

# Hifi Pig Magazine

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Issue #13



## REVIEWS

Townshend Audio F1 Stereo RCA Interconnect, The Varios Jr Loudspeakers, Vermouth Audio Black Pearl Loudspeaker Cables, Epiphany Acoustics Atratus 3 Interconnect, Tellurium Q - Blue, Ultra Blue and Blue Diamond Speaker Cables, Van Damme "Blue" and Hi-Fi Grade 6.0mm Speaker Cables, Grado PS500e Headphones, Henry Audio 128 MkII Asynchronous USB portable DAC, Lindy HF-110 Headphones, Tidal Music Streaming Service

Graham Slee Majestic DAC, Baby Reference Preamplifier by Music First Audio, JIB 'Digital Glass' Toslink Cable, Audiomica ERYs Excellence Interconnect and CELES Excellence Loudspeaker Cables

**PLUS** Album Reviews, The Classics Review and interview with My Brother The Wind's celebrating their recording from earlier this year "Once There Was A Time When Time And Space Were One" and A Festive Christmas Countdown



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# Townshend Audio F1 Stereo RCA

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



I have to admit to not getting too excited reviewing cables; not only do you convince some readers who believe that all cables the same, but conversely I have to make every effort to ensure that when I do review something, it's not the footprint of the hardware itself that's actually making all the difference. I have therefore, over the years, put together different hi-fi set ups that I know to be honest purveyors of the original sources that I have mixed myself in the studio or know really well. It is also essential to make sure an over-biased eccentricity created in one wire is not compensated for in another wire along the chain. Therefore, I have my cable favourites and pet hates. Careful placement and material is vital in establishing my audio paradise. Over the years I have ascertained the bland and dull, and similarly discovered the bright and thin. So much depends on the metal, the amount of oxygen in it, the dielectric, and the casting process (called extrusion and annealing) from the master raw material. For example, Silver is the most conductive metal above copper, but it has the tendency to sound bright and thin, which initially can make the music sound more compelling. Whilst that might sound great for bland sources, or those of us who have top end frequency deficiency, what is really needed is an absolutely flat cable that takes nothing away nor adds anything. It must not act like a capacitor or resistor, nor like an aerial and add RFIs. Max Townshend has spent his life trying not to add anything to the music (in his passive autotransformer preamplifiers), and to dampen everything else that tries to get in (with his Troughs, Paddles, Seismic Sinks and Isolation Feet, etc).

So, to be given a cable that has both wires as close together as humanly possible was for me the last

**This new cable from Townshend Audio is as radical a move as was his excellent 2002 DCT300 interconnect with its metal sheet conductors side by side in their own PTFE air tubes.**

thing I wanted to see, and something, to be honest I didn't expect Max to do. This new cable from Townshend Audio is as radical a move as was his excellent 2002 DCT300 interconnect with its metal sheet conductors side by side in their own PTFE air tubes. This design ensured that 99% of the cable had air as its dielectric. The new F1 uses Townshend's latest incarnation of enhanced DCT (Deep Cryogenic Treatment), better known as 'Fractal-wire', hence the letter 'F', and which he guards in strict secrecy, having learnt a lesson from his original DCT technique which is now copied around the world. Indeed, Fractal wire is also used in the windings of his Allegri autotransformer passive preamplifier. The F1, like its precursor, ensures the cable has an absolute minimum contact with the insulator. Indeed, the thin and thick layers of PVC or PTFE dielectrics in 99.9% of cables can add their own distinctive colouration and microphony. Think of the common capacitor as two pieces of metal held apart by some non-conductive material (dielectric), and you'll see how much your interconnect resembles this major electrical component. Wire Resistance in cables is fairly insignificant, and general 12 gauge house wiring, being around 0.016 ohms per foot, is



# Townshend Audio F1 Stereo RCA

sometimes used as a cheap alternative, though this misses out other major 'parts' that make a cable and therefore far greater affect the sound. Having heard so many cables at all price points I can even, more than occasionally, recognise manufacture, metals and dielectric blindfold simply by listening. The differences can be so big that at times the cables can make a bigger difference than comparing different source. Hence, auditioning cables tends to be much easier to do than pieces of Hi-Fi, but that means you really need to know your sources, and full implications of mixing components and cables. For example, silver can work better on valve than transistor.

Unfortunately many feel that spending a significant amount on cable is a waste of money. And if the dielectric is quite simply air, that payment in the shop or on-line can be even more painful. The choice of dielectric is, however, as important as the metal itself. Indeed, one of the best dielectrics to use is air, and I recall writing in HiFi News about Abbey Road Cables doing a similar stunt a few years back, using wiring held in place with grommets in air-filled tubing. In Max's cable the signal travels through a singular very thin polyester-coated enamelled copper wire, which spirals around a much thicker bare copper ground wire. Because signal and return conductors are so tightly spaced, external electric fields cannot get in. As a result, these cables block radio frequency interference (RFI) and help to stop hum in valve amplifiers. The cable reminds me of Litz cable (incidentally, this is used in their Super Tweeter cabling). Each thin strand in Litz cable has its own enamelled coating, and relies on the skin factor, whereby the majority and faster electrons vibrate at the edge of the cable. In a good conductor, skin depth varies as the inverse square root of the conductivity. This means that better conductors have a reduced skin depth. Therefore there is no need for 'thicker' wire - something perhaps more favourable to the wallet-fearing customer.

I remember my A-level Physics talking about energy and electric field in relationship to AC (and therefore audio) flowing in a wire. It tells us that the electric field vanishes inside a conductor, in other words no energy flows inside a conductor but actually just outside. Therefore, the speed of a signal depends on the dielectric properties of the insulation. The best dielectric allows flow of "the signal" at around 70%

speed of light. In Townshend F1 the signal conductors only come into contact occasionally with the inner of the two concentric PTFE tubes. Most of that dielectric is air, as I mentioned earlier. The PTFE tubes are in turn placed inside a third, and clear, PVC outer cable. Such a clever and simple idea. In many cables, linen or cotton can be used to dampen the wire movement inside that cable from vibrations. With the F1, if vibrations appear in the outer layer of PVC, the air dampens it from the next two PTFE tubes. Brilliant. The fact that the two cables are so close together means this is not likely to be a problem. The whole is terminated in the industry best Neutrik Profi RCA phono plugs which have a spring loaded ground collar. There is also a balanced version, which incorporates two strands of the ultra-fine enameled copper conductor spiraled together with a parallel drain wire but no shielding, and again terminated with Neutrik XLR plugs.

**I have personally only found two other interconnects that don't leave a musical signature - whether it be tonal or timing - this F1 was up on the top with them, and much faster than Lewis Hamilton.**

I played lots of different music using a selection of sources, both valve and transistor. I particularly wanted to check three areas; 1) depth of frequency range, 2) dynamic range, and 3) how complex sound structures were conveyed from source to amplifier. The first area passed with flowing colours, from lowest bass thumps in 'Sister Drum' by Dadawa, to the cymbals in 1970's LP 'Feel the Love' by Love Song was the best I have ever heard. The skin factor, which can limit high frequencies would be off the scale, so no problem there. Dynamic range was not an issue in even the most complex tracks I played; whether Nono, Neillson, Mahler, Sibelius or Britten, or Tangalga's energetic 'La Zucca Barucca'. The

# Townshend Audio F1 Stereo RCA

complex orchestration in The Pines of Rome, Respighi, (Chicago Symphony Orchestra) was unflustered. This cable could do it all, and with all types of music. Quite simply, this cable was so open, transparent and unflappable, uninfluenced by anything around it, that I was quite taken aback. Nothing added and nothing taken away. I could just concentrate on the music around me; not the cables and not the hi-Fi! The cable, itself, was just not there. It didn't worry me that it wasn't the most beautiful looking or the thickest. I actually didn't want to see it, I just want to 'see' the sound in a 3D audio arena from two speakers. And I really could! It worked equally well with Wilson Benesch, B&W or Graham LS5/9s, and with vinyl or CD into transistor or valve amplifiers. My Krell KSS 20i CD is well known for bass emphasis, sometimes overstating the rest of the audio, but it didn't mask or slow the rest of the frequencies. I have personally only found two other interconnects that don't leave a musical signature - whether it be tonal or timing - this F1 was up on the top with them, and much faster than Lewis Hamilton. I rarely get excited about cables, and having initially

expected these to not be anything special, going by the unique design, I have to admit I was wrong. These proved that thinking outside the box can actually be the most sensible thing to do. Something Max does every day.

**Janine Elliot**

**Build quality 8.5**

**Sound quality 9.1**

**Value for money 8.7**

**Overall 8.77**

**I rarely get excited at interconnect, speaker or mains cables. There can be such differences in them. But to find one that just doesn't leave any footprint and makes my music sound as real as it did in these test, is something I really want to shout out about. This is as good as it gets.**

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# The Varios Jr Loudspeakers

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



**I**taly, the country known for its fast cars, beautiful landmarks and now completely bonkers hifi!

When I first set my eyes on the Vario's range of speakers at the High End Munich show a few months ago, I was taken aback by their completely unique design. This “in your face” design echoes though the entire range of speakers.

I was given the Vario Jr to review. From the unboxing onwards the speakers ooze quality. Each little speaker has its own carrying case which is a great touch.

They feel weighty for their size (120×175×150 mm) and once set up, will sit proudly on any desk.

Every aspect of the Junior's design is near perfection.

The varnished wood casing and high quality plastic on the back and front are soft to the touch. No screws are showing on the front and sides which adds to the flow of the design. The speaker grill on the front is made to look like an eye and is very well done, it is magnetic which makes removing it very easy.

Behind the speaker grill is a tiny 2 inch driver that a lot of people may say is no way big enough, but the

**Behind the speaker grill is a tiny 2 inch driver that a lot of people may say is no way big enough, but the designers have worked around this and by some miracle the sound stage is huge considering the size.**

designers have worked around this and by some miracle the sound stage is huge considering the size.

The look of the Jr and the whole Vario line up of speakers has what I like to call a Marmite effect:

“You either love them or you hate them”

Personally I love them and I think it's a bold step for a relatively new company and I respect them for that. They stand out from the crowd despite their small size. Very stylish and 100% unique.



# The Varios Jr Loudspeakers

Vincent and Lola (yes, they have their own names!) have their very own cartoony style and fun personality.

But are the Vario Jr style over substance?

The short answer is no!

When listening to the Varios I used lossless FLAC music files running through a Schiit Modi DAC and alternated between various amplifiers.

I tried to listen to many different kinds of music and although the Varios struggled with super bass heavy music like dubstep and some hip hop, they sounded amazing with rock, house music and just about anything with an acoustic guitar.

The driver is very responsive and snappy. The sound is bright and mids are rich. It is definitely favourable to the

Jr. The vocals and electric guitar sounded raw and natural. And the signature bassline sounded deep.

Strobe by Deadmau5. Surprisingly this very bass heavy track sounded great on the Varios. They brought a kind of orchestral feel to the track.

Feel Good Inc by Gorillaz. This mix of hip hop and alternative rock sounds sublime on the Juniors. The atmospheric and almost scary aspects of the song were accentuated by them. The calm acoustic section sounded very natural.

The Vario Jrs proved to be very versatile across many genres of music.

Now moving on to price, the Vario Juniors are 850 Euros. It's a lot of money for such a small speaker, but when you buy them you are not just

buying a speaker, you are buying a piece of art....that just happens to be a great sounding, hand-made Italian speaker too.

The Vario team have made a quirky unique speaker that not only looks the part but also sounds very good for its compact size. It is beautifully made and rivals the best of the best in build quality.

**Harry Smith**

**Build quality: 9.5/10**

**Sound: 8/10**

**Value for money: 7.25/10**

**Total: 8.25/10**

**Price when tested: 850€:**

**Recommend for people looking for a smaller, desktop speaker that is incredibly well built and has a fun and unique personality....a work of art!**

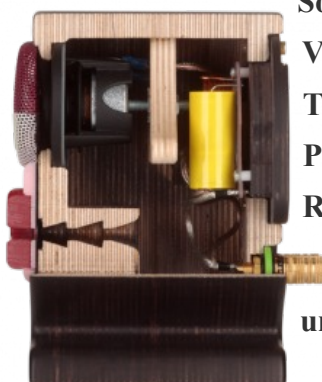


**The Vario Jrs proved to be very versatile across many genres of music.**

top-end but the bass is not in any way lacking. In fact at higher volumes the bass suddenly comes alive. So to get the most out of the Jrs you should run them closer to their limit.

The stand out songs for me with this set-up were:

By The Way by the Red Hot Chilli Peppers. The song was brought to life by the



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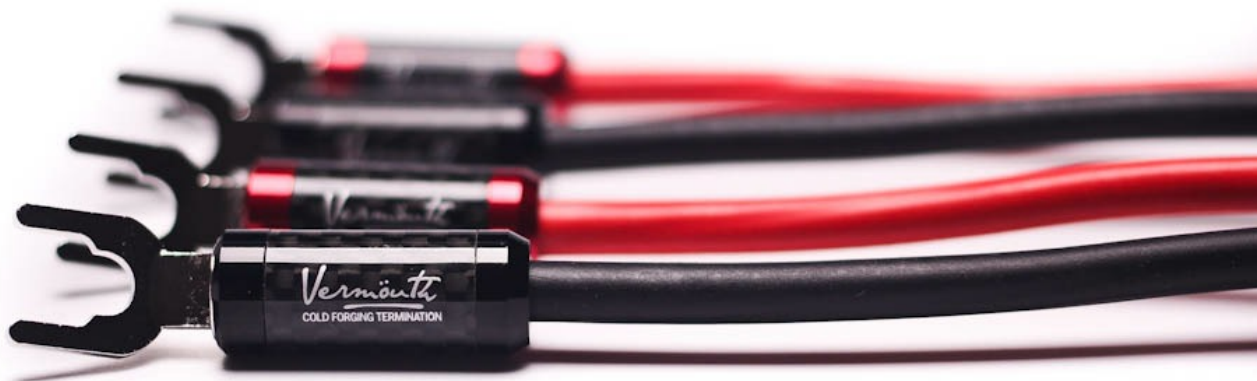
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# Vermouth Audio Black Pearl Loudspeaker Cables

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



Vermouth Audio are not that familiar a name in audiophile cable circles and have only been founded for some four years or so in 2010, though Hifi Pig did review their Black Curse interconnects back in 2012. They originate from Bali, which again doesn't have a reputation yet for producing top flight audio products, but if we take Vermouth Audio founder Mr Hendry's opinion as valid, then all that is set to change in the not too distant future. The Black Pearl speaker cables for review here are at the top of a three model speaker cable range comprising the Black Pearl, Black Curse and the Red Velvet, in descending order. Similarly, they produce a range of interconnects with the same model designations, along with Black Curse and Red Velvet power cords, plus a Black Curse integrated amplifier.

When it comes to buying cables, most audiophiles I reckon will use three simple criteria as their initial judgements for their intended purchasing decision:

- Firstly, they will use their eyes. It has to look right and fit for purpose, because more often than not this is how we first encounter our

**Kick drum too  
has a solid  
“whump” that  
feels like it's  
hitting you in the  
pit of the  
stomach as much  
as you hear it  
with your ears.**

# Vermouth Audio Black Pearl Loudspeaker Cables

objects of desire, as photographs in various publications or indeed an internet based source. If it doesn't look “right” then it's probably not even going to appear on anyone's short-list of candidates for audition.

- Secondly, with their ears. Ears are used to decode how much details and resolution is available from the cable in terms of bass and treble absolutes and that all-important midrange clarity and naturalness. Does it excite? Does it offend? Is any part of the sonic spectrum lacking? Does it suit the hi-fi system and listening environment? Will the overall presentation the cable gives provide long term satisfaction?
- Finally, with the brain which decides whether or not the cable represents an investment in sound quality over the return in terms of cash outlay.

And so, I will attempt to apply those three criteria on your behalf dear reader to the Vermouth Audio Black Pearl speaker cables submitted here for review.

## Appearance

In terms of appearance, the Black Pearl cable rates highly in my estimation, better in fact than the majority of cables with any pretensions to being high end. There are simply stunning carbon fibre shell covers fitted to the plug terminations and some exquisite screen printing denoting manufacturer and model details. In the sample submitted for review, there are 4mm banana plugs at one end with generously sized spade connectors at the other end, but I understand that either connector array is available to order. “Cold forging Tellurium Copper Rhodium Plated Termination” as Vermouth Audio's website proclaims is what the connectors materials are and attachment to the cable itself which measures some 21mm in diameter along the main body of the cable with bifurcated tails of some eight inches in length of a smaller diameter up to the connectors. At that junction we find “Anodised sandblasted aluminium cable stoppers” and very nice they look too. Internal construction is said to be

10 AWG UPOCC multisize and multilayer conductors with air spacing suspension. The outer covering is of braided expandable nylon mesh with a silvery criss-cross pattern. So, on looks alone the Black Pearls score well on the eye candy scale. It looks very substantial and rather heavy too, which it is.

## Sound

With most cables there seems to be a trade-off somewhere, from excellence in one area of the sound at the expense and detriment of another. A cable can have stunning bass performance, yet the treble can be vague, the midband nasal and muddy (and vice versa), yet we can all easily be beguiled by that bass, mid, or treble performance at first hearing but overlook,

even forgive the short-falls

initially, which will eventually manifest itself into the conscious later

on and lead to dissatisfaction. Having lived with the Black Pearls for a while now I can say that this cable is not one of those. Vermouth Audio Black Pearl Loudspeaker Cables I don't see that as a negative in any way because it means it isn't busying itself revealing faults with partnering components and recording quality that will irritate and annoy.

For example, while listening to the opening track London Grammar's excellent '*If You Wait*' album there is a wealth of synthesized reverberation effects and a deep penetrating bass line to the music, underpinning the female vocals. The Black Pearls portrayed this track with both the delicacy and power necessary to make it an enjoyable and satisfying listen. Track two from the same album contains some very obvious and deliberate fret fingering on steel strings from the guitarist and that comes across as crisp, defined and uncannily real sounding.

Ginger Baker's epic drum solo on *Wheels of Fire* by Cream has the drum kit close mic'd during the performance which is ideal for testing transient ability. Snare drum and tom toms sounded taut and dynamic the way they should be and the cymbals have a polished refinement with no splashiness or tizz. Kick drum too has a solid “whump” that feels like it's hitting you in the pit of the stomach as much as you hear it with your ears.



# Vermouth Audio Black Pearl Loudspeaker Cables

Moving on to Derrin Nauendorf's 'Live at the Boardwalk' which is a live acoustic recording with Derrin playing solo acoustic guitar and accompanied only by a basic set of drums, the tonality of the guitar's sound was conveyed realistically and full of natural resonances and timbres. Every pluck on the strings was heard in great clarity and detail, although I cannot say that Derrin is the best of vocalists, but an enjoyable listen nonetheless.

Treble then is clean and clear, and I was able to pick out minute detail and finer points, even when the music got hectic. Bass has depth and power, without overhang or delay and is able to react to fast transients in a clear delineated fashion. Female vocals were up there with the best of the competition. Play a simple acoustic recording in a live venue and all the reverberation effects and ambience in a venue are delivered with solidity and competence. They have a balanced and neutral sound with no peaks or troughs to trouble or perturb and it is due to that neutrality I was very pleased with the Black Pearl's performance.

The acid test for me personally is whether or not I play entire albums or just my favourite "showcase" tracks off albums and secondly, how long do my listening sessions last for, so a very late bed time without realising what the time actually is, is a huge endorsement. The Black Pearls met those two criteria easily.

## Sound Per Pound

And finally, how much bang for the buck do the Black Pearls provide? Plenty, I say.

Starting at £575.00 for a 1.8 metre pair they are not cheap by any means, but given that they cost considerably less than similar sounding rivals in the marketplace, then they do represent good value in my view. Oddly enough, they are available in 1.8, 2.3, 2.8, 3.3, 3.8, 4.3, 5.1, 5.4, 5.7 and 6 metres in length. But, the benefit to that is buying a closer match in length to what you actually need to reach from amplifier to speaker, rather than the standard metre or if you are lucky, half metre increments.

## Summary

While the Vermouth Audio Black Pearls are not the absolute best at resolving every last drop of music from a recording, I don't see that as a negative attribute, rather as a positive benefit because a cable

**Having listened to cables costing twice and three times as much for a near identical performance to the Black Pearls, that puts their pricing into context .**

that can and does wring the very last drop of detail will also have the undesirable trait of being utterly ruthless with issues from recordings or systems, resulting in not being able to be listened for hour after hour without fatigue. That also means they are going to be a good match in synergy terms to a broader spectrum of system components, so on that basis the Black Pearls will, I am sure, easily win many friends and followers. Having listened to cables costing twice and three times as much for a near identical performance to the Black Pearls, that puts their pricing into context . As usual, the *caveat* is seek out a home demonstration to form your own opinion regarding these cables.

Did I mention they look rather tasty too?

## Dominic Marsh

<b>Build Quality</b>	<b>8.3/10</b>
<b>Sound Quality</b>	<b>8.2/10</b>
<b>Value For Money</b>	<b>8/10</b>
<b>Overall</b>	<b>8.2/10</b>

**Price as tested £575.00 for a 1.8 metre pair.**

**Recommended for: Any system where neutrality is the overriding sound attribute, where extended listening without fatigue is required.**





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# Epiphany Acoustics Atratus 3 Interconnect



What's this, a second bite of the cherry you ask? As regular Hifi Pig readers will no doubt have already spotted, a [review of the Epiphany Acoustics "Atratus" interconnect](#) was conducted way back in March 2012 by our esteemed Jerry. He more than liked the first Atratus model – he jolly well bought it! And, judging by the warm reception he gave it then, he was surprised at the price too, costing under £40. That cable is still available and at an affordable price.

And so we blow away the mists of time and fast forward to the present day to evaluate the latest incarnation of the Atratus interconnect in Mark 3 guise,

**Well, the Atratus Mark 3 shrugged it off with absolute ease from the first note onwards and this really did get my attention immediately.**

# Epiphany Acoustics Atratus 3 Interconnect

which sits alongside its stable mates, the Atratus 1 and 2 models.

## Construction

Barring the name of course, the Mark 3 cable is a somewhat different beast from the 2012 variant. Gone from the Mark 3 version are the “bubble” RCA connectors and this particular cable now sports KLE Silver Harmony connectors – a welcome addition in my opinion. The outer jacket has also upgraded from a plain black with white spiral design to a subtle shade of green with white criss-cross patterned jacket which looks very attractive and I am rather happy to say, also sets it apart from the herd of the plain black cloaked cables and its siblings.

Construction is said to be OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) Copper conductors with a double shield of copper foil and braid. OCC, PC-OCC, OFC, BBC, ITV, what does it all mean? I won't explain it all as it would take more than a mere brief review to do that, but suffice to say a clever chap called Professor Ohno from Japan discovered that drawing copper wire in a slow continuous draw from the die at a very specific temperature produced less grain boundaries in the resulting wire which happened to sound better than high speed ejection at high temperatures from the die which produces conventional copper wire. Still with me? No? No matter, I will just ask you to accept that it is apparently 'better' for now and let's move on to what really counts in the final analysis, the sound.

