass detail and layering was still very similar to the Concord on its own and the intimacy was still there but had a little added spice.

During the course of the review I also tried a few aftermarket power cables I had on hand with the Concord and whilst these aren't the focus of this review all had an effect on the sound and I'd suggest that positive results can be had.

Conclusion

Personally I could live with any of the presentations mentioned in this review as they are all superior to many mid to high priced cables I have heard and all have a highly accomplished detailed presentation with slight characterisation differences... and in the world of hifi, like motor racing, small differences matter!

The Concord as standard is simply beautiful in its presentation and is a perfect match for most music

types except the most fierce of dance or rock. If you want a clean vocal and a strong rendition of instruments it's a fantastic cable. If you have a great USB cable already and want to enhance its detail and flow by taking away the dirt and hash of your computers power supply and motherboard noise then their is the option to suit. Even with my modded SBT and its power supply I found an improvement and so would expect this to be true with the likes of a MacBook or laptop running on battery.

The Astintrew Concord has an almost intelligent way of adding a subtlety of tone and ease of breath to other cables as well as to the sound as a whole in its own right. It can render instruments very well, smooth off a digital edge marvellously and convey a wonderfully intimate listen from a digital source. With a good looking power supply to show off in the rack, plenty of cable length and the ability to customise its presentation with a USB cable of choice I can see the Concord really becoming something of a standard in high end systems. Recommended for its intimate and natural attenuation of a digital source.



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Atoll seems to be little known outside their French homeland but Hifi Pig has always been impressed with the sound of their electronics when we've heard them at shows and so we thought it time to take closer listen... In this review Jerry Jacobs looks at the IN 200 integrated amplifier and the CD 200 CD player.



Atoll - due to the occasional but very positive online and magazine 'vibes' I'd picked up over the years, I'd had a hankering for quite a while to try some of their kit, but for some reason it just hadn't happened. Then I spotted an eBay auction for one of the early AM80 power amps, and soon it was firmly ensconced in my system ... and showing my beloved Krell KAV-250a power amp a thing or two about playing music! I was a bit surprised, to say the least.

Individually or together, the amp and CD player had a similar sonic signature and undoubtedly worked extremely well when paired. There was

So I was on the old email pronto to suggest to Stu (Mr Hifi Pig) that some current Atoll kit may well be of interest for a review. A handful of emails were exchanged with Atoll-GB and some Atoll Electronique-labelled boxes soon arrived.

With the commendable philosophy of providing

"reasonably priced true high-end audio electronics for budget-conscious audiophiles" Atoll was founded in September 1997 by 2 brothers, Stéphane & Emmanuel Dubreuil and is based in Brecey, Normandy, France.

Atoll's product line is quite extensive, and includes 5 integrated amplifiers, starting with the 50wpc IN30. The IN200 SE reviewed here being part of the Prestige range. Digital streamers and AV equipment are also available.

Similarly, there are several CD players, and optional boards are available allowing USB and coaxial digital inputs to access the onboard digital to analog converter (DAC).

UK prices are currently set at £1495 for both IN200 SE amp and CD200 SE-2 CD player, and start at around £400 for the IN30 amp.

There is also a "high end" range called Gamme or 400 Series, priced at around £4,000 per component. The styling of these is

rather more adventurous than the rectangular boxes of the mid-priced range, and I am sure the intention is to provide sonics of even higher fidelity. I've not heard these, but given the fine performance of the lower-priced range, I would be very interested in doing so!

Reviews

The IN200 SE integrated amp

With MOSFET output devices, this solid state integrated amp is a bit of a powerhouse, providing up to 120wpc (8 ohms) and 200wpc into a 4 ohm load.

Available with black or silver faceplates, this is a solidly made substantial piece of gear and quite attractive in a conventional rectangular box kind of way. A finishing touch that greatly appealed to me were the ventilating grille holes on the top panel of the amp; a swirling array of small circular holes, very nice!

Five single-ended inputs are provided (one of which can be modified to access an optional phonostage), one tape loop, a home theatre bypass (to access the power section directly without passing through the volume control) and two pre-outs. Unusually, the IN200 SE also has a balance control (this is not accessible from the remote control, though).

Usefully, but sadly rarely seen these days, there is a (6.3mm) headphone socket lower left corner of front fascia controlled by the amp's volume knob. Output to the speakers is muted when the jack is inserted.

The display can be dimmed (3 settings) or turned off altogether.

The CD200 SE-2 CD player

This uses a TEAC drawer and laser mechanism designed purely for audio purposes. The drawer action is solid and purposeful, none of the shaky quickfire jerkiness sometimes encountered.

A BURR-BROWN PCM1794 d-a converter chipset is used providing 24bits/192 kHz and 8x oversampling.

A stereo pair of RCA outputs is accompanied by a

RCA digital output. As mentioned, an option is available to access the onboard DAC by adding USB and co-ax digital input sockets.

Unlike the IN200 SE amp, the display cannot be dimmed or turned off. The middle dimmer setting on the amp is a very close match.

Usefully, the remote handset provided could control both the amp and the CD player.

Sonics

Individually or together, the amp and CD player had a similar sonic signature and undoubtedly worked extremely well when paired. There was definitely a lot of positive synergy at work here.

Where these Atoll components excel is in midrange and treble resolution and transparency - vocals are crystal clear, higher frequency percussion is superbly rendered, and complex musical mixes are unravelled with genuinely excellent lucidity and articulation. Quite exceptionally so when price is considered.

