

Hifi Pig Magazine

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Hifi Pig Visits Triangle

REVIEWS

McIntosh - MA 5200

SoulNote SC 710 CD Player and SA730 Integrated Amplifier

The Digital Music Box - Linus and Kalliope USB Cables

Roksan - Caspian M2 Integrated Amplifier

Neat Acoustics - Motive SX1 Floorstanding Loudspeakers

INTERVIEW Marijn Kooy of Snip Records

PLUS Reader System, Dealer System, Album Reviews, The Classics (John Martyn "Solid air")



JOHN MARTYN solid air



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Way back in May Hifi Pig visited the headquarters of French Loudspeaker manufacturer Triangle in Bordeaux. Not only were we lucky enough to meet the people behind the brand, but also visited the major shareholder's chateau in Saint Emilion.

This is not your typical factory visit write up and is well worth a read to get an insight into the philosophy and history of the company.

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John Scott likes talking about music and hifi nearly as much as he likes listening to it. This month he wonders whether the hifi industry is failing to attract a new customer base.

Let me tell you a secret; I hope you're sitting down: people don't give a flying floorstander about hifi. No, it's true. Obviously, that doesn't apply to you or me - we avidly read Hifi Pig every month, and quite possibly other lesser-quality hifi magazines as well. We go to hifi shows and hang around in hifi shops pretending to be interested in stuff that we can't possibly ever afford to buy. But we love hifi and in our pursuit of a better system we, and thousands of others like us, spend enough money to keep the hifi industry in business.

The vast majority of the population don't do any of that stuff though do they? If they are under forty years old there is a very good chance that the word "hifi" isn't even in their vocabulary unless they remember it from an Austin Powers film or something. If they are over forty they probably had a hifi of some description at some point - once upon a time just about anything that played recorded music was regarded as hifi; like my parents' 1950's HMV radiogram or a 1980's Wharfedale micro system. For those who cared, the upgrade path was relatively straightforward - replace the crappy box in the corner of the room that played music badly with a bunch of other better boxes that played music well.

What about now though? Just as most people back then would have bought their hifi from Dixons, Currys, Comet or their local department store rather than from a hifi dealership; today their purchase is most likely to be made online without even giving much consideration to what the item they are actually buying sounds like. A recent visit to the electrical department of my local department store revealed only two items that were recognisable as being anything like a traditional hifi system: a micro system - CD player, tuner and speakers - and (oh, the irony!) a 1950s styled radiogram-type affair with

Do manufacturers continue to rely on a pool of relatively affluent hifi hobbyists to keep their businesses afloat...

iPod dock, CD player and tuner in a swish wooden cabinet on spindly legs. It'll look lovely in your house and I'm sure it sounds okay but if you are serious about hifi and have £2000 to spend it's not going to be your first choice is it? Everything else on display was a variation on the ubiquitous iPod dock at a variety of quality and price levels.

So, if you buy an iPod dock and then decide you want to upgrade to something better, what are you going to do? The chances are that you'll just buy a better iPod dock. After all, if you are happy to take photos using your phone, you'll probably just keep upgrading your phone rather than ever get round to buying a real camera. How then does the hifi industry draw people into real, affordable hifi and the

Editorial

further upgrade path that goes with it?

As well as the nature of what is commonly accepted as hifi having changed, the way that people are consuming music is fundamentally changing. I have two sons in their early twenties. Both would describe themselves as music fans - they buy CDs and go to gigs and festivals. They play music in their cars and on their iPods on the bus or at the gym. They don't have any kind of hifi setup at home. They don't, as I did at their age, disappear into their room every night to play music for hours. Why do that when you can play video games online with your mates? I'm pretty sure my kids are typical of their peer group.

And then there are streaming music services to consider. You and I know that these will soon provide a high res music source that, properly handled, will provide the basis of a satisfactory hifi experience. But that still requires quality hifi equipment. If you are happy to stream mp3-quality music and play it through your laptop speakers (and it seems that many, many people are) are you ever

going to develop an interest in real hifi?

As a hifi industry outsider, it seems to me that these questions raise some important issues. It is a regular occurrence for me to read a hifi magazine and not find a single thing in it that I can even dream about affording without a lottery win. Do manufacturers continue to rely on a pool of relatively affluent hifi hobbyists to keep their businesses afloat - surely this pool will start to evaporate as younger people gravitate more and more towards lifestyle home entertainment systems such as Sonos or the aforementioned "radiogram" as an upgrade to their iPod dock rather than a hifi system as we know it? What does the industry do to attract people - particularly young people - away from their docks and mp3s?

I don't know the answer to any of these questions - I don't need to; but I really hope there are people in the industry who do.

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Hifi Pig reader Ben Bishop tells us about his system's history and some of the people that have helped him along the way.



My hifi journey began in 1993, back in the days when it was an easy by-the-numbers process. Neither creativity nor imagination required. A trip to W H Smith, a copy of What HiFi and a flick through to cheapest Best Buys. I can remember exactly what I picked out, and (I think) their prices: A NAD 533 turntable (£219), a Kenwood 3020SE amp (£200) and a pair of Mission 780SE standmounts (£240). Cable Talk 3 speaker cables

from Richer Sounds on Albany Road in Cardiff. And, as I recall, Partington stands.

I'd never been prouder of anything I'd ever owned before. And in the months after I first set it up I thought it sounded just great. I no longer own any of that original kit. And, that's a real shame. I'd really like to hear it again. Because over twenty years and thousands of pounds later, I really need that first system to sound substantially worse than my current

Reader System

setup. I need to find myself in a better place on my hifi journey.

Thinking about it, it would actually be quite nice, and befitting of the current vogue for nostalgia, to have a reunion for all of my kit from the past twenty-two years. I can imagine excitedly catching a glimpse across a crowded room of that Musical Fidelity X-A2 integrated amp that I fell in love with in 2001, or of those Dynaudio Audience 62s that were my first ever floorstanders... Ahh, happy times.

Whenever I have read about the personal hifi journeys of others, I have always detected a real sense of fondness in the retelling. Perhaps this comes from the inevitable connection with the emotion of the music, and perhaps from memories of the listening sessions themselves. This is certainly the case for me.

And looking back, for a good while Musical Fidelity and Dynaudio were my staple brands. Always punchy, clean and dynamic. I ended up with a MuFi A3.2 integrated feeding huge Dynaudio Audience 82 three way floor-standers. That combination was capable of producing just stupidly high sound pressure levels; well beyond the capacity of my ears to comfortably accept. After that I spent a while enjoying working through most of NVA's range.

Nowadays the business end of my listening room is never going to be a feature in What HiFi magazine. To start with, my current speakers are as old as me, 1973 Goodmans Goodwoods. When first purchased they, perhaps like me, were curious rather than impressive. But, unlike me who has grown old gracefully, the Goodmans have been tempted to have work done. Conveniently the work could be carried out just down the M5 in Dursley by Paul, of RFC. Paul is a friend. He is also an impressive engineer whose work in and around Gloucester's waterways keeps my house safe from flooding. Last year Paul took my Goodmans and completely revitalised them: new binding posts, new internal wiring, newly designed crossovers, new tweeters, reinforced bracing and other wizardry that I now take so much for granted I've forgotten he did. And more recently Paul rolled up his sleeves and doped some new bass drivers that I'd managed to acquire. The RFC/Goodmans sound stunning nowadays. Smooth realism from top to bottom. Dynamic but refined. Absolutely beautiful.

I am very aware that I take huge satisfaction out of human contact with people generally. My professional life has always been in jobs where I spend time listening to people. So when friends on the Audiochews forum started advising me to give Class A amps a go, of course I was going to listen. I had been pretty pleased with my amplification at the time, but was goaded into trying something different in the form of an old IncaDesign ID25 Class A power amp. The ID25 had been refurbished by (another) Paul who allowed me to have it for a home demo. As it turned out, the amp's original designer, Colin Wonfor, was kind enough to pick up the amp from Paul and drop it off to my house on his way up the M5. This unusual courier ar-



rangement obviously added to the moment of its arrival. I'd already got to know Colin a little through some mutual friends and acquaintances. Colin is one of the most gentle and generous people I have met. A lovely chap, with more than a whiff of the crazy genius about him.

To spend time with people like Paul and Colin who have created the pieces of equipment through which I enjoy my music really adds to my enjoyment of owning those pieces of equipment. I don't believe that my opinion of the sound of the equipment is affected in any significant way by my friendships with the creators, but it certainly makes me more likely to enjoy the experience of having the equipment in my life.

In the case of the ID25 my feelings about the sound coming from the amp were very positive. The ID25 had a silkiness and bass depth unlike anything my previous amps has been able to offer me. Intrigued by my new discovery of the Class A sound, I didn't stop there. Spurred on by the impressiveness of the ID25, I recently purchased a second refurbished Colin Wonfor amp from the same Paul who had sold the ID25 to me, this time a TOCA SECA 20 ('Touch Of Class A: Single Ended Class A'). There is an easy and natural smoothness to the sound with a tight, powerful, and utterly uncongesting bass. Everything is effortlessly and faithfully presented. Exactly the right degree of detail, exactly the right degree of warmth.

Another recent change of direction for me has been in terms of sources. I own a lot of vinyl and a rather pleasing direct drive turntable, a Pioneer PL-71 armed with a Decca Super Gold cartridge. Via an NVA Phono 2 the sound is pleasing. Almost as good as good digital in fact. However, whilst much of my setup has a solid appreciation of the best of the past, in recent months I have quietly relieved the vinyl front end from service. This has left me with my NVA TFS (The Future Statement) media PC as my only source.

The TFS project was the brain child of Jason Souloglou. At the time when I was looking to move into computer media and away from CD and Bluray players, Jason was hooked up with Richard Dunn of NVA and looking to produce a PC dedicated to the superb playback of music and videos. In addition to providing superb media playback, Jason's intention was to produce a PC which would look more at home on a hifi rack than it would on a desk or a lap. I had already got to know Jason through our shared



interests in music and hifi, and so happily snapped up a TFS from Jason as soon as the first production models emerged.

I am far from being a computer whiz, but a few technical details nevertheless. The TFS has a discrete linear PSU unit that separately feeds the TFS mother board and soundcard. A bluray drive allows HD movies to be watched directly or, even better, to be ripped to a hard drive and watched from there. (In my setup, an HDMI cable links to an InFocus 720p projector, which, whilst hardly cutting edge, puts up a sterling performance on my weekly Friday movie night.)

The TFS came with JRiver Media Centre. I have found this software to be by far and away the best media player that I have tried. In fact, I think it is the only one that I could live with. With lossless rips or downloads playing in ASIO mode, music sounds just right. From a user-friendly point of view, the software also just works. Even given my technical shortcomings, JRiver has never been anything but intuitive and accessible.

The knock on effect of retiring the vinyl is that my NVA P90SA passive preamp is now redundant. There's no longer any need to switch sources away

Reader System

from the TFS (which provides music, video and radio streaming), and the TFS can feed the power amp directly via the volume control in JRiver MC. To my ears, the sound quality with the digital volume in place is at least as good as with digital volume disabled and with the P90SA in place. Despite having heard horror stories of computers crashing, digital volume controls maxing-out and speaker cones ending up in shreds, in the two or more years that I've been enjoying the TFS, neither Windows nor JRiver has crashed in anything other than a silent way, so I am willing to continue taking the risk.

And so to ancillaries. A while ago I introduced a Power Inspired AG1500 mains conditioner. At the time it quietened down the transformers in my then power amp. Further to that it made the sounds coming out of the speakers cleaner, tighter and drier (all in the best ways). It has stayed. Interconnects are NVA SSP and speaker cable is TQ UltraBlack. Both of which impress me with the smoothness, detail and body that they leave untouched in the musical signal.

Whenever I have read about the personal hifi journeys of others, I have always detected a real sense of fondness in the retelling. Perhaps this comes from

the inevitable connection with the emotion of the music, and perhaps from memories of the listening sessions themselves. This is certainly the case for me. May be also there is a pleasure inherent to journeys and progress. I don't really doubt that my system has progressed over the years, nor that my current system sounds significantly preferable to me than the sound that came out of my Mission 780SE speakers in 1993. I also don't doubt that I could happily live with my current system as the final destination of my own hifi journey (though I do doubt that it actually will be!)

But speaking very personally, if there is any fondness in my own retelling of my own hifi journey then it is at least in part due to the people that have become a part of my wider experience of "hifi": The Colin's and the Jasons and the Pauls of the audiophile world have brought value to my overall enjoyment of hifi far beyond that which could be achieved by mere electronics. Similarly, the emergence of internet forums over the past decade has put me in contact with human beings whose personal involvement in my hifi journey has been massively enriching.

So, I am very happy with my hifi system, but I am





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This month's Dealer System comes from Hifi Sound in the North East of England and features some exceptional kit.

The most striking features of these turntables are their two counter-rotating platters, one positioned above the other. "Why this unusual construction?" I ask Simon. "Torque cancellation", says Griffin. Kronos' designer Louis Desjardin believes that on a floating sub-chassis turntable, as the motor turns the second platter, it imparts an opposite rotational force into the turntable suspension."