## Sound

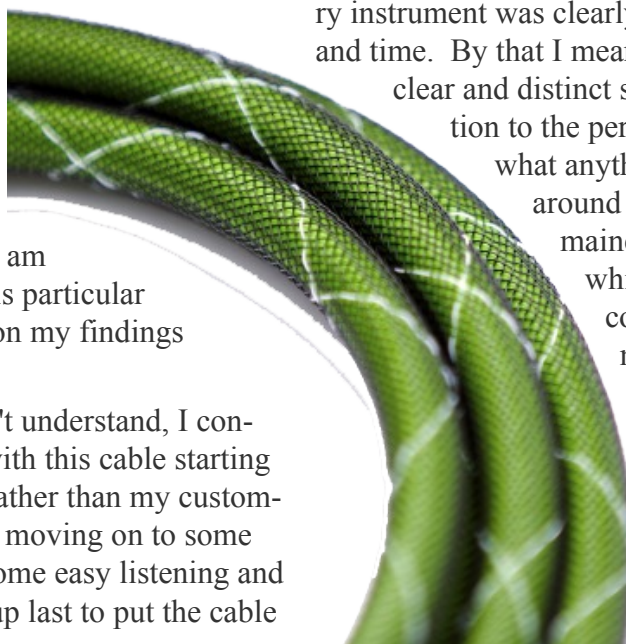
If Jerry got somewhat enthusiastic about the original Atratus interconnect he reviewed, I wonder what his opinion would be about the current Mark 3? Unfortunately I never had that pleasure of hearing the earlier variant, so I am more than content to accept this particular cable at face value and report on my findings accordingly.

For whatever reason I still don't understand, I conducted my listening sessions with this cable starting with the “torture tracks” first rather than my customary gentle acoustic recordings, moving on to some classic recordings, then onto some easy listening and so on, with the murder music up last to put the cable

under review to a real workout, I'm sure you can picture the natural progression I would normally take. First into the CD player then is Porcupine Tree's “Deadwing” which sounds either superb or pretty awful and takes no prisoners along the way. Many a cable with high-end pretensions has fallen victim to this CD and I have become rather ambivalent about the outcome each time I play it with new components in the system. Well, the Atratus Mark 3 shrugged it off with absolute ease from the first note onwards and this really did get my attention immediately.

**It stuck true to itself through it all, thick and thin, a delight to listen to even when the going got tough, where each strand of the music remained separated and clearly defined without masking.**

It wasn't the notion of sparkling treble or subterranean bass that captivated me, it was how each and every instrument was clearly delineated in its own space and time. By that I mean that each instrument had a clear and distinct start and end to its contribution to the performance, irrespective of what anything else was happening around it. A long low bass note remained fixed in its own space while the drums were playing concurrently during that bass note with their own dynamics and stop-start timings, not to mention the lead and rhythm guitars' involvement in the musical composition as well, so complex transients were not troublesome at all for





# Epiphany Acoustics Atratus 3 Interconnect

this cable. The silences too drew my attention and it came as a complete surprise when the music exploded from that silence and far from being shocked, I was pleasantly surprised by it. Meanwhile, the imaging remained centre/front and rock steady in position, with plenty of depth and incredibly wide staging beyond the speakers. That's an awful lot of words I have just typed to convey to you what this cable does, but let me finish that by saying it is only an elite band of cables that can do this effortlessly with highly complex and dynamic music.

I followed Porcupine Tree with Paloma Faith's "Fall to Grace" album, which is not an album I actually like. Errrrm, what? Strange you may say, but if a system can lift the sound of this album above the ordinary and actually get me to enjoy what I'm hearing, then that is some trick it has pulled off. Paloma's voice to me doesn't have much tonal range, power or depth to it compared to other singers, which no amount of orchestral backing can elevate from what to me is the mundane. Sorry if I offend all you Paloma fans. You may be glad to hear I ticked this particular box with no complaints, as the Atratus injected some much needed sparkle and dynamics that make it enjoyable – well, sort of. I think all audiophiles should also dig out and dust off similar recordings, using them as an acid test as part of their evaluation process, rather than just their showcase demonstration music. Works for me anyway!

A track I will often use to evaluate treble performance is Jack Johnson's "Staple it Together" from his In Between Dreams album. The percussion on this track has been recorded with high energy and almost nil compression, so needs very little provocation into sounding overly bright and splashy, quite painful to listen to in fact with unsuitable components. With the Atratus interconnect in the system, it came so, so, so close to the threshold of being over indulgent with the cymbals, but never actually crossed that line in my own system. Given that other cables many times the price of the Atratus have stumbled at this particu-



lar hurdle, then in all fairness any criticism here (however slight) of the Atratus should be taken in context, but I felt then and now it is a facet of the Atratus which readers of this review should be aware of. However, if you are looking for a cable with verve, sure-footed lithe dynamics and crisp definition, you have just found it.

Next up was a favourite of mine; Joe Satriani's The Extremist and in particular the track "New Blues". This track begins with some solid weighty kick drum and cymbal work from the drummer, joined soon afterwards by a simple guitar riff from Joe, then the bass guitar with string plucks that go deep. Then a countdown 1, 2, 3, 4 with the drummer crashing drumsticks together in time. Now that really sounded like wood against wood, not plastic or any other material... it was wood for sure. That kick drum too has a double stroke, the first softer than the second, which you can feel as much as hear. The Atratus didn't quite manage the raw power, energy and depth from the kick drum that other (read more expensive) cables have managed, but it still sounded clean, powerful, above all realistic and a credible showing nonetheless. The biggest surprise though was at the

# Epiphany Acoustics Atratus 3 Interconnect

tail end of that track where the faders are gradually reducing the recording down to zero level, it was the hi-hat cymbals that were the last instrument that could be heard... just. I am sure during previous hearings it was the guitar that was last instrument to be faded out, but with the Atratus there was no ambiguity. You live and learn as they say.

Close mic'ed acoustic guitar is I think one of the hardest instruments to recreate faithfully and some people are rather irritated by the guitarist's fret work, but I find it a rich source of inner detail to test microdynamics. If I cannot hear the difference between steel, gut and nylon strings being drawn along by fingers, I need to ask questions as to where those sounds have gone. The Atratus cable had no difficulty in delivering those microdynamics from my reference recordings, nor did it skimp anywhere on reproducing the timbres and textures from the body of the instrument either.

I haven't mentioned bass performance so far and it would be remiss of me to say nothing at all about it. I found the bass to be a trifle 'dry' by nature and whilst all the lower octaves were indeed reproduced with no curtailing of frequencies, there seemed to be a slight lack of heft and weight to bass notes. This meant I was listening out for the bass, rather than having it presented to me as part of the total musical landscape which I am used to with my resident cables. That to me is a better compromise than a tubby, ponderous, or overhung bass that seems to plague budget cables and much further up the cable hierarchy as well if we are to be honest. Bass like that also tends to swamp or dominate the lower midband as a consequence, but on the plus side the sound package the Atratus presents has that lively clean bouncy energy without bloom anywhere in the audible spectrum which I am very sure many listeners will enjoy and relish.

## Conclusion

I intensely dislike the term "giant killer" because those cables that have been labelled with that epithet are anything but in my experience. They lack the detail, fidelity, solidity, finesse and sophistication of true high-end cables, even though they outwardly present a superficial facsimile at first encounter. A large number of cables on the market can easily provide a clean-ish balanced sound that sounds good *tonally* with simple uncomplicated music, but give them some fast, complex, multi-layered and di-

versely dynamic music and they quickly fall apart or collapse inwards on themselves to present what I would describe as a mangled mush of music with instruments and/or vocals crashing into one another. It would be fair to say the Atratus Mark 3 interconnect is not one of those types of cables as it can keep up with cables existing higher up the performance tiers and price brackets.

It stuck true to itself through it all, thick and thin, a delight to listen to even when the going got tough, where each strand of the music remained separated and clearly defined without masking. The treble can at times be a tad unforgiving and verging ever so slightly on the uncouth, but only verging mind you, never quite stepping over the line during my own listening sessions, although I'm not so sure how the partnership would fare when paired for example with speakers that have metal treble drivers. Bass is a touch on the lighter side for me personally, but you may love all its positive qualities and attributes to bits and an audition should settle that matter for your own individual tastes and partnering components of course.

The Atratus 3 easily manages to climb up the greasy pole of sophistication in sound that very few "budget" cables can attain, which is highly commendable. When I tell you that they cost £99.99 for a one metre pair, it will perhaps enable you to make some sort of judgement from my outpourings in this review and maybe come to the conclusion that I am not in fact nit-picking or criticising a cable costing many hundreds of pounds, I am actually describing with high praise the Epiphany Acoustics Atratus Mark 3's stunning performance envelope which I say stands head and shoulders above its immediate rivals and further beyond too.

**Dominic Marsh**

**Build quality: 8.2**

**Sound quality: 9.1**

**Value for money: 8.7**

**Overall: 9.0**

**Price as reviewed £99.99 for 1m pair.**

**Recommended for: Systems that would benefit from some treble and midband verve and vitality, or those looking for a more controlled, taut and less dominant bass.**

# Epiphany Acoustics Atratus 3 Interconnect

The Epiphany Acoustics Atratus 3 Interconnect will now go for second review to see if they will achieve Outstanding Product Award status. You can read the full results of Dan Worth's second review below.

When I had a chance to listen to the new Atratus Mark 3 in my system, my initial perspective was drawn immediately to how good the soundstage of the cable was. I've had a plethora of interconnects pass through my current system over the past few months pertaining high-end status of which many excelled in their huge soundstage but not all...

Being able to layer the performance with great depth is not the same as being able to create what I refer to as a 'huge soundstage' being able to have a wide and open soundstage is not like having a 'huge soundstage'.

**Comparing to some of the more exotic and expensive Interconnects which I have had here lately the Epiphany falls a little short but it's ability to convey 90% of what I've heard achieved by some of the very best cables for 5-10% of the costs is simply staggering...**

The Atratus III gave an open soundstage yes, but after further listening a strong element of the phrase 'huge soundstage' was very apparent. Comparing to some of the more exotic and expensive Interconnects which I have had here lately the Epiphany falls a little short but it's ability to convey 90% of what I've heard achieved by some of the very best cables for 5-10% of the costs is simply staggering, giving depth, height, width and three dimensionality that simply belies its price.

As Dom says - the phrase 'giant killer' is thrown about too often and there are many fads with cables that soon run their course but the Atratus III has a definite sustainable palpability and presence which I consider to be very grown up articulate, embracing and highly musical.

My own experience with the cable showed the sound to have many qualities and only one real criticism. Assessing the performance of a cable can be somewhat user or system specific and it's only when comparing notes with other users that a more generalised opinion can really be offered as to the specifics of its sonic signature, anything else is simply how the cable has performed in my system, so having other components and or other systems to use a cable in will reinforce these opinions. So I tried it on three different amps as well as hearing the cable with Dom one afternoon.

Midrange quality is great, clear concise, articulate and layered, the one area where I could grumble is the lower midrange. There is a cleaner, thinner presentation here leading into the upper bass, extrapolating detail but at the expense of some body. mtge undertones of the vocal especially male vocals can be a little leaner with the up the line effect of its also leaner bass line.

Bass is a little dry due to this but I am being picky here. Bass is as a whole, very informative, extended and quick. Treble too has a strong linear extended bandwidth. It remains airy musical and true conveying symbol work with great texture and appeal.

The amount of detail the Atratus III can muster up is really quite remarkable, I never once even considered the fact that I was missing information in any performance although the lower end conveyed it in a slightly less cohesive way for me and a point which could have been easily missed as it never came to mind whilst listening, never drawing myself to a lack of resolution, dynamics or intrigue into the musical palette.

All in all I think Dom really summed this cable up very well and although I could have simply wrote 'I agree' I was enthusiastic to convey a little of what really made this cable for me a fantastic piece of wire and a stellar buy.

**Dan Worth**

**Build Quality - 8.2**

**Sound Quality - 8.6**

**Value For Money - 9.3**

**Overall - 8.7**

**Recommended for its performance to price ratio.**





# Tellurium Q Blue Series



There's no need for an introduction to Tellurium Q - today I look at how the new 'Complete' Blue range stacks up in a triple review.

## Blue

The Blue is constructed to look like a ribbon and sits at the base of Tellurium Q's cable range coming in at £17 p/m.

The cable is extremely flexible and easy to twist turn and route in and around the system.

What I admired from the off with the Blue was how it was able to simply convey good strong musical flow right out of the box. Its signature is a little lively but soft(ish) in regards to instrument leading edges, digital music and recording of not the best quality.

**Now at £17 a meter we aren't expecting the earth but what we do get is a large chunk of the moon.**

The Blue likes to show off without showing off, taking that confident walk with head up and shoulders back, sporting a small grin as it walks past other budget cables in its price range and some of a greater cost in my experience as a bit of a cable nerd.

Now at £17 a meter we aren't expecting the earth but what we do get is a large chunk of the moon. A realistic take on what a performance means and tries to convey and a good deal of that emotion that makes things more 'real'.

A sparkly and vibrant top end that doesn't over step the mark, a transparent midrange with a decent bassline to conclude what I consider to be an established class leader and a best buy budget cable.

## The Ultra Blue

The Ultra Blue is also one of the smaller ribbon forms that TQ produce, very different in size to the larger band type cables, but equally as visually appealing with a nice sky blue finish and white heat shrinks.

Ultra Blue is immediately a stronger performer and allows through such a surprising amount of detail it really took me by surprise, how much is this a metre...£31...

There is still that softer edge to it, whereas the Black range of cables has a more neutral and tighter leading edge. It's a clever little devil in the way it presents information.

Take a brighter sounding chip amp and some bookshelves and the Ultra Blues will take that grainy harsh edge off of the edge of a note, yet flow through the note's extension with sparkle and vibrancy, a very difficult trick to pull off, but here it is right here right now doing it in spades.



# Tellurium Q Blue Series

I've heard many cables that can downplay or smooth out a note and be classed as a non-fatiguing and sometimes coloured cable, but the Ultra Blue doesn't do that at all. What it does do is kinda train the music like a dog getting to the roadside waiting to cross - wait, wait, go on then....good boy.

**The Ultra Blues may not have the crystalline slap, kick and punch to a kick drum of some higher priced offerings but they never lack presence in weight or shape of the bass**

The detail retrieval really is remarkable allowing me to hear all the small cues, nuances and rubbed strings on 'Seven Wonders' by Norah Jones, leaving her vocal sultry with that tiny bit of sombre edge that I love so much in her voice but which many find boring... I find it relaxing and the Ultra Blues conveyed all the late night intimacy I love about this track and others from the same album.

The Ultra Blues may not have the crystalline slap, kick and punch to a kick drum of some higher priced offerings but they never lack presence in weight or shape of the bass registers. Listening to a bit of dance music took away a sharpness which can intimidate the listener into turning the volume back a few notches. Instead I was allowed a louder listen with plenty of searing treble, deep bass and the over emphasised soundstage which make dance music sound so good for me. Not as esoteric as it can sound, but giving a definite representation of every frequency without missing any portions of enjoyability due to a lack of bandwidth or potential in conveying convincingly what the recording artist has laid down on the track.





# Tellurium Q Blue Series

They are actually such a good listen in my system that I could actually live with them and I've tried the likes of the Black, Ultra Black and Ultra Silver. Don't get me wrong, without a budget I could happily drop way more money, but if I had to strip down my system then the Ultra Blues would be a consideration for about two seconds and they would be in the mix.

The Ultra Blue just seem to do something special without even trying, I could definitely declare them as one of the very best budget cables I've ever heard. There's no, I can do this but can't do that, they just convey a coherence that doesn't allow the listener to criticise, especially at their meagre price point!

I've now had the Ultra Blues in my system for two weeks solid without even batting an eyelid. Normally if I have someone coming around and what with always chopping and changing kit in and out for review purposes, unless necessary for an opinion I tend to put my system back together as I am and have been making gradual changes and tweaks to it, but I can honestly say the Ultra Blues have been stared at, thought about and walked away from thinking, 'I'll leave 'em in I think'.

They don't warrant a second thought and that's a testament to Tellurium Q, I've always been very fond of their cables, but for me the Ultra Blue stands out because it doesn't make a scene, it just creates one.

## Blue Diamond

Well my enthusiastic self is a little worried now - I've given the previous cable so much praise I don't want to feel in anyway disappointed with the new Blue Diamond which tops the Blue range. I just hope it's not like the day when your son reaches 16 and says "No Dad, I'm bigger than you and if you want to go outside then we can sort this out like men".

The Blue Diamond are not of the smaller ribbon type of cable. I always look at the these, the Ultra Blacks, Ultra Silver and Black Diamond as a 'band' rather than a 'ribbon' due to their overall size, thickness and rigidity.

Routing these bad boys is somewhat trickier. Yes they will route, but you just need to take your time be a little more careful and all will go according to plan in next to no time.

So can the big daddy hold its own against its offspring? Uh, yes! I was hoping that I didn't have to



# Tellurium Q Blue Series

call Tellurium Q daft as I didn't fancy going outside as its cold now in November.

The Blue Diamonds are a good step up again from the Ultra Blues and coming in at £170 p/m I should think so.

Listening to London Grammer's Hey Now produced the deep dropped progressive bass notes in the first paragraph of play that roll across the room and gently resonate the sofa and which puts an instant smile on the face and leaves a bit of intrigue in the mind as to what these cables may be capable of, whilst listening to this slow and somewhat bland track that has good intimate characteristics, yet doesn't have the zip and excitement that you want to hear from first hearing something new in the system, before the brain relaxes and the music does too as the day progresses on.

A total change of direction and as I was scrolling through my album library I thought as I went towards Nils Lofgren I hadn't heard the Natasha Bedingfield album for years. Quite poppy but there are huge sections of tracks which offer an interpretation of strong 3D imaging if the systems components are up to the job.

People talk about sound memory only lasting for a matter of seconds and I had this conversation with our latest addition to the Hifi Pig team Dominic on the phone earlier. I personally remember very vividly attributes and aspects of equipment and music, he agrees and he does have ears I trust, so visiting this album was like shaking the hand of an old acquaintance whom I hadn't seen for some time.

Natasha's excited vocal had all of her passion and high pitched narrative to the tracks story. The Blue Diamonds seemed to register themselves as a controller of all that is wild without losing the faithfulness of the music and the aforementioned three dimensional, studio generated effects were completely as I remembered them in guises of better days when I've heard the album with some truly competent kit.

Not forgetting about Nils Lofgren I later moved onto his Acoustic Live album (for me his best work) I navigated to 'Keith Don't Go' in order to hear some exposed areas of the Blue Diamonds such as top end control, instrument timbre and vocal body.

**Soundstage is an area where all TQ cables are exceptionally well versed and the Blue Diamond is exceptional in this category also.**

This track is always played loud when I'm testing or reviewing an item as the guitar solo three quarters of the way through the track gets extremely lively and if not careful ear piecing and fatiguing very quickly.

The Blue Diamonds refinement addressed vocal clarity projection and body impressively. Decay of strings and timbre of the acoustic guitar led into spatial awareness including crowd interaction and theatre perspectives. Yet what I found really intriguing was how the clever top end functioned.

Remember the dog crossing the road? Well this was a little more sophisticated than that. The dog had migrated and matured from a walk around the block and gone to Crufts with a fluffy perm and a rosette! In English what I'm getting at is the Blue Diamonds reflect a note in a manner that allows it to shine, still have that clarity and controlled subtlety to its leading edge, but also allowed for that note to breath and that breath of a note was the key aspect that made this cable a substantial outlay compared to the other blue cables. The son may have grown into his boots but the father had time and experience on his hands and new how to address and deal with a situation.

Soundstage is an area where all TQ cables are exceptionally well versed and the Blue Diamond is excep-

# Tellurium Q Blue Series

tional in this category also. I've found that with Tellurium Q cables it's not about how big their soundstage is as they can all spread their wings, it's about how clean and strong the boundaries of that soundstage can stay, maintaining the strength of the centre stage out to its borders and the Blue Diamond and it's clever upper end attenuation and presence produces width height and perceived depth extremely well indeed displaying attributes of its internal construction which has obviously been filtered down from the even more expensive and complex designs further up TQ's range

## Conclusion

All three cables are in their own right and price range terrific achievers and more than that stand-out music making aids, and each deserve respect, not just as the link between amp and speakers, but as a key integral part of the whole and never any less.

From Blue to Ultra Blue and Ultra Blue to Blue Diamond, there is an aura of consistency even if the price jumps considerably. But then so does the performance.

There's no denying that the Blue Diamond is an absolutely stellar performer, but the level of performance to price ratio that the Blue and especially the Ultra Blue exhibits is something of a statement.

I appreciated the Blue range as a whole has a certain sound preference of control and careful explanation of leading edges and top end attributes that puts it in

its own class of cable from TQ. I simply suggest not to jump in straight away on the more well known Black range and see your local dealer about trying the Blue against the Black and even the Silver, as each range has a particular characteristic which you may realise that you don't need until it sits in your system and explains the music to you in your own living space.

## Dan Worth

### Blue

**Build Quality - 8/10**

**Sound Quality - 8.5/10**

**Value For Money - 8.5/10**

**Overall - 8.33**

### Ultra Blue

**Build Quality - 8/10**

**Sound Quality - 8.7/10**

**Value For Money - 9/10**

**Overall - 8.56**

### Blue Diamond

**Build Quality - 8/10**

**Sound Quality - 8.9/10**

**Value For Money - 8.7 (sound quality is respective of price and vice versa)**

**Overall - 8.53**

**As is customary with Hifi Pig, whenever a product scores 8.5 or more then a second review is**





# Tellurium Q Blue Series

**called for, so after Danny's scoring ratings, I have been asked to conduct the follow up reviews.**

**I**t's very nice (although rather rare) for a reviewer to be asked to review a component or cable that the reviewer themselves has actually owned at some point in time. Being the curious and fickle lot that we are, we do like to dabble amongst the available equipment on the market, hoping to perhaps make that rough diamond find that nobody else has yet latched onto. It isn't curable, trust me!

So it was with me and the TQ Blue speaker cable, back when TQ as a company was in it's infancy so to speak and a blind purchase if ever there was one, as to the best of my knowledge there were no published reviews to analyse for making an informed choice. I enjoyed it immensely back then and it was a pleasure to revisit it again wearing the reviewer's hat this time.

## **Blue**

Built as a flat rectangular 'shotgun' layout, it is an unobtrusive cable that isn't difficult to route and minimize it's profile. It can be purchased in off the reel lengths to terminate yourself, or better still TQ will do in my opinion a very neat and professional job with compact 4mm "Z" banana plugs or spade connectors soldered on and heatshrunk to make a solid and lasting connection.

As with all the TQ cable products, there is absolutely no technical specifications supplied regarding construction and materials. You may think differently of course, but personally speaking I would not care if the major constituent in the construction was cold porridge as long as the cash pounds I paid bought the sound level I have paid for.

## **Blue Sound**

Talking of which then, here is my perception of this cable's sonic performance.