The Buggles' Age of Plastic album has wonderful clarity and presence with the Atoll gear, and the separation of the vocals from the supporting electronic mix saw me with a huge grin on my face - to be honest, in many ways I've never heard it this well portrayed before. Quite stunning. Thankfully, the transparency is not artificially enhanced by hyping up the treble response; the high frequencies are clean and pure and are a pleasure to listen to.

The Buggles album also highlights one of the relative shortcomings of the Atoll equipment reviewed here - it doesn't have the deepest, grippiest bass I have heard. It's pretty good and has moderate slam and control, but there is a bit of an added gently softening bloom. Some listeners may well like this,



but in my view the real joy of this equipment lies further up the frequency spectrum. But, realistically, you cannot have everything, especially with what must be regarded as mid-price components.

Loreena McKennitt's Parallel Dreams album again highlights the Atoll pairings superb lucidity in vocal music, and it's commendable lack of confusion when the music has many simultaneous interwoven strands. It also shows up another slight limitation - the soundstage is of only moderate depth. The track Breaking the Silence doesn't throw the almost holographically 3D soundstage that can be obtained - usually with much more expensive equipment! Left to right (lateral) imaging is excellent and clearly benefits from the top class resolution that the Atoll components provide, but for some reason front to rear separation is a bit truncated. It's not at all bad, actually it's pretty good, but it can be improved on.

Excellent sound and equally excellent value for money are to be had with both the Atoll CD200 SE-2 and IN200 SE.

Component Matching

I'm usually a 'mix & match' kind of audiophile, happy to have each component in a system from a different manufacturer, so long as it's synergistically done and is enjoyable to listen to! But I might make an exception here. The Atoll amplifier and CD player really do complement each other well - considering the very reasonable prices asked, there is exceptional transparency to be had in the mid and high frequency bands and I would be wary of pairing either item with another brand for fear of diluting this.

A little care is probably also needed so as not to combine the explicit midrange and treble of the Atoll equipment with a loudspeaker that is on the forward and bright side of neutral - the combination may be a bit much and result in a tiring sound.

Comparisons

The slightly higher priced Roksan Caspian M2 integrated amp that I reviewed a while back for Hifi Pig provides an excellent example of an alternative approach to amplifier voicing. The

Roksan's presentation is funky and upbeat, with grippy bass and real slam across the frequency range, and a way with rhythms that just propels the music along. Great for some music, but, for me, lacking in subtlety and finesse for less upbeat musical genres.

So - bring on the Atoll IN200 SE!

With the Atoll amp everything is a bit more evenhanded. The rather 2 dimensional imaging of the Roksan is improved upon by a subtler and more insightful rendition of the recorded acoustic, although as previously mentioned, more can be had in this respect. The truly excellent high resolution in the Atoll midrange and treble gives a startling and subtle insight into vocals and higher frequency percussion, for example.

But does the Atoll amp re-arrange your internal organs and have you stomping your feet to dubstep rhythms in the way the Roksan can? Well, no - it really is a case of horses for courses. It would be very interesting to hear what the top range Gamme / 400 Series of Atoll components

provides - the very fine sounding mid-price units reviewed here would certainly form an excellent foundation for a true high end range - at the cost, of course, of nearly tripling the prices!

Summary

Excellent sound and equally excellent value for money are to be had with both the Atoll CD200 SE-2 and IN200 SE.

If bass-led musical genres are your main interest, the Atoll equipment adds a bit of low frequency bloom, and you can get better grip and control elsewhere. But for pretty much any other music, the exceptional levels of midrange and treble resolution of these Atoll Electronique components and their ability to deftly handle all the complexities that music can throw at them should most certainly qualify them to be on your audition list.

Review system: MBL 116F speakers ; Vincent CD S7 CD Player; Restek Challenger integrated amp, Krell KAV-250a power amp, Restek Consens pre-amp.

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LessLoss DFPC Signature Power Cables

by Danny Worth



LessLoss Audio is an American/Lithuanian based company headed by Louis Motek and a team of individuals who are extremely passionate - bordering on bonkers about audio! The LessLoss website has enough technical information, graphs and tables about their products to give even Steven Hawkings a headache!

Louis comes across as an extremely personable guy, friendly and easy to chat to, but if you get him started he will blind you with science in a matter of minutes (well he does me), all with absolute relevance to his products, tried and tested methods behind the technology utilised, not to mention other tweaks and experiments he will have you doing.

Not being of a techy/geeky nature as such, well not to Louis extent, I will provide you guys with the key information on the cables and proceed to conveying their sonic signature.

The Products Under Review

Louis sent over a few of each range of power cables for me to have a play with, the DFPC Original, DFPC Signature and the DFPC Reference. For this review I'm going to be concentrating on their middle of the road DFPC Signatures \$1152 1m, further reviews

of the cables either side of these will be published later in the year.

Bling bling is the sound of the doorbell when the courier arrives with these American lovelies! The cables are extremely sexy and exceptionally substantial. Made up of four conductors each in a separate outer braid and weave which is perfectly symmetrical and finished by hand to a very high degree.

I will add that the Signatures are made up of three large cross sectioned solid core copper, doubled for the live, and single for the neutral. Looking a little dominated by its partners there is a fourth 6mm cross section conductor of a similar type for earth duties.

