

Hifi Pig Magazine

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March - 2014
Issue #4

**Amptastic's
£99 "Mini 1"
Amplifier.**



INTERVIEW Behind the Brands with
Nigel Finn of The Chord Company

REVIEWS

Leedh E2 Loudspeakers, MS HD Power Plugs,
Paul Hynes SR3 PSU, Chord Electronics Qute
EX DAC, Amptastic Mini 1 Amplifier

PLUS Editorial, Reader System, Dealer System, Album Reviews
WIN One of Ten sets of six Oyaide MWA-RCA Wave
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Hifi Pig Magazine

March 2014 Issue 4

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Another interesting month at Hifi Pig (are there any other kind?) what with the anniversary of our second birthday. It's been a whirlwind couple of years with us coming from absolute obscurity to being one of the "names" on the hifi circuit. We're committed to bringing you the very best of what is out there, but we don't just review anything - we feel that review items need to be interesting and of a high enough quality to pique the curiosity of our readers. We have a few plans up our sleeves which will be revealed over the coming months but for now we hope that you enjoy the current edition of the magazine and don't forget to check the [website](http://www.hifipig.com) for our daily hifi news updates!

Stuart Smith

WIN

**One of 10 sets of
six Oyaide MWA-RCA Wave
Absorbers**



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The 'F' Word

Linette Smith

I'm writing this article as Hifi Pig has its 2nd birthday. I am incredibly proud of what Stuart has achieved in such a short space of time...and I (and I am sure all the other guys that contribute to the Pig) am really chuffed to be involved.

The thing about Hifi Pig is, well, it's just so much fun, with a capital F!

What's not to like? We get a constant stream of hifi arriving to be reviewed, we get to play with all sorts of kit and listen to music sounding its most incredible. We get to go to hifi shows and events and visit different places and meet loads of new people.

We are enjoying ourselves snoofing around and hopefully that translates to you enjoying reading about it.

Or like seeing a fashion show where all the models wear clothes that they picked up from the '2 for £5' rail on a market stall, rather than the latest wisp of designer frippery from the likes of Gucci or Prada.

But what I have a really, really hard time understanding, is that some people don't approach the world of hifi with the attitude that it should be fun... they just want to bitch and moan and complain about it.

Some people complain that there is too much stuff on Hifi Pig that we think is great...um, hello! I don't see the problem with publishing reviews and articles about hifi that is great. In reality, who is going to want to spend their time reading about a piece of kit that is, at best, mediocre and at worst, a piece of crap?!

I, like most people, want to read about exciting hifi, that we may get a chance of hearing some day.....to

go to shows and showrooms with our appetites whetted and keen to find out more for ourselves.

Why on earth would anybody complain about a hifi show featuring kit that is 'too high end' and 'too expensive'?

The whole point of going to a hifi show is to look at and listen to hifi that is the pinnacle of what is being produced, to lust over loudspeakers that you could never possibly

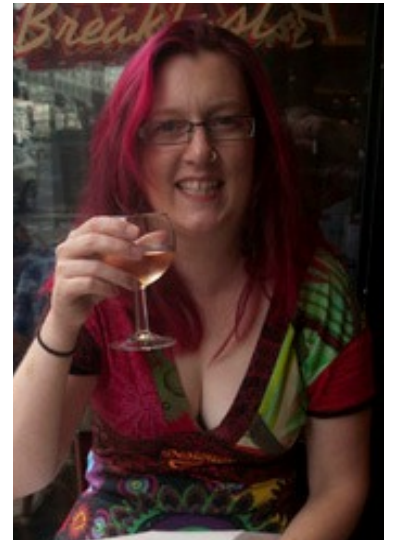
afford unless you won the lottery...twice! To marvel at turntables that amplifiers that you would need to extend your home quite considerably to accommodate.

You want to

wander round like a kid in a sweetshop, ogling all that hifi candy like there is no tomorrow.

This is dream stuff and it's enjoyable to experience.....yes you might go home and listen to a much more modest system, but hopefully you have been inspired to make your own system the best that you can within your available budget.

What do the complainers want to see? Just the most run of the mill hifi that most people can afford, nothing colourful or exciting or just a little bit crazy? It would be like going to a car show that just had bog standard, everyday cars.....who's going to want to go to a car show without seeing the latest insane supercar that costs more than Wayne Rooney earns in a couple of months?



Or like seeing a fashion show where all the models wear clothes that they picked up from the '2 for £5' rail on a market stall, rather than the latest wisp of designer frippery from the likes of Gucci or Prada.

I read today about the Save the Stereo Project <http://savethestereo.com/> This is a project that is trying to make sure that

component based hifi doesn't die out and that the younger generation get into the idea, and experience the reality, of listening to music played at it's best. This is a great project because what happens if the youth don't get into high performance audio and don't have it made accessible to them?

It will just die out and the next generation and the generations after them will never know the joy of listening to music as it is truly meant to be heard...in short people will really miss out.

Surely, one of the biggest steps we can take towards making the world of the audiophile more accessible

and less intimidating to the younger generation is to let people see it at its very best.....so that they realise that it is something fun and exciting to be involved with.

If he people that are currently involved in the world

It will just die out and the next generation and the generations after them will never know the joy of listening to music as it is truly meant to be heard...

of hifi can get across their enthusiasm about what is available, how great it is and the amazing options and possibilities that the world of hifi has to offer...then so much the better.

We need it to be inspirational and (back to the 'F' word)....fun.



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Linette Smith
HiFi Pig

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My Latest Squeeze and Why it's Just Not Worked Out The Way I'd Hoped.

Stuart Smith

Well it's all change here at Hifi Pig towers, much as I knew it would be. It could only last so long. Of course there was that brief honeymoon period of me simply not being able to get enough, but sadly all things fade with time. You'd think I'd have learned my lesson from previous bad experiences but there's been that nagging voice at the back of my head telling me that it would be all alright this time and, despite our differences, we'd be able to make it work for the best.

The first month or so of the new relationship was great and I felt like the most pampered person in Christendom - I barely had to get out of my seat and my every whim and wish was her command. She was beautiful and stylish and I often found myself looking at her sat across from me. She was tactile and I couldn't help but lavish attention on her, procuring the very finest baubles to make her happy and content.

I convinced myself that it had all been my fault as to why previous relationships of this kind had broken down irrevocably and indeed I think this was true – it was after all me who had sent previous incarnations packing. “It’s me not you!” I would say as we parted our ways, but time and time again I would find myself helplessly drawn to identikit personalities. I’d sit alone with my music and look to the place she once occupied and a pang of nostalgia would tug at my heart

strings. I’d resist of course, but in the end I knew resistance was futile and like a moth to a flame I’d find myself perusing the online adverts with their mildly provocative and seductive photographs with text that promised a relationship that would bring me nothing but happiness and comfort. In the end I pressed the button and after a brief exchange of messages I found myself back where I found myself

only a few months prior. That was late last year and the relationship soon turned sour.

Of course, regular readers will be aware I’m talking about my on-off-off-on and now definitely OFF relationship with the

Squeezebox Touch and all things computer audio. Things came to a head when the software refused to find an album I knew I’d ripped correctly and despite me having forked out on a new tablet so that I could control the whole kit and caboodle from anywhere in the house I just couldn’t get on with it. The Squeezebox is gone. It is no more. It has ceased to be. And I hereby pronounce that the last one will definitely be the last one and I will never again be seduced.

I’ve not abandoned computer audio altogether though and I’m experimenting with JRiver MediaCentre and actually I really like the interface and particularly the Android controller. To my mind the whole package seems better thought out than the Squeezebox interface...but then that could be the



“It’s me not you!” I would say as we parted our ways, but time and time again I would find myself helplessly drawn to identikit personalities.

whole honeymoon period thing once again.

Anyway my experience reminded me of an article I wrote some time ago for Hifi Pig and I thought I’d share it again with you here...

“I was discussing with a fellow hifi nerd (sorry audiophile) the merits of CD over vinyl and during the discourse he happened to mention that he was firmly

in the digital hi-fi camp and had sold all his vinyl, 400 albums or so, about 10 years ago. This reminded me and caused a certain melancholy to descend as I thought back to the day I sold my beloved record collection.

There's a saying that there comes a point in any man's life when he must leave childish things behind and that's partly the reason I sold my collection. I was Djing at the time, owned a record shop and had around 3000 bits of personal vinyl, a similar collection of second hand vinyl in the shop that was mine and a shed load of new stuff to boot. Our first child had just been born, we needed to leave the town we were living in and I needed to move on to a point where I took a bit more responsibility for my life and that of my partner and our son. I suppose then that selling the records marked a right of passage for me: It signified in a very real way the transition from childhood (I was twenty seven) to adulthood. I also sold at the same time the shop and any means of playing vinyl and was left with just CDs and tapes.

I used to occasionally search online for records I used to own and I could buy a very nice car for what they are now worth, but it's not the monetary value, nor does the pittance that I sold them for that make me overcome with nostalgia and regret. Records aren't just bits of plastic with a couple of grooves printed on them. They are much more than this.

Records and the songs they hold are our friends. They were there the first time we got drunk, the first time we went clubbing, the first time we lured a female of the species back to our rooms. I can still remember notes I made on record sleeves about beats per minutes, which track to play and the style of music. If someone mentions a tune that I used to play I don't think of the music itself, but I will know what colour label it had and what the sleeve looked like and where to drop the stylus. I can remember what record was delivered to my door the day the boys in blue thought it would be a good idea to kick it down ("Smells Like Teen Spirit" remix on the Klone label) and I can remember the day I bought "One More from the Road" by Lynyrd Skynyrd, dropping the needle onto the start of the groove and the specific feeling the record gave me.

Little by little I'm slowly rebuilding my collection of past friends, but it's not quite the same. They're not the same friends. The pop and the clicks aren't in the same places - I used to frequent a rock pub in my mid teens where the juke box had a well worn copy of "Hotel California" on there. To this day, every time I hear that record being played, I still mentally playback the click where the record sticks and repeats one word over and over and over until someone kicked the jukebox and every time I am immediately transported back to pints of John Smiths, hippies, rockers and hells angels in the back room of this seedy little pub. The sad thing is I don't think I will ever replace all the vinyl I sold and you know what, I don't even know if I should try...though I'm giving it a damned good go. Anyway, I've got a good deal of the stuff on CD now...but it's not quite the same is it! I really can't see middle aged blokes in 25 years time reminiscing about their CD collection or collection of zeros and ones on their hard drives.

So I'll persevere with the new relationship and perhaps I'll put in the extra bit of effort this time to really make it work

So what's the moral to this story? There isn't really a moral at all to be honest. It's just a rapidly ageing bloke reminiscing about past friends, friends that are now lost never to be replaced, or perhaps to be replaced with bit perfect facsimiles of themselves.