Given that it can be bought for around £17.00 a metre unterminated, we are not talking bank-busting expenditures now. It has a bouncy sound but not to the point where the listener is fatigued by it. Treble is well defined and clean with no nasties, easily picking up details and nuances in the music, presenting them clearly and concisely. Cymbals have a crisp metallic 'ting' to them without unwanted shimmer and without any sting to it, so no concerns at all there either. Bass is firm and solid, full of articulation,

**Treble is well defined and clean with no nasties, easily picking up details and nuances in the music, presenting them clearly and concisely.**

while not the quickest on transients, it's no sluggard either. All in all, a great performing honest cable which belies it's modest price. Rather short description I agree, but see that as a good sign from me folks!

## **Ultra Blue**

Virtually identical in size and physical layout to the Blue cable, the Ultra Blue has a different (lighter) shade of blue for the outer covering and bright white heatshrink over the terminations. Price has risen to £31 per meter for the Ultra Blue and the burning question then is can a person justify the additional cost of the Ultra Blue or the standard Blue? Read on and judge for yourself.

## **Ultra Blue Sound**

A step up in price and performance from the Blue and the differences are rather more than just subtle. From the first note onwards you can tell instantly it

# Tellurium Q Blue Series

is a Blue by ancestry, but fed on a course of steroids, rippling with energy. The same fundamental tones with an equally balanced treble and bass palate as hitherto found with the Blue , just a 'bigger brother' version with maturity, expansion and power that says “Don't mess with me”. I found it excitement all the way and not in a brutish way, hell bent on savaging the senses with it's presentation, more like a larger or magnified version of the Blue's sound, similar in fact to selecting a larger font size on your computer screen to make reading text just that little bit easier on the eyes. When required to, the Ultra Blue was as light in touch as a feather and female vocals exemplified that with a sweetness that allowed what we all love in female vocals to convey richness, silkiness and depth, yet snap into instant dynamics as only the ladies know how to. The cable could also demonstrate the velvet touch as well, with music that was recorded at very low levels or with a close intimate feel, played back with delicacy, softness and beguiling finesse that left you utterly spellbound.

## Blue Diamond

The construction of this cable moves away from the flat rectangle shotgun style seen in the Blue and Ultra Blue into a widely spaced parallel configuration, not unlike the Ultra Black and Graphite models in the TQ range. This is in fact a revamped Green model and given it's new “Blue Diamond” epithet to place it precisely in the product lineup. It is a stiffish cable and less easy to make inconspicuous because it has a propensity to do what it wants to do, not what you want it do. Still, the serious audiophiles among us bothers not about such irrelevances do they?

## Blue Diamond Sound

Surprisingly, the Blue Diamond manages to create a smooth silky understated sound that isn't at all lacking in detail and refinement. Don't arrive at the conclusion though that it is laid back or sluggish, far from it, it does transients and dynamics, but not in a spotlight manner that waves a flag or draws attention to itself, rather going about it's business efficiently and diligently as a great cable should do. This cable also does imaging and soundstaging you can almost walk into and around the musicians and vocalists, the effect is so palpable and real. The word “holographic” does tend to get over used these days but describes the effect perfectly and I searched for ages for a bet-

**Don't arrive at the conclusion though that it is laid back or sluggish, far from it, it does transients and dynamics, but not in a spotlight manner that waves a flag or draws attention to itself, rather going about it's business efficiently and diligently as a great cable should do.**

ter word to use and failed, so you are stuck with it I'm afraid. Nevertheless whatever word we do use, it adds another layer of listening pleasure to be derived from this cable and a live recording really does come alive and a smoke filled room with the clinking of glasses comes flooding back to the memory as you listen to some good jazz music. Microdynamics are another forte of the Blue Diamonds and during my listening sessions I noted many instances of subtle tonal textures and nuances that I had heard before in the recordings with other cables of a similar performance level, but not with the same degree of absolute accuracy, so a gently struck triangle for example would ring with better clarity and detail and for a much longer duration as well, then fading away to silence in a delicious way. With that also comes treble content that is completely under control. Think about it, that is a bold statement to make about a cable's treble performance.

I am a lover of fast transients and not ashamed to admit it. A snare drum MUST have a sharp “crack” to the sound so you are under no illusion whatsoever it was struck with anything other than a wooden stick for only the briefest of moments, with a razor sharp defined start and stop on the proverbial sixpence. When evaluating the Blue Diamonds I played a direct cut recording on Sheffield Labs by James New-

# Tellurium Q Blue Series

ton Howard 'And Friends' which isn't that enervating or involving in a strictly musical sense, but can certainly put a system through its paces and unerringly finds the weak spots in a hi-fi system like a Cruise Missile. The track from the album called "L'Daddy" starts with a three beat countdown with the drumsticks and then some intense strikes of the snare drum that simply EXPLODES at you to catch you unawares, because the previous track called "She" has a quieter more relaxed pace and flow. The point is that the Blue Diamonds relished those fast transients and delivered them with realism and sure-footedness, with that anticipated sharp "crack" delivered rather impressively, equally so with deep articulate bass laden with well defined and executed timbres and textures found on this album recorded impeccably as a bonus.

## Conclusion - Blue

The Blue speaker cable is a good example that good sound on a budget is within easy reach. It is not a finicky highly strung cable, but a good all-rounder with no vices to speak of – at least I couldn't detect any and I humbly suggest that I am rather accomplished at that task. It has a bouncy sound that pleases with its vitality and I would suggest it will find many admirers of its performance.

## Conclusion - Ultra Blue

Effectively, this outshines the Blue in what the Blue does best, so it really has a strong kinship with its sibling and no mistaking it is the better cable of the two by a good margin. More detail, more definition, more bass and a cleaner midrange not only sets it above the Blue, it sets it well above a great number of other cables in the market at this price point too. In terms of price and performance, the latter is greater in value to you the listener than the former. In other words it offers huge bang for the buck, so rightly deserves the high praise I give it.

## Conclusion - Blue Diamond

The lineage is less clear here between the other two cables in this review, but I believe it is allied more closely to the Blue range than any other and fits here logically. The construction is completely different to the other two cables under review and hence that will be reflected in its cost, so that factor negates the progression in price we have seen with the Blue and the Ultra Blue. While there is no denying the cable is capable of top-notch performance, we the reviewers

**More detail, more definition, more bass and a cleaner midrange not only sets it above the Blue, it sets it well above a great number of other cables in the market at this price point too**

must also balance out all the factors like price versus performance and that of course affects the "Value For Money" rating. Having said that, if price tags don't faze or give you the shivers, then who am I to argue?

## Dominic Marsh

### TQ Blue

**Build Quality – 8/10**

**Sound Quality - 8.8/10**

**Value For Money - 8.8/10**

**Overall - 8.53**

### TQ Ultra Blue

**Build Quality – 8/10**

**Sound Quality – 9.1/10**

**Value For Money - 9/10**

**Overall - 8.7**

### TQ Blue Diamond

**Build Quality - 8/10**

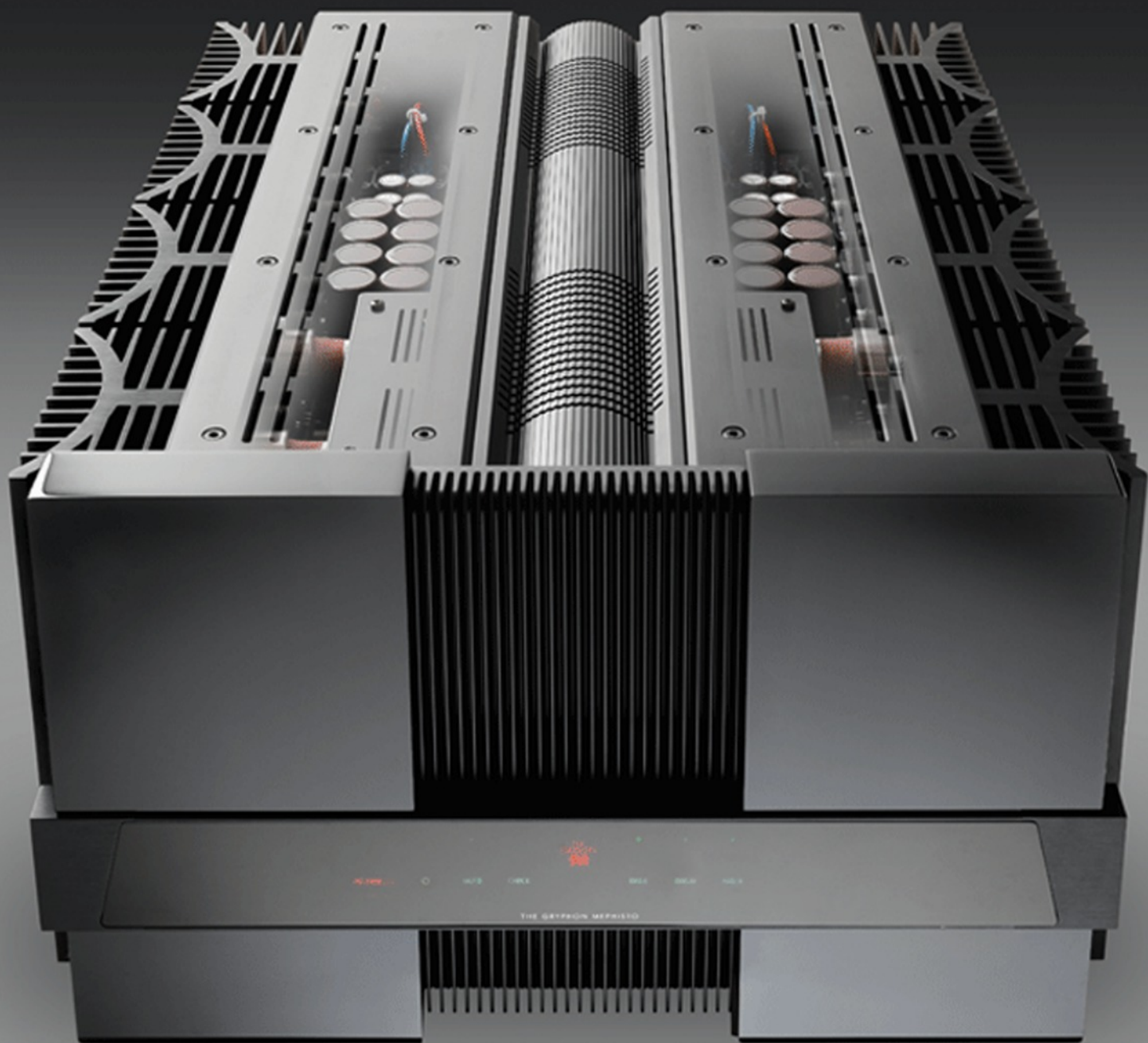
**Sound Quality - 8.9/10**

**Value For Money - 8.6/10**

**Overall - 8.5**



# THE GRYPHON



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# Van Damme “Blue” and Hi-Fi Grade 6.0mm Speaker Cables



**Van Damme also manufacture a Tour Grade version of this cable which is even more robust with a more resilient outer sheath, plus a “Hi Fi” variant too, more suited to the gentler home audio environment – more on this cable later in this review.**

**P**icture the scene . . . You hear a knock at the front door early one morning and you open it to find a person you have not seen for years. Thankfully, you like this person, so you invite them in without any hesitation and spend hours reminiscing about the great and not so great times you've had together in the past with your old pal.

Pretty much the same happened to me when I was given a pair Van Damme Blue Studio speaker cables to evaluate. Van Damme Blue and I had a glorious time together once long ago and it was just like meeting that old friend once more. But this time I didn't open the door in my pyjamas. Silly place to put a door.

Also included in this review is Van Damme's 6mm model in the UP-LCOFC Hi-Fi speaker cable series. I sure as heck am not going to type that lot in each time I make reference to it, so for the sake of brevity I will simply call it “Hi Fi” with the clear inference it is the variant aimed at the domestic market listener.

**Construction (Blue series cable)**

# Van Damme “Blue” and Hi-Fi Grade 6.0mm Speaker Cables

The Van Damme Blue speaker cable under review here is some 6.00mm squared per conductor plus the PVC insulation of the conductors, plus a substantial rubberoid outer jacket, means we are talking about a seriously built cable at 14mm in diameter. It has to be, as it's design brief is to survive being manhandled and abused in the professional music arena, ranging from the recording studio and often out into the tour circuit, set in venues where build up and strip down is not done at all with kid gloves on by the technicians.

Van Damme also manufacture a Tour Grade version of this cable which is even more robust with a more resilient outer sheath, plus a “Hi Fi” variant too, more suited to the gentler home audio environment – more on this cable later in this review.

Van Damme also manufacture the Blue series design of cables with smaller diameter conductors ranging from 0.75mm, to 1.5mm, 2.5mm, 4.00mm and of course the 6.00mm we are discussing here, so the range of gauges caters rather well for various applications.

The cables arrived supplied with 4mm banana plugs supplied by Van Damme, similar in style to Michell screw down banana plugs which easily accepts large gauge cables. My one reservation about these connectors is the knurled 'bolt' works itself loose over time so needs regular checking for tightness. In fact one plug had worked loose during transit, but soon tightened up again by hand.

Conductor material is said to be high purity copper of 0.20mm per strand, 189 strands per conductor, so there is a lot of metal in there giving a commendably low resistance reading of 3.2 Ohms per kilometre. No inductance or capacitance measurements are provided.

## Sound (Blue series cable)

Taking into account this cable was deemed to be unused and fresh off the reel, it required some running

in to let it settle down. It took what seemed to be an exceptional length of time to become listen-able so I would advise new owners to be a little bit patient when first installed and not to make hasty judgments at first hearing.

Given that the Blue is not considered to be a “hi-fi” cable in a domestic setting and aimed more at being a rugged studio workhorse, it was evident from the sound that refinement is not at the top of this cable's priorities. I wish I could point out to you where exactly its strengths and weaknesses lie, because one CD track where I was listening to it would sound fine, another less so and variations in between, so I will try and pick out the reliable consistencies that I experienced.

Midrange was certainly congested sounding, with female vocals having a lack of air and grace that I know is there in the recording. Treble had a slightly steely edge that was prevalent with cymbals in particular, while bass

didn't have the rich fullness that a cable of this diameter should be delivering with ease in my opinion. It is a listen-able cable nonetheless and I wouldn't condemn it out of hand as I know there are many folks out there that own and enjoy the sound it makes for them.

However, the next cable to be evaluated happened to be the Van Damme LC-OFC 6.0mm “Hi Fi” variant, so let's see how this cable fares . . . . .

## Construction (Hi Fi variant)

This cable has a completely different geometry to the Blue series, arranged in a parallel “shotgun” arrangement, in a clear slightly tinted outer sheath nicknamed “clear”.

Once again, supplied fitted with the Michell style 4mm banana plugs and I have already stated my reservations about these plugs.

## Sound (Hi Fi variant)





# Van Damme “Blue” and Hi-Fi Grade 6.0mm Speaker Cables

As we have black and white, ying and yang, so it was with the Blue and these particular cables. While the Blue failed to impress on a sonic level, the 'clear' cloaked Hi Fi variant certainly was a breath of fresh air by comparison. I was immediately impressed by the bass, which simply flowed out the speakers in copious amounts that fair took me by complete surprise, it was so unexpected. That isn't to say though that the bass was bloated or overbearing, far from it in fact and the best way I can describe it to you is the sonic difference between an eight inch bass driver and a twelve inch bass driver, there was simply MORE of it in a powerful, extended and coherent way with terrific solidity, lushness and texture. Bass guitar acquired a background 'growl' to it, sensed rather than actually heard, instead of just a standalone vanilla bass note, kick drum too had a real “whooomph” to it, underpinned with a firmness and control that I haven't heard in quite some time, even from some esoteric speaker cable confections. Anyone who has heard a Tannoy fifteen inch driver in full song will know what I am saying here regarding the bass energy level and how it makes it sound 'bigger' than it actually is. The icing on the cake for me was that lush full bass I was hearing didn't intrude further up the frequency band to taint the upper bass/lower midrange region, as some cables are prone to doing. My one concern is how this cable would perform in another hi-fi system with someone else's hearing acuity, but an audition prior to purchase should answer that query.

Treble too was transformed from an unsophisticated fizzy sound the Blue was providing, to a startling sweetness and clarity that enthralled. Instrument separation was good rather than exceptional and the mid-band was slightly coloured but not excessively so, manifesting itself on male vocals in particular which tended to slightly lose the innate silky warmth the male voice has. Being picky here so don't add too much credence to this remark.

To put that into context, I played Fink's “Biscuits For Breakfast” album on CD and that really did emphasize what this cable was doing. I like the album because it has a slow precise pace to it and a great frequency palette despite its simplicity which I find to be a great analytical tool. Bass literally filled the listening room and worse luck did excite the awkward corner bass nodes I have, so the volume turned down a notch or two alleviated that problem. I envy

**However, Van Damme with their Hi-Fi consumer orientated “UP-LCOFC Hi-Fi speaker cable series” certainly have created a speaker cable aimed squarely at the domestic user that performs far better than I had anticipated and at a price that has left me in awe at Van Damme's accomplishment within that parameter.**

the people who can hit number 10 or 11 on the dial with impunity. I was stunned at just how much tonal texture actually exists with a bass guitar when you listen closely, plus that sound lived in perfect harmony with the percussion from the drums, a defined separation between the two. Cymbal crashes and top hat beats are recreated accurately with a detailed metallic ring so highly convincing and palpable.

I hope you have gathered by now I liked these “Hi Fi” cables because that's what they are, with one small exception. Transient attack was not as fast, refined and polished as I would like, with leading edges seemingly having a slower rise time, so losing that keen knife edge excitement and the semblance of muddling at high volumes crept into the sound. For those of you that have read some of my other re-

# Van Damme “Blue” and Hi-Fi Grade 6.0mm Speaker Cables

**It's raison d'être is more about survival in that environment within a given budget being the primary objectives, rather than aimed at absolute sound quality, even though it has a very adequate performance in that role.**

views, you will know this is my own personal hobby horse I am a tad fastidious about and regard as an essential hallmark of cable performance.

## Conclusion

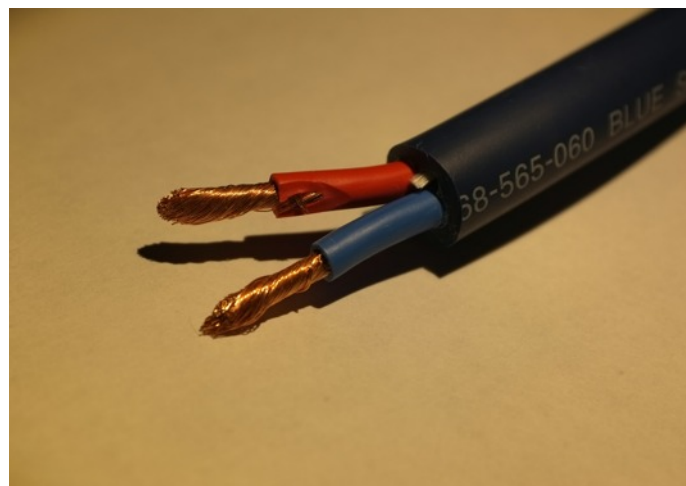
Despite being the long serving darling cable of choice for budget conscious audiophiles, I don't think the Van Damme Blue speaker cable should any longer be accepted as such. Correct me if I am wrong, but my understanding of the whole design ethos of the Blue cable is to live in the professional studio environment with all the challenges that location presents. It's raison d'être is more about survival in that environment within a given budget being the primary objectives, rather than aimed at absolute sound quality, even though it has a very adequate performance in that role. Yes there is a budget involvement because wiring an entire studio or concert venue with anything substantially more expensive would result in an installation invoice containing more zeros than the Starship Enterprise's odometer. It belongs where it belongs and long may it continue to do so.

However, Van Damme with their Hi-Fi consumer orientated “UP-LCOFC Hi-Fi speaker cable series” certainly have created a speaker cable aimed squarely at the domestic user that performs far better than I had anticipated and at a price that has left me in awe at Van Damme's accomplishment within that parameter. A full rich bass, a more than competent mid-range and a treble with clarity and fluidity make up an attractive package at an enviable price. Ignore my

remarks about transients that only an obsessive fuss-pot would even dare to mention. A recommended buy verdict from me then.

I do have one complaint though, I wish Van Damme would put their thinking heads on and promulgate a better product designation than “UP-LCOFC Hi-Fi speaker cable series” because acronyms mean something only to the people who know what it means. Even the name “DA KABLE” is a lot easier to remember and so much less of a brain teaser and tongue twister than “UP-LCOFC Hi-Fi speaker cable series”. If you use my suggested name, Van Damme, then kindly remember who the copyright belongs to!

**Dominic Marsh**



## BLUE 6mm SPEAKER CABLE

<b>Construction</b>	<b>6.5/10</b>
<b>Sound Quality</b>	<b>7.0/10</b>
<b>Value For Money</b>	<b>6.00/10</b>
<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>6.5/10</b>

## UP-LCOFC Hi-Fi 6mm speaker cable

<b>Construction</b>	<b>7/10</b>
<b>Sound Quality</b>	<b>8/10</b>
<b>Value For Money</b>	<b>8/10</b>
<b>Overall</b>	<b>7.6/10</b>

**Recommended for: This cable should have universal appeal and application amongst the audiophile and music lover fraternities. An audition prior to purchase is advised though regarding bass performance suitability.**

# LEEDH E2

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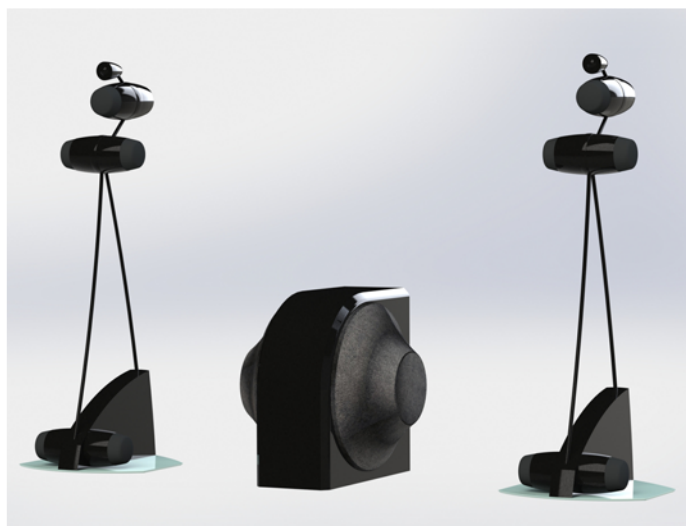
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- Pistonic membrane in UHM Carbon (Ultra High Modulus) to eliminate standing waves in the pistonic membrane which could otherwise cause colouration of the sound. Because of the small size of our driver and the stiffness of its material the frequencies of colorations are up to 1500Hz instead of 50Hz for a conventional driver which in effect means that there is no audible colouration.

Distortion reduced to the same level as the best amplifiers (less than 0.02% above 500 Hz with 50W power) Sound source controlled directivity and the compactness of the acoustic modules ABD ensures there are no faceplate or baffle diffraction and this leads to a 3D sound image (holophonics)

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The UNIVERSEL has been designed not to create the usual vibrations due to the currents within the wires of the cable, and to eliminate the usual preferential connecting direction.