LessLoss opt for Oyaide at each end and a Furutech 1363 on the UK version of the cable as Oyaide still to this day have not manufactured a UK power plug – why, I have no idea!

So you can now imagine the considerable size of the Signatures! Each one I received was 1.5m and to be honest I expected them to weigh a little more than they actually did. The flexibility of the cable is fantastic and very unexpected, as soon as I looked at them in their packaging my immediate thoughts were “oh Christ I'm going to have problems here!” But it

simply wasn't the case at all.

Burning In

I placed all four Signatures into my system at the outset and had an initial listen. First impressions were pretty good, nice detail, deeply layered mids and an informative bass.

Soundstage width was good and there was nice harmonics outside of the speaker boundaries. An overall ease to the nature of the sound, a little gentle in the bass but extended.

I left three cables in my system, one for the mains block and one each on the Totdac and SqueezeBox Touch to burn in while I had some household DIY to get on with. The fourth was removed altogether and placed onto the television. There was no way I was going to leave the valve amp on for any long period of time (imagine the electricity bill) and my other half watches so much

TV I thought it would probably burn in before the other three!

Every few days I would take the fourth cable and plug it back into the amp and have a listen to the system briefly. After about 75 hours the cables opened up further revealing more expression to the midrange

The Signatures made good work of the extension in bass, again a little gentler or easier in the upper bass but informative nonetheless.

and air in the upper registers and after about 150 hours the bass began to fill out further too. A matter of about two weeks in total passed by before I sat down to have what I would call my final listening days where I noticed a greater liquidity to the midrange and a slightly more fleshed out upper-bass lower-mid. Top-end was a little more atmospheric



Great quality connectors add to the quality feel of this cable from LessLoss



The conductors of the LessLoss cable close up.

The midrange has a sense of liquidity, the upper frequencies are fleshed out and controlled, with good insight into a layered performance

and controlled but during these days of critical listening I really didn't notice any further changes.

The Sound

Playing Loreena McKennitt's 'Raglan Road' it was immediately clear that the midrange of the Signatures were highly developed, her vocal sits back in the soundstage and has a strong projection of width which can be localised from its source point in the performance. Her tones were very liquid and silky and the upper registers had a quality of control that gripped me into the performance. The album is of a live performance and the atmospheric presence of the stage could be felt - airy and spacious.

Contrasting her vocal with a male artist such as Nils Logren and the 'Acoustic Live' album, the fleshed out lower-midrange is expressed very naturally indeed and the liquidity heard previously didn't wash over his tonal character.

The speed and attack of Nils' guitar solo in 'Keith Don't Go' highlighted a strong degree of control in

the upper frequencies and the layering of decay on notes where a fresh note started was easily heard. I felt I have heard the guitar with a little more richness to lower notes in the past, maybe a slightly more accentuation of cabinet tone on a lower notes, but the ease of presentation across the board made for such an interesting and harmonically complex listen focus was drawn primarily to other areas of the music.

Chris Jones' 'Angel From Montgomery' is one of the most addictive of tracks for me, an extremely musical and enjoyable piece which is actually fairly complex in micro details and harmonic artifacts on a nice system, it's one of these songs you can have a good singalong to when busy with something else, but when you sit down and really analyse it, it has

some good key aspects to use for auditioning components. The Signatures made good work of the extension in bass, again a little gentler or easier in the upper bass but informative nonetheless. Chris' vocal comes across wonderfully with the enhancement the cable adding to the quality of midrange sculpture. The cable also seems to extract a certain magic from the ambiance of the recording, helping to give a natural nature and almost lifelike take on the music.

I haven't mentioned a black background in this review and have just thought about this, I don't believe there is one, or one that stands out to me. What there is though is a lifelike atmosphere instead, not noise as such rather an organic sense that something is clearly heard or not. Don't get me wrong, there are quiet passages in the music, but there's always that sense that the music is alive.

I went on to play a variety of dance music to look further into the bass. Playing music from Tiesto, Mikado and Armin Van Buren gave good slap and kick to the music. Firm bass registered, as did extended

bass notes, but there wasn't a real solid driving force to the sound at lower levels, crank up the wick and the cleanliness, pace and kick of those upper bass registers were fantastic, a real metallic feel. Ambient harmonics and dynamics were great and the processed nature of the music really showed off the layering ability of the Signatures.

Listening to some of the big film soundtracks from the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra the Signatures displayed a window to each instrument that was never closed and allowed for reverbs and decay from the neighbouring musicians to wash through with me noting that complexity of rhythm and structure is a key accomplishment of the LessLoss cables. Cymbals shimmered and were well controlled with the first hit but had enough presence to loosen and dissipate the sound correctly. Large dynamic shifts (in bass especially) sat across the performance rather than explode in height and confusion which linked nicely with the atmospheric presence.

Conclusions

The LessLoss DFPC Signature Power Cables have a sonic signature of ease and stability; they open a window to individual portions of the music yet still remain locked on to the performance as a whole. The midrange has a sense of liquidity, the upper frequencies are fleshed out and controlled, with good insight into a layered performance and there's good extension to the bass leaving me to conclude that these are indeed an extremely well accomplished cable. I would have liked to be presented with all of this and a little more driving force in the upper bass regions, however there is a wonderful sense of musicality as a whole and a great sense of connection to the music.

The cables look and feel great are very well made and you do feel that pride of ownership when you have one in your hand.

All in all I personally thoroughly enjoyed them and would recommend them for their natural ease of presentation, musical insight and build quality.