If you wake up one morning and you think the time has come to move on and sell your vinyl record collection then my advice is to pull those covers back up over your head, close your eyes and leave it to another day far, far in the future".

That was written a couple of years ago and I really am trying to embrace the new found technology that is computer audio. I know it is the future and I know that the technology that manufacturers are developing are making the actual music sound fabulous - I'm loving hi resolution downloads!

So I'll persevere with the new relationship and perhaps I'll put in the extra bit of effort this time to really make it work...to be continued.



Black Pearls

DIVE DEEP INTO YOUR SENSES



Hifi Pig reader Robert Stanley tells us about his system and how it has evolved to where it is today.



Music.

That's what our shared hobby is about, right? I sometimes wonder, when I think back over the thirty years that I've been buying shiny new boxes and dutifully selling off the old ones. It's really all about the music. It feels as though it's more about the electronics sometimes. So this article is about how I got "here", from "there".

First, a bit of history that some readers might recognise, at least in parts. If you do, then I salute you for you are a true HiFi warrior!

HiFi

I grew up listening to my Dad's Ferguson stacker system and at the time thought it was pretty decent, though a bit woolly sounding. Removing the massively dense foam speaker grilles improved things, as did lifting the speakers off the floor.

The twin tape-drawers were so over-damped that they opened roughly at the rate of glacial creep. Worse, I was forbidden from pulling on the things to

speed the process up. Removing the speaker grilles was similarly forbidden (this time by Mom, for aesthetic reasons). I was consumed by a desire to burn the thing.

As a relatively impoverished Aerospace engineering student my journey into "proper" HiFi really got started when a relative decided to sell off his old "separates". I managed to obtain his TEAC A-160 top-loading tape deck and pair of Wharfedale Lintons. But I needed an amplifier.

Much reading of the 1980s HiFi mags ensued, and I settled on a sparkly new Arcam Alpha. My enjoyment of music went up several notches. That was it – I was well and truly off the starting blocks.

I realised that better quality HiFi is, at least for me, definitely a conduit to more musical enjoyment. Synapses realigned and the connection was made. Accordingly my bank account sprung a slow leak that I've not quite been able to plug ever since.

I swapped out the Arcam for a Quad 34/405-2



Reader System

combo, and added a Trio KD 1033 turntable, later swapped for a Sansui SR222 MK5, and then a Linn LP12/Ittok. I swapped out the venerable Trio for a new Denon DRM-11 (yes, I wanted a Nakamichi Dragon, but it was financially way out of reach). I actually had a poster of the Dragon on my bedroom wall.

I followed convention: Linn, Quad, Naim, Arcam, Tannoy, B&W, Wharfedale, Celestion and several others. It's been a long and *mostly* positive journey, though I still wince at the memory of the morning after the student party that destroyed my B&Ws.

It was a *great* party though.

Onward

So, I'll press the fast-forward button for a while and leave the pre-internet era behind.

The Great Nineties Surround Disaster

The children came along, and alongside the various joys of parenthood I had nightmares of one of the

girls deciding to post a jam sandwich into the CD drawer, whilst the other used my Linn as a potter's wheel. Around the same time I fell for the then-new allure of surround sound. I sold the lot (I mean the the HiFi!), and purchased an Arcam/B&W surround system and widescreen TV and did all the "family" stuff. It was great, we watched movies and I lacked sleep (and worked rather a lot).

But I realised I was missing something – the music.

The enjoyment of music had diminished. It was soulless, without realism or dynamics. Memories of the woolly Ferguson surfaced. An urge to burn the surround system on the same pyre as the Ferguson from decades before emerged.

It was time for a change...

Hi Honey I'm Home!

So, the children grew up, I worked a *bit* less, and certainly started getting a good night's sleep again. Back to the music then.



Neat and tidy looking system of less common brand names

With a general budget in mind (and later blown), I started cruising the main dealers, buying lots of magazines and arranging demos all to try and determine what it was that I *really* enjoyed in audio.

This process led to the realisation that I was not as impressed by the “main” high-end brands as I felt I ought to be, given the multitudes of five-star ratings handed out by the “glossies” to the big names. How could this be? I’d read the review in some magazine, but when I listened for myself I often left unimpressed.

The cycle of disappointment ended when I chanced upon and subsequently purchased a pair of Aspara HL6 horn speakers (some folks might know the brand by their former name IMPULSE). To me at least they sounded way better than any of the mainstream speaker brands I had heard at a similar price-point. I decided to explore the fringes of HiFi some more.

Popular wisdom held that the natural accompaniment to efficient horn speakers would be valve amplification, so began another investigation, leaving the solid-state amplification aside for a while. I eventually found what I was looking for: Single Ended Triode 805A monoblocks from Ming Da UK. Silky, musical and thoroughly enjoyable – especially with the horns.

Digital Dreams

I do find digital streaming credible and I think it can replace CDs and vinyl as a source. Maybe. One thing led to another and I discovered a blog by a Polish audio engineer named Lucasz Fikus. For many years he’d been selling kit DACs and modding mainstream CD players to apparently good effect. He started selling ready-built DACs and I had a listen to one, a Lampizator “Level Four” with some mods: Duelund silver cable and Jensen caps.

Oh, so liquid, musical and just, right! It was better than any other DAC I had heard and by some

margin. The source was his Lampizator “Transport” streamer, a modified Squeezebox Duet with tubed SPDIF output, which helped I’m sure. I purchased both.

End Game?

So, the journey has been fun, and I’m near the end I reckon (famous last words!), but I felt the need to look at the speakers again after upgrading to the “Lampi” gear. More was possible, and this time achievable. I added a pair of hORNS FP15s, which

gave me the grand sound stage and clarity of big Tannoys, with some of the precision and speed of, say Rogers LS3’s. The grand sound of the hORNS, combined with the silky, grain-free and dynamic Ming Da 805s and Lampizator sources is, to me at least, sublime. I salute the fringe manufacturers! Well done!

A bit of mains filtering via the Lampizator SILK conditioner was added next and I’m so enjoying the music. The urge to burn (and upgrade) the HiFi has gone, replaced by simple musical enjoyment. My HiFi is largely from one manufacturer, albeit from the fringes of HiFi

manufacture, but that is fine – I’m happy with where I am, and there’s no more slow-opening tape drawers to deal with.

If there’s one thing I’d like to leave you with, it’s this:

Please do visit the fringes, the Oort-like cloud of small HiFi manufacturers. There’s superb stuff out there! I’m certainly glad that I did. You might not necessarily like my choices in HiFi, but that matters not – all that matters is that there **is** a choice beyond the mainstream. Go for it.

So, back to the music. Well, that **is** what this is about, right?

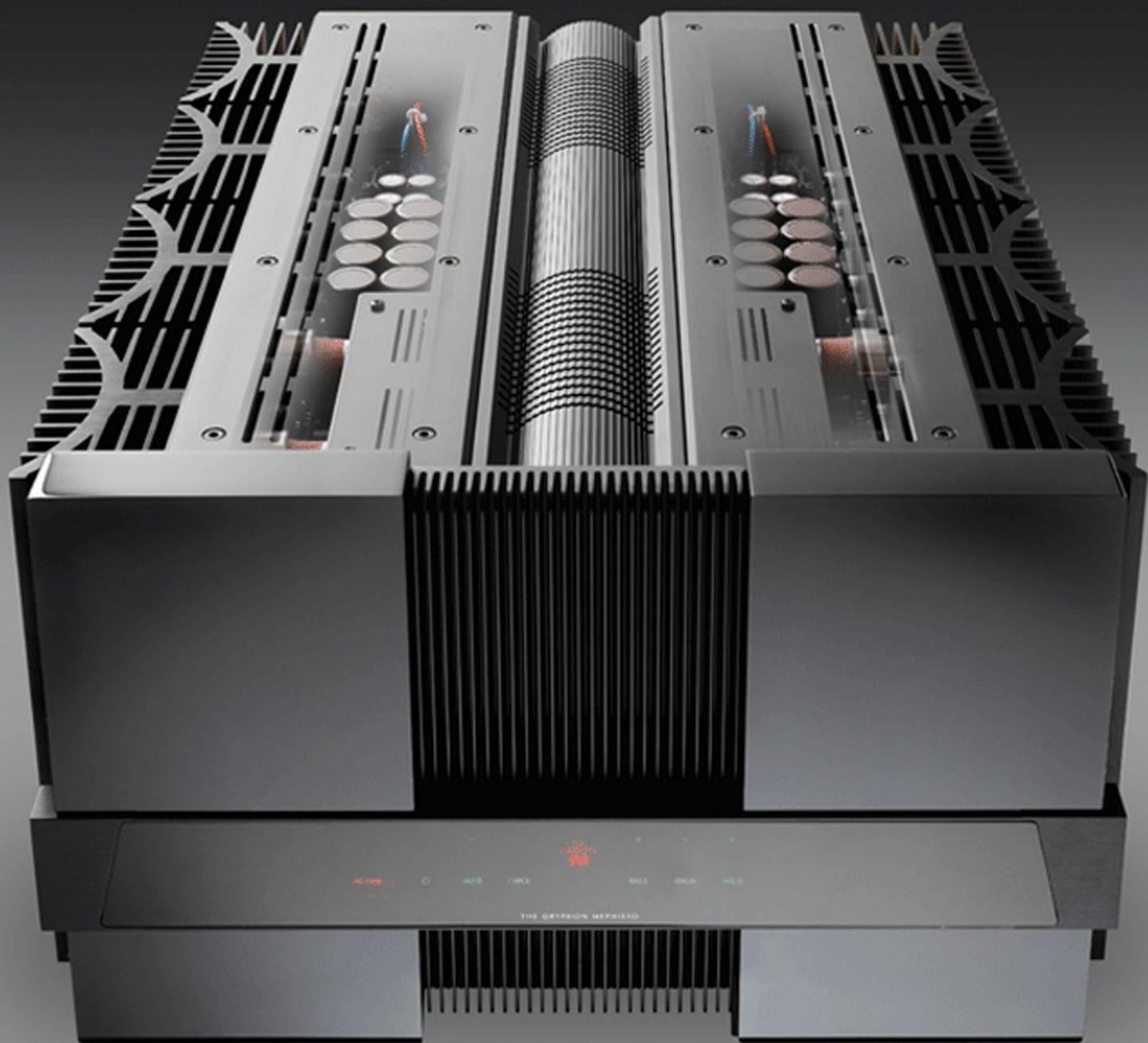
Robert

Ps Huge thanks to my good friend Ian Sadler for taking the photos!



Lampizator taking pole position.