The tonearm is also from Kronos and is the 'Helena'. It's a carbon fibre one-piece arm tube with unipivot bearing. The unusual feature here is the mirrored cup and stainless steel ball bearing pivot. The Helena features adjustable VTA, overhang and azimuth but unusually does not feature anti-skating. Desjardin's thinking is that by aligning the pivot exactly with the plane of the record, surface skating forces are minimized and therefore anti-skating is not necessary, especially with the deck's torsional forces in cancellation.

Completing the vinyl front-end is the Transfiguration Proteus MC cartridge by Immutable Music of Japan. "I've always loved Transfiguration for their liquid musicality combined with tremendous resolution and insight, but without sounding harsh or clinical. Vocals in particular are so real," enthuses Griffin.

His chosen amplifiers for the Dealer System are from Californian valve legends Aesthetix. "We love the Aesthetix amplifiers for their natural musicality", he says. "Compared with much of the competition, they just sound *right*". In this instance Hifi Sound chose the Janus preamplifier which includes an in-built all-valve phonostage, a fully configurable phono input and an in-built cartridge demagnetizer. That's

"Listening to this system is sumptuous and utterly captivating experience. The levels of presence and detail are astonishing. The Aesthetix amplifiers certainly didn't get in the way of all of this information..."

combined with the Atlas power amplifier which, says Griffin "can drive any loudspeaker that I've come across".

Which brings us, finally, to the loudspeakers: another of Decent Audio's brands, Magnepan. Magnepan



(the company) make Magneplanar (the product) loudspeakers, famous for their use of planar magnetic drivers and known to their many friends as 'Maggies'. The planar magnetic drive units use patented technology. The speakers are large flat panels, ranging in size from around 1.3 to 2 metres tall, yet are only around 3cm deep! For this system Simon chose the newest addition to the range: the MG3.7i, which uses a full range ribbon tweeter and quasi-ribbon midrange and bass panels. The ribbon and quasi ribbon panels are all sub-species of the planar magnetic genre. The ribbon tweeter is essentially an unrolled and flattened voice coil that sits in a magnetic gap. The lack of a separate driver membrane means moving mass is exceptionally low, and the diaphragm is driven over its entire surface. The quasi-ribbon mid and bass panels are constructed from a very thin membrane (mylar perhaps?) onto which is stuck a ribbon, i.e. the flattened unrolled voice coil. This provides the additional surface area required for lower frequencies but still retains low mass and, perhaps more important, the surface is driven over its entire area.

"Magneplanars do have a couple of noteworthy drawbacks, otherwise perhaps everyone would use them. First, they are visually large – especially the bigger ones (for deeper bass). Secondly they do require a high powered, and high quality amplifier. It's this that makes them such a perfect match for the Aesthetix Atlas, which combines an all-valve signal path with solid-state muscle to deliver 200 watts of delicious pure valve music into each channel" says Griffin.

When we asked what he thought this particular system brought to the listener Simon responded "Listening to this system is sumptuous and utterly captivating experience. The levels of presence and detail are astonishing. The Aesthetix amplifiers certainly didn't get in the way of all of this information. The Janus preamplifier/phonostage marries purist and high tech: 12 valves provide up to 75dB of gain and the cartridge loading can be fine-tuned by remote control, ensuring the cartridge is accurately 'dialed in' to give of its best. The



Dealer System

speakers, being rigorously held by the vice-like grip of the Aesthetix Atlas, convey a soundstage that is not only life-like but life-sized. Individual instruments are projected in a realistic space behind and in front of the speakers. The bass is deep and powerful and breathes in a very natural way, really quite different from the obviously 'driven' bass produced by the conventional box loudspeaker. The sound seems bigger than, and freed from, the speakers. The midrange was open and deliciously detailed and the effortless treble shimmered with seemingly endless extension."

One further surprise, and a nice illustration of just how committed to analogue music reproduction Simon Griffin is the Turntableworld Record label. It turns out that this is the first of a yet another Griffin venture: high quality vinyl pressings.

[Hifi Sound's Website](#)



Hifi Pig Visits Triangle



When French loudspeaker manufacturer Triangle asked if we would like to pay them a visit we thought we'd be heading North to their factory in Soissons, but it was South and to Bordeaux where we were asked to make our way.

Earlier this year in May Hifi Pig was invited to visit French loudspeaker manufacturer Triangle at their offices in Bordeaux, but first of all who are Triangle and what is the history behind the brand?

Triangle was initially founded in 1980 by Renaud de Vergnette in 1980 and launched their first loudspeaker the 1180.

In 1981 they introduced the CX2 which was the first Triangle design to mount the tweeter on top of the cabinet and by 1985 they were producing their own drivers which remain the company's trademark to this day.

By 1990 Triangle introduced a new loudspeaker, the Altair, which was the first loudspeaker to incorporate a curved cabinet, something that has become all but an industry standard in modern loudspeakers.

The very first Esprit range was introduced in 1994 with the Antal TZX and these names have remained

with Triangle ever since. Indeed the Antal was this listeners first introduction to the Triangle sound. Triangle's flagship Magellan loudspeaker was announced in 2003 introducing new technologies

Keen to promote the Made in France aspect of their loudspeakers both the Signature and Magellan series of loudspeakers are made exclusively at the Soissons facility, whilst Triangle continue to develop their own drivers.

Triangle Visit

which the company have since trickled down into other ranges in their portfolio.

The Decelle family (Olivier Decelle) purchased Triangle in 2006 and began to reorganise the company.

By 2009 Triangle had opened purpose built R&D facilities which were separated between mechanical and acoustic research and development. The facilities include CLIO software, 3D print capability and an anechoic chamber.

To celebrate its 30th anniversary Triangle introduced the Anniversary range in 2010 and later, in 2011, the Color range was introduced combining a modern design with vibrant finishes.

The Signature range of loudspeakers was introduced in 2013 as was the new sales and marketing offices in Bordeaux.

The Triangle Esprit EZ series of speakers was launched to the public in 2014.

The team we met at the Bordeaux offices was young, vibrant and as well as having a good deal of experience in the audio industry. Above all they are passionate about their product and where it is going in the marketplace.

Production of loudspeakers remains in the Northern French town of Soissons but sales and marketing is located in Bordeaux, the wine capital of the World, as the Decelle family are heavily involved in the wine industry – as you'll read later.

Keen to promote the Made in France aspect of their loudspeakers both the Signature and Magellan series of loudspeakers are made exclusively at the Soissons facility whilst Triangle continue to develop their own drivers.

Currently Triangle is sold in around 40 countries around the world with France being the biggest market. Rune Jacobson is charged with developing the brand's presence around the world and this multilingual Danish national certainly knows a thing or two about the industry – you can read his responses to our Behind the Brands questions in last month's Hifi Pig Magazine.

One of the trademarks of Triangle loudspeakers is the use of hornloaded tweeters which are developed by Triangle for Triangle and this remains an important part of the business with triangle selling OEM drivers to a good number of other loudspeaker manufacturers. The tweeter horn is 100% injected aluminium with different solutions and materials being used on the more expensive models, but all maintaining the core technology and philosophy.



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Triangle Visit

Triangle's midrange driver is a new design with the 185cm aluminium basket being designed to offer improved ventilation for the double-layered voicecoil. This paper coned driver is equipped with a small pleat peripheral short travel suspension with newer versions using a specially treated paper. Triangle have replaced the phase plug on earlier models with a dust cap made to an identical size and shape.

Whilst we did not visit the Soissons facility Triangle say they have undertaken a complete review of their manufacturing process and now engineers work very closely with the people who put the loudspeakers together with several acoustic tests being carried out throughout the process to ensure each element of the loudspeaker's make up meets Triangle's strict

standards. Speakers are finally tested in the company's anechoic chamber with veneers later being carefully selected to produce a matched pair of loudspeakers.

Triangle currently has four series of loudspeakers in their portfolio: Color, Esprit, Signature and the range topping Magellan which we got to listen to at the Jean Faure Chateau in St Emilion and owned by the Decelle family.

Triangle is headed up by its CEO Marc Le Bihan with Olivier Decelle being both a major shareholder and his son Hugo Decelle involved in marketing the brand. Rune Jacobson and Nicolas Serra deal with the international sales and marketing, whilst Sebastien Miguel heads up the R & D team.

Tasting Notes From Saint Emilion

When we were invited to visit Triangle my first thought was what a great opportunity this was. I'd heard the company's speakers a couple of times at shows on the end of valve amplification and had always been impressed with their open and fast sound. We'd expected to have been invited to make the journey east to the Northern French town of Soissons where they have their factory and R & D facilities and it came as a bit of a shock when we were asked to join them in Bordeaux. Thinking now about the people behind the company, Bordeaux shouldn't have been such a surprise as the Decelle family are heavily involved in the wine industry, owning a total of five vineyards around France, including the Jean Faure chateau in St Emilion which has recently been awarded "Grand Cru" status...but more about that later.

Triangle's offices in Bordeaux are the main administrative offices where the company's sales and marketing team are based as well as its web designers etc. The offices have been stunningly transformed from an old wine shipping building into a modern and spacious environment that seems perfect for this young team of professionals to



operate from. Speaking to Hugo Decelle he tells us they plan to open up the ground floor space (which still houses the huge wine vats) to host evenings of music where people will have a chance to hear Triangle's loudspeakers in informal and relaxed surrounding.

Our hosts for the duration of our stay were the aforementioned Hugo Decelle and Rune Jacobsen

(pictured above) who were keen to discuss Triangle's plans for the future as well as the philosophy behind the brand.



Hugo (above) is the son of major shareholder in the company Olivier Decelle and takes care of marketing for the company whilst Rune is in charge of international sales and marketing and getting the brand better recognised around the world. Hugo studied business management at university with him spending a year in Hull at the university there.

Olivier Decelle, who we will meet later, has an interesting background in hi-fi and has involvement with Triangle from the very outset of the company. In 1980 he became the very first retailer for the model 1180 loudspeaker when he had a hi-fi shop on rue Saint Jacques in Paris. In 1995 he became a minority shareholder in the business whilst the company was reorganising itself and positioning itself as one of the three top brands in France. Indeed, if you go into any of the large retailers in France (Boulangier for example) you will find Triangle sat beside Focal and Cabasse. There's an

inclusivity apparent with the brand and, despite having the mega-bucks Magellan in their range there is also ranges that are much more affordable and that will have appeal not only to the dedicated audiophile but also for the more casual music lover.

When in 2006 Triangle's original founder Renaud de Vegnettes left the business Olivier, with the help of Marc le Bihan (the company's CEO), took over control of Triangle both modernizing and consolidating the brand, whilst maintaining its core values and philosophy.

Rune Jacobson also has a strong background in hi-fi with him having bought his first hi-fi at the age of fourteen and later working part time in a hi-fi shop and becoming export manager for Italian brand Pathos. He's worked in pro-audio with TC Group and speaks far too many languages than is good for one person. Interestingly Rune's degree is not related to hi-fi or audio in any way and is actually in wine production and so the move to Triangle, given the Decelles' other interests, is somewhat natural.

At the heart of Triangle's philosophy it is clear that their starting point is always their own drivers and trademark horn tweeter.

What is clear from speaking with Rune and Hugo is that their passion and belief in the brand is very strong and they also have a very clear vision of where the brand should be. Yes, they are keen to talk about the Magellans and the Signature series of loudspeakers, but they're also eager to tell us about their affordable and funky Color series too. I like this outlook a good deal and think it is to be applauded.

Triangle Visit

Of course many readers of this article will have invested thousands upon thousands in their music play back system, but it remains that there are a vast majority of folk out there who want a simple hi-fi that allows them to enjoy their music or films in great quality and without having to spend a king's ransom... or have something in their sitting room that just takes over.

At the heart of Triangle's philosophy it is clear that their starting point is always their own drivers and trademark horn tweeter. It's also evident that they want to keep a family sound with all their products. They're investing heavily in R & D and Rune is keen to have the brand better represented in the UK marketplace and I believe it deserves a higher profile than it currently has.

As we wrap up our chat in the Bordeaux office it's nearing lunchtime and if you've ever been to France you'll know that everything stops for this ritual and having lived here for nice years it's one we've taken on wholeheartedly. We jump in our car and follow

The chateau has been transformed from a virtual ruin into a beautiful family home with a working vineyard that Olivier Decelle is keen to tell us has gone a good way to them being awarded Grand Cru for their chateau.

Hugo and Rune to make the half hour or so trip to St Emilion where we eat a great meal and then head up to the Decelles family home, Chateau Jean Faure.

Now this is an impressive place! The chateau has been transformed from a virtual ruin into a beautiful



family home with a working vineyard that Olivier Decelle is keen to tell us has gone a good way to them being awarded Grand Cru for their chateau.

After a brief look around the very impressive wine making facilities of the chateau we are invited to a tasting (*we can confirm that Chateau Jen Faure is a truly delicious glass*) and then we take our refilled glasses into the living room of the Decelles to listen to some music via some rather impressive Audio Research amplification, Krell CD player and, of course, Triangle's range topping, €56K Magellan Grande Concert loudspeakers.

The Magellans are an imposing loudspeaker with a total of eight drivers (four bass drivers and one of each mid-range and tweeters mounted both on the front baffle and on the back panel). It's a three-way loudspeaker that is 91dB sensitive and a claimed frequency range of 28Hz to 20KHz. Their nominal impedance is 4 Ohms, each one weighs 100Kg and they stand 2.15m in height.