LessLoss in the mains distribution block.



Getting straight to the point, I was impressed. I very much enjoyed using these cables in my system and they suit my own preference in sonic presentation well.

hi-fi+

Jade Audio's cables are sensitive and delicate souls, not exactly built for the studio. This is a deliberate move on the part of Jade Audio, because the company feels over-engineering of the cable would undermine the performance it gets.

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[Resonessence Labs Concero DAC](#)
[Audio4Soul Xtreme 16](#)
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[Totaldac D1-tubedac](#)
[Longdog Audio VDt1 DAC](#)
[AMI Musik DDH-1 DAC and Headphone Amplifier](#)
[Q N K T C AB - 1.2 DAC](#)
[Resonessence Labs Herus Headphone amp/DAC](#)

Cables

[RFC 'Reference Mercury' Interconnect Cables](#)
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[Black Rhodium "Twist" Speaker Cables Part 1, Part 2](#)
[Black Rhodium Interconnect Cables - Opus, Rhythm, Prelude & Symphony](#)
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[Neutral Cable - Fascino Interconnects](#)
[Neutral Cable - Fascino Power Cables](#)
[Orion Diamond Red and Symphony Orange Interconnects](#)
[Graditech Kide Digital, Kide3 Interconnects and Lumi3 Speaker Cables](#)
[Chord Crimson VEE 3, Cobra VEE3, Chameleon VEE 3 Interconnects](#)
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ALL REVIEWS

Album Reviews

Loleatta Holloway - Queen of the Night (Expanded Edition) BBR

Even if you've been living under a rock for the last 35 years or so you must have heard either some of Loleatta Holloway's disco charged tunes or at the very least one of the many tunes that sample her ... "Love Sensation" anyone?



"Queen of the Night" was first released in '78 on Gold Mind/Salsoul records and was Holloway's follow up to her '76 breakthrough album for the label "Loleatta". Here we find it re-released on Big Break Records with a trio of extra mixes (the 12" Disco and Disco Madness mixes of the album's opening tune "Catch Me on the Rebound" and the 12" disco mix of "I May Not Be There When You Want Me (But I'm Right On Time)."

The album opens up with the infectious "Catch Me on the Rebound" and this sets the tone for the rest of the album (the bass line is a killer!) and is pure D.I.S.C.O of the very highest order – strings, that bass line, fabulous percussion and of course Holloway's diva vocal soaring over the top.

Philadelphia's Norman Harris, who's on production duties on this record, catches the feel of disco perfectly and it's none stop uplifting dancefloor madness all the way with the exception of "Only You", "You Light My Fire" and "I'm in Love" that take the lights down low and bring on the end of the night smoochers.

OK, I'm a sucker for disco grooves, and particularly anything with the Salsoul Orchestra, but this is an album that just oozes sleazy disco sexiness and is made all the more worthwhile by the inclusion of the extensive sleeve-notes by Stephen SPAZ Schnee and the extended mixes - the 12" Disco Mix of "Catch Me..." is an absolute belter with it's prolonged percussion breaks...the Disco Madness mix is a bit special too!

Charo - Cuchi Cuchi (Expanded Edition) BBR

Charo, or Maria del Rosario Mercedes Pilar Martinez Molina Baeza as her parents would have known her, is a Spanish-American singer,



actress, comedienne and flamenco guitarist well known back in the day for her somewhat flamboyant style and her catchphrase "Cuchi-Cuchi" ('Cuchi' is a Spanish slang term for a woman's genitals. However, Spanish speaking countries often have local dialect for the term. In Venezuela, it refers to something pleasing to the eye." Thanks Ask.com). She's done films, television (she was a regular on The Love Boat by all accounts but that was all before my time)... and she was voted Best Flamenco Guitarist by Guitar Player Magazine...TWICE!

"Let's Spend the Night Together" which is all a bit Margarita Pracatan

"Cuchi – Cuchi" is Charo's first album and is recorded alongside the amazing Salsoul Orchestra and was released on the Salsoul label in '77 and is about to see its re-release on Big Break Records where it's been remastered and comes with extra mixes and sleeve-notes.

The album was recorded at Sigma Sound Studios in Philadelphia with Salsoul Orchestra's leader Vince Montana taking on production, mixing, arranging and some playing duties.

The opening tune "Dance a Little Bit Closer" is a pure disco tune with Charo's thick Spanish accented English language vocals over the top – it's fun and it's great. Next up is a version of the Stones' "Let's Spend the Night Together" which is all a bit Margarita Pracatan if you take it seriously, but it's got a real Latin tinge to it and you can't help but like it – it's also got a classic Salsoul break down at around two minutes.

"Borriquito" has Charo singing in her native Spanish and she implores us to dance the Flamenco Disco and again it's all a bit "French Campsite After Far Too Many Whiskey Cocas" (don't ask) but all this is forgiven if you take it at face value, lose your inhibitions and get into it. "Speedy Gonzalez" – you'll know the tune I'm sure - is fabulous in its kitsch kind of way and then comes the title track "Cuchi-Cuchi" which is a great big slice of disco pie with Charo's Superwhip vocals smothered all over the top of it.

The remix of "Dance a Little Bit Closer" and (the brilliant) remix of "Cuchi – Cuchi" are well worth the effort but I could have taken or left the final Xmasy track "Mamacita Donde Esta Santa Claus?"