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**For this month's
Dealer System Audio
Emotion have put
together a stylish and
compact rig. Here
they tell us why they
chose Gato products
to achieve this**



Dealer System

Over the past 2-3 years, we have found that an increasing number of customers are looking for a more streamlined system, often citing a desire to reduce the box count to an absolute minimum, but of course wishing to keep a very high fidelity sound and wishing to embrace current trends towards streaming services and music server style sources as well as the possible integration into an existing AV set-up.

The unique aspect to this particular system is the ability of the Gato DIA-250 to take the digital feed directly from the iPad Mini's Lightning Connector (or 30 pin in the older variants). This feature is quite

rare in the DAC marketplace, as almost all other DAC's we have tried (and we have tried a huge array) are not able to deal with the lower current output of the iPad (<100mA).

A lot of potential clients are often dismayed at the lack of design thought that has been applied by the manufacturer when a product is released

Gato have clearly had their focus on a wider market when developing the DIA range of Integrated amplifiers, with the iPad connection being only one of a host of flexible digital interfaces. Here's a quick breakdown on the Gato's range of

Simple clean lines and ease of use feature in this elegant system





applications:

- Line Out – To connect to an external power amplifier of active speaker set-up.
- Balanced Input – For High end CD Player or Professional Equipment
- Toslink – Apple airport Express, Apple TV, Streamer, Satellite/Cable Box etc
- Coax Digital – Sonos, Squeezebox, Smart TV, CD/DVD/BDP, Docking Station etc
- USB – iPad (Direct), MAC, PC or Laptop.
- Home Theatre Bypass Input – Turns Gato into fixed level power amp for AV surround setups.
- 12v trigger – Toggle on/off external equipment.

A lot of potential clients are often dismayed at the lack of design thought that has been applied by the manufacturer when a product is released – the usual comment of 'oh, another square box' is not unusual - this is never a comment you are likely to hear when looking at the Gato set-up, as their Chief designer Frederik Johansen has clearly not forgotten about

As hundreds of hours of audition will tell us, system synergy is king

aesthetics when penning his latest creation!

As we know looks are not everything – especially in Hi-Fi.

As hundreds of hours of audition will tell us, system synergy is king, and it not a guarantee that a same make system will offer the best £/Performance ratio. However, in terms of the Gato DIA-250 and the Gato PM-6 this it is very much the case of 'the curved sonic peg in the curved sonic hole' ! – wonderful tonal balance, layering and separation are very much to the fore here – all the key attributes of high end sound and one which we think is genuinely holographic - add to this the exceptional room friendliness of the PM-6's and we believe you have a sub £7k system which very much punches above it's weight.

Dealer System

Cables wise, we have tried a number of different combinations with the Gato set-up, and determined that the AudioQuest range offers by far, the best integration here – the USB cable was the biggest surprise for us, as this was one of the largest leaps in performance that we experienced when doing a number of back to back listening tests with a massive range of alternative USB cables – we found it was simply sensational with a huge ability to convey the right level of outright resolution but balanced with a texture and organic (read analogue) presentation that really impressed us.

In summary, we (and a growing number of customers) have found this Gato/AudioQuest combination to be the perfect union of real world musicality with thoroughly modern design ethic, and more importantly able to play with the big boys on a very even playing field, and with a fraction of the budget – I guess no system is future proof, but we think this is as close as it gets!

Source:

iPad Mini with 24/192 .WAV Music Files -
£234.00
Apple iPad Camera Kit - £25

Amplification:

Gato Audio DIA-250 Integrated Amplifier (with
built-in 24/192 DAC) - £2990.00

Loudspeakers:

Gato Audio PM-6 Floorstanding Loudspeakers
- £2890.00

Cables:

AudioQuest Coffee USB cable 0.75m (iPad
direct to Gato) - £239.00

AudioQuest Rocket 88 1.5m pair - £555.00

AudioQuest NRG-X3 Power Cable 0.9m - £65

System Price - £6998.00



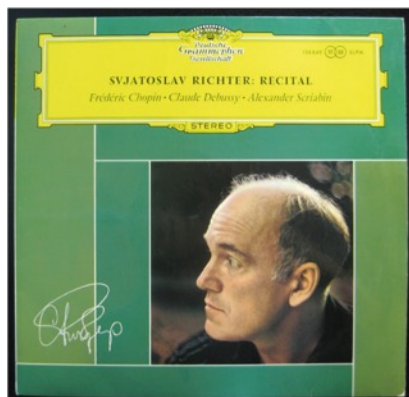
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certainly looks
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speaker we've
encountered here
at Hifi Pig but we
wanted to know
what this French
curiosity sounded
like before we
passed
judgement.**

■ Stuart Smith and
Linette Smith



The Leedh E2 loudspeaker from Laboratoire Etudes et Developpements Holophoniques is a very interesting design indeed and quite unlike any loudspeaker I've come across. However, let's step back a while and explain how we first encountered this speaker. A couple of years ago we were at one of the

Paris hi-fi shows and we'd seen them in one of the rooms, thought they were quite interesting but really thought no more about them thereafter. Fast forward to the Paris shows of September

and November and several of the manufacturers were using them in their rooms and they were making a really great sound. I introduced myself to Gilles Milot, the guy behind the speakers and a review was arranged.

Now the Leedh loudspeakers are a bit of a revolutionary design to say the least as there are no boxes as such and each of the "drivers" is housed in its own little "pod". The Acoustical Beauty Driver (ABD) is the key ingredient in the design and it's able to operate in just 0.3 Litres of space and this is where the pods come in.

The driver is an ironless motor with a ferrofluid sealed suspension which is designed to reduce harmonic distortion and parasitic resonance modes of the diaphragm, the basket and the air in the pod. Without going into the technology too much (read the website if you want all the techy bumph) each of the ABD motors has 20 magnets and this allows the coil of the carbon/epoxy diaphragm to move in a constant magnetic field with an excursion on plus or minus 7mm. Ferrofluid covers the entire volume between the cylindrical interior of the external structure of the motor and the outer tube of the diaphragm, with the fluid being held in place by a magnetic field. The air in each of the pods (what the company call the box/basket) is compressed by the concave diaphragm and acts as a pneumatic suspension and this determines the ABD's resonance frequency of 90 Hz which, given the high magnetic dampening leads to a gradual cut off slope of 3dB/oct (50-100 Hz) to 12dB/oct below 40 Hz.

With regards to parasitic vibrations experienced by conventional loudspeakers the small volume of the

pods allows them to be made very rigid and the vibrations caused by the diaphragm of the ABD is cancelled by a back to back (push push) mounting and the use of a silent mechanical actuator in the mid pods.

The Acoustical Beauty Driver (ABD) is the key ingredient in the design and it's able to operate in just 0.3 Litres of space and this is where the pods come in.

OK, I will admit that most of the science is beyond me and not really of that much interest to be honest as I'm of the "just make it make music" train of thought, but the general gist is that everything in the Leedh E2 is designed to minimise resonances and vibrations.

We have the Leedh E2 here to review but a smaller Leedh C was produced with the main difference being that the Leedh E2 has four ABD modules (pods) coupled back to back as opposed to the two on the LeedhC. The first pair the pods are just off ground level (the speaker uses the ground for bass reinforcement) with the second pair about a metre from the ground and on the carbon composite legs. Both these pairs of pods point outwards from the main structure at 90 degrees. Above the second pair of pods is a single forward firing pod and above that, again on a carbon composite "leg", a tweeter pod. Have a look at the photos and you'll get the idea.

Overall the Leedh E2 is pretty compact being just 108cm high and its open structure makes it very easy to blend into your living space. They have an aesthetic that will I'm sure divide opinion and, whilst it has been described by one visitor to the house as looking like a praying mantis, the overall appearance is, to my mind, very pleasing indeed.

The speakers have a minimum impedance of 3.2 ohms at 300 Hz, will handle 300W and have a sensitivity of...wait for it...82dB. Quoted bandwidth is plus/minus 1.5dB from 100 Hz to 20 KHz with bass response being -3dB at 70Hz, -6dB at 50 Hz and -8dB at 20 Hz. The speakers have a price of €16 000 a pair.

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As I say the technical side of things doesn't really interest me a great deal and so let's get on to the setting up and actually listening to what these loudspeakers do.

Gilles arrived from Paris (a six or so hour drive) mid morning and we immediately got to setting up the Leedhs. They were positioned about a metre from the back wall with them pointing directly at the hot seat with the seat making up an equilateral triangle. He also brought along a prototype of a sub and his own loudspeaker cables with a polarised outer sheath and a small crossover device built in. However I wanted to try the speakers with the unlikely pairing of the 20W a channel Tellurium Q Iridium power amp along with our usual cable compliment first of all as this is our day to day kit and the stuff we know well.

20 Watts into 82dB... Surely Not!

Ok, so this is an unlikely partnering I'm well aware, but as I say it's what we know and so this is the first combo we tried. The sub wasn't connected initially!

The first thing you notice when you listen to these speakers is that they are just so open and uncoloured in that "not at all boxy" kind of way. Obviously not having boxes in the conventional sense this really didn't come as a great surprise. I was interested to see what vibrations were being generated by the speakers and touching each of the pods in turn I can say that there was nothing I could feel even when driving as hard as I dare.

The second thing you notice is that the stereo image is very wide, very high and very deep – this is, for want of a better word, quite holographic. I know there will be those that scoff at the use of this word but until you have experienced this they really shouldn't. Listening to Bowie's "...Ziggy Stardust" there is a real purity to the tone across the whole frequency range and with even the very modestly



The Leedh E3 look like no other speaker we've come across

rated power amp we were able to drive the speakers to reasonable levels in our quite large listening room.

On the usual audiophile show type material (female vocals) you can understand why many of the exhibitors at the last Paris show used these speakers - there is that purity to the tone and a real clarity to the listening experience – all very very life-like.

Instruments are easy to distinguish from each other in the stereo space and the main vocal elements are positioned dead centre and forward...quite beautiful. Yes, the bass is a little compromised here and this may well be an issue for some, but let's not forget

that this amp isn't something you'd usually partner with these speakers.

In this configuration, whilst having some very positive attributes, the Leedhs have their limits, but then many listeners will be just blown away with that exquisite openness and transparency and will be able to forgive these minor flaws of the pairing.

Personally I could just about live with the Leedh/Iridium combination as it really does draw you into a recording and you do become literally enveloped in the sound they present, but regular readers will be well aware I'm a bit of a bass-head and so a different amp was plumbed in.

I knew the Leedhs were coming and I was aware the reference amp would probably struggle to drive them to the levels I enjoy and so I'd asked if I could keep hold of the Claymore amp we recently reviewed. It's a 70W a channel amp and whilst it doesn't have the last bit of finesse of our reference it does have plenty of power on hand... and great bass.

Ok, now we're really getting somewhere and there's a whole new level of drive to the speakers with the extra juice on tap really getting the diminutive drivers (they are tiny) pumping – you can see them moving in time to the music!