Triangle Visit



Ok this is a large and high room and not all rooms could reasonably accommodate the Magellans, but in this setting they do not look overly out of place and blend into the beautiful décor pretty well.

We spend an hour or so listening to a wide range of music through this system and despite being in unfamiliar surroundings we were able to get a reasonable measure of the speaker's main attributes. The first thing we noted was that there's a really wide sweet-spot being thrown and so, despite neither of us being bang centre, we were both able to enjoy an striking stereo image and deep, deep soundstage. There's good dynamics, as you would expect, with great detail being evident even in quieter passages and whilst the Magellans certainly sound like big loudspeakers, they are still somewhat sweet and delicate sounding in a not at all "in your face" style – indeed one of the notes I made reads "natural and unforced – shut your eyes and forget that the speakers are there". Listening to a Danish female vocalist it's very easy to spot the slight Danish twang in her voice and the guitar on Pink Floyd's "Shine On You Crazy Diamond" is as natural sounding as I've heard. There's a feeling with the Magellans that

no one frequency is being over dominant and what you are left with is a very detailed and relaxed sound that, had we time, I'd have happily spent hours in front of.

Needless to say the finish on these loudspeakers is of a very high quality and they really do ooze style and sophistication that is enhanced somewhat by our surroundings. But then, as I mentioned, Triangle aren't just about these high-end loudspeakers and, having heard the €6K Signature Alphas in our own home, can confidently say that there is certainly a family sound with Triangle speakers at all price ranges.

Linette and I would like to extend a huge thank you to the folks at Triangle and particularly Hugo and rune for looking after us and making us feel so welcomed. Thanks also to Olivier and Madame Decelle for inviting us into their wonderful home and being so welcoming.

McIntosh MA 5200

Price: £4,995

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Peter Stanton-Ife takes a listen to this iconic American brand's well specified all-in-one amplifier, DAC, phonostage and headphone amp.

As European amps continue to expand in size, and as this amp is rather small by some American standards, this £5000 McIntosh MA5200 100W per channel integrated is perhaps a McIntosh which might contend well in the European market place. With 9 inputs, including 1 Moving Magnet phono and 3 digital inputs that will decode digital music at up to 32 bits and 192kHz, it deserves to: as well as being exceptionally well-equipped and capable, it is a very musical all-in-one amplifier.

McIntoshes are very American both in terms of design cues and in terms of size. Visually it will happily

sit alongside any Mac made over the last fifty years – it has the distinctive black fascia with blue dials and a shiny green logo, like it or hate it.

By American standards, it is quite svelte at 48 x 15.1 x 44.3cm but its depth and width might trouble many Euro equipment racks. It weighs a hernia-inducing 17 kilos, so frequent moving is not desirable. On the other hand, this unit (in common with several competing offerings) provides scope for considerable rationalisation as it could credibly replace a preamp, power amp, DAC and phono stage, and accordingly save on all the associated cables, isolation, racking

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etc. It also supports multi-room implementations. Put that way, £5000 seems reasonable if not fantastic value. Judgement on fantastic value will depend on the sonics.

Forget the clichés about American amps, this is not a brute, but nor is it polite.

First impressions

Opening the rather hefty box produced the first surprise and it was a good one – typical of the thought that has obviously gone into this kit. Lifting the amp out of its shipping carton revealed that it had been attached by two screws to both a cardboard base and a rigid MDF base which secured the amp completely against the tender mercies of couriers during its transport. A cheap but highly effective way of preventing needless returns to base. Other manufacturers might take note.

So how about first impressions? Let's get the gripes over first. It is very much a Mac - very American, and I mean that well. It is very muscular but some

design aspects jar; the level and source selectors look and feel so plasticky that using them does not give the confidence that the amp's visual cues offer. I imagine it is the same feeling that Aston drivers used to have when they wallowed in lovely leather seats and discovered switchgear from the Ford parts bin plonked on their dashboards. With a £5000 amp, tactility matters and there really is no excuse not have squeezed a few cents extra spend on some better parts. This is, after all, the main interface with the user, especially as the remote is a seriously hideous piece of lightweight plastic. This must particularly matter when you are fighting the likes of Devialet for business. In fairness, I should add that neither the switches nor the remote failed to do what was required of them; my complaints are all about what goods at this price level should feel like.

Under the hood

The controls are actually quite sophisticated. Not only do they turn, but they can also be pressed or clicked to navigate the user menu. Reading through the manual, which is well written and comprehensive, you find instructions for a bewildering array of settings such as activating the S/PDIF inputs for the built-in DAC, applying home theatre throughput or setting up comms for a multi-room system. The built-in DAC has a built-in Windows driver which allows simple access through a USB connection. The S/PDIF options are set through the menu where one of the five line-level inputs (4x RCA, 1 x XLR or RCA) is deactivated. All these inputs can be named. In addition to the line level inputs, there is an in-built MM phono stage and a pre-out/main-out loop with metal jumpers. Helpfully there is a 6.3mm head-



Reviews

phone socket on the front. The speaker terminals are chunky and are standard rather than multi-tapped.

Let us look first at the pre and power amplifier sections. Sadly, this Mac is made without the proprietary autoformers for which the marque is renowned. Instead, McIntosh has deployed new circuitry called Dynamic Power Management or DPM, designed to intelligently adapt to varying loads. In all fairness, I cannot claim to have presented anything difficult enough to this amp to comment on the effectiveness of this circuit. Living in a built up area and not wanting an ASBO, the limits of my testing were such that this amp never broke a sweat, less still challenged any of my speakers.

How does it sound?

Forget the clichés about American amps, this is not a brute, but nor is it polite. Many amps are voiced to impress in the showroom but then blare and grate rather after some time listening. Or they are just too mellow to stir the soul. What this amp does so well is

Like all McIntoshes I have ever heard, the MA5200 generates a credible and large soundstage – you really do get the sense of the concert hall, the cocktail bar or the rock concert.

to let the music come to the fore and simply provide the power when it is needed.

In the interests of brevity, as I lived with this amp for a month and played it every day, I shall not list all the music I tried on it. I applied all the standard tests – female voices, male voices, organ, large orchestral pieces, chamber orchestra, piano, drums and guitar through FLAC, red-book and vinyl.

Like all McIntoshes I have ever heard, the MA5200 generates a credible and large soundstage – you really do get the sense of the concert hall, the cocktail bar or the rock concert. But it is also very well balanced indeed. It comes across with a fluidity and smoothness which makes it very easy to listen to for long stretches.

The treble never obtrudes and the bass is always well rendered without veering towards the flatulence that sometimes comes with big amps, but this is no window shaker, unless you want it to be. It plays good recordings well with only a small suggestion that the top and bottom ends could go further but it also has a tendency to make poorly recorded music more



listenable - it tames slightly edgy modern (digital) recordings and it renders sometimes flabby 50s and 60s (especially classical) recordings well. It is not the last word in detail retrieval, nor in resolving tran-

If I were in the market for a £5000 all-in-one amp, I'd be perfectly happy to take the MA5200 and pair it with a good pair of loudspeakers

sients but what it puts out is recognisably music.

The most impressive thing about the MA5200 is just how self-effacing it is: It is a Jeeves of an amp, shimmering about in the background, quietly ensuring that the music is given every opportunity to show itself at its best, and keeping all those reserves of power for when they are really needed. If you are not looking at the amp itself, it is easy to forget that it is in the musical chain. It just sounds good and this is helped by the consistency across the line stages, the DAC inputs and the phono stage which all behave with a similar tonality and integrity. This amp is very easy to live with and I can see why Mac buyers have such brand loyalty – in technological terms, it really is “fit and forget” – no tweaking, no perpetual chase for upgrades, no “voicing” – just listen to the music.

I used the MA5200 with both a pair of Sonus Faber Grand Pianos and a pair of Bastani open baffle speakers alternating between runs of Skogrand Ignis Purist cable and my normal Electrofluidics cable. I also borrowed a pair of Spendor BC1s from a friend to try out on the MA5200. Again, consistency of

sound proved to be the order of the day, even with speakers as coloured as the SFs. I tried a pair of elderly Sennheisers on the headphone output and can report that late night listening will not be a chore.

Turning to the built-in DAC, I simply could not differentiate between the two S/PDIF inputs. To my ears, they had the same tonality. The asynchronous USB input had marginally clearer resolution than the coax input from my streamer but that might just be down to differences in cabling. (I understand that the DAC circuitry in the MA5200 is substantially the same as that in McIntosh's rather more expensive units, so that the consumer here is getting the benefit of some rather tasty trickle down technology.)

As an experiment, I ran my satellite box through the DAC and will happily report that using the MA5200 as a stereo TV amp with my Sonus Fabers delivered by far the best audio I have ever heard from my TV, far, far better and clearer than the dedicated AVR amp and 5.1 speaker system!



In comparison to the V1 DAC in my Naim rig, I could not honestly say much more than that the V1 was marginally better resolved and had more “bite” i.e. it sounded typically Naim and that the Mac sounded typically McIntosh. But would I spend £1250 on a separate V1 if I kept the MA5200? Probably not. In my opinion, you would have to find quite a lot of money more conclusively to beat the Mac's DAC.

I'm afraid I was much less taken with the standard 47 K ohm MM phono stage, but then I listen to vinyl more than any other medium. For “residual” vinyl users it will do the job with a good MM or HOMC. It

Reviews

does its job adequately but compared to any of my outboard phono stages, even the humble Dynavector P75 Mk III, it falls quite short.

Tonally the MM input shares the MA5200 sonic signature but it was not fully up to the job on dynamics, soundstaging and separation for serious and extended vinyl listening. It might, of course, be that McIntosh's own turntables and cartridges mate better with this amp than the ones I had at my disposal.

I tried my Reference Fidelity SUT with my Zu Audio Denon 103 into the MM input and it sounded a bit clearer, more dynamic and differentiated more of the instruments and voices than either the MusicMaker MI or my Ortofon Black MM, but if you listen to a lot of vinyl, you will probably need to plan on using a discrete phono stage. The good news is that a good one really sings - my Whet PS30RDT came through dynamically and clearly with a line input, as did my Electrocompaniet.

Conclusion

I have long been a fan of McIntosh kit and the MA5200 does nothing much to disappoint. For me,

the McIntosh MA5200 is an excellent amplifier, with a quality DAC and a no fuss approach to presenting music. The amp is very tolerant of supports, cables and sources and requires only simple set up and precious little tweaking. Set it up in an hour or so and off you go.

If I were in the market for a £5000 all-in-one amp, I'd be perfectly happy to take the MA5200 and pair it with a good pair of loudspeakers. As for sources, you could get going with only a laptop. It is an outstanding amplifier with a fantastic sound quality and a build quality (despite my quibbles regarding the knobs and the plastic fantastic remote control) far better than much of what is produced in the UK.

Build quality – 9/10

Sound quality – 8./10

Value for money – 7/10

Overall – 8/10



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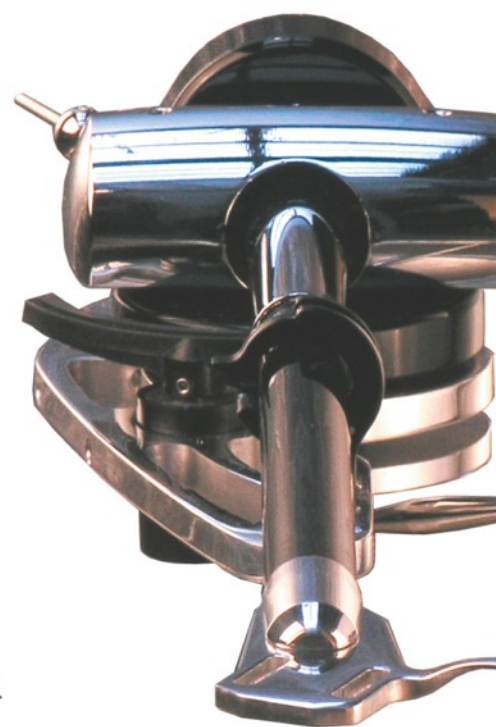
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SoulNote SC 710 CD Player and SA730 Integrated Amplifier

Stuart Smith

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

Amplifier - €4200

CD Player - €4000



I took a listen to [SoulNotes little SA 710](#) amplifier a few months ago and awarded it an overall score of 8.2/10 so when we were asked if we'd have a listen to it's bigger brother and associated CD player I was very keen!

The design of the two black boxes carries on from the SA 710 and is simple and elegant with little being given to unwanted and unnecessary frippery. The only concession to any kind of blingness is the SoulNote nameplate which sits in the middle of each of the two units' facia. Both units are of standard width but are both quite shallow in depth.

SC710 CD Player

The SoulNote SC710 uses a Burr-Brown 1792A DAC with filtering provided by the NE5532 chip implemented without negative feedback. An 80VA power R core transformer is used as well as double Darlington discrete non-negative feedback power supply.

On the front black panel you've got all the usual buttons dealing with play, stop, eject and search back and forward. There's the on/off switch and above that you have a blue LED to let you know the unit is powered up. The display is a simple red, LED affair showing track number, minutes and seconds.

Round the back there's a pair of RCA outputs, a pair of XLR outputs and an RCA digital output.