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LEEDH E2 TEST **Hifi Pig**

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The two 9' drivers, loaded by 16L volume inside the box, work together to displace exactly the same volume of air in amplitude and in phase as the two 15' would in open air, i.e., making them work as they were in an infinite volume.

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

This technology eradicates the boomy effect and the low frequency ringing, by simulating a box of infinite volume, but also to meet the dynamic range by simulating a box of infinite mass, as the four drivers cancel each others mechanical reactions on the box.

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# Grado PS500e Headphones

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



I've been a user of the [Grado 325i headphones](#) for over two years and preferred them over many headphones costing more until I very recently heard [Audeze LCD](#) headphones which surpassed everything I'd heard. I had always thought the Grados to be very good indeed with superb top end detail and an openness I really enjoyed. Yes, there are those that think they are bright, but as I said in my previous review, I think these people are wrong and mistaking upper frequency definition and clarity for harshness.

So, a while ago I was sent the Grado Professional Series PS500e headphones to try and was somewhat underwhelmed when they arrived. The 325is are just shy of £300 whereas the PS500es tip the scale at a few pennies short of £600...yet outwardly they look identical, but then looks can often be deceptive.

I'll not go into too much detail about how these look as you can read the 325i review and the only perceptible differences I can see are that the headband on the PS500e is slightly (very slightly) better padded and the driver housing is a slightly different shape...for all intents and purposes they look physi-

**Now here's the thing, given what I've just written about the Grados I'd have expected them to be pretty tough to listen to for long periods but they're just not at all, actually, for all this detail they are surprisingly non-fatiguing.**

cally the same, though the newer headphones come with a mini jack and an adaptor rather than the proper quarter inch jack – I'd rather have cans with a quarter inch jack and downsize if I need to, but then



# Grado PS500e Headphones

the vast majority of headphone listening is done at my desk and not on the go.

## The Sound

For the whole of this review I have used the excellent Beyerdynamic A20 headphone amplifier (review to follow shortly). There is an immediate and startling difference between the Grados I own and this new model. The PS500es are clearly more open and more three dimensional sounding, with instruments having better separation in the mix, which is perhaps why they are given their professional moniker. Pretty much, comparing the 325is to these newer and more expensive headphones is a bit of an unfair ask, the newer PS500e is clearly and immediately a better sounding can and so it should be.

For the record they are 32 ohms with a frequency response of 14 – 29 000 Hz, 99.8dB sensitive (1mW) and each driver is matched to .05dB.

Putting on Donovan's Colours, there is a clear and identifiable soundstage apparent with instruments sitting in the mix where they should and with instru-

ments having good tone. The harmonica sounds raspy and like a harmonica, whilst the vocal is slightly forward. On Goldwatch Blues the studio's reverb effects on the voice are clearly identifiable and clear as a bell. This separation and clarity will please many I think and gives the Grados a distinctly audiophile quality – not the refined and smoothed out sound that some prefer, but a hard hitting and distinct feel to the music. Guitar has good timbre and great speed and accuracy. Ok, popping on the Audeze LCD XC and it's clear there has been another step up in quality with the sound, being more of everything and even better speed and control, but again we're comparing apples and oranges price-wise.

On Deep Purple's Made In Japan there is an apparently wide soundstage presented with a good out of the head feel. I've been using this track to listen for the quality of the bass guitar and whilst there is plenty of welly with the Grados it's not the very best I've heard, but then we're not comparing like with like again. The Grados do feel open and very "left and right" when instruments are panned and again I think

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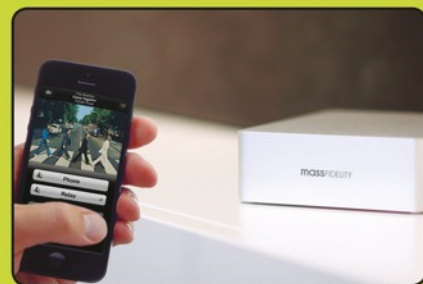
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# Grado PS500e Headphones

I'd be fairly happy to mix on these headphones. It's also apparent here that the Grados are nice and easy to drive. Now here's the thing, given what I've just written about the Grados I'd have expected them to be pretty tough to listen to for long periods but they're just not at all, actually, for all this detail they are surprisingly non-fatiguing.

The drum solo on The Mule (Live In Japan Again) has a great dynamic feel to it, particularly in the toms and I really enjoyed the Grados here, sadly the [Sennheiser HD 800](#)

[headphones](#) are long gone but I think, if my memory serves me correctly, that the dynamic feel with the Grados is on a par with them – there's a real depth and "feel" to the drums ... texture if you like. Rock heads will like these and I believe lovers of dance music will do so too.

**They are very light though and the headband is pretty comfy overall, though I'd potentially like to see a little more padding in there...**

The bass manages to underpin the mids and top frequencies really nicely and with that separation of instruments in the mix there's a real feel of sidechained pump. Daft Punk's Around The world has punch



throughout the frequencies with bass being clearly definable from the other instruments and I really enjoyed this feature of the Grados. Like the Sennheisers they are pretty exciting to listen to and have great rhythm and speed.

Ok, so they can do rock and dance with aplomb but what about less bass dominated music? I'd listened to a little Donovan initially but now for a bit of Emiliana Torrini in the form of her excellent record Fisherman's Woman. There's a slight harshness at the very top end of her voice and whilst there had previously been good width

to the soundstage there was a feeling of things being a little compressed and focused towards the middle of the skull and that out of the head experience that is so important with headphones seemed a little lost when compared to the best. That said the vocal frequencies are overall really nicely produced and you do get a real feel for her vocal style – unforced and almost child-like.

## Comfort

Over long periods of listening the earpads start to rub a little and become uncomfortable and I really wish that Grado would look at supplying their headphones with alternative earpads or covers for the foam pads. They sit on the ear rather than over it and I think some will find this to be an issue after prolonged wear. They are very light though and the headband is pretty comfy overall, though I'd potentially like to

# Grado PS500e Headphones

see a little more padding in there, they're certainly not as comfortable as the [HifiMan HD 560s](#) which were a bit of a revelation in this respect.

Whilst out and about you can shake your head about a fair deal before they become loose...and they are easy to drive with a portable player, but being open backed you're likely to get lynched on public transport if you wear these.

## Conclusion

These are a good sounding headphone that are quite analytical and clinical sounding, but then they are a professional headphone and so you should take this into account. This said, they are perfectly happy in the home environment and do a very good job of bringing out the dynamics and emotion within a recording...this sounds like I'm contradicting myself, but if you want a sound close to the master recording then these do offer that insight.

On the build side I find the Grados a bit on the lacklustre side of things. They have a certain steam punk

kind of charm and they feel sturdy enough, but they just don't really excite me in the way some headphones have. The headband needs addressing and I'm going to moan about alternative pads again...

Overall I can recommend these headphones if you are looking for a mid-priced headphone that does nothing massively wrong and an awful lot right. There is a family sound to the Grado range and I like it a lot and if you already own Grados down the range and enjoy them, then these are certainly going to bring a smile to your face.

**Stuart Smith**

**Sound – 8.25**

**Comfort – 7.85**

**Fit and finish – 8.00**

**Value – 8.5**

**Overall – 8.15**

**Recommended if you are looking for an accurate sounding headphone that represents decent value for money.**

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# Henry Audio 128 MkII Asynchronous USB portable DAC

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



**D**igital to Analogue Conversion is like solving a connect-the-dots puzzle. Your hand's horizontal movement drawing a line between the dots is analogous to the DAC's clock precision. Clock noise (dubbed jitter) is comparable to a left-right shake of your hand as you draw. Vertical movement is comparable to the DAC chip's quantization levels and output precision. A poor DAC chip will add something comparable to up-down shake of your hand. A good picture (actually, sound quality) will only emerge when both kinds of shake are minimized.

The Henry Audio USB DAC 128 mkII tries to minimize both errors by using a good DAC chip and good clocking solution. Both the DAC chip and reference clock chips have abundant power reserves

**When comparing the former MkI version of the DAC formally known as the QNKTC DAC and then revised later to the Henry Audio brand, one can aurally understand where the improvements in sound quality are and appreciate its MkII guise.**

# Henry Audio 128 MkII Asynchronous USB portable DAC

placed right next to them. All of this is situated on a printed circuit board which has been designed and analysed in minute detail.

The Henry Audio USB DAC 128 mkII uses asynchronous USB Audio. This is a technology with a direct influence on audio quality. That is because the clock signal used to convert the audio is not coupled to the often noisy clock signals inside a computer and on the USB cable itself, but rather generated by precision clock chips right next to the DAC chip. These clocks are made by UK company Golledge.

"Harsh" and "digital" sound signatures often stem from improper clocking and timing noise. Jitter is comparable to wow and flutter in its nature, but operates at much, much higher frequencies.

The USB DAC 128 MkII builds on the very well received [USB DAC 128 \(aka. QNKTC AB-1.2\)](#). The new model uses the same DAC and clock chips but with much improved decoupling capacitors and power filters. This has an audible effect such as more bass punch (due to larger energy reserves), better resolution (due to cleaner power) and a more natural sounding character (due to energy reserves being available quicker on the circuit board).

The Henry Audio 128 MkII comes with a single Micro USB input (Asynchronous) with a plug and play implementation with Mac OSX and Linux although, as usual, Windows will require a separate driver, available on the Henry Audio website. Output is via pair of analogue RCA sockets.

**At this price level it's so difficult to fault this strong achiever, the former model was excitingly good value for money and the 128 MkII takes this up a level with its more sophisticated take on the sound without losing the excitement of the earlier model.**

## The Sound

Although simple in its configuration and limited inputs, Borge Strand-Bergesen told me during his recent visit to the UK when he dropped off a DAC to me that he is looking at addressing this in a future model, a very beneficial option increasing the DAC's flexibility hugely, although this will require a sepa-





# Henry Audio 128 MkII Asynchronous USB portable DAC



degree of depth presenting their vocal. Never secluded from the performance and band yet singled out enough to demand their own presence within the performance, allowing for the artist to shine a little more.

Male artists had a throatiness and rich tone and female vocalists projected incredibly well considering the price point of the 128 Mk II DAC from Henry Audio. I've heard a fair few DAC's costing a little more in comparison and a fair few of them can leave the upper end of a female vocalist too ex-

posed and a little splashy, yet with the new found refinement in the MkII, although still a touch forward there is a suitable amount of refinement which holds the whole performance together and exudes a more natural and explorative midrange.

## Conclusion

Although the new Henry Audio DAC looks physically the same the improvements are apparent, not incredibly so but cleverly subtle in some areas. Top end information is more refined and open, the mid-band portrays better texture and depth and the bass commands a great deal more respect from the listener, expressing a weightier, bolder and muscular sound.

A coax or optical connection would be great and Borge and I did talk about its continued application of portability and the possibility of a new version still being powered through the USB socket. So on the road another device could be accommodated whilst a laptop or portable USB based battery could provide power duties.

At this price level it's so difficult to fault this strong achiever, the former model was excitingly good value for money and the 128 MkII takes this up a level with its more sophisticated take on the sound without losing the excitement of the earlier model.

**Dan Worth**

**Build Quality - 7.5**

**Sound Quality - 8.2**

**Value For Money - 8.7**

**Overall - 8.13**

**Price at time of review - £210**

**Recommended for - portability, good sound quality with finesse, strong bottom end and ability to explore many genres very well.**

rate power cable as the current and former models are both powered directly from the USB. All of this aside and concentrating on the current model the Mac locates the DAC instantly and is ready to play in mere seconds.

When comparing the former MkI version of the DAC formally known as the QNKTC DAC and then revised later to the Henry Audio brand, one can aurally understand where the improvements in sound quality are and appreciate its MkII guise.

The rendering of leading edges in upper frequencies is more refined and a little more opulent, culminating in a less 'digital' type sound than its predecessor. The DAC borders towards a more natural flavour and its presentation oozes value for money.

During the beginning of Fleetwood Mac's 'Everywhere' the sparkling that begins the track had good air and separation allowing for each separate ring to float across the soundstage, leading into the bassline which is slightly richer, tauter and larger than the older MkI version. More bumpety bump rather than bump bump, a bouncier rendition of the bottom end.

I found myself particularly more impressed with the bass of this new version over the old as my listening tests progressed, noting a strong representation of many genres of music. A double bass had more fullness and was rounder in presentation whilst listening to Damien Rice and Dance music was fast and tight expressing the slap of a kick drum more competently. Extension and decay of lower registers was very good and really delved into the lower octaves with power and finesse.

Whilst exploring some of my favourite vocalists, male and female my impressions were instantly convinced that the artist had a slightly more solitude position in the soundstage, an air of space and a finer



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# Lindy HF-110 Headphones

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



Ok, Lindy is a new name to me but they are apparently pretty well known among computer types...read youngest son Harry... so I was a bit sceptical about having a go with these budget (£84.96) headphones.

Lindy have been providing technology products such as petrol lamps and electrical appliances since the 1930s and have offices throughout Europe, the US and Australia. These headphones are designed, de-

**Bass is hard-hitting and deep, not as fast as some headphones I've had the pleasure of hearing, but tuneful and fairly easy to follow.**

# Lindy HF-110 Headphones

veloped and voiced in the UK and when I opened the box I was a little taken aback. Packaging is very good and inside you are presented with a foam lined and sturdy looking carrying case which contains the headphones themselves, a spare pair of ear pads and the removable cable.

The cable seems of reasonable quality and pushes into the bottom of each can with a satisfying clunk. At this price-point I suspect that after-market cables are not something that would be a consideration, though it is possible.

The headphones themselves are lightweight and plasticky but they appear to be pretty robust. They're an over-ear design, open back (also available in closed back), the earpads are well padded, as is the headband and the headphones feature a "vented driver" enclosure designed to get rid of standing waves reflecting back to the listener.

The 42mm drive units have Copper Clad Aluminium Wire voice coils resulting in a 64 Ohm impedance and a sensitivity of 100dB.

## The Sound

I'll be absolutely honest here and confess that I've put this review off for ages as I really wasn't relishing trying out a pair of headphones that are decidedly on the budget side of things after having been lucky enough to have experienced some truly outstanding cans in the recent past. However, perceptions can be completely wrong and so it is with the Lindys.

OK, these aren't going to compete with the likes of the [Audeze](#) or [Oppos](#) of this world, but the truth is they are pretty good...and particularly for the modest asking price.

**Good breathable earpads that are really well padded, along with the Lindy's well padded headband make these headphones really comfortable and being so light you can wear them for long periods without any bother.**

Playing the Tresor 109 compilation rewards you with a solid and deep bass response that, whilst powerful, doesn't completely overshadow everything else that

is going on. The top end is good and crisp, but there is a feeling that the mid-band is a little muddy when compared to the best out there. This results in a slightly nasal sound on vocals when there's lots of other things going on in the background of a tune, but when there is just a vocal they're pretty clear. The vocal on David Crosby's Croz album feels a little further back in the mix than it should and likewise on Gil Scott-Heron's Back Home tune. I am being hyper critical here considering the price of these but it needs to be said.

Popping on Massive Attack's Be Thankful





# Lindy HF-110 Headphones

**For the money it's hard to be overly critical of what represents a good package, with good accessories and a sound that makes them well usable.**

For What You've Got plays to the Lindys' strengths. Bass is hard-hitting and deep, not as fast as some headphones I've had the pleasure of hearing, but tuneful and fairly easy to follow. This is a feature that is going to appeal to people who enjoy the likes of dub and bass heavy music. NWA's Alwayz Into Something is another tune that also plays to the Lindys' strengths with bass being deep (perhaps a little overblown) and dominant – ironic really given this is a Dr Dre tune. Playing a collection of old Acid House I thought they were great and ended up listening through the whole collection without really finding anything wrong at all...but then this music is all top end and bass.

At the start of Jeff Buckley's version of Lilac Wine, you get a good insight into the singer's distinctive

vocal style as well as the spatial effects on his voice. You also get to feel the emotion of the tune. When the music comes in there's a little of that muddying, but this is perfectly listenable stuff and had I not been spoiled by much more expensive audiophile offerings, something I could live with. Out of the head experience is pretty good but not outstanding and soundstaging isn't too bad at all.

## **Comfort**

Good breathable earpads that are really well padded, along with the Lindy's well padded headband make these headphones really comfortable and being so light you can wear them for long periods without any bother. They are quite tight on the head but not uncomfortable and you can shake your bonce about a good bit without shaking them loose, so good for the more active folk out there.

They are open back but don't leak sound too badly at all so youd probably get away with wearing these on public transport too.

## **Conclusion**

These are not the best headphones in the world and for the asking price they were never going to be. However, they sound pretty reasonable, offering good powerful bass and tops. Things get a little confused when there is a lot going on in a track and this is brought out in the mid-band in particular.

For fans of dance music and the bassheads amongst Hifi PIg's readers, these offer a dynamic and powerful sound (particularly in the bass department) that conveys enough of the rest of the musical information to make them perfectly usable and as such I'd recommend them for people who use headphones only once in a while and don't want to spend a small fortune.

For the money it's hard to be overly critical of what represents a good package, with good accessories and a sound that makes them well usable.

## **Stuart Smith**

**Sound – 7.25**

**Comfort – 8.15**

**Fit and finish – 8.00**

**Value – 8.9**

**Overall – 8.08**

**Recommended for those who like bass and tops to be dominant and those looking for a cheap but very usable headphone.**

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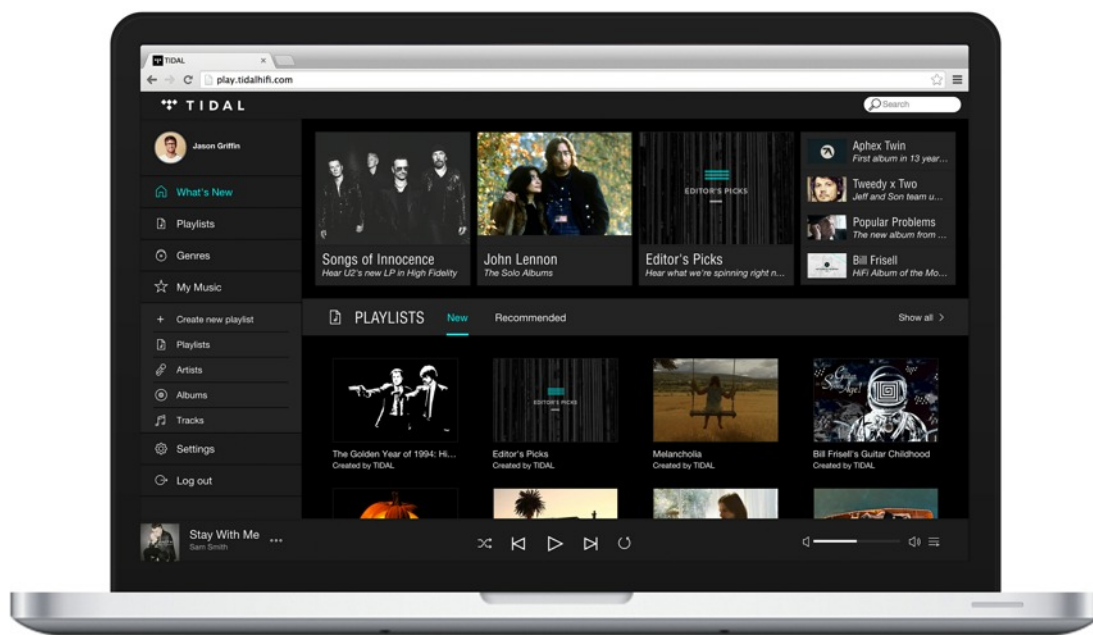
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# Tidal Music Streaming Service

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



Depending on traffic conditions, I spend between 2-3 hours of my working day on public transport so having music to accompany me has always been important. I was, therefore, really curious to see how Tidal worked as a portable music player on my phone. As it happens, I was making my way home on the bus when I registered for the service - it helps that my local bus company offer free Wi-Fi access - and within about 2 minutes I had downloaded the Tidal app onto my phone and was streaming The Way Young Lovers Do by Van Morrison into my headphones. Tidal offers three ways to stream music while on the move: through 3G using your call plan's data allowance, by Wi-Fi where a connection is available, or by downloading the tracks directly to your phone's storage and playing them offline. I don't have a large data allowance in my call plan so 3G access is not really an option and my bus route goes through some areas of patchy coverage so

**Three independent reviews of the new Tidal music streaming service from users with different listening habits/styles. First up is John Scott.**



# Tidal Music Streaming Service

Wi-Fi caused some dropouts. I fairly quickly decided that the offline option was the best for me.

## Choice of Music

Tidal claim to have over 25 million tracks available in lossless quality and I reckoned that even if 24 million of those turned out to be music I wasn't interested in, there would still be plenty to keep me occupied. I immediately set to, trying to catch Tidal out with my favourite obscurities. Seventies psychedelic/jazz/rock jam band Sweet Smoke were present and correct, including a live album I was previously unaware of. No-Wave New York chanteuse Lizzie Mercier Descloux is well represented with 8 albums. Finnish jazz fusion bassist/keyboard player Pekka Pohjola also did well with 6 albums, several of which were new to me although there was unfortunately no sign of his 1977 Mike Oldfield

collaboration *Mathematician's Air Display*. Going out on a limb slightly, I have a couple of friends who are musicians and, with no real expectation of success, I decided to put their names into Tidal's search bar and hope for the best. Scottish band Shatterhand came up trumps with their 2012 album *Chaos And The Art Of Dissent* - a great mix of punk/hardcore with pop hooks. My erstwhile school friend, next-door neighbour and bandmate Kevin Walsh also delivered the goods with 3 albums including his recent musical *Outlander*, based on Diana Gabaldon's novels. I actually struggled not to come up with at least a partial result for almost everything I searched for - some artists are represented by a handful of albums rather than their full catalogue. A few searches failed completely: No joy for session guitarist Barry Reynold's 1982 solo album *I Scare Myself* (If you are familiar with Marianne Faithful's *Broken English* or Grace Jones' *Nightclubbing* albums then that is his distinctive slashing guitar that you hear). King Crimson fans will also be sorely disappointed at the lack of KC content although that is hardly surprising given Robert Fripp's well-documented views

on streaming royalties. A big zero also for one of my favourite female vocalists Mary Coughlan.

Tidal aim to have new albums available on the day of release. As I write this, I'm listening to Pink Floyd's *Endless River*, released today. The What's New section of the app has a wide selection of releases featured across all genres with albums from artists such as Neil Young, Damien Rice, Aretha Franklin, Annie Lennox, The Flaming Lips, Jessie J, Jackson Browne etc., etc., etc. All in all, I think it's

fair to say that choice isn't a problem. I haven't even scratched the surface of Tidal's classical or jazz offerings.

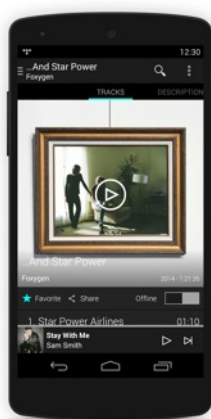
## The Tidal Interface

Tidal's interface is subtly different depending on whether you use it on a phone, tablet or desktop. This is welcome as I imagine most users will want to use the mobile version on their phones differently from how they

would use the desktop/tablet versions. All versions are intuitive and easy to use; the phone version leaves Apple's standard iPhone music app dead in the water in every respect and that's probably as much as you need to know. Barring a couple of minor style differences, the Android phone interface is identical in use. One of Tidal's selling points is their "curated content" - interviews and features related to the music. This is present in the phone and tablet versions but is not easy to spot, it really comes into its own on the desktop version. My writing of this review was interrupted when I spotted an article on the new Pink Floyd album. It certainly adds another element to the Tidal experience. Tidal also offers high definition videos but that is not an aspect that I have so far explored.