Listening to “The World of Bleep and Booster” and their techno beats you'd be forgiven for thinking that you were listening to MUCH bigger speakers. The openness and the airiness are still there, as is that three dimensional quality to the stereo image I previously mentioned. The character of the different amp is also very evident. There's just so much more drive and energy here and I have absolutely no idea how such small drivers manage to deliver this kind of dynamic performance. Yes the bass doesn't trawl the very lowest depths but here we're getting very close to what could well be a speaker I could definitely live with long term. It's worth mentioning also how fast the speakers are – there is no overhang at any frequency and attack and decay is immediate where it should be, they are also a very dynamic and engaging loudspeaker in that edge of your seat kind of way. We listened to loads of different music and

they really never failed to bring a huge grin to your face whatever the genre.

As a bit of an experiment with regards source I took the external DAC we use out of the system and tried the line out of the Squeezebox. Oh dear! The Leedhs really will highlight any deficiencies in the chain and this experiment lasted all of one track!

I still maintain that you need very good (if not exemplary) electronics in front of the Leedhs and so don't think you can plonk them on the end of just anything and get away with it.

As I mentioned, Gilles had brought along a prototype subwoofer (Expected price will be €5500) that he says is flat down to 20 Hz, and I've no reason to doubt him, along with his own speaker cables with the built in crossover. With these in the set up and still using the Claymore you get, obviously, a LOT more bass energy in the room, but you also maintain that wonderful wide open and clean feel to the reproduction of music. The sub integrates very nicely and apart from a slight narrowing of the width of the soundstage what you get is a beautifully listenable presentation that is hugely addictive. There is still that forward and backward three dimensional feel to the sound too which will appeal to many I'm sure. Now we are getting into the realms of a loudspeaker that ranks with the very best I've heard and had the Iridium something more akin to 100w a channel I'd suggest that this combo would be hard to beat. I still maintain that you need very good (if not exemplary) electronics in front of the Leedhs and so don't think you can plonk them on the end of just anything and get away with it – the Claymore is about the limit of what would be acceptable I'd suggest.

On his return to pick up the speakers Gilles had brought his own 3D Labs 1000W monoblocks to try so we hooked them up with the Coffman Labs preamp, Gilles own prototype speaker cables and the subwoofer. Now this is a good pair of amplifiers, although little is known about 3D Labs outside of France, but I've heard a number of items in their portfolio over the last 5 years or so I've always been

Reviews

very impressed with them. From the outset it's clear that the extra power on hand is welcomed by the Leedh E2s, but you can still hear very clearly the different character of these amplifiers coming through. Drum hits still have an immediate clout to them, cymbals still have sparkle and air around them, acoustic instruments still sound like...acoustic instruments and something has just hit me – what these loudspeakers are is as neutral as I've ever heard. They move the air leaving the listener with a feeling that the speakers aren't really doing very much at all other than communicating what they are fed with and as such this makes them quite a difficult beast to review. How do you describe something that doesn't really have a great deal of character of its own?

For example, on Gil Scot-Heron and Brian Jackson's "Winter in America" the insight into the recording space is as if you are there. On busy tracks the speakers don't seem to get lost or confused and on simple music they just sound so damn lifelike!

They are clean, uncoloured and transparent loudspeakers and this review really could have been written using just those three words.

At low volumes you don't miss anything that's in the mix and you still get the incredible soundstage thing, but pop a bit of power up these speakers and they spring to life. On Hawkwind's "Steppenwolf" at low volumes all the tweets and effects are there, as are all the stereo effects and when you turn the juice up you just get more of the same.

Conclusion

Total transparency isn't always what people are looking for in a loudspeaker and people have their own personal preferences in the way a loudspeaker presents the music. Some enjoy horns, some electrostatics, whilst others prefer conventional boxed speakers. What the Leedh E2 loudspeakers bring to the table is actually very little and

you are presented with whatever your chosen electronics fetch to the show.



They are equally at home with the aforementioned audiophile fodder of female vocals, or rock, or whatever you care to throw at them.

In some ways the Leedh E2 represents the ideal loudspeaker for someone who does reviews as they make hearing what is happening in the system VERY apparent. Now this may sound like they are cold and analytical tools and I suppose they are analytical in that they are high-fidelity in the truest sense of the word.

Put quality electronics in front of these speakers and you will be justly rewarded with a wonderful representation of the music. Power them with poor electronics or poor recordings and they will show up

any deficiencies in your system. They also manage to throw a hugely deep and wide soundstage with accurate placement of instruments and this only makes them even more attractive to me.

Some will think the speakers challenging aesthetically, but I liked them and they're really much less obtrusive than many of the loudspeakers we've had through here in recent months.

Personally I highly recommend the Leedh E2s for their ability to do very little with what they are given...if that makes sense. If you have great electronics already then I'd suggest these really should be on your "must hear" shortlist. **Stuart Smith**

Spiders from Mars? No, insects from France!

Linette Smith's take on the LeedhE2s

These speakers have intrigued me for the last year and a half...I have encountered them at shows and been incredibly impressed by the sounds that come out of what are, by most audiophile's standards, pretty small speakers.

I think they are stunning and they are so different but elegant, I think that they will still look futuristic in 20 years time and could well become a design classic.

There is a definite 'insectoid' look to them, kind of a robotic praying mantis, almost spindly with the drivers contained in pods...a bit of a departure from the usual kind of loudspeaker.

The finish is a very high gloss piano black and the individual driver grilles add to the insect-like appearance by looking like a fly's eyes.

I think they are stunning and they are so different but elegant, I think that they will still look futuristic in 20 years time and could well become a design classic.

We were fortunate to also have the prototype of the subwoofer that Gilles, the creator, has in development at the moment. I am hoping that when the sub goes into production it will be finished with larger grilles and will carry the insect theme through. So why do these speakers look so different, they use a completely different technology to traditional speakers, I'm not even going to try and go there with

the science bit...a full and detailed explanation is on the LEEDH website. Basically the drivers are oil filled pistons, have a look with the grilles off when the speakers are playing, the movement is different to what you will have seen before.

LEEDH don't just think outside of the box...they have done away with the box altogether, which, in a similar way to the TSAE Evince speakers (albeit a different approach), frees the speakers from the constraints of the ordinary.

'He took it all too far, but boy could he play guitar.'

This 'freedom' comes across in the sound too; they are described as being 'holophonic' which to me means that they will give a realistic and 3-dimensional reproduction of the music. This is exactly what you get, a real feeling of 'thereness' with the performers, every detail is heard.



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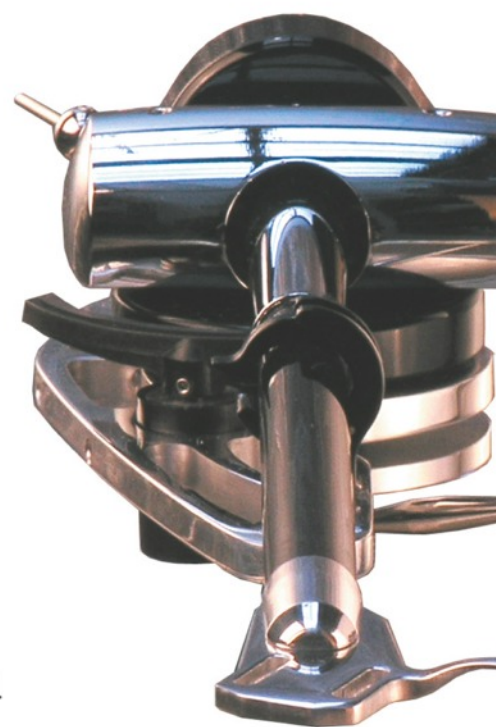


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Acoustic guitar in particular sounded as if the guitarist was sat in the room with you, I noticed this and so did Harry, our youngest, who has a keen ear and is a guitarist himself.

They also sounded fantastic with electronic music (my favourite genre) and could well be the perfect all round loudspeaker, whatever your poison!

Now our main listening set up is a pretty large and high ceilinged room but after having heard these speakers in a large room before I was confident they would cope...and they did.

They manage to fill the room, but there is no booming or flabbiness, the sound seems effortless, defined and clean.

I would describe the sound as like living in an epic film soundtrack, it is actually a very emotional experience listening to these speakers, in much the same way that listening to great horn speakers can be. Gilles did tell me that a lot of people who are fans of Avantgarde Acoustic horns like his speakers and yes, even though the technology is different, I can really see, hear and feel why.

Something that did become apparent is that these loudspeakers need to be fed with good things.....they do show up the quality of what is going into them, both electronics and music...there is nowhere to hide.

Like a racehorse, you can't expect to put crap in and get the best performance out.

So what about the sub?

Of course this was in its prototype stage so not as 'pretty' as the finished product would be, but it was good to listen to anyway.

The sub seemed to integrate with the main speakers well, there was none of that being able to pinpoint the sound as coming from the sub, it just became part of the tapestry of the sound stage.

It definitely added a different dimension to the overall sound, but I don't think that you have to have the sub with these speakers....I guess it depends very much on your musical tastes and how you would be using the speakers.

In the interest of seeing whether audiophile grade hifi can be liveable with, we also tried setting things up so that we could use the speakers in an AV system.

This works brilliantly, and the sub really comes into it's own in a home cinema environment, adding to



The pods may look small but they pack a serious punch!

Reviews

the overall pleasure of watching a film.

Summary

In summary I would say that these are very clever loudspeakers.

You get something that is a bit out of the ordinary, a real statement pair of speakers, that won't take up a ridiculous amount of space.

They will suit audiophiles and they will suit people who want something more liveable with.

Having heard them paired with Devialet kit in Paris last year, I would say that combination would be pretty much perfect if you need something that will look sleek and stunning in your living room and sound great.

Could these loudspeakers be the hifi equivalent of Daft Punk - Futuristic and French and about to take over the world?

LEEDH are pretty much unknown outside of France at the moment; however I think that is set to change.

Could these loudspeakers be the hifi equivalent of Daft Punk - Futuristic and French and about to take over the world?

I certainly hope so, the rest of world needs to open its eyes and ears to France and have a little look at what gems we have over here....and you never know, you may even get lucky! **Linette Smith**

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UK Plugs that will accept heavy gauge cables are few and far between so when hifi Pig was given the chance to try out the MS HD Power plugs we jumped at the opportunity. Danny Worth



For as long as I can remember the audio market has been lacking an alternative to the Furutech 1363 audiophile standard plug which will accept thick cable and larger conductors. I actually mentioned in my last review of the LessLoss cables that I'm surprised someone hasn't already dealt with this issue and produced an alternative – there is clearly a market!

So, unknowingly and to my surprise a knock at the door produced a packet which when I opened it contained a UK plug that looked somewhat different to any other I had seen before.