SA730 Integrated Amplifier

This is a 75W a channel (8 ohms) integrated that again used negative feedback circuitry. Into 4 Ohms you get a healthy 115W a side.

The front has button selectors for the two XLR inputs and 4 RCA inputs which click with a pleasing solidity and have a green glow around them when selected. A power on button with blue LED and a motorised volume pot and that's your lot.

On the back panel there's the two stereo XLR inputs,

the four stereo RCA inputs and a pair of substantial loudspeaker binding posts.

The pair look good together on the rack and come with a lightweight remote commander that controls

Even at loud levels the amplifier doesn't feel like it's running out of steam and remains in control of the speakers.

both the CD player and the amplifier. This remote covers all the necessary functions with the volume going up slowly which is a nice feature.

For the purposes of this review I wanted to use the SoulNote CD and amplifier as a pairing as I believe this is likely how they will be bought. With the reference 95db Mummy speakers we usually use the 75W on offer was a bit overkill and as we had a pair of Roksan Darius S1s in fro review (*thanks Tufan for the extra couple of weeks with these*) we used these as they're a more real world partnering.

The two were listened to in the main system too and I'll note that where applicable.

Some Tunes

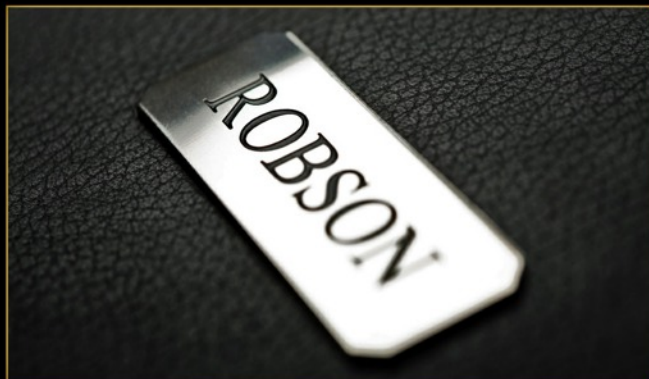
Over the period of time we had with the SoulNote kit we managed to listen to pretty much every genre of music we own from rock to folk to jazz to electronic.





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Regular readers will know there's a distinct lack of classical in our collection!

On rock music such as Marillion's "Fugazi" it's clear that the CD player is delivering the amplifier with a good quality signal and there is certainly nothing missing in the mix. At low to medium volumes there's a solid stereo image presented and you get the full range of frequencies with mid and highs to the fore slightly. There's good speed and slam with snares having the required snap to them. Bass is a little recessed at these volumes. Fish's vocals sit bang in the centre of the mix and there's good insight into his vocal style, with little vocal effects in the mix coming through well. However, this kind of music isn't made for these lower volumes and cranking up the pot you get the feeling that the amp is really coming into its own. There's a real sense that the amplifier is taking control of the speakers and that speed and slam I mentioned a moment ago just gets "more so". Bass is tight and a little dry with no bloom or overhang. Vocals are pushed a little forward in the mix and synth and guitar leads have the required soaring quality. This pairing does rock music very well indeed with drums having impact and power to them when needed, but also allowing softer touches on cymbals to have the right ring and shimmer to them.

Even at loud levels the amplifier doesn't feel like it's running out of steam and remains in control of the speakers. Perhaps at louder volumes the very high frequencies become a little more pronounced than I would have liked but the bass and mids remain tight and controlled.

Popping the SoulNote CD player into the main sys-

tem and taking out the Pioneer DVD transport into the Valve Audio Devices DAC there is good air around instruments in the higher frequencies with a decently open sound. Bass has a touch more control to it than my valve based reference, but vocals are projected further forward in the mix than I'm used to. Overall the tube DAC I have suits my taste more and I would say it presents a more harmonious, richer sound, but perhaps lacks the snappiness and immediacy of the SoulNote.

Back to the pairing and switching CDs for something a little less hectic and I reach for Madeleine Peyroux' "Careless Love" and as I'm putting the CD into the tray I notice the tray is a bit on the flimsy side – a common enough complaint with CD players using generic transports! Pressing play on the remote has the tray sliding in to the machine silently and smoothly though. There's a few seconds delay whilst the player reads the CD which had me reaching for the remote to press play again for the first few discs I played.

I buy a lot of second hand CDs and often take pot luck on artists I've not come across before and sometimes the discs look like they've been used as frisbees at a chimps tea party to the point my usual transport gets quite fussy about playing them. Not so the SoulNote with it playing pretty much every CD I threw at it bar the very worst examples... which I really ought to get round to binning!

Anyway, back to Madeleine and it's clear from the first opening bars of "Dance Me To The End Of Love" that the SoulNotes can play this popular jazz style too. There's not the same finesse as when I'm



Reviews

using the Tellurium Q SECA and reference DAC and pre, but there is a feeling of control again ...and of course the SoulNote goes louder with these speakers! The play between drums and bass is portrayed really well and with the syncopated rhythms you can't help but tap your feet along in time to the music.

There's good balance to the sound with mids (vocals again) being slightly highlighted and I think that many will actually enjoy this kind of presentation. There's loads of smaller details in the music in evidence with little touches on the bass fretboard being clearly distinguishable. This pairing seem to be overall pretty neutral sounding with just a hint of warmth to the sound which I put down to the mids being slightly exaggerated.

When switching out the SoulNote amp for the little Clones audio i25 (*which I really rate for the money*) you appreciate the extra power of the SoulNote as well as the firmer control it displays over the loudspeakers.

There is scale and there is dynamism to the music with the SoulNotes ...

Some electronic music now and to Deep Dish's excellent "Yoshiesque Two". The East Coast disc opens with the fabulous vocal of Julie McKnight on The Kings Of Tomorrow's "Finally" and I immediately began to get that goose bump thing you get sometimes when you hear a tune you know portrayed really well. There's a clarity and tone brought out that just sounds great, with the slight delay effect being very much in evidence. I found myself hitting the rewind button on the remote but found it pretty unresponsive and it taking me back to the end of the album...pressing the track number button worked fine!

When the beat finally comes in there's that speed and slam thing again and it really suits this kind of music very well. The stereo image is wide enough, but not overly exaggerated, with different layers of instruments being clearly defined. Bass lines are bouncy, tight and stand out in the mix. This style of music is again well suited to the SoulNote pairing's style of delivery.

Switching out the Roksan speakers for a pair of Triangle Signature Alphas we have in for review there's

still that sense that the SoulNotes are taking control of the speakers and you can clearly hear the very different presentation the two speakers have.

Conclusions

The SoulNote CD and amplifier are a natural pairing that clearly play to each others strengths. The open and airy nature of the CD player is complimented by the amps powerful and forceful presentation. There's oodles of power and great speed and slam (sorry for repeating this yet again but I can't think of how else to describe this) to the music (PRAT perhaps?).

I'd suggest that the systems strong points are playing music that has solid rhythmic foundations and comes into its own when the volume is turned up loud. The amp isn't the last word in absolute finesse when compared to our reference, but it will appeal to those that like to boogie and enjoy listening to music rather than analysing the sound coming out of the speakers.

There's a slight forwardness to the mids, but this is nicely tempered by the rest of the character of the pairing and overall gives a well balanced presentation.

There is scale and there is dynamism to the music with the SoulNotes and I for one really enjoyed my time with them...not sure about the people down the valley though as I did play a lot of music very loud. As I say not the last word in absolute finesse when compared to our reference system, but they do love to party and will appeal to a good few people I believe!

The pairing isn't by any stretch of the imagination falling into budget territory, but for the money you get an amp with power and control, plus a transport and DAC that perform reasonably well in comparison to our much more expensive reference.

Build Quality – 7.9/10

Sound Quality – 8.3 /10

Value For Money - 7.9/10

Overall – 8/10

Recommended for people that are looking for a no-nonsense, well performing pairing that deliver a powerful sound with great bass weight and punch.

Price when reviewed:

Amplifier - €4200

CD Player - €4000

FM-6 2½-way Fidelity Monitor

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The Digital Music Box - Linus and Kalliope USB Cables

Dan Worth

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

£500/m and £1000/m

There's been a very rapid increase in availability of exotic USB cables over the past year.

Many companies are offering a range of this cable type which can consist of as many progressive versions through the range as digital coaxial cables which were for many the main digital link between transports and DACs.

The Digital Music Box has concentrated their efforts on two USB cables:

- The Linus which is an ordinary single cable containing data and power conductors.

"Solid silver conductors are used for the data wires and termination to the plugs is with silver solder to give a very highly conductive path. The conductors are helically wound with silk and contained in PTFE tubing to give exceptional dielectric properties. The data conductors are screened from the voltage and ground wires to ensure total protection from data corruption.

High quality USB gold plated plugs are used, supplied with a clear hard plastic hood to protect the plugs."

- The Kalliope a separately powered USB cable leaving the data lines only to be connected to the source computer. "The power supply is a very high quality precision regulated linear design housed in an aluminium extrusion, available in anodised black or silver with black end plates. A high quality locking power connector is used to maintain a permanent connection between cable and power supply.

The low voltage cable from the Kalliope Power Supply is a totally separate screened cable to be certain there is no chance of data corruption, it terminates at the USB B plug to supply the 5V required to complete the link between computer and Digital-to-Ana-

logue Converter.

99.99% silver wire is used for the data cables which are soldered to the USB connectors with high quality silver solder to give superior conductivity for the transfer of data. The conductors are helically wound with silk and inserted into PTFE tubing giving exceptional dielectric properties. The USB plugs are gold plated and supplied with a clear hood for greater protection."

The two implementations of USB are a somewhat considerable outlay with the Linus coming in at £500 and the Kalliope at £1000.

Each of the cables and the power supply is extremely well made, the clear USB plugs look nice and I appreciate the amount of strain relief protecting these delicate plugs.



Bearing in mind how important the link between the two source components (computer and DAC) are and what many of us are willing to and have spent on digital link cables in the past, the two cables are sitting in a position in the market that already has many other digital cables fighting for dominance. Before we get into how I found my time with the two DMB cables, let's talk about that 'pride of ownership factor' a little.

Both cables arrive presented in beautifully created embossed logo'd, thick walled boxes with magnetic flaps for secure closing. The silver text and satin black is very appealing and immediately presents the company (who I was not aware of before) as one who's attention to detail is clear even before I've even got my hands on the actual product.

Opening the two boxes reveals medium density foam which is cut out very neatly keeping the cables and in the Kalliope's power supply nice and safe.

Each of the cables and the power supply is extremely well made, the clear USB plugs look nice and I appreciate the amount of strain relief protecting these delicate plugs.

The Sound - Linus

We'll take a look at the Linus first and then move onto the more expensive separately powered Kalliope, make a few comparisons and then conclude things.

Once I had finished creating a playlist in Amarra 3.0 on my Mac and letting Chris Jones' 'Long After Your Gone' begin to play I initially thought "wow, this sounds clean and dark", but I was a little apprehensive at how the overall balance was going to be as the lower notes started. So, whilst holding my thought process for a few more seconds this big, full

and rich bass just sank down straight in front of me before it opened up and then rolled throughout my listening space.

Yes, this is a cohesive and generously proportioned cable in frequency terms. Full bodied articulate and has a background silence that you don't listen for, it's just there - or not so if you catch my drift.

Leading edges with a range of female vocals was clean and ultimately grain free. There's no masking of any part of the range and the grainless, stable nature to each part is effortless.

Listening to some faster bassier tracks through Amarra and Spotify was also great and dancer beats can be said to have good impact with a pace and speed of execution that is undeniably attractive, engrossing and rhythmic.

Small note flecks in and around soundstage borders are clear and concise, allowing the systems micro



dynamics and inner depth to come through without restriction and there is an enviable openness to the sound.

After some more time with some other male vocalists, the undertones for me can always be understood more definitively when demoing or reviewing a new product. The openness that shines through on the cables mid to upper registers would not work as well if it didn't portray this thick, rich and detailed lower frequency or undertone and the picture as a whole is just great!

I found the Linus to be well grounded from top to bottom without any nasties or commonalities which really favoured a particular genre and not another.

The Sound - Kalliope (Powered USB)

SKOGRAND CABLES



– MOST WANTED COMPONENT 2012 –

“Incredible lack of noise, a level of inner detail and dynamic contrasts that I have not experienced before.”

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– PERFORMANCE VALUE EXCELLENCE AWARD 2014 –

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Pure audio joy.



*“A glimpse into the future
of purist cable technology.”*

SKOGRAND  CABLES

My first take using the Kalliope was how more three dimensional, refined and silkier the sound was.

When the bass came in on the same Chris Jones track as previously mentioned, there wasn't as much overall weight. Extension was still long and deep, but what could be described as an outer spectrum wobble, or less natural or clean rendition of the frequency in this area which didn't seem apparent on the Linus before was now more natural and expressive.

Upper frequency extremities and the pitch on a plucked string had more refinement, more stability and rang truer in a more holographic soundstage.

This soundstage still seemed dark, deep and very

Unpowered the Linus has grunt, pace and rhythm, tackles dance and rock music with a distinctive nature that I personally feel an over refined system simply cannot achieve.

black just as the Linus did but its depth of field and front to back positioning was more developed. If the Linus was wonderfully three dimensional, then the Kalliope was more structured and had more points of referenced depth exploring points of detail more definitively.