## Playlists

My very first commuting companion was an Aiwa recordable portable cassette player. I bought it in October 1983 and it cost around £100 - a reasonably large amount of money back then. It used to take me about 2 hours to make up a 90 minute mix tape, a process I went through at least twice a week. Using Tidal, I can make a 2 hour playlist in about 2 min-



# Tidal Music Streaming Service

**Ongoing access to new releases is highly attractive and very probably worth the subscription price on its own.**

utes. One thing I really, really like (and I really, really can't tell you how much I really, really like this) is that I can build a new playlist on my phone on my way home from work and once I get home, launch Tidal on my home set up and have that playlist ready and waiting to play. If you are too lazy to spend a couple of minutes creating a playlist, Tidal has hundreds of readymade themed playlists for you to try out.

If this kind of thing floats your boat you can post your playlists on Facebook or Twitter and other Tidal users can play them or comment on them to let you know how great they are. This latter aspect appears to be broken as although my playlists appeared on Twitter, the thousands of responses congratulating me on my exquisite taste evidently got lost somewhere in cyberspace.

## The Listening Experience

Using Tidal as a mobile player with downloaded files is excellent and it does everything I would want

it to do. Sound quality is great - I haven't done a direct comparison with mp3 files but I certainly have no complaints. For my home setup I downloaded the Tidal application to my laptop, connected my laptop via USB to my DAC and was good to go. The files were streamed via Wi-Fi from my router to the laptop and I did experience the occasional drop out. If I was to invest permanently in Tidal, I'd also invest in a wired Ethernet connection – something I should really do in any case. Once again, I had very little complaint over sound quality when compared to my usual streaming set up – a Squeezebox Touch into the DAC. I did have one major gripe though: Tidal did not initially appear to support gapless playback. This was a real problem for live albums or any other album where tracks run together and really spoiled any affected tracks. However, I'm happy to say that after a few days this was resolved.

As mentioned above, my usual streaming is done via a Logitech Squeezebox Touch. When I began my trial, Squeezebox devices were not supported.

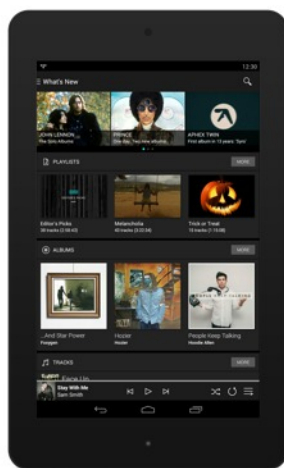
Thankfully, a Squeezebox update was made available, enabling Tidal to be accessed directly through the Touch. This made a huge difference as I really didn't want to tie up my laptop to use the service. If you currently use a dedicated computer solution to play your digital files then I guess this is not a problem. If, however, you use a streamer then you will

want to have Tidal supported by your streamer's manufacturer. Happily, Tidal are in negotiation with a range of hifi manufacturers about integrating the service into their products.

## Conclusion

While, for me, a streaming service such as Tidal could never replace my own music collection it does provide a very appealing add-on. Ongoing

access to new releases is highly attractive and very probably worth the subscription price on its own. The lack Squeezebox integration and support for gapless replay would have been deal breakers for me but with both of these issues resolved, I was highly impressed with what Tidal offered. Looking to the future, support for high resolution files is something



# Tidal Music Streaming Service

that I, and I imagine most audiophiles, would want to see. All in all, using Tidal is a very enjoyable experience and I would certainly recommend giving it a trial. The more I use it, the less likely it is that I'll want to be without it.

*Next up is Linette Smith*

## TIDAL...Bang Tidy or not ????

First off, TIDAL certainly looks the part, slick and simple and pleasing to the eye. When I first log in, helpful instructions pop up to guide me...it all seems pretty straight forward, now what do I want to listen to?

The suggested playlists that pop up first are all for Christmas so they get a wide berth (it's November!!!) but they may well come in handy when I am in a more festive frame of mind.

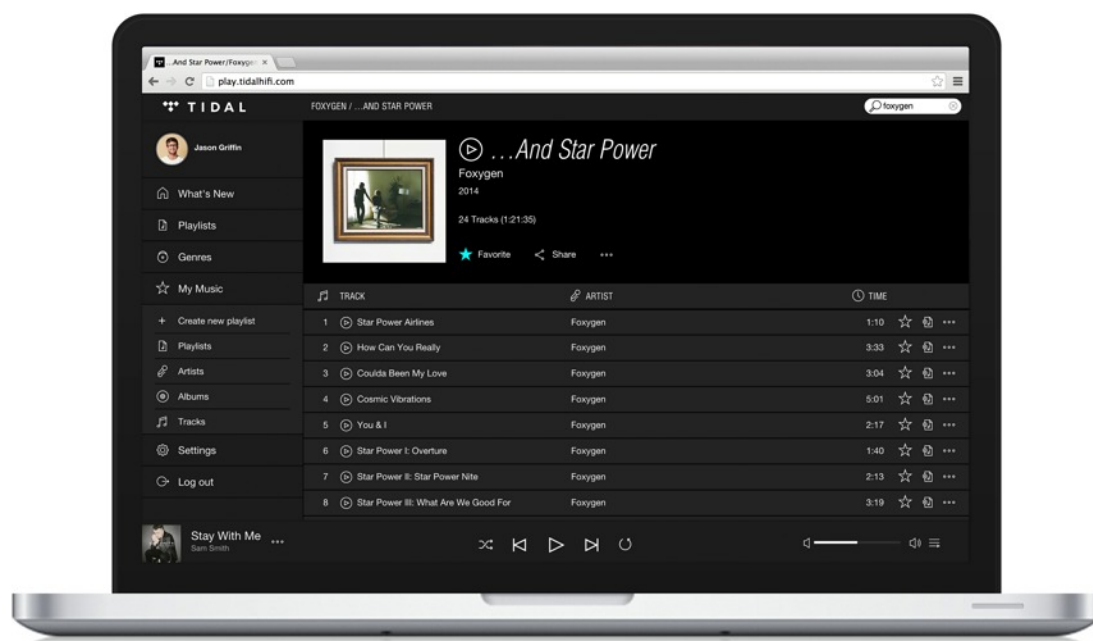
I flick to the genres section and select Dance...which seems to be mainly Calvin Harris and Avicii, and

then realise I will probably be more at home in the Electronica genre.

At first glance there doesn't seem to be that many options, even when I hit 'show all' on the album section, so I pick a Simian Mobile Disco album to start with.

The TIDAL interface seems pretty intuitive to use. It makes sense that if you click the title of the album that's playing, it comes up into the main screen to show you the full track listing...and that's exactly what it does....also scrolling down there are more suggested albums by the same artist, which I swear were not in the 'all albums' option that I started from!

There is a bit of a delay for a new track/album to start playing, but to be fair that's probably down to the 'oh so slow' internet in our rural neck of the woods (we have been promised fibre-optic broadband but I am not holding my breath!) I do also get





# Tidal Music Streaming Service

the odd break in playback.....again I am sure this is my internet connection as once the internet is behaving itself the breaks disappear.

The promised lossless, HiFi quality sound is just that. I'm listening at my desk using my laptop with a Chord Company USB cable to connect to my little ami Musik DAC/Headphone amp and Oppo PM1 headphones. The sound quality is as good, if not better than listening to Flacs from J River. Clean, clear and detailed, I feel like I am getting the most from my headphones. This is a really good start!

Although TIDAL splits the music into genres, I don't feel like this is specific enough. While not one for pigeonholing music too much, I feel it would be easier to find new music that might be my taste with sub genres too like House, Techno and Drum n Bass....Electronic covers a huge range of musical styles. I guess this would work for all the other genres too, maybe something for TIDAL to think about down the line.

I have a bit of a dabble with the TIDAL playlists (avoiding the Christmas ones!)...these are pre done for you so you can just pick what you fancy listening to and press play, a great feature to use while sitting at my desk working. Plus if a track comes on that I really like its easy to select it as a favourite or save to my own playlist which I can rearrange into the perfect track order later.

I recommend the Equatorial Beats playlist to liven up a rainy afternoon!

Discovering new music is probably where TIDAL is working best for me, browsing through the genres and listening to playlists brings you something new at the click of a mouse. I like the feature that if you search an artist it brings up what album their tracks are on, often compilations or mix albums, which is a great way to discover other music from similar artists that is either new or that you missed before. For example I found was Hardfloor's remix of House classic "Jack your body" from Steve "Silk" Hurley.....I had missed this remix when it was released!

Will it replace my CD collection or using ripped copies of them?

No, because although it is great for discovering new stuff, there isn't everything I want to have to hand to listen to on TIDAL yet, however it is excellent to have in complement to your own music collection, especially as the sound quality is so high.

**Discovering new music is probably where TIDAL is working best for me, browsing through the genres and listening to playlists brings you something new at the click of a mouse.**

I for one am looking forward to using TIDAL more and finding out all of its features.

*And finally Stuart Smith*

I'll not go into most of the features and whatnot of Tidal as John has already covered most of these.

I was pretty interested in hearing this new-fangled Tidal thing given the recent hype surrounding its release, but at the same time somewhat skeptical about how it would perform. However, set up is a doddle, the layout clear and simple to navigate... and it streams FLAC direct to my desktop.

In the last couple of weeks I've given it a fair old hammering and I like it a lot, but let's deal with a few issues that I personally encountered.

Searching for Chumbawamba's "Pictures Of Starving Children" and "Never Mind The Ballots" drew a blank. A search for Crass also drew a blank other than an albums called "Crass Moments In 20th Century Culture" by The Klone Orchestra which was pretty interesting and not a record I'd had the pleasure of hearing before and so whilst I was initially a tad disappointed, there was a silver lining to this particular grey cloud.

I wanted to test Tidal's content for the obscure given the distinct lack of a couple of bands I enjoy and so I searched for "Nurse With Wound" expecting to get similarly disappointing results. Wow, Nurse With Wound are pretty obscure, or so I thought and so I was pretty overwhelmed with the plethora of albums Tidal was able to offer. Now this is a band of whom I had a few vinyl albums back in the day before Inter-

# Tidal Music Streaming Service

net and so it was interesting to read the band's biog'...nice feature.

Also a nice feature is the Related Artist button which in this case brought up the likes of Skinny Puppy and Psychic TV. Like I say this is a nice and useful feature and it does open you up to bands you may not have heard of before that are relevant to your tastes, but I found myself jumping around from track to track and not really listening to whole albums. This is more a quirk of my personality I think than a problem with Tidal, but it does open a new way of listening to music that some will enjoy and others will not...it's certainly quite addictive. So I hit the Related Artists button yet again and up popped an old favourite LFO, hit it again and, hang on a minute...I "get" how Speedy J and Two Lone Swordsmen are related to LFO but NSYNC and Five...mmm.

The What's New feature is also pretty cool and you're offered a load of Playlists (I didn't explore these as I'm too old for that kind of thing but apparently they are all the rage with most folk) as well as a whole load (100 plus) of Recommended stuff under a separate tab. This feature is interesting and so I hit play on a record by The Hum called Hookworms. Yep, my kind of thing so top marks to Tidal for helping me discover a new band. I like this feature a lot!

The Top 20 tab is ok, and brings up pretty much the stuff you would expect, Pink Floyds last album, Annie Lennox and Ed Sheeran, but also some other less expected stuff like Flying Lotus

I added a few of my favourite bands to the My Music section of Tidal with one of these being Hawkwind, so on with "Live Chronicles" and one of my favourite tracks "Moonglum"...oh hang on a minute that's not Moonglum but an entirely different track. Somehow all the songs are out of kilter somehow – "Master Of The Universe" (side 1, track 12) plays "Sea King" (side 1, track 5), "Angels of Death" (side 1, Track 7) plays "Naration" (side 1, track 10)...I lost patience and moved on before finding "Moonglum" I'm afraid to say. Now this is a live album and here is another niggle as playback is not gapless. However, click on the Hawkwind biography and that's pretty good, detailed and well written, but then hitting the Related Artists button brings up just four bands, one of whom was Mike Oldfield. However, there are plenty of other Hawkwind albums to go at, so it's not all negative.

Ok, so there are some niggles with the content on some of the albums (perhaps I stumbled inadvertently across an album that was the exception rather than the rule) but what about the sound quality? Well, most of my working day is spent sat at my desk and so out of necessity this is where I do the majority of my listening. I've got a nice little system based around KEF X300A speakers fed directly from the USB on the computer and with Tidal set up to play FLAC 1411 (again a doddle to set up) there really is very little to complain about with regards the quality of sound I'm experiencing with Tidal...it's excellent. I found that having the volume on Tidal cranked up to the max and controlling the volume via the knob on the speakers' amp gave best results. There is a bit of delay when you first fire up a new album and I did experience the odd glitch/dropout in the playback, but these were few and far between and likely an issue with the frankly appalling Livebox router we have been lumbered with – given that this is lossless music being supplied wirelessly I was pretty impressed.

## Conclusion

From the perspective of someone who listens to music all day Tidal has proved to be something of a revelation and at just shy of twenty quid a month it represents a bit of a bargain. There is a catch with this however in that Linette and I both work from home and both listen to music independently at our desks and so to get the most out of Tidal we would have to have two subscriptions.

The Offline mode, videos and most of the editorial are pretty irrelevant to me given the way I listen to music, but for others they will, I'm sure, be a major selling point...though I did read a few of the biogs, I must confess.

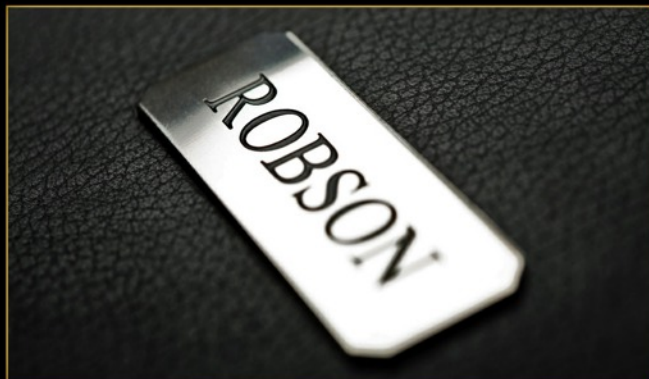
As always, the main consideration and question has to be "Would I pay for this service or not?" and the answer is a resounding YES...probably. The new music content is excellent and above all sound quality is excellent. Tidal isn't perfect (what is?), but for my needs and the way I listen to the majority of my music it's not that far off. Like John, I will find it difficult to change the way I listen having experienced Tidal and recommend you take the trial.

**No scores for this one but all three agree that despite the odd niggle it's definitely worthy of recommending.**

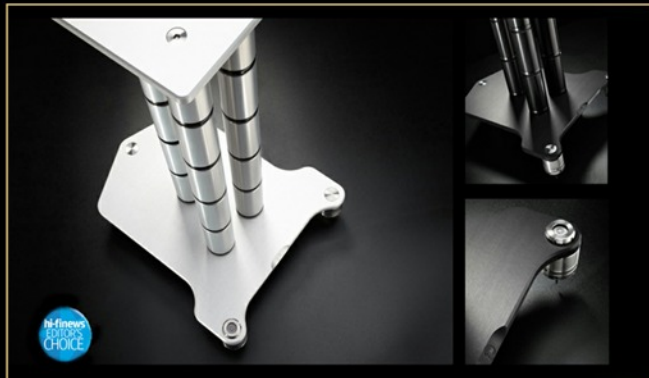


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# Graham Slee Majestic DAC

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



Talk about Graham Slee and you think of small phono and headphone amplifiers of excellent audio quality, if perhaps unadventurous looks. But, and many of you will know my BBC background, I remember spending many a lonely night working in Bush House sitting in front of one of the mixing desks he made whilst working as senior engineer at Audionics. In those days the BBC ushered quality and precision. Graham Slee has continued that zest for making the best since then, with his own projects under the label GSPAudio (Graham Slee Projects) with a particular emphasis on trying to get the finest possible designs using big discrete components into the small spaces. I remember all the worries he had in trying to get great audio after RoHS changed permissible chemical elements used in electrical components - including the ban on certain components and lead solder. Following that ban, despite no vicars dying due to the lead on their church roofs or Miss Scarlet dying from the lead piping in Cluedo, political correctness massacred a great deal of great audio designs. Slee frantically modified components in order to get the best possible sound whilst China could still import whatever chemical cocktails they wanted. Mr Slee never gave up trying to get a triangular peg into a square tube, and his modified electronics went as far as they possibly could to get that good sound. By the way, the idea of trying to fit a triangular peg into a square hole is something I will be returning to again later.

**The speed and detail of sound was further improved, though the lower frequencies are not over emphasised, as they are slightly from the analogue output.**

Since their inception in 1998, GSP Audio have continually worked on new ideas and new avenues to extend their portfolio, including improved versions of a same product and also completely new avenues such as a power amplifier, interconnect and speaker cabling, and the Bitzie and Majestic DAC, the latter which I am looking at here. At £1600 this is their most expensive and the most recent product, and largest, though at only 17.4cm x 5.7cm x 18.8cm, it

# Graham Slee Majestic DAC

is still anorexic. Packing in 3 coaxial and 3 optical digital inputs these both operate 16 and 24 bit and up to 192 kHz maximum on the coax and 96kHz Toslink optical (to be precise, frequencies allowed are 32 kHz, 44.1 kHz, 48 kHz, 88.2kHz, 96 kHz and 192 kHz). Optical input 1 can be 192kHz to special order. There is also a USB and an RCA analogue input to boot. More on these later. The unit uses the professional and highly respected Wolfson WM8804/WM8741 stereo chipset and all with a 140ps jitter, the same as on my Cambridge Audio 650C Azur CD player, which uses the *Wolfson* WM8740 chip. Outputs include balanced through TRS 1/4 inch jacks ideally to be connected to the balanced inputs of their Proprius monoblock power amplifiers, and a fixed-output line-level RCA connection (though this can be supplied variable level at special request). To ensure a smooth and detailed analogue sound the D-A converter is run below full scale to prevent signal clipping. It is also run in hardware mode so there is no microcontroller adding its own signature through power supply modulation or interference. Its mute function is deprecated to a manual front panel switch to remove another layer of complexity, though this does mean I have to press it to delete digital clicks every time I switch tracks or change input. The DAC uses a digital oversampling filter sending the Nyquist frequency to 364 kHz, thus allowing for a gentle roll-off and a more natural sounding analogue low pass filter. More about roll-offs later.

At first listening I set it to analogue input. Slee included an analogue input predominantly for phono, which makes me think this product would be more sellable (certainly at this price point) if it were simply a phono input, since his own phono-stage designs could easily be incorporated inside the box. For the review I connected a CD player, similarly spec'd Cambridge Audio 650C Azur. I then plugged in the separate power supply; there is no on-off button, typical of all Graham Slee products, and something I do feel a missing element especially with pulses making their way to the speaker cones. Slee suggests you leave it switched on all the time to keep components at their optimum, and so for that reason there is no switch. I used the designated Proprius mono blocks, again without on-off buttons, connected via Slee TRS stereo 1/4 inch jacks (being balanced output there are 3 connections, hence the stereo jack). I also used a stereo jack-to-XLR cable to allow direct connection to my balanced Krell KAV250a poweramp input. I was immediately impressed by the quality of sound attainable from my Cambridge Audio. Analogue output was by no means an afterthought in this preamplifier. There was full bandwidth of frequency, exceptional warmth in the lower frequencies and a very quiet noise floor. Through my LS5/9 speakers from similarly named Graham Audio, the class-AB Slee Proprius gave a rendition with aplomb, an old school rendition that is very easy to listen to and very musical at the same time. This is a good combination. The volume control is labelled in dB, which I have always wanted to see on an amplifier or preamplifier, but which is very rarely applied. At -30dB or



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9 o'clock, there was sufficient audio level even into the 25watt Proprius.

Once I switched to coaxial digital input things got even better. The speed and detail of sound was further improved, though the lower frequencies are not over emphasised, as they are slightly from the analogue output. The bass warmth from the analogue output was highly tempting, and very enjoyable. In comparison the digital was as clear as glass and open. This was not a complaint. Where the analogue was like Irish stew and dumplings the digital was just salad; much better for you but not quite so much fun! Once my ears got adjusted there was no going back. Unfortunately politics denied me to connect digital output from my SACD player. And similarly, whilst I could connect my Tivo box optical connection and get very musical audio from Radio 3 on channel 903 with bit rates of 192kbps (one of the best I have ever heard radio, I might add) and alternatively OTT compression on Classic FM on 922, HD audio at 256kbps wouldn't be able to work. It would have been nice to watch the Proms in HD and get decent audio as well. Never mind. There are no politics with analogue.

**For £1600 you might not get all mod cons like 24bit/192kHz USB, Bluetooth or wifi, and it may well not look as exciting as some at the same price or cheaper, but this DAC is not intended to be a Bugatti Veyron.**

For me to listen to my super dooper digi delights I would need to play the HD audio from my laptop. There is one problem with that. Most PCs don't have an SPDIF or optical output, relying instead on digital output forcing itself out of the USB socket. This is

where everything gets either confusing, or rather, mis-confused. Let me explain. The USB socket is not designed for audio. And also, the chip doing the D-A conversion on the laptop does not understand USB either. With an external D to A converter, all the digits for that audio will be sent out of the USB socket into the external DAC to be translated into analogue music. USB audio class 1 (UAC1) works at a slower speed than USB Audio Class 2 (UAC2). Bear in mind these are not related to whether your USB socket is rated version 1, 2 or the latest 3. UAC1 is standard on all Microsoft laptops, and its design limits its digital audio to 24bit/96kHz. OSX and Linux have a native mode USB audio class two driver (UAC2) so they can cope past 32bit/384kHz. Some, including Slee, believe that with native components and drivers digital audio exits PC laptops at only 24/48kHz maximum. For that reason Graham Slee uses;

“...plain-honest 48k adaptive isochronous, and the DAC section uses oversampling (8x) to give a very similar analogue result without all the faffing about”.

USB is converted to S/PDIF and reclocked by a Wolfson WM8804 transceiver which sends I2S to a Wolfson WM8741 balanced DAC chip. Therefore in the Slee the USB input quite literally converts the signal so it can be handled exactly the same as all the other S/PDIF and Toslink digital inputs.