With a semi smoked plastic body and a cable clamping system (much like the Furutech but with differences) the MS HD Power is air tight and patented. There are two screws either side of a plastic torsion grip, but my eyes were drawn towards the rear of the

plug (the smoked plastic part) where I could see through the outer body at what looked like three larger than normal conductor tightening screws side by side and horizontally along the inside.

The plug came from Air Audio who are the distributor for these 'MS' plugs, so I gave them a call and they explained that the plug is capable of accepting much wider cables – up to 16mm in fact and the poles can take conductors of up to 4mm. They added that the plugs are available in a standard, highly polished copper version and also with a range of popular plating options - silver, gold and rhodium, all polished inside and out. Looking at the gold version it's very apparent that the polishing is carried out to a very high standard and the metal surfaces really do look perfect.

The plugs meet every British Standard and are fully compliant with all the necessary regulations - this has

been a controversial point amongst some enthusiasts with regards some UK plugs that have been marketed as suitable for audiophile use.

Starting from £30 for an unplated version and rising to £60 for the heavily rhodium plated version, the MS HD Power UK Plug is a product that I for one have been crying out for

Opening the plug up reveals an amount of layout and routing for individual conductors that is a breath of fresh air. I dread to count the number of times I've wired MK and standard sockets and have had to chisel, chop and hack plastic out of the way to get the cables and I'm sure many of our readers have experienced this too.

Between the live and earth terminals of the MS HD Power is a silver plated fuse which is also a nice touch and so I decided to get one of my big chunky DH Labs cables and test how simple it was to wire a thick cable to this plug.

The fixing point of the conductors into the pins consists of a large opening with a loose U shaped piece of matching metal passing through the top part of the hole. This clamps down on the conductor sandwiching it to the base of the hole once the screw is tightened.

Fitting a Thick Cable

The DH Labs AC Power Plus cable which is made up of 12 gauge conductors fit with ease and the thicker 10 gauge conductors from the companies Red Wave also fit nicely, so what more can I say than I was extremely impressed. The pathways to the pins were unobstructed and wide enough to take a substantial thickness of cable without any trouble at all. Three screws secure the three conductors, there are two screws to clamp and two screws to fit the case back together - it really couldn't be easier.

Inserting the plug into my extremely rare all copper MK unswitched socket gave a tremendously tight fit



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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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and the cable management bit of the plug keeps the cable closer to the wall and very easy to route. I have found that my right angled Furutechs have a tendency to be knocked occasionally when I'm playing with different bits in my setup as they come out of the socket partially to one side - I've actually never been a huge fan of this plugs build quality over the more robust straight plug, but then even that plug is terrible if knocked or a wire snags when reaching behind the rack – it's for this reason I must always ensure all plugs are firmly in place after fitting new kit. The MS HD however has a much lower profile and stays snug to the wall plate and even with a good poke it remained in place.

Sound

As far as the sound is concerned I can only submit my view of the gold plated version I received, against the Furutech 1363G with both sporting a 10 amp Bussman fuse. I found the MS HD to be a bit fuller sounding on the Red Wave cable with a tiny bit more weight which had a nice effect on the treble. There really isn't much in it to be honest and one

could argue the Furutech had a bit more air in the top

The MS HD however has a much lower profile and stays snug to the wall plate and even with a good poke it remained in place.

end, but then it has been used for a long period of time now and fully “burned in” so I guess it would really come down to styling and cost at the end of the day as to which you would prefer to spend your money on.

Conclusion

Starting from £30 for an unplated version and rising to £60 for the heavily rhodium plated version, the MS HD Power UK Plug is a product that I for one have been crying out for for many year. The plug is a more affordable and with its BS1363 fully compliant standards, low profile tight fit, and the ability to be able to terminate very large cables it is a no brainer. I shall be ordering some very soon.

Highly recommended!

Danny thought these were a “no-brainer”



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Paul Hynes SR3 Power Supply

Danny Worth



Paul Hynes(PH) is a long established designer and builder of bespoke power supplies. He is located just off the Scottish Coast on a cold and misty island and with his business partner David Webb in Watton produces a range of power supplies which can be used with many hifi products including analogue, digital and amplification.

Recently, due to popular demand, the business has expanded with David taking over the commercial side and his team of experienced engineers building Paul's designs, leaving him able to concentrate on further R&D with more products finding their way into his range in the not too distant future I'm told.

First impressions were one of added weight mainly but it was clear to hear the supply needed some good burn in time

I initially contacted Paul regarding a power supply for my Squeezebox Touch (SBT) rather than about a review product as I had been recommended his power supplies by many users and wanted to give one a try - I thought it would be a good comparison against my Teddy Pardo PSU which has lived in my system for sometime now and I've been very happy with.

Discussing my requirements and the standard I was used to he recommended it may be worth trying the SR3 power supply (£300), 'it comes in various forms' Paul said 'and can be configured to your devices specific power requirements' – Sounds good tome. The SR3 was the first product to be handed over to David Webb and his team (which I think Paul was thankful of due to a backlog of orders) so I contacted David to make arrangements to purchase one to try.

The Actual Supply

The supply can be bought with a plaited DC cable made from solid core copper (£50) or solid core fine silver (£85) and there's also an option to compliment the silver output cable with matching lines from the regulator to DC socket internally (£10)

My current Teddy Pardo(TP) PSU has an external silver DC cable and internal silver Deltec cabling which was a mod I had done after purchase and I thought offered up further improvements over the standard unit, but I opted to have the all copper Paul Hynes solution and run with that for a while and to ultimately upgrade to the fine silver cabling thereafter if I thought it would offer an upgrade in sound quality.

Burning In

A couple days after purchase my supply arrived. A very smart aluminium case with a black aluminium faceplate sporting the companies branding, the underside has the serial number. The DC cable is made up of three copper conductors in individual teflon tubes braided by hand.

I swapped out the TP supply for the PH unit and fired up the system for a quick listen. First impressions were one of added weight mainly but it was clear to hear the supply needed some good burn in time as it wasn't sounding anywhere near as open and detailed as the TP did, which was to be expected.

Over a period of about three weeks the sound really did gain snap, sparkle and openness and vocals were allowed to breathe considerably more. I would say in the later parts of the fourth week that the supply seemed to hit a more stable ground and I was convinced that any further burning in would only add a few more percent in performance.

The Sound

The SR3 gives very good weight to the sound, a rich and tempered feel to the music. It's extremely natural in its reproduction and has dynamics to suit. Playing my favoured array of female and male vocalists along with some acoustic music I found transients were well defined whilst vocals were strong, focused, sat in the soundstage just to my likening and never had any hint of forwardness. In all, I found

there was simply a display of natural ease and flow to the sound which was great.

The Teddy Pardo PSU which I was A/Bing back and forwards into the system has a more dynamic and energetic shift to the presentation and although very entertaining I felt that it made for a more exhaustive and a little more of a manufactured sound in comparison.

The TP PSU did however have better sparkle and air in the top end and I enjoyed the pronounced clarity of reverbs more, inner detail and the emphasis it gave on harmonics, which with both power supplies I felt filled the room equally, expressing the qualities of the modified SBT which was producing a fantastically solid and spacious soundstage but the TP just had the edge when it came to the clarity of those smaller details and nuances.

Sparkle and airiness were more apparent and vocals took on a gorgeous silky tone with improved clarity ...

Impressed with the nature of the Paul Hynes PSU with its very natural flow, I tossed up the idea of the silver cabling for a day or so, wondering if it would take the edge off the presentation that I enjoyed and replace it with a more cutting edge and sparklier dynamic sound like the TP.

I had a chat again with David and Paul and they graciously agreed to doing the silver upgrade for me and if I didn't like it I could have it returned to the previous copper and so of course I agreed.

The following day the supply was collected and two days later it was returned! Which allowed me to have some good critical listening with the TP and create a playlist of songs I could use to compare certain aspects of the sound, bearing in mind there was now even more burning in to do.

Reinserting the Paul Hynes supply into my system and switching back on showed immediate differences in tone and timbre. Sparkle and airiness were more apparent and vocals took on a gorgeous silky tone with improved clarity and so far the weight and natural dynamics which I'd enjoyed was still there.

After about another three weeks the playlist that I really wanted to use to compare and contrast the two supplies with finally came into play. I chose a mixture of music as I would for any session of this kind,

Reviews

female vocals to test sheen on upper mids, good solid male vocals to hear how fleshed out the lower mids were and a mixture of instrumental and manufactured music such as dance and electronica for nuances, dynamics top end and bass response.

The Paul Hynes power supply was a dream that left the Teddy Pardo behind, not by a huge margins at all, but enough to conclude that the silver upgrade was the correct decision.

Cymbals absolutely shimmered and on busier symphonies there was a great spatial awareness and darker background that I didn't feel the Teddy Pardo managed quite as well, concerning itself more with impact on dynamic flurries and allowing a little more grain to enter the soundstage, whereas the SR3 retained that natural feel but added extra clarity to those smaller details allowing them to be a little more prominent on and around the boundaries of the soundstage.

The Teddy Pardo had a wonderful 3D image, or at least contributed to the SBT's characteristic of one, but the Paul Hynes arranged the layering with more definition which added character to a performance. I often talk about 'sculpture' referring this to the likes

of layering and 3D imaging which was cleaner and less misty now.

Vocal work was better than the copper wired version, a cleaner more frisky tone to the female vocal, slightly better pronunciation and no sheen or brightness in upper registers. The natural, weightier presentation of the SR3 was key to me enjoying the more fleshed out raspy tones of male vocals, which was preferable over the Teddy Pardo's cleaner midrange as a whole.

With regards to top end breath and air, sparkle and shine there really wasn't much difference between the two supplies, but the integration down into the midrange on the Paul Hynes with its slightly warmer side of neutral balance added to a more pleasing presentation to these ears.

Bass notes were detailed, responsive and extended and with manufactured music showed off the powerful and dominant side and I really can't fault the Teddy Pardo in this area and especially with this type of music as it is one of its true strengths knocking out kick drums and dynamics with absolute ease.

Since owning the Paul Hynes SR3 I have purchased another standard Squeezebox and can confirm the attributes mentioned in this review to be apparent

The Paul Hynes SR3 PSU set up for use with a Squeezebox



and feel it an extremely worthwhile upgrade, especially in bass reproduction which develops a tighter and more informative response with greater extension and detail.

It's also worth playing with different power cables I believe and I have had very worthwhile improvements in selecting a particular cable that favoured my tastes from a few I already owned.

Conclusion

Both supplies are extremely well made by professionals which are really at the top of their game. The Teddy Pardo is a clean sounding dynamic supply with incredible attributes. However, for me and to cover a wider range of genres, the Paul Hynes is a far better fit and does excel in certain areas, some in smaller degrees and some in amounts that convinced me it was a better all rounder. The Paul

Hynes supply was able to produce a beautifully natural and silky presentation in the midrange coupled with added body and tone, without ever

Highly recommended for its clarity, attention to detail and natural overall presentation.

sounding exhausting dynamically. I also found it able to replicate an image convincingly clean and clearly without adding grain and remaining true to the tonal balance of a track and also having a strong solid engaging soundstage.