Midrange as a whole was silkier and a little sweeter - I really like the Linus here as it has a more raspy grunt instead of this silkier appeal and fleshes out the bottom end of a male vocalist incredibly well, but the Kalliope is just so organically natural and developed in any vocal it has its hand in allowing the system to convey just flows through with absolute presence and grace.

With a beautiful female vocal the Kalliope allows for that upper-mid to flow so well it can only be described as beautiful, gorgeous or luxurious. Female vocalists with huge ranges such as Rachelle Farrell hit octaves that sounded utterly magical with such control and the Kalliope retains all this flare, remains clean and never forward.

The Kalliope is also very rhythmic, holding the tone of a bouncy tune with ease whilst rendering lower-mid, upper-bass detail with ease and precision.

In short the Kalliope can be seen as a more refined Linus with better soundstaging and a more natural bass, with an overall silkier feel to the sound, but with clarity and definition to the higher registers which takes the Linus' definition a step further.

Some Comparisons

There's a lot to be said for what power supplies can offer a USB cable but this is very dependant on the DAC used - whether or not the DAC is already powering the USB chip separately to make the need of the added supply even necessary.

Fortunately - I guess, the Astintrew Concord doesn't self power the USB, this allows me to be able to try both of the cables from The Digital Music Box.

I do have an Astintrew Concord USB cable which uses a separate 'Never Connected' power supply. Similarities between this and the Kalliope are there for sure, most notably the 'silky' and the darkness of the background. I would say the Kalliope is cleaner in sound though and has a better more holographic soundstage, especially in depth perception. I preferred the cleaner nature in the upper-mid and treble articulation which lead to solidly defined edges, it's never to the point where I would ever say it gets anywhere near analytical whatsoever and arguably it exposes minimal amounts of added detail, it's just has more air, sparkle and shine right up there at the top.

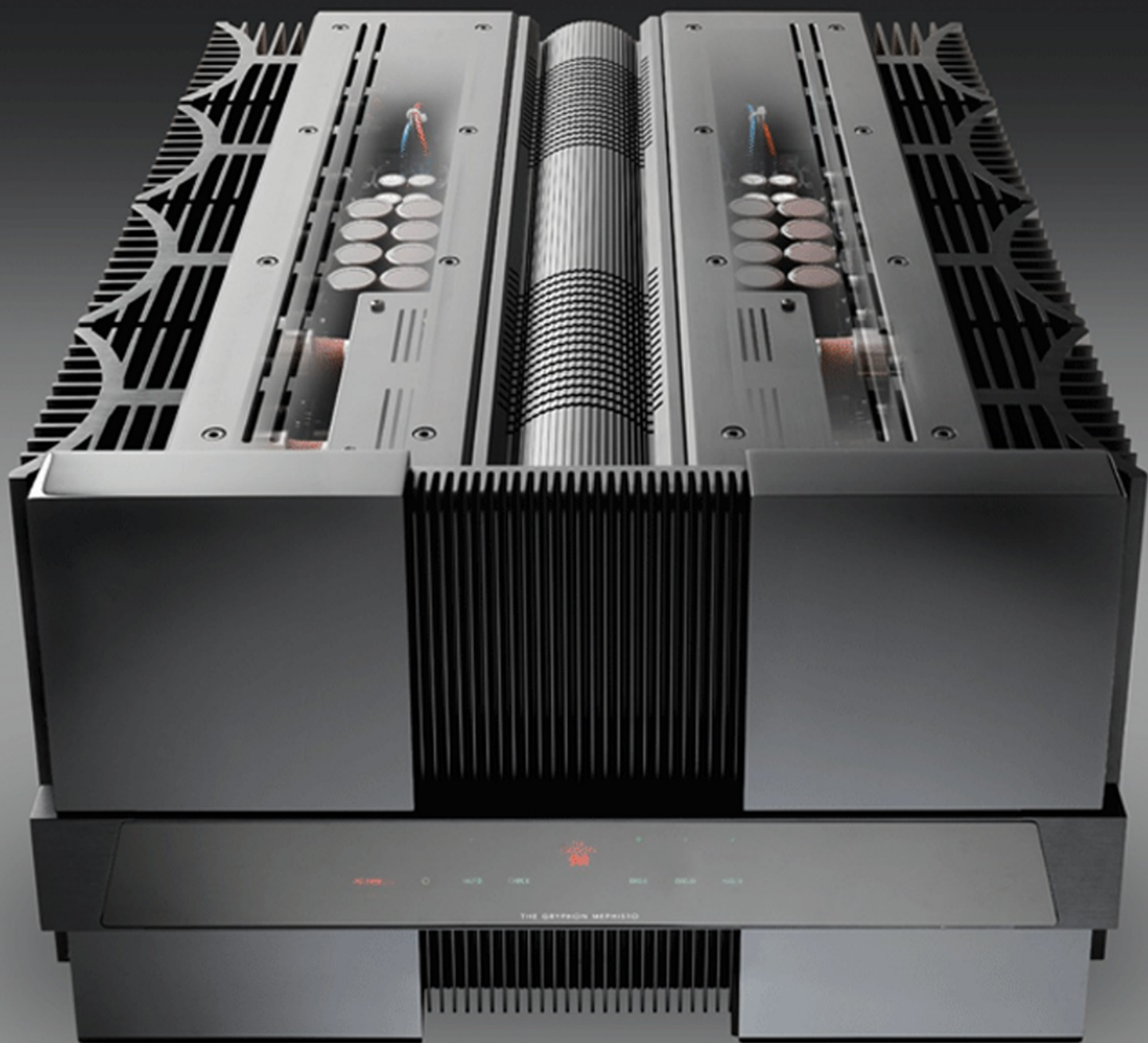
Another cable I use is the Tellurium Q Black Diamond. Now, being a single cable without the added power supply, it doesn't have this silkier more refined nature which I have come to the conclusion is an added trait of a powered USB cable implementation.

Bass control on the TQ falls somewhere between the two Digital Music Box cables - very exciting, full and fast. It's midrange is a little more relaxed and extremely detailed throughout, but not as sparkly as both of the DMB cables with their clarity being a standout attribute and one that I haven't yet come across in all the USB cables which I have heard to date.

Conclusion

This was never a "shootout" or a comparative review between what I've heard and the two Digital Music Box cables, but some small comparisons between other cables I currently have in my procession are

THE GRYPHON



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necessary when detailing the sound of a company's product which will be unknown to many.

Both the Linus and the Kalliope have outstanding detail right across the board, a background of silence that it is one of the first characteristics one notices when listening to each cable and a clarity and air that until now I haven't experienced from a USB cable... and I've heard a fair few.

Unpowered the Linus has grunt, pace and rhythm, tackles dance and rock music with a distinctive nature that I personally feel an over refined system simply cannot achieve.

The powered Kalliope has a refinement, a depth of scale and a sculptured soundstage that brings vocals and instruments more to life and throws details around the soundstage so effortlessly that the music as a whole can only be described as a holographic avalanche.

Yes, they are on the richer side of a lot of USB cables, but boy don't they both make an impression. If you're in the market for a new USB then try the two

cables from The Digital Music Box and see where your benchmark lies thereafter.

Dan Worth

Linus - £500 - 1m

Build Quality - 8/10

Sound Quality - 8/10

Value For Money - 8/10

Overall - 8/10

Recommended - for background silence, tonal balance, detail retrieval and excitement.

Kalliope - £1000 - 1m

Build Quality - 8.5 (The power supplies fit and finish gives it some extra wow)

Sound Quality - 9/10

Value For Money - 8/10

Overall - 8.5/10

Highly Recommended - for absolute precision of clarity and tonal balance, a formidably structured soundstage and ability to allow through all micro details.



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Roksan Caspian M2 Integrated Amplifier

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Dan Worth takes a second look at this well known English made amplifier from Roksan

£1995

As previously mentioned in the earlier [Darius S1](#) review, I always really enjoyed the first Caspian Integrated Amplifier and asked to try the M2 when I had the pleasure of having the S1's in for review. Subsequently after using the Caspian with the Darius' I asked if I could hang on to it for a little longer to try in place of the Emille in my main system.

I wanted to hear if the musical magic I once enjoyed with the first Caspian was still apparent years on.

The M2 is now equipped with a set of XLR inputs (a flick of a switch on cd input) which was a surprise and also a very welcome addition over the two previous models and these aren't just a pair of sockets either, they are fully balanced.

Along with the XLRs are a plethora of RCA inputs and outputs - no less than 5 pairs of inputs and two pairs of pre outs for running upto a quad set of monos for bi-amping, or two separate power amplifiers and due to the Caspian having a separate 60VA

The M2 like the Darius' have a unique voicing to the upper frequencies. They aren't attenuated in any way but they have a clever response which for me allows them to be more forgiving to nasties and grain reproduced by lesser recordings.

high quality stage for the preamp section a good clean signal can be utilised from the integrated.

The power amplifier stage of the M2 dishes out 85wpc into 8 ohms and 125wpc into 4 ohm loads. Coupled with a low noise high quality 350va trans-

Reviews

former the M2 is on paper ready to be able to competently kick out some tunes!

Looking at the specifications after admiring the industrial-chic main chassis of the M2 with its generous amounts of ventilation slots, I saw that the heatsinks in the unit were fan assisted. Well that was a surprise because at no point in time did I notice any fan noise emanating from the unit - it is thermally controlled so to be honest if your rocking it out then any fan noise would be completely drowned out.

I gave this a good test by playing some loud tunes for a prolonged period of time in order to warm the unit through nicely, then turn down to Sunday Service listening levels and ascertain if this would leave any perceivable noise from the fan before the amp cooled again. I can report I heard no fan noise just a little bit of transformer hum when poking my ear into the shelf, nothing much though.

So looks wise, what did I personally think of it? Yeah, I like it! The front panel is solid, has nice style and shape and as mentioned in the last paragraph, I did like the stainless steel main chassis to the amp as it gives a feel of a substantially made purposeful design. It kind of relates to the substance behind the facade, visually adding the feeling of industrial strength to the prettier forefront - imagine a nice foyer with a pretty receptionist against the hard working powerplant worker. Yes it could have been fitted with dirty great heatsinks down the sides and a larger chassis, but remember this is an integrated costing under £2000.

If I had one complaint with the newer Roksan amps is that I feel the knobs on the front are too shallow, not too shallow for use but I like to have a good sized selector and volume dial to turn. I feel this is down to the aesthetics/style of the dials as they are at their centre point deep enough, it's just their rounded edges that allow for that shallow feeling to the touch. Yes, Roksan do provide a remote, a full system remote actually, allowing for the control of all of Roksan's accompanying equipment, so yes you could argue that what does it matter, stop complaining! But it's my review and I'll cry if I want to!

The remote is bit of a treat for me to be honest as usually I have the pleasure of turning two volume pots on the Emille, counting the clicks on each to reach the left/right balance, a royal pain when there's a passage on a track that you quickly want to add some volume to, then subsequently turn back down

before the neighbours from four doors away begin to complain.

Channel balance on an amp is something which, since having the Emille, has become a more prominent area and one I listen to carefully. I have had

Musicality has always been an overwhelming aspect of Roksan gear...

amps in the past, monoblocks, which I could swear had an imbalance in output or I felt the timing was off quite badly. After having the manufacturer come around for a listen and a couple friends too, they all told me that I needed to get my ears cleaned, but I was adamant and pulled out a multimeter and yes, I was correct, the amps were 9mv out from each other.

The Caspian M2 caused me think about this event, not because I heard an imbalance, quite the opposite in fact. During listening I remarked to myself at how well timed I felt the presentation to be. I don't get a huge sweet spot in my listening room due to its modest size, it's ample don't get me wrong, but I've heard better in larger rooms. The M2 gave me a great centre focus and sound staging was very accurate, wide and full.

Depth to the centre stage was really pretty good with the Ayons and the Darius'. Listening to 'Latch' from Disclosure and Sam Smith highlighted what I consider to be a strong attribute of the M2's performance - whilst there is great dispersion into the room the Caspian has an extremely strong and solid spread to the front of the soundstage, conveying rich bass, strongly projected mids and that finely tuned treble which I enjoyed so much in the Darius'.

I have always considered the older Caspian to be a non-offensive amp which has sat well in many combinations of system electronics and transducers in the past for me and I have had systems in the past where the Caspian was by far the cheapest product on the rack, even the cabling costing many times more, which was a testament to it.

The M2 like the Darius' have a unique voicing to the upper frequencies. They aren't attenuated in any way but they have a clever response which for me allows

them to be more forgiving to nasties and grain reproduced by lesser recordings.

Not as transparent or revealing? I wouldn't say so, I never felt during my listening tests that I lost any of that timbre or shine on brass instruments, the echoing effect of higher guitar notes in smaller acoustic spaces or a sense of atmosphere, there was just a sweeter representation of higher frequencies which was more palatable.

Musicality has always been an overwhelming aspect of Roksan gear and the better models of electronics and newer versions seem to have retained this, along with more refinement and detail retrieval but without losing soul and the essence of a performance.

I've had and reviewed the new [Kandy K2 BT](#) and where it is a strong performer in dance and rock music I never felt it was particularly strong across a very wide range of genres, the Caspian is more than capable of dealing with many different genres effortlessly

The musicality and ability to strongly reproduce music of the most delicate tones, yet have enough pace and rhythm to excite must make this amp one of the very best in its class at the moment.

from electronica to acoustic.