Grab a great big spoon and fill your face!

Leon Haywood - Naturally (Expanded Edition) Universal Music /Verve

Like me, the name Leon Haywood may well be a new one to you but don't let that stop you from reading further because this one is a bit of a hidden gem. Haywood is best known for his crossover hit "I Want'a Do Something Freaky To You" from 1975 which has been sampled by Public Enemy, Dr Dre, Redman, Aaliyah, 50 Cent, Mariah Carey and others.



He was born in Houston, Texas and he's had a pretty wide and varied musical career including him accompanying Guitar Slim on piano when he was still a teenager, playing keyboards in Sam Cooke's band and playing on a number of one hit wonder bands' tunes. His first solo hit on Decca records was "It's Got To Be Mellow" which reached the giddy heights of #21 in 1967.

So from an artist that I'd heard nothing about previously I was a little taken aback to hear that Naturally was actually his ninth studio album, was originally released in 1980 on the Century Fox label and was at the time his most successful release reaching #22 in the R&B charts.

The album kicks off with "Don't Push It, Don't Force It" which is five and a half minutes of mid tempo funk with a great bass line, horn stabs, a fab chorus and it's no surprise that this tune reached #12 in the UK chart. The album's opener sort of sets the tone for the rest of the album and that's no bad thing...the only track that doesn't follow this funkacious groove is the epic and soulful "Love Is What We Came Here For". There's even a proto-rap on Lover's Rap which is an early style rap laid over a funky as hell groove.

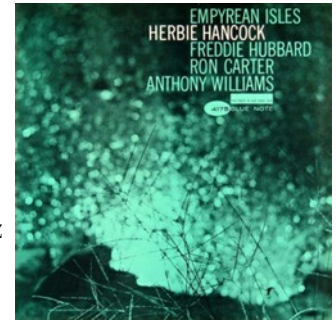
Track of the album is a difficult one as they're all of the "winner winner funky chicken dinner" variety but "Don't Push It..." and "That's What Time It Is" (the story of a man weighed down with bills and hardships who decides that he's "Gonna dance dance all night long").

This is a very very good record indeed and one that will be getting a good deal of play here. It's reminiscent of a lot of things (listen and you'll pick out what folk's have nicked from it) and you can certainly hear that Haywood's influence has been taken up by a whole load of modern recording artists. This is the first time it's been available on CD and all power to BBR for making it available to a new generation of funkateers. The sleeve

notes are pretty interesting and there are four bonus tracks on the CD so it's pretty good value too.

Herbie Hancock - "Empyrean Isles" Blue Note

Empyrean Isles was recorded in 1964, released on the Blue Note label, established Hancock as a serious artist and is now available on hi rez format (this copy came from HighRes Audio in Germany)



The album contains two of Hancock's most famous compositions – "One Finger Snap" and the brilliant "Cantaloupe Island" which is one of my favourite tunes of all time.

Recorded by Rudy Van Gelder, players on the album are Herbie Hancock on piano, Freddie Hubbard on cornet, Ron Carter on bass and Tony Williams on drums and all push themselves to their limits.

"One Finger Snap" opens with the album and is really fine soul-jazz with the real standouts being Hancocks superbly dextrous piano and Hubbard's cornet. The drum beat is fast, infectious and relentless before it breaks to a solo at around the six minute mark. Whether you like soul-jazz/hard-bop or not I defy anyone to listen to this tune and not tap their feet. Here, on the 24/96 version there's a real insight into the recording space and the drums in particular have a real snap to them.

"Oliloqui Valley" (sampled by Eric B. and Rakim on their 1990 "Untouchables" tune) is more of the same fast and frantic style and the standout part of this song for me is the bass break at about 5'30" which is just fantastic only adding to the whole funkiness of the tune.

The aforementioned Cantaloupe Island (sampled on a tune I used to hammer whilst Djing, (Us3 "Cantaloop (Flip Fantasia)") is a real tour de force with its unremitting funky and repetitive piano line with searing cornet over the top. This is less frantic than One Finger Snap or Oliloqui Valley but no less toe tapping. The beat drops in and out with different musicians being given the spotlight from time to time, but then there's a slight hesitation in the timing and the beat is back with a vengeance. Without a doubt one of the greatest records ever recorded and if you don't know it you really should go out and buy it now!

Album Reviews

“The Egg” is the album's final track and starts off with a piano riff that is repeated and repeated over the beat with cornet over the top. Hancock plays around with this piano riff with it becoming more and less recognisable in parts throughout. There is some great interplay between piano and cornet. Of all the four songs on the album “The Egg” is the most challenging musically but it still works very well as a piece of music. The (broken) beat comes and goes and each musician is given solo parts that pull the work together - the bass solo is particularly interesting and mournful, as is the piano part in places. This tune is certainly pretty far out there with regards to experimentation and cool improvisation but, as I say, it works as a whole piece.

The recording of the album is fabulous and really does demonstrate why a good hifi is essential when listening to music – the drum solo on The Egg at around 12 minutes is superb on a dynamic system. The hi-rez format plays to this and it's been a real pleasure to hear this record again.

Ella Fitzgerald and Count Basie - “Ella and Basie” Universal Music /Verve

Recorded in 1963 and released in July of the same year on the Verve label (and then later in 97 where there were extra tracks) this is Ella Fitzgerald and the Count Basie Orchestra with Quincy Jones being responsible for the arrangements (Fitzgerald later worked with Jones on the 1989 “Back on the Block”) and with production credits going to Norman Granz. Ella and Basie had worked together previously on just one occasion on the 1957 record “On the Sunny Side of the Street”.