I would recommend the silver upgrade if it's within budget when purchasing but it's always something that can be done at a later date.

Highly recommended for its clarity, attention to detail and natural overall presentation.



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Qute and Perfectly Formed?

**Danny Worth takes a
listen Chord Electronics'
Qute EX DAC**



Needing no introduction the hugely well known and popular Chord Electronics provided Hifi Pig with their ultra compact and aptly named Qute EX DAC (£1195) for review.

The diminutive Qute EX is capable of playing DSD files up to 128 decoding levels and PCM from 44.1 to 384khz 16-32 bit. It has USB, optical, coaxial via BNC and an input for the wall wart based power supply, whilst the simple milled and anodised aluminium casework is completed with a magnified fish bowl type circular window giving a visual indication

to power and lock LEDs mounted on the circuit board.

Burning In

Burning in with the EX is essential so give it at least 150 hours to tone down the sharpness of the extremely detail driven presentation in order to round the edges a little and calm the higher frequencies. Bass will fill out in the lowest frequencies and upper bass becomes more tuneful too.

The Sound

On first listen the tiny Qute EX has an absolutely huge, robust and dominating sound that is in extreme contrast to my Totaldac. It is very clean and tempered displaying an extremely wide band-

Listening at lower volumes late at night is a bit of a treat using the Qute EX and being able to hear every single note and nuance without disturbing family or neighbours was really nice.



The Chord certainly lives up to its Qute name

Inside the Qute DAC



Bass notes were particularly good with the extension and size of the bass being accurate and it just rolls across the room effortlessly.

a soundstage that can explore every reverb, performer and musician without breaking a sweat and all in a more upfront na-

width. It sounds peakier than I am used to, but has a real talent for exposing detail... and I mean every detail. Also, quite noticeably from the outset there is a large amount of gain meaning I could only turn my Emille amplifier up to around half of where I would normally to achieve similar listening levels.

Listening to vocal and acoustic music I would say that there is an emphasis on the recorded material that really stands out. I know a few guys who really enjoy delving into the mix of a recording and this type of sound would suit them perfectly but for me I felt that the DAC didn't render the decay of the instruments with a flowing nature, but that it stops and starts on a dime displaying leading edges with absolute precision and timing. It's fast, very dynamic, has

ture that offers the listener a semi near-field experience.

Playing some 'Power Ballad' type rock music I loved the grunty and raspy electric guitar that rang through the soundstage and I don't think I've ever heard so much detail extracted from this type of music before. Every note, chord, string, cymbal, drum beat and vocal is absolutely right there to hear in all its glory - upfront, close and personal.

Bass notes were particularly good with the extension and size of the bass being accurate and it just rolls across the room effortlessly.

Some new age jazz shows terrific sound-staging and although forward as a whole the Qute EX still dis-

plays a very good amount of intelligent layering with dynamic flurries of instruments. Clarinet solos can become a little hard I thought and the Chord does favour very good recordings for sure. I'd listen to one piece of music and think wow this is awesome and then the next song would sound a bit grainy and peaky, so be very careful when feeding the Qute EX DAC with anything less than the best recording you can obtain – it lays them bare!

However, playing a great recording on the Chord has it expressing detail and flow in double bass and complex cymbal work with sax or trumpet that will utterly impress and astonish. For my personal taste there was an overall desire to critique each instrument and get so drawn into the recording that I found myself drifting away from listening to the music as a whole piece sometimes.

I'm giving with one hand and taking with the other here I know and my personal tastes are somewhat irrele-

vant here - it's more about describing the overall sound of the DAC which I am trying to convey.

A simple piece of music such as 'Blue Jeans Blues' by ZZ Top - the acoustic version, sounds absolutely fantastic through the Chord. This is an uncluttered stripped down piece of music and the Chord allowed each instrument and the vocal to shine through incredibly well, rendering each individual portion of the record in a way the Totaldac just cannot. And then we have the flip side of the coin as on 'Seven Wonders' by Fleetwood Mac and it all gets a little much for me, I just don't think my brain is capable of computing that much information in one go. In comparison the Totaldac doesn't actually miss out on anything, but to me it comes across as a more relaxed presentation which for me makes for a less fatiguing listen.

Listening at lower volumes late at night is a bit of a treat using the Qute EX and being able to hear every

single note and nuance without disturbing family or neighbours was really nice.

Higher resolution files fed from the Mac showed detail in even more abundance and great quality recordings really gave a huge wow factor with an extremely clean sound that I'd liken to the sound you may get whilst monitoring in a studio.

In Conclusion

The Qute EX is exactly that, it looks absolutely fantastic. Sound-wise it not within the boundaries of what I would consider to be perfect for me across the

broad range of music I listen to day to day, but for the nearest of acoustical performances and late night listening I thoroughly enjoyed its hugely detailed and forward presentation.

The Qute EX really is massively detailed, clean and has an extreme bandwidth, with the sound being forward and upfront. Feeding it with great recordings is a must, partnering with good quality electronics is a necessity and I would

say it definitely bridges the gap between hifi and pro audio.

If this type of high-fidelity, recording laid bare presentation is the sound that you strive for (and I know many who do) then partnered with equally good equipment before and after the Chord is sure to impress the pants off you.

Would I recommend it, well I'm leaning towards no but then that would be a more personal take on the DAC and that's not what a review like this is really about.

I was asked by a friend 'but if someone you knew was after a DAC and enjoyed a more analytical, detailed and upfront sound and asked your opinion on what to buy, what would you suggest?'

The simple answer has to be without a doubt the Chord.



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Is Small Beautiful?



Jerry Jacobs, who loved Amptastic's first offering, takes a listen to the company's latest creation, a £99 chip amp called the Mini-1



A while back now, I wrote a Hifi Pig review of Amptastic's first product, the diminutive Mini-T class D amp. That was something of a rave review; genuine audiophile sound quality for a few tens of £.

Amazing, astonishing. I loved that little amp. And I still do. In fact, I still use it as the amplification for a second system, powering a pair of very nice Usher X-719 standmount speakers. A £60 amp powering a £1400 pair of speakers. Loopy stuff! But it works for me.

I keep a Mini-T as a 'spare' for my main system as well, just in case a stand-in is required to use with my 5 figure MBL speakers. Even loopier - but that works for me, too.

Crazed equipment swapper that I am, the Mini-T is one of the very few (quite probably the only) piece of audio electronics that I can return to time after time and still just kick back and enjoy it without any niggly qualms.

Crazed equipment swapper that I am, the Mini-T is one of the very few (quite probably the only) piece of audio electronics that I can return to time after time and still just kick back and enjoy it without any niggly qualms.

But Chris at Amptastic is not one to let the grass grow under his feet, and after extensive design and development work a range of new product, including a DAC, is being rolled out over the coming months. The first of these to be released for sale is the £99 Mini-1 amp reviewed here.

Reviews

Technicalities

As with the Mini-T, the Mini-1 is based on the superbly transparent TA-2020 chipset. The circuit has been redesigned and refined and better quality components are utilised. The power supply, too, has been uprated and a 5A wallwart PSU comes as standard.

The TA2020 chip is a popular one, and there are many lower quality copies available at lower cost, but Amptastic use 100% genuine Tripath chips sourced in Europe.

On-board advanced power management has been added to the main circuit board so that the amp is not reliant purely on an external PSU to deliver constant smooth power to the amplifier. The amplifier itself can monitor and cope with very large demands and stores power reserves right next to the TA2020 IC.

Custom made copper 'Air Core' output inductors are used to reduce the amplifier's harmonic distortion. The output filter is a key part of the design, and

Amptastic say they have benchmarked and tested many different inductors and found that any amount of ferrite causes unwanted distortion. A long time was spent selecting the best quality 'Air Core' output inductor and better than Tripath datasheet performance in some areas is claimed.

While still small, the chassis is a little larger and is better finished than the Mini-T. With its beautifully rounded edges I think it looks seriously cool as well as purposeful. The single pair of RCA input sockets and the speaker cable binding posts (accepting spades, bare wire and banana plugs) grip well and are of good quality. There's adequate cable room at the back and I was easily able to bi-wire from the terminals, simultaneously using spades and 4mm banana plugs.

The volume control can be bypassed, turning the Mini-1 into a power amp, and the quite bright blue power LED turned off, using on-board jumper settings; a fairly simple procedure for the customer

A tight squeeze but everything present and correct



requiring a pair of needle-nosed pliers.

Sound Quality

Where the older Mini-T amp really excels is in openness and transparency, image focus and soundstaging, palpability and presence. Which is fine by me as that is where my own audio priorities lie. It's not just good for a £60 amp, in my honest opinion in many musically important ways it can take on the best amps I have heard at 5 or even 50 times the price or more. Happily, the new Mini-1 amp retains these qualities, while spreading its wings somewhat and providing noticeably more power and headroom in the bass. It's a more powerful sound with a solid, taut, extended and free-flowing bass foundation.

There's an overall naturalness, a "yeah, *that's* how the music should sound" about the Mini-1 that I find pretty much totally satisfying and that I can return to with a smile again and again. It's musically alive with a sense of tactile palpable presence in a way that is so rare in an audio component.

Well, that all sounds very impressive, doesn't it. But is it really the Perfect Amplifier?

Well, no. Resolution is good but not top notch. Despite its amazingly open and extended high frequencies, like the Mini-T before it, the Mini-1 doesn't quite resolve the last layer of detail. For example, the repeated 'spangy clap' in Eddy Louiss's synthesiser on Blues for Klook (on his album Sang Mele) doesn't quite resolve its double-peaked nature like with some amps. It smooths it over a bit. But it still sounds like a very *fast* amp; hmm, strange that, it sounds contradictory, but it's true!

And I would describe the overall tonal balance as a bit "brightly lit". For those who favour a more subdued balance, more of an easy-listening experience or for those who prefer to sit further back in the hall or arena, I guess (reluctantly!) that the Mini-1 may not be for you.

And of course, you have the rated power of 20wpc. Based on measurements I have seen for other TA-

2020 chip implementations, I strongly suspect that this is with the wind firmly in the right direction and with a level of distortion that is not consistent with high fidelity reproduction. 10wpc is probably nearer the mark, but that's just a guess, I've not seen any measurements for the Mini-1.