There are so many discussions on the internet forums about what actually exits the USB, whether it be 24/48 or 24/96, that even I got more confused at the end than I was when I started. However, after many hours (this review has taken me longer than most), I realised that my Windows laptop played 24/96, and for those DACs playing 24/192 you can install a suitable driver on your PC (and which usually comes with the DAC itself) to convert any USB from UAC1 to UAC2. Today USB is the future of digital audio whether from your PC or mobile phone via a micro USB OTG (on the go) cable converter. SPDIF and Toslink limit you to a fixed CD or DVD Audio spinner, and in today's world of hard-disk sourcing these elder two are disappearing as quickly as DCC did. For Slee not to allow 24bit/96kHz is, I fear, a big mistake, whether or not he believes it is possible now. His belief that the limit from a PC is 48kHz is actually shared by many others. However, whatever the specification, with many new DACs appearing each month, limiting the product will not be helpful. The Cambridge Audio DACMagic100, for example,



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allows 24bit/96kHz without a driver from a UAC1 USB. And their minute £100 Dacmagic XS, the size of a matchbox, will even allow UAC2 if you install the supplied driver.

The best D to A device is a single box, because it will have the lowest amount of 'jitter'. This is caused when the master audio clock has timing errors from the information it receives. A well-designed one-box disc player places a fixed-frequency master audio clock right next to the D/A chip for the best possible performance. My 20 year old one-box Krell KPS20i CD player has an enviable jitter of 0psec and many new DACs have little more than that. The “adaptive” isochronous USB in the Majestic, means the clock in the D/A converter “adapts” to match the rate that the computer sends out audio packets. The Slee Majestic has a reasonable 140psec, exactly the same as that of the ageing Cambridge Audio CD player. In reality, jitter-induced timing errors create artefacts that audibly degrade the music signal.

USB files played through this DAC were extremely musical, with no apparent degradation of signal, nor losses in top end frequencies, and the 24 bit noise floor being used fairly well (theoretically there are 120dB, and this DAC read just under a 100dB). Rav-

**Classical, jazz and popular recordings are of equal musicality in terms of soundstage, speed, and pure openness and clarity.**

el Piano Concerto in G (Julius Katchen, with Istvan Kerytesz conducting the London Symphony Orchestra) was very controlled with the piano sounding very real indeed, something that really surprised me in view of the hardly exciting specification. Similarly, J.S.Bach Concerto for Four Harpsichords (Karl Ristenpart, Orchestra of the Sarre) was very precise with no lack of control or clipping. Slee's attempt to fit a triangular peg into a square hole was perhaps not in vein after all.



# Graham Slee Majestic DAC

**This DAC-come-preamp thingummy could handle almost anything I threw at it as long as the digits were no higher than 24bit/48kHz.**

For me to take full advantage of the Slee statistics I would need, however, to record my excellent audio onto DVD Audio and play via S/PDIF through the Slee. Boy, does that sound musical. Top frequencies are tight and well controlled, as are the lower frequencies through my Krell/Wilson Benesch Arc and Torus duet. Resolution, detail and dynamics are excellent and this unit gives out a commanding feeling of authority and control. Classical, jazz and popular recordings are of equal musicality in terms of sound-stage, speed, and pure openness and clarity. If you are happy with its limitations on paper, and no Bluetooth or wifi, then this machine is definitely something well worth listening to. Its technical limits are in some respects its ace card. Just like the Legato Link “curves” adopted on many Pioneer CD players/recorders to make CD almost human, and the fact that some of the oldest CD players actually sound more musical than later ones as they weren’t trying too hard to be too clever in the processing. Some folk might consider that conversion circuitry for frequencies us mere humans cannot hear (ie anything above 20,000Hz and therefore anything above the 24bit/48kHz maximum) will only add their own artefacts, such as intermodulation distortion, to infect the audio quality in the bits we humans can hear. However, I know that even a trumpet has some very quiet harmonics at 80,000Hz (see abstracts from authors such as James Boyk), and that even I can hear different frequency patterns from the same trumpet recording on a CD and on vinyl. The fact that the Slee makes grand pianos sound so amazingly lifelike makes me wonder what magic the Majestic is doing. It also made me wonder how many of those 24/192 downloads are actually that, rather than up-sampled CDs or from master reel to reel tapes that have a 30kHz roof? Even using the frequency curves

on some of my digital downloads show very little actually getting past 20Khz, which is of course no concern for the Majestic, since the DAC’s analogue output is limited to 11Hz-36kHz (-3dB) from Coax input and only 11Hz-20kHz (-3dB) from the USB. However, and I reiterate however, this DAC is one hell of a musical experience. It might sit miles behind others in terms of specification, but in terms of audio musicality it hits the same spot as do many of their other products, and many preamplifiers of considerably more cost. Plugged into the Proprius mono-blocks, it makes listening to music very enjoyable. And plugged into the Krell KAV25a Wilson Benesch Arc/Torus combo ‘Walking On The Moon’ by the Yuri Honing trio eschewed double bass authority and percussion with dynamics and bite. All frequencies were in control and fast. Wynton Marsalis ‘New Orleans Bump’ was more open and fun than I have heard it in a long time. Even the analogue input from the Cambridge Audio CD player gave a very respectable rendition. Dee Bridgewater was only very slightly not in control in her loudest yells in Cotton Tail, but the bass line was full and I was in the audience. No, I was in with the musicians. I was that close to the details. This DAC-come-preamp thingummy could handle almost anything I threw at it as long as the digits were no higher than 24bit/48kHz. Whether you can live with this disability on paper is up to you, but if you want to hear pure musicality then this is a surprisingly good competitor. In terms of audio sound quality this DAC was one of the most enjoyable for ages.

**Conclusion.** For £1600 you might not get all mod cons like 24bit/192kHz USB, Bluetooth or wifi, and it may well not look as exciting as some at the same price or cheaper, but this DAC is not intended to be a Bugatti Veyron. This is a Rolls or Bentley with real wood veneer not carbon fibre, and super soft suspension, not spine shattering hardness. This product oozes quality and musicality with a useful analogue input thrown in. Yes, there are cheaper DACs out there, but this one is musical where many out there might just be telling you fibs.

**Janine Elliott**

**Sound quality 8.45**

**Build quality 8.3**

**Value for money 8.2 (in terms of sound quality/£)**

**Total 8.28**



# " THE ULTIMATE REAL WORLD TONEARM"

HI FI WORLD MAY 2009

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6 Moons Awards



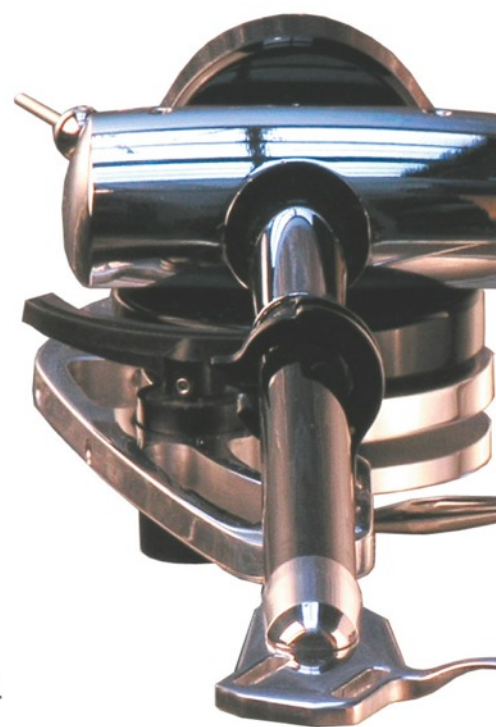
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# Baby Reference Preamplifier by Music First

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



Having spent a lot of hours and money trying out and buying active pre-amps from USA, Britain and Germany over the years, I came to the conclusion that all they did was simply add their own imperfections and idiosyncrasies. I could play a track of music and instantly know from listening *what* pre-amp it passed through. As a sound engineer, a professional musician, composer and a woman, my ears hopefully tick all the right boxes for being reliable at judging what sounds accurate, real and musical, so listening to a passive preamplifier, such as the Baby Reference Pre-Amplifier from Music First Audio seemed a good idea. Indeed, more and more passive preamplifiers are coming on to the market each week, as we begin to realise that all we actually need between a line-level source and power amplifier is some kind of volume control, rather than noise or colouration generated with electronics. Over the last thirty years or so we have realised that for vinyl sources a dedicated amplifier and equalisation unit is far preferable than integrated phono circuitry in a preamplifier. A passive preamplifier is therefore becoming more and more popular.

Whilst some cheap passive preamplifiers simply have a dual-potentiometer and input switches to do

**If you have over £5000 to spend on a preamp, and aren't flustered by not having lights and something to plug in to the mains, you would do very well to give this little Baby a listening.**

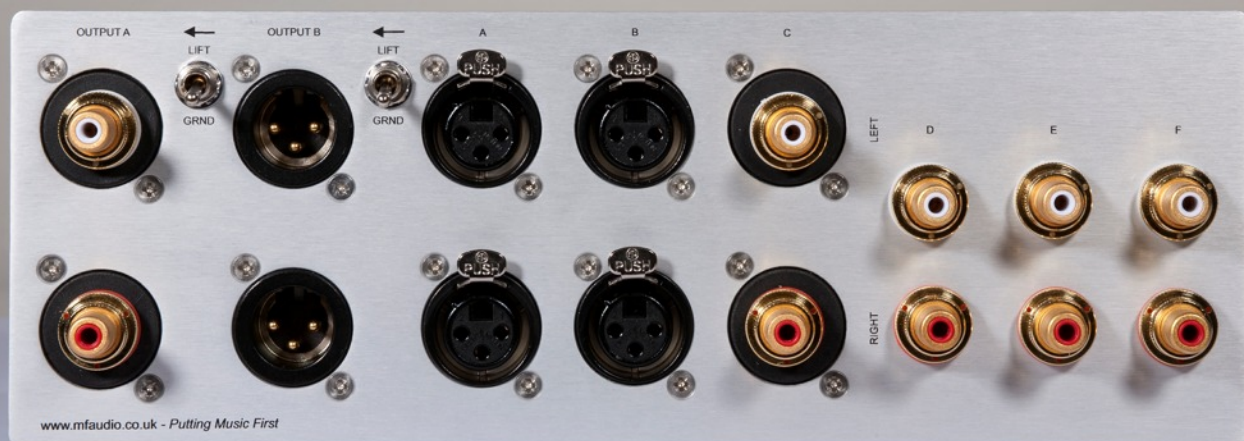
that job (I remember the one I built up in my bedroom when I was very young), even that will add its own sound-print to the original sound, changing impedance with frequency and failing badly in areas such as crosstalk and accuracy between left and right legs. Indeed, a dual-gang potentiometer to control both left and right channels can have tolerance levels

# Baby Reference Preamplifier by Music First

as bad as 20% between the two. To reduce this, early passive volume controls were simply a series of discrete resistors. I remember my early days at the BBC World Service using their home-grown rotary Bakelite volume controls on the 'Type B' desks, made of a series of resistors out-putting in 2dB steps, meaning you could hear "clicks" as you played a 1KHz tone signal and turned the knob, which seemed to entertain a few of the Studio Managers, I recall. Whereas the idea of using a series of resistors improved the accuracy, it was still not ideal. Their design would create impedance mismatches and, depending on the setting and cable load, frequency response irregularities. Whilst many hi-fi fans will like the tinted glass sound, puritans like myself want nothing added. And where some passive preamplifiers have actually "taken away" from the source, in terms of frequency response or speed, there are a few passives out there that take, nor add, nought. Townshend Audio and Music First Audio are two such examples. In the Auto Transformer system the wires are tapped at different sections of its winding and sent to a series of switches – the rotary volume control. The preamplifier is basically just a series of multi-tapped attenuation transformers; as each switch is engaged, the voltage level and output impedance

**Listening to music there was a new standard of resolution and timbre, making it easier to distinguish individual sounds and their placement within the soundstage**

changes and, unlike a potentiometer there is a greater amount of the incoming voltage that makes its way through without being lost. Therefore, the lower the switching volume control, the *lower* the impedance, and so this passive preamp particularly works well at low level, whereas many active preamps need to be driven hard to get a good sound, and probably complaints from the neighbours. Channel crosstalk is obviously excellent, since the two channels never come



# Baby Reference Preamplifier by Music First

**Being human we tend to think better of spending several thousands of pounds on a complex electronic preamplifier with buttons and lights rather than simply buying a box of wire.**

into contact with each other. Being a transformer, it doesn't suffer the impedance matching issues that can sometimes happen, especially if you run long cable lengths. Indeed, I ran different length cables from the preamp, and didn't notice any degradation. It also worked just as well into powered speakers I tried. Finally, being a form of isolator, any RFA that came with the source will not make its way passed this device, much like the heavy Isolation Transformers I carried about at the BBC to protect the mains from dirty guest musical instruments so there is no need for mains conditioners, and of course no mains cable. As a transformer there is consistent impedance across all frequencies. What you put in is what you get out!

Many think the use of passive preamplifiers will mean not enough gain to the speakers, but as we progress further with modern-day sources, especially digital to analogue converters, the levels are much higher now than they were 20 years ago, and consequently there is actually no longer any need for any gain in sound level in a pre-amplifier. Being human we tend to think better of spending several thousands

of pounds on a complex electronic preamplifier with buttons and lights rather than simply buying a box of wire. Hand building a passive preamplifier actually takes far longer than soldering components onto a circuit board, and wire is not cheap!

In my own set-up I have gone the passive route, and have never ever regretted it. Having bought the original MFA Classic preamp the prospect of listening to the Baby Reference was an opportunity I didn't want to miss. Playing a wide range of sources and an equally extensive choice of music types took my music to an altogether new level, and something I would never have believed had I not auditioned it. What I had already heard as crystal clear reproduction got even clearer and with frequency extension. Since there is no active circuitry there is little to limit frequency response, so 10-100,000Hz is easily possible, and therefore nothing is quoted on the website. Similarly, there is no noise created in the unit, which should make your power amp sound better than you thought it ever could. At 88mm x 250mm x 260mm, it is a tad wider and deeper than the Classic, but still very compact, especially considering the 6 inputs and two outputs at the back made of a mixture of XLR and RCA connections. Indeed, you can contact Mr Billington at Music First Audio and choose the permutations you so desire. My model had 3 balanced XLR and 3 RCA inputs and both XLR and RCA outputs, all using high quality gold plated connectors. And, because the unit is basically a transformer, it means you can connect an unbalanced source and get a true balanced output signal from the XLR. Listening to music there was a new standard of resolution and timbre, making it easier to distinguish individual sounds and their placement within the soundstage. I was now wearing virtual 3D glasses for my ears! Whilst I have heard some of MFA's competition, their Baby Reference gives a tighter and quicker top end, perhaps with a slight deficit in the very lower frequencies compared with, say, Townshend Audio's Allegri Autotransformer passive preamplifier. However, there is nothing missing. You can still hear the sounds of lorries driving past the cellos outside of the Sofiensaal concert hall in Vienna in the recording there of Mars from 'Holst Planet Suite', Karajan, Decca. The cymbals in 'Live: A Fortnight In France', Patricia Barber, is equally realistic and stimulating. The album 'Aerial', by Kate Bush, essentially a multi-layered work recorded by her in her own studio, complete with occasional har-



# Baby Reference Preamplifier by Music First

**Indeed, the latter sounded like I had a 9 foot Steinway in the room, rather than an upright on steroids (as with many an active pre-amp), and I was left compelled to listen to the musicians in my room.**

monic distortion and level mismatches, can be easily dissected but still sound very musical with the Baby Reference. All its eccentricities come to life with the Baby Reference, including the wide dynamic range and despite the didgeridoo and voice of Rolf Harris. Whilst both these models use copper wire, they sound surprisingly different. The Townshend uses the Fractal (EDCT) copper wire with 80% nickel mu-metal laminations for ultimate performance, and this MFA Baby uses the TX102 MkIV in its 'Nickel Brick' guise with a nickel Permalloy core, with transformers 25% bigger than that used in the Classic Preamplifier, and bigger than in the Townshend, not that size matters here. Whilst so much can be assumed to be similar both manufacturers keep their methodology tight-lipped, and these machines are surprisingly different in sound. If you are unsure which to buy, listening sessions of both is advised, and also do bear in mind inputs and outputs as well as price difference when choosing. The Mk IV is a complete revision of the excellent original TX102. The transformers are a labyrinth of layers of winding wire and paper, resulting in a very complex construction making it time consuming to build. As with the

Classic Preamplifier, it features twenty three separate 'taps' for a total of twenty four (including mute) discreet volume steps. The extra work in all this hand wiring shows in the sound in the output.

The Townshend and MFA are not here for comparison (that would be a first); both sound amazing and different. Compared with other passive and active preamplifiers these, at time of print, are the two best I have ever heard. What makes me so excited about the Baby is the fact it is so much better than the Classic, which was already my choice at home, and comes with balanced ins and outs, something missing in the Allegri. I must stress, however, that there is a vast price difference between the Townshend and MFA. With the £5,000 +VAT Baby Reference I now could experience greater dynamic range and a bass to die for; not OTT but uncluttered and incredibly fast. Put up against my Audio Research, Krell and Manley preamplifiers there was just no competition. This was sweet music to my ears. Brass had bite, clarinets had clarity and piano had power. Indeed, the latter sounded like I had a 9 foot Steinway in the room, rather than an upright on steroids (as with many an active pre-amp), and I was left compelled to listen to the musicians in my room. All the time, every day! The speed of sound and sheer clarity of audio was what made this, for me, the king of the passive preamplifiers. Coupled with my meaty Krell poweramp, and Townshend Rock 7/Rega/Kontrupunkt b/Manley Steelhead source, I was in another world.

Finally, what makes all this even more exciting is the choice of 4 colours (black, blue, silver, red). I am a woman, after all!

**Conclusion** If you have over £5000 to spend on a preamp, and aren't flustered by not having lights and something to plug in to the mains, you would do very well to give this little Baby a listening. For me this is the King of preamps and certainly lives up to its name Baby Reference.

**Janine Elliott**

**Build quality 8.5**

**Sound quality 9.0**

**Value for money 8.4**

**Total 8.63\***

**\*The Baby Reference Preamplifier by Music First Audio will now go to a second reviewer to see if it will achieve Outstanding Product Award.**

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# JIB - 'Digital Glass' Toslink Cable



**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**

**T**oshiba originally created TOSLINK to connect their CD players to the receivers they manufactured, for PCM audio streams.

The software layer was based on the broadcast audio standard AES3 and was adapted as the "Sony Philips Digital Interconnect Format" (S/PDIF) which varies from AES3 only in voltage level.

TOSLINK was soon adopted by manufacturers of most CD players. Early TOSLINK systems used the raw PCM data from the CD player; the SPDIF standard has now become nearly universal for audio streams. It can often be found on DVD players and some game consoles to connect the digital audio stream to Dolby Digital/DTS decoders.

The name is a registered trademark of Toshiba, created from *TOSHiba-LINK*. Variations of the name, such as *TOSlink*, *TosLink*, and *Tos-link*, are also seen, while the official generic name for the standard is *ELIAJ optical*.

Although TOSLINK does not suffer from electrical problems such as ground loops or RF interference its application still has its limits. A typical plastic core cable will only comfortably transmit signals across distances of up to 10-15m without losses but a glass fibre core will transmit signals over far greater distances without damage to the signals integrity and is the material of choice for Telecom companies. Both applications are fragile and a kink or sharp bend in the cable will damage its internal fibres and render the cable unusable.

**Dynamically with instruments and electronic music the Digital Glass has a fullness of impact, a delicacy of flow and a responsiveness that adds an organic texture which I have simply not heard another optical cable achieve before.**

The JIB 'Digital Glass' from their 'First Line' range of cables is just that, I have no specifics on the internal construction of the cable but we can assume that its glass transmission cores are centralised in a bundle of supporting cores which are all coated in acrylate, aiding the cables flexibility yet never interfering with the refraction of the light.

Outer jacket is thick and overall gauge looks to be a good 6-8 gauge with a fantastic eye catching finish which set off by the rhodium and gold connectors makes a serious statement for an optical digital cable.



# JIB - 'Digital Glass' Toslink Cable

## The Sound

Playing Fleetwood Mac's 'Rumours' album through the Digital Glass was a revelation in new found inner information and naturalness compared to my favourite plastic optical cable. Strings rang free of the percussion of other instruments holding foreground positions alongside the vocalist with the drums a good six feet or so to the off side rear. Whilst timbre was a stand-out point, upper-end clarity was as strong a factor, seeming more effortless in presentation, relaxed, efficient and proud.

Dominic, another Hifi Pig review team member, brought around his ultra-rare Sting 'Live from the Royal Albert Hall'. I could pick so many aspects of this album which excited me showing how very different listening to Sting Live is in comparison to a studio produced album and I really gained a new respect for the artist.

Many live albums can be imploded with hash from the surrounding crowds interaction with the venues acoustics. There is a little of this here, but the recording is strong none-the-less. What I admired with JIB's portrait of the album was how well defined and dealt with each portion of the sound was displayed.

For instance, whilst Sting was giving small solos and the crowds ambient levels would flutter, there was never any crosstalk masking the higher notes and adding a grain to the sound, there was a hash of some sort but this was reflective of the crowd and remained specific rather than inflicting on the band.

Dynamically with instruments and electronic music the Digital Glass has a fullness of impact, a delicacy of flow and a responsiveness that adds an organic texture which I have simply not heard another optical cable achieve before. I have experience with one Glass optical cable (and a very well constructed one at that) but I would imagine as it is a great number of years old its implementation is not as up to date as the JIB and the lack of its overall size in comparison could well suggest that structurally and mechanically the JIB is superior.

Although the Digital Glass from JIB Germany is a bit of an Anaconda in a goldfish bowl its looks can be deceptive. The beautiful tones of Loreena McKennit conveyed a delicacy that was clean, incredibly articulate, sibilant free and natural in reflective tone to the artist. And the current pop favourite Ed Sheer-

an reflected this approach from the tonal balance of the cable from a male perspective.

Worth mentioning again is how impressed with the cables ability to handle separation, whether it was between instruments, depth of the field or width and height perspectives in the room, there never feels like there is a void in the sound and its coherence is great but there are pockets of blackness and areas of air that paint an extraordinarily good picture of the performance.

## Conclusion

It's no doubt obvious from this experience with a glass based fibre optic cable that the implementation is of a considerably higher standard than plastic based cables, although there will be exceptions to the rule. I'm sure my favourite plastic fibre based cable will be better than a poorly constructed glass version. So it's not just about the technology it's about the attention to the implementation.

JIB have no doubt constructed this cable using extremely highly polished Quartz glass and have adopted the very best of techniques to ensure that its implementation, light transfer stability and mechanical precision is nothing short of the best they could achieve and with its final fit and finish the Digital Glass exudes this.

I have always been more of a fan of Coaxial or AES/EBU over optical, although dependant on the implementation of the equipment one can never be 100% sure which digital interface will sound better.

JIB bridges the gap for me, offering a cable which is a true contender with electrical SPDIF based cables making the decision no longer as simple as I thought it once was. I'm extremely impressed with this cable and can highly recommend it over any plastic fibre option.