Let me say that the first thing I thought when listening to this hi-rez version from High Res Audio was how spot on and modern the recording was and I'm becoming a bit of a convert of this digital format it has to be said...there's a real opening up of the sound and soundstage for me.

I'm sure many will know this album and many of the tunes therein. It kicks off with a the Fats Waller/Andy Razaf tune “Honeysuckle Rose” with an absolutely glorious arrangement and Ella's scat style adding a great touch to the tune. This is big band jazz and whilst it may

well be from 1963 it doesn't seem at all dated and that is indeed true for the rest of the album.

“Deed I Do” is another standard, this time from 1926 with Fred Rose on music and Walter Hirsch on lyric duties. The Ink Spots “Into Each Life Some rain Must fall” comes next and without listing all the tracks and their composers let's just say that the album is crammed with Jazz standards that will have you singing along with abandon.

Standouts are “Dream a Little Dream of Me” which has an organ (Basie) that could have been recorded yesterday, Duke Ellington's (et al) “I'm Beginning to See the Light” from 1944 and another Fats Waller tune “Ain't Misbehavin”...you know them all don't you!

Actually to pick out a standout from this collection of timeless classics is a bit unfair as there really isn't a bad tune on here.

Ella's vocal is astounding with a purity of tone that is as smooth as silk and her occasional scat on this record is terrific. Her vocal is complemented perfectly by the band behind her and whilst clearly a showcase for her voice, the arrangements and musicianship are tremendous. There's a real power to the music when the musicians are called to give it and yet delicacy too like when the gentle strum of a guitar comes in on “Satin Doll”.

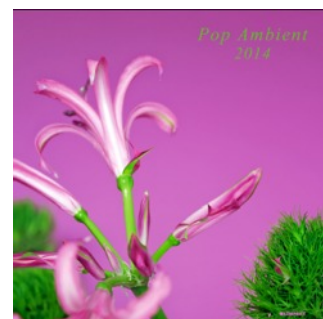
This kind of big band swing has certainly had its heyday but this particular recording has stood the test of time perfectly and I'd argue that it remains as fresh, exciting, dynamic and ‘get up and dance’ today as it must have sounded in the ballrooms of yesteryear.

Various - Pop Ambient Kompakt

Out 27th January on the Kompakt label Pop Ambient 2014 is the 14th instalment of this series of albums presided over by label head honcho Wolfgang Voigt.

Pop Ambient kicks off with “The God of Pads” Ulf

Lohmann who's had a six year hiatus and it would appear he's back in fine form with the wonderfully dreamy “Sicht” and the tune that finishes off the record PCC. Both are majestic offerings that carry you along on a wave of lush pads and are an apt pairing to open and close this album.



Mikkel Metal's "Patience" introduces percussion and beats of sorts with slightly disturbing noisescapes over the top – this is a little reminiscent of a lite version of Ben Folds' "By the Throat" album in that it explores similar territories only in a less menacing way.

Marsen Jules' is a regular on the Pop Ambient collections and here we are offered up "The Philosophers Trap", a stark yet beautiful piece of music which drifts this way and has a feeling of urban landscapes and wandering through them late at night.

Cologne Tape could be described as a bit of a Kraut-electronics supergroup made up as it is of Michaela Dippel, Axel Willner, Jorg Burger, Philipp Janzen, Jens-Uwe Beyer, Volker Pannes, John Harten and Daniel Daniel Ansorge (and other friends) and their contribution to Pop Ambient, "Moorpark" is a glassy, repetitive number that is all too short at just 2'35'.

Simon Scott's "Fur Betty" loops and loops and to me is oddly evocative of George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord" - it sounds nothing like it, but the effected vocal loop really does bring it to mind for some reason.

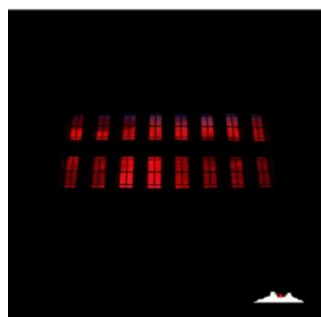
The Bionaut (Jorg Burger), famous for "Everybody's Kissing Everyone" from the early 90s is present and correct with a haunting remix of the 1992 Aquamarine and it's a lovely thing indeed with its ephemeral vocal, luxuriant pads and layer upon layer of sounds that come together to produce a gorgeous melange. This could well be a taste of what can be expected from his upcoming Triola album out in the spring.

Wolfgang Voigt is represented here twice, once as himself and the tune Ruckerzauberung 8 and once on remix duties with his Gas hat on (it's first outing since 2008) remixing The Field's "Cupid's Head". His own tune is seven minutes of building pads and loops echoing in on themselves to give a slightly ominous and shadowy effect, whilst the remix of Cupid's Head still maintains all of the originals splendour but with a much more ambient and dreamy quality to it.

There's not a record on here that isn't truly great and it's the perfect record to put on after a stressful day and drift away on the ebb and flow of lush electronica.

Dusty Kid - III

Well this is certainly a good deal of music for your money with Dusty Kid's third album coming in at round about the two hours mark



spread over two CDs which are limited to just 1000 copies on the Isolade label.