But you would likely be very surprised with what that 10wpc can do! - it certainly drives my 84dB/W 4-way speakers to all but truly insane levels on

in my honest opinion in many musically important ways it can take on the best amps I have heard at 5 or even 50 times the price or more.

seriously challenging full-range material like the previously mentioned Blues for Klook. And listening to The Buggles' Age of Plastic album is a grin-inducing experience - the clarity, power and presence are beautifully captured. But my MBLs, large and full-range though they are, are quite an easy load and maybe the Mini-1 would run out of puff into a more challenging speaker? Although that could depend on whether you want to use it for girl-with-guitar or dubstep, string quartet or full symphony orchestra. It is equally unconstrained on my Usher X719 speakers.

But I have heard of situations where the older Mini-T amp does not weave its magical spell and sounds uncharacteristically earthbound, maybe the Mini-1 will be the same? As ever in audio system component matching, synergy is crucial. There's only one way to find out if it will work for you - try one!

Summary

I am awestruck by this amp. Not just 'for the money', but in absolute terms. It's a great amplifier, full stop. If I was unable to continue my 'boxswap' habit, enjoying the variety provided by a frequently varying audio system, what would my "final amp" be? - in truth, I'd be more than happy if it was the Amptastic Mini-1. I could not say that for the vast

Reviews

I can live with one input; and the music sounds real and in-the-room even if I know that a bit more resolution can be had...

majority of the many amps that have passed through my system over the past 30 years or so of my obsession with this hobby. I'm not sure that I can give a recommendation stronger than that.

I can live with one input; and the music sounds real and in-the-room even if I know that a bit more resolution can be had; I enjoy a tonal balance a tad on the bright side; and you'd require an industrial strength crowbar to part me from my MBL speakers and they work well with the Mini-1; so my only real reservation would be the practical one of lack of remote control - but hooked up after my lovely

remote-controlled Restek Consens pre-amp the Mini-1 still sounds great! And that solves the issue of lack of multiple inputs as well.

Is this amp too inexpensive for you to

take seriously? Maybe - but if so, that's your loss!

Recommended with the utmost enthusiasm!

Review systems:

MBL 116F speakers, Restek Consens pre-amp, Jolida FX3 DAC, Pioneer DV-717 (CD transport). Cabling by XLO, MCRU, Atlas, Audioquest.

Usher X-719 speakers, Denon DCD 6.5 midi CD player, Sony 1000ESD pre-amp.



Many will find the Amptastic useful when used in a desktop system



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.



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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Hifi Pig Magazine

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ALL REVIEWS

Album Reviews

Various Artists - Sweet 'n' Salty Popcorn Croydon Municipal

Popcorn? When this CD turned up on the doorstep I was expecting bubblegum pop or some-such but what I actually heard when I pushed the play button was nothing of the sort.



So what is Popcorn music? I'll refer to the liner notes of "Sweet and Salty Popcorn" to explain. Popcorn is a "genre" (movement would be a better description I think) born in Belgium of all places that is difficult to pinpoint accurately – its roots go back to the late 60s and it could sort of be likened to the Northern Soul movement in the UK. In fact the name popcorn comes from the first club that was identified with the sound - a café (called the De Oude Hoos) that held Sunday afternoon dance contests in 1969 and later opened full time as "The Popcorn".

The music itself is underpinned by a "slow swing" dance and indeed Popcorn DJs will slow down the records to make them fit this aesthetic. The Popcorn clubs of Belgium are as far removed from the raves and night clubs of the UK and elsewhere as you could possibly get – they're often in small towns, in unlikely diminutive venues and ply their wares during daytime hours... and the DJs will slow the records down to get the right tempo for the dance. The dancers are in the main over 40 years old.

So has the Popcorn phenomena died out in Belgium – far from it would appear and even the Guardian newspaper in the UK has recently run an article on the scene.

What about this album then? Imagine slow and gritty (and old) R and B and you're sort of there, but it's more complicated than that. The whole Popcorn thing is that it is impure and varied...and yet once you hear the album you'll be able to say "That's a popcorn tune" when you hear one.

The music is necessarily slow (for the dancers) with vocals and a percussive and staccato drum beat for the dancers. It's sort of like listening to a Sunday afternoon black and white film (with actors you've vaguely heard of) at your grandmothers in the late 70s – oddly alien and yet strangely familiar. There are orchestral stabs and a sleaziness that isn't really all that sleazy at all in a 50's kind of way. It will certainly appeal to those who enjoy soul, girl groups of a certain age, latin grooves, R&B and fifties grooves.

Most of the music you will not have heard before and many of the artists will be equally obscure; though you will have heard of Earth Kitt and Tony Martin I'm sure. There's no real stand out tracks so to speak, but the whole album has a certain vibe about it that I actually quite enjoyed. The last song on the album (there are 20 tunes on here!) is the aforementioned Tony Martin and "She Makes a Nice Cup of Tea" which tells the story of a lady with a yacht on the water, a chauffeur, a maid and a porter ...and her dear mother taught her secretly how to serve a nice cup of tea". I don't think it's about a nice cup of tea at all and it's fab... "No Lemon"!

Anne Hytta - Draumsyn Carpe Diem

Anne Hytta is a leading player of the Hardanger fiddle in her home country of Norway and here in Draumsyn performs her own music which is very much rooted in the traditions of this distinctive instrument.



Here's what her website says about the record "The music is both modern and old - new and original - inspired by modal melodies of medieval music and the sound landscapes of composers such as John Cage and Morton Feldman. Some tunings in the Hardanger fiddle repertoire have colour names from colour shades that occur at different times of the day. Throughout the day light and colour change gradually - with frequent, continuous variations it is repeated over and over again...

The concert Draumsyn can be performed either solo with only candle lights as accompaniment, or with video by Ingeborg Staxrud Olerud.

But what's a Hardanger fiddle I hear you ask...and that's a good question because despite having spent a good deal of time in Norway, I too had never come across this instrument before. The fiddle looks very much like a violin but instead of the four strings of the violin the Hardanger fiddle has eight or nine strings where four strings are played as you would a violin and the other "understrings" resonate away with the other strings. So now you know.

Draumsyn is made up of thirteen tunes and for a newbie to the Hardanger fiddle it's an interesting and somewhat haunting album that I think will appeal to a good number of people. Regular readers will know that I'm no classical musical lover but this is quite different and if I was to give it a classification I suppose it would fall

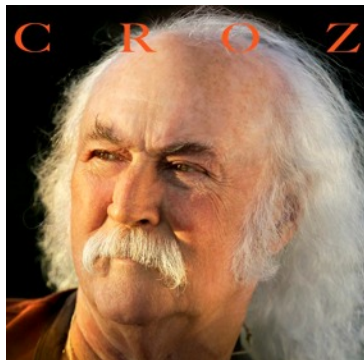
under the broad umbrella of World Music as that seems to be a catch all for folk who don't know quite what to call something from a foreign country that they've never come across before.

The music is quite sparse, desolate and dark in its feeling and this would echo the landscape and weather of Norway I suppose, with the resonating understrings certainly adding to this sombre feeling.

The fiddle playing here is undoubtedly not the kind of get up and dance music you'd may hear in Irish folk and overall it's really a bit melancholy and gloomy. But don't let that put you off, Draumsyn is really quite a beautiful record and Hytta is clearly a bit of a dab hand with the old Hardanger fiddle. Downloaded in Flac from Highresaudio Draumsyn is out now on Carpe Diem records.

David Crosby - Croz Blue Castle Records

Released at the end of January 2014 on Blue Castle Records (the label that Crosby founded with Graham Nash in 2011) and downloaded here in FLAC from HighResAudio, "Croz" is David Crosby's first album of solo material in twenty years and contains eleven new and original tracks recorded at Crosby's home studio. Croz will be supported by series of concert dates in the US.



Croz is produced by Crosby himself, James Raymond (Crosby's son) and Daniel Garcia with a number of the tunes being written by Crosby and his son. Guests on the record include Wynton Marsalis ("Holding on to Nothing"), Mark Knopfler ("What's Broken"), Leland Sklar ("Find a Heart") and Steve Tavaglione ("Morning Star" and "Find a Heart").

The album is a nice collection of tunes with a distinctive West Coast feel to them and that shouldn't come as any real surprise to those that already know Crosby and his past associations – it's also a very well produced record and sounds great when played on a decent rig. Crosby's voice belies his 72 years, not to mention his colourful past, with there being a really familiar and beautiful tone to it – fans will certainly not be disappointed.

Content-wise there's a touch downheartedness tempered with hope to the songs as in the beautiful "Holding On To Nothing" and you get the felling that Crosby is comfortable with himself and his life...with perhaps a

hankering for the past. Harmonies are present and correct (as you'd expect) and the arrangements are professional and polished – as is the playing. Fans will love Croz I guess and for newcomers to David Crosby the album offers a fine album of sincere tunes with its heart very much in the present but then tipping its hat to the past.

OmenOpus - The Archives Monty Maggot Records

OmenOpus are, it has to be said, a new band to me and they have a handful of albums and EPs on the Monty Maggot label that we'll take a listen to over the next couple of months, but judging by what I've heard so far they certainly know where they're going and what they're up to musically.



First in the CD drive is their album "The Archives", which is incidentally their latest CD, and very good it is too if you like your music unsettling and disturbing and with a story to it. The Archives is a concept album set in the 24th century and is best listened to in one sitting to really appreciate it properly and get a feel for the narrative.

I'd just read Philip K Dick's short story "The Gun" when I first started listening to this and The Archives has a similar feel – it is actually based on a short story by Sheriden Starr from the band along the lines of:

Machines have seemingly done away with the need for man to fight in wars but the story takes a twist where the Operators of the machines turn on the Creators (through necessity) and hold mankind to ransom with the machines until the Creators put forward a solution (based on Asimov's three laws of robotics) called the Zeroth Commandment. The album is split into three distinct parts (Containers), which are I presume the "archives" from whence the story evolved, with each telling a different bit of the story.

Style-wise it's difficult to decide what pigeonhole to pop The Archives into as it swaps and changes throughout the record. It has elements of space rock (Bridget Wishart of Hawkwind (...and Hippy Slags) fame is a player), elements of metal and bits of prog.

Whatever, it's certainly musically very accomplished and manages to conjure images of disconcerting future landscapes and a bleak outlook for humanity, but that's not to suggest that it doesn't have its moments of beauty too.

Album Reviews

Interesting and thought provoking ...play it loud!

Tubby Hayes Quartet - Seven Steps To Heaven: Live at The Hopbine 1972 Gearbox Records

I must confess that I'm a bit of a new comer to Jazz but the more I explore its wide and varied sub genres the more I am enjoying it. Step up to the turntable Gearbox Records and Tubby Hayes "Seven Steps To Heaven: Live at The Hopbine 1972".



Now, to aficionados of British Jazz I'm sure the name Tubby Hayes is well known, but to me it was a new I hate to confess and so a little history is perhaps in order for those readers in the same boat as me.