**Dan Worth**

**Build Quality - 8.5/10**

**Sound Quality - 8.4/10**

**Value For Money - 8.5/10**

**Overall - 8.46/10**

**Price at time of review - €79 for 2m length**

**Recommended for fantastic value for money, exceptional sound quality over plastic fibre cables costing similar prices and great fit and finish.**

## Audiomica Erys Excellence Interconnect and CELES Excellence Loudspeaker Cables



**I would have them just for that treble and midrange quality alone and teach myself some disciplined restraint with the volume control.**

Anyone who thinks reviewing Hi-Fi components is an easy job, let me persuade you otherwise. Firstly. You have to entirely switch off all your own personal preferences and be neutral minded to begin with, lest preconception and bias sets in – no easy task for sure. Secondly, all the emotions and gut feelings have to be well locked away and for you to remain detached and dispassionate. Part of the review process is also to study what the manufacturer has to say about their product, usually swathed in plenty of Marketing wrapping and dare I say it, pseudo-scientific babble as well and also disentangling their emotions and passions which may be included, from pure fact. It pays to find out how long they have been in business and what their design criteria aims at for the reviewer to weave into the resulting review. I have seen enough new ways to slice bread to make it the best ever and washing powder that washes whiter than white, to last me a lifetime so thankfully I am immune to all that. The purpose of writing this seemingly useless paragraph is to tell you that there are some components you evaluate that throws it all straight out of the window and you think to yourself “Oh, what the heck” and to enjoy what you hear on a personal level and set aside the review until later. Other times you can tear your hair out when the partnering components are simply not gelling together and this review is one of those,

needing different amplifiers with different qualities to come to a conclusion, plus a heady cocktail of cable changes to serve a particular purpose. Intrigued? Read on . . . . .

And so we get back into dispassionate mode and study what the Audiomica Laboratories Erys Excellence interconnect and Celes Excellence speaker cables have to offer.

Audiomica hail from Poland and are one of the growing band of cable makers that are moving away from the familiar standard co-axial type cable construction and really looking into what makes a cable tick. They say a lot of research and development has gone into their cable designs and to their credit, they do provide plenty of somewhat variable documentation to support their claims for all of their cables, which is quite an extensive range I believe. You either accept or reject what they say of course. Personally, it bothers me not.

### **Erys Interconnect**

#### **Construction**

This interconnect lies mid-range at number five in a series of eight in the Audiomica interconnects lineup and this particular cable sports a DFSS “pod” situated along the cable's length, which I believe is an ex-

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tra cost option above the 'standard' Erys cable. It is deemed by Audiomica as one of the "Excellence" series which shares the same bright red outer sheath colour as the "Red" series (Yes, it also confused me too). Be aware too that Audiomica constantly refine and improve their product ranges, which did lead to some misunderstanding over which cables I was actually reviewing, as they had incorporated one or two changes to the review sample.

Audiomica say the DFSS pod contains filtration components designed to address distortion with what I understand to be ferro-magnets and spacers placed for accurate gap and alignment, which they term as "Double Filtering Signal System". What that means to you and me is neither here nor there, provided it delivers the sound we expect from it and for the more curious amongst us to pay a visit to Audiomica's website which should provide you with the technical information, although the translation from Polish to English is quite challenging to assimilate.

Outwardly, we see a smart bright red outer woven sheath, the DFSS pod situated some 30cm from one end of the cable and silver locking RCA phono plugs all round. Conductor material is said to be pure copper with a copper screen. None of the WBT locking RCA connectors have a polarity marking, so connecting up is a bit more considered when doing the "over rack pike dive" hunched over to connect it all up in a poor light. Even a quarter inch piece of red heat shrink band at each end of one cable in the pair would cost pennies and make connecting up less of a blind fumble. The cable supplied for review at 1.5 metres long has a price tag of €958.00 and that puts it squarely into a fiercely competitive territory within the circa £1,000 bracket of the interconnect market.

### **CELES Excellence Loudspeaker Cable**

#### **Construction**

Cloaked in the same bright red outer sheath as its stable mate the Erys interconnect, it lacks any "pod" in its construction and is said to be multi-stranded copper of 99.99999% purity. The main body of the cable is some 18mm in diameter bifurcated into two 'tails' of around 20cm in length, the junction masked by black heat shrink with the Audiomica Laboratory name printed on it. Silver (plated?) "Z" banana plugs were fitted to the review sample which do an admirable job of gripping the sockets. Reassuringly, each of the tails is coloured red and black with the correct polarity for installation, unlike the Erys in-

**My first impression of the Erys and Celes paired sound was generally very good indeed, with fast crisp dynamics, excellent separation, a terrific sound stage with plenty of depth and height**

terconnect which isn't marked for polarity. Priced at €980.00 for the 2.5 metre pair supplied for review.

#### **Sound Quality**

My first report will be the Erys Excellence interconnect paired with the Celes Excellence speaker cable and then partnered with another brand of speaker cable. This will hopefully determine what the Erys's performance is for those that are looking to purchase the interconnect on its own, or conversely, for those interested in the performance of the Celes speaker cable alone, so other interconnects will be substituted into the chain.

#### **The ERYs and CELES Pairing Sound**

My first impression of the Erys and Celes paired sound was generally very good indeed, with fast crisp dynamics, excellent separation, a terrific sound stage with plenty of depth and height. Clean concise midrange and a powerful bass also greeted me as well, so all green lights are on so far. When it came to the treble, this presented a paradox; it was very much clean, crisp and highly accurate, but recessed somewhat. Cymbals sounded further back in the mix than I was accustomed to, seemingly slightly out of balance. At the time they were connected to an amplifier that had been loaned to me which I was not wholly familiar with, so back into the system went my resident amplifier, which of course I know intimately.

Now, the sound was full of energy and giving me a 'big' sound at normal listening levels. Explain yourself Dom. Yes I will. The term 'big' here means that the sound rose from a zero baseline of silence to a perceived amplitude in excess of what I would normally expect at a given volume setting, which sug-

## **Audiomica ERYs Excellence Interconnect and CELES Excellence Loudspeaker Cables**

gests a higher dynamic headroom. How these cables accomplished that is beyond my understanding or even speculation, but hear it I did and did cause a bit of an upset during my evaluation. The treble too kept accurate track with the bass and midrange now and the recessed nature of that frequency band was now in perfect alignment, placed equally within the total sound landscape so I no longer had to listen out for it. I was enjoying this sound so immensely, I almost forget to put my dispassionate reviewer's hat back on again. Bass was thunderous and weighty, yet still under control. Mid-band, particularly vocals, had a silky richness with crisp inflections that enhanced rather than detracted from the performance and that TREBLE, oh yes, that treble was the icing on the cake. I have not heard such exquisite treble for a very long time and with such clarity and precision too. No splash, no fizz, no tizz, no nasty artefacts, so rich in textures and palpability, that married very well with the mid-band seamlessly too, so I will say it again, it is accurate almost down to atomic clock level. I think I am in love. Stop it Dom.

So to translate these observed sonic snippets into some music some of you might be familiar with, I put Supertramp's "Crisis, What Crisis?" in the CD drawer and pressed play to hear my favourite track on the album, 'Lady'. This track has raw edges to it that comes straight at you in a direct way, which was not unexpected. However, when the music got somewhat hectic with the volume turned up, some of the finer details got a bit lost, yet everything held together fairly well. The vocals sounded like they were recorded elsewhere like in a cavern, there is so much echo and reverberation added, but they still sounded yards deep throughout the entire track, while bass and drums are recorded to the foreground and form the underpinning of the track. Kick drum was solid and tangible almost, cymbals are represented by hi-hat beats which never vanished into the mix even when the band was playing at frenetic levels. The last one third of the track is comprised of the bass guitar in a 1 – 3 repetition, the hi-hat beat, clicking of fingers and simple vocals. Delightfully simple, but not exactly challenging either, so I suppose it is part of that track's charm. Track 8 is another favourite on this album called "Just a Normal Day". A slower pace perhaps, a touch on the melancholy side as well, but the track has piano, saxophone, violins and a haunting vocal that either touches your emotions or leaves you rather cold, depending on how well it all

hangs together, which it did with the Erys and Celes pairing.

Next into the CD drawer went Fleetwood Mac's live album "The Dance". Track one "The Chain" starts off with solo kick drum and various other percussion instruments in the background. This kick drum beat set the floorboards off in my listening room and could feel it with my feet the same time as I was listening through the speakers, nor did it diminish during the entire track and remained consistent. With a live album of course we also get to hear the audience clapping, cheering and whistling and that is quite a challenge to recreate accurately without sounding like paper tissue being torn and crumpled up. Clapping in particular can all too often be tainted with a "shoosing" sound, but not so with the Audiomica cables it wasn't, each individual hand clap of what seemed like hundreds and more all around you was eerily recreated with realism. Track three on the album called "Everywhere" has a pounding kick drum and Maracas playing throughout the track so I could follow both with ease, whereas there have been many cables I have heard that simply couldn't accomplish this. However, that slight muddling manifested itself once more at high volumes and I was starting to become perturbed by this, as I half expected it with the Supertramp recording with its raw energy but not with Fleetwood Mac's recording which I know so well. Puzzlement has set in now.

So, on to the next step and see if there is a star performer out of the two, or are they the inseparable match?

### **Sound Quality – ERYs Interconnect Alone**

I then paired the Erys interconnect with a pure silver speaker cable and straight back to the Fleetwood Mac album. Being constructed of silver rather than the copper of the Celes, I was expecting a different 'flavour' of sound from the silver speaker cable. The kick drum now had a small measure of additional solidity, plus a modicum of extra weight to it, but not to a large degree and just didn't sound right with a darkened midband. Treble though acquired a misty veiled sensation to it, not as crisp and realistic as I had with the Celes speaker cable in situ.

In for a penny, in for a pound they say, so a real left field choice now with the TQ Blue speaker cable, simply because it was there available to hand rather than digging about in the cable cupboard, so not really a conscious choice by any means. Seems the

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Erys interconnect won't jump into bed with just anybody. Bass was not as solid, it was ponderous and loose by comparison, midrange had become a bit vague and yet the treble had plenty of sparkle and vitality although not with the same accuracy and fidelity as with the Erys/Celes pairing.

### **Sound Quality – CELES Excellence Alone**

I tried a SLIC Innovations Eclipse C interconnect with the Celes Excellence speaker cable and that fared much better with a close match to the Erys in overall sound. Good solid bass, clean mid ranges and a whisker away from the Erys's treble. It might as well have been a mile to be honest. Still heartbroken. Hold on a minute, where has the muddling at high volumes with the same setting gone to? Aha, time to investigate further and found that my resident amplifier and the Erys interconnect were having a bit of a synergy clash going on, so at least that particular mystery was solved. I installed another amplifier and there was no muddling whatsoever from then onwards.

I then paired the Celes Excellence speaker cable with the Epiphany Acoustics Atratus 3 interconnects (Recently reviewed in Hifi Pig) to see if love could blossom between these two. Nope. Biggest loss was bass power and dynamics, but midrange and treble stood up well, although where has the object of my desire gone – THAT treble? Treble was crisp and clear, but that stunning corporeal touchable realism was not there as it was with the Erys interconnect.

At that point I was coming to the realisation that it was probably futile to proceed any further along that particular avenue, because it seemed that just like Laurel and Hardy or Morecambe and Wise, the Audiomica pairing were a really great act together and no true solo performers in their own right without the other.

### **Conclusion**

The things us reviewers do for our craft and your enlightenment dear reader. After a lot of back breaking dives leaning over the rack and repeatedly plugging and unplugging cables and amplifiers, I am shattered. Still, I hope that you are forming your own opinions about how the Audiomica Laboratory cables sound from my writings and perform together superbly as a duo.

So, to sum up then, the pair produced a powerful and solid bass with articulation and resolution aplenty, a

liquid transparent midrange that had clarity and sophisticated enunciation, natural and detailed, not forgetting the exquisite treble qualities that got me wanting it's babies, it was that good.

To follow on from that, I don't really know how much seriousness I should attach to the 'loudness' in sound I was hearing with the review pairing at high volume levels – and I mean really high. I recall that these cables produced a high dynamic headroom right from the start, which no other cable partnerships did, so was it a case of input overload somewhere in my system? Probably. Maybe nobody else is as crazy as I am in winding the volume control that far round? Certainly! As it turned out, it was my amplifier which wasn't gelling well with the Erys interconnects, as another two amplifiers I used were just fine. It is rather unusual for my resident amplifier to behave this way, but I will dust off the usual faithful get-out clause reviewers use and say that an audition will determine the outcomes for your own personal circumstances, as I would be very loathe to unfairly blight these cables from my time with them, because I think their performance together overall is very, very good indeed, so I will give my recommendation to them.

I would have them just for that treble and midrange quality alone and teach myself some disciplined restraint with the volume control. Some hope. There, I've said it and the pleading note addressed to Santa Claus is winging it's way to him as I write this.

**Dominic Marsh**

**Build quality: 7.9/10**

**Sound quality: 9/10**

**Value for money: 8.5/10**

**Overall: 8.4/10**

**Note: Scored as a pair.**

**Recommended for: Sounds best as the pairing as described above, in a system capable of tonal accuracy. Audition is advised.**

### **Prices**

**Erys 0,5m - €730**

**Erys 1m - €828**

**Erys 1,5m - €958**

**Celes 2,5m - €980**

**Celes 3m - €1198**

**Celes 4,5m - €1415**



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## ALL REVIEWS

# Album Reviews

## Pink Floyd - The Endless River

Parlophone and Warner Bros

**W**ell, Pink Floyd's *The Endless River* has certainly been a long time coming... in fact it's some twenty years since we were treated to a studio album from the Floyd, the last was 1994's *Division Bell*. It's no surprise then that this record was eagerly anticipated by the band's legion of followers. This copy comes from HIRESAUDIO on Parlophone and Warner Bros as a FLAC file, but there are standard CD, double vinyl and deluxe box sets available.



**Is this album going to set teens who have barely heard of the Floyd rushing out to delve into the band's back catalogue ...**

2008 but this record is made from concepts and recordings made during the making of *Division Bell* and can be taken as very much a tribute to Wright... and he is indeed there on the record. *The Endless River* has taken two years of adding new parts and rerecording others and can be described as an ambient record with just one track (the final track) having a proper lyric...but still it is very much a Pink Floyd record – listen to it and it could be no other band.

Production duties, are taken up by

Gilmour, Youth, Andy Jackson and Phil Manzanera and the album was completed in Gilmour's studios the *Astoria* and Medina Studios in Hove (UK). It is widely accepted that there will be no further releases from Pink Floyd after this.

There are four sides to *The Endless River* and on the whole it's a damned fine record that should have Floyd fans well pleased. It opens with *Things Left Unsaid*, a sprawling tune of E Bowed guitar and long

lush synthesizer pads. It's an eminently majestic opening to my mind, setting the tone for the record to come and it is certainly reminiscent of past Floyd. The next track, *It's What We Do* has elements of past Floyd too reminding me very much of *Shine On You Crazy Diamond*. You get the picture I'm sure...

*The Endless River* is made up of four quite distinct suites split into parts that are segued together pretty flawlessly. Side two has a slightly more upbeat edge with drummer Nick Mason getting more of a look in and this is something that I enjoyed a great deal. Side two's opening *Sum* has Mason pounding the toms in such a way to bring back memories of the Pompeii video...if you don't know it then it's a must see!

Side three is made up from a series of short passages with none other than the last track of the side lasting more than a couple of minutes... but you'd never really know it and it all gels together pretty seamlessly. This side is more reminiscent of the "more recent" Floyd albums.

Look, I don't live in a bubble and I know that this record has been slated elsewhere in the press with *The Independent's* Andy Gill saying "...without the sparking creativity of a Syd or Roger, all that's left is ghastly faux-psychedelic dinner-party muzak." But I think that this is missing the point a bit. Is this album going to set teens who have barely heard of the Floyd rushing out to delve into the band's back catalogue ...well no it's not, but as a piece of work it's going to appeal to current fans starved of new output from the band. Personally I love it and heartily recommend it to Hifi Pig readers as a piece that is certainly nostalgic in its make up (how could it be anything else?), but not without considerable merit as a coherent piece. Is it a classic...again, no not really, but it will get a good deal of play here I reckon. Yes there are borrowed elements from previous records but also there is genuine novel material.

**T**he *Endless River* closes with the aforementioned vocal track *Louder Than Words* and it's a fitting end I think. It opens with the line "We bitch and we fight, dis each other on sight" clearly commenting on the all too public and acrimonious falling out with Roger Waters and it has a somewhat consolatory tone to it. Will there be another album...I doubt it very much, but I for one am glad there is this one to add to the virtual record shelf.



# Album Reviews

## Caroll Vanwelden - Shakespeare Sonnets 2 Jazznarts

**C**aroll Vanwelden is a Belgian singer and a graduate of the London Guildhall School of Music and Drama, but only after having passed her engineering degree in Brussels. Shakespeare Sonnets 2 is, needless to say, the second album of Vanweldens where she puts the bard's sonnets to music. It's out now on Jazznarts and my copy is downloaded from HIRESAUDIO.



**OK, I don't read Shakespeare and wouldn't know one of the sonnets if they stepped up and slapped me round the chops with their ballow...**

Ok, I know this concept sounds a bit far-fetched and it really shouldn't work, but the language used is interesting, involving and when combined with the jazz music herein is really pretty infectious. This is not noodly, or jazz that you need a beard, a pipe and a degree in pseudology to appreciate, indeed Since Brass Nor Stone, the third tune on the record, has a drum line that is veering towards drum and bass...it's really very good.

The main course here is of course Vanwelden's voice itself. It is modern sounding, powerful and at times playful...much like the sonnets themselves. The music is likewise pretty upbeat and modern sounding and has elements of latin and Eastern European flavours thrown in for good measure at times. Thomas Siffing on the flugelhorn and trumpet weaves his magic in and around the tunes without ever forcing himself to the forefront and never doing anything but complimenting Vanwelden's beautifully toned voice.

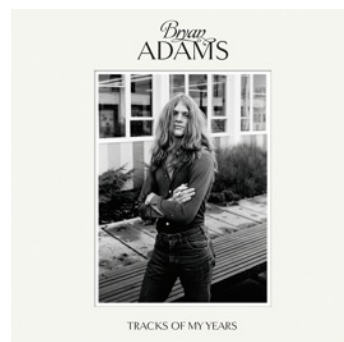
Rodrigo Villalon on drums and percussion is a bit of a highlight and with Mini Schulz' contrabass the duo underpin the tunes with finesse and a deft touch.

The tune that really does it for me on this record is How Oft When Thou My Music which has some beautifully piano playing with the soft and slightly mournful horn accompanying Vanwelden's voice...really lovely.

OK, I don't read Shakespeare and wouldn't know one of the sonnets if they stepped up and slapped me round the chops with their ballow, but that doesn't mean that this album is difficult or only for those with a good grounding in English literature. It's really accessible, very enjoyable indeed and should appeal to a pretty wide audience and not just the jazzsters.

## Bryan Adams – Tracks of My Years (Deluxe Edition) Verve

**1**4 covers (10 on the normal version) and two original tunes, one penned in partnership with Jim Vallance and the other with Gretchen Peters (this only on the Deluxe Edition) on this, the twelfth studio album from Canadian rocker Bryan Adams has tracks from writers such as Lennon and McCartney (Any Time At All), Bob Dylan (Lay Lady Lay), Chuck Berry (Rock and Roll Music) John Fogerty (Down on the Corner), Bobby Hebb (Sunny), Brian Wilson and Tony Asher (God Only Knows) plus a handful of others.



The album was recording took around three months over the course of two years and Adams says that selecting the songs took him a long time...and this shows. The album could have easily descended into a clichéd covers album but it's varied enough in its scope to be appealing and entertaining. It's certainly done pretty well in the Canadian charts where it sold 14000 copies in its first week and it's charted in the US Billboard 200 too.

All the tunes are sung with Adams gritty and bluesy voice well to the fore and the playing and arrangements are sympathetically done and different enough

# Album Reviews

from the originals to make this a really worthwhile album to own.

**I'm not a fanboy in any way of Adams, ... but I heartily recommend this record for anyone looking for a good time rock record that is at one immediately accessible given you'd be hard pressed not to know most of the tunes.**

Highlights include God Only Knows which slows the tempo down a good deal to partner Adams with, for the most part just a piano...with slide guitar making a guest appearance too. It's one of the tunes I love in its original form from The Beach Boys' Pet Sounds album but here it is stripped bare and delivered with an emotionally charged vocal delivery. On the deluxe version this tune fades and we're back into the bouncy rock and roll of You've Been A Friend To Me (Adams/Gretchen) and I'd suggest that its worth your while spending a little extra on this version as the supplementary tunes are really pretty good, with Adam's rendition of Help Me Make It Through The Night (Kris Kristofferson) being an absolute belter of a bluesy/gospelly tune. C'Mon Everybody (Eddie Cochran) is an up tempo rock n roller before the penultimate track Many Rivers To Cross (Jimmy Cliff) brings back the blues... indeed Many Rivers is a really great, emotional version of what is already a fabulous tune and I'm surprised it wasn't chosen for the normal length album.

The deluxe version finishes off with You Shook Me (Willie Dixon/ J B Lenoir) a plodding, overdriven blues number that is sure to please and would sound perfect in a Chicago blues club with a few beers.

All in all there's a good deal to commend on Tracks Of My Years and very, very little to criticise. I'm not a fanboy in any way of Adams, with Summer Of '69 being pretty much the only tune of his I'd be able to sing along to with, with any gusto, but I heartily recommend this record for anyone looking for a good time rock record that is at one immediately accessible given you'd be hard pressed not to know most of the tunes. This will sell well this Xmas!

## Various Artists - The Eve Folk Recordings Cherry Red/RPM

The music media in the early to mid-sixties were alive with talk of a « folk boom » in the UK and indeed there was a burgeoning number of folk clubs open every night of the week, to the point that pretty much every

town of any size had one. I remember as late as the early seventies as a young child there being a popular folk club in Wath-Upon-Deane where my parents had a pub...and even they had a music room where folk music was the order of the day. A folk boom is a bit of a misnomer if we go by record sales, but, as Colin Harper's excellent sleeve notes to The Eve Folk Recordings suggests, the folk "stars" of the day made their living not through record sales but through live performances and a life "on the road". Harper also suggests that this movement was a true underground movement and the pressure on the performers not to sell out was huge.



**You get 27 tunes that are all most definitely of the folk variety, but all the artists represent a very different style of this broad church.**

Ask anyone about British folk music and the name that will inevitably come up will be that of Donovan who, in 1965 scored himself a record deal after a slot on Ready Steady Go! and later went on to great success both in the UK and in America. Donovan's management during the recording of his first two albums had been Geoff Stephens and Peter Eden (he sacked them in October '65) and they managed to broker a four album deal with EMI to release music from other artists on the scene. This marked the birth of Eve Folk Recordings and the three albums they released is what we have here. There are also four Donovan tunes included on this double CD: Catch the Wind, Colours, Goldwatch Blues (A Mick Softley penned tune) and The War Drags On.

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The first of the Eve Folk Recordings' albums here is Mick Softley's Songs For Swingin' Survivors and it represents the anti-establishment, protest tradition of folk music. As well as his self-penned tunes there's a couple of covers – Billie Holiday's Strange Fruit (a fabulous version) and Woody Guthrie's Plains Of The Buffalo. This is right up my street many regular readers will be surprised to read and I heartily recommend The Eve Folk Recordings CD for this selection alone.