III is interestingly mixed with the use of vintage consoles and everything being recorded on to reel-to-reel tape to give the finished product a distinctly dirty and lo-fi feel to it and this is apparent from the off with the opening track "Crepuscularis" where a grimy and distorted kick lay the foundations for more deformed sonic shapes thrown over the top. It's dark and menacing but the strings over the top lift it a little - as if there is hope rising from the burned ashes of a destroyed future city.

It's meant to be listened to in one sitting and has been conceived as a single piece of music, so strap yourself in cos it's gonna get bumpy.

This is not safe music, it's music created to evoke an inner panic

The first five tracks of CD1 continue the dark, sinister and disturbing vein with the five tracks merging into one another with an underpinning head-nodding, mid-tempo kick. This is not safe music, it's music created to evoke an inner panic and yet there are some beautiful moments in it such as half way through the 15 minute third track where it breaks down, before heading off in an absolutely fantastic acid attack and then getting all cinematic and stately again towards the end and into another track of head down techno ("Raww Oohmmm"). "He Won't Let You In" finishes off the opening "suite" of tracks with a Spatik groove and then we're into "Leather Bears Cinematic Suite" made up in a video game style with names relating to levels 1-5 ("Doom", "Flames", "Pandemonium", "Dark Room" and "Exit 24"). The style of the music is the same mid-tempo distorted kick with mad acid flourishes ("Flames") and funky mentalism ("Dark Room"). By the time you get to the "Exit 24" you do feel like you've passed through a trial of some kind.

CD 2 is pretty much more of the same. Track 2 ("Yota Wave") is a tremendous tune and had it been around in the early '90s when I was djing it would have been hammered to death in the clubs. "Prelude" is a beautifully atmospheric tune to get lost in and is really uplifting with its strings. "Omega Y" feels like an opening for the fantastic air punching, bouncing in the air "Omega X". The last three tracks move us through to the final track "Ending" which gentle comedown of a track.

Very much recommended. Available now as a download and in February on CD.

Scott Berry is a US-born audio engineer and the founder and owner of Computer Audio Design (CAD). The company's debut product, the 1543 DAC, won the 'best-sounding hi-fi room' at the UK's largest hi-fi show - Bristol Sound and Vision 2013 - against hundreds of well-established brands. He takes time out to answer Hifi Pig's Behind the Brands Questions



Your History

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

I graduated in 1989 with a BSc in electrical engineering and one of the main reasons I got into engineering was my interest in audio. My first job out of college was at an audio testing agency, which gave me a head start when I started Computer Audio Design (CAD) about three years ago.

I worked at Tektronix (the oscilloscope company) and then Xerox in R&D and manufacturing. I started working on DAC design a few years ago and then decided to make my product available to fellow music lovers.

Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?

I always followed what Nelson Pass and Helmut Brinkmann were doing; I have met Helmut a couple times now and use his amplifiers.

Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?

Our first audio event was at the UK's biggest hi-fi show last year: Bristol Sound and Vision, 2013. It was our first show and we were debuting our first product, the 1543 DAC, so we were understandably a bit nervous. However, following a visit from the Clarity Alliance (formerly BADA – the British Audio Dealers Association) show judges, we later learned that we had won the 'best-sounding hi-fi room' against 140 established hi-fi brands — I couldn't believe it!

I have spent many, many years on the R&D of the 1543 DAC and to get the best sound in show against all those established brands who have had experience of exhibiting and playing music at shows for decades, well, that was my proudest moment!

You and your system

What was your very first system?

With the money I earned from my first job in High School, I bought a huge Pioneer receiver and then a Nakamichi 480 cassette deck. I then made my first speakers.

Tell us about your system history

My first serious system consisted of one of the first Naim Nait integrated amps, a Rega Planar 2 and Linn Kan speakers. In the USA in the 1980s, nothing I heard came close to what Naim, Rega and Linn were producing, so those three companies got the share of my money for many years. I developed the 1543 DAC using my wife's old Naim 180 amplifier that I modified (slightly)!

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

My Linn Kan Speakers. They were great in smaller rooms.

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

I think the Nelson Pass First Watt SIT-1 Mono Amplifiers are the best amplification I have heard. Unfortunately, they only put out 10 watts each so you need an extremely efficient speaker to get the best out of them.

Tell us about your current system(s)

I have, of course, the 1543 DAC. It is connected directly to a pair of Brinkmann Mono Amplifiers that drive a pair of Dynaudio C1 speakers. I have many computers as sources, both Mac and PC, but my reference is a brand new product (which hasn't even been announced or press released yet) and will debut at this year's Bristol Sound Vision show (2014). It's a new type of dedicated transport called the CAD Computer Audio Transport (CAT). It has been designed to complement the 1543 DAC, providing consumers with a complete high-quality computer audio source component.

The CAT, when used with the 1543 DAC, has been designed to provide the best-sounding source component possible. I have used all my skills to produce this transport and it is pretty special. CAD is also launching another new product at Bristol, the CAD cable, which is a high-performance USB cable of my own design. I have been working on it for almost two years now and I have a couple patents pending on it, so I am pretty proud of it. My other system RCA interconnects include Townshend F1 Fractals, or The Chord Company's excellent Sarum Tuned ARAY. Speaker cables are either Townshend Isolda, Tellerium Q Ultra Black, or The Chord Company's new Epic Reference.