Damien Rice's 'Older Chests' begins with a few bars of delicate acoustic guitar before Rice's vocal joins in. His vocal was represented very well, I could here the breaking of his voice and the emotional quality was conveyed as it should be. There's also smaller sounds of children playing in a park to the left of the soundstage. The trick with this track is the ability to convey to the listener that Damien is sat on a small stage slightly off centre to the right and the children are actually outdoors in open space with associated background noise. You could imagine the scene with him sitting in his living room with patio doors open on the left. The Caspian really portrayed this picture and in fact nailed it.

On Rice's 'Cheers Darlin' from the album 'O' a fluidity was expressed through the sound expressing fan-

tastic soundstage detailing front to back with great spacious rolling soft bass notes and violin which washed through the soundstage. The track is a very spacious affair when reproduced well and the Caspian added body and a touch of warmth to the overall take on the sound.

Reading back through this review I haven't touched really on the dynamics in bass slam or dashing transient shifts. I can only put this down to the fact that the amp got me completely engrossed into my acoustic tastes and I listened to a few more albums of this type and stopped writing for a while.

I'm not going to go into too much detail regarding these aspects I'm afraid as I am still sat here enjoying some music, but I did have the chance to listen to some music which has great dynamic qualities (subtle transients and some larger passages with good slam) and my take was that the Caspian M2 can hit slam with ease and body. The amp isn't smooth, it's rich sounding and this richness adds a fantastic weight and fullness to large fast notes. There's nothing worse in my book than an overly clean, dynamic amp and the Caspian couldn't be further than that - it's full bodied with overtones of clarity.

In Conclusion

The Roksan Caspian M2 for me has retained and further improved the characterisation of what I loved so much about the very first model of this amplifier. The M1 got a little way there but the M2 has nailed the essence of what (for me) a £2000 price tag should buy you.

The musicality and ability to strongly reproduce music of the most delicate tones, yet have enough pace and rhythm to excite must make this amp one of the very best in its class at the moment.

I think Roksan are at a point after hearing the Caspian and the Darius' where they have such an impressive technique when voicing products that just makes for such an engrossing listen and leave me for one in anticipation of what they have up their sleeves for the future.

Build quality - 8/10

Sound Quality - 8.5/10

Value For Money - 8.5/10

Overall - 8.3/10

Recommended - For pure musicality, involvement and entertainment across the board.

Roksan is one of the most renowned names in specialist audio with a multitude of international awards to its name. The Oxygene series, being the company's flagship range, incorporates all of Roksan's award-winning sound quality in its stylish housing, resulting in a highly desirable package for our increasingly design-astute customers. The Oxygene sound is full, detailed and involving, truly bringing you to the heart of the music.

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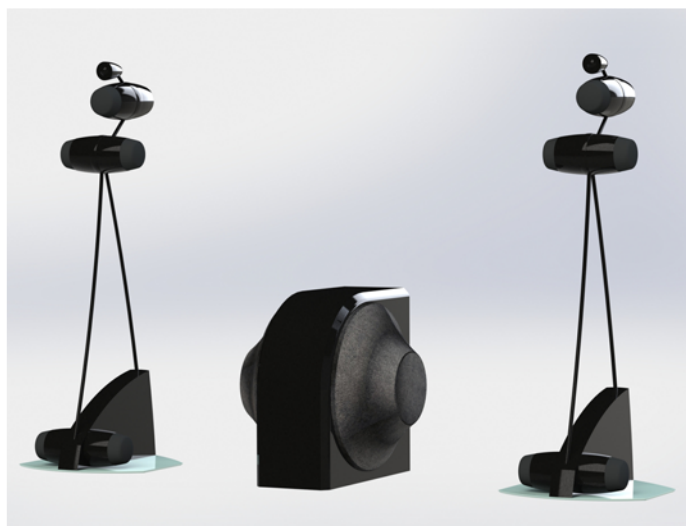
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A 300W amplifier is used for each couple of drivers, both equalized to reach 20Hz at -1dB.

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Neat Acoustic Motive SX1 Floorstanding Loudspeakers



Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

British loudspeaker manufacturer Neat Acoustics have a reputation for building good sounding speakers that have proven to be consistently popular with music lovers for many years.

In this review Dan Worth takes a look at the company's floorstanding Motive SX1 model.

£1888

It's not always possible to accommodate large speakers in our listening spaces. We are not all fortunate enough to have large living rooms or rooms dedicated solely to Hifi. With the constraints of a modern home, should we consider this factor a limitation on obtaining great sound quality from a small package?

The Motive SX1 floorstanding loudspeakers from UK manufacturer Neat acoustics, are full range, 3 driver units with a modest footprint of only 22cm x 26cm. They also stand a reasonable 92cm in height, never really imposing themselves on the home or its décor.

Coming in a large range of real wood veneers and any other specialist finish to order, you can rest as-

sured that whatever any significant "other" may deem fit for the living room then the Neats can accommodate!

The finish I was sent was Natural Oak, coincidentally matching my listening room perfectly. The bottom of the speaker has a black plinth and under the plinth is the reflex port, firing downwards to once again allow for further ease of placement in the room.

Driver compliment is a 25mm inverted polydome tweeter surrounded by foam for reflection absorption and two 13.5cm doped paper cone mid/bass drivers.

The cabinet which houses the drivers leans backwards by a few degrees helping to aim the tweeters more towards the ears and to control time alignment.

The cabinet is pretty inert and the overall finish is very nice indeed from top to bottom where a set of spikes raise that downward firing port above floor level.

Setting Up

Although the SX1 have a down firing port, placement is still somewhat crucial but... not as much as rear firing speakers. With my room being about 15 foot wide I found the Neats to work exceptionally well at about 7 feet apart tweeter to tweeter, less than a foot from the back wall provided the best bass response across a broad range of music and in line with my various room interactions. Toeing in was minimal and the speakers sat almost flat, reproducing a wide soundstage with strong centre focus.

Running In

Straight out of the box the SX1 had an over-lively top end which showed up some brash artifacts at beyond average listening levels. Bass response offered a leanness restricting lower mids from sounding full and fleshed out.

Moving towards 60 hours of average volumes to break the drivers in, a richer tone began to come through allowing piano notes to have more body. The top end gained better control and edges had less sharpness allowing guitar, strings and cymbals to show more character.

The midrange of the SX1 is slightly forward of flat, well pronounced and, after around 100-120 hours use, well fleshed out, bringing lower-mid upper-bass frequencies into more cohesion with the whole. This added period of running-in time, where volume levels could be raised more comfortably, gave a more relaxed and confident overall appeal to the presentation. With a little care and patience, as with any other new component, this running-in period always benefits long lasting performance.

The Sound

As already mentioned, the SX1 does have a slightly forward midband with female vocalists sounding clean and fully formed, offering great projection from a height in the soundstage and which directly compares to any other larger speakers in my listening space. The few degrees of rearward lean to these loudspeakers offers the presence that a realistic soundstage should portray, despite the cabinets physical dimensions.

The very top and lower end of the SX1 is slightly more recessed than the mid-band. Now, I wouldn't necessarily say that the top end is rolled off, but its slightly more laid back nature allows for female vocals to hold body and extension without any harshness.

Dynamically the Neats have a better punch than deep slam and give a strong dynamic range when it comes to midrange notes which resulted in a responsive and convincing vocal with energy and presence.

On the flip side the overall cabinet size does only allow for a degree of real bottom end. I found the height of the spikes and flooring material adds to the overall bass response, so have a play with granite slabs on carpet and spike shoe's height as well as the height of the spike itself.

Playing male vocals always allows me to hear well through the lower-mid reproduction. The Neats for their size really don't do too bad a job in my more average sized room, allowing for good undertones if not really filling out the lower tones of deeper vocals. If I had to make any compromises with a sound and had to state a key feature I want in a speaker, then for me it's a strongly projected vocal and the SX1 for their size and price point do tick that box with a thick marker pen.

Moving on to soundstage attributes I was once again very impressed with the height capabilities of the SX1. Soundstage width was beyond the cabinets' outer width and the front to back image was pretty good, giving a better rear sensation behind me with

Reviews

particular music/tracks than depth behind the speakers which was shallow.

Dynamically the Neats have a better punch than deep slam and give a strong dynamic range when it comes to midrange notes which resulted in a responsive and convincing vocal with energy and presence.

The top-end conveys good smaller details and flares of small dynamics, especially around the boundaries of the room, allowing for an open stage that doesn't sound forced but remains controlled and restrained.

Considering all these factors I can understand why a lot of people enjoy Naim amplification with Neats, adding top-end excitement and lower end slam which will balance the overall presentation better than my Emille or Kavent amps could. The Kavent did however give the SX1 a good bit of juice which they responded to more emphatically, allowing them to offer better drive and pace.

Conclusions

The Neat SX1 is a small speaker for the big music fan. Combined with some good solid state muscle

they will deliver good strong notes across a broad range of musical genres, giving an exciting and engrossing sound which will keep the avid listener satisfied.

The finish is particularly nice on the Neats and the wood grain has nice texture. Placement of the speakers will need to be paid attention to, but the design implementation makes it nowhere near as tricky to extract the best from them in any modern home.

With the addition of complimentary speakers for a full theatre experience, a good solid 2 channel amp running with home theatre bypass into a surround setup would offer a complete system for all requirements.

Build Quality - 8/10

Sound Quality - 8/10

Value For Money - 8/10

Overall - 8/10

Recommended - for their flexibility of placement, soundstaging abilities and strong midrange.

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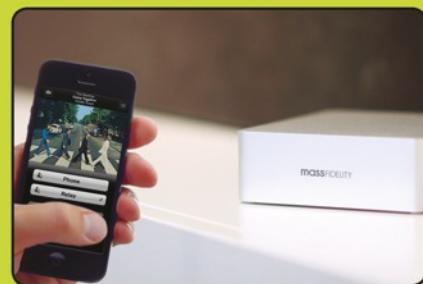
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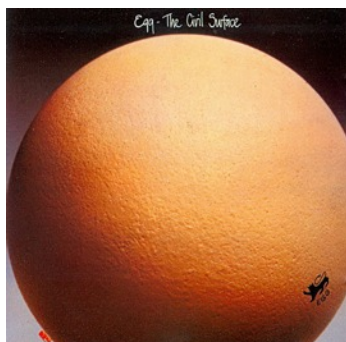
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ALL REVIEWS

Album Reviews

EGG - The Civil Surface *Esoteric Recordings*

Well, this re-release on Esoteric Recordings is certainly one for the progressive heads. The year is 1969 and Egg emerged from an earlier quartet with Steve Hillage going by the name of Uriel, but Egg founding members were Dave Stewart (No not the one of Eurythmics fame) on the organ, Mont Campbell on bass and vocals, plus Clive Brooks on the drums.



Egg finally got the record deal they were after in June 1969 when they signed to Decca, releasing the single “Seven is a Jolly Good Time” (it was in 7:4 time) which got favourable press but failed to make an impression on the hit parade.

Their first album “Egg” on Decca did unspectacularly well, again despite the critics being very positive.

Decca were losing interest in the band after the second record “The Polite Force” was recorded but it was duly released in their Deram label in 1971.

Live work was drying up, Decca were reluctant to release a third album and in July 1972 the band made its final performance (or so it should have been) until in 1974, after appealing to Richard Branson’s new label, they reformed and recorded their third album.

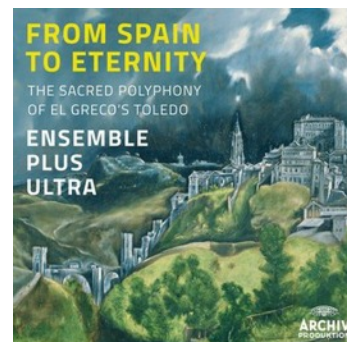
Released in December 1974 on Virgin’s underground/esoteric Caroline label “The Civil Surface” got played by John Peel and sold well enough but not spectacularly.

It’s a good record with elements of Soft Machine, Pink Floyd (in their more left field moments) and even Pekka Pohjola being recognisable. It’s also quite a clever (musicians) album with wind quartets, French horn, oboes, clarinets and bassoons all underpinned by a solid rhythm section laying down those odd time signatures and nifty organ lines over the top.

If you enjoy prog’ or left field music then this is most certainly an album for you. For all its cleverness it’s eminently listenable and despite it being intellectual in style it’s still remains quite accessible.

It’s clearly the product of an English band from a particular era but this re-release is valid and welcome. I’d not come across Egg or any of their work previously but this record’s been played a good number of times since its arrival.

Ensemble Plus Ultra - From Spain to Eternity, The Sacred Polyphony of El Greco’s Toledo *Archiv Produktion*



“A crack squad of the finest British early music singers” Early Music Today said about Ensemble Plus Ultra, but as regular readers of my reviews will know

I’m no fan of classical music, but only a few weeks ago I was mentioning to Linette that I really quite liked the odd bit of choral music...and then this dropped into my virtual postbox via HIGHRESAUDIO and on the Archiv Produktion label.

The record has certainly whetted my appetite to explore this particular musical niche a little further.