Hayes was born in London in 1935, is best known for his playing of tenor sax and has been regarded as one of the very best British jazz instrumentalists. At just 16 (in 1951) he joined Kenny Baker's sextet and later played for lots of big-band leaders, but in 1955 he toured UK with his own band. He was a co-leader of The Jazz Couriers with Ronnie Scott from 1957 – 1959 and even had his own television series in the early 60s. Thanks Wiki.

2013 would have been Hayes' seventieth birthday had he not died at the age of 38 following a second heart operation...and this brings us to the record we have on the turntable as I type.

Seven Steps to Heaven is recorded at the North Wembley pub "The Hopbine" on 2nd May 1972 and follows Hayes first heart operation (June 1971) which by some accounts had left him "a spent musical force". The recording is made by Bill Hugkulstone on a few mics, a small desk and a Revox tape recorder and represents the second half of the gig that night.

None of the tunes here are Hayes' own but are standards which were, according the fabulous sleeve-notes on the record, the mainstay of his post op' comeback gigs.

Musically, and knowing a little of the history garnered from Simon Spillett's excellent sleeve-notes (aren't real records great for being able to sit and read about the recording whilst you listen!) you would have expected the saxophonist to struggle, but there is none of it and the album is a fabulous blast of energy from start to finish with Hayes aided and abetted by Mike Pyne (piano),

Daryl Runswick (bass) and (probably) Tony Oxley (drums).

It's an excellent record and there is a real vigour to the music from all of the players – there's a drum solo on Seven Steps to Heaven that is simply wonderful and to my mind it alone is worth the price of the record. My personal favourite tune is actually where Hayes puts down the sax' and picks up the flute on Someday My Prince Will Come – his playing is a breathy/vocal style much in the same vein as Jethro Tull's Ian Anderson (I use this only as a broad reference so people not familiar with the style and my useless description to get a feel for what I'm describing, so please don't hunt me down Jazz cats!) and he and Daryl Runswick play beautifully off each other.

The actual recording is not the greatest from a technical perspective, but what you do get is a real insight into the recording space and the music of the night – there is a palpable atmosphere here, almost as if you are sat in the audience and these simple type of recording set-ups often end up being my favourites!

Gearbox Records should be applauded heartily for taking such care with the mastering and cutting of this record (on 180 gram vinyl) as well as the beautifully presented sleeve-notes and cover and I'll be exploring their catalogue further I'm sure .

If you love British jazz I imagine you'll already be aware of this record and have it in your collection but if you're a intrigued jazz amateur (much like myself) I'm sure you'll find the record equally rewarding – I've certainly played it a LOT!!!

Fire - The Magic Shoemaker Esoteric Recordings

Fire were a late 60's/70's three piece band, The Magic Shoemaker ("a fairytale opera") was released on the Pye label in 1970 and was recorded in January 1970 at the label's studios in London. This reissue is re-mastered from the original master tapes by Ben Wiseman at the Audio Archiving Company and released on Esoteric Recordings.



Dave Lambert (guitars, percussion, piano and vocals), Bob Voice (drums, percussion and vocals) and Didck Dufall (bass guitar and vocals) made up the band with all

Album Reviews

tracks being written by Lambert. Dave Lambert later joined The Strawbs.

Throughout the record there's the story of The Magic Shoemaker (Mark) being told (by Lambert) to a group of young children who are clearly enthralled by the story.

Now all this telling fairytales to kids may seem very whimsical and it is a little, but the music is powerful blues-psychedelia for the main part and the musicianship is very accomplished indeed. Lyrical content is a little contrived, as it would be given the subject matter but don't let that put you off. There's some very nice piano on the song Shoemaker but the vocal "He's a Shoemaker..." will no doubt raise a smirk or two I'm sure. Bass guitar is authoritative throughout and lead guitar is superb. Drums are used sparingly where needed to create atmosphere and pounding elsewhere to create a huge wall of sound.

I suppose The Magic Shoemaker very much in the "concept album" tradition but it does stand up very well indeed and sounds remarkably fresh and vibrant for a

very much in the "concept album" tradition but it does stand up very well indeed and sounds remarkably fresh and vibrant for a record that's 44 years old.

record that's 44 years old. The record nosedived on its release and original copies change hands for huge sums so this re-release is very welcome.

You get a few extra tracks on the CD too Father's Name is Dad, Treacle Toffee, Round the Gum Tree and Toothie Ruthie - the A and B sides from a couple of single releases from '68. Both singles are much more commercially minded than the album and Round the Gum Tree with its Surf vocal is a novelty too far in my opinion...perhaps the drugs were stronger then!

If you're a fan of late 60s and 70s blues-rock then this album will really appeal I'm sure. I really enjoyed it and played it a few times back to back – which has to be a good sign.

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Behind the Brands with Nigel Finn of The Chord Company



Your History

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

My first (and only) job in the industry has been with The Chord Company. In truth, I fell into it and became completely fascinated. My history is a mixture of music obsessive since as young as I can remember, and musician when I discovered the utter delight of making music with other people.

Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?

When I first worked for The Chord Company, we dealt with some truly amazing dealers and I learnt so much from them about music and, perhaps more importantly, music replay. That and hearing an LP12 connected to a Naim system for the first time!

Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?

Our proprietary Tuned ARAY cable technology: our unique cable-tuning system. What's been so wonderful is the sheer delight and enthusiasm we've seen from customers. It doesn't get any better than when satisfied customers want to tell you how great their music is, rather than how great their system is.

You and your system

What was your very first system?

My first proper system was a Roksan Xerxes turntable with a Rega tone arm and an original Cambridge C100 and P100, with a pair of home-made speakers.

Tell us about your system history

My Father worked for Mullards and when they were taken over by Philips, he came home with a big box of components and over the weekend, put together a turntable and a valve amplifier and built a speaker into the bottom of a bookshelf. After that it was a Garrard, a Solovox amplifier and a pair of Solovox speakers. That was replaced by the Roksan and the Cambridge, and a Micromega Solo CD player was added. Since then, there have been almost too many to mention. My job involves testing our cables with as many different set-ups as possible, so we can meet the needs of a range of customers and their systems. Currently, there's a DAC 64 driving a Bonnec pre and power amplifier, plus a set of Eclipse loudspeakers; it's a wonderful system that never fails to delight.

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

I wish I'd never sold the Micromega Solo. It was such a funky CD player and at the time, one of the few CD players that could sound really musical.

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

The Zanden phonostage. Horrendously expensive and so good I almost cried!

Tell us about your current system(s)

Current system is a Cambridge Audio 840C as transport (works very well and no, not all transports are equal), a very loved Chord Electronics DAC 64, a Bonnec Timpano and a Bonnec Alto pre and power; everything is connected with our Sarum Tuned ARAY cable. Finally, Eclipse 712 speakers.

I have a small room and this system works fabulously well at low volumes, so I can listen late at night.

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

Rather like transistor amplifiers, there are some good and some bad. What the renaissance of valve amplifiers has meant, is that companies are building efficient loudspeakers again, which is a good thing.

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?

I'm more optimistic than I've been for a long time. The resurgence in vinyl is cause for pleasure, particularly as it's being driven in part by younger people. It may be part reaction and part fashion, but whatever, it is introducing a new generation to the delights of great-sounding music. I'd like to think the death of CD has been greatly exaggerated. There's no doubt that over the past five years or so, CD players have become extremely good. We recently got hold of a copy of Let's Dance by David Bowie, it's a 1999 24-bit re-master. I remember buying one of these in 1999 (Ziggy Stardust) and being hugely disappointed at its semi-unbearable brightness. Played on a contemporary CD player, these now sound pretty good (though not as good as the Japanese pressing!). Streaming and proper high-resolution downloads will continue to improve and if streaming introduces people to new music, then great.



Behind the Brands

As a cable company, should we feel threatened? I think there will always be enthusiasts and passionate music lovers who want the very best. I think the high end will carry on.

What will happen to prices? One of the extraordinary things over the past couple of years has been the rush to make extraordinarily expensive equipment. At the other end, the driving down of prices in the television market has been equally surprising. What I think is beginning to happen, though, is the reintroduction of the, frankly very good, mid-price hi-fi. It's very easy to think of several extremely good £500 to £600 CD players, DACs, amplifiers and speakers. Affordable hi-fi systems that play coherent and involving music will introduce more people to the utter pleasure of music.

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

It's absurdly low profile. More people need to know that there are really good retailers not far from them and more people need to know that good hi-fi doesn't need to cost a fortune.

The way you work

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

For us, it's the balance of detail, dynamics, micro-dynamics and most importantly of all, coherence and timing. Because we're a cable company, our ethos is that our products should have as little influence on the signal that our cables carry as possible. Our design period for new products is relatively slow and the path we follow has tended towards designing better cables, so we've always had a reference point to work from. This has been particularly useful because several techniques that we've discovered, we have been able to apply to other cables within our range.

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

Timing and coherence are not negotiable. Neutrality, transparency, believability, involvement. Ideally, a good system should simply disappear and leave you with the music.



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

It depends on the situation. The fact is that many British houses are simply not that large and full-range floorstanders can cause real issues, either because of siting (how far out in the room can you really get away with?) so in a lot of cases, smaller speakers (with or without a subwoofer) will often produce the most musically satisfying sound. As well as this, it's hard to get round the fact that bigger speakers tend to need bigger amplifiers.

Of course, the other problem with subwoofers is siting. I used a subwoofer with a pair of standmount loudspeakers some years ago. Luckily, I lived in a detached house because although I had the subwoofer nicely set, even at reasonable volume, I could hear it from the bottom of the garden! What systems really need to do, regardless of whether they are being used with floorstanding or standmount loudspeakers, is to be able to play convincing sounding music at reasonable volume.

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

What is your favourite recording?

It changes from day to day. I really can't come up with a favourite. Right now I really love the new David Crosby album, Croz. Beautifully recorded, his voice sounds fabulous. The level of musicianship

is very high and the songs are some of the most positive and life affirming I've heard in a long while.

Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings

With any product, at some point, I'm going to listen to The Banks of the Nile by Fairport Convention, The Ninth Wave from Hounds of Love by Kate Bush and Hard Candy by Counting Crows.

What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures?

The first record I can remember asking for, for my birthday was House of the Rising Sun by The Animals. Pretty cool and somewhat offset by purchasing Where do you go to my lovely? by Peter Sarsted. I don't really have anything I feel particularly guilty about but I've been known to play Wichita Lineman by Glenn Campbell repeatedly until everyone in the room agrees that it's the greatest love song in the world. Or at least it was until Richmond Fontaine released Post to Wire.

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?

Music is a very strange thing. It triggers memories and times and places and people. Hard Candy by Counting Crows probably isn't my favourite album but the memories and the emotions it triggers are just so special. It's not always what you hear music on, sometimes it's who you hear it with.