Behind the Brands

The state of the industry

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

I think it makes a lot of sense. I believe that simpler circuitry provides better sound. Many tube products have a sound that to my ears, is just more natural. Maybe it's not! But who cares? — if it works for you that is all that matters. More people need to hear how good a single-ended tube amp can sound.

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?

One of the reasons I call my company Computer Audio Design, or CAD for short, is because I believe the future of music will be directly linked to computers. It is already happening: so much music is available by download or streaming and it all requires a computer (in some form) to function. There is a huge movement of small companies producing high-quality playback software for ridiculously low prices. The next thing is computer hardware designed for audio. There are already companies producing products that have a very low cost in audio terms, that make a real difference in sound quality.

It is my belief that the best sound quality that we will ever hear will come from a computer-based system and that these systems will cost substantially less than what we currently pay. I think better sound, lower price and more convenience is what the future holds for the audio industry.

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

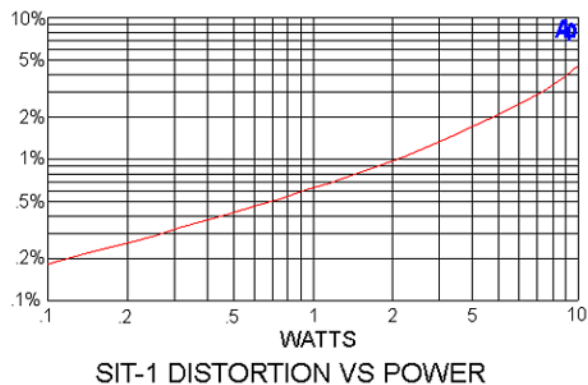
The audio industry has been through some tough times. How many shops have gone under in the last 10 years? — we probably all know of at least a couple. The industry needs something new to get customers excited

about sound quality. The iPod brought convenience, but lost the quality. From what I have seen the age group of people interested in higher-quality sound is well over 40, unless you look at computer based audio. The industry needs to bring out some new exciting technology that gets customers enthusiastic again.

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

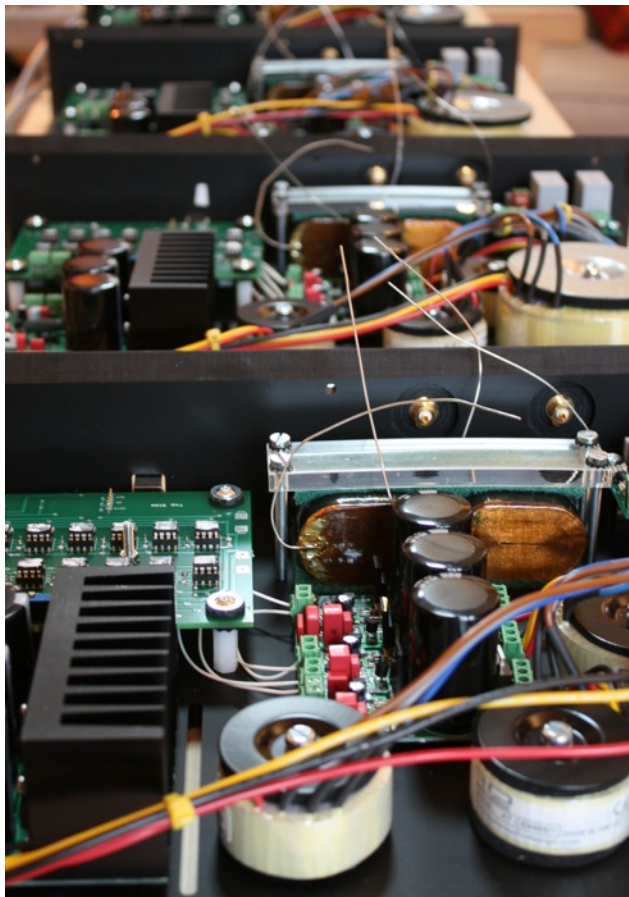
I get in a lot of trouble every time I say this, but I am not all that interested in measurements — they only tell *part* of the story. I do, of course, have all the oscilloscopes and spectrum

analyzers, etc. after all, this is where my career started, but some of the best-sounding products I have heard do not measure all that well. Take a look at the First Watt SIT-1:



Just under 5% distortion at 10 watts!

I listen for naturalness, non-fatiguing sound, low noise floor, speed, rhythm (foot-tapping), soundstage and emotional impact. There are countless examples of audio



products that sound incredible but don't measure that well. Valve amplifiers are a case in point.

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

I think I just answered this! :)

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

A smaller two-way mini monitor works for me and there's a huge amount of support for this approach out in the audio community and even within the press.

It's all about the music, man...

What is your favourite recording?

It changes all the time! At the moment, it's John Martyn with *Solid Air*.

Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings

Cowboy Junkies: *Studio* or *Acoustic Junk* single-mic recordings are superb; great space and sound staging. Damian Rice: *O* is good for seeing how well a system lets you 'get' the emotion of the artist.

Leonard Cohen: *Old Ideas*. Incredibly well recorded and, I feel, his finest. There's detail everywhere.

What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures

I listen to a lot of older classic stuff that my wife hates!

Traffic for three hours straight? No problem!

Grateful Dead, Rickie Lee Jones, The Byrds, Van Morrison, Lou Reed — it's all good!

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?

Well, since I am a computer audio guy, I can grab my hard drive with 4,000 full-resolution albums on it. But, I think that avoids the question! Bethany & Rufus *900 Miles*, it's out of print and killer.