Historian, Richard Kagan says that “El Greco and Toledo are one” as this Spanish city was Cretan born Domenikos Theotokopoulos’ home for almost 40 years and it is sacred music intrinsically bound to this city that From Spain to Eternity pays tribute.

All the music is choral and the work of just three composers: Alonso Lobo (1555 – 1617), Cristobal De Morales (1500 -1553) and Francisco Guerrero (1528 – 1599) and it really is quite beautiful.

Ensemble Plus Ultra were formed in 2001 and aim to “promote historically-aware performances of liturgical marvels from the Renaissance” and they do sound glorious on this recording.

I confess to knowing nothing about the music herein but doubt that those more in the know will be in any way disappointed by what they find on “From Spain to Eternity”.

The record has certainly whetted my appetite to explore this particular musical niche a little further.

Alexander Chapman Campbell – Sketches of Light

Stuart Listening to More Classical Music Shocker... and again quite enjoys it!

Now I don't know if it's my impending birthday (I'll be 47 nurse tells me) or what, but the last two classical music albums I've listened to I've really enjoyed a great deal indeed.



A real close your eyes and drift away record that is not unlike some of the chilled electronica that is out there in some ways - though it is just piano!

Alexander Chapman Campbell is a solo pianist who decided that a university life wasn't for him and so he moved to the North coast of Scotland where he worked as a chef and the rest of the time composed music at his piano.

By 2010 he had decided to give up the cooking lark and take up composing full time and so, with the loan of his grandfather's upright piano spent three years practicing, studying and composing for solo piano with Sketches Of Light being the resulting collection. All the tunes on the record were recorded at St George's in Bristol.

As with “From Spain to Eternity” this is new territory for me and so when HIGHRESAUDIO sent this out I assumed it would get the usual cursory listen

most classical music does and be bypassed for more “modern” musical offerings.

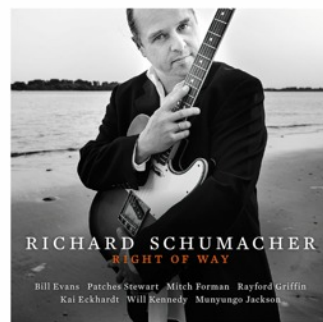
Sketches works well as a whole piece despite the individual tunes not being connected as such and Alexander Chapman Campbell certainly knows a thing or two about writing moving musical pieces.

There's a deftness of touch about his playing and compositional style that brings to mind light dancing on the surface of the water in “Light On the River” (Linette made the same remark when listening and without knowing the album's title) and this conjuring of images carries through to the other tunes on the album too.

A real close your eyes and drift away record that is not unlike some of the chilled electronica that is out there in some ways - though it is just piano! Yes, this is classical music but it's not the “stately home music” that I so dislike. It's beautiful, engaging, accessible and I hope that others not used to listening to this kind of music will put away their prejudices and give this one a whirl...it's lovely!

Richard Schumacher - Right of Way *Straight vibe Records*

Born in 1955 in Boston but growing up in Hamburg, Richard Schumacher first began to make a name for himself as a session player in the 70s with the likes of Udo Lindenberg and Carsten Bohn's Bandstand. In the 80's he studied jazz composition and arrangement at the Berkley School of Music whilst in the 90's he formed (in Berlin) Vibe Tribe and released the albums “Cool Shoes” and “Foreign Affairs And Views”.



“Right of Way” is released on Schumacher's own Straight Vibe Records label and comes here from HIGHRESAUDIO. The record does highlight Schumacher's instinctive and accomplished guitar playing style, but never really pushes it to the fore, instead he is happy to add texture and substance to the tracks on the album.

Album Reviews

From the upbeat blues-jazz style of "Oklahoma Willy" to the more contemplative and laid back style of "One Year Ago" and "Wherever You Start" through to a more delta blues feel of "Acoustic Silence", what you have with "Right Of Way" is a thoughtful and thought provoking album that will please the jazzsters as well as the bluesmen, without being so far into either camp as to be a musical cul-de sac.

There's an easy listening quality to this record, but that's not to say it's in any way boring. It conjures the artist at work in a smoky club with his band, but equally I think it will work well at the summer festivals.

A great summer vibe which blurs genre boundaries and is all the better for it!

Eighth Wonder – The Remix Anthology *Cherry Pop*

"Fresh as the moment when the pod went pop". Patsy Kensit first entered the UK's collective consciousness at the age of 4 when she fronted the well loved and iconic Birds Eye peas television advert...I still remember it and I'm sure many others do too!



Eight Wonder were formed by Kensit's brother Jamie who put her at the front of the band and by all accounts they caused quite a stir with London's A&R departments before finally signing a deal with CBS. All this was in the heady days of 1985! The band had success in Italy and Japan but in the UK the record buying audience were slower to respond. There was an album – "Fearless" which was released in '88 but then the band split in '89!

This anthology spans the band's whole career and highlights remixes of their well loved singles including three versions of "I'm Not Scared" (originally written and co-produced by Pet Shop Boys) which originally peaked at #7 in the UK.

For those quick to dismiss this record it should be noted that there's some pretty big names on remix/production duties on this record including Little Louie Vega, David Leonard, Pete Hammond, Richard

James Burgess, Alan Shacklock, Pet Shop Boys and Phil Harding. Six of the tunes on this CD appear in the UK for the very first time.

I have a small confession! During the lifespan of Eighth Wonder my musical diet consisted of a steady stream of Space Rock, Anarcho Punk and towards the end of the 80's house and techno...so I'm about as familiar with the work of Eighth Wonder as I am with the inner workings of a nuclear power plant, but I'm nothing if not open-minded and I'm partial to a bit of acid house and a bit of a fan of Louie Vega.

Ok, the extended versions of the originals don't really do it for me and, to me, are standard 80's pop fodder, but "Cross My Heart" (House Mix) is a good, if formulaic, early house tune and I would have happily spun this in my early DJing days...at a push. The dance mix of "Baby Baby" is OK in an early Madonna style and the Acid House mix of "Dusted" makes all the right noises for a "jack-track" ...even if it is a little light on the old 303. Little Louie's mix of "I'm Not Scared" is an interesting and very 80's mix of a pop tune with its early house stylings and whilst it's pretty good, it is very much of its time.

There are 12 tracks on The Remix Anthology (out now on Cherry Pop) and, coming from the perspective of someone who isn't/wasn't an Eighth Wonder fan, it doesn't do a lot for me, but for those lovers of all things 80's pop I reckon this has all the right elements present and correct.

Annie Ross, The Tony Kinsey Quintet and Christopher Loque - Songs From The Establishment and Red Bird *El/Cherry Red*

Christopher Loque was a poet, edited columns True Stories and Pseudo's Corner for Private Eye and even wrote a pornographic novel too. He protested with Bertrand Russell against nuclear weapons and is an all-round "true original".

"Loque Rhythms" (1963) is his poetry set to music arranged by Tony Kinsey, Stanley Myers and sung



by English female vocalist Annie Ross. The album was recorded at Peter Cook's Soho jazz club The Establishment and here comes with the EP *Red Bird* (1959) on which Loque himself reads his poetry over music by the Kinsey Quintet. Topping off this CD (out now on El in association with Cherry Red) are seven tunes sung by Annie Ross herself and so you get no less than 27 cuts for your money ...with this being the first time many have been available on CD.

Loque Rhythms could easily have descended into a Pseuds' Corner of its very own but it doesn't! Loques poetry is funny and brilliantly observed (The Liberal Man is hilariously funny as the right on liberal young man succumbs to conformity) and socially aware. Annie Ross' vocal is clear as a bell and beautifully toned matching the laid back musical arrangements perfectly. The recording is "live" and sounds fab...though very much of its time.

"Red Bird" begins with the upbeat rhythms of "Little Girl, Brown Girl" with Loques reading the lyric in a very English and deadpan manner which adds to the charm of the recording. Other tunes are more slow in tempo, but this works and conjures images of late 50's black and white movies.

The seven Annie Ross tunes are to my mind the weakest on the here. There's nothing wrong with them and her voice is beautiful but they just don't seem to gel with the rest of the Loque related recordings...good stuff to have though to play in isolation.

Various Artists - The Brazilian Scene *El/Cherry Red*

The Brazilian Scene is a collection of tunes from Antonio Carlos Jobim with Herbie Mann ("One Note Samba"), Baden Powell with Herbie Mann ("Consolacao"), Zé Maria with George Ben, Gilberto Gil, Luiz Bonfá ("Murmurio"), Radamés Gnattali and Heitor Villa-Lobos all with a laid-back Brazilian theme which is just perfect for the long awaited summer.

Brazilian Scene opens with the wonderfully infectious "One Note Samba" by Antonio Carlos Jobim

and Herbie Mann and is closely followed by "Consolacao"... I'm a bit of a fan of the virtuoso guitar style of Baden Powell anyway and this is as good a starting place as any to become acquainted with his style...though I'd have liked to have had more than just the one tune.

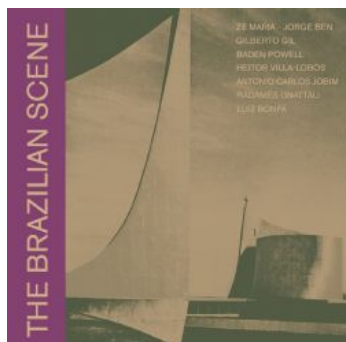
There's bossa-nova, samba, classical, jazz, as well as a melange of all these styles and as a whole it sits well together.

The centrepiece of Brazilian Scene is the album from organist Ze Maria's "Tudo Azul – Bossa Nova E Balanco" from 1962 which is a heady concoction of jazz samba and bossa nova standards from the songbook of Tom Jobim, Vinicius de Moraes and Carlos Lyra and was the recording debut of the then seventeen year old singer-songwriter Jorge Ben... who was the first to play sambas on the electric guitar. Ben's music is said to have transformed the Brazilian music scene and his songs are still been recorded and revised today. Despite its year of recording, "Tudo Azul" remains fresh and vibrant, conjuring images of hot clubs full of exotic folk cutting the proverbial rug on the dancefloor.

The four tunes from Gilberto Gil are a slower and more laidback style of primarily guitar and voice. It's good stuff and it's no surprise that, in Brazil, he acquired pop star status, though he did manage to upset the politically left of the country for sounding "too American".

Luiz Bonfá's "Murmurio" is a mid tempo guitar, bass and flute number and is really rather beautiful. He's a skilled (very skilled) guitarist whose sense of rhythm and judicious use of notes is breathtaking – it's a shame there's only the one tune on Brazilian Scene from him.

Next up is Radamés Gnattali's "Sonatina for Flute and Guitar" with classically trained guitarist Laurin-



Album Reviews

do Almedia playing the highly respected composer Radamés Gnattali's composition brilliantly. There's elements of the Brazilian sound in here fused with a more classical feel. The playing is breathtaking from both Almedia and the flautist Martin Ruderman.

The Brazilian Scene finishes off with a couple of tunes from Heitor Villa-Lobos who was without a doubt the major figure on the South American music scene and was idolised by Jobim. Uirapuru is the story of the Enchanted Bird considered the King of Love with its evening song luring Indians into the woods in search of the wonderful singing. The young natives find an old and decrepit man playing a nose flute, beat him and drive him from the forest. The young men continue their search and behold the nocturnal animal world. A beautiful woman appears to them who has also been searching for the wonderful singing of the Uirapuru and finally catches it and shoots it through the heart with an arrow whereupon the bird transforms into a handsome young man. The woman is captivated by the beauty of the young man and is followed by the natives and is about to leave the forest when they hear the shrill and awful nose flute music. They lay in hiding for the ugly Indian and the youth confronts him only to be killed by a perfectly placed arrow. The woman and the natives carry the body to a fountain where it transforms into a beautiful bird with its sweet song fading into the quiet of the forest. Well that's the story behind this classical piece and it's much easier I find to enjoy and understand a piece if you know the actual story. It's a lovely bit of music which is totally different from the rest of Brazilian Scene but equally valid!

The final tune on the Brazilian Scene is another Villa-Lobos tune called "The Little Train of Caipira" and brings to mind the sound of trains preparing for journey and whooshing past. It's a little out of context given the other tunes on this record, out now on él and Cherry Red, but it works in its own way.

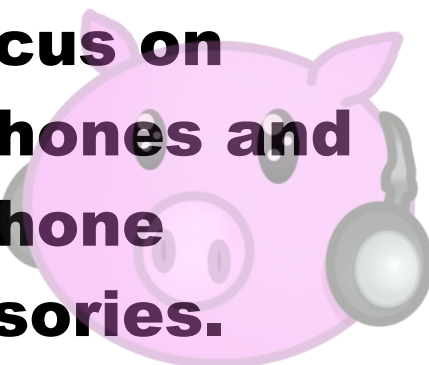
All in all Brazilian Scene is a wonderful record that is varied and eclectic. There's bossa-nova, samba, classical, jazz, as well as a melange of all these styles and as a whole it sits well together. The last two Villa-Lobos tunes are the most "different" in that they are straight up classical music but (despite my lack of interest in the genre) they work well in this context. A lovely summer record that you'll surely enjoy!

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Magazine

Next Month

August is headfi month in Hifi Pig and all our reviews will focus on headphones and headphone accessories.



This month John Scott takes a look at John Martyn's classic 1973 album *Solid Air*.