Next up is son of Tyneside, Bob Davenport and The Rakes and this is much more in the traditional folk style that will appeal to many, but I can take or leave it if I'm honest. However, this kind of music is perhaps the traditional working music of the UK and as such this collection of tunes has, if nothing else, an interesting historical perspective. There's a Reel, with spoons and recorder, and a Jig thrown in for good measure and, though this isn't my kind of thing in a recording I can see it being hugely entertaining in a live setting...and this is perhaps where this revivalist style is best enjoyed to my mind.

Finally we have Vernon Haddock's Jubilee Lovelies and the first tune is Coney Island Washboard which reminded me of Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band and indeed there is reference to this band in the albums liner notes. It's got a bit of a hillbilly style to it and indeed a good few of the tunes herein were originally recorded in the 1920s. Not my usual listening fodder, but this will be of interest to those interested in that era of music. The kazoo, where's that particular instrument gone, makes regular appearances in the tunes and that will give you an idea of what to expect. The music is fast furious and great fun.

The Eve Folk Recordings is a really entertaining album. You get 27 tunes that are all most definitely of the folk variety, but all the artists represent a very different style of this broad church. My personal favourites are the Donovan and Mick Softley tunes but that is not to say the other artists aren't valid. There's a stereotypical image of a folky and that is all tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows and pints of bitter to match his world outlook, but folk music is so called because it is traditionally the music of the working people and I reckon this rerelease should spark a bit of interest in this much maligned (but often plagiarised) genre. Out now on Cherry Red/RPM

## Various - Millions Like Us "The Story Of The Mod Revival 1977-1989" Cherry Red

**M**illions Like Us is « The Story Of The Mod Revival 1977 -1989 » and it's a wonderfully exuberant blast of tunes, many of which I know from my teens and some

which are new to me. I was ten in 1977 but the mod revival was in full flow by the time I was in my second year or so of senior school. Along with the mod revival came two tone, ska and these were heady days indeed...my first proper gig was at the Wakefield Theatre where I went to see The Beat and it was rammed and perhaps one of the best gigs I've ever been to. Soon after I went to see The Jam at Leeds City Hall and then I was all Oxford bags, Harrington jacket, Fred Perry shirts and pointy shoes...I wasn't allowed a fishtail parka, would have looked daft in a mohair suit and my take on the "look" was very much garnered from what I read in the music press and what I was allowed to get away with. It was a brief love affair as far as I remember lasting a couple of years or so, but it's brilliant to hear some of the tunes I played on my parents' music centre and eventually my Amstrad set up getting a fresh airing on this 4CD collection.



**There's a hundred tunes on this record and it's no real surprise that there was a real interest in this music back in the seventies and beyond. It has the energy of punk/new wave/pub rock but with a more melodic feel...**



# Album Reviews

Millions Like Us is named after the Purple Hearts (a nod to the speed that kept the original mods up all night) tune of the same name and is as comprehensive a document of music of the time that you could hope for. There's a lot of music that is new to me to be fair, but there's Secret Affair's Time For Action which I remember very fondly and which reached 13 in the UK charts selling an impressive 200 000 copies... and a few others that charted too. There are a good few names that bring back a good few memories... The Chords, Merton Parkas, Nine Below zero and The Lambrettas, plus loads more. There's a hundred tunes on this record and it's no real surprise that there was a real interest in this music back in the seventies and beyond. It has the energy of punk/new wave/pub rock but with a more melodic feel... you can also hear where a good deal of the Britpop sound had its roots (take a listen to the Aardvark's Arthur C. Clarke).

Of course there was a revival of the mod revival in the mid-eighties and this too is represented with the likes of The Untouchables...but I wasn't there for this one I'm afraid having my head full of psychedelia, 60s folk/rock and metal so this is all new to me but it's true to the original spirit of the mod sound and all is good.

This is pop music at its very best in my opinion – fast, short bursts of magic (most tunes come in at less than 3 minutes or so). Highlights for me are The Blades The Last Man In Europe which has a terrific horn line and The Reflection AOB's All I Want To Be...but then there's the retro James Taylor Quartet's Blow Up which fuses an infectious back beat with a terrific organ line...truth be known this is a real case of All Thriller, No Filler!

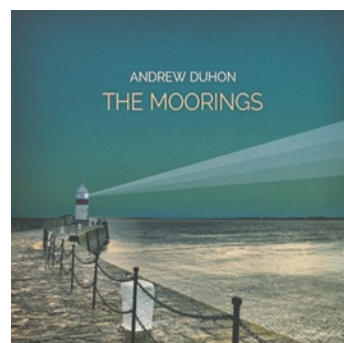
This is a great collection of records and will appeal to lots of folk whether they were into the mod sound or not and it comes with a whole load of press clippings and the like from the time to give you a background which helps place this all in context. The only thing missing to my mind is a tune from The Jam...perhaps from Modern World.

Highly recommended and will certainly getting a load of play here come the summer months (August Bank Holiday anyone?) with the car windows open and the tunes blasting out... Out December 8<sup>th</sup> on Cherry Red.

## Andrew Duhon - The Moorings

**A**t this time of year there is a tendency to look backwards; to think back on all the year's discoveries. So, it comes as a bit of a shock to stumble across one of the best things I've heard all year.

The Moorings by New Orleans singer songwriter Andrew Duhon came at me out of nowhere. Duhon is a new name to me. He may be a new name to you too but he won't be a new name for long. If the songs



**I suspect that Andrew Duhon will be singing these songs, and those still to come, to audiences for a very long time and that other singers will want to sing them too - I can hear Bonnie Raitt singing Sidestep Your Grave in my head right now.**

# Album Reviews

on this album are anything to go by, Andrew Duhon will be a big name before long.

The Moorings is rooted in folk music but is no way stuck in the past. The opening title track echoes an old Scottish tune *The Bonnie Bonnie Banks O' Loch Lomond* but Duhon sets it to a shuffling rhythm and sends it sailing. And the lyrics also deal with sailing away; from the refuge of love to whatever unknowns lie ahead.

Songwriters strive to find new ways to tell old tales and only the best succeed. The songs on The Moorings may deal with familiar themes: love found and love lost, mistakes made and lessons learned; shared joys and solitary sorrows but Duhon brings the craft of a master short story writer to his songs and in doing so creates a series of skilfully rendered vignettes.

Does he find the devil in *Evelyn* as he tries to recreate the Garden Of Eden or is it a song of salvation? Duhon leaves you to decide. A sure sign of quality song writing is that on first hearing the song sounds like you've known it all your life.

*Tandem Bike* and *Feel It In My Soul* are as familiar as old friends.

A special mention has to go to the band on this record. Accompanying Duhon's vocals, acoustic and electric guitar and harmonica are:

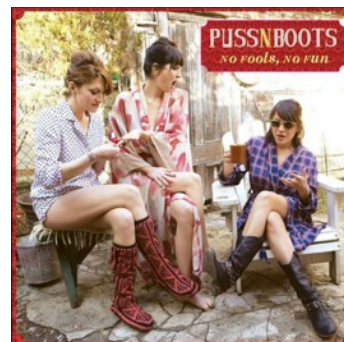
Maxwell Zemanovic - drums and percussion; Myles Weeks- upright and electric Bass; Jon Harris - lap steel; Adam Campagna - piano, keyboards, accordion; Eric Heigle - drums ("Takes a Little Rain"); Trina Shoemaker - Percussion; Chris Lippincott - pedal steel; Jack Craft - Cello; Sam Craft - Violin; Michael Girardot - Trumpet; Kara Grainger and Lisa Mills - harmonies. These musicians play in the service of the songs and get it just right. Kudos too to Grammy Award winning producer Trina Shoemaker who brings a warm, open sound to the album.

These are songs that you will want to hear again and again. I suspect that Andrew Duhon will be singing these songs, and those still to come, to audiences for a very long time and that other singers will want to sing them too - I can hear Bonnie Raitt singing *Sidestep Your Grave* in my head right now.

As I listened to The Moorings names like John Prine, Peter Case, Ray Lamontagne and Steve Earl came to mind, not because Duhon sounds like any of these guys but because he can stand shoulder to shoulder with them as a songwriter. Give The Moorings a listen, you won't regret it.

## Puss N Boots - No Fools, No Fun

Blue Note



Okay, so what do you do if you are a piano player but want to improve your guitar playing? If you happen to be Norah Jones then you form an alt-country band with a couple of friends, learn some covers and play a few gigs for your mates before recording your first album. And - possibly only if you happen to be Norah Jones - it works like a charm.

## Imagine Dolly Parton, Emmylou Harris and Linda Ronstadt's Trio album crossed with Golden Smog's *Weird Tales* and you won't be far off.

Puss N Boots' first album consists of 7 covers and 5 originals, a mix of live and studio recordings. The band - Norah Jones (vocals, electric guitar, fiddle). Sasha Dobson (vocals, acoustic guitar, bass, drums) and Catherine Popper (vocals, acoustic guitar, bass) - play relaxed, loose, country-inflected rock that is a joy to listen to. Imagine Dolly Parton, Emmylou Harris and Linda Ronstadt's Trio album crossed with Golden Smog's *Weird Tales* and you won't be far off. Jones' scratchy, sketchy guitar colours the songs in without worrying too much about staying inside the lines. Neil Young has had decades to perfect his slapdash single note guitar solo in *Down By The River* so it is perhaps no surprise that Norah's attempt here is slightly stiff in comparison but that is entirely forgivable. And it's not all about Norah, this is very much a collaborative effort with Dobson and Popper contributing every bit as much to the album as their somewhat more famous band mate. If you want to hear a band playing music they love and having a great time doing it, then give *No Fools, No Fun* a listen. No frills, all fun

# New Advent - Yours In Hifi

Is this article really just a thinly-veiled excuse to make a REM-related terrible pun? You decide, as John Scott lists his top 24 festive favourites – a Christmas countdown playlist that Santa would be proud to leave beneath your tree.

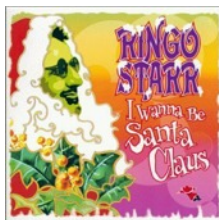
**25. Suddenly It's Christmas - Loudon Wainwright.** From the album *Career Moves*. In which Loudon bemoans Christmas Early Onset Syndrome as he watches it set in immediately after Thanksgiving. He should think himself lucky, in my experience it starts after the first weekend in September.



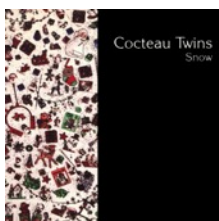
**24. I Want An Alien For Christmas - The Fountains Of Wayne.** From the single of the same name. If you are going to ask for "a little green guy who knows how to fly" then you had better pen your power pop epistle to Santa in early advent.



**23. Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer - Ringo Starr.** From the album *I Want To Be Santa Claus*. You might expect a Christmas album from Mr Starr to be a bit of a turkey but while it may not contain five gold Ringos, this track is a cracker.



**22. Frosty The Snowman - The Cocteau Twins.** From the *Snow* EP. The timeless tale of the icy anthropomorph as filtered through The Cocteau Twins' glacial guitars and wintry vocals.



**21. Silent Night - Erasure.** From the album *Snow Globe*. A bleepy, spacey version of everyone's favourite Christmas carol by the '80's electro-pop duo, Vince Clark and Andy Bell.



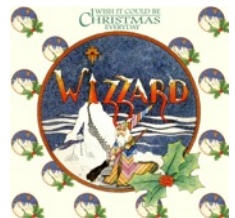
**20. In The Bleak Midwinter - Lauren Laverne.** From the album *It's A Cool, Cool Christmas*. Lo-fi loveliness from the former Kenickie singer/guitarist turned British TV culture pundit.



**19. Christmas (Baby Please Come Home) - Darlene Love.** From the album *A Christmas Gift For You*. Phil Spector did the rock and roll Christmas song a massive favour in 1963 - he invented it. All of the songs on his "A Christmas Gift For You" belong on this list. And without Phil, there would have been no...



**18. I Wish It Could Be Christmas Everyday - Wizzard.** From the single of the same name. As much as we all love Christmas, would you really want it to be Christmas everyday? Roy Wood would. The Brum Beat genius takes his kitchen sink and chucks it at Spector's wall of sound.



**17. Sleigh ride/Santa's Party - Ferrante & Teicher with Les Baxter.** From the album *Christmas Cocktails Part Two*. Break out the eggnog, warm up the fondue, pull on that Christmas jumper and kick back with this loungetastic slice of cheesy goodness.



**16. Children Go Where I Send Thee - Natalie Merchant.** From the album *A Very Special Christmas Volume 3*. Ms Merchant





# New Advent - Yours In Hifi

isn't generally known for getting her groove on but she very definitely does here.

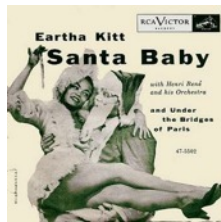
## 15. Christmas Time (Is Here Again) - The Beatles.

Originally released as their 1967 fan club Christmas record, a shortened version finally saw a release as the B side to Free As A Bird. Dora Bryan recorded All I Want For Christmas Is A Beatle in 1963. For Beatles fans, this fan club release was as close as they could get.



## 14. Santa Baby - Eartha Kitt.

From the single of the same name. Sexiest Christmas song ever. Watch out that Eartha's smouldering vocals don't set your Christmas stockings on fire. She recorded this twice: the earlier 1953 recording is the one to go for.



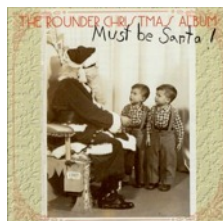
## 13. The Man In The Santa Suit - The Fountains Of Wayne.

From the single *I Want An Alien For Christmas* (B Side). As if writing one Christmas classic wasn't enough, The Fountains Of Wayne have another up their sleeve. Being Santa must be the greatest job in the world, right? Yeah right.



## 12. Santa Claus Is Coming To Town - Joseph Spence.

From the album *Must Be Santa*. Quite, quite mad. Mr. Spence sings like a drunk tramp doing an impression of Tom Waits singing like a drunk tramp. You might not want to sit beside him on the bus but you should buy his record.



## 11. Ring Out Solstice Bells - Jethro Tull.

From the album *The Jethro Tull Christmas Album*. If Santa ever decided to jack it all in and become the singer in a prog rock band, he'd pick Jethro Tull. Remember though Santa, standing on one leg while playing the flute can be bad for your elf.



## 10. There's No Lights On The Christmas Tree, Mother (They're Burning Big Louie Tonight) - The Sensational Alex Harvey Band.

From the album *Framed*. Remember kids, Santa knows if you've been naughty or nice. It's the electric chair for Louie - Guess which of Santa's lists he was on.



## 9. There Are Much Worse Things To Believe In - Stephen Colbert and Elvis Costello.

From the album *A Colbert Christmas: The Greatest Gift Of All!* Okay, the Christmas story might not be for everyone but even if you are not a believer, Colbert and Costello make the case that the world would be a poorer place without Christmas.



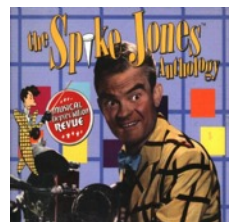
## 8. I Believe In Father Christmas - Greg Lake.

From the single of the same name. It may be the most mean-spirited Christmas single ever released but it has shed loads of sleigh bells in it and still sounds fantastic.



## 7. All I Want For Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth - Spike Jones and His City Slickers.

From the album *The Spike Jones Anthology*. Spike wishes us all a merry Christmas with his patented brand of musical mayhem. Those sibilants will give your tweeters a workout too.



## 6. Bedtime For Toys - Stevie Wonder.

From the album *Someday At Christmas*. The only song on this list that would go on to inspire the name of a bunch of Black Eyed Peas wannabes. Stevie turns up the schmaltzometer to eleven. Remember to brush your teeth after listening.



## 5. Winter Wonderland - The Brian Setzer Orchestra.

From the album *Boogie Woogie*

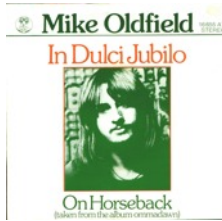


# New Advent - Yours In Hifi

*Christmas*. Brian and the boys use their boogie woogie big band chops to roast this Christmas chestnut.

## 4. In Dulci Jubilo - Mike

**Oldfield.** From the single of the same name. Mike brings his multi-instrumental virtuosity to a tune that originally dates back to the beginning of the thirteenth century, when 16 track mixing boards were in their infancy. This is such a happy wee tune that you will forgive him for flubbing the guitar solo a bit.



## 3. Christmas At The Airport -

**Nick Lowe.** From the album *Quality Street: A Seasonal Selection For All The Family*. Little Saint Nick gets himself locked in the airport on Christmas Eve. While you are tucking into the turkey, he's rootling in the bins for leftover pizza.



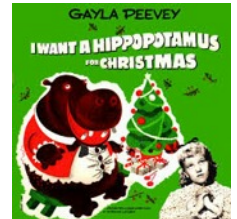
## 2. Must Be Santa - Bob Dylan.

From the album *Christmas In The Heart*. Who's got a big red cherry nose? Well, let's not hold it against him. Bob's Christmas album could have seen him Ho Ho Ho-ing in the wind but surprisingly he pulled it off with aplomb.



## 1. I Want A Hippopotamus For Christmas - Gayla Peevey.

From the single of the same name. On Christmas Day it's important to remember the true meaning of Christmas - Presents. Gayla wants a Hippo and nothing is going to persuade her otherwise. Simply the greatest Christmas record ever made.



**And all that remains to say is that the Hifi Pig team wish all its readers a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year**

# Future Classic

**John Scott introduces us to another classic album and this time it's My Brother The Wind's recording "Once There Was A Time When Time And Space Were One". He also chats to the band's guitarist**

**W**hen a band's influences include Popol Vuh, Amon Duul, Sun Ra, Ashra Tempel, Gong and Pink Floyd then they are pretty much guaranteed my attention. When I hear that their latest album was totally improvised, played live and recorded during a one day session then that is something that I definitely want to hear.

My Brother The Wind is a Swedish four piece band who describe themselves as a fully improvisational cosmic rock collective. The four members: Nicklas Barber, Mathias Danielsson, Ronny Eriksson and latest recruit Daniel Fridlund Brandt are also all members of other widely known bands (well, widely





# Future Classic

known in Sweden at least) Makajodama, Magnolia, Animal Daydream and Anekdoten.

**Once There Was A Time When Time And Space Were One**, the group's third album, was recorded to 2" tape on a 16 track Ampex recorder dating from 1968. This is highly appropriate as the album has echoes of Pink Floyd's **Saucerful Of Secrets** album from that year in several of its tracks.

Entirely instrumental, the album -there's no way I'm typing **Once There Was A Time When Time And Space Were One** or even OTWATWTASWO over and over again so let's just refer to it as "the album", okay? - opens with "Prologue." If history has taught us anything, it is that prologues come at the beginning so if you are going to call a track "Prologue" then it is certainly a good idea to open with it. And open with it they do, warming us up for the two part "Song Of Innocence" that follows.

From the first drum beat of Part 1 it feels like we are in the room with the band. Bass and drums propel us forward. One guitar begins a series of spidery explorations while the other creates a rhythmic drone before both guitars reach a climax. The bass picks up the pace in Part 2, driving relentlessly like Lemmy on Hawkwind's **Space Ritual** album but with a much more melodic flair.

The Hawkwind influence continues through the next track, "Into The Cosmic Halo" before slowing into "Misty Mountainside" where hand drums, flute and acoustic guitar mingle with the bass to provide a brief change of pace.

"Garden Of Delights" is reminiscent of Pink Floyd in "Set The Controls" ...or "Careful With That Axe Eugene" territory with some stunning interplay between all the instruments, making its 12 minutes seem to speed by in a flash. The next track, the reflective "Thomas Mera Gartz," is a tribute to the late Swedish prog drummer of that name.

An acoustic guitar returns for the title track "Once There Was A Time When Time and Space Were One" and is joined by heavily-reverbed electric guitar and bass for a brief interlude that takes us into the finale, "Epilogue." Bass and drums are the stars here, providing a jig-like dance as a Mellotron swells mightily in the background and then fades as we reach the end of our cosmic journey

If you like your music with a spacey, psychedelic hue then I strongly recommend that you look out for

My Brother The Wind's latest release. You are in for a trip.

**Once There Was A Time When Space And Time Were One** by My Brother The Wind was released on 14 October on the Free Electric Sound Label.

## **Guitarist Nicklas Barker spoke to HiFi Pig about the recording of the album and his thoughts on audio reproduction.**

**The new album, Once There Was A Time When Time And Space Were One, was recorded live with no overdubs in a single day. Was that a new approach for you? How did you prepare for that?** That's how we have always done it. The first album was recorded during a spontaneous jam session that we had in the studio and after listening to it we decided to release it since we thought it was pretty cool. We really don't prepare, apart from mentally. The idea is that someone starts and the others follow. This is how all our albums have been recorded since.

**You recorded the tracks to 2" analogue tape. Was this something new for the band? What advantages did this bring over digital recording? We're there any disadvantages?**

All of our albums have been recorded on a 16 track Ampex 2" machine from 1969 at Love Tholin's Drop Out Analogue in Åmål Sweden. The sound from that machine is amazing. The good thing is that if you record loud onto tape you get this nice warm natural compression which brings out great details and punch from the instruments. Also there's not much eq made to the instruments since it automatically sounds good because of the tape. Since we record live without any overdubs there's not many disadvantages. If you record an album with a lot of overdubs and retakes it takes much longer since you need to rewind all the time.

**The album seems very much like a journey from start to finish. Was that your intention?**

Not really. When it comes to putting all the album together we think about it. During the recording we just try to stay in the presence and let things happen.

**Given the live recording sessions, was there much done in post-production to get the final sound that you wanted?**



## Future Classic

During the mixing which was done the day after recording we hooked up some tape echoes, plate reverbs and a phaser to shape the sound. When we have found an ok balance we do a so-called live mix with all of us hanging over the mixing console adding echoes and stuff here and there. Also this is done in one or two takes and goes really fast. The mastering and editing is done digitally with hi res files and the best AD converters existing. We also use some Neve strips to glue the sound together. Our mastering guy Hans Fredriksson is a master in bringing out the best from the recordings.

### **What are your thoughts about audio reproduction? Is hifi something that interests you?**

I prefer vinyl when it comes to old music. For new music I prefer hi res digital files most of the time. Since the mastering almost always is done digitally, I think it's closest to the source listening to hi res files. The optimal would be 96/24 files in a good stereo. With old music that was recorded analogue and mastered analogue I prefer original first pressings

since it's closest to the source and mostly how the band and producers wanted it to sound.

### **Can you tell us about your own hifi system and how it has evolved over the years? What do you look for in a system?**

I use a Thorens TD 125 turntable with a Sansui Au-555 amp. I just bought a new pair of Mirsch speaker that I haven't hooked up yet. Also a Cambridge cd-player. When I'm listening to digital and to mixes of records I'm doing I mostly listen through my Macbook with Protools and a Mbox sound card. There's a huge difference listening through Pro Tools than using, for instance, iTunes. My speakers here are a pair of Genelec which are pretty flat but I like them.

### **Thanks for taking the time to speak to us Nicklas. Can we expect to see Once There Was A Time When Time And Space Were One taken out on tour any time soon?**

Oh yeah! We have some great gigs coming up next year but we start of by playing a gig here in Stockholm on December 20.

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