John Martyn (born Iain David McGeachy) was a singer/songwriter/guitarist whose music straddled folk, jazz, blues and rock with equal success, providing a unique synthesis which influenced many other musicians but was bettered by none. Although generally perceived as Scottish, Martyn was in fact born in Surrey. His mother was English and his father Scottish. They divorced when Martyn was five years old and his subsequent upbringing was spent between the two countries -he could switch accents from South London wide boy to Glaswegian hard man at the drop of a hat. When at Art College in Glasgow, Martyn was taken under the wing of folk singer Hamish Imlach and soon began his career as a professional musician.

Martyn signed to Island Records in 1967 and released his debut *London Conversation* a year later. An album of straightforward folk-influenced songs which showcase Martyn's impressive fingerpicking guitar work, it is clear that he was yet to find the voice for which he would be best known. The following album *The Tumbler* continues in a similar vein but with a bluesier influence and even better guitar work. Martyn married singer Beverley Kutner and in 1970, as John and Beverley Martyn, they released *Stormbringer*, the first of two albums that they would record together. It is during these albums that we hear the beginnings of the style that Martyn would be best known for. That style was further honed on 1971's *Bless The Weather* but it was with *Solid Air* two years later that everything really fell into place.

The album was recorded in December 1972 at Sound Techniques and Basing Street studios and was co-produced by Martyn and John Wood, the go-to engineer on the burgeoning folk rock scene. *Solid Air* opens with the song of the same name, a tribute to Martyn's friend and Island Records label mate Nick Drake who would die of an antidepressant overdose 18 months after the album was released. Drake recorded three fine albums *Five Leaves Left*, *Bryter Layter* and *Pink Moon* before his death, all



of which are worthy of your time and attention. The lyrics of *Solid Air* perhaps hint at Drake's state of mind at the time: " You've been painting the blues, You've been living on solid air, And you've been seeing it through, And you've been looking through solid air, I don't know what's going 'round in your mind, But I can tell you don't like what you find, When you're living through solid air".

Solid air is also an apt description for the sound of much of the album; the music hanging between the speakers in a thick haze. Martyn's voice had been taking on a more slurred quality over previous albums but it is now positively blurred, like an impressionistic photograph with the shallowest possible depth of field. In contrast, the music is as sharp as a cutthroat razor. Martyn plucks and slaps his acoustic guitar to provide a syncopated backdrop which is sympathetically augmented by Danny Thompson's double bass, Dave Mattacks' drums, Tony Coe's saxophone, John "Rabbit" Bundrick's electric piano and Tristran Fry's shimmering vibraphone.

After that reflective opening number Martyn picks up the pace on *Over The Hill*, bringing in Richard Thompson and Simon Nicol on twin mandolins along with Sue Draheim on violin. *Over The Hill* is a song of leaving but it is clear that Martyn is more than happy to be moving on to get back home. *Don't Want To Know* slows the pace slightly again featuring spacy electric piano, but picks up the tempo when the drums kick in and sets us up for

Martyn's take on the Skip James tune I'd Rather Be The Devil. This song features what would go on to be one of Martyn's inimitable trademarks, the use of a tape loop delay system called the Echoplex. Martyn had begun experimenting with this on *Bless The Weather* and would perfect its use on his next album *Inside Out*. Using the Echoplex, Martyn builds up layers of polyrhythmic patterns and then plays against them, building up and releasing

tension within the song. To hear the full extent of how Martyn could do things that were never ever intended to be done to an acoustic guitar, check out his excellent *Live At Leeds* album. **Legal**

disclaimer: Hifi Pig accepts no responsibility for any offense caused as a result of listening to the between-song banter on this album which sounds not unlike material that was cut from a Derek and Clive album for being too rude.

The fifth track Go Down Easy lets us catch our breath before the Echoplex and wah wah pedal reappear for Dreams By The Sea. This one comes on like something from a Blaxploitation cop film. If Richard Roundtree, rather than Mark McManus, had been cast as the dour Glasgow policeman Taggart, then this surely would have been played over the opening credits. If folk funk hadn't previously existed as a musical genre, then it did now.

May You Never, would become Martyn's signature song – a blessed out benediction to friends and family and the song that audiences would leave his gigs singing to themselves for hours afterwards. Eric Clapton would record the song on his *Slowhand* album – a handy earner for Martyn no doubt, and

described his friend as: "so far ahead of everything else it was inconceivable". Does The Man In The Station have the merest hint of the The Girl From Ipanema about it, or is that just

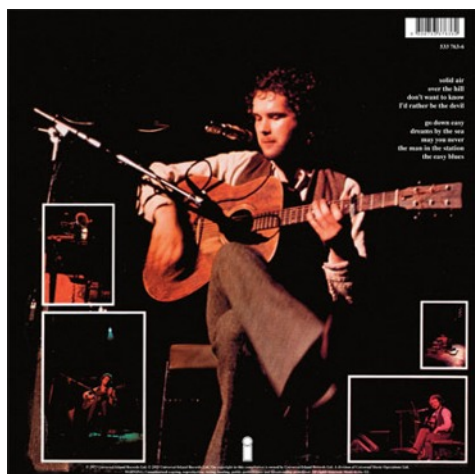
me? In any case this is all about rainy railway stations rather than Brazilian beach babes and is suitably moody and atmospheric.

Solid Air ends with The Easy Blues, a recasting of the old blues song Mr Jellyroll Baker, with some outstanding acoustic guitar work leading into a hypnotic electric coda. I once saw Martyn open a gig with this as a "warm up" piece and wondered how the gig would go on to get any better. Suffice to say, it did.

For any other artist, *Solid Air* would stand as their masterpiece. In John Martyn's case however, at least one other album vies for that title. Following the breakup of his marriage to Beverley he would release *Grace And Danger* in 1980. Very different musically from *Solid Air*, it charts Martyn's emotional excoriation with a devastating economy. John Martyn recorded more than twenty albums during his career. It was no secret that he liked to play hard and he was eventually beset by health problems, leading to the loss of a leg following problems arising from a burst cyst. This did not stop him, however, and he continued to record and gig, performing from a wheelchair. Tragically, he died in hospital from double pneumonia on 20 January 2009. We will not see his like again but his music lives on forever.

Recommended Discography

Bless The Weather
Solid Air – Deluxe Edition
Inside Out
One World – Deluxe Edition
Grace And Danger – Deluxe Edition
Live At Leeds – Deluxe Edition
Or just go whole hifi hog and buy the 18-disc *Island Years* collection. Go on, you know you want to.



Hifi Pig goes Behind The Brands with Marijn Kooy of Dutch record label Snip Records, a relatively new label presenting high-quality jazz, world and pop music performed by talented artists – along with all sorts of other musical genres!



What is your background?

I studied 'Art of Sound' at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague, which is a Tonmeister study. The programme was a good mix of musical theory and practice combined with all the technical aspects of music recording and producing.

What Music did you listen to when younger?

Growing up it was everything my dad played on his Philips active mfb541 loudspeakers, which was mostly music from the Beatles and Simon & Garfunkel. In my early teens I had a short period of playing Dutch pop music and when that phase passed I was really open minded, from classical saxophone quartets to Prince. I still don't have a particular genre I listen to, as long as it's high quality :)

What system do you use at home?

I have to confess that currently we do not listen to music in our living room very often, but when we do I use a system with Cambridge electronics and Audiovector floorstanders. Perfect for just casual listening, something I do most when I am reading the paper or cooking. Furthermore I use the system for referencing my own music.

How long has the label been going?

We feel that musically we are finding our direction as we build the catalogue. Starting with world music and an intimate jazz duo we are now moving more towards studio based albums with a distinct

My wife and I started the label two years ago, we have three albums released and the fourth is scheduled for after the summer.

My wife is the label manager and hence responsible for marketing and communication, as well as the artwork and design (like the free iPad app that comes with every album, to replace the CD booklet), while I focus on all music "duties".

We started the label because we noticed that a lot of talented musicians have trouble bringing their music

Behind the Brands

With three albums out we are currently working hard to get ourselves well positioned in the market. I think that most people see a label offering hi-res digital music as something of a niche, but I believe that hi-res will be the next thing after CDs have (finally)

to the public when self-releasing the album. Apart from promotion and distribution these albums are often also self-produced, which means that all the creative decisions have to be taken by the musicians themselves, which can be a pitfall as musicians may get lost in their own creativity. So we started the label with a strong vision, not only technically -

offering all the music as (hi-res) downloads only - but also musically.

In all the records I make, the musicians always play together when recording, there may be some overdubs like adlibs by the vocalist, but 95% of the music on the albums is made by real people playing together in real spaces. This may sound self-evident, but in today's music industry the computer takes a leading role with endless amount of tracks and editing capabilities. A lot of records coming out today are 'over tweaked' with tuned vocals, drums replaced by samples, etc. On most of these albums musicians do not play together, losing a synergy that is there when you force musicians to think as a band instead of as an individual, which by the way is not always an easy task!

What artists do you have.

We are really strict when it comes to signing artists; only really talented artists playing high quality music are signed. Our first release was the group ti-an-guis. A group of musicians from all over the world that play traditional songs in a non-traditional way, adding and mixing elements of different cultures creating a musical and multicultural melting pot.



It's one of those groups that is a true joy to listen to, they have so much fun playing together which gives their music a really positive energy. Our second album was InDuologue, a duo of bass and voice that plays beautiful jazz standards in a minimalistic form. The album is recorded in a chapel located in the woods of a Dutch national reserve, giving a rich sound to the album. A very intimate album I would say.

Our latest release is from MELPHI, a band with jazz trained musicians and a soulful singer. Their songs seek the edge of jazz and soul combined with some good songwriting. Currently we are working on our next release due in fall 2014 by American artist Sarah Marie Young. The album will be a good blend of soul and R&B. I am looking forward to presenting this new album!

What's the style of the label musically?

We feel that musically we are finding our direction as we build the catalogue. Starting with world music and an intimate jazz duo we are now moving more towards studio based albums with a distinct vocal. Vocals is something I find most important when scouting for new artists, in combination with the songs of course. If the vocal sound does not

immediately appeal to me and does not have a little 'extra' I can't work with them.

Songwriting and composition is something I can work on as a producer, but the sound of the vocal is pretty much a given, so it has to be good.

Where are you going with the label?

With three albums out we are currently working hard to get ourselves well positioned in the market. I think that most people see a label offering hi-res digital music as something of a niche, but I believe that hi-res will be the next thing after CDs have (finally) died.

Digital seems to have a negative connotation due to the lossy format of MP3, but with hi-res, you can really get a better sound than CD. We often receive the question by non-audiophiles whether the difference between CD and hi-res really can be heard. Even last week we had an acquaintance asking this question, he had read somewhere on the internet that you really can't hear the difference. We invited him over for dinner and a listening session, and when we played the CD and Studio Master quality he immediately heard the difference. I believe anyone can hear the difference, not only those with large hifi systems. I find hi-res much more easy sounding to



Behind the Brands

Now with digital recording and the playback format being the same resolution as the outcome of the mix, it is mainly about giving the album a coherent sound and that sparkle that makes it sound like an album instead of a collection of songs.

the ears, much more open and dimensional. It does not give you the agitated feel what I get when I play lower resolutions.

Plans to release vinyl?

At this point no, but perhaps in the future if there's a real demand. If we would, it would be a limited edition of one of our albums, structurally releasing our albums on vinyl is not our focus.

How does the recording process work?

The process of making an album is quite a long one. After having scouted an artist and have done all the paperwork, I can start on working on the songs. Usually there are some songs written or there are ideas on the direction of the album. I then produce the songs as a film director would direct a movie. A film director knows the actors can better act than he can but he gives them clues and direction to get them to the next level. I do the same with my artist, they write the songs but I direct them to give the songs the right form and feel and making a coherent sounding album. This is the pre-production and takes a couple of months. After that we will record the album with the whole band, usually in just a few days. I choose the location depending on the type of music, but I always ensure that all musicians can see each other when they play, so in a studio there needs to be a lot of glass.

I mix the album in my home studio, in the computer with Sequoia DAW and on my active KS Digital

C88 speakers connected with Sommer carbokab 225 interconnects from my RME interface. I have deliberately chosen to work in the computer, and not with a mixing desk, I prefer the workflow of the computer. As you can see on the pictures the rooms has been acoustically optimised, and therewith has actually become one of the most pleasant rooms in our house. I master the productions myself as well. In the old days mastering was mainly a task of transferring the music from one format (tape) to another (vinyl or CD) without losing too much as each playback format has its own quirks. Now with digital recording and the playback format being the same resolution as the outcome of the mix, it is mainly about giving the album a coherent sound and that sparkle that makes it sound like an album instead of a collection of songs.

It also means getting your levels and loudness right and this has proven to be something of an issue these last years with the loudness war going on. I master towards set standards (the K-system). See an analysis of the dynamics of the MELPHI album on Dr.

Loudness: <http://dr.loudness-war.info/album/view/63604>

I feel the whole loudness war began when people started to buy singles and hardly any albums. That is the reason why in our own webshop we offer our music as complete albums only and not as singles, a lot of thought has gone into the order of the songs and album as a whole, it'd be a pity if people would purchase an incomplete product.

You can download [Snip Records' releases here](#).